Felicia Alvarenga
Amanda Carnes
Noah Cooter
Colleen Fleming
Ana Hahs
Naisargi Jaiswal
Haley Fumiko Jernigan
Mirian Leon
Alisha Solomon
Acknowledgements

We are pleased to present the Best Essays Anthology 2016-2017. It is through such an anthology that we are able to honor our finest writers. These pages are the work of students enrolled in the West Valley College’s English department’s English Literature and Composition courses. The focus of these courses is mastering several varieties of essays. The WVC privileges and supports good writing; that is why this collection of student essays is so vital. Taken together, they illustrate that students work diligently to understand, master, and hone the skills that enable them to write perpectively and creatively. The panel of judges comprised three English faculty and one student who read and rated the works anonymously.

Front Cover: Alisha Solomon, Brainstorm

You may access this anthology at [www.westvalley.edu/academics/language_arts/english]
Table of Contents

Narrative

“Forgetting Rodney King for a Moment,” Colleen Fleming

“Forikörperkultur,” Amanda Carnes

Argument/Persuasion

“Proofs of a Dumbspiracy,” Noah Cooter

Researched Argument

“A Woman’s Right,” Felicia Alvarenga

“How America Silences Victims of Rape,” Mirian Leon

Literary Analysis

“Governmental Citizen, Societal Outsider: Post-Colonialism’s Baby, the Socially Rejected,” Haley Fumiko Jernigan

“Falling on the Way to Damascus,” Naisargi Jaiswal

“Trapped by Society: Mrs. Dalloway and ‘The Waiter’s Wife,’” Ana Hahs
My name is Colleen Fleming and I am currently in my third year at West Valley. I am a psychology major and I plan on becoming a psychiatrist. I am also a part of the West Valley Softball Team. Although my major and my extracurricular are not literature based, English has always been a favorite subject of mine, especially creative writing. In Professor Davis’ class we read the play Twilight by Anna Deavere Smith: a compilation of monologues surrounding the varying perspectives on the LA Riots following the Rodney King trial and verdict. Professor Davis gave us the opportunity to choose our own prompt for our essay surrounding the play. One of the options was to create your own monologue and I took that idea and added a very personal touch. Being that my family spent much of my early life living in Southern California, I knew that my father, Michael Fleming, was in close contact with the LA Riots as they occurred. I mimicked Deavere Smith’s writing style to format my father’s monologue and then reflected on these choices in an essay following the monologue.

Forgetting Rodney King for a Moment
-Colleen Fleming-

Michael Fleming
Former Entertainment Industry Executive

(In his home in Saratoga, California. He has since moved from Los Angeles for personal reasons. He sits in a rocking chair in his living room. He wears comfortable clothes and trifocal glasses. He has a very strong speaking voice that commands the room. There are magazines and newspapers scattered throughout the room. He is a large man in both height and size. He is about 65 years old. He has a serious look to him, but his laugh is boisterous and his voice is calming. He is drinking his morning coffee.)

I was actually in New York on business and was not aware of specifically what was going on. Um, I was on my way back to LA the day that the court verdicts were rendered out and I was landing in the late evening hours at, um, LAX, Los Angeles International Airport. The pilot actually came over the intercom and told us that the Rodney King verdict had been announced, all the officers had been acquitted, and they didn’t know anything else. As an active traveler I had several different routes I would take to get to and from the Los Angeles Airport because traffic on the freeways right around the airport is terrible. One of those routes took me right though South Central Los Angeles. By the time I had landed the riots had been going on for several hours and had spread to various parts of the city and, um, although as I flew in on the airplane and could see the fires as we crossed over that part of Los Angeles, I was not aware of how widespread the issue was.

So I hopped in my car and took my normal route which took me right through the middle of where the riots were going on. Again this was the first night not several days later when things got really out of control. So I was able to observe many bands of mostly youngsters
who were running about from location to location trying to cause as much, um, mayhem as 
they could. I came across several different, probably four different small strip shopping 
centers in that part of Los Angeles, near Los Angeles Airport that had already been burned to 
the ground.

