Perspectives: Miami Through a Different Lens, 2018, Volume 2

University of Miami

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Dear Reader,

We hope you enjoy this year’s edition of Perspectives: Miami Through a Different Lens. In an attempt to gain a better understanding of the society we live in, we’ve woven together the stories of University of Miami students and those of various marginalized groups. This year, we spoke to men in the Everglades Correctional Institute and women in the Halle Place residential home who are completing their journey to re-enter society. Writers at UM and ECI shared their thoughts during the semester on a common piece of literature: George Orwell’s 1984. They were able to foster a thoughtful and creative dialogue with their respective partners. Communicating with people in ECI and Halle Place resulted in a greater understanding of other points of view. We have also included reflective papers on students’ experiences with their ECI partners, demonstrating the transformative effect the exchange had on all involved.

This journal also includes selected works from students enrolled in upper-level English classes at UM. These submissions highlight the students’ passions for all things justice—they speak of a history of societal wrongs and the actions that may rectify them. Throughout the collection are several pieces of artwork and photography as well. Jimmy Green, a writer in a Trauma Journaling class at Dade Correctional Institution, created the portraits featured in the Halle Place section. Jason is the artist behind our cover, and another piece of his is included in the questionnaire section.

As editors, we have had the meaningful experience of reading through all of these insights and experiences from so many different voices. We expect that you too will appreciate this opportunity to learn about the experiences of our students as well as the men and women of ECI and Halle Place.

Sincerely,

ENG231/SOC 291 Fall 2018
Letters from ECI: Exchange for Change

The University of Miami and Everglades Correctional Institution collaborated in a program hosted by Exchange for Change, where each University of Miami student corresponded with a letter-exchange partner from the prison. Through this program, both partners wrote under pseudonyms. Each week, students wrote a letter to their partners on a variety of topics. Both classrooms read 1984 by George Orwell. The text served as a point of discussion for many of the students’ letters, although we often chose to write about other topics as well.

These exchanges were a way for those in prison to feel connected to the outside world. Through the exchange program, this often-voiceless community could have an outlet through which they could have their voice be heard and paid attention to. For the university students, this program served to expose them to a marginalized community that they may not have previously had any interactions with. It is a way for all involved to become more politically aware, open-minded, accepting, and less judgmental. A learning and bonding experience for the partners on both sides of the wall, the exchange allowed us to better understand each other, despite our apparent differences and distances.

Each University of Miami student selected a letter, or part of a letter, from their partner that most impacted him or her. This section features those excerpts.
Bull to Gemini:

This excerpt is from Bull’s letter to Gemini on November 1:

Being the oldest of my siblings and in prison feels like such a terrible example. But I still motivate them and give them the best advice I can. The second oldest (my first brother) says he still listens to me and looks up to me. But I’ve been told by outsiders that ‘I have no right to tell my siblings or anyone else how to live their lives look at where I’m at.’ I rebuke this type of mentality because there is a lot of knowledge behind these walls, great character, and overall just some good, normal people. Of course, if I knew then what I know now I’d be better off. Now though since I have to live out my situation as I find...it important to keep spreading that knowledge and leadership and be a man.

This excerpt is from Bull’s letter on November 8:

I wouldn’t choose to commit crime again, but the consequences of my actions have been worth it. I’ll never let these people get me in here ever again. I live for a reason, with a cause, to develop a message from the knowledge I acquired in here. Many other men and I in the system have made up our minds that this is not the life we were destined to live forever. We shall survive one of the most traumatic instances some of us will ever face. Realistically this will not be on 100% recovery rate for some guys they may have to take this trip another time or two before they get it. It’s possible for the mindset of life to be different every time around.
David Rhodes to Charlie:

Dear Charlie,

Happy Halloween

How are you doing?

I just know that you enjoyed your trip to Philly, as I read it wasn't too hot and relaxed. I'm sure that it was more hectic on vacation than your student schedule. I went to Philly once, when I was stationed at our Embassy in Wash. D.C. A long time ago when the dinosaurs still roamed the planet.

As you can imagine there is not too much going on here. The same routine day in - day out, even the weekends are run on that timeless schedule. Thank goodness there are TV's, radios, and now those tablets. Otherwise the doc wouldn't need a death ray, we would all die from boredom. Wouldn't that save a lot of taxpayers' money?

Okay, let's start with this boring book that I can't get into. After a few pages I loose total interest in it.

However, I read your letter with undivided attention. You can easily replace the name Oceania with the following names of countries: North Korea, China, Russia, the entire Middle East.

I'm certain that we both can agree on the next statement. The economy is very stable, the jobless rate is going down, and the Dow is gaining points. Signs that investors have confidence in both the government and the Donald.
Ah, now let's move on to what I can describe as "you will love to hate my opinions again"!

Why would you even try to change the political system under the Donald? I believe that there is nothing wrong with him being president! But what is wrong is this 2-party system in the USA... that is the problem!! It's either blue or red, hot or cold, high or low... under this system there is no middle ground, and the current politicians see as if making a compromise is being the weak link in the system... so we have a constant stalemate... the winners are the politicians and their cronies. The losers are the people, the working class.

Most European countries, Belgium included, have at least 7 major political parties... it gives the people more options to choose from... and no party will ever get the 51%... so the winner will have to make deals, compromises in order to make a coalition and govern the country.

Ah, another good one! Now what makes you think that the Donald is not qualified to be president? Let me start a little list with people similar to the Donald... lack of political experience... Governor and president Ronald Reagan, Governor Arnold... I guess being a movie star makes you qualified? Governor Jesse Ventura... a WWF wrestler!? Oh, don't forget Hillary... what made her qualified to be a Senator... just by being on Bill's coattails?! The only thing what's wrong with Donald is he will not stick to the script.
But then if the Donald would stick to the script he would become just another politician... another mouthpiece for the party... don't forget that almost 60 million people voted for him... his base, his supporters, people who were tired of the same "make lots of promises then do nothing" politicians. The people voted! Instead of fighting and doing everything possible to undermine him, why not work together, as it suppose to be! and get the best trade deals, make the borders safe, get a universal health care system, get the jobs back!
get people elected who will compromise and who will represent the people... who will unite instead of divide, who will build a bridge instead of destroy...

I believe that I have made the strongest point to say that the Donald is... right now the best man to lead this country.

Warm greetings,

David Rhodes
David Rhodes to Madam President:

*Excerpt from letter #5 written on October 25th, 2018*

Last week the newsletter organized an essay contest. The topic: ‘A memorable Holiday or moment’ and I believe that I have a story that fits...

are you ready to become my essay judge?

**Part I**

1939... The Germans invaded Poland using their “Blitzkrieg” tactic. Since then, the rest of Europe was on an edge. Countries mobilized.

After observing the destruction and deaths of the Great War, the world was convinced another war of that magnitude would never happen again. Countries’ militaries were mostly used to quell civil unrest and assist during natural disasters. While the world stood by and watched, Germany built their armament, and in the morning hours of May 10, 1940, the Earth at the eastern border between the small kingdom of Belgium and Germany trembled.

Rumblings could be heard in the distance as the German army was on the move. The Belgian military with their outdated tanks, trucks, planes and weapons were outmatched by the roaring advancing German juggernaut. Amid fierce fighting and some heroic resistance, Belgium surrendered on May 28th.

In 1942 with the tide turning against Germany, my Grandfather along with other able-bodied men were rounded up, forced on trains and transported into already war ravaged Germany to work in their factories.

Early 1943, almost every night the allies continued their air bombardments on German cities, bridges, electrical plants, and factories. In the city of Stuttgart, bombs rained from the sky, factories were leveled and Grandpa became a causality of friendly fire. He was buried in a 10 person mass grave.

**Part II**

I was born May ’63. My loving grandmother raised me; she had re-married after the war ended. By sheer coincidence his name was also Rifin. We lived in a turn of the century built old farmhouse. There were amenities, however, the first ten years I had to use an outhouse.
The Grandpa that I knew died after a long battle with an illness when I was 7. Grandma told me many happy stories of the Grandpa I never met. While talking about him I could see that sparkle in her eyes.

Shortly after I turned 17 I decided to join the Belgium Air Force. I got stationed with a small Belgium detachment at one of the largest US Air Force bases in Germany. Grandma showed only little interest in the gifts I brought her... so I wanted to do something very special for her... I brainstormed... I had a crazy idea... in my mind I started to formulate a plan.

Could I pull this off?

With the assistance of the US military, I was able to acquire the information I needed.

Part III

One sunny weekend I set out on a 150-mile discovery trip. When I obtained the information, city officials included a detailed map with directions marked. Wrong turns and dead ends are the norm on exploratory trips. But finally I found what I set out to look for. Now the hard part: Convincing Grandma to come on a trip to Germany with me.

In the summer of 1985, we started our sightseeing tour. Alternating between highway travel and the rolling hills of the scenic route, we reached the city of Stuttgart. A few of the earlier wrong turns remained, found parking and hand in hand we walked along the well manicured green lush lawns.

Author Spotlight Bios: David Rhodes

Early tragedy, walking circles, making differences.

My memoir in 6 words.

Hi, I’m David Rhodes, 55 years old, born in Belgium, a small country in Western Europe, raised by my loving grandmother. I grew up in a small farmer’s town, where luxury is measured by how old... or how the farm tractor was. At 17 years old, I joined the Belgian Air Forces. By the time I was 23, I got a plush assignment and got stationed at our Embassy in Washington DC. Bought a customized old van and traveled up and down the eastern part of the United States during my off-duty days. My struggles with personal issues brought me to Florida, where in ‘89 I ran afoul of the law. That’s the first part of the 6 words, the next 2 are -- or is -- the time you could say “wasted” in prisons all across the state. In 2015, I participated in a Belgium TV series about Belgians in foreign prisons. After the series aired on Belgium TV, I received tons of mail from strangers who now became my friends. And I became social again. Prison did not make me into a bitter person; au contraire, I’m one of the happiest people in our Quad, and I like to share those smiles. My motto is "enjoy the little things life has to offer."
Hand in hand, we stood still, both with tears rolling down, mine because I could present her with this special gift. Grandmas of both: sadness of having found the long lost love, and happiness of finally being able to say goodbye.

This will always and forever be my most memorable moment.

Standing in front of an old stone marker, engraved 6 lines from the top:

“Rifin Uuttersprot (Rel) & Mörz 1943”

Othello to Ashakiran:

Like you, I have an intense dislike for injustice. My “Day of Hope,” I am not an innocent person nor am I innocent of my crime. I learned about injustice the worst way; by being unjust. At the time I didn’t view my actions as being so, but the truth is what I did was wrong, and I meant pay my debt to society. I do believe that I am a changed man and that I have earned a new chance. I don’t want to mislead you. I rather people hate me who I am than to love me for pretending to be someone else. I am not a “sick monster” but I did do something wrong. There are injustices that felons and ex-felons must face. The right to vote once more

Othello to Murphy:

For some years now, I have been living in a community of men from various backgrounds. I have seen the best and worst of man. I have met righteous men who have sinned and seen sinners do noble acts. I see the good and bad in people and realize that I am the same. To live a life of honestly you must have clear eyes and an open heart.

I will not repay your honesty and trust with intolerance. That’s not love. A long time ago I made a promise to show love no matter what. I will not let any
difference of opinion affect our exchanges. Please keep being open and honest with me. I promise to do the same.

**Author Spotlight Bios: Othello**

I want to be known as a person who embraced the good inside himself. The good part of one’s self that we all inherit. The idealism and naivety of a child. As a man who made mistakes but did not let those mistakes define him.

I am a Hispanic male that has been incarcerated for several years. In that time, I have lived in close proximity to a lot of different men. Some have become good friends, mentors, role models, and leaders that any person would follow. Together we have helped one another to become accountable. Because of these men I have gratitude for the small blessings that every day brings. I now see the silver lining in the limitless sky.

I threw myself into a dark pit and found hope. True hope, a belief that an expectant outcome will occur. I hope to be a good man. The belief is that if I continue to choose what is good, then I will become good and Righteous. I am here now to serve others with kindness, humility, and respect. In short, I want to be known as someone who gives back to society.

**Montana to Dolphina:**

Hello Dolphina,

I think in here and out there, there exist a little rebel in all of us. In here I do favor the mindset of Julia, but at times, looking back, I can see where I’ve pushed back against the system.

Oceania is like the Mafia, both operate outside the law and if you disagree with either, you simply vanish.

And yes, in here Big Brother is always watching. So many cameras these days, but I welcome that and I think, in here, there should be more. The cameras deter crime. People are not so quick to break the rules when they know the camera will catch it.

Following the rule has always been easy for me. Even when I was a child I never really had a problem following the rule.
Even now, I’ve gone my entire sentence thus far without a single write up. (13 years so far). And even though I am in prison, I still consider myself a man of integrity.

I am guilty of my crime, but that doesn’t define who I am. All that does is point out that at one time in my life I broke the law and now I am paying for it.

I am thankful that I only have 56 months left because, like Winston, I am growing tired of Big Brother (prison) and I’m ready to leave here and start trying to rebuild my life. I’ll be 51 years old when I walk out the gate. I have no savings and no money. I’ll have 14 years until I reach 65 and that’s not a lot of time to build a retirement.

That’s why I want to start my food truck. That, and my novels I hope will be enough so that I may retire at 65 and enjoy a world free from prison. I have so many places I want to go and so many things I want to see!

I want to watch the ball drop on news years eve in time square in New York! I want to see the Grand Canyon and the redwood forest! I would love to see your homeland and Israel!

In here and in the book 1984, everyone seems to have lost their sense of adventure. Winston has his journal but Julia, what does she have? And everyone has seemed to have lost any ambition! It’s like everyone’s spirit is so oppressed that it’s ceased to exist.

I relate to Julia in here because for now I keep all my thought to myself. And I try my best to hide what I think because my mind will never conform to this world. I do not believe in mass incarceration, or the oppression of people. But because I don’t want to do or say anything that could prevent me from going home. That is my focus and I can’t say or do anything that could hinder that. I’m still not done with the book but so far it looks like Winston nor Julia will flee and head over to Eurasia. They both believe they are soon to be caught and killed, but yet they do nothing to try and flee. It’s like a frog in a pot of water. You turn on the heat and the frog will never jump out. It will sit there and be boiled alive. And so far that is Winston and Julia.

It’s always a joy reading what you have to say. And I look forward to your next response and prompt. Until then, please be blessed!

Dreamer to Juliana:
Today is October 31st, 2018 and as the divided states of America celebrates Halloween, my mind wanders to a state of concern. And I wonder, and the thoughts of Oceania come to me. How really different, is the government that oppresses the millions of us who are being held captive behind these razorwired fences, and the one in which Winston finds himself in? You say that you really don’t want to be Winston or Julia, but although you may not realize it, you already are one of them. And your thoughts are not jumbled, and yes I can make sense of them. You say that you believe in doing what’s right and you associate that with Winston.

Author Spotlight Bios: Dreamer

I am a proud father of two sons ages 23 and 20. I am a poet, a songwriter, a singer in a Spanish worship church band at Everglades Correctional Institution. I grew up in a border town in South Texas, without a father. My childhood was tough, but I have always been a Dreamer. I enrolled with the exchange for change writing program about 3½ years ago, and this program has truly been a blessing because the department of corrections has stopped funding educational programs, and no writing program such as this one existed in prisons of Florida. I have also taken a songwriting class, which allowed me to release the song that had always existed inside my heart. An Exchange For Change student volunteer from UM taught this class. Our songs were recorded and showcased last year at the Frost School of Music with a video showing the lyrics of our songs. I have taken poetry, memoir, even Shakespeare, as well as creative writing, Flash Fiction with an FIU professor, and film class, and I am going to continue participating in Exchange for Change because I fly free on the wings of my pen! I will never get to physically get out from behind these razor wire gates, yet I have been “free” since joining the Exchange for Change family.

My letters to my UM partners truly explain who I am, but my most cherished title that truly defines me is a “DAD!” Although I have spent the past 20 years of my life behind the razor wire gate, I have always been a loving Dad to my precious 2 sons. I have “held” their hands through the “storms” of their lives. You see friends, a Father’s love can never be imprisoned, and I love my sons! My own father abandoned me, and never told me “I love you, son.” He expressed his love through falling tears as he laid on his deathbed, intubated while I spoke into his ear telephonically as my youngest brother held his phone to his ear. We made peace.

As far as my cultural background, I am an American citizen of Mexican Descent, 48 years young! I chose “Dreamer” as my pseudonym because I have dreams of my own, and because of the Dreamers that Trump wishes to deport. We are all dreamers in a sense; it is what motivates us to go on, even in the midst of the “storms” of life. In closing, my dream is that our exchange will be more than just another class assignment. And although you shall never know my true identity, nor I yours, God knows, and you shall always be in his prayers.
Invictus to Antares:

Dear Antares,

I send greetings from Beautiful Downtown Everglades, a “Gated Community” just minutes from the famous Miccosukee Hotel and Casino. The other day, I took a walk around the compound... I checked out the 12 foot high cyclone fences topped by the 3 foot roll of razor wire. There were no watch towers, or guards with high powered rifles keeping an eye on things, but we did have a white sedan with Black tires slowly making the rounds. Certainly a real shotgun was...um...riding shotgun.

Heard the chick chick boom- pop-pop-pop pop pop...pop of gunfire on the range and the yelping of the bloodhounds in their nearby kennels. So I went back to my dorm and made a note in my journal: “The perimeter is secure! If things continue to spiral out of control, we should be able to stop the locals from trying to sneak in and steal our food.” Ha!

On November 15, Invictus wrote the following poem to Antares. He was inspired by W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939” and introduced the poem by saying:

“If Orwell had been sitting next to Auden in the bar on fifty-second st., What would he have said?

That’s an interesting thought -- W.H. Auden was writing about the horror of a world war that was about to be unleashed, while 1984 was a reflection upon where the world might be headed after the conflict was ended, and what would civilization do for an encore.

The poem entitled 'Hardline Views' would have been my contribution to the conversation if I had been there at the bar with them. :)

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Hardline Views
By Invictus

Each time we turn on the evening news
Our stress levels can begin to rise –
As images of a world gone mad abuse
Our sensibilities and assault our eyes.

And yet, as in the days of Noah,
People just running to and fro –
As punch drunk as Rocky Balboa
Trying to shake off another blow.

If the “signs of the times” were neon lights
Perhaps then it would get our attention –
Or revolution reduced to sound bites,
Labeled “Time for an intervention.”

Well we’ve got wards and rumors of wars,
And those earthquakes in diverse places -
The devil roars while the world ignores,
The signs of the times flashed in our faces.

Can we be so blind that we cannot see
That the handwritings there on the wall –
And what’s unfolding as prophecy
Let those who stand take heed less they fall.

Yet some Gospel of prosperity,
Is what seems to be filling the pews –
And so many of us just refuse to see
Those revelations on the evening news.

There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth
On a day when it’s least expected
For those who chose the path of disbelief
By when the world of truth was reflected.

Well I know I’d be much more popular
If I wrote things people wanted to hear
Or if I chose to hold a seminar
With words catered to the itching ear.

But it’s not me that’s being rejected
It’s all plainly written there in the book –
The Word of God is being neglected,
Perhaps it’s time we all took another look.
Mr. Wall Street to Ronnie Rossi:

I am dearly intrigued with your interest in all things concerning “Mr. Wall Street.” Well, let’s begin by saying the transition of leaving Africa and growing up in America has been nearly a 500-year ordeal. I was born in Tampa, Florida (1960) and I am still catching hell like my ancestors did when they first came to America.

But you know what, America has been good for me, I just haven’t been good always for America.

I graduated from Florida A&M University in June 1981 with a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering. I pledged a Greek fraternity while I was at Florida A&M University.

I pledged Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, you know who I’m talking about. The smooth, cool players who wear the red and white and do their steps and drills with a “walking cane.”

Well, my fraternity brothers gave me the name, “Mr. Wall Street” because I was always about my business (selling drugs), and I was always dressed and pressed like a Wall Street corporate titan. Shoes shining, well groomed, and calling shots like a real gangster, that’s how I became Mr. Wall Street.

After graduation I was offered a job with Lockhead Martin Aerospace Corporation in New Orleans. We were designing and building space capsules and structures for the international space station. I also was a senior test engineer for NASA in New Orleans, manufacturing the “space shuttle external tanks,” a twenty-six-million-dollar product.

I was employed by NASA when challenger (blew-up), exploded in 1986. That is before you were born. I lived in New Orleans for many years. As a matter of fact, I actually bought my first home in New Orleans. I was living in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina flooded the city in August 2005. I have been around.
ECI: Questionnaire

University of Miami students put together a questionnaire to help them better understand their partners. Four E4C writers answered the questions posed to them in the questionnaire: Dreamer, David Rhodes, Jason, and Montana. This section contains the questions on the questionnaires and these four partners’ answers to the questions.
1. Who has been the most impactful person in your life? Why?

