24th Annual Audley Webster Memorial Essay Contest Winners

Writing Program

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24th Annual Audley Webster Memorial Essay Contest

2017 AWARD WINNERS

Awards Ceremony
March 29, 2018

English Composition Program
University of Miami
Coral Gables, FL
Twenty-four years ago, we selected the first winning essays of the Audley Webster Memorial Essay Contest. These yardsticks of quality prose from the University of Miami’s first-year writing courses continue to identify the highest standards. How fitting, then, to boast this name: Audley Webster! Webster’s years of teaching composition at our University convey a working definition of the professional.

Webster felt responsibility to a larger educational goal, says his daughter Dr. Susan Webster: “[a] love of teaching, and broader—impacting knowledge.” He loved sharing knowledge and rational thought with all his students, and he “believed that the greatest gift is the gift of learning, and that that gift is not complete until it is passed on.”

Throughout his professional life, Webster made expertise his specialty. He developed skills necessary for both his job and beyond, kept his knowledge up to date, and taught the individual as that individual learned best. Pictures remain of Webster sitting with a student, both concentrating on polishing that clear sentence. Did he succeed? Testimonials offer evidence: “He made instruction so clear,” and “He really cared that I learn to write,” assert two UM alumni. Evidence came, too, in the Monday newspapers wrapped in quotable quotes of the NFL or NBA week’s hero, his former students; evidence remains in both national and international market plans that came from UM alumni now in the business world; and evidence appears in the clear, persuasive writing in legal briefs filed by former students, periodically remembering and using Webster’s standards for rational thought.

And his was a personality of candor, honesty, courtesy, and respect for human dignity in all relationships. Many teachers of writing remember his advice—about both life and writing. That advice included a professional attitude and optimism. In addition, he could relate a narrative—often personal—to sharpen a point. For example, Dr. Webster, a psychologist, remembers when meeting students their saying, “Oh, you are the feminist daughter.”

Webster in his quiet, dignified, and confident manner, earned the respect of students and faculty with his high values and principles. Even before joining the U.M. faculty, he helped bring about equality through diversity on campuses. He lived the belief of Martin Luther King, Jr. that “An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of the individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.” Audley Webster embodied King’s words, and through the above professional qualities—and more—he reminds us all of the highest standards in both teaching and imparting knowledge. —C.R., 2012, edited.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

2017 Judges
Melissa Burley
Sarah Cash
Diana Dabek
Paul Deveney
Judy Hood
Susan Leary
April Mann
Kimberly McGrath-Moreira
Charlotte Rogers
Joshua Schriftman
Josie Urbistondo
John Wafer

2017 Contest Coordinator
Adina Sanchez-Garcia

Composition Program Director
Joanna Johnson
CONTEST WINNERS

1st Place
Lauren Lipsky "Man's Worst Friend in the Spotlight: Cutting Edge Knowledge on Rats"
Instructor: Martha Otis

2nd Place
Sabrina Ullman "A Proposal to Reduce Flooding by Planting Rain Gardens at the University of Miami (Coral Gables Campus)"
Instructor: Adina Sanchez-Garcia

3rd Place (tie)
Kristi Brownlee "Defining the 'Strong Black Woman"
Instructor: Nicole Hospital Medina
Jasmine Mompoint "I once thought I was beautiful. Then I saw a magazine."
Instructor: John Wafer

Honorable Mentions:
Kara Clemmenson "The Responsibility of Knowing"
Instructor: Judy Hood
Haley Fishberger "The Musician's Tug of War"
Instructor: Judy Hood
Jordan Ghidossi "Society's Kernel: How Operating Systems Changed the World"
Instructor: Martha Otis
Manuel Pendola "Is Trading for a Living a Good Investment?"
Instructor: Nicole Hospital-Medina
Chloe Reid "Just Getting By"
Instructor: John Wafer

To see all the essays for this contest, please visit the University of Miami Scholarly Repository: https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/audley-webster-memorial-essay-contest/
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Instructor Reflections—Martha Otis on Lauren Lipsky

Recently while teaching my advanced writing class I found myself telling students to let their freak flags fly. (Freak frag fry…. didn’t manage the tongue-twister too well.) After reading Lauren Lipinsky’s paper they understood: the closer we get to the writer’s relationship with the material, the weirder and more surprising it gets, and the better the writing.

Permission to fry these frags invites an odd assortment of research paper subjects. One memorable semester: black holes, the multiverse, the nature of gravity, the history of dreams, the physics of the snowboard and, flying outlandishly over this bunch, the (brilliant) one about a pet chameleon. Spring 2017’s trending themes were college stress, depression at college, illegal use of smart drugs at college, and the opioid epidemic. Then there was--there were--the rats.

This brings us to Ms. Lipsky. Lauren confesses her freak from page one of her award-winning paper: “at the end of eighth grade, I pitched the idea of a pet rat to my skeptical parents, a pitch made via PowerPoint, complete with moving pictures, fading transitions and cage prices.”

Spring 2017 was a freakishly chaotic semester in composition classrooms. But smiling always, amidst the drama of others, sat Lauren Lipsky, rat researcher. She showed up daily with more rat research to report, even scoring an interview with Dr. Peggy Mason, the neuroscientist who had just discovered rat empathy. All this seemed to make Lauren happy. Rats made her happy. In fact, everyone in the pictures included in this paper is touching the rats! And smiling! The rats have names: Bailey, Boo, Bones, Brownie. What is this?

Lauren does what all good writers do, making the “familiar strange and the strange familiar.” The paper nudges us toward the realization that perhaps, all along, we’ve been betting on the wrong horse—that henceforth we probably should just ignore horses. Because living in our very palm trees and attics and dumpsters has been an answer all along, to a question we haven’t even thought to ask.

Rats have proven their altruism, affection, companionship and smarts. Highly trainable—most impressively, to detect tuberculosis and land mines—they seem (oh, my, did I really just think that?) to make good friends. Read on and you, too, will want a rat friend, because Lauren Lipsky’s rat paper will make you happy. And—I was her writing instructor and even I don’t know how she does it—this paper smiles.

Lauren Lipsky
“Man’s Worst Friend in the Spotlight: Cutting Edge Knowledge on Rats”
ENG 106—Spring 2017

The teenage years are a horror for parents. It is the end of middle school, a time when fingerless gloves are all the rage, and with every new haircut the parents get bombarded with a snobby “it’s not just a phase it’s who I really am.” For me, silly bands and overly-long shirts from Abercrombie were my teenage necessities. It was around the same cringe-inducing years that have since been deleted from social media, that I became fascinated with rats. Yes—you read correctly—rats. The little (or freakishly large) rodents that scurry out of the dumpsters late at night and get chased by the neighborhood cats and raise four mutant turtles in a sewer... those rats.