I continued on my path up to the north and headed back into my office which was on Sunset 
Boulevard on the edge of Beverly Hills, it was actually referred to as Beverly Hills Adjacent. 
And my office, it was up on a hill and I was on the tenth floor of a ten story building, so uh, 
my windows in my office looked back towards the South and West of Los Angeles. So I could 
actually see the fires burning in various parts of LA and coming towards me, where I was 
located, which was many, miles away from LAX and where the riots had all started.

I stayed in the office for about an hour and as I headed down Sunset Boulevard towards 
home I actually came across, I think it was a Best Buy, but it was a consumer electronics 
store and the rioters had already gotten to there. They'd broken the glass, the front windows, 
and the door and were carrying electronic materials out into the parking lot and as I sat out 
at the traffic light near that one of these guys came up to me and asked me if I wanted to 
buy a television for cheap (chuckles) so I told him I did not and headed on home.

As it affected us personally, we lived in an area that was quite a ways away from where the 
main riots were occurring. Again, most of the riots were happening in South Central and 
South West Los Angeles down near the Los Angeles International Airport and Inglewood and 
that general area, though the riots did spread out to various parts of LA County. We lived up 
in the North Eastern side of the county so we were 20 miles or so away from where the main 
activity was occurring. I think that for most of us who lived out where we did it didn't bother 
us particularly and with my background in military service and combat I wasn't particularly 
worried about our safety. If anybody came close to our house it would have been dealt with 
pretty, significantly quickly.

But, there was general fear in the community because the rioting took all types of forms. 
They were extremely violent, there were more than 50 people that were killed, and 
thousands that were injured. There were many innocent people who had nothing to do with 
anything that just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Including a fellow 
named Reginald Denny who was just a truck driver, driving through town, as I recall, got 
 kinda lost and ultimately was pulled out of his truck and nearly beaten to death. And that 
was also televised, a media helicopter filmed the entire thing. So that kind of activity did 
create concern.

It certainly affected all of us as residents of that area because there was something very 
clear, no matter what your opinion was of Rodney King's behavior. Rodney King, who later 
proved through the rest of his very checkered life that he was a man of low moral 
compunction and was a regular, was regularly arrested for robbing people, abusing women, 
beating women. Both of his marriages ended in divorce because he was physically 
aggressive with those women. So Rodney King had a strange history before and after this 
event happened. But, forgetting Rodney King for a moment, it was very clear that we had a 
serious problem in LA County that was made worse by a police chief who had very strong 
opinions about how certain parts of the community needed to be dealt with because there
was such a large amount of crime going on and how many citizens were affected negatively by the crime.

But, I think there was a lot of activity in the Los Angeles community that was very useful to open communication going on within Los Angeles County. And there was a lot of effort, whether it was the Los Angeles Dodgers’ and the LA Lakers’ team members who went out into the communities and helped heal some of the wounds, helped raise funds for rebuilding homes and business to what the local faith communities did. There were lots of churches that were directly involved in helping provide anything from living spaces for people who had lost their homes to the fires and the riots and again to helping raise the funds to help businesses get back on their feet again. So it ultimately did result in reducing some of the fractures in the community that had led to this level of violence.

Forgetting Rodney King For A Moment Reflection

My father, Michael Fleming, was born in 1951 in Oakland, California; an area with a similar demographic to that of South Central Los Angeles. At a young age he moved to the Washington D.C. area and spent much of his adolescence there. He was raised in a working class household and my grandparents, his parents, both came from large, poor families. My father went to a high school that was a majority African American, at the time, and played basketball, a sport dominated then and now by African Americans. In the late 1960s my father joined the Marine Corps and was chosen to be a part of a Special Operations Force Team that was sent to Vietnam. He then moved to Atlanta, Georgia, which has a large black community, where he met my mother. My father eventually became a high ranking executive for Sony Pictures which led them to Los Angeles. My parents adopted my oldest sister, Melanie, a young African American woman, after her mother passed away. From an external view, it may seem that my father was an affluent white man with as little context as Elaine Young. In reality he had as much knowledge as those involved in the riots themselves. Although my father shares similar perspectives with many of the monologues represented in Anna Deavere Smith’s Twilight: Los Angeles 1992, he provides a cohesive combination of many differing frames of reference which makes his monologue one of a kind.
Overall, my father’s situation is extremely unique and interesting, not only in the story itself, but in the context behind the story. The people affected by and exposed to the LA Riots could not control their own context. Wealthy white Angelenos could not change the fact that they had been born and raised in the luxury that is associated with the glitz and glamour of Beverly Hills. Poor African American Angelenos could not control the unfortunate and underdeveloped areas in South Central Los Angeles of which they resided. Korean Angelenos could not go back in time and choose to develop their culture in a part of LA that had less racial tension and animosity. Each person in this story has their own context, but I believe my father had a mixture of all of the above.