Dreamer:

My mother, because she taught me how to never give up, even in the midst of the “storms” of life. She showed me unconditional love and sacrifice, at times going without meals in order for us to have an extra portion. She instilled in me the act of forgiveness and courage.

David Rhodes:

My grandparents. I grew up with them, as my dad at the time had more love for his big bottle of beer than for his family. So, when I was born, my grandmother took me home with her. Grandpa died when I was about seven, but I do remember all his life stories. One of his sayings I will never forget and apply to my daily routines, each time I find myself in front of an obstacle. Grandpa used to say: “Always be smarter than the object you are working with.” Grandma also taught me valuable life lessons.

Growing up in Belgium in the 70s was not easy. We didn't have indoor plumbing until I turned 10 years old. I had to use an outhouse, a coal stove to heat up an old farmhouse, and I was schooled by Catholic nuns and brothers.

Jason:

Who has impacted my life more than anyone else? I would have to say that the one person would have to be my stepmother. The reason why is because she is the one person who taught me what love is, in that even when I came to prison she was always there for me and in no way did she judge me. She always let me know that I was loved and missed. She showed me how to forgive even when I did not want to. She was my mother and my best friend and I will never forget her.

Montana:

Robert Ryerson. He's like a father to me. He has not only stood beside me, but he's always believed in me and he always encourages me to be the best I can be.

He is a man of morals and integrity, with a heart of gold. If everyone could see the world the way he does and shared one-tenth of the love he does then the world would truly be a better place for all.
2. If your life was a book, what would you title it? Why?

**Dreamer:**

I would title the book: UNWANTED (the true story of a child born without a father who wanted him)

Why? Because that’s how my life began, and although my mother did her best, I grew up with the pain of knowing that my father did not want me. Being unwanted truly wounded my heart and I was reminded daily of this when I saw that all of my friends had a father who loved them. Father’s Day was the toughest day of the year for me, especially when at school our teachers would ask us to make a card for our father. As a young child up to my teenage years, I hated him. It was a tough life that I endured because he left. At times having to go house to house asking for a couple of eggs or potatoes to eat. He caused me so much pain, and not once did he ever tell me “I love you son” when I did visit him on those rare visits to his house. Even as an adult he stayed away, and in these past 20 years he never visited me in jail or prison, and never wrote to me. I forgave him, and he finally told me he loved me...

**David Rhodes:**

“Early tragedy, walking circles, making differences” The first part of the story would be about the struggles in my childhood, teen years and as a young adult. The discovery of being “different” than the other guys in the youth group. Up to joining the military, more an escape from living in a small farmer’s town, with a secret that I couldn’t share with nobody at that time. Then up top of that, finding out that I also have a deadly disease, a heavy burden to carry. In 1989 my secret got exposed, not knowing how to deal with it, took a handgun and shot 2 innocent people. Found guilty in court and sentenced to life in prison. I just turned 26 years old. Walking circles are those years between 89 and 2015. A Belgian TV producer offered me an opportunity to tell my story to the Dutch-speaking population in Belgium. My story was the season’s finale in the series about Belgians in a foreign prison. A few weeks after the airing of the episode I started to receive lots of letters, of people who wanted to get to know me, not as a murderer, but as a person.

**Jason:**

A Life from Hate to Love. My life was not easy, raised by those who thought that their drinking was more important than I was. I never knew my birth parents and the abuse i suffered at the hands of other made me hate people as a whole and
did not want anyone in my life. That was until I met some people on the streets while I was homeless that taught me that no matter how people treat you, you need them in your life to help you grow. So, I had the privilege to go from a life of hate to a life of love. It was not an easy journey, but it made me stronger.

**Montana:**

The real Joe Dirt. Because my life is so close in reality to what the life of Joe Dirt was in that movie!

*By Jason*
Reflection Papers

This section features reflective papers written by students in Joshua Schriftman’s exchange class at the University of Miami. For these papers, students selected a particularly impactful moment from their exchange with the students at ECI, and they tried to make sense of the experience by identifying how the experience made them feel, using their own research to explain their reactions.
Rattle Your Echo Chamber

Charlotte Mulica

The current political climate in the United States of America bolsters constant division in a country that is a melting pot of different cultures, ethnicities, backgrounds, and perspectives. Conflicting opinions on race generate a breeding ground for controversy and tension across the nation. The growing hostility produces a sensitive environment which limits conversation and interaction with diverse viewpoints, a moment in time where echo chambers invisibly encase each and every one of us. An echo chamber is a closed environment where personal beliefs amplify as they ricochet back, creating a safe place for people to speak their truth, no matter how racist or objectionable they may be. The most toxic echo chambers are often found in very racially isolated environments, as the lack of diversity creates a lack of accountability. When we find ourselves in these environments, it is our responsibility to acknowledge the overt or covert racism and stand up for the voices that aren’t present. We need to take advantage of these environments where people feel comfortable to speak their truth about racism through a civil conversation about why and how we think the way we do. It is our responsibility as citizens to eradicate the echo chambers that are perpetuating racist ideologies and dividing the country.

My partner, Brasil, furthered my understanding of the perspective of someone who doesn’t think racism currently exists to the extent it did in the past. In response to one of my letters, which acknowledged the existence of white supremacy and racism in the United States, Brasil replied that he does not believe in white supremacy and that he thinks “racism is not something that exists at the level people think it does or want it to. There are some racist people but most people are just normal individuals who want to live their lives and don’t focus on race” (Letter 3, 1). Brasil believes race relations in American society have improved from the past, as he further clarified by saying, “society as a whole has grown past the point that racism is acceptable” (Letter 5, 1). To support his claim he used the example of the white reporter, Megyn Kelly, who received backlash for saying that blackface should be acceptable for halloween costumes. Brasil believes that the backlash was enough to show that racism is over and he added that the comment was “fairly benign and had no prejudicial intent” (Letter 5, 1). Brasil is under the impression that racism doesn’t exist as much as people think it does. After reading this letter from Brasil, I kept coming back to the question, how can someone be in one of the most oppressive systems in the country and not recognize the racism within?
Through further reflection and discussion, it became more clear to me how much of an echo chamber exists within Brasil’s confined life in the prison system. As prison is used as a form of social control, the information Brasil receives is completely monitored and molds his scope of reality. In one of his letters, he stated, “I don’t have the internet, I can’t view any form of social media and my news sources are severely limited. Not to mention the people I interact with on a daily basis aren’t typically the most educated demographic of society” (Letter 6, 3). Within prison, Brasil’s echo chamber is amplified as he has minimal people to challenge his opinions on racism, based on the lack of education around him, as well as limited access to materials to educate himself. Brasil’s perspective made me think of “Is This Kansas,” by Eula Biss, who reflected on the opinions of her twenty three students at the University of Iowa. The “twenty-three tall, healthy, blond students” believed racism and sexism had “already been resolved a long time ago, during the sixties” (Biss 137). These students lived in an echo chamber where racism and sexism didn’t exist, or at least didn’t affect their lives. Brasil’s life in prison puts him in the midst of a monocultural society where there is minimal education, and empathy for the inequalities in the outside world, resulting in a lack of opportunities and desire to challenge or discuss varying opinions regarding racism.

The only way to rattle our echo chamber is to seek out these opportunities and take the initiative to challenge and discuss our alternative opinions about racism; Brasil helped me learn this. My interaction with Brasil was so meaningful based on his willingness and open-mindedness to fully question and listen to my perspective, despite our different outlooks. He asked questions like “When you talk about racism happening more in today’s world than people think, in what ways do you mean?” and “You talk about a system of oppression against people of color. Does this mean you think that the system is prejudice while the average citizen is not?” (Letter 5, 1). His readiness to question me forced me to arrange and articulate my most complex thoughts and opinions on how I see racism. The difficulty I found in organizing my thoughts into words to answer his questions, revealed my lack of experience in articulating these concept thoughts outside of my own head, as well as outside of my own echo chamber. Other than my classmates, the people I feel most comfortable explaining my opinions to about race and racism are my friends, because we all share the same viewpoint as we have grown up in the same generation and have similar backgrounds. This is a place I always feel comfortable to speak my truth because hearing agreement only solidifies my opinion. I don’t feel as comfortable speaking my opinion about racism around my family because there is no echo chamber present. My opinions won’t be reiterated back to me and I will be left on an island to fight for myself and my opinion, making me feel vulnerable and uncomfortable.
For example, last year I purchased a pack of Black Lives Matter pins, for my backpack, on my family’s Amazon account. When my mom asked me about them, I told her what I was using them for, she laughed and said, “Oh your dad and I thought you were going to pass them around at school or something,” essentially making fun of me, it felt like at least. Moments like these are why I usually don’t initiate these conversations with my family because my opinion is never understood and I leave feeling insecure about how I see things. All I want is for my opinion to be validated; this is why I keep going back to my echo chamber, and sharing my opinions about racism where they are agreeable. Although I often deviate from conversing with opinions that oppose mine, exchanging with Brasil highlighted the importance of these interactions. This exchange was a challenge for me because within my life my echo chamber has limited my interactions with people who share similar opinions as Brasil. Conversing about racism with him, someone outside of my echo chamber, has left me with a better understanding on how I see racism covertly functioning at the hands of mass incarceration, through criminalizing the black skin tone, to successfully exploit, subordinate, and marginalize Black bodies. Brasil helped me understand the extent of my echo chamber as well as the importance to venture out of it.

It is important to venture out of our echo chambers because infectious opinions fester in this country and are solidified when no one challenges these isolated ideologies, in turn amplifying them. Without disrupting this echo, the country will continue to divide and go down the same racist path. Being trapped in an echo chamber is a scary reality that is commonly seen across this country. An example can be seen at The University of Oklahoma Chapter Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity in 2015. The fraternity was caught posting a video which showed its’ members celebrating the exclusion of African-American men from the fraternity through a song containing a racial slur and lynching references. Nolan L. Cabrera, an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the University of Arizona conducted several studies where he interviewed white college students about their thoughts on race. Throughout this study, he found that the biggest problem was that the “housing” for Greek life catered to an environment with a lack of diversity and a lack of accountability for things that are said. He states, “so it becomes this major echo chamber where it is OK to say things like this on a regular basis,” he also added that these situations only happen in “very racially isolated environments” (Cabrera). For these fraternity brothers who participated in this racially-charged video, their ever-present echo chamber and the lack of alternate opinions in the room allowed for an environment in which this video could be recorded. This example goes to show how abrasive and invisible an echo chamber can be in modern day society. This is why it is so important to acknowledge the opinions around us, because, like a domino.
effect, the more times we break someone else’s echo chamber the more likely someone else in the room will carry our message with them into the next echo chamber.

I’m not specifically talking to the student population or the prison population, but the citizens of American society as a whole, as an outcry to acknowledge that our voices mean something and how much power we hold to make a change when we use them. It must be a communal effort to break the walls of the racist, isolated echo chambers that are cryptically smoldering all around us. In this exponentially dividing country, it is our mission as citizens to listen to the language around us and to try to understand why people think the way they do to fully be able to fix the infectious ideologies in this country. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Utilizing experiences such as mine with Brasil can and should inform our perspective on public discourse and allow for more nuanced viewpoints going forward. We can’t let our fears trap us in, and trap equality out. We need to break free from our chambers of fear!
Works Cited


As I Say “Goodbye,” It is Time for You to Say “Hello”

Stephanie Perez

There are voices that are locked in metal cages, behind concrete walls, in places so far off the beaten path that nobody would ever come across them unless they were looking for them. These voices speak of knowledge and wisdom; they come from good men with strong characters, just like the well-dressed and clean-shaven men that you walk past on the street on your way to work, except these men have not walked the streets in years. These are our nation’s prisoners, all 2.3 million of them. 2.3 million voices are locked away and forgotten, but I have had the pleasure of getting to know one of the men that lives behind bars. In our letter exchanges, my partner, Bull, has expressed difficulties trying to feel like a good role model for his younger siblings while being in prison. He describes being silenced by people who believe that he is in no place to be giving other people advice as to how to live their lives, and yet those people have no idea the life-changing impact, for the good, that prison has had on Bull. Although Bull has already started to work past these difficulties, I was still shocked and outraged that people would shut Bull out simply because he is in prison. He has so much advice to give -- pages and pages of it! I implore you all, listen to Bull’s experiences that I relate below, listen to my struggles to work through Bull’s experiences, and then find it in your hearts to listen to one of the 2.3 million voices hidden behind the concrete walls that are crying to be heard.

In our letter exchange, Bull and I talked a lot about our relationships with our siblings since I have a very close connection with my twin sister. Things took a turn in one of our letters when this discussion turned from just casual, curious conversation to something far deeper. In one of his latest letters, Bull admitted to me that, being the eldest child in his family, he feels like a terrible example for his younger siblings because he is in prison, yet he still tries to motivate and advise his younger siblings as most older brothers do. He is happy that his younger brother (the second oldest in the family) still listens to him and looks up to him, but many people think that he should not. Bull writes, “I’ve been told by outsiders that ‘I have no right to tell my siblings or anyone else how to live their lives. Look at where I’m at.’”

Bull does not listen to these kinds of comments, however; after all, nobody on the outside can know what prison is really like, but Bull knows. He writes, “There is a lot of knowledge behind these walls, great character, and overall just some good,
normal people.” He then continues, “Of course if I knew then what I know now I’d be better off,” which is why he thinks it is so important to share what he has learned with his younger siblings. For Bull, “it is important to keep spreading that knowledge [that he has learned behind bars, demonstrate] leadership, and be a man.”

When I read Bull’s words, they touched my heart, and I hope they touch yours as well. Although I would never be able to understand exactly what Bull was feeling, I tried to imagine how I would feel if people I didn’t even know were telling me what I could or could not tell my siblings. Try that for a second: see if you can put yourself in that situation. Okay, now think about how you feel. When I did that, I immediately felt frustrated and extremely outraged. How can somebody, a random outsider, tell another person whether they have the right to give their younger siblings advice? It just seemed to me like nobody else’s business besides Bull’s and his siblings’.

But that isn’t the most important part of the moment that I selected, because anger and frustration aren’t going to give you a reason to listen to what Bull has to say. Bull’s statements about the amount of knowledge, good character, and normal people behind the prison walls and about the importance of spreading what he learned in prison, being a good leader, and being a man impacted me far more than anything else he had written up to then. I hope they impact you as well. I can’t describe what I felt upon first reading Bull’s words. I definitely felt inspired by the person he became on the inside -- maybe even a little proud of him for learning from the consequences of his actions and for using his horrible and traumatic situation to make himself a better man. I didn’t do anything to help him with this; Bull was already this “new man” by the time I got to know him, but through this letter exchange, I grew to care for Bull to a certain degree. And when you care about someone, you take pride in their accomplishments, big or small, and this is certainly a huge accomplishment for Bull. As our exchange is coming to an end, I can feel hopeful because of this moment in our exchange, hopeful that Bull is now on an upward climb out of the system and towards lifelong freedom and the happy life that he deserves. It definitely will make saying goodbye a whole lot easier for me, and I hope that it makes saying hello to someone like Bull easier for you, knowing that he or she, too, can one day see that first step and start climbing.

Obviously, I am the outlier here: one single person angry at what many “outsiders” find okay to do. And so, I started thinking about what made me different from all those outsiders. Granted, Bull never specified who exactly the outsiders were, but I saw them as people from the outside world who might be friends or former acquaintances from college or work. In short, I saw them as people who at some point knew Bull, but now have a bad opinion of him because he is in prison.
But why did they all automatically have a bad opinion of Bull? Does the fact that I have taken the time to get to know somebody behind bars make a difference in how I perceive prisoners as a whole?

Studies show that the answer is yes. Researchers at North Carolina University conducted a meta-analysis of existing research of public attitudes toward ex-offenders to see what variables had the most significant impacts on the public’s attitude. They looked at 19 studies with a total of 9,355 participants and found that there are only three variables that significantly impact a person’s attitude toward ex-offenders: political ideology of the person, whether the offender has a history of sexual offense, and interpersonal contact with offenders (Rade et al). This last one is the one I am going to highlight here, not only because this is why I think I had such a strong reaction to how the outsiders that Bull mentioned perceived him but because it is the only one of the three significant variables that can be easily changed. The study shows that those who reported no contact with a current or ex-offender reported more negative attitudes toward ex-offenders compared with members of the public that had reported any type of contact, whether face-to-face or otherwise, with current or ex-offenders (Rade et al). That is so significant: even just positive electronic contact with a prisoner, like I had, could be enough to change one’s attitude toward ex-offenders. If those outsiders who tried to shut Bull up had decided instead to push aside their preconceived notions of him, sit down, and listen to what this man -- this human being -- had to say, then maybe their perceptions of Bull would have changed. It is a simple thing to do: instead of saying the first thing that pops into your head, just say “hello.”

But really, you do not even have to say hello if you do not want to. Contact with a current or ex-offender can be just as simple as reading a personal essay written by someone who is now or was at some time incarcerated. Bull’s words reminded me of the first piece of writing that we read in this class: Kemba Smith’s letter. Smith was a 28-year-old woman (the same age as Bull) who was given a 24-year sentence for a drug possession crime. She penned a letter to Emerge magazine, pleading that the public change the way they perceive our nations’ prisoners. She writes:

Please understand that I am twenty-eight years old and have seen and have seen and learned many things while being in the system. Understand that I am not criminally minded....that I love my people and that knowledge, maturity, and wisdom have shown me just how much.

Smith’s words tell the same story and share the same message as Bull’s, and I think that’s why this whole situation makes me feel so outraged. It is not just one person
who is being shut down by people who could not even imagine what they are going through; it is the whole population!

I believe I felt so inspired after reading Bull’s letter because it reminded me of Smith’s letter, which also left me feeling very motivated. After first reading Smith’s letter, we wrote a response to it, and I immediately started writing about how excited I am that I’m in a perfect position to start seeing new changes in the criminal justice system. I wrote that college students are the future changemakers; it is college students who can give those that are incarcerated the hope that things will change because we will be the ones making that change. And I think that’s why I’m writing to you, because, although us students can start change, we cannot be the only ones to execute the change. We all need to come together because change is not going to happen unless a majority of people are willing to hear and share the stories of our nation’s 2.3 million prisoners.

Where do I go from here? Where do you? I talk of feeling outraged and inspired by Bull’s words, but my conversation with him is soon ending. So how do I keep fighting the good fight? Last summer, I interned for a program that worked with juveniles in adult prison and in juvenile detention centers, and I think they may have had a program with adults at Everglades Correctional Institution, where Bull is being held. Maybe I can ask my supervisor and see if that program still exists so that I can help another prisoner share his story. That way, my reach can extend beyond juveniles, because the adults in prison still have a life to live. They need our help, too.

But to see real systemic change happen, I need to go beyond helping the individual, and that is why I am choosing to go to law school to practice criminal law. I want to understand the ins and outs of the system. It is like a machine. Once I understand how every part of it works and why it works the way it does, I can start taking it apart and putting it back together in the most effective way possible. It is a long road ahead, but experiences like my letter exchange with Bull help ignite the fire and the passion that I have. They motivate me to keep working towards change.

This essay might be your first positive contact with someone who is going through the criminal justice system (for I am writing to you all today on Bull’s behalf), and I hope that it serves as the first match to start your fire for change. And I am sure you are wondering as I first did when I became aware of the seemingly insurmountable challenges ahead: how do we even begin? Start with something simple. Read articles or books about the criminal justice system to learn more about how the system operates. My recommendation is to read a couple of chapters of The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander so that you can learn how mass incarceration
came to be. Read memoirs, essays, poetry, or any other piece of writing written by a prisoner so that you can start to hear their voices. There is a website called The Prison Arts Coalition that has loads of published material written by prisoners from all around the country.

If you want to take it one step further, become a pen pal with a prisoner as I did. The program I did it with is called Exchange for Change, but I am not sure if they have opportunities for members of the community or if it is just for college students. Still, if you search up “prison pen pals” on Google, you will come up with tons of websites that connect you to people behind bars. Want to have face-to-face contact with people involved with the criminal justice system? There are plenty of organizations that do volunteer work in prisons or other institutions related to the justice system and that are always looking for more volunteers. The organization that I worked with in the summer is called Eradicating the School-to-Prison Pipeline, and I know that they are always looking for more helpers. Other volunteer opportunities that I know of include volunteering with Riverside House, a reentry facility for prisoners nearing the end of their sentence, and Transition, Inc., an organization where working professionals mentor offenders that are reentering the community. You might wonder how you can possibly start a conversation with someone whose life seems so drastically different from yours. Well, I will tell you, it starts with saying “Hello.”

This is for those outsiders who tried to silence Bull.
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Reflections

Olivia Dobrin

With a prompt asking for the specific silenced group you would lend your voice to, my partner “David Rhodes” and I took drastically different approaches. While my first letter centered on lending my voice to women, David Rhodes actually wrote about the exact opposite without even knowing what my answer to the prompt was. I explained to him that women are a silent and oppressed group, treated by some as second-class citizens — as weak, fragile, and emotional and thus having no business trying to become lawyers, doctors, politicians, and so on. I even added a personal story of how both my parents are academics in the same field of study yet my mother struggles far more in her consolidation of power and authority than my step-father. I had hoped that I offered a clear and concise answer to the question and that my partner would understand why I had picked women as my silenced group. However, David Rhodes believes this to be different.