Truly, and thankfully, my love for rats is not a phase like my other teenage interests. At the end of eighth grade, I decided to take a leap of faith and pitched the idea of having pet rats to my very skeptical parents. This pitch was made via a skillfully created PowerPoint on dumbo rats, complete with moving pictures, fading transitions, rat facts,
and even cage prices. I am still proud of my nerdy, thirteen-year-old self because, looking back, it was that PowerPoint which has rewarded me with four tiny rats since then.

Many people do not realize the joy a rat can bring into your life. After years of owning rats, I am lucky enough to understand the happiness they offer. Despite what I tell peers, not that many people are willing to give rats a chance. Upon finding out about my near obsession, almost everyone’s initial reaction is disgust—and I understand where they are coming from.

Rats are put in the same category as cockroaches and termites; the horrible vermin that infest your home and only leave after the Orkin man shows up. Historically, rats have been associated with plagues ever since biblical times. In 1 Samuel, the prophet writes of emerods which many scholars believe to be the bubonic plague, unfortunately spread by rats at the port of Ashdod. Mummies have been found with ulcers speculated to be bubonic plague bubo and bubonic plague is credited for the fall of the illustrious Roman Empire (Hendrickson). Rats are infamous for their role in spreading the bubonic plague hundreds of years ago across fourteenth century Europe as well. Now, studies have come out that claim gerbils, not rats, are responsible for spreading the disease (Morelle), yet the distain towards rats has persisted.

I believe it is time for a fresh perspective on rats. With new studies every year, rats are being re-evaluated to be less of a pest and more of a brilliant species; often they are cited as one of the top smartest species on Earth (Butler). So, are rats truly deserving of our contempt or not?

Rats and mice have been observed exhibiting pro-social, empathetic behaviors that were previously only observed in humans and other primates. The principle study that illustrates empathy in rats was conducted by Inbal Ben-Ami Bartal, Jean Decety, and Peggy Mason from the University of Chicago in 2011. Dr. Bartal happened upon the empathetic response by accident. In an interview with Susie Allen from the University of Chicago’s magazine Dialoglo, Bartal declares,

My original idea was related to how food sharing would be influenced by stress. I went down to animal facilities and put a restrainer inside a cage and trapped one of the rats, just to test it out. I noticed that the rat’s cage mate was kind of going berserk. That’s a basic form of empathy: just being able to recognize the fact that this trapped rat was distressed and getting a similar emotional response. (Allen)

Stemming from this initial observation, Bartal designed an experimental to test to see if rats have empathy towards others of their kind. She placed two rats in a glass arena, one free and one in a clear cylinder in the middle (reference Figure 1).

Over the course of twelve days in which the experiment was conducted, the rats learned how to open the door and free the trapped cage mate within 6.9 days, give or take 2.9 days. (Bartal) At first, the free rats struggled to open the container: tipping it to the side and up with their heads. Over the next few days however, all the rats learned to open the door with their heads and no longer froze when the door fell, “demonstrating that door-opening was the expected outcome of a deliberate, goal-directed action (Bartal).”
Additionally, the rats only showed empathy and freed other rats. Empty cylinders and cylinders with fake rats were placed into the arena, but neither were ever opened by the free rat. Two more variations of the study were conducted; one where the rats never came in contact, even when one was freed, and one where chocolate was given as an alternative option to the restrained rat. Similar to the dilemma a young child might have after Halloween, the rats had to decide to share the treat or be selfish. Surprisingly, when given the option to eat all five pieces of chocolate versus giving some to the other rat, “they shared them in half of all trials (52%) and in 61% of trials on days 6 to 12 (Bartal).” To put this test into perspective, as a previous rat owner, I can confirm that chocolate is the epitome of snacks; take everything you have ever seen about rats and cheese, multiply it by ten, and that is how much rats adore chocolate. Even for Dr. Mason who worked on the study said, “[free rats sharing the chocolate] is the most surprising result we found.”

Some adult humans will refuse to share their food with strangers, yet Bartal’s study shows that a rat will do so without any persuasion or training. This pioneering study, unlike previous empathy experiments, “didn’t have to [subject] unbearable physical pain for other rats to help them. In the earlier study in mice, researchers caused a lot of excruciating pain (Bekoff).” The earlier study that Bekoff is referring to was led by Jeffrey Mogil at McGill University in Montreal. In the study, the mice were subjected to acidic solution injections in their abdomens and formalin in their paws and it was reported that “mice became more sensitive to pain when they saw a familiar mouse in pain” (Miller).

Mouse empathy studies guarantee a reaction because they are subjected to pain; the aforementioned rat studies, however, are based solely on pro-social, empathetic behavior. Upon seeing their cage-mates in the clear cylinder, the rats could have sat there, cleaned themselves, fallen asleep, or whatever they wanted to do. Instead, they decided to help the rat in distress, and more than half the time, they did this PRIOR to eating the chocolate in the cage, thus not only helping a fellow rat, but sharing their delicious treat with the trapped rat as well. As someone who worked firsthand on the study of empathy, Dr. Peggy Mason believes what she witnessed with the rats was definitively empathy, not just pro-sociality. In my interview with her, she explains her reasoning:

I think that the notion that we humans are evolutionarily close to rats is difficult for some to swallow. But for me, the idea that rats share affective states with us is far less surprising than would be a finding of human exceptionalism. Of course, the rodent version of empathy is likely to be experienced differently than the human version. So are your and my experiences of empathy, the color red or a wind chime. Words are just shortcuts for complex notions. In the case of empathy, the rats are
motivated to act in the interests of another, even without any obvious immediate payoff (the only payoff being internal, the warm glow of helping). Furthermore, our paper in Frontiers in Psychology shows that the motivation to help is blocked by blocking affective distress. That is the final nail in the coffin for me.

The idea to study rat behavior in this setting is quite novel. Dr. Mason reported that the idea to study rat empathy actually came about when one of her graduate students at the time, Inbal Ben-Ami Bartal, came to her with the idea, and she liked it. Then as the experiments worked, the helping part of her lab increased and around 2012, she made a switch to focus entirely on social behavior such as helping. Mason had always liked rats, and reported that her studies have only increased her admiration for rats. She said, “Watching them (rats) makes me think that if we could act out our biology more, we humans would be better off” (Mason).

Making humans better off is the focus of another body of research and practice that involves rats. Much to people’s surprise, rats are also on the forefront of humanitarian issues—or rather, being trained to help with humanitarian issues. “Anti-Persoonsmijnen Ontmijnende Product Ontwikkeling, [APOPO for short], is a non-profit organization that researches, develops, and implements detection rats technology for humanitarian purposes such as clearing landmines and detecting tuberculosis (APOPO).” Fittingly called HeroRATs, the African giant pouched rats used by APOPO are handled from the day their eyes open and they begin training soon after. Similarly to how people train dogs, the rats are trained with a clicker as a conditioned reinforcer. Over the span of their lives, each rat carries out their duties and when the rats decide it is time to retire, they spend their days frolicking outside and playing with handlers.