In his introductory letter, David Rhodes first explains two groups that he would not lend his voice to: journalists and women. More specifically, he never exactly mentioned women’s rights, but rather a specific group/campaign for women’s rights: the #metoo movement. He starts by saying that there are “a lot of rotten apples in that basket” and that he questions the motives of the women, asking “why [they come] forward after all these years”. He explains that he thinks these women coming forward are related to a personal vendetta and have no backing. Specifically, he talks about Brett Kavanaugh, and how he doesn’t trust the women who have come forward. His doing so further justifies the idea that all men have made crude comments about women’s bodies, and that objectifying them is just a part of life — a “boys will be boys” mentality. When thinking about my goals for this exchange, I never really imagined having a partner whose views directly conflict with my own. I expected that we would agree to some extent on the issues we bring up and the topics we share. Even though I have found this to be very false, I still think it’s important that I am having these types of “hard” conversations with David Rhodes. My end goal of this exchange is to express how I feel and explain my opinions, which I have done. David Rhodes has done so as well. Having opposing opinions leads to exciting debates of ideas and opinions, and I look forward to further discussing topics in the same way.

With these goals in mind, when I first read David Rhodes’s response, I was shocked and dismayed by his ignorance. His words and his beliefs offended me greatly, as someone who adamantly supports the #metoo movement. The letter I
wrote to him, which he at the time had not received yet, was a direct opposition to what he argues. I was honestly unsure of how to go about responding to my partner. I wanted him to understand the severity of his words and explain to him why I didn’t agree with his views, but in a way as to not offend him, or make it seem like I was pushing my views on him as well. With all this in mind, I wrote him a personal and emotional response to his letter, in hopes that he would respond well. I think the reason I was able to do so was that I believed so strongly in my own opinion. I personally don’t understand why three women, if not more, would lie about these abuses in such a public manner. They made the active decision to forever be remembered for this movement for the rest of their lives. Everyone values their own personal legacy, and to be remembered as an accuser, despite all their accomplishments in life, is a decision that is difficult to make. The fact that my partner explains his view by arguing that the timing of their accusation was suspicious is not valid in the slightest. Many people who do not believe Dr. Ford, like my partner, find it hard to believe that people can get emotional in regards to this issue. I honestly find it hard not to get emotional on issues such as this in our current political climate.

I chose women as who I would lend my voice to not only because I am a woman, but because it is my own personal belief that we are not treated equally, as I have seen through personal experiences throughout my entire life. The very notion that a man like Kavanaugh could even be considered for such a highly esteemed position amid sexual assault allegations baffles me and upsets me. Even more so, it is so hard for me to deal with people, like David Rhodes, who just don’t really see the “other side” of the story. I’ve dealt with people like this all my life, especially growing up in a conservative small town in Texas. I’m so used to having my feelings and beliefs put down, especially when it comes to politics. Speaking with David Rhodes about this issue almost brings me back to my childhood, where people exemplified everything that I thought was wrong. His opinions honestly feel like a slap in the face to all women, sexual assault survivors or not. It shows that the “men” in charge do not validate a woman’s voice, and will not protect them in their time of need. Dr. Ford did not make her decision lightly, but she did so because she felt it was her civic duty to prevent a man such as Kavanaugh from attaining a position of such extreme power in our country. I found it almost hard to believe that my partner could think this, but after taking a step back, I can rationalize as to why he believes the things he does.

David Rhodes has been in the prison system for more than three decades. Any and all information that he receives is limited, unlike our ability to obtain any and all information we want. In my opinion, the prison system has sheltered him in a way to where he is not open to all the media outlets because of lack of resources
and lack of time, among other things. This further creates a system in which prisoners are not allocated the appropriate resources to form opinions on matters, such as sexual assault. David Rhodes is formulating opinions and ideas through the influences of male figures, with limited exposure to the “outside world,” which is far different from how we create our opinions outside of the prison walls. The criminals in the prison system are “marginalized from mainstream society...[that] will continue to create and maintain an enormous undercaste”(Alexander 96). Because of this, prisoners are not allocated the same resources and learning opportunities. This often creates a system of hierarchy that prisoners fall into, putting them into a category of second-class citizenship.

One cannot always completely blame the prisoners for their faults, such as my partner's lack of knowledge and understanding of sexual assault. Instead, one should take a closer look at the institution itself that closes several doors for those inside the prison system. This system allows men to remain unaware of current social issues, such as women’s rights and sexual assault. The system further propagates inherent biases by not allowing prisoners to experience new ideas and theories, which is apparent in David Rhodes. In everyday life, almost everyone knows someone who has been affected by sexual assault, and it often times becomes a very personal issue. My partner hasn't had this experience, being locked away in prison and surrounded by men who most likely share the same lack of awareness. However, it is hard to tell whether or not that justifies his misogynistic words and beliefs. Can we truly blame him for his ignorance? Or should we blame the system of marginalization that the prison system creates inherently?

I think in the case of David Rhodes beliefs, there isn’t one clear-cut answer on whether or not one thing or another is to blame. Clearly, my opinions and beliefs on this matter are slightly more biased, because of the experiences I have. My family has always instilled in me that every person is created equal and each person deserves equal opportunity. My mother, a strong proponent of equal rights, is a professor researching the ongoing problem of sexual assault in the workplace. After reading her research and hearing her tell the stories of these brave women, clearly my strong emotional response comes to light. Sexual assault on women is an ongoing problem that is not a recent phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, almost everyone has experienced themselves or have known people who have been sexually assaulted, and it is not an easy thing to deal with. The people I know who have gone through such horrible things are clearly affected by it. For someone to outwardly deny the rights of these women breaks my heart, which is why I take my partner’s words so personally. However, I haven’t been locked away in prison for the last thirty years, surrounded by the same ideologies and opinions. There are many things to blame for David Rhodes’s differing opinions, like his constant interaction with
mainly male influences, the marginalization of prisons, and so on. I do think it is one's own experiences that lead to the creation of opinions, which is why I feel so strongly about this issue. My goals for the rest of this exchange are to constantly express my opinions and ideas, in hopes of teaching my partner what I believe and also working to understand his thought processes. Clearly, we have different backgrounds and views on several different topics, but I believe this won't hinder our conversations as we continue discussing important topics.
Work Cited

Halle Place, a supportive housing program located in West Palm Beach, is specifically designed for women who were formerly incarcerated within the prior six months. Most women who enter Halle Place are willing and ready to change their lives and accomplish things they never thought possible. The program includes career exploration, on-the-job training experiences, gender-responsive programming, substance abuse prevention, health and mental health support, financial literacy, life skills around healthy relationships and healthy living, family reunification, literacy and GED support, a leadership curriculum, and conflict resolution. Each woman lives in an apartment-style home in order to successfully re-enter society with all the help and assistance Halle Place offers. Programs such as these are innovative and can be transformative for women who have lost everything. The environment is supportive, strict, and helpful. Here they can meet women who have similar stories, fostering a sense of belonging that these women may have not experienced before.

Our exchange program with Halle Place served as a safe place for the women to share their stories. We heard about their experiences, insecurities, and worries, and it was our personal goal to make them feel empowered and confident in their recovery process as they re-entered society. We hoped to offer a sympathetic ear to their stories as real people who respect them and their humanity. The director of the program, Val Stanley, explained to us that while at first the women were not receptive to writing these letters, once they started the program, each woman found joy in sharing their stories and being valued as individuals rather than being defined by their circumstances.

Six students participated in the letter exchange with Halle Place. These are their thoughts and takeaways from the experience.
Amber:

*It’s been a long hard journey, but I still press forward each and every day and if I did it then it’s possible for everyone.* –Heather

*My life is now full of meaning and it gives me a challenge every day to be the best at everything I do.* –Heather

My partner’s name was Heather. Heather is an inspirational and extremely strong woman who has been through a lot in her life. In her first letter to me, she described her traumatic childhood abuse, which included being molested by her biological father since the age of five, being prostituted by her own mother to her mother’s boyfriends, and being raped by one of her mother’s boyfriends at the age of thirteen while her mother was sleeping next to her in the same bed. She began using drugs at a very young age to escape the pain and confusion she was feeling and became addicted to heroin. Because of this, she was incarcerated for six and a half years, where she had to deal with both detoxing and confronting her trauma head on, all on her own. In her subsequent letters, Heather described how difficult this was for her and how thankful she is for Halle Place, where she is now able to attend trauma management classes and discover who she is and how valuable her life is.

Ashakiran:

My partner was VanNetta Smart. She endured a lot of hard things in her life, so she feels very lucky to be at Halle Place. She strongly believes in God and her faith helped her to face the difficulties she has come across in her life. She is very thoughtful and has a strong concern for animals. She would really like to be able to make things move. She is an optimistic and inspiring woman.
Dolphina:

...everything we’ve been through made [me] stronger and has made me who I am today. –Jay Sunshine

“Follow your dreams, you can be whoever you want to be. You are beautiful, you are smart, you are creative.” – Jay Sunshine

“Turn your dreams into reality, babygirl!” - Jay Sunshine

In the exchange with Halle Place, I had two partners. They called themselves Jay Sunshine and Dory. Jay Sunshine was the type of person who no matter the situation, always sees the bright side of things. Sunshine’s story is sad. She was an addict and a homeless woman before she was introduced to Halle Place. Plus, during those hard times, she lost a close loved one. She put herself and her family through a lot of pain, but now that she is older and wiser, she can understand what she did in those days that led to her addiction and homelessness. She is a dreamer and she likes to follow her dreams and make them happen. She will encourage you to become whatever you want. She will remind you of how beautiful you are and that you are capable of anything.

By Jimmy Green
I would stay up for days and did whatever I had to do to get high, I thought the drugs were taking away my pain. –Dory

Now I know that I don’t need drugs to be happy. –Dory

Here, I feel like a new woman. –Dory

My second partner was Dory. Dory went through a really rough path at one time in her life. She grew up in a broken family, where her mom and dad argued a lot. She was beaten up so hard that she had to shower to wash off the blood. Her father was never supportive. He told Dory since she was a kid that she was never going to be anybody, that she will be the first one of the family to get pregnant, and other things that hurt Dory deeply. When she was 14, she started hanging out with the wrong group of people, where she became a cocaine/crack addict, and in time, she became homeless. When that happened, her family did not want anything to do with her. The good part of this story is that she is grateful for this program of Halle Place, where she is starting a new life and she is becoming to be proud of herself.

Charlie:

It’s people who put themselves in a box that ultimately fail.... –Precious Delaney

I was always thinking about me and about what I could get. I never stopped to think about society. –Precious Delaney

I would like to live a life that is fulfilling to myself and focus on my happiness. –Precious Delaney

My woman, Precious Delaney, has had a rough go in life. She details her early childhood years explaining that her parents abandoned her and her sister on the front door of her aunt and uncle's house. They were fortunate enough that they took her in and cared for her as if she was their own child. However, she underwent significant trauma being abandoned by her biological parents, and she began acting out as young as 14. She began associating with the “wrong crowd” and used drugs and sex as a coping mechanism. When she was 16, she got pregnant and in order to remain in the care of her aunt and uncle, she had to terminate the pregnancy, which only furthered her erratic and irresponsible behavior. She explains that from then until entering Halle Place, she continued with this behavior. She continued abusing drugs and sex, which ultimately led to her having three other children and, unfortunately, HIV.
However, Precious Delaney has a mutant gene that basically means that she is living with HIV but exhibits no symptoms. It is almost as if she never had the disease in the first place. Now, Precious Delaney has three children, is attempting to overcome her struggles, and hopes to mend her relationship with her family. She maintains a positive, can-do attitude that is impressive for a woman who has been through so much. She constantly tells me how she is trying to turn her life around, and I truly believe she will. She is living proof that someone who has lost everything can still manage to pull herself together. She is an inspiration to not only me but those who surround themselves with her presence.

**Molly:**

Today I live in a women’s empowerment program. I am now building a better life and future for myself. I am gaining back my self-esteem. I also have learned to let go of the past. I am now finding my inner strength. I am surrounded by wonderful people who genuinely care about me. I know now that there is hope for me. –Kimberly

To all the women experiencing this kind of hardship, THERE IS HOPE. Never give up. –Kimberly

It actually feels so good to express myself to someone that does not know about my past. I don’t know why, but it just does. –Kimberly

Eventually, when things get better for me and I can get back on my feet, I want to advocate for women that are going through what I have been through. Not only to help them, but to help me. –Kimberly

I hope that my story can one day help another one’s distress. –Kimberly

Now that I am working on changing my life—which is not easy—I have become a stronger, more humble person. They say Rome was not built in a day. I am still building my city.” –Kimberly
My Halle Place partner was Kimberly. She is a woman who has been through endless amounts of trauma but is extremely positive and looking forward to her second chance at life once she graduates from Halle Place. She recalls her childhood as a time that was consumed by her mother being abused by her father before he went to prison. This was followed by her teenage years, in which she dealt with being raped by her father’s friend at the age of 17. She spent the next decade dating very controlling men and getting married for the wrong reasons. After being sexually, physically, and mentally abused, Kimberly started using drugs to mask her pain. This eventually ended in her being homeless. Her story is not easy to digest, but the hope she has for her future can give it a happy ending. She visits her daughter and grandson every weekend she has free, and she is looking forward to making amends with her brothers and mother once she is completely back on her feet. She has a lot to look forward to, and she is slowly but surely building up her strength, confidence, and self-esteem with the help of the empowering women surrounding her.

By Jimmy Green
Annette:

Nobody wants to hear about AA or recovery when they are still using. That’s a boundary I can’t cross. Yet, I love them. And I can only show leading by example.  – Jennifer

I am safe, I am loved, and a friend today. –Jennifer

My partner’s name is Jennifer. Her journey started with a few beers and some weed. She taught me never to take addiction lightly. She was married, had kids, and, after being prescribed opiates, could not keep control. She lost everything—her husband, her kids—and she was in and out of jail. Without family support, she was still strong enough to go through with this amazing program and do what was best for her even though it wasn’t easy. She is thoughtful and sees the best in things despite her situation. Jennifer is so truly grateful for what she has and for the support she’s received from her Halle Place family. She is a ray of sunshine and a true inspiration. She’s growing into the best version of herself through tireless efforts and hard work every day.

This exchange has been a wonderful and eye-opening experience for all of us. It put us in a position to speak to women who have had far different lives than ourselves, which was something we might not have had the chance to do. Each woman in Halle Place is special. They come from different backgrounds and all have different stories to share. Some of these women have seen and experienced things that we cannot even begin to comprehend, yet they all maintained such a positive attitude towards their recovery in Halle Place. While we hope that they might have been able to learn something from us, I think it is far clearer what we learned from them. Our correspondence exceeded the goals we set in this project, and this exchange is not something we would change for the world. These women are an inspirational story of recovery, resilience, and hope.
Upper-Level Composition Papers

The following are papers were submitted by students at the University of Miami who are currently taking upper level composition classes. Their work provides us with different perspectives on the world around us. Some of the papers are based on research on different cultures while others are personal narratives based on the writers' own experiences. They came from English 231, English ... The final four papers all come from Dr. Charlotte Rogers’ English 331: Legal Writing course, in which students were asked to ... In one way or another, all address the theme of social justice.
Why Can’t Black Women Just be Great?

Kara Davis

There are three well-known stereotypes concerning Black women in America that have developed throughout history: the mammy, the hypersexualized Black woman, and the “Mad Black Woman.” These stereotypes have become more prominent at various times, yet they all have their roots in slavery. Although Black women have long been marginalized in society, they have continued to hold positions of power in their families and create personal identities, as they are becoming a united force through their cooking. Food in Black culture provides more than just nourishment; it holds tradition. These traditions have been treasured from generation to generation, keeping Black women held in the highest regard in the Black community. This paper serves to investigate the relationships between the stereotypes and Black women and how this relationship is a dominant force in the inhibition of the rise of Black women in society, while also considering the positive view of Black women held by members of the Black community.

The mammy is one of the most influential stereotypes surrounding Black women. She is portrayed as a large, old, and often unattractive woman. The mammy would be brought in the house to help raise the slave master’s children and also to cook and clean for the whole family. Because the mammy was working in the slave master’s household, she was usually less attractive. This was often intentional so that the slave master would not be sexually attracted to her, even though slave masters often exerted their dominance over the female slaves by raping them.

A major factor in the persistence of negative stereotypes in society is the way that it is portrayed in popular culture. Famous representations of the mammy stereotype include a character named Mammy in Gone with the Wind and the maple syrup mascot, Aunt Jemima. This stereotype became harmful to Black women, as it depicted them as ugly, fat, and unintelligent. With this stereotype in mind, many Black women were viewed as lesser than in America. This stereotype is one of the inhibitors to the rise of Black women in society. If Black women are viewed as unintelligent and overall lesser, they cannot be seen as equals or receive equal treatment.

Although popular culture representations have perpetuated this stereotype, they can also fight back against them. Betye Saar created an art piece, The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, to do just that. The focus of this piece is a mammy figure with a gun on one side and a pistol on the other. In the skirt of the mammy figure, there is another mammy holding a white infant. Seemingly painted over that image is a
black fist, and this statue is surrounded by multiple images of an Aunt Jemima advertisement. All of this put together symbolizes a new generation’s fight against an old stereotype. The fist in front of the mammy holding the white child seems to represent the new generation fighting for the rights that their ancestors could not have. Saar’s artwork was debuted shortly after the Civil Rights Movement, an important fight in earning more rights for Black people, ended. One of the most prominent figures of the Civil Rights Movement was Rosa Parks. She inadvertently rejected the mammy stereotype by asserting herself in the midst of white dominance and by refusing to make sacrifices for white men.

When slaves were first brought over from Africa, the women’s bodies were viewed as extremely exotic, and they were quickly overly sexualized in America, giving birth to the jezebel stereotype. One of the most tragic inhibitors of Black women’s rise in society originated with the raping of the female slaves. The hypersexualized view created around the female Black slave in America bred the notion of the slave masters at the time: these women were practically begging them to have sex with them, when in actuality, they wanted the exact opposite (Hine, Darlene Clark, 1989). What does this stereotype look like today? The most common place to see this stereotype played out is in Hip Hop music videos. The women featured in these videos are scantily clad and are usually dancing either on the rappers or on cars. The sole purpose of the women being in these videos is to objectify them; their presence often has no correlation to whatever the song is actually about. Black women are continuously objectified in these music videos because “sex sells,” which sends the message to Black women that money matters more than their bodies.

When asked to name a stereotype of Black women today, a common answer is the “Mad Black Woman.” This stereotype is how Black women are most commonly portrayed in modern day popular culture and media. This mad Black woman is often a single mother that can find any way to be mad at the world and the people in it because she often feels that she was wronged in that situation. This stereotype has led to implicit bias in society’s view of Black women. They are commonly thought of as being angry and presumably single mothers. Both of these biases are clearly detrimental to a Black woman’s growth in the modern society, as being viewed as constantly angry will prevent people from hiring you out of the fear that you will create a constant hostile work environment.

The idea of Black women as always being single parents is also detrimental in that it spreads a falsity. Not all Black women are single mothers, but this implicit bias is still held by numerous white employers and is a factor that they consider in the hiring process (Kennelly, Ivy, 1999). The bias is also harmful because of the
discrimination against women in general in a workplace setting. It is a well-known fact that implicit biases have often prevented women from being hired over their male counterparts for the fear that they will eventually get pregnant and request time off from work to raise or start a family. With Black women often being assumed as single mothers, they can be overlooked for work because of employers thinking that these women will be late for work, leave early, or take large amounts of time off because no one else will be around to care for their children.

Art has long been lauded as a form of self-expression. Through it, countless people have found their voice and spoke up about injustices they see in society. For example, Kara Walker addressed the negativity behind the stereotypes of the mammy and the hypersexualized Black woman in her piece *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*. The focus of this piece is a sphynx-like figure that calls to mind the hypersexualized stereotype as she has extremely large breasts and hips. However, in looking at the figure’s face and head, she also resembles the mammy figure. Walker could be attempting to contrast the two stereotypes or show that the existence of the Black woman is a combination of the two. Combining the stereotypes rejects the negative stigma attached to them and reclaims the narrative of the Black woman in society. The mammy figure is not portrayed as sexy; she is the exact opposite. In a positive light, the mammy is also the most nurturing. She cares for a family and her children that are not her own, and the children of her slave master often grow up very fond of her. By embracing the hypersexualized body of Black women, we see a woman able to bear children. There is a deeper message in this figure being depicted as a sphynx. Originating in Egypt, the sphynx creates an image of Black women as the creators of all life on Earth. Kara Walker’s installation details the importance of Black women being included in the narrative. What was once a negative and harmful stereotype has now become a celebration of the Black woman.

One of the most famous Black women in American history is Anita Hill. What she endured in the process of testifying against Clarence Thomas during his confirmation hearings for the U.S. Supreme Court epitomizes the strife of the Black woman in America. As detailed in “Myths, Stereotypes, and Realities of Black Women: A Personal Reflection,” Ella Louise Bell gives a firsthand account of Black women’s experiences during and after these hearings. Bell discusses Black men pushing back against Anita Hill’s allegations as part of their membership in what they call the “Black Men’s Club.” This fictional club gives Black men the feeling that they have the right to assert their dominance and authority within the Black community because they would not be able to do so in the white community. One aspect of this is Black men jumping to the defense of other Black men when something goes wrong. With this “membership requirement,” Black men jumped to
the aid of Clarence Thomas, without even considering the veracity of Anita Hill’s allegations.

In comparing Anita Hill’s allegations to those of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford against Brett Kavanaugh, we see a repeated behavior of sexism and disbelief of victims now coupled with a willingness to listen before casting judgement. While many Black men immediately rebuked Anita Hill for going against their fellow “brother,” many also joined a group of 1,600 men in taking out an advertisement in the *New York Times* stating that they believe and stand with Dr. Christine Blasey Ford. In both instances, the men accused of sexual assault were still confirmed and put on the U.S. Supreme Court. However, Kavanaugh’s reputation is arguably more tarnished than that of Clarence Thomas because of the race of the woman, or women, that came forward. In “Stereotypes Stalking Black Women,” written immediately after the Clarence Thomas hearings, Susan Rieger questions why Thomas was never labeled as a liar. Reading this piece today, after seeing how quickly and publicly Kavanaugh’s character was ripped to shreds when Dr. Christine Blasey Ford came forward, is just as upsetting. Black women’s power outside of their home is not only hindered by racism and sexism in a predominantly white society or workplace but is also overshadowed by the Black man’s hypermasculine need to assert his own dominance.

If Black women are viewed so negatively in the American society, how are they able to hold so much power in the Black community? Most Black families are headed by a matriarch, not a patriarchal figure. This could be in part due to the large number of single-parent, often the mother, families in the Black community. It ultimately comes down to who has been relied on to provide nourishment for the family, and that tends to be the mother. Since the days of slavery, Black women have been the ones to cook and clean their household and the houses of others. The house slaves, including the mammy, were usually women. They were in charge of cooking all the meals for the slave master’s family, cleaning the house, and caring for the children. When they finished, they were to then return to their own homes and do it all again for their family. In stories passed down through generations, the female house slaves were often described as skillful in the kitchen. They would be able to take the scraps of food that they made for the slave master’s family and turn it into a new meal for their own families. This ability to nourish solidified the role of the Black woman in her family as the matriarch. Without her, the family does not eat.

This beautiful concept of the Black woman is not often portrayed in popular culture or media; however, when it is, there is usually some sort of underlying drama or conflict to keep viewers entertained. The perfect example of this is George Tillman’s 1997 film *Soul Food*. The grandmother in this film is the matriarch of the
family. She is the unifying force and conflict is often addressed and resolved over her Sunday dinners. The grandmother effectively maintained the family’s relationships by having her children and grandchildren help her prepare the meals. Unfortunately, when she passes away, we see the family quickly fall apart. Conflicts are no longer being resolved and communication fades. It is not until the children and grandchildren are back in the grandmother’s house eating a Sunday dinner that they prepared together that we see a resolution. Not only does the Black matriarch’s food provide nourishment, it creates tradition. This tradition then allows for the preservation of the African-American culture. Many people in the Black community will reflect on cooking with a mother, grandmother, or aunt when discussing their favorite dishes to either eat or prepare. The food they describe may not be their favorite, but they cherish the traditions and relationships established and strengthened while both preparing and eating the food.

The Black woman as the center of food tradition is accurately portrayed in Carrie Mae Weems’ *The Kitchen Table Series*. This photo is part of a series featuring Weems depicted as a lover, mother, and friend. In almost every image in the series, Carrie Mae Weems is at the head of the table. She represents that strong Black matriarch that holds the family together. Weems’ series highlights the Black family’s reliance on Black women to be the strong person in their family and all of their relationships. Weems details a heartbreak in this series while also showing just how quickly she has to heal from that heartbreak in order to provide for her children. If she does not care for them, who will? *The Kitchen Table Series* shows the power that Black women possess within their Black families as they are the ones always seated at the head of the table. The kitchen table in this series is symbolic, as it is a representation of the unifying force that the Black matriarch holds; however, it is also a physical reminder of the nourishment that is constantly provided by Black women to their families.

In *Daughters of the Dust*, the relationship between the Black woman and food is illustrated amongst multiple generations. The film highlights the various foods that the Gullah people eat, but it also shows Black women as the point of nourishment. For example, Yellow Mary discusses working as a wet nurse for a rich family after she lost her own child. This story also highlights the abuse of women’s nourishment as Yellow Mary had to physically stop herself from producing milk because the rich family became abusive. Women are again portrayed as the leaders of the family as we rarely, if ever, hear from the men in this film; they are secondary to the women. *Daughters of the Dust* portrays food as tradition and also a connection to the family’s past. The older women in this film were teaching the children in the community words that they remembered from their language while cooking and preparing food for a meal later.
Again solidifying the role of the Black woman as that of nourishment, Psyche A. Williams-Forson details the history of Black women through one specific food, chicken, in *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*. Williams-Forson claims that throughout history, Black women have been able to use all parts of the chicken for food but also to find independence and foster entrepreneurship. The title is comical but hints at the ability of Black women to be able to make a home out of the small things they were given. When hearing stories of the times during slavery, we are often told how the women that worked in the house were sometimes given scraps of food. With these scraps, the slave women would be able to feed their family for extended periods of time. The Black family dynamic thrives on the innate ability of the Black matriarch to provide.

Three harmful stereotypes concerning Black women have stood the test of time. The mammy, the hypersexualized Black woman, and the “Mad Black Woman” have been repeatedly used by society to prevent Black woman from rising up in society. This concept of being viewed as lesser than their male and white female counterparts is one rarely seen in the Black community. Black women have been able to maintain their role as the esteemed matriarch partly because of the love, respect, and admiration they receive as a result of their skills in the kitchen. Food is commonly referred as the thing that brings people together; however for Black women, food serves as a driving force in creating an identity and solidifying one’s role in the family resulting from their ability to nourish others even though they are often left malnourished themselves.
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Cooking & Counter-Narratives:
Exploring Food Preparation & Cooking for African American Women as Mechanisms for Empowerment & Reclamation

Madison Xilas

Introduction

The United States has been home to a long history of Black female domestication and Black female food creation, consumption, and distribution. Starting in the 17th century, slavery forced Black women to tend fields and to cook for white masters and their families. These recipes were often a meld of African and traditional southern foods and should be credited with creating a massive portion of modern southern cuisine, much of which is still enjoyed today by white and Black people alike. Of course, credit is rarely given to these Black women for the creation of dishes like corn cakes, Gumbo, and Cala, despite the fact that all of these foods were cooked and made famous in the south by Black women (Holloway 3, 4). That is not to say that the role of the African American woman as creators of food has been wholly ignored by the dominant white culture. American consumers still see the beloved mammy figure grace the face of Popeye's commercials and Aunt Jemima syrup. This feeds directly into the idea of Black women as willing, docile, and cheerful servers and creators of food (Ethnic Notions 14:01). The mammy figure and the systemic downplaying of the origins of African women's influence on southern cuisine is not new news. It is something that has been widely analyzed and critiqued. That said, something that has truly fascinated me is that this mammy figure exists whilst there is also a complete counter-narrative of the African American women in dominant culture.

The sexist and racist narrative of the mammy occurs side by side with the notion of Black females being strong and powerful and of portrayals of Black women as matriarchal heads of their families. There is research that, on some level, this portrayal of the strong female woman has, and continues to, feminize, and thus delegitimize, the Black man. This is especially relevant when one considers that the mammy was often portrayed as aggressive and assertive with her own Black family (Ethnic Notions 16:25). But this analysis certainly does not explain the contemporary phenomenon of Black women championing their status as strong leaders of their families.
It is these two seemingly contradictory notions that both exist within dominant U.S. culture about the Black women’s role in food production and as a central figure of families that I am interested in analyzing. Specifically, I am intent on unpacking these two realities via the study of food production mainly within Black families in America. That said, this paper will start first with a brief analysis of the mammy figure as well as with some more recent information collected by scholars and ethnographers on Black women producing food in the public realm. This is mainly in an effort to understand why the commonly held idea that Black women cooking is always a product of gendered and racialized oppression exists. The bulk of the discussion will then shift, and consider the complex and fascinating roles that Black women can play as they meal prep and cook for their Black families. Ultimately, I will argue that while it may seem that Black women producing food is a gendered activity that reinforces racist and patriarchal views of Black women, in reality, cooking for Black women is a complex action packed with meaning. In fact, cooking for Black women is a mechanism wherein they often find liberation, historical and cultural preservation, intellectual challenges, and power to better their family’s health and overall wellbeing.

Black Women & Food: The Mammy

The mammy figure has been for decades the dominant caricature in white culture associated with Black women and food production. Understanding the historical and sociocultural weight that the mammy has had since its creation is vital. The pervasiveness of the mammy figure explains why white people, who see cooking for the white family as a gendered act, also see Black women cooking for their families as a gendered and racialized action. The mammy first made its appearance in 1810 and has been widely considered one of the most pervasive stereotypes of Black women. As Jennifer Kowalski, author of “Stereotypes of History: Reconstructing Truth and the Black Mammy” puts it, the mammy is “this mythical image [that] has been repeatedly modified to serve the interests of advertisers and the powerful groups of society” (Kowalski 1).

Examining the role of the mammy as a cook and producer of food is a prime example of this evolution. Almost a full 70 years after the creation of the mammy, Chris L. Rutt, the producer of a popular pancake mix, witnessed a blackface performer portraying the mammy as a “plantation cook in an apron and red bandana” (Kowalski 4). This inspired Rutt to create the Aunt Jemima figure we still see grace so many food products today. The long association of Black women with food production continued well into the 20th century. *Gone with the Wind*, released in the 1940s and still wildly controversial for its portrayal of Black people and the antebellum South, includes several scenes of Black women preparing for white
women to eat by gathering tea and food. Fifty years later, the infamous Pine-Sol commercials in the 1990s portrayed the same mammy figure passionately talking about the best ways to remove cooking odors from refrigerators, coolers, and homes (Kowalski 6). Kowalski does go on to acknowledge that, almost 210 years after the mammy figure first took form, she has changed but also stayed much the same. Though she is now an often skinner, bandana-less, and less overtly racist figure, Kowalski argues the message is still clear: Black women's role in society, and in American consumerism and marketing, is still to cheerfully create, sell, and serve food (Kowalski 6).

**Black Women & Food: Cooking in the Public Sphere Today**

It is not just the longstanding history of the mammy figure and the modernized presence of the mammy that indicates the looming existence of stereotypical views of Black women cooking. Interactions Black women have themselves when preparing food in the public realm appear to contribute to the argument that cooking as an African American women is still very much a gendered and racialized act. There are a plethora of examples of this in Psyche Williams-Forson’s “Black Women’s Food Work as Critical Space,” Here, she gathers comments from Black women chefs and scholars about the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and the production of food. The most striking of these reflections comes from Gillian Clark, an African American Executive Chef. She writes, “not smiling while at work in my open kitchen became a huge issue that I found myself having to defend” (Williams-Forson 36). She attributes this criticism to the notion that, as a Black woman, her role is to be a cheerful provider in the kitchen. The sexist and racist outlooks do not stop there. Clark explains that people do not consider her as an “authority in the kitchen” and that customers often refuse to call her a chef, sticking instead to the title “cook” (Williams-Forson 37). Additionally, she discusses how customers constantly question why she does not make a soul food restaurant and are shocked to learn of her origins as a New Yorker, assuming instead that a Black woman cooking would likely be from the South (Williams-Forson 37, 38). The take away from these interactions is again evident: people do not see Black women as executive chefs.

Truthfully, this inability to see African American women as chefs makes sense given the current makeup of chefs in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, only 11.6 percent of Chefs/head cooks in the U.S. are Black, and an overwhelming 78.4 percent of Chefs/head cooks are men (U.S. Census Bureau). These statistics are reflected in Clark’s own experiences as a Black woman chef as well. She writes, “for years I was one of only two Black women leading kitchens in Washington D.C.” (Williams-Forson 38). Clark then goes to say even when Black
women make it into the kitchen as Executive Chefs they are “not allowed to have the so-called head chef’s attitude” (38). This leaves Black women who are Executive Chefs, like many women in male-dominated fields, to negotiate their gender in a double bind (Bowles 16). Essentially, they are left to attempt to project both femininity to make themselves likable while also trying to inhabit the traditionally masculine traits expected to be an assertive and effective leader in male-dominated professions (Bowles 16).

Combine this sexism and racism that still affects Black women chefs, the extreme lack of diversity in U.S. kitchen leadership, and the ever-present archetype of the mammy, and it is easy to see how Black women’s cooking, in the public realm, is an act bogged down by sexism and racism. That is not to say that cooking in the public sphere cannot be an empowering act of reclamation for Black women. It is to say though, that in large part, food preparation on the part of the African American woman in the American public is still widely connected unfortunately to pervasive stereotypes, sexism, and racism. That is why it is so important to draw the vital distinction between Black women producing food for the general public and Black women producing food for their families and communities. While it may seem likely that, as a result of the sexism and racism that follows Black women when they cook in the public realm, the act of cooking in private is also affected by these stereotypes, this is not the case. In fact, this outlook is actually a gross misunderstanding of the range of roles Black women play when cooking for their families. Thus, the rest of this analysis will be devoted to unpacking the empowering and plentiful roles that Black women have made and continue to make for themselves when cooking for their own families and communities.

Black Women & Food: The Community Preserver

The community preserver is one main role that African American women inhabit when cooking for their families. Undoubtedly, the community preserver is one of the most important roles that Black women occupy while they cook. This is because the role benefits the community on both micro and macro levels. It connects these women, their significant others, and their families to their ethnic identities while also creating a modern communal culture within families and Black communities in America. Psyche Williams-Forson writes extensively about her own role as a preserver of culture and community in “Other Women Cooked for My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food, and Identities in an African American / Ghanaian Household.” She professes that her cooking “binds my husband to his country, and by my sharing these foods with him, they bind me to him” (Williams-Forson 458). Here, Williams-Forson is careful to emphasize not only that her
cooking brings her and her husband closer to her husband’s cultural roots, but also helps to bring them, as a couple, closer together.

This closeness created by food is reproduced on a larger scale as well in the Black community. In fact, as Foodway scholar Dorthy Lupton rightfully asserts, food often “marks differences between cultures, serving to strengthen group or national identity” (Eves 288). Similarly, Rosalyn Collings Eves, author of “A Recipe for Remembrance: Memory and Identity in African- American Women’s cookbooks,” seamlessly brings together conversations about individual closeness and the overarching power of cooking to strengthen national identity. Collins writes:

Even individual memories are often remembered in the context of the group narrative: many of the Sunday dinner traditions, although individually recounted in the cookbooks, are strikingly similar because they stem from the same communal narrative that calls from an elaborate family meal after attending church (293)

Clearly, Black women, whether they are writing recipes down or producing food only for a small group, contribute to the culture of eating as a community that connects so many African Americans. Thus, the building of current African American culture and values is done, in a large part, through individual gatherings, cooking, and the creation of common food narratives within the community.

This preservation of the tradition of cooking and coming together is especially important when one considers how community gathering has been, and still is, especially necessary in the African American community. This is a community that faces an enormous amount of political strife and routinely feels the effects of institutionalized racism and classism. In fact, Alicia Garza, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, said in a Washington Post article published this year that she believes there is an “important story to tell around the way food helps us reconnect with ourselves.” Undoubtedly, Garza is referring both to the power of food as a community builder as well as the benefits of wide-scale sharing of food traditions as a mechanism for reconnection and reclamation of African American history. This sharing is vital when one considers the deeply rooted and often ignored history that is attached to so much of the food cooked in African American households. Re-connection to this very history is thus the focus of the next section of this analysis.

Black Women & Food: The Historical Preserver

In an interview with the Washington Post, culinary historian, academic, and Black author Jessica Harris, passionately professes:
We [African Americans] have planted it. Harvested it. Processed it. Cooked it. Served it. Cleared the table. Washed the dishes and emptied the chamber pot. Which pretty much gives us the full food chain there. With all that, we have another, deeper attachment.

Harris is correct that Black people, especially Black women, as they were often the people primarily responsible for cooking for both their own families and white families, have a deep, historically rooted, attachment to the food they still cook today. This attachment to certain foods can be traced back through the history of slavery and the history of African culinary traditions before that. In “African Crops and Slave Cuisine,” Joseph Holloway lists at least twenty-five foods brought over on slave ships, the bulk of which are still branded as traditionally “southern foods” today. Gumbo, Jambalaya, Fufu, and Cala are only a couple of the foods that provide a direct link back to the richness and diversity in African cooking and African American history (4, 5). Cala is a prime example of a food that connects the African American people who cook and consume it to a rich culinary history. Also known as sweetened rice cakes, it has played an important role in the lives of Black women in Africa as well as in America.

Brought over on slave ships and “African in origin,” Cala was sold, according to Holloway, by Black women in the French Quarter of New Orleans. In Georgia, it was known under a different name but was still made the same. Holloway reports that one woman born into slavery in the 1930s remembered her mother making Cala, saying:

Yesium. I membuh how she made it. She wash rice, ann po off all duh watah. She let wet rice sit all night, and put in mawtuhm an beat it tuh paste wid wooden pastle. She add honey, sometime shuguh, add it in floot cake wid uh kams. Saraka, she call um. (4)

The meticulous process of cooking these rice cakes outlined above is strikingly similar to the process today. In fact, a quick search on the internet reveals hundreds of recipes proving Cala’s persistence as a food consumed and recreated by the African American community. Moreover, Cala (or Puff-Puff as it is called in Nigeria and the Republic of Cameroon, or Bofrot as it is called in Ghana) is still a widely popular street food today in several parts of West Africa (Immaculate Bites). Thus, by simply cooking one dish like Cala, African American women are able to connect themselves and the people they share their food with to the history of slavery, the history of African culinary traditions, and sometimes popular culinary traditions in Africa today. This preservation of African culture/identity and African American history, done mainly by African America women via food deserves
recognition. This is especially true when one considers that the dominant narrative of Black women cooking is still rooted in the mammy figure.

In regards to this resistance of dominant understandings of the history of Black people cooking and consuming food in America, Black women cooking historically relevant foods like Gumbo, Jambalaya, Fufu, and Cala for Black families serves two main functions. Eves articulately describes that it

...opens a window that we [African Americans] can look through. When we sit at their tables, look at their recipes, and consider how they cooked, we get a chance to ask larger questions about who African American women were... and what their place has been in society. (Eves 284)

Encouraging thought about the actual role of Black women throughout U.S. history is undeniably a way of fighting against racist and sexist understandings of the history of Black women, more specifically the history of Black women and food. This is especially true when one considers that the actual historical reality of Black women in America is one of strength, resilience, and savvy use of intellect to fight for political and social rights. Secondarily, African American women’s cooking and writing about the cooking of African foods for their families and communities “suggests resistance to dominant cultural memory” (Eves 286). Thus, cooking food is, for Black women, a way to connect themselves, their families, and their communities, to their rich culinary history. In other words, when African American women cook these foods in an authentic and meticulous way, in recognition of their African roots, they actively resist the dominant cultural understanding of African food and ingredients as simply “southern cuisines.” Thus, the role of historical preserver via cooking works as a form of liberation and resistance for African American women. That being said, acknowledgment only of community and historical preservation, though of vital importance and probably the most easily recognizable of the roles, would not give justice to the plethora of other positions that African American women inhabit when cooking. Thus, the next role of “calculated negotiator,” though less commonly known, speaks to another facet of cooking as an African American woman.

**Black Women & Food: The Calculated Negotiator**

The role of the calculated negotiator is a complex, important, and routinely undervalued role that Black women inhabit when cooking for their Black families. In fact, one of the first assertions Marjorie DeVault makes in *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Works* is that:
Planning a meal is rarely recognized as the kind of intellectual problem it is. The process is like solving a puzzle. There are special requirements stemming from individuals’ tastes, the relationships within the household, but variety is also important. (48)

This non-recognition is, of course, unsurprising. Undoubtedly, the view of meal preparation and creation as less of a challenge that requires thought, negotiation, and consideration for others, and more as something that is “instinctual” is a reality that applies to women across all races. This outlook is a product of U.S. hegemonic culture which places value on men’s work in the public realm and simultaneously devalues women’s work in the home, even though a woman’s labor can be equally (if not more) challenging and can often come in addition to a job outside of the family (States News Service). Recognizing the role of negotiator is thus important because, in doing so, there is an acknowledgment of the intellectual challenge that all women (Black women included) face when creating meals for their family. Specifically for African American women, though, it is vital to consider the role of negotiator in regards to what DeVault says must also be critically considered when planning meals and cooking: culture.