Now, you might be wondering, why TB? Why landmines? More importantly, why rats?

“An untreated tuberculosis patient can infect up to a dozen people a year. Almost 10 million people worldwide contracted TB in 2014, and some 1.5 million died from it. The disease is largely curable, but first it must be diagnosed. That’s where the rats come in” (Zackowitz). APOPO uses “specially trained African giant pouched rats to detect pulmonary tuberculosis in thousands of people per year” (Beyene). A trained rat can easily and effectively detect tuberculosis at a fraction of the time it takes a lab technician; what takes a HeroRAT twenty minutes can take up to four days in a laboratory (reference Figure 2). As of recently, over 404,758 samples have been screened for tuberculosis (APOPO). When roughly one in three people have been exposed to TB (Poling), there is a call for help that APOPO has answered.

Along with TB detection, HeroRATs are used to detect landmines. A similar training method is used, but instead of screening human sputum samples (Beyene), the rats are trained to detect TNT. Since the early twentieth century, millions of landmines have been planted, but many have been left unexploded, thus doing “great harm by denying civilians access to their homes and land, as well as... causing bodily harm, death, and psychological duress (Poling)”. Thankfully, rats have an excellent sense of smell and do not weigh enough to set off the explosives. Moreover, in the entire history of the program, no rats have passed away as a result of...
their work in the fields. Equally as impressive as the tuberculosis statistics, over 21,599,612 m² of land has been checked by APOPO’s rats (APOPO).

Out in the fields or in the labs, you will only find African giant pouched rats. Unlike black rats and brown rats, *Cricetomys gambianus* (the HeroRATs) are bred specifically for their work with APOPO. They can weigh up 1.5 kilograms, grow to three feet long (tail included), and live up to eight years (reference Figure 3); other rats typically weigh less than half a kilogram and live only one or two years. Additionally, the rats are native to Africa, thus they are resistant to most of the tropical diseases they might encounter (APOPO).

Haylee Ellis is one of the doctoral students who works with the APOPO rats in training (see Figure 4). She runs experiments with the rats as part of the behavioral analysis program. Ellis works directly with the rats, supervising the rat trainers, analyzing data, and trouble-shooting the research process all while still obtaining her PhD at Waikato University in New Zealand. When asked about the differences between tuberculosis and mine detection rats, she reports that the rats are currently randomly assigned to TB or mine detection depending on need, but there is some exciting research planned on whether it is possible to test rats to see if they would be better suited to TB or mine action, and if there is even a genetic component to this. What first got Ellis excited about APOPO were the rats. “I worked with lab rats for years, and have had my own pet rats since I was a child” states Ellis, “Rodents are very intelligent, adaptable animals in general, so I was excited to work with a similar but actually quite different species.” At APOPO, Ellis is given freedom and responsibility not usually available to someone who is at her
stage in their career. Behavior analysis traditionally focuses on autism and lab-based animal experiments, so her favorite part is being able to do something a bit different. “Personally, it’s very satisfying to be part of an organization that values integrity, and I can go home at the end of the day knowing I’m trying (not always succeeding) to help solve some very big problems” (Ellis).

The next time you hear the word “rat”, don’t associate it with filth or contagion; instead, remind yourself of everything rats are capable of and what they do every day to help make the world a cleaner, safer place. What we know today is only the beginning of our understanding of the amazing creatures that live among us. As a former rat owner who cared for my rodents every day for almost five years, I can confidently say they deserve a second chance. If you can look past a naked tail and a questionable past, rats will never disappoint. Their intelligent minds are constantly working to solve problems: whether it is freeing a fellow rat in a study or finding the fastest way to the food in your hand. In their short lives, my four rats—Bailey, Boo, Bones, and Brownie—gave me all the love and passion that drives me to study and write about rats today. Their constant playfulness and charm was so substantial that at every chance I get, I try to change someone’s mind and speak on behalf of rats. They are brilliant, empathetic, life-saving animals and in my opinion should be seen and treated as such.

Figure 5—Brownie and me

Works Cited


Instructor Reflections—Adina Sanchez-Garcia on Sabrina Ullman

Two things stood out to me about Sabrina during the first week of classes: 1) she loved the University of Miami—the campus as well as the diversity of students she found here, and 2) she had mad skills on her RipStik. Everywhere I went, there was Sabrina zipping along.

Then Hurricane Irma threatened. Sabrina and her classmates, most from the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, were enthralled as they followed the hurricane’s path and were excited at the prospect of actually experiencing a hurricane first hand. Then Hurricane Irma struck. Their excitement didn’t wane—even though it was a bit of a pain getting back into the swing of things in ENG 107 that semester.

This course, ENG 107, differs slightly from our other courses in that the students are focused on scientific and technical writing and have assignments that force them to address a variety of audiences in a variety of formats. Whether they are addressing a lay audience through their blogs or writing scholarly literature reviews, they need to understand the conventions of each. The penultimate assignment for this course was a scholarly literature review and, of course, Sabrina did extensive research on the effects of global warning on hurricanes!
Next step, write a practical and persuasive proposal to solve a problem—so back to that RipStik. On her many trips to and from class, Sabrina observed various areas of flooding around campus impacting students’ ability to travel to different parts of campus. And if you think it’s hard avoiding a puddle while on foot, try doing it on a RipStik.

Her solution? Planting rain gardens—beautiful and practical. Simple enough. As for Sabrina, keep an eye out for her; as a budding meteorologist and broadcast journalist, she may soon be the one to watch as a hurricane bears down on us.

Sabrina Ullman
“A Proposal to Reduce Flooding by Planting Rain Gardens at the University of Miami”
(Coral Gables Campus)
ENG 107—Fall 2017

I. Introduction
The purpose of this paper is to persuade Facilities Management at the University of Miami Coral Gables campus to allow the CommUnity Gardening Club to install two to four rain gardens. The rain gardens would be planted by the Hecht-Stanford walkway and near the Ashe building to reduce the amount of flooding in those areas that occurs whenever there is moderate rainfall. Since it is a private university and the club does not own the land, permission is necessary to plant the rain gardens. Facilities Management is in charge of all of the landscaping on campus and therefore, the decision would be up to you. The only assistance needed would be a financial contribution of $200 to $400 for the materials necessary. If granted permission and given the financial contribution, these rain gardens would be installed and maintained by the CommUnity Gardening Club, a student group of volunteers interested in gardening. Planting the rain gardens would take approximately two days, depending on the number of volunteers, and maintaining the rain gardens would be simple and inexpensive.