DeVault touches on the importance of culture broadly, writing that cooking for the family “requires critical thought as to what is ‘proper’ and an understanding of various cultural expectations” (43). As has already been analyzed at length in earlier sections, cultural expectations for African American women cooking includes several added aspects in addition to the requirement that these women act as negotiators when choosing what food to cook. African American women are expected to create and encourage a culture of community via their cooking, to cook historically and culturally relevant foods (which often requires the following of meticulous recipes from memory, hours of scheduled out preparation time, and a honed in knowledge of foods), and to handcraft their foods.

Ultimately, when one considers that Black women balance both these cultural factors in tandem with the baseline intellectualism required when planning and prepping a meal that DeVault outlines, it is impossible not to acknowledge the role of the Black women as a calculated negotiator and master multi-tasker. This role, wherein the African American woman embraces the intellectual challenge of feeding her family while balancing all the aforementioned considerations, also pushes back on the stereotype of the mammy figure who is meant to be a jolly and non-intellectual figure who blissfully serves the white family. Thus, the critical work that comes with feeding the African American family not only should be considered as an intellectual exercise and challenge but also as a form of resistance -- a form of resistance that actively pushes back both on the sexism and racism that has been
attached to African American women cooking since the creation of the mammy in 1815.

**Black Women & Food: The Family Health Protector**

The last role that African American women inhabit that will be outlined in this analysis is, like the role of calculated negotiator, a mechanism for resistance against racism. This role is that of the family health protector and is, admittedly, a bit different from the roles discussed previously. This is due mainly to the fact that the role of the family health protector is not, to a certain degree, inherent in the act of cooking as an African American woman. In fact, the role requires consciousness of families health choices and often active movement towards changes in cooking. That being said, the role is included precisely because of the increase in recent conversation around healthy eating by Black women.

One indicator of growing commitment to healthy eating on the part of Black women is the influx of vegan and healthy eating cookbooks in 2018. *Why Vegan is the New Black, Sweet Potato Soul: 100 Easy Vegan Recipes for the Southern Flavors of Smoke, A Southern Girl’s Guide to Plant-Based Eating: Recipes from the Vegan Soul That Won’t Make You Broke,* and *Ageless Vegan: The Secret to Living a Long and Healthy Plant-Based Life* are all books about healthy eating written by Black women in the U.S. published within the last year alone. This indicates that there is both an increased interest in writing about healthier versions of foods traditionally enjoyed by Black communities and a proven interest on the part of African American people in consuming healthier food. Additionally, a study published by the Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities indicated African American women’s high level of concern for health issues and their potential effects on their families. In fact, in this study, 78.8 percent of participants responded that they were concerned that they or someone in their family could become hypertensive (Asiedu 10). Likewise, 69.8 percent responded they were concerned about high cholesterol, and 56.5 percent responded they were concerned about themselves or someone in their family having a stroke (Asiedu 10). This awareness is vital because, as the study points out, “if individuals are not concerned about a particular health issue, it is unlikely they will attend to information about it or accurately identify signs to seek care for themselves or a family member” (Asiedu 2).

This increased cognizance and concern over disease, coupled with an indication that more conversations are happening amongst African American women about healthy eating, implies both reactionary and preventive action on the part of African American women when they cook for their families. These reactionary changes can be seen easily in “She looks out for the meals, period:
African American men’s perceptions of how their wives influence their eating behavior and dietary health.” In this study of 83 middle-aged Black men from the Midwest, the authors report that “a prominent theme in the focus groups was the role of the wives in managing their husbands’ diets in order to maintain or improve the men’s health” (Allen 8). Additionally, the authors relay that the men often noticed their wives focused increasingly on healthy eating and nutrition after the men had been diagnosed with or warned of potential medical issues. The women did this without “consulting them or gaining their input or buy in” (Allen 8, 9). The report also indicated that even though the majority of the men “disliked the changes eating healthier entailed,” they simply accepted the changes without much pushback to avoid marital issues (Allen 9). Thus, it is made clear that African American women, without asking permission or seeking validation, have the power to put in place reactionary measures to help care for the health of their husbands and family’s health. This same power is exercised when it comes to making preventative choices regarding the eating habits of families as well.

Jenga Muendo, an African American mother who is introducing her daughter to a vegetarian and raw food based diet, is a prime example of a Black woman who uses cooking for her family as a means to preventatively protect from health issues stemming from unhealthy eating (Soul Food Junkies). Jenga professes that, growing up, she faced judgment from other African American people because of her dietary choices (Soul Food Junkies 52:44). Now, she says she feels African Americans no longer look down on her and that many are beginning to recognize the benefits of eating healthy (Soul Food Junkies 53:00). Additionally, she talks passionately about passing her dietary choices down to her daughter to ensure that she lives the healthiest life she can (Soul Food Junkies 53:06). Thus, Jenga operates as a Black mother whose job in the kitchen is to filter her daughter’s diet and provide her with healthy lifestyle choices so as to set her up for a long, ailment-free life.

Ultimately, this role of reactionary health protector, and especially the role of preventive health protector, both operate as a form of resistance against the systemic racism that plagues the food industry in America. As author and activist, Dr. Marc Lamont Hill, asserts in Soul Food Junkies:

There is no better example of racism than the relationship of Black people and access to healthy foods. people think of racism as an individual act of prejudice or distraction... that’s not what it’s about. It’s about systems, it’s about structures, it’s about institutions. The fact that Black people live in neighborhoods where they can’t get access to healthy food choices and white people can... that is classic textbook racism. (49:00)
When racism is understood as a force that manifests most powerfully with the denial of access to healthy foods, African American women making the choice to feed their families healthier foods must be understood as a direct form of resistance against systemic racism. Thus, like the role of calculated negotiator and historical and community preserver, the role of family health protector is one of liberation and opposition to systemic cultural realities born out of racism.

Conclusion:

There is an immeasurable benefit to recognizing and unpacking all four of these roles that African American women inhabit while cooking. In a society where being a Black woman means being told that your life and what you do means less than that of men, especially of white men, recognition of empowering, calculated, and subversive action is vital. In all of the capacities outlined above, African American women champion the fight against the mammy figure and help to liberate and empower their communities. Even more impressive is that all of the aforementioned acts of resistance and empowerment are done via food production, something that the dominant white culture for so long has believed is one of the only actions suitable for African American women. Thus, on top of all of the titles that African American women inhabit when cooking, they also deserve the title of covertresister. As covert resisters, African American women have used the position of “cook,” a position that is viewed acceptable and non-threatening, to start movements, to sharpen their own intellect, and to re-connect their families and communities to the culture that was ripped away from them because of slavery and later culturally appropriated. African American women were doing, and continue to do, all of this in the middle of a racist and hegemonic culture that is too blinded by stereotypical understandings of the role of Black women while they cook to see how vital this work has been, and continues to be, for the African American community.

Ultimately, it has become clear that the reason African American women champion themselves as strong, empowered women and matriarchs of the household is that, in so many respects, they are. They are able to make choices without asking permission from any man, and often hold positions of immense power simply by virtue of how much they do as providers, mothers, significant others, and community leaders. This position of the strong matriarch is not only one that African American women inhabit now, but one they created centuries ago and continue to create and re-create for themselves, for their daughters, and for their granddaughters. Likewise, it is a position that they created and continue to create within the confines of a society that has told them, since slavery, that they should retain no power -- especially not power that enables subversion to the patriarchal and racist society surrounding them.
My aspiration is that recognizing the reality of the difficulty of this subversion in tandem with acknowledging some of the roles that African American inhabit when they cook could serve, in and of itself, as an act of empowerment, reclamation, and resistance for African American women. Thus, my hope is that this analysis has served to bring together important, but potentially isolated conversations about food and African American women, in one narrative centered around African American female empowerment. I am quite sure that in this regard, there is much more work to be done in recognizing individual conversations about mechanisms of empowerment and food in the African American community. I know that this by no means is an exhaustive list, and I look forward to learning more about these important conversations as I believe they will become increasingly prevalent with the rise of a new generation of empowered African American women. I thus hope that this research, in some capacity, can simply serve as a catalyst for the continuing addition of these rich, important, and complex conversations.
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Reparations for African Americans: The Bare Minimum
Joseph Gyedu

Why hasn’t there been any reparations for the long-lasting health effects of slavery? On December 6, 1865 the United States officially abolished slavery. However, justice for African Americans was not immediately restored. Segregation was ruled legal and little was done to protect the rights of African Americans. Over time, landmark cases and historical movements in the United States helped expedite this grueling process. However, it is ignorant to say that the playing field has been leveled for African Americans and that their ability to succeed is no different than any other person born in this country, because that is simply not the case. Although we have equal rights by law, we are not all equal in the eyes of the American dream. African Americans are still being denied rights; rights to a healthy and fruitful life. African Americans still suffer from the consequences of America’s shameful history. While we cannot help everyone affected by slavery, we can affect those who are living. It is time to do something about food deserts, poor education, ghettos and all the negative products of slavery. America needs to truly take accountability for slavery. Reparations are due and it’s time for America to pay up.

The reason for the poor health of African Americans dates back to slavery, a painful, but still vivid time in our country’s history. In order for slaves to perform at the highest level and the produce as much as they could, they had to consume high calorie diets to ensure the necessary energy to complete a day’s work. “Food had to hold you all day long. Salad wasn’t going to. You needed high-calorie foods for energy to carry you through the day” (Weaver, The Family Style Soul Food Diabetes Cookbook, p. 6) The problem with this is that slaves were given poor quality, high calorie foods to do hold them all day long. Additionally, the science of nutrition and disease from food did not exist back then. Of course, there were foods purer and more fresh than others, but people knew very little about what was good and bad for you. And even if slaves did know how bad the food that they were consuming was, what choice did they have? In today’s society we have no need for such high caloric diets and consuming such poses an imminent threat to our survival. The average American lives a sedentary lifestyle; this means that we
don’t burn many calories via physical activity. In burning such little calories, the consumption of such a high caloric diet in African Americans is counterintuitive.

In making their own food, slaves began gaining a sense of culture and community. The meals eaten each day was the one thing that slaves could truly look forward to because if they were eating, it meant they weren’t working the fields and could enjoy one another’s company. One could compare this to Thanksgiving for slaves, except it was every day. In a way that the average person cannot understand, is that this was all they had. African Americans were unique in the kind of mentality they had. They looked for the bright side of everything. Food that could be seen as “fattening a pig and preparing it for slaughter,” was seen as food for their souls, hence the term “soul food.”

“Collard greens, turnip greens, ham hocks and chitlins were things our forefathers ate because they picked cotton and worked in the fields all day long” (Weaver, *The Family Style Soul Food Diabetes Cookbook*, p. 6). *Soul food was a symbol for strength and might.* This was the food that a slave’s ancestors ate. It spoke to the power and resilience of the people who worked on plantations. Soul food These traditions and recipes were passed on from generation to generation and are still very much present today. “Lard and pork were widely used, as the meaty hogs were plentiful. But the best cuts went to the slave owners. Plantation owners and their families fed on ribs and roasts, and slaves were tossed leftovers: hog ears, snouts, neck bones and feet,” (Energy Times Article, p. 2)

Many African Americans live in a family that has a history of heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes, but that isn’t all genetic. The diseases that were just named are all preventable. Those diseases aren’t passed down from generation to generation, it’s the eating habits of young African Americans and the soul food that is being passed down from generation to generation. Young African Americans come into this world believing that they are destined for disease when in reality, they have a chance to stop the disease dead in its tracks. But they need help, they need the help of local politicians and the help of the American government to do so.

Unfortunately foods that represent strength and might also symbolize heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and preventable morbidity. For the African American that know the health consequences of soul food, many of them feel that they have to abandon these foods entirely, thus giving them the feeling that they must abandon their culture. African Americans should be able to enjoy some of the foods that their ancestors passed on, but the key word is some. African
Americans need to modify the foods passed on from generation, thus “descent with modification.” However the problem is that many African Americans do not know to do this or even how to do this. If there was more nutritional education in low income communities such as food seminars or even more food markets, we could bring and end to generational morbidity.

Soul food consists of dishes that are really high in fat and terrible for heart health. But to dive deeper what is some of the foods listed. For example, what are chitlins? “Chitlins” is short for chitterlings, or the small intestines. (Energy Times Article, p. 2). That is so unhealthy it is unfathomable to think that anyone would even want to to eat that. Unfortunately, slaves had no choice and had to do whatever it took to stay alive and appear productive in the eyes of their oppressors. Some of the foods listed are so unhealthy that the average American may not even know what it is. However, the average American was not a slave, nor was the descendant of a slave.

The food that many African Americans consume today many consider are the “fruits” of slavery. This is mind-boggling, because a group of people so willingly take the good from such a terrible and inhumane institution. It’s a beautiful thing to see and it removes a lot of understandable hate from this world. However, the problem viewing it this way is that the “fruits” of slavery are slowly killing the African American race. The way of eating that is being passed down renders no nutritional value to African Americans today. Slavery is no longer a legal practice, therefore there is no reason to be consuming such high calorie diets. However, when raised to believe that this is the norm, one may not see an issue with this. The average person just believes that it is part of our everyday life. Many people try to reject this way of eating but face issues such as finding a suitable alternative. It’s easy to tell someone to just eat healthy, but for everyone the ability to do so is different.

Unfortunately, many African Americans live in food deserts. Food deserts are communities that lack access to healthy foods and are communities saturated with fast food chains and low-quality bodegas. Picture waking up and seeing Taco Bells, Wendy’s, and McDonald’s all around you. Try to imagine craving fresh food and only having expensive, poor quality food near you. It is unfathomable, but unfortunately for some, this is a reality. It is understandable why people who live in these environments are so unhealthy. What is even worse is how low the quality of these fast food chains truly are. Most people are unaware of this but there is a such thing as fast food restaurants that are better than others. Most of these food
deserts don't even have higher tier food restaurants such as Five Guys or BurgerFi. You would think if a community was going to only have fast food, they would at least have some of the more healthy ones. However, this just goes to show how much these communities are struggling.

The constant sight of low income food affects an individual in the most profound way. Everywhere they turn, they find food that is inadequate and detrimental to their health, yet they view this as the norm, because for many of them this is the norm. Many of us know that eating Burger King, McDonald's, and Wendy's every day is bad, but when that is all you see, the situation changes; to them it is not bad food, it is just food. Unfortunately, for many African Americans this is the case.

The issue that African Americans face regarding health is one of the most overlooked issues in this country to date. Because on top of living in food deserts where access to health foods are limited, African Americans have a lot of baggage in terms of the habits that they were taught over the course of American history. Food is part of their culture and people's experiences, so to say to one, “you can't do this or eat that” is tantamount to stripping part of someone’s culture. As a country, we owe it to this group of people to do something about the terrible health present in African Americans. This isn’t a minority problem but an American problem, because the practices of our ancestors and the institution of slavery that our government allowed caused the health issues we face today. As a country we have made progress, but not nearly enough.

Nutrition and health is the disparity that we often forget so much about. African Americans are being denied rights to a healthy and fruitful life. It’s no secret that this race is at the bottom of the food chain, but how can one expect mobility when not given the resources or when handicapped? African Americans are handicapped in the sense that poor health is more than just a medical label; it’s a social barricade. In Texas the Oxford Journal of Nutrition did a study on food deserts and the socioeconomic characteristics associated with them; the results were astounding. In this study, six rural communities lacked access to nutritional foods and had exceedingly high percentages in the amount of impoverished African Americans. Additionally, these communities had many minorities who lacked access to a vehicle and who did not graduate high school (Neighborhood, Socioeconomic Deprivation, Journal of Nutrition, p. 14).
These results really should not surprise anyone. Correlation between health and education has always been a well-known problem, it has just been ignored over the years. Fixing this problem, means that we are truly leveling the playing field for everyone. The problem is that nobody wants to fix this problem and many look past it because it believed to be too complex of an issue. However the problems we prevent now mean less problems we have to deal with in the future. An improvement in nutrition not only means healthier people, but it would also mean more well abled and educated people. That would lead to less crime as well. We would be giving the up and coming generation a fighting chance in this world; we would also be breaking a vicious oppressive cycle, a cycle our government swore to bring an end to.

Unfortunately, people with poor health do not have the luxury to worry about education; they are forced to live their lives day by day. In speaking about poor health, the issues are extremely severe; people with heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes can’t do much for themselves or anyone else. Additionally, there is the sad realization that there is a great correlation between food deserts and food borne illnesses:

Research has found that residents of low socioeconomic status (SES) areas and particularly areas with higher percent African American in the population have greater access to smaller, independently operated food markets and fast-food/take-out restaurants compared to those of high SES \[24,25,63,78\]. This differential access may be an increased food safety risk for low income and minority populations for two reasons. The first is that surveillance of foodborne disease outbreaks has found that 68% of outbreaks associated with a single place of food preparation were associated with a restaurant or deli while only 9% were associated with food prepared in a private home” (Foodborne Illness Incidence Rates and Food Safety Risks for Populations of Low Socioeconomic Status and Minority Race/Ethnicity, p. 18).

What exactly does this mean? It means that these illnesses can all be avoided if African Americans are provided access to nutritious foods and as long as we get rid of food deserts in minority communities. The question we need to ask is why isn’t this issue being taken seriously? Why is this issue not being treated with the severity that other social issues are being treated with? A major reason for this is that many people aren’t even aware of these health issues. Many people view change or even criticism in different ways. Even some minorities perceive it as one
trying to stray away from his or her culture. Some Blacks see it as a “white person’s” diet.

The strains of history are heavy and have an enormous impact on the problem we are trying to fix today. Some may argue that the individual is in charge of his or her health and you could say that’s true, but when you live in a community that makes the ability to succeed extremely difficult, something must be done about that community. Being that the issues stem from institutions that the United States government allowed, it is only right that our government step in and make changes. It is unjust that we merely brush away the effects of slavery and are forced to pretend that it never happened or like it still hasn’t affected our lives or our family’s lives. Where is the reparations for such a terrible institution that not only took so many lives but is still taking lives as we speak? Are African Americans unworthy of reparations?

After Pearl Harbor was bombed, the United States prepared for war by ordering the illegal detainment of Japanese Americans on the premise that some of them may be working with the enemy. Following the illegal internment of Japanese Americans, The United States acknowledged their illegal actions and their wrongdoing. Families were at least financially compensated for what transpired. And although it is in no way enough, at least the government acknowledged wrongdoing and took preventative measures to make sure Japanese Americans are able to live the lives promised by that of our constitution and that of the American dream.

Acknowledgement is all we ask of for the the African American community. America acknowledged the wrongful Japanese internment camps and we have also acknowledged slavery, but what we have not acknowledged is effects of slavery that drive African Americans deeper into despair that still have to be dealt with. We no longer want to be America’s burden or the reminder of the shortcomings that this country has had. African Americans can sustain themselves as long as we fix the system. Time and time again America has failed our citizens. And this is not say that the government has wholeheartedly neglected African Americans; during the Obama administration Michelle Obama made a conscientious effort to improve nutrition in schools all over the country, including low income communities, but the issue that we face today needs to the focus of the entire government, not just one member or one administration. We owe it to this country and our citizens to be better so that we can do better as a nation. All that
is being asked of is for the government to address the pressing issue that most threaten our country.

Of course, African Americans can in no way be compensated for slavery, but we owe it to them as a country to at least make the American dream applicable to them, because right now the American dream is not in reach. Slavery cannot be taken back or quantified financially in any way, but we can help those that are living live the life that they deserve. The government owes it to African American communities to fully give them their lives back and take a longer look at the way African Americans are forced to live. Nobody is asking for the government to write a check. Instead, the government has a social responsibility to enable a disabled group of people for the first time in our history. What a healthy environment could do for African Americans is almost indescribable, because the floodgates of success and prosperity would immediately be opened.


The Tenorman’s Embrace of Delayed Pain

Zach Rosenthal

It was the eighth grade. I step out of the locker room to answer a call. My team is minutes away from starting our flag football game. It’s my Mom. I have not spoken to her since the last time I was at her house. Our homes are divided -- my sister and I living with my dad, my other sister and brother living with my mom. Witnessing the vulgar insults and flying objects, I understand why my parent’s marriage ended in divorce, but not the loss of my siblings. It is hard seeing people who you thought would never leave your side become strangers. I’m supposed to start my week at her house. Instead, in a monotone voice, I am told not to come home. Thirteen, confused, I feel an unwavering intensity of fear swallow me whole: betrayal. Painful questions consume me. Elizabeth Kubler Ross writes, “beautiful people do not just happen.” Beautiful people are instead created. Knowing defeat, they have an understanding that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and perspective.

I could have marinated in despair. Lost my voice in the confusion. Be drained of my compassion. Instead, I confronted my feelings and learned to guide them. Something beautiful blossomed in the looming darkness of my rejection and heartache. I cannot see it or touch it.” A passage taken from my old college admission essay. I do believe this to be true: everyone is a product of their environment, and when shit happens, it takes a chunk out of you, out of your DNA, and you are posed with this rare opportunity to fill that chunk with whatever you want, wisdom or animosity. I chose the former, but I never fully confronted the latter.

6 years ago. That was my pain, my iteration and triumph over it... my roaring 20s, after the war had ended. But it hadn’t ended, just changed its face. It wasn’t even all that painful in hindsight, just confusing. Then again, hindsight is anything but 20/20. In fact, our memories forget a lot; they’re creative, in a sense. Those tiny moments of utter despair against the backdrop of stimulation. Looking back on the night of that call, I never even shed a tear. But there certainly was a great deal of pain, from the collapse of our family (most of which wouldn't manifest for years) to other relationships. It was a delayed pain. At the time, it seemed normal because I was raised in a dysfunctional family. I thought the pain was over because it never really came. I spoke of great wisdom and perspective. I managed to escape it, choreographed like a diamond heist. I unintentionally avoided it all. I thought everything was fine.
This essay is the timeline of my illusive pain, where it finally hatched, and what the explosion of emotions inside taught me about what it really means to be human. Using art as the tangible anchor to my past, to turn the emotions on the paper into artifacts with great history beneath their faces. Art has a sort of symbiotic relationship with pain. Because, in the end, that was what saved me. The beautification of pain and what it truly means to be alive, accepting it all. The most controversial piece of art is me. And if I'm endeavoring to be like art then I must realize that when molding your art there are external forces acting upon your work. They might make permanent molds for the better. Or worse.

Whenever confronted with the question of pain and how it has shaped me, I start to think about my Mom. And how she kicked me out when I was 13. I was so young, so innocent, so curious! I had been exposed to my parents fighting, but they always seemed to work it out. My siblings and I assumed it was normal. But when my parents divorced, things became more real. I remember thinking how good it was going to be for everyone, now that they don't have to fight. So I never even shed a tear. I was perfectly happy. In fact, things got really good for a while. My dad met a new girl and she made our lunches, did our laundry, was loving and kind...it was like having a new Mom, but one you didn't really know. It was almost instantaneous. It was sort of uneasy to jump into that, but the grieving period had been diluted into normalization. Before she kicked me out, life at my Mom's was hell; we'd fight incessantly, throwing things, shouting infernal phrases like, “go to hell you, fucking piece of shit,” when I was only 13. Then she kicked me out. I was always the least sought in her eyes, always asking questions and defying rules. I remember walking into her room and seeing books about how to “deal with the defiant child.” I was so torn, to know that someone you seek so much validation from just sees you as a problem, a wart, an infection. That might be what saved me though – my defiance, my lifelong infallible tendency to question everything, and defy rules. Or “argue” as my friends would say.

So I was constantly in a state of “what about me?” Always feeling left out or less loved. Which is actually a real thing and can mess you up. I mean, I was so incredibly insecure. Not only from the constant conversations of plastic surgery: “Zach, you’d look so much better, get a nose job, get your ears pinned back, get your scar removed, don’t you want to look better? Like your brother? All the kids are getting nose jobs, it won’t hurt! I’ll buy you all the presents you want...” I mean come on! How could anyone endure that and not be the least bit insecure. My friends at the time would make fun of me for being stubby or make harsh racial jokes just because they liked to see me get worked up, which didn’t take much. And I think that made me angry for a long time. It was the perfect storm of emotions. How could they make these jokes? How can they be so cruel and heartless? I now realize It’s
because they hadn’t experienced the pain that I had at the time. That wasn’t their fault either. I didn’t choose a life like this, nor did they. So, holding on to anger wasn’t fair for either parties.

Pain and suffering can fill you with compassion and experience or make you numb. I chose the former. If you get your leg amputated, you might be a little less inclined to make fun of someone who has really small legs, or someone who’s insecure about them. You see things in a different way because you’ve been somewhere dark too, which helps you to appreciate the light. I didn’t understand that years ago, so when my friends would watch real live people get decapitated, or shoot birds, or say terrible things to me, I was so angry and so confused. I didn’t know how to handle my emotions. How can they not see? I felt so alone in my head. Was I wrong to be this way? Or is everyone else? It was me against the world. But in my own anger and insecurity I was placed in a condition, a corner, where they would not listen to me anymore. Even if I was right, confirmation bias blinded them of that.

Growing up, I was forced to think about things. About life. About love. About friendship, and it taught me everything. If my mom didn’t say “I love you” back, I would cry at school in the 2nd grade. Sometimes she wouldn’t say it back because she was mad at me. I so desperately needed to hear it. I needed validation, proof that I too was loved and wanted. What did that say about love? My parents were always busy fighting or doing something else, so I was pretty much raised on the movies I watched. I thought no matter what, Love always comes back if it’s real, Jack and Diane driving off into the horizon, something like that. I had this ethereal and fairytale-like view of Love, despite my reality. I thought it was forever, and best friends never die, people who love you don’t put you down, et cetera. So I questioned all that after a while. Does she really love me? Why did she kick me out? What happened to the stories she’d tell? The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn? She always told us kids that we meant the world to her, what about now? These boiling questions filled me with so much doubt and insecurities. I felt so alone in my head. Why do my friends treat me like shit, why does my family say they love me when they don’t seem to show it? The pot was hot, but it didn’t start to boil until the end of high school and into college.

I completely escaped in middle school. Grayson was this crazy, circus bound act. It was a great time. I could be so weird and it didn’t matter. We’d make the weirdest noises and laugh. Until it hurt. I felt like I could be me, without my Mom breathing down my neck. Anytime I’d show my funky side to my parents I’d get the snide, “are you on drugs? No seriously? You need Ritalin.”
I could be a kid. And I could create space from the ever-serious family that I lived in. Will basically took me in. I’m not sure if he fully understood the meaning of it all, but his parents did. I remember a specific night at one of the many family dinners I joined. Will and his dad were talking about something I can’t recall, but I remember him saying something that stuck. As he approached the table, plate in hand, they chatted about some story. He pulled out the chair and sort of leaned in, hovering over me, and said, “sometimes in life, you’ve gotta help your friends, especially if you can, because everyone goes through something,” and then he looked at me with a slight smile, one that said, “you know what I’m talking about. You’re gonna be alright, kid.” It was like a tear in the fabric, an aside in a play. It was cool. All the shit I had been given from Will’s harsh personality sort of just dissipated. Because of all those movies I watched, I had always been acutely aware of moments like these: fleeting, infinitesimal, but important scenes in the story. I remember feeling really bad for leaching off that fucker, but what choice did I have? There was almost never food at home, and I didn’t have a relationship with any non-immediate family members under my mother’s sovereignty. I had no money either. I’ll be in debt for a long time to them for taking me in. Then there was Kai. Finally, someone who had a thirst for adventure. To leave this tainted bubble. The world is so big, and no one seemed to contemplate it except for us, as we’d sit in our thrones of geode and let our thoughts about life echo through the valley and bounce off the rocks on our treks into the mountains. So my friends were an escape, despite the friction.

Now I see things clear, with peripheral vision, and 360 degrees. I have no anger towards anyone. Not my Mom. Not my Dad. Not my life. My Mom was shaped by external forces. Her own brother molested her, and it was never justified. She had to live with that, and maybe she wasn’t able to look at herself the way I do when presented with pain. I know why I have difficulties with trust. Or commitment. That part of me is still healing. My heart was broken. This is what love is? How will I truly know if the next person in my life, who proclaims the same, actually means it? My innocent spirit was shattered. But I didn’t understand that she had her own demons – it’s not her fault. All of these things didn’t become clear to me until years later. My jealousy, indecision, insecurity, and fear of going down a path that would inevitably lead to a broken home, whether that home is my soul or my dwelling. These were all completely delayed, drowned out by my friendships and quick recovery. Then I fell in Love.

The pain was delayed through a series of escapes, and she was the last of them before the pain started to catch up. My fantastical, epic love. She was best friends with a girl named Audrey Woods, and that’s all I knew of her. In the 2nd grade, they were the odd balls that howled across campus, mixing their potions and calling
themselves witches. Someday I’d fall under her spell. She moved to New Mexico after that year, and we wouldn’t meet again until a football game in our freshman year of high school, when she moved back. That was when the big saga began. Junior year we had physics together, and of the 36 seats in the room, she was assigned next to me. That was when we really started jammin’. She’d tutor me in all the things I couldn’t know, due to my short attention span and ever-thinking mind. I didn’t do well with indoctrinated education. Didn’t believe in it either. We had a connection like no one else. We’d talk about the world and how ours seemed to spin the wrong way. Like a Super 8 run backward through the film projector. She came from a broken home too, but her strength was far greater than anything I’ve ever seen. We’d stumble down every street, tellin’ stories of shadows. The way she laughed, the way she connected to me. Those are the colors that can never be re-created in the painting of our love.

Senior year of high school, on September 15th I asked her to be my girl. And in December I fell in love. Mad, conscious-altering, gravity-defying, multiplying…Love. The harder you stare into the night, the more stars appear, every second. That’s how it was. We cooked, we danced, we travelled, we did it all. There’s an infinite amount of time between those 2 years that we dated, and I could never explain their beauty if I tried. I never truly knew what it was like to cry tears of joy until I met her. We would just stare into each other’s eyes all night, and talk, and sway. Every single heartbeat, hiccup, laugh, cry, growl, shout, was just another instrument singing in the beautiful orchestra that is our Love.

After about 7 months into our relationship, the pain began to seep in. We were driving on the 55, stuck in traffic, and it came up. College. She made it clear that she wanted to stay with me, and right away she could sense my fear. I had realized that college was around the corner. I knew I wanted more experience, and I knew my parents met each other when they were 16, had never experienced anything else, and settled down too soon. That scared me, and for a while my history was deciding the fate of our relationship.

I think we all have a reservoir of curious energy, and it must be spent in your youth, trying new things and learning new things. For me, breaking up seemed like a sort of justice to the youth. I knew she could be the one I shared the rest of my life with, but was I ready for that now? The delayed pain, disguised as the skeletons of my past were getting close, walking two steps behind me, and the skeletons from the future were starting to turn around. They always knew the time, and would make sure I did too. But they’re only evil if you let them be. At the time I didn’t see them as guides, only something I needed to run away from. All I could think about was
my parents meeting too young, and the future telling me I’ll always carry this curious energy. If I don’t do something about it now, it will grow.

But the first year of college I couldn’t do it. We stayed together. Not because of pity, but because I loved her too much, I couldn’t stand the thought of losing her. The fear of losing her controlled me. But I wouldn’t trade that year for anything. We learned the most valuable lesson: love is not about possession. And during that year my pain exploded. I became so consumed with jealousy that I couldn’t see or appreciate anything I had. I wanted to be in California with her, and I believed that the lifestyle I wanted to cultivate could only be achieved there. They couldn’t catch up to me until now. I ran too fast. And when I fell in love, I finally slowed down, they grabbed me. My trust began to wither, and it wasn’t her fault. These were things that I had to deal with before I could be with anyone, even myself. It wasn’t just about “exploring.”

Arden – Watercolor by Han Dai-Yu

The piece above, watercolor on paper, describes her underlying state from the moment we started talking about breaking up, on. She’s guilty of nothing but geography. All of my pain started to catch up to me, and she had pay for it. She bleeds onto the page effortlessly and unapologetically, her freckles become wine stains, and her eyes become puddles that force me to see my reflection. A monster, who had broken her heart. She’s so sad but so beautiful. She’s screaming out of every muscle in her soul, “why are you doing this to me?”

What was I supposed do? I couldn’t help my unflinchingly honest desires, and I couldn’t keep them from her, even if they crushed her. All of these questions and emotions took me out of the present. I wasn’t there.
Roulette-Watercolor
by Arden Sanchez

The piece to the left describes the dichotomy of our positions. In her voice, “trying to hang on,” and mine, “It’s okay to let go.” Conveying two messages at once, showing only the hands reddish from grasping so tight. The rest of us invisible, our emotions almost disembodied and suspended in the air like mist falling to the ground, each droplet moving with adagio. I felt so trapped in my own emotions, like a game of roulette. If we break up, I could lose her forever. If I don’t, I might always wonder what would happen if I did, spending the rest of my life never really knowing anything or anyone because I was too afraid to try. I knew that if I didn’t do this, I’ll never know what it’s like to be my own person, to fully confront the delayed pain that bred so many issues with my sense of self.

Paralyzed by my fear, I constantly battled myself. Why the fuck do I want this? Look at her, she needs you. But if you don’t do this, the curiosity for self-
exploration might grow, and manifest into some unhealthy obsession. She’s the only
girl I’ve ever been with, I felt so inexperienced and so young in that sense. I didn’t
want to end up with what my parents had. If I didn’t confront the fear it would breed
hatred, the future skeleton.

The more I wrestled these emotions the worse they got. My sadness was like
quicksand. I wanted our love to transcend the arena in which it was cultivated. If
our love is true then it doesn’t need possession. It is free of definitions and titles. I
wanted to know she loved me without having to hear it. But I was so damn afraid to
lose her – for all the love we shared to dissolve into a nod between two strangers on
the sidewalk. I felt like I was torturing myself. How could I do this to her? But I had
to confront my skeletons, or they’d never stop. I didn’t want to know time anymore.

She takes two deep breaths and falls asleep, just like that. Always. And I
usually stay up a while, run my fingers through her hair, and confide my secrets. The
hardest night, when the guilt swallowed me whole, was on a backpacking trip over
the summer of our breakup. I lied awake that night, thinking about how terrible it
must be in her shoes. To have loved someone with everything you’ve got and still
face defeat. As the tears ran down my face, she began to toss and turn from a bad
to me, you have a bad dream?” Her head drifted back. Without opening her eyes she
whispered, “you left me.” Every bone shuddered. It was at that moment that I
realized: this is hardest thing I’ve ever been through. And her nightmares didn’t
stop. Here I was, with the most beautiful girl and the deepest love, and I was slowly
killing her.

Our love is so amazing; why can’t that be enough? Why do I need to answer
these questions, why can’t these skeletons leave me alone? Why do I have this
underlying desire to explore even when it’s so good now? So, there they were, the
skeletons of my present, telling me time. But like I said before, they’re only evil if
you let them be.
This was the hike we always went on together, 32nd street. And on September 15th, 2016, I asked her out when the sun went down. And the night I left for my sophomore year in Miami, we hiked there again, one last time, to end where we started. But the colors of the final sunset were symbolic. I was finally able to see things in another way, one without my jealousy, and the draining grip the relationship had over us.

Manuscript 9/1/18:

“This place is magic, you know. Clouds rushing past one another like cars on a highway. The water shattering in the wind chop. The sun flooding the sky and exploding into a thousand hues behind me. It’s different every time I come. Always. The wind is warm on my skin and as I march along the shore, I have to traverse the hundreds of washed up jelly’s. I was high livin. Singing out of my youthful heart strings and bobbin my head. You’d think I was mad if you saw me. I am. Mad to live. I sat down to take it in one last time before heading back to my bike. Man, I dig this place hard. Let this be a testimony for the times I forget it. Which I most definitely will. So, as I was sitting there. Incredible feats were underway right before my eyes. I mean it was crazy. These people were wielding the energy of the earth. This man was bouncing 15 feet into the air on his kite board. Surfers carving the waves into their sculptures. Kids shaving the surface with their skin boards. It was straight bliss. Out in
the distance skyscrapers sat in the water. There’s cool people here. There’s people as mad to live as I am. Here. There. And everywhere else. You’ve just got to find them. I used to think each place had a genre of people and that’s all. But I was wrong. Each place has its entirely own menu of people. The only thing I could think of that would make my eyes glow even more is Arden. We could talk and walk and let our souls dance with all the others wielding the earth's energy. I kept thinking about her. What’s she thinking about right now? Is she thinking about me? Who knows. I can’t wait to see her again. So I set off for some dinner, gliding through the firefly lit sidewalks and then through the marina. This place really does dance all on its own. I’ve forgotten the beauty of biking. That lateral acceleration, it puts you in tune with the movement of the earth.”

I was finding my place, and I realized something that was too disillusioned to see before. for the first time, I allowed myself to trust you. That godly grip I once had has finally been released, released from me too. It was crushing us. Now I feel like I can focus on myself. After we hung up, I felt whole almost instantly, but also so overcome with love for you. I can’t explain it. Someday we’ll be stumbling through the streets laughing and dancing and this will be but a blip. I love you. So, I’m riding this high, finally I did something new. Something so radical from my average everyday life. It makes you feel younger in a way. Andres picked me up and right away I swung back to UM to meet the climbing club for our departure. I met some new cool cats. One with a music taste that hung in my mouth longer than it sang. It was the type of music that makes you forget where you’re going. That’s the idea, right? To be so heavily consumed in the moment that you forget the purpose of next one or where it’s going. So, climbing was fun. It's always therapeutic to move your body, especially in such an animalistic locomotion. I went right to bed after that, the dark of the night put me right out.

10/11/18
6:28 PM

I can’t even begin to explain the emotions of today man! So much of it all. This school is the perfect amalgamation of the pluses, the minuses, the influx and the outflux! I don’t even know what I’m saying. It’s the quintessential dichotomy of my geographical destiny. The rat race is right in front of me. All of the sleepwalkers and the hamsters!! They’re right here for me to pick like cherries. But I overlooked something.
The cool cats. The coolest cats man. Precisely because they are amongst the giants and that teach your collars. The white picket fence franchise. The business frat monkeys’ man! They are amongst them, but they are thriving! Like an algae bloom man. They’re the moss that points north, the beacon of cultivated, pure passion. I didn’t see them until tonight. That coffee house...took me for a trip! Holy shit man what a trip. I’ve never seen such incredible performances in a dim lit space, in any space. The vibrations were so right, and this is just the place where vibrations like these could shatter something that needed a good shake. Man. These cats were so cool, the way they just let it all out, effortlessly, it was so unscripted. Every call from the crowd, every little dance, every little smile. It was the breakfast club, the dead poets society, the kids that breathed the wind from the west! It’s so amazing to see this kind of life where it’s least expected. This is where it’s needed the most. Amongst So many kids living for the weekend.. but those guitar echoes ... so gooey. So good! So Briston Maroney! I want to hear more! I gotta kick it with these kids. I knew it was here. I knew it.

Shit man will they find out? I’ve got the secrets to the universe now. In my back pocket and I can’t sit down it’s so hot! Stay tuned! I gotta drink it all up before my body turns me in! Quick man.

THE LICENSE

8/28/18 2:12 AM

“...It made me think about that eye of the hurricane. That’s what it’s all about, can you turn the muck into gold? Can you dig your place when everything around you is havoc? In that moment, I did. A day of thinking about Arden and feeling depressed...dissolved into that beautiful dying sun. Each color was an emotion. A river of molten lava. Like the core of the earth, taking everything and blasting it with all its energy. Everyone threw their baggage in that fire. And each one made it more beautiful. It was the type sunset that makes you stop and say hey, my life ain’t so bad. Look at all of that burning beauty in the sky. Little do they know, that for a moment, that sun has stolen all of your worries and sins and pressures ... he’s taken them all, and swallowed them up, all of them. Then all the world’s Fahrenheit ensues inside his belly, until he explodes for you to see that everything is connected and it’s all great beauty. Give your worries to the sun and he’ll show you it’s all just paint on a canvas man. He’ll melt them,
mold them, let them drip, mix them together. That's all it is. Every emotion. Every elation. Every rapture, every rupture. It's all there and they're all top shelf paints. You need all of the colors to create something beautiful. Thanks Mr. Sun. For Dying every night, of a great mosaic that everyone creates…"

This is it! The symbol of my final development. Ultimate allowance. The portal into the present is granting yourself permission to feel every emotion. Pain is a part of Love and Art. Singing is crying, walkin’ is dancin.’ Everything is connected in ways that are hard to swallow. Arden and I are still in Love. Having her without the title is akin to having a job without getting paid. The whole aspect of “what it’s for” just dilutes. It’s not for anything. It’s not defined by anything. Love is not about possession. It’s about enduring pain and beauty together, growing, enraging, melting, and floating.

I realized that it was the fear that was controlling me, the fear of future pain, of mistakes, of heartbreak. And the only way to really live, to be truly present, was to allow everything without judgement. Every joy, every pain, and every skeleton are equally as important as the other, the trick is to observe them all. Listen to what they are trying to say, instead of running from them like I did. Now I see it all, in technicolor visions, and it’s beautiful. That right there is worth the price of admission, to see it all from above and only see beauty. Each of these pieces or art, these vulnerable artifacts, led me to the great archeological find of my inner well-being. This idea of listening without the intent to reply, for replying requires an energy which pulls you from fully absorbing that which is being said. The watchful mind observes everything, without judgement. Without filtering reality with preconceived notions. Allowing it all and recognizing that it’s part of the music, like a jazz quintet. They each have such mastery over their instruments, and no matter what beat is thrown, they’ll be jammin’ just the same. And someday I shall be the next great Jazz Trumpeter of the 21st century, with mastery over my instrument, my mind.