II. Needs Assessment
As a University of Miami student living on campus, I frequently have to walk across campus to commute to and from my classes. Within a couple of weeks of starting class this semester, I noticed that just about every time it rains, water gathers in two specific spots on campus. This flooding does not just occur when there is a hurricane or a heavy storm. Speaking from personal observation, any moderate rain causes a noticeable amount of water to flood these two areas.

The first area is located on a portion of the walkway between Hecht and Stanford residential colleges, as shown below. Whenever it rains more than a few inches, the shadowed area on the map on the right floods, with water anywhere from around half an inch to a few inches deep. The water seems to gather here due to having nowhere else to go. There are approximately 1,000 students who likely use this walkway, especially freshman living in Hecht and students in the theater department or other classes in the building. Although an alternative route may be taken by going across Fate Bridge and along the walkway by Eaton, that route provides no shelter from the rain. On the contrary, those who use the Hecht-Stanford walkway are able to walk under the shade along the front of the Shalala Center for a portion of the walk. This causes students going from the breezeway, Richter, Dooly, and any of the building on that part of campus to Hecht to have to choose between walking under constant rainfall for the entirety of their commute or walking under the shade of the Shalala Center but having to wade through water up to their ankles.
The second area I identified is a portion of sidewalk located on the intersection of the path from the Ashe Administration building to the McArthur Engineering building and the path from the Dooly Memorial building and the fountain at the end of Memorial Drive. The area affected is smaller than that of the Hecht-Stanford walkway, but the water gets deeper due to the surrounding sidewalk being higher up. The rainfall gathers and forms a pond of water on the sidewalk whenever there is moderate rainfall. While there are alternative routes in that area, if a student is going from Ashe to McArthur or vice-versa or perhaps to and from Dooly and Memorial Drive, this sidewalk is a straight, short path. Going a different way would add time to an affected student’s commute, requiring a longer walk in the rain and potentially making them late to class.
My research regarding this topic was purely observational due to a lack of topographic evidence. Topographic maps for the region use a scale of ten feet, and the difference in elevation for these areas is more subtle. I determined that the flooding has been an issue from personal experience and from discussing the issue with my peers.

III. Proposed Solutions
There are several ways to help reduce the amount of excess water from rainfall. The water can be intercepted and redirected, captured and stored, or allowed to soak into the soil [1]. Each method has different approaches, as described in the subsections below.

A. Intercepting and Redirecting the Water
The use of swales, French drains, or catch basins would intercept the water and redirect it to a suitable area. This creates a question of what can be considered a suitable area. Do you want storm water and runoff to just go into Lake Osceola? The water may be contaminated by nitrogen and phosphorus from the fertilizer used in the nearby landscaping [2], adding those chemicals to the lake. Aside from the need of a suitable area for the water, the strategy of intercepting and redirecting the water would also be costly and time-consuming.

Creating a swale, which is a wide, shallow ditch, would require a fair amount of digging and completely rearranging the soil in the areas. It would also need more room than the two specified areas can handle. Another option would be installing a French drain, an underground drainage device with a perforated pipe surrounded by gravel and connected to downspout pipes and sump pump pipes. The average national cost for installing a French drain is $1,000 to $1,500 [3], so this option would be too costly. A catch basin, which is a collection box with a slotted drain at the top and a drainage outlet at the bottom, would cost around twice as much [4].

B. Capturing and Storing Runoff
Rain water is also able to be collected through the use of rain barrels or cisterns. The runoff water from a roof can be captured and stored for future use, such as irrigation. Overall, rain barrels are cheaper but cisterns hold more. Either one would be beneficial in regard to water conservation.

Rain barrels can cost anywhere from $15 if you make one from a garbage bin to $200 for a specially designed wall-hugging, 80-gallon barrel. They collect water from rooftops via a downspout, but an inch of rain on a 20x25 square foot roof would fill most rain barrels 4-5 times [5]. Due to the amount of rain the specified areas receive, this alone would not be a practical solution. In addition, the flooding appears to be due to run-off from nearby land, not necessarily from the roof, so this would not resolve the issue.

A cistern, which is a much larger version of a rain barrel, would be able to collect plenty of the water, but the same issue would arise of the rainfall collecting on the walkways. Installing a cistern would cost a minimum of $2,000 [6] and involve either building a decently large structure above ground or digging fairly deep underground to install one.

C. Infiltrating Water into the Soil
By installing dry wells, a compost blanket or soil amendment, or rain gardens, more water would be able to be infiltrated into the soil. Whenever the amount of rain exceeds the amount of water that the soil can infiltrate, or absorb, runoff occurs unless there is a physical barrier to stop it. The flooding problem in the two specified areas is due to having a difference in ground level that causes there to be more water than the soil can infiltrate, so these solutions may resolve the issue.

A dry well, also known as an infiltration trench, is an underground storage area filled with gravel. The void spaces between the gravel store water until it is either infiltrated slowly into the ground or flows through an underdrain. A dry well needs to be in a permeable soil layer for it to be a good option, so it may not work well in the given areas, depending on the soil content. The cost of installing a dry well can be anywhere from $300 to over $5,000, likely on the more expensive end for the areas on campus because of the size and the amount of technical work needed.

Another approach to infiltration is to add organic matter or compost to the soil to reduce soil density and improve soil structure, making it more porous and susceptible to infiltration. This can be done either with low intensity, which uses a compost blanket or high intensity, by amending the soil. A compost blanket is a thin layer of compost that can be used to control erosion and retain sediment resulting from sheet-flow runoff. While the cost of this would be comparable to a straw mat, a compost blanket is not generally used where collected water flow occurs, such as in the selected areas.

Soil amendment is a more intense and costly version of a compost blanket that has the same effect but the results are seen more quickly. Like a compost blanket, soil amendment would not work for the given location. Both methods are visually unappealing, which would be an issue as well since the University of Miami is a college campus known for its beauty.

Rain gardens, on the other hand, are beautiful, inexpensive, and effective for infiltrating rain water. They can be made in many styles and sizes, but the general description is a landscaped depression placed in the path of runoff with perianal flowers and native vegetation that soak up rainwater. For the size needed, the cost would be $100 to $200 for each raingarden. Installation can be done by just about anybody, and maintenance is simple.

D. More on Rain Gardens

While planting a rain garden seems like an obvious solution, there are some potential issues that need to be addressed. The specified areas may not be able to have rain gardens installed due to problems with the soil and limestone. The soil may not be healthy enough to hold and infiltrate the water or for plants to grow in. In Florida, limestone is common, which would be difficult to dig through and require expensive, professional equipment.

The soil must be tested to see if amendments need to be made for the plants in the rain garden to survive. This can be done by digging a hole, filling it with water, and seeing how long it takes for the soil to soak in the water. If it takes less than 24 hours, the soil is suitable. A formal test may also be done for $15 to $75, but that is optional.

There may be limestone since that is common in Florida, but that would be at least three to four feet underground. Unlike many of the other options for storm water control, installing a rain garden would require digging a maximum of two feet deep, as shown in the diagram below.
IV. Recommendations

Coral Gables, Florida receives 60 inches of rain per year, well above the national average of 39 inches \(^{(10)}\). Most of this rain occurs during Florida’s rainy season, which is from May through October. During those months, the Hecht-Stanford walkway and the sidewalk near the Ashe building flood frequently, affecting approximately one in 15 students at the University of Miami.

After conducting research regarding the issue, I have determined that the best and most cost-effective solution to resolve flooding on campus would be to install rain gardens. My recommendation is to plant one next to each specified area. Since each rain garden would cost $100 to $200 to install, the total cost would be $200 to $400. The price would be on the lower end of the range if seeds are planted instead of having to buy the plants. Also, this is assuming that the soil does not need to be amended and that no underdrain or overflow piping is needed. There are pre-existing plants by the Hecht-Stanford walkway that are growing well, so the soil should be fine.

For a rain garden to be effective, the selection of plants is crucial. The plants must be native to the area to grow naturally without the use of fertilizer and pesticides. They must have deep and variable root systems in order to infiltrate the excess water that will be directed towards the rain garden. Habitat value and diversity is also needed to maintain a balance in the nearby ecosystem.

To prevent additional cost and maintenance after the installation, the plants must also be sustainable once established. Starting from a seed, the plants would need to be looked after at first, but once they are grown, a yearly trimming would suffice. The plants also need to be aesthetically pleasing to fit in with the rest of campus.

A few plants that meet the requirements for a rain garden in the given areas are Muhly Grass, Spider Lily, and Sunflowers. Muhly Grass is an easy to grow ornamental plant commonly placed in groups for a stunning visual effect \(^{(11)}\). Spider Lily is fast-growing and known for its fragrant, long-lasting white flowers \(^{(12)}\). Lastly, heat-loving sunflowers can grow in any soil type in a variety of warm colors \(^{(14)}\). There are plenty of other plants suitable for a Florida rain garden, but these three would be a good start.
Before a rain garden may be planted, 811 must be called to ensure that there are no underground utilities in the way. Once we get the green light and buy the materials, such as seeds, shovels, soil, and gloves, the CommUnity Gardening Club can install each rain garden in approximately two days. For the plants to grow successfully, this should be done in early spring. By the time school starts in August, we should see a reduction in flooding in the selected areas.

References

Instructor Reflections—Nicole Hospital-Medina on Kristi Brownlee

English Composition at The University of Miami empowers students by encouraging them to gather information, synthesize data, compare various points of view, and present results in writing. Kristi Brownlee’s essay, "Defining the 'Strong Black Woman,'" is an outstanding outcome of these empowering composition skills. In my spring 2017 ENG 105 class, I assigned students the task of investigating a stereotype on their own terms, and Kristi bravely dove into the project, producing a potent and pertinent piece of writing.

Kristi, a front row student in my class and a Gates Millennium Scholar, displayed a multidimensional comprehension of the world around her. Unafraid to make us uncomfortable, as a class we learned about the complications of our community and media through her voice. She amazed us with her intricate analysis of Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* album cover. Kristi served as a liaison between our little 105 class and the real world by inviting us to an event that she hosted along with The Office of Civic Community and Engagement entitled, *States of Incarceration: A National Dialogue of Local Histories.* Kristi’s writing reflects her sophisticated consciousness and passion. I am so honored to have been a part of her flourishing academic career.
Kristi Brownlee  
“Defining the ‘Strong Black Woman’”  
ENG 105—Spring 2017

America birthed the Strong Black Woman; she is a figment of our Founding Father’s imagination. The Antebellum South constructed a fantastical image of Black femininity that characterized her as: hard-working, moral, long-suffering, resilient, loyal, sassy, sexy, and self-reliant. This stereotype has created a perplexed and unattainable standard of what it means to be “Black” and what it means to be a “woman”. And, while this narrative has elicited positive and powerful images of Black womanhood, it has confined African-American women to the margins of perfection:

Stories of Black women’s limitless capacity to nurture others, their willingness to sacrifice for family, their unswerving loyalty, and boundless Earth Mother sexuality proliferate within historical and contemporary cultural lore. And, while inspiring respect and admiration, the Strong Black Woman is ultimately denied the ability to fail, to suffer, to fall from grace – for to demonstrate the human frailty afforded to others is to relinquish her power and become her antithesis: The Victim (Mataka).

Archetyped as Mammy, the Jezebel, or Sapphire, the Strong Black Woman stereotype leaves no room for versatility or individuality in the expression of Black womanhood. My personal interviews and observations confirm this reality and show that despite possessing complexity and distinctiveness, for every African-American woman, there is always the pressure to ascribe to this unreachable narrative. Thus, in descriptions of the Black woman, an overwhelming majority sees her as the very depiction of this stereotype.

Within in the media and my interviews of 10 African-American women, along with 10 participants from diverse backgrounds, it seems every African-American woman portrays some characteristic of a nurturer. She is the backbone of her family. Every family has a female figure that embodies Mammy. She was written fictitiously into American History as the slave master’s favorite “happy-go-lucky” caretaker. Depicted as a jolly, big-bosomed, sexless woman, Mammy made slavery seem more humane and suggested the fact that there could actually be such a thing as a happy and appreciative slave (University at Albany). Think of Aunt Jemima’s pancakes or Octavia Spencer’s Oscar-winning performance of Minny Jackson in The Help. Mammy personifies the ideal qualities of a strong African-American woman – one that has wisdom and has appreciation for everything. These aren’t qualities to disown. But, in an attempt to exist as an individual, those women who don’t want to have children and have the audacity to question the unjust fall short of the glory of Mammy. For example, while watching ABC as a part of my observation, even the strongest women – from Scandal’s Olivia Pope to How to Get Away with Murder’s Annalise Keating – have the essence of a nurturer. This expression of Mammy is subtle, yet in order to counter the domineering strength of two limitless lawyers, they have to possess a sort of softness.

In one particularly heavy scene from How to Get Away with Murder, Keating who typically purports an unremitting toughness, embraces her law intern, Wes, that is suffering the loss of his neighbor whom he’d befriended and fallen in love with. On the wooden staircase of Keating’s home, her embrace of Wes is long, a small stream of tears is shed from one eye, and her words of wisdom are soothing. Just as a mother would calm her child, Keating, while not displaying hyper-jolliness and unreasonable appreciation like Mammy, initiates her “mother-instincts”. Furthermore, she fulfills the Mammy archetype as she takes care of her fragile student in his time of need. Taken from my observations, in its
entirety, media representations of Mammy are present, but balanced with countering characteristics, such as toughness, as in the case of Annalise Keating. This could possibly be due to the social backlash of Mammy, and Black society’s quest to bring death to this oftentimes demeaning personification.