An Empty Vessel: Bodybuilding’s Endless Pursuit

Sebastian Garcia

Reflection cannot be manufactured. It comes at times of great enlightenment, and is an invitation that is given to us rather than something that we simply do at the beck and call of our analytical minds. We cannot truly understand always simply by analysis. Analysis makes us human, it is the ability that we have to analyze the past and future, to somehow make sense of this complex procedure. But it is prone to error, and not all original thought comes without a fire to the match. For some of our most profound realizations in our lives are a product of what has happened to us, be it joyful or depressing.

When we are at peace within ourselves regarding a time in our lives, after we have consciously closed a chapter rather than the chapter be closed for us (which we will find a way to resent), we will be invited. Invited by this new version of ourselves that has the maturity and readiness to tackle the analysis of what is ironically the most difficult to understand. The substance of our own minds. We think we are so proficient at understanding the minds of others, and that through our empathy we for certain know why others think a certain way. And we have this proud false belief that we are mind readers, but why is it never glorified to read your own mind? We just take it for granted that we can.

Why do we do things, what makes us tick, what makes us happy, what makes us full, what makes us empty? It is these questions that are the purpose of life, to discover ourselves through life’s experiences, and in our final chapters be able to make sense of our being to the tiniest minutia. It is the game of life. A journey of self-mastery and discovery. But the success in this endeavor comes at a price. Hours of incessant thinking, probing our own thoughts, it drives me mad sometimes, it is how I am wired. Another pain I have suffered my entire life. But, it is through this instinctual circuitry that I was able to leave a poisoned way of life.

To be empty is to be unfulfilled, starving for a future reality manifested in the form of the exterior. And to be full is to no longer demand more, to no longer harbor our happiness, locked away in a box, in which the key to its opening will be granted to us at a later date. A time when apparently our present self seems to believe the future self will be fulfilled. But why can’t we just be full now, and why do sometimes those who are seemingly teeming with life, health, and vibrancy the emptiest where it counts. Wouldn’t logic tell us that those who appear to have it all in a particular
facet certainly be satiated in that avenue? But the paradox comes, when on the inside, it is resembling that of a hollow carcass, there is no real substance. We walk around on a daily basis thinking we can understand someone, by having our human mind analyze other humans solely on the basis of what the eye can see. We make judgments, and we come to conclusions. But hey, is that just part of being human? And because it is a component of human nature does that make an injustice justified?

To be fulfilled on the inside outweighs any fleeting genie in a bottle type wish that can be granted to us on the outside, which will only be stripped of us when the inevitable decay of all things tangible takes place. I lived for 5 years of my life, trudging along with an empty vessel that on the outside appeared to be a meticulously crafted subject. This creation was forged through years of sacrifice, however to no avail in conquering the essential answer to satisfying true human desires. And the question to that answer is what will bring happiness? As if happiness is never something available to us now, but a destination that we can count our future selves to somehow achieve, as if it is some sort of tangible trophy. We always find a way to make things concrete, nothing can simply be. To the spectator, we can only deem worth, importance, or beauty to what the eye can see, what we can actually process. But just because the masses can understand it, does that mean that the subject itself can ever truly be fulfilled with just empty praise and fleeting appearances? I stopped chasing trophies and constructing a value of self-worth forged out of 3-dollar plastic.

My photos act as a vehicle of depersonalization. To explore the states of myself, at a time where I was a certain age, or a certain body weight, but far too foreign to have a sense of oneness. However, those people were still me, alter egos it feels like, the same body but just a different mind. Variations of myself that sought to do me harm in the long run. I look at the person in the photos and I do see someone else. Someone that I knew very well at one point. A best friend who confided in me all of his feelings, his pains, and his fleeting happiness. A pain that comes with numbness, because sometimes the worst pain of all is to really have no pain. Because in having no pain there are also no other emotions. If one does not feel pain they do not feel joy, as they are both logical opposites and really exist as one, like a roller coaster of life’s emotions. My emotions at the time were never felt fully because my mind was always in the distant future where my idealized emotions swirled about. Sometimes you forget if you’re able to feel anything at all when you wonder why nothing you are doing allows you to derive any lasting pleasure. There is no greater pain than for your emotions to be somewhere else, instead of being felt now.
I kept all of those mental notes that I took of my subjects and held them in lock and key. To then be able to tell them their story and explain what was really going on. One in which it only took more suffering, more sacrifice, until he'd finally be happy. But, he had no idea that this vicious cycle never ends, it is an endless pursuit for an empty vessel. If the person in the photos seemed too familiar, familiar in the sense that it felt too much like who I am now, I don't think it would be the same. I would not have the same lens, because I would inevitably be biased to assume he was just fine. Because sometimes we have an issue with acknowledging our ever-present suffering that will come with the natural highs and lows of life. However, there is no worse a multiplier than suppression. We all have a story to share, it is a byproduct of living a life. Although sometimes it can be difficult to articulate it, we need to give ourselves that qualification.

There is a reason why you can so easily pull this photo off the internet when you google bodybuilding. They say in the fitness community, that the day you start working out is the day you became forever small. I never understood why this culture was so glorified, in an activity that was supposed to be one of self-discovery, self-improvement. Isn't the reason why people workout simply to feel good? Somewhere along the road it became a sick obsession, a road of milestones that led down a path with no ending. The never satisfied mindset in bodybuilding is a disease that plagues even the most casual of gym goers. Our tendencies to always need and want more seep into something so simple as picking things up and putting them down. "I just need to increase my bench press a bit more, or gain another inch to my arms", I found myself repeating like a broken record. Even at my darkest points, I questioned this. I wondered when my body would be good enough, why was it so difficult to simply be okay with the way it was already. What exactly was it that was driving me to revolve my life around eating and working out. Was I just driven towards a goal or did I have serious issues that I needed to face. The never satisfied culture does not just stop with bodybuilding either, we see it in all avenues of life. Whether it is the student who just needs one more A or the business owner whose million-dollar salary and Mercedes just will not cut it until there is a Ferrari in that drive way of the ocean front estate. I ask again, how did something so innocent and positive become so dark?
He was so insecure. A young high schooler that was skinnier than his peers, he felt weak and inadequate. He thought muscles would equal respect, attention from the opposite sex, and more friends. That's what the fitness industry marketers like to say when they sell you placebo products, and he believed them. I would have saved a lot of my parent’s money if I wasn’t such a sucker to a culture of insecurity and lies. Sure, he masked this new infatuation with the gym to my friends and my family as simply an avenue to become more competitive in sports. I am looking at this photo now as I write, and I am sad. I feel the pain he had, and I also know the pain he came to endure. All of the time he’d long to get back, but never can. Regretting that is even more of a waste of time though. A retrospective insight that he obviously did not have.

Maybe had he had it, life’s course would have panned out differently. But that would be too easy. For I have no regrets in the choices he and I made, for without them I would be very different, and in the end, I finally came to love myself. Not for the reasons he would have suspected though. At the time, seeing his body shape brought immense pleasure, although an artificial one, and not something I can now consider to be legitimate. If we only receive pleasure from things that are beyond ourselves how do we ever gain true fulfillment. It can only lead to the roller coaster of a feast and famine life in which we are either very high or very low. It was only when he saw those scale numbers in my favor, or my workouts improving that he really felt anything.

It has occurred to me that this thought is not just that of a childish 15-year-old, but all too many people think physical manipulation will provide them salvation. To do something for momentary enjoyment or experience is great, but to believe that experience or altered life situation is to make you happier than you can be now is a mistake. Not to promote an ideology in which conforming to misery or dysfunction is sufficient, but one that acknowledges there is only so much progress to be made, until we need to realize it is as good as it can ever be. In terms of how much more it will “make us happier.”
I spoke with a man recently for an hour and we shared a great debate. As I sat in my Uber, we had very surface level conversations. A quiet man, I engaged him in discussion by asking him some of his favorite restaurants in the area. He proceeded to tell me some, only to backtrack and subtly insert in his dialogue that he wished he had a romantic partner to join him in these moments. His words carried a deep sadness, and I did not know how to respond other than, “you seem like a great guy and I am sure you’ll find your person when the time is right.” Sounding a bit like a cookie cutter advisor in his life’s romance novel. After a moment of awkward silence passed he asked me what is the most attractive feature in a man. Only to then go on an impassioned rant discussing how his height has held him back from approaching people in any attempt to connect. He talked about all these surgeries he has explored to manipulate his leg bones in an effort to just gain a few inches to his height. And if he had those inches, oh how different his life would certainly be. How much happier he would be. This poor man had stripped away all present life, to live in a day dream that once it came he would start to live. But I have never heard of a way to get taller.

In reflection, I am remembering things about myself that at the time I did not have the necessary conscious to understand. When we are being controlled by exterior forces we can never know ourselves, we drone through life only to be discovered later on. Every day, my auto pilot brought me into the gym and sent me back out to feed my body so that I could start to become who I felt I needed to be. Once he realized that he had control over his appearance, he had become completely addicted. Addicted with this idea that he could look how he wanted to. All he had to do was dedicate his life to this. And somehow, that selling of my soul seemed to be worth it to that 16-year-old. I rarely ever looked the same. When I look back on my evolution to me it never is the same person. Its someone else who was a certain age or a certain bodyweight. If he didn’t see family members or friends for a few months, they would cease to recognize him. My parents were worried, and the doctors said he had to slow down with weight gain. He figured they were being
hyper worrisome and he was growing like a normal teenager. He went from 110 pounds to 150 in about a year and then all the way 200 pounds shortly after. A gain of 100 pounds in that short time frame. Gaining and gaining, with no end in sight. Every day he would eat around 5,000 calories, double that of an average adult man. I vividly remember, how he would some nights not sleep, sitting on the toilet trying to hold back the vomit from so desperately trying to hold onto the massive excess of food he was consuming. Because then that meant he would continue to gain more muscle and strength, all for the purpose of that one day where I would reach my final form. People worried for his health. A health that could be shown on a chart or some stupid medical exam. But, why did no one question his mental health. The war being waged within his mind was one leading to the performance of super human feats. Eating every day like in a professional eating competition or working out until not being able to see straight. Everyone just assumed that the things he was doing were conscious, and at the time he thought they were and that he was just some master at his body that these “lazy” people could not understand. He took pride in the fact that he could become whoever he wanted to be. But really, he was a slave, a slave to this voice in his head that needed to control him in order for it to survive. And on the inside, I would always be light as a feather.

He dropped that excess weight that everyone seemed to be in such an uproar about. Just more people telling him what to do with his body. He did what they told him, but not because they told him to, there’s a difference. Losing the weight had nothing to do with health, nothing to do with trying to regain the reins of his eating habits, and constantly fluctuating body composition. It was because now he was ready, since he reached my peak weight of 200 something pounds. Ready to hatch from his chrysalis into a beautiful butterfly. After spending 2 long years, suffering as a puppet, eating copious amounts of food and destroying his body in the gym for this very moment. The journey where he would prove to myself that he was a real bodybuilder, and that he was truly hardcore enough to call himself one and embody the lifestyle. I wonder if any of the choices were really his own.
Everything was extreme, he spent those 2 years just thinking about this moment, no wonder he was so angry. He harbored so much unconscious tension, pain, and anger. But he could never quite pinpoint what it was. He just assumed he had anger management issues and went about life as if this was to be my life’s sentence. And let’s face it, he was too busy building biceps to focus on building my mindset. Thanks a lot, man. On the outside, he now received so much praise, especially from the same people who ridiculed his weight gain. And while now he finally was deemed to have a beautiful exterior, he was the emptiest he had ever been on the inside. And this emptiness only drove him to deeper chasms.

He spent 4 months dropping over 50 pounds down to 160 pounds to get on the bodybuilding stage. But, he deemed himself too inadequate to compete in the bodybuilding class, so he did men’s physique. A glorified male beauty pageant where men wear shorts, a fake tan, and smile their pearly whites for the judges. The desire for validation from a panel of strangers would not even allow him to present my work in the way he wanted to. At every turn, he was living simply to please, never deriving any sense of fulfillment from what he was able to see. In competitions, bodybuilders base what they do entirely upon how they believe the judges will rate their physique. I think now how that makes no sense. You spend years suffering to get under those bright lights and then you do not even compete the way you really want? This whole thing is so masochistic, and quite frankly makes no sense. But, how many will ever realize that. Maybe, I am just jaded and this whole thing is perfectly normal. For the love of the sport, right?

How does someone spend so much time feeling worthless and not snap? I guess worthlessness does not allow for an awakening, or breaking of the chains. Because this feeling only demands more suffering through completing actions we so desperately feel we need to do in order to rid our worthlessness and fulfill our self-esteem. Whereas before he was trying to keep his food down, he was now trying to keep it out. Starving a majority of days. But this would not be the last time he would put myself through this vicious cycle.
He never did steroids. But everyone always thought he did, they assumed it. This hurt him tremendously and almost led him to become the monster he was made out to be by the whispers. He had worked so hard for this physical body, and it was simply discredited by words. Words from those who he so desperately craved approval from. So, then it really seems that all things are subject to criticism, and this idea of achieving happiness through this exterior being was not feasible. For to lay your worth in the opinions of others will inevitably destroy you. He obsessed over taking steroids. He did hours of research, and contemplated ordering them. His internal mind was so lethal that it was driving him to contemplate injecting my body with foreign substance that were not only illegal, but would jeopardize my health. He wanted to become the villain that he was made out to be, for if he couldn’t love himself nor be received by others regardless of how hard he worked for it, he just wanted to be disliked. For at least then maybe he would feel something. An identity maybe. He never shunned this opportunity to gain any identity, and if being the angry combatant was something he could latch onto then so be it. I am glad he didn’t become that villain permanently, that pain would have driven him to darker places than I could imagine.

At this point though he was conflicted. He had reached a level in my physique where he finally began to feel this might be it. However, the desire to improve greatly outweighed this fleeting satisfaction, but it was a great feeling if only for a moment. He would meet it again, and make the same mistake. He was now on a crash course.

Yes, there was a desire to improve, but there was also this incredible anxiety that came with the thought of relinquishing this identity. He knew himself as a bodybuilder, so did peers, friends, and family members. He clung to this construct like a sailor fallen overboard clings to a life preserve. An identity gives us a sense of self, in a world where it is so awkward and confusing to have none. To have no title, no purpose, no answer to the “hey, so what do you do”. It’s all mental though of course, for in reality it makes no difference “what we are”, we are just ourselves and
not literally our hobbies or our day job. But, to lose the concrete sense of self that our minds have latched onto would be far too dangerous to our outward appearance.

For him, his identity was my body and the idea that I was constantly changing it. The body is like the mental identity, in being able to state, “I do bodybuilding”, but now it becomes even stronger as the physical body is also an unspoken identity. For it is seen and understood by the eyes, which apparently is the main predictor of value in our society. So, to lose that societal value would be devastating. The body represented everything for him. It represented his confidence, my hard work, my passion, my ultimate talking point in conversation. He had become so one dimensional, stemming from this umbrella concept. The things we do are always to be aligned with our identity, so logically he missed out on so much, because he could never be compromised. Never just exist, there always had to be a calculated reason for everything he did. He would never go on vacation, always turn down an alcoholic drink or a day away from the gym or food. Because then maybe he would be exposed, the truth would come out, and the empty controller would be filled with something that transcended a name tag like identity.

He kept his head down. Isolating himself from others, his lifestyle had now reached the real extreme. 220 pounds was the heaviest I had ever been. Not only did others not recognize him, he did not recognize himself. None of the clothes fit, his waist had gotten over 40 inches, and he was far more self-conscious than as a 110 pound stick figure. But regardless of what he looked like, he would have had that emptiness. He clung far too much to our body. Thankfully, He began to learn that what’s on the outside does not reflect the insides, and those who seem the most put together may very well be the ones screaming the loudest on the inside, but no one will ever hear them unless they allow it.

He had his first breakdown, where he felt he could not take this anymore. As is indicative by my previous choices, he clearly took great pains to ensure he was living on the extremes. So, desperate to get this weight off, he grew angry. Angry
with himself and the fact that he had done this to myself, and what for. He barely ate for a week, and he spent the entire days exercising. He was willing to do anything. But, through years of participating in this lifestyle he had learned what was realistic, and what were the proper approaches to dieting. So, he relinquished his emotions and constructed a plan, one that would not be easy. He had to finally silence his mind, and let go to the process, maybe finally have faith for once that things would work themselves out, and my body would follow. This person accounted for every variable in his life to ensure physical success. Accounting for sleep, food, training, disconnecting relationships. He had to change to really transform. Forget physically, but mentally something had to give. For even this enslaved soul knew that what he was doing to himself was no way to live.

It took a full year. He tried to find a balance to the process, and he set out to do so. And for a while he was able to fool himself that he was managing. But, how can you possibly be allowing life to take place if you spend every second of concerted effort toward this goal. It is not a pleasant feeling to be somewhere, but mentally be somewhere else. And the guilt that came with going off track, was enough to keep him on the robotic assembly line. The worst part of the process was not in the sacrifice, the hard work. It was in the fact that I lost a year of my life, another year of my life gone. One year of physical time placed into one day in the distant future when he would complete his diet and strip the weight off. When he would then be happy, and then maybe he could start living. And that is assuming he would be brave enough to take a stand.

He became a bodybuilding champion. When he received that first-place validation, the quest was complete. Keep in mind, these thought processes were subconscious, things that I could not understand until now. At the time. All he knew was that winning this competition, getting this trophy, and achieving this physical form led him to believe he had made it. And this was the physique I was going to reach my final destination
as. It was as if the moment he was being judged the most, the most scrutinized, he had learned to relinquish the placement of his worth in someone else. Maybe it was when I finally realized it was not the answer. I was beginning to break through the cracks.

But, there was one complication. This obsession with physical shape had now manifested itself in something else. He had created a platform of recognition and a business that was entirely dependent on his bodybuilding career. It was now that he truly was not doing this for himself, only for the validation of others, but now the choice seemed almost out of his hands. Not something that he could just abandon. For now, he had gotten in too deep.

Before, it was more indirect. He was bodybuilding for others validation only based upon shorthanded remarks, or whispers out in public. It was those little moments that fueled his ego. On this platform he had now created, bolstering over 30,000 people following my account, all of the praise that the skinny kid yearned for to give him a sense of self, was pouring in by the boat loads. Thousands of likes, messages, comments. Maybe it wasn’t the trophy that was the destination, but this following he had developed. And it had nothing to do with muscles, but simply having an influence and others to look up to him. How different is that though from a body, it’s just as exterior based, just as shallow, just as reflective of an empty person. Nothing changed, it just took a different form.

I read his writings too that accompanied these posts. And he often spoke about bodybuilding and used writing as a creative expression to describe his feelings
towards bodybuilding. As well as his philosophies regarding the lifestyle. And within those writings I can see now a cry for help, I was desperately trying to be heard through my hollow shell. He was of course consciously writing those things on his page, but behind the writing was who I am now, trying to break through the shell. “I don’t know what it is for me, it’s like a subconscious need.” He wrote that. Writing at a time of great delusion he did not even know why he was doing what I was doing, there was just some indescribable drive to do so. It was the emptiness. And it was slowly starting to fill up.

That feeling of satisfaction had faded into the abyss as his obsession to satisfy spectators had once again driven him to this compulsion to gain and improve my muscularity. We can change so much, but at our core our natural tendencies can find a way to haunt us. He had thought that mentally he had improved so much over 5 years, had faith in the fact that maybe there was something going on where it counts. But, really, maybe he was still that same skinny insecure kid inside, screaming desperately to be heard in an empty cell.

He began to feel so frustrated. That he had once again fallen back into habits he swore to never repeat. He had no self-control in an aspect that we believe is only
of our own. It makes no sense sometimes, that logically we would have the best opportunity at control over ourselves, however it is the most elusive. Reverting back to bad habits, ignoring doing what will bring us pleasure and instead trading it for pain wrapped in the mask of exterior beauty.

Salvation will never come in the guise of the illusion of perfection. He believed for so long that my happiness was being held in the distant future, that he would certainly get there through living a life of misery trudging through the muck of hard work. Because nothing takes us where we want to go except hard work and sacrifice right? Does this not sound a lot like the ways in which many people live their lives, working day in and day out like robots only for that day in which they finally are able to reclaim their sanity, and finally be free and happy selves. The point is not that anyone should not work hard, or trade their aspirations for leisure at all turns. I want to stress that. It is about the idea that we need to appreciate all parts of the process. As well as be able to acknowledge when that process is vain. An unhealthy and toxic lifestyle that we have created, justified because we have “goals”, which is only causing us interior deprivation in hopes that someday we will have a certain appearance or object that will at least give us false delusions. And it is up to no one to tell you what you should and should not do. With your body, your life. It is for your own discovery to figure out what gives you life and what strips it away.