My interview process allowed for the participants to answer an open-ended question: “What is your view of the Black woman?” The African-American women interviewed were asked a slightly different question: “Do you ascribe to the Strong Black Woman stereotype?” I took down the specific adjectives used to describe African-American women and determined whether they aligned with the characteristics depicted in the stereotype. In analyzing the Mammy, personal interviews more so spoke to the ideal of being a Mother and “spreading love,” as one interviewee put it. Another interviewee mentioned that the first thing that came to mind when thinking of African-American women is “being a single mother.” Thus, while the nurturing aspect of femininity is an appreciated component of the Mammy archetype, when considering African-American women specifically, my interview reveals that with the nurturer role comes a burdensome responsibility to provide for her family alone.

Unlike Black society’s rejection of Mammy, the depiction of the Jezebel is one archetype that a social uproar will not erase. Her audacious sexuality and promiscuity runs rampant in television advertisements. Furthermore, my interview descriptions detail the African-American woman as possessing a “captivating beauty”; however, the Jezebel historically represents a false sense of sexual liberation. Her characterization is a means to justify systemic sexual violence against African-American women that is rarely acknowledged (Ferris State University, Jezebel). Statistics show that African-American women are 10% more likely to be victimized than their White-American counterparts, yet 61% of sexual violence goes unreported (Sharply-Whiting, 57). A Black woman’s inability to give consent is seen in the many sexual assaults of the slave master and has perpetuated a notion that African-American women – with their sensuous curves and Siren-like sex appeal – are too sexual to give consent (Sharply-Whiting, 67). They are always stereotyped as sexually available.

Television and other media outlets objectify all women, regardless of color. But, what is interesting is that objectification of an African-American woman is rooted in her being an “Earth Mother”, and it being her duty to give life to America, as she has done for centuries (Frank). Her supposed hyper-sexuality and promiscuity is merely a fantastical scapegoat for men – White and Black – to have her for his pleasure at all times. With this idea exists a certain loyalty that is hard to unravel, and this is seen in the unwavering love that African-American women have for their men. Take BET’s Being Mary Jane; the lead character’s sexual escapades are masked by this desire to have love – and when she finds it in a White man – it is somehow unfulfilling. Mary Jane expresses the desire for “Black Love,” even at the expense of her sexual well-being, which is seen in her careless rendezvous with an endless list of men.

One moment in the television series that spoke volumes to this hypersexual complex occurs during one of Mary Jane’s many escapades. She meets a British Black man in the midst of a chaotic and music-blasting nightclub, upon her first night in her new home of New York City. Despite the busyness and noisiness, they manage to make a deep connection driven by lust. Mary Jane in that moment is not hesitant or “playing hard to get,” rather she handles this approach with indiscipline and frankness. She rushes the conversation along, in order to jump right to her objective, which was, “to get the freak out of my system, before my husband comes”. She’s made a pledge to stop “auditioning boys for her bed” in order to find her husband. The most intriguing moment comes as the couple
arrives to Mary Jane’s hotel and her new partner realizes a strange look in her brown eyes. He instructs her to tell him what she wants, referring to sexual favors, and she responds, “Tell me you love me.” This is an interesting counter to the Jezebel archetype that simultaneously complements it. Mary Jane’s male counterpart objectifies her based on her sex appeal, which is illustrated in her silhouette-shaping black dress and red calf-extenuating stilettos. Yet, this Jezebel persona that Mary Jane epitomizes is actually a means to an end that attracts him on a deeper level. This complex example is an exception rather than a standard for African-American women displayed on BET who are typically portrayed with far fewer complexities and nuances.

Many commercials on this channel displayed African-American women dressed in revealing or form-fitting clothing to sell hair products, for example. Sex appeal, along with a diversity of hair textures and skin-tones, showcased a progression in ethnic diversity that divested from a Eurocentric ideal of beauty, but reminded the audience of the age-old idea that “sex sells”.

Interview descriptions, in a way, meshed these two Jezebel performances together and painted the Black woman as “undervalued,” “exposed,” and “self-sacrificing”. The descriptions speak to Mary Jane’s sacrificing of her body and the commercial models’ physical exposure for the purpose of selling a product. The interviewee descriptions provided richness to the discussion, making the stereotype less ‘black or white’. Rather than determining whether the interviewees ascribed to the Jezebel narrative, it became more important to decipher what attributes seemed more acceptable or befitting than others.

Sapphire, however, is the most contested among interviewees and the most masked in the media. Sapphire recreates the angry Black woman imagery – an African-American woman who is loud, rude, malicious, and overbearing. She is “tart-tongued and emasculating, one hand on a hip and the other pointing and jabbing, violently and rhythmically rocking her head” (Ferris State University, Sapphire). But, more than that, assigning this caricature serves as control mechanism to punish African-American women who violate the societal norms that encourage passivity, submission, and invisibility (Mataka). Her anger is typically directed toward African-American men to critique them for their failures and disloyal allegiances with other women not of African descent. Sapphire is at the root of every bottled-up, blood boiling jousting argument that is seen on television, yet TV shows such as FOX’s Empire buffer these intense argumentative scenes with a crying spell or a heartfelt story that provides context to her anger. Empire’s “Cookie” often fuels fiery quarrels with her ex-husband Luscious Lyon or her three sons; the audience isn’t taken aback by her anger but rather sympathizes with her, considering the unwavering passion and protection she has for family after being incarcerated for 17 years.

An episode that was premiering inspired my analysis of Cookie and her eccentric character. She is loud, in every sense of the word. In this particular episode, her clothing screamed dominance and fearlessness, with roaring leopard prints on her mesh top and matching jacket and gold stones in her hat resembling a crown. Her attitude was on par with her outfit as she engaged in a heated argument with her ex-husband that turned into literal destruction. Luscious had hit a nerve that sent Cookie spiraling out-of-control, destroying elegant glass tables, crystal light fixtures, and even a baby grand piano. Cookie’s character is an explicit embodiment of Sapphire, but her explosion is seemingly justified, as the scene ends with her in tears. Given the context of the scene, we see that she has unresolved feelings for Luscious that viscously haunt her. The balance in the scene is an example of Sapphire’s archetype being exploited for entertainment, but also being contested by Black society, so as to not ‘wholeheartedly’ feed into this negative stereotype.
Interviewees demonstrated no tolerance for Sapphire, embodied by Cookie, and wanted this archetype to die along with that of Mammy, but, the adjectives used to describe an African-American woman, words like “assertive”, “determined”, “not afraid”, and “go-getter”, actually seem to demonstrate an appreciation for the manner in which Sapphire rejects patriarchy and provides dimension to African-American women. Sapphire’s expression of emotion besides sorrow and dominance in her craft is often misinterpreted as indignation and bossiness, yet Sapphire is reflective of the feminists that have helped pave the way for African-American women to be independent “girl-bosses.”