Well, he snapped. It finally got to the point where that obsessive voice inside his head, the one that was driving him to do perform with a discipline I cannot comprehend, was defeated. His craving for exterior fulfillment had been outweighed by the need to become whole. He sat in the gym one day, after vomiting from
working out so intensely, and I asked him a simple question. Why do you do this to yourself? It felt like in the movies, when the devil and angel are on your shoulder, one begging you to commit wrong, and the other pleading to have you do what is right.

He answered me with a voice with a simple, “I have no idea”, and I walked out of the gym in the middle of my workout. We all talk to ourselves, right? He had never left a workout in 5 years, even though one time he threw his back out. Damage had been done though, in the sense that I was so emotionally drained from the bodybuilding lifestyle, I had now gone to the other end of the spectrum. I felt like I was just came out of a long slumber and needed time to rejuvenate. I resented the gym, self-improvement, and came to glorify the fact that I no longer cared about my health because I was too busy enjoying food, life, and working towards my academic goals. I had lost so much of the muscle and strength that seemed so precious to me, and I realized something profound. The fact that none of that made any difference to my self-esteem or my happiness. In fact, I felt the fullest in my entire life.

An epiphany is in a moment, and it would be correct to question its sustainability. How does a single moment that could have been caused by so many instantaneous and fleeting frustrations possibly last? Maybe that workout was just a bit harder than the others causing an acute anguish that would entirely dissipate for tomorrow’s workout. The very nature of an epiphany is its sustainability though. For the simple fact that its profoundness is not truly an “aha-moment”. It is one that’s arrival is an accumulation, a buildup of feelings and realizations that are just waiting to be exploded. Even the toxic and deluded mind can only persist so long before it is discovered. And upon its implosion, it is not possible for that rubble to so easily be rebuilt.
I finally found that balance. After months away from the gym I decided I was ready to come back. Once I had processed it all, the pain, the pleasure I was able to ensure that he would never come back to cause harm, I was whole. I would be lying if I said I didn’t have occasional days where I think to myself what would it be like if I got back into it. After all it was something that was such a huge and defining part of my life. If I began training every day again, tracking all my calories and foods would I be able to now see it differently? In fact, I tried it again. But I didn’t last for more than a few days. I go to the gym when I feel like it a few times per week, and for the most part I eat what I want while being somewhat health conscious. I go to the gym now for fun, for my health, and to feel good, mainly as a means of prioritizing my mental health and well-being. It was once I realized how little my appearance did for my life that

I was finally freed. And able to reach this point.

We are often blind, amidst our self-induced trauma. We convince ourselves that what we are doing is because we are just so passionate that it’s what we need to do. That was usually the answer he would give people that looked at him with 3 heads. We need to just let life take its course, and we eventually find our way back, with some taking longer than others. I have gained that clarity as well in dealing with other people. Understanding that in life we can go through phases where we may strongly believe one thing only to denounce it later on. It is all too easy to want to impose my own philosophies and tell other bodybuilders I have been there, you’re going down a dark path. If someone told me that that other guy most definitely would have disregarded them, and had he listened to them he never would have gained that self-mastery I have been talking about. We change, we evolve, mostly
for the better but sometimes for the worse. However, they will be okay in the end too.

To accept yourself, your body, your circumstances, does not come always through getting closer to the point where we believe that acceptance and satisfaction will come. In fact, that is just a prolonging of the core issue, which is the fact that nothing is or ever will be good enough. Because good enough is never perfect. Most times it never comes and you tell yourself you only need a little more. Just a few more pounds! To be okay with whatever is there at the moment, a surrender if you will, is total acceptance. That choice is entirely yours and available when you're ready to stop the perpetual effort.

It took me 5 years, but my journey has told me there is a hope. We are not a mental compilation of our circumstances and we have the power to create a different mindset and outlook. For if we didn't then we would really be those hardwired robots that are on a preprogrammed assembly line.


Garcia, Sebastian. 14 Year Old Physique. June 2012. Author’s personal collection.


Garcia, Sebastian. 16 Year Old Competition Physique. May 2014. Author’s personal collection.

Garcia, Sebastian. 16 Year Old Physique. November 2013. Author’s personal collection.


Garcia, Sebastian. 17 Year Old Physique. March 2015. Author’s personal collection.

Garcia, Sebastian. 18 Year Old Peak Weight. July 2016. Author’s personal collection.

Garcia, Sebastian. 19 Year Old After Diet Physique. June 2017. Author’s personal collection.


On Stage Competition Photo. June 2017

The Eighth Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits excessive bail, excessive fines, and cruel and unusual punishment. The Supreme Court of the United States has decided decades of capital punishment cases where parties argue whether the death penalty constitutes “cruel and unusual punishment.” The Court’s decisions continuously clarify Amendment VIII—in a manner that proves society’s evolving standards of decency.

Some may argue that society’s standards of decency are not evolving because this evolution is not constant. For example, the Court decided in Stanford v. Kentucky (1989) that the death penalty is constitutional in cases where offenders commit crimes at age 16 or 17, despite 17-year-old Kevin Stanford’s pleas that sentencing minors to death violates the cruel and unusual punishment clause of Amendment VIII. However, the Court later overruled this decision in Roper v. Simmons (2005). The Court spared Christopher Simmons, also only 17 years old, because they felt that the nation’s opinion had changed. Americans now believed that executing minors was cruel and unusual punishment. While evolution may seem erratic through a short-term lens, society’s standards of decency are overall advancing. Still, some argue that the death penalty constitutes “cruel and unusual punishment,” and, thus, the Court’s failure to abolish this practice over the years proves that standards of decency remain static. But this conclusion is unwarranted because the Court’s decades of holdings demonstrate society’s progressive understanding of proper proportions of punishments to crimes and evolved recognition that it is “cruel and unusual” to impose the death penalty (1) for the mentally insane, (2) for intellectually disabled individuals, and (3) for minors.

While the law permits the death penalty, Supreme Court holdings further limit which convicts may be sentenced to death.

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1 Constitution of the United States of America, Amendment VIII.
4 Constitution of the United States of America, Amendment VIII.
5 Constitution of the United States of America, Amendment VIII.
Society used to sentence “a capriciously selected random handful”\(^6\) of rapists and murderers to death, as Justice Potter Stewart wrote in his majority opinion for *Furman v. Georgia* (1972)\(^7\). Over time, the Court prohibited such a harsh sentence in cases that do not warrant this reaction. In *Furman v. Georgia*, the Court found that defendants are inconsistently sentenced to death, often in a pattern that suggests racial discrimination. The inconsistency and lack of rational standards to decide when to consider the death penalty leads to discrimination and violates both the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments. As a result of this holding in *Furman* (1972)\(^8\), states enacted new laws to standardize the imposition of capital punishment. Court decisions from *Coker v. Georgia* (1977)\(^9\) and *Enmund v. Florida* (1982)\(^10\), respectively declared that the death penalty is an excessive punishment for convicted rapists and for convicted murderers who did not kill, attempt to kill, or intend to kill someone. More recently, the Court found in *Kennedy v. Louisiana* (2008)\(^11\) that the death penalty is unconstitutional if the defendant is not convicted of murder or crimes against the State. Each of these Court holdings are qualifications that demonstrate progress. The Court may abolish the death penalty someday, but they have shown improvements by prohibiting this sentence from being considered as punishment for many—even heinous—crimes.

The Court’s case decisions have also reflected society’s increasingly robust understanding of and compassion for the mentally incapacitated, whether by insanity or by intellectual disability. In 1986, in *Ford v. Wainwright*\(^12\), the Court upheld that sentencing the mentally insane to death is “cruel and unusual.”\(^13\) The Court similarly concluded in *Atkins v. Virginia* (2002)\(^14\) that executing intellectually disabled convicts violates Amendment VIII, overruling the 1989 decision in *Penry v. Lynaugh*.\(^15\) Justice John Paul Stevens’ majority opinion in *Atkins v. Virginia* (2002)\(^16\) demonstrated a clear and sophisticated understanding of why the Court’s decision is the only fair one. He wrote that intellectually disabled

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\(^7\) *Furman v. Georgia*, 408 U.S. 238 (1972).

\(^8\) *Furman v. Georgia*, 408 U.S. 238 (1972).


\(^12\) *Ford v. Wainwright*, 477 U.S. 399 (1986).

\(^13\) *Constitution of the United States of America, Amendment VIII*


individuals cannot communicate like people with higher IQ scores and are therefore more likely to be sentenced to death because sometimes (1) they are more susceptible to suggestion, (2) they confess to appease their questioner, and (3) juries misunderstand them as not remorseful for their crimes. Further, in *Hall v. Florida* (2014) the Court held that, in cases where the defendant faces the death penalty and has a borderline intellectually disabled IQ of 70 to 75, the states must allow the defendant’s attorneys to present additional evidence that demonstrate their client’s intellectual deficit. The Court admitted that IQ tests have a margin of error and that allowing additional evidence is necessary to avoid unconstitutionally sentencing an intellectually disabled individual to death. The Court’s requirement that convicts have the capacity to understand their crime and punishment if sentenced to death is not a legal requirement, rather, one that just demonstrates simple decency.

As previously mentioned, *Roper v. Simmons* (2005) overruled *Stanford v. Kentucky* (1989), effectively ruling that capital punishment for offenders who were minors when they committed the crime violated the “cruel and unusual” clause of Amendment VIII. In the majority opinion, Justice Anthony Kennedy, wrote that the death penalty is a “disproportionate punishment” for minors. He illuminated three major differences between minors and adults: (1) juveniles are less “morally reprehensible” because they are immature and irresponsible, (2) juveniles are easier to forgive for not being able to escape their negative environment because they are more vulnerable and less in control, and (3) their misbehavior is not evidence of “irretrievably depraved character” because they have not yet established their identity. Although this qualification came only recently, its establishment nevertheless demonstrates evolving standards of decency.

Society’s standards of decency evolve—at an erratic rate. I look forward to seeing how state courts use the most recent evolved standards to potentially convict and sentence Nikolas Cruz and Robert Bowers, the suspects in the

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21 *Constitution of the United States of America, Amendment VIII*.
24 Ibid.
Parkland school shooting and Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, respectively. Each time the Supreme Court grants a capital punishment case certiorari allows for another opportunity to demonstrate society’s progress.
The Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard case is founded on claims that Harvard University is discriminating against Asian-American applicants. This case concerns Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and the Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection Clause. The Asian-American applicants argue Harvard's affirmative action application policies that are designed to apply more weight to the applications of minority groups have unfairly wronged them. The Asian-American applicants seek a remedy that removes the race category from the application process in order to promote fairness. If precedent is to be maintained, it is likely that the federal district court of Boston’s decision will be decided in favor of Harvard.

The first precedential case shifting the likelihood of a favorable outcome for Harvard is Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265 (1978). In Bakke, Allan Bakke, a thirty-five-year-old white applicant to the University of California Medical School at Davis, claimed he was rejected from the school solely due to discrimination against his white race. The Supreme Court held eight to one in favor of Bakke and ordered he be granted admission to the University of California Medical School at Davis.

One might now ask that if the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiff in this case, would the Court not do the same for the Asian-American applicants in the Harvard case? The key distinction between Bakke and The Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard is the University of California's use of a “racial quota” system to ensure that a specific number of minority applicants would fill the allocated spaces for their race. This distinction persuaded the Court to rule in Bakke’s favor because the use of rigid racial quotas violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In addition, Bakke reaffirmed that

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1 The Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard (Argued 2018)
Affirmative Action is but one of many criteria for admission to a school, is still constitutionally permissible.

The point of discussion in *The Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard* is whether Affirmative Action is still constitutionally permissible. Harvard employs a “holistic approach” in their admissions process. This holistic Affirmative Action approach does consider race as a criterion; however, it also takes the applicant’s extracurricular activities, volunteer work, and “the personal rating” (calculated through teacher recommendations and interviews with alumni) into consideration, in addition to grades and test scores. Harvard argues that basing decisions entirely on grades and test scores alone would be extremely difficult due to the sheer number of applications with high grades and excellent test scores. A holistic admissions approach ensures each applicant has the chance to stand out to compete for the limited number of spaces in the class. Harvard’s strict avoidance of quotas, point systems, and stringent numbers follows the Supreme Court’s prior ruling. These admissions policies repeatedly have been found to be constitutional and will likely continue to be for the foreseeable future.

Harvard’s admissions practices are further supported in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003). In *Grutter*, Barbara Grutter, a White applicant applying to the University of Michigan Law School, claimed to be rejected solely based on her race. The Supreme Court voted five to four in favor of Michigan Law School (*Bollinger*). It was decided that Michigan Law School’s “narrowly tailored” use of race in the admissions process was in fact a constitutional effort to reach a “critical mass” of minority students. The use of the key words, “narrowly tailored” provided enough evidence to the Court to show that race was not the only factor considered. The use of the words “critical mass” likewise detracted from what otherwise might have been considered a strict quota. A “critical mass,” as defined by the defendants, was framed more as a rough goal to achieve, rather than a strict number of students that would be admitted based on their race. Both clarifications went towards the law school’s goal of a “compelling interest in achieving diversity among its student body”: a goal that the Supreme Court supported. Thus, the Court decided that the law school’s race-conscious admissions program inflicted no harm on nonminority applicants.

Harvard, like the University of Michigan Law School, shares the goal of seeking a diverse student body. The University of Michigan uses a “critical mass” approach, which although considered constitutional, is arguably more targeted towards a set number of minority applicants than Harvard’s “holistic approach.”
Harvard’s “holistic approach” circumvents targeting a set number of minority applicants entirely by avoiding both a strict quota and a “critical mass” in its admissions decisions. Both universities morally seek to make their schools more diverse and welcoming to foster a well-rounded community comprising individuals with various unique backgrounds. Harvard argues that due to the small number of Black and Hispanic applicants to their university, it adopted an affirmative action policy that considers race to maintain a racially diverse body of students.

Historically, it has been these very policies that guaranteed Asian-American applicants more spaces at Harvard than they otherwise would have had access to. Harvard has since stated that removing the consideration of race would significantly reduce the diversity of its student body and hamper its educational goals. This has already been seen in several states that have banned the use of race-conscious admissions programs, such as Michigan, where Black enrollment in particular has yet to recover since the changes. *Grutter v. Bollinger* decided that a race-based consideration must serve a compelling state interest and that each applicant must be evaluated as an individual. It can be argued that Harvard’s policies align with both rulings. Harvard’s goal in seeking racial diversity within its borders is a just one. By considering each applicant as an individual, with race as one of many criteria considered, Harvard constitutionally builds its desired diversity.

The constitutionality of race conscious admissions programs was further defined in *Fisher v. University of Texas*, 133 S. Ct. 2411 (2013). At this time, a law was put in place where the University of Texas was required to admit all students who were in the top ten percent of their senior class in high school. Abigail Fisher was not. She, therefore, competed with other not-top-ten-percent students, only to be rejected. She claimed that the university’s consideration of race in admissions decisions went against the Equal Protections Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the University of Texas in a seven-to-one decision, stating that race conscious admissions programs are constitutional “but only under a standard of strict judicial scrutiny.” This means that the policies must be “precisely tailored to serve a compelling governmental interest” in which the consideration of race is the only means to meet this governmental interest.

Therefore, it can be argued that Harvard University’s race-conscious admissions policies are, in fact, “narrowly tailored” enough to serve this wider
“governmental interest.” Race is but one of many criteria considered during the application process to promote the university’s diversity goals. Harvard’s current admissions policies should be deemed constitutionally appropriate due to the precedents set forth in Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, Grutter v. Bollinger, and Fisher v. University of Texas. Regents of the University of California v. Bakke states that strict quotas for admitting minority applicants are unconstitutional, but since Harvard does not use strict quotas, its admissions process should not be considered unconstitutional. Harvard employs a “holistic approach” to admissions that is further supported in Grutter v. Bollinger, which maintains that “narrowly tailored” use of race in order to reach a “critical mass” goal of minority students is constitutional. Lastly, it can be stated that Harvard’s policies support a compelling state interest by ensuring that minority students are represented in sufficient numbers at their institution, for without this policy, they might not be represented at all.

While it makes sense for this policy to be in place now and remain constitutional, it may not always be this way. In the words of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, “race-conscious admissions must be limited in time,” but Harvard and their proponents argue that now is not that time.
Works Cited


The Evolution of Decency

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In United States law, the concept of decency is very important. First set forth in the Preamble to the Constitution, standards of decency within criminal law guaranteed all defendants the right to remain free from excessive punishment that is cruel or unusual. However, standards of decency in the late 18th century were very different than what now exists in the 21st century, and this has been recognized in our courts. In the case of *Trop v. Dulles*, Chief Justice Warren noted that it is these evolving standards that reflect how much progress a society has made toward maturation. However, it is not such a simple concept to understand as the evolution of a society, and their standards of decency, do not move in a straight line.

If anything, in America, standards may remain behind the times to some degree because of *stare decisis*, which is the legal concept that current cases are usually decided according to precedent unless some new or unusual factor is present. In some cases, these new and unusual factors are present, but in many cases, the similarities eventually rely on precedent, so nothing changes. Therefore, changes to the standards of decency happen as bricks put in a wall – things remain constant according to precedent for some time, then a unique situation happens that *requires* the standards of decency to change, which then sparks a new wall of case precedent. Each subsequent case using the doctrine continues to add bricks to that wall. However, there is no specific time pattern to this trend, and it simply happens as the situations arise and society has changed enough to see them differently. Although different standards evolve from time to time, the concept of modern decency has evolved most in the areas of mental health and age.

The best way to describe the current evolution of the standards of decency is reviewing how the law now treats individuals convicted of crimes who also have been diagnosed with mental illnesses or disabilities. One of the best modern cases to describe the beginning of this evolution in standards of decency came in the case of *Atkins v. Virginia*, 536 U.S. 304. In this murder case, an individual was convicted of murder; however, due to having a very low IQ of 59, he was relieved of the death penalty in favor of jail time because he was classified as mildly mentally retarded. Essentially, the Supreme Court ruled that it was a violation of the Eighth Amendment to sentence the murderer to death because of his low
mental capabilities. However, this was not a nationally mandated ruling; states still reserved the right to make judgements based on mental ability under their own state laws. Yet, this was an evolution because the ruling in the case gave some protection for individuals suffering from mental illnesses or disadvantaged conditions.

Twelve years later, when dealing with the intelligence level of a death penalty defendant in Florida in the case of *Hall v. Florida*, 572 U.S., the standards further evolved. In this case the Supreme Court ruled two important things. First, they determined criteria for establishing mental level: (1) the defendant must have a low IQ score; (2) they must also lack the basic ability to interact with others and functioning society; and (3) the appearance of whatever the mental illness must have been diagnosed prior to the defendant’s eighteenth birthday. The second important factor about this case is that it showcases the evolution of standards of decency. It was no longer appropriate to ignore mental conduct or act like it made no difference in the courtroom. It is unconstitutional for that to happen.

This concept was extended even further to address full mental illness and not just a lack of mental capacity. In *Panetti v. Quarterman*, 551 U.S. 930, the Supreme Court ruled that if an individual did not understand why they were receiving the death penalty, it would be cruel and unusual to enforce it. In this case, the defendant had been convicted of murder, but he had a strong history of mental illness, and his behavior during the trial was clearly that of someone not in their right mind. Therefore, after looking at his mental history and current mental condition, the Supreme Court determined that he was not competent to stand trial, let alone be executed, and thus decency standards evolved even more. Nearly thirty years prior, in 1986 in the case of *Ford v. Wainwright*, 477 U.S. 399, the court had started this concept of mental competence and execution. In that case, the defendant had been convicted of murder and sentenced to death, but after eight years the defendant’s mental health had deteriorated significantly, to the point where the Supreme Court ruled that his mental illness was too great for him to be justifiably executed.

Additionally, in *Roper v. Simmons*, 543 U.S. 551, this concept of changing the standards of decency spilled over to minors as well; the Supreme Court voted that sentencing minors under the age of eighteen to be executed for their crimes was unconstitutional. This decision represented a major evolution in standards of decency, because sixteen years before *Roper v. Simmons*, *Stanford v. Kentucky*, 492 U.S. 361 determined that anyone over the age of sixteen was eligible for the death
penalty. Even earlier than this, individuals fourteen years of age were eligible for the death penalty. When the Bill of Rights was first adopted, common law recognized anyone over the age of fourteen as an adult and thus eligible for adult punishment (Champion, 2004).

In both age and mental capacity, the standards of decency have evolved. For age, while adulthood in the 18th century was thought to begin at fourteen years of age, adulthood is now deemed to begin at eighteen, and rightfully so. For mental health status, the Supreme Court has now created precedent that individuals who have very low mental capabilities or suffer from mental illness cannot be executed, and each ensuing case has built more on the doctrine. As these changes have taken uneven numbers of years to complete, there is no specific timeline where the evolution has happened, but when it does, it happens like a wall where the foundation is laid with a unique case, then each subsequent case continues to add bricks to the wall, strengthening and expanding the doctrine.
Works Cited