Encompassing all forms of Black female strength, these three caricatures of African-American women each miss the margin in their ability to explain her complexity and personhood. Given the atrocities that African-American women have suffered, they are still the most marginalized and oppressed persons in American society. These stereotypes were created by a White patriarchal system that saturates media and propaganda with destructive images of minority populations, but more than anything, these archetypes confine African-American women to live up to a standard of strength, loyalty, sexiness, independence and nurturing, while also treading a fine line to reject notions of rudeness, dominance, dependency, and negligence. While media representations from the outlets I observed and the interviews confirmed the existence of the Strong Black Woman stereotypes, they also provided many interpretations of Black womanhood. These observations unveiled that despite wanting to hold on to the positive images that uphold the Strong Black Woman narrative, there is a desire to be versatile and see humanized versions of African-American women in the media.

Works Cited

Jasmine Mompoint will tell you what piece of art she chose to write about, the one that engaged her, spoke to her, that, frankly, made her angry. Observing and engaging with art, and in doing so becoming a better observer for all sorts of reasons, is a growing trend in academia. Medical and nursing students, for example, have been coming to Lowe to sharpen their observational skills and to improve doctor/nurse/patient communication.

We have this incredible museum right on campus and many students—like Jasmine—had no idea how wonderful and expansive this museum is until they went inside—after walking by dozens of times.

When I read Jasmine’s first draft, I knew right away that her essay was Audley Webster Essay Contest material. I told her: “You’re on fire Jasmine”. I felt like I was a witness to good writing, and I also had something to learn from her writing. In her essay, she takes me on her journey through the museum to this pop art piece that spoke to her, and then how some of John Berger and Jeannette Winterson’s ideas resonated with her experience.

Her essay is wildly creative, a page turner, and demonstrates an erudite understanding of the scholar’s ideas, as well as how the art made Jasmine think long and hard about the continued exploitation of woman in the media and our society. All that—from conversing with a piece of art. Jasmine also includes what many writers need to do sometimes: bleed a little bit, and share what’s going on inside the writer, the viewer—when a piece of art grabs us, and invites conversation.

Jeannette Winterson, one of the art critics Jasmine read for this assignment claims that “If art, all art is concerned with truth, then society in denial will not find much use for it”.

To the contrary, Jasmine definitely is not in denial of some hard truths, and found significant use of her time at the Lowe Art Museum. She wrote an essay that is artistic in its own right, delightful to read, and instructive for anyone who reads her full essay.

Jasmine Mompoint

“I once thought I was beautiful. Then I saw a magazine.”

ENG 105—Fall 2017

The squat, small, awkwardly angular shaped building stared at me from across the two-way street and I stared back. Sun rays piercing boldly through the sky, ready to strike someone, anyone, or maybe just me. We were in a silent showdown; someone standing a ways down the sidewalk would have looked upon us, the Lowe Art Museum and I, and seen something resembling a western film; gun in holster, hand on hip, cowboy hat in hand. We were battling over who would prevail, the artwork hidden behind its walls or me, the person who had come to see it. I do not think the museum knew I would not be as everyone else was: haughty, arrogant, similar to, as Winterson calls it, “some monstrous Roman Tyrant.” (14) A person who would come not to appraise the art, but to objectify it. One who looks beneath or behind the beautiful oil painting or the dark shading of the charcoal, searching for meaning in the painting in connection with their lives, that probably does not exist, ignoring what the art is truly trying to say. I told myself that this would not be me, for Winterson’s words had touched me deeply, and I knew that in acting as just about everyone else did, in believing that I myself was superior to the art I had come to see, I would only be cheating myself. Cheating myself out of the almost out-of-body experience that comes with viewing art. Cheating myself out of the journey to another world, time, and place, of which
the artist was attempting to take on. Therefore, with this strange push and pull dynamic I had found myself to be in with the Lowe Art Museum, I told myself that maybe I was not there to prevail over the artwork, but rather to, for the time I was there, merge my own life with the life of the artwork.

Connecting with the art was challenging. Not because of the artwork itself. With such talented artists and impressive creations, there were several pieces that enticed me in countless different ways. No, it was just about everything else that made it difficult to fully immerse myself in the art on display. The “thick curtain of irrelevancies that screen the painting from the viewer.” (1) mentioned by Jeanette Winterson in her own essay on Ecstasy and Effrontery. The “low lights” and thick glass that kept the art in their own world and me in mine. The footsteps of the guards pacing close beside me, irritated me to no end—eyes focused on the side of my face, burning holes into the back of my neck. I suppose they were waiting to see me pick up one of the 12 x 14 paintings hanging on the wall and attempt to stuff it into my purse. I was not truly connected. Maybe if the “thick curtain of protection (was) taken away; protection of prejudice, protection of authority, protection of trivia, (then) even the most familiar of paintings (could) begin to work their power.”(10) But it wasn’t. The typical trivialities surrounding art were as tangible to me as the art itself and, because of it I did not feel as though I had the time to “fall in love” with the artwork as Winterson demanded. Luckily with the painting I saw, I didn’t have to.

The image that drew me in was the picture of the yellow girl. Constructed by Mel Ramos and entitled “Tobacco Rosie,” the screenprint encapsulates a nude woman, posed stiffly on two boxes of “Phillip Morris” cigarettes, holding a cup of coffee. The last notion is an almost comical aspect of the picture; a notion I suppose taken to maybe normalize the model’s actions in the screenprint; as if posing nude atop an open box of cigarettes, cup of joe in hand, is an everyday action for a woman. For a minute I stood in front of Ms. Rosie, and could not understand why exactly my eyes were drawn to her delicate fingertips, wrapped around the small, plain white cup. Then however I thought, that in art, or in a painting, there are no mistakes. The strangest of elements might be included within the piece, and, at first glance, might have no relevancy to the overall message being portrayed. However, this is not the case. I personally feel as though this, understanding that art can have aspects to it one does not necessarily understand, is one of the largest elements of art people struggle with. Believing there is no meaning behind something that has no meaning to them. This egocentrism disrupts our connections with art. If we only looked through the eyes of the artist, the truth of the artwork might rise above the surface. Bringing such
thinking back to Mel Ramos’s painting, I imagined the eye he might have beheld when looking at the painting, and thought, that coffee cup is no mistake, no object half-heartedly included in the screenprint to add depth to the painting.

No.

Instead, in my eyes, the coffee is there to humanize the woman. Make her seem more natural in such an unnatural pose. It is there to make Ms. Rosie look sexy. What man’s fantasy would not be fulfilled if he stepped into his kitchen one morning and there, sitting at the table was a nude woman, beverage in hand? I can almost guarantee not a single hand would be raised. The coffee sends a subtle message that rings true throughout our society. Women, do not get a moment just to themselves, in which they can relax and live their plain, unglamorous life. They must always be poised, beautiful, sexy, seductive. They must be ready for the camera first thing in the morning and perfectly coiffed even before going to bed. No one likes a woman who does not keep up with herself right?

My brown orbs travelled away from the cup held in the models fingertips and ran down her wrist; paused at her elbow and changed directions, making their way up Ms. Rosie’s pale arm, around her shoulder, resting on her face. She was staring at me in almost challenging way. Daring me to back away from the powerful message she represented. The model in Mel Ramos’ screenprint, “Ms. Rosie” had eyes that drew me in, eyes resembling a window pane. Look into her orbs and one would be looking at all the secrets hidden behind her eyes, fall into her emotions like one would fall into a bottomless pit. Look into her eyes and just lose yourself.

Her eyes screamed out Berger’s words, that “every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. (Or in this case a screenprint) Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinite of other possible sights.” (Page 99. Berger. The art of seeing) It was this sight that pulled me in because I looked at the screenprint with the eyes of just about every woman who had ever walked the Earth did, and saw the same story. Confidence. Awkwardness. Beauty. Ugliness. Advertisement. Exploitation. Mel Ramos knew that there was an infinity of sights that he could have captured, but chose this one. To throw light on the exploitation of women in advertisement and the normalizing of oversexualization in the media. I saw the story.

And then she spoke to me.

Ms. Rosie, the model in the screenprint, was comfortable in her position, sitting forever in the uncomfortable way that she does, posed atop two ridiculously large boxes of cigarettes. She had gotten used to men ogling her; pretending to search for the meaning of Mel Ramos’ screenprint when in reality, their eyes searched for her breasts. Ms. Rosie had on her poker face for this purpose; so that she could stare back at those staring at her and look bored, at ease, uncomfortable, sexy, and constipated all at the same time. She spoke of how the advertisement business had used her for the ad, as a body not as a real woman. Did she mind? Of course she did! But what could she do? She was just a small and yet, essential part of the advertisement industry, an industry that has used women to their advantage. It’s a business who uses whatever tactics it must to get its products to appeal to consumers.

Furthering Ms. Rosie’s message to me is the blatant oversexualization of women not only in the advertising industry, but in our society as a whole. In taking a step outside of my own reality to observe the image, I could truly see the message Berger was trying to make in his dissertation on “Ways of Seeing.” Berger had blatantly expressed that, “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relationship between things and ourselves.” Resulting in our vision being “continually active, continually moving, continually holdings things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are” (98, Berger “Ways of Seeing”) Truth was found beneath John Berger’s words, deep down within me.
Looking at Ms. Rosie perched atop her box of cigarettes made me think of the countless aspects of our society I had noticed were unfair to women dating back to my childhood. It made me question why a woman’s full nude body could be showcased in film so openly, while the male counterpart’s dignity would forever be preserved. It made me wonder why female characters in cartoon movies were drawn so voluptuously more times than not—because of course the first message we want to send to young girls is how inadequate their own bodies are. Reflect back on the ample curves of cartoon characters like Jessica Rabbit, Betty Boop, or ‘Mom’ in the children’s show Dexter’s Laboratory and consider just why the aforementioned women are drawn so sensually. All stemming from different time periods, 1980, 1930, and 1990 respectively, the timeline shows that the oversexualization of women is not a new guest to the table, and is most likely not on its way out either. It made me think of Playboy calendars and how a different nude woman was used to represent each month out of the year, so that one could fantasize about one woman for a whole thirty days before moving on to the next. It made me think of why in the hell someone would think to put a nude woman on top of a cigarette box.

Because it works.

Because sex, and sexuality, and anything that falls beneath this umbrella has become infused into just about all aspects of our society. Saving the ‘innocent’ minds of Americans from perversions has turned everything into a perversion. Seeing images like Ms. Rosie paraded about our society has made people fantasize constantly about what they can and cannot have, what they want. To see beautiful women with no imperfections, no self-consciousness, no holds barred, leaves people to fantasize and question just why they cannot have someone in such a way. Who wouldn’t want to have the perfect woman, be the perfect woman?

It works.

Posing Ms. Rosie atop the box of cigarettes plays to men’s ego and evokes the desired emotions of women. By just buying this box of cigarettes you have somehow displayed your manhood in the utmost of ways—smoking is what a man does right?—and are simultaneously permitted to take a sneak peek at a free pair of breasts each time you go out for a smoke. The health risks melt away. Instead of companies being honest with consumers about the dangers of smoking or the ingredients stuffed into the cigarette sticks, their ads instead focus on the social effects of smoking; how cool you will look, how much everyone else does it and therefore you should too, how sexy it is. One might believe these types of social pressures have no effect on their willingness to buy an advertised good, in this case a box of smokes, but it does. The companies play to the unconscious; ignite the craving we have locked away at the base of our brain or the self-consciousness believed to be rid of since grade school. The anxiety that we all have buried deep within the base of our brain that we are not attractive enough, fit enough, smart enough, etc. is targeted with these advertisements, and the ad companies all now it.

It works for women. The advertisement of Ms. Rosie might not evoke such a mass sexual desire from the female population as it does in the male, but it does evoke sexual envy. Women should want to look like her, be thin or voluptuous like her, have hair like her, etc. This is dangerous, and has been for a long time. To have an entire population of people searching desperately for the unattainable, because, despite the extensive conversation I had with Ms. Rosie that lazy Sunday afternoon in the Lowe Art Museum, she does not exist. Advertisement companies have the fuel for the fire. All they need to do is light a match. Ms. Rosie is a photoshopped, edited version of what a real woman looks like. She has perfectly coifed hair and no split ends. She has flawless skin and long shapely legs,
not short stubs or too large thighs. She does not need a push-up bra like the rest of us to entice men. She has no love handles. She is perfect. She is not real.

Mel Ramos captures the basic theology of American society in his screenprint, which is how we are constantly striving to achieve the impossible; centering our dreams and fantasies around false delusions when amazing things are already in our own reality. Ramos captures the inner emotions of how a woman in the advertisement business might feel—exploited, helpless, apathetic, numb. The screenprint does not just speak to me, but to all women, I think, if only they took a minute to listen. The screenprint is real.