Through my writing, I wanted to be able to mimic Smith’s style in the delivery of my father’s monologue. I was sure to pick a title that was drawn from something my father said. I felt that “Forgetting Rodney King For A Moment” was a powerful line because it is easy to believe that this whole issue revolves around King himself. Rodney King later proved to be “a man of low moral compunction” as my father points out, but “forgetting Rodney King for a moment it was very clear that we had a serious problem in LA County” (Fleming 2). In actuality, the issues that created and resulted in the explosion that were the LA Riots were much greater than Rodney King. They were greater than any individual resident of LA County. The riots represented years and years of mistreatment and discontent.

I created a description of my father that would aide the reader, but would not overpower his own words. In the novel, I noticed that the more well spoken and influential monologues had shorter character descriptions because their words created the characters themselves. My father is an extremely well spoken and eloquent man and I wanted to make that clear through his monologue. In terms of the spacing of the actual monologue, Smith tends to create line breaks to
mimic the speaker's speech pattern. If I were to have done this with my father’s monologue it would have been extremely long. I instead made the choice to break up my father’s monologue by his different memories and ideas of the event. Each small paragraph follows a particular train of thought.

If my father’s monologue were to be placed in Smith’s play it would probably be broken into two parts. The first part, describing his experience driving through South Central at the time of the riots and interacting with the rioters would be placed in “War Zone”. It gives an apt description of what was going on at the exact time of the riot, in the exact area that was affected. The second part of his monologue, where he describes the greater issues that caused the riots and the reconstruction that happened after the fact would be placed into “Twilight”. I believe this part of his monologue gives a brief overview of the cause of LA Riots and sense of closure for what occurred. As my father ends he says the riots ultimately resulted in, “reducing some of the fractures in the community that had led to this level of violence” (Fleming 2). Even though the riots created mass destruction and distress in LA County, it did bring about a call to action and the change that was needed for the Los Angeles community to heal.

Works Cited

Our class read *Naked* by David Sedaris. One theme focused on Sedaris' father and his golf obsession. His dad would enthusiastically involve his entire family with golf regardless of their interest in it, so our teacher prompted our class to consider any hobbies our own parents had forced upon us. I wouldn't normally write about my naked family, but at the end of his book Sedaris visits a nudist colony, making the topic strangely appropriate. My essay is about relationships, taboo subjects, and acceptance.

**Freikörperkultur**

-Amanda Carnes-

My parents divorced when I was five. My mom also remarried when I was five. Our new dad came with two children and he adopted my brother and me. We were all close in age. My dad was a Green Beret in the U.S. military and he was unaware that he had married an alcoholic. She deceived him. My mother was beautiful. She was an artist and an interior designer which meant that she bought a new couch every month. She also collected cats. It started off as two cats, then six for some years, and we eventually lived in a designer home with thirty cats inside. I was told not to talk about the cats at school, but I learned on my own what not to talk about at school.

I was seven when my dad took our family to a nude lake, in Stuttgart, Germany. My parents are nudists. My dad insists that nudism is natural, but I feel it is unnatural to search for public spaces to be naked. I was not aware of how odd our naked family was when I was seven, but I was brought to an awareness of it. I definitely stopped telling my classmates early on. The event that initially made me conscious of our weirdness happened while my parents were out for the night. My parents would leave us four kids alone every Friday night, while they went dancing. They were professional country western dancers. We lived on the bottom floor of government apartments on a military base, and I shared a room with my sister, Erin, while my biological brother Scotty, shared a room with my step-brother Sean. My mother was up to six cats and a German Shepherd. The apartment had a large dining room that connected to the
kitchen. It also had four rooms with a small bathroom at the end of the hallway and a larger bathroom between my parent’s room and my dad’s office. All of the windows had bars on them and all of the government apartments had the same layout. Our apartment smelled like cat piss. When my parents would go dancing, my siblings and I would play games. We would turn off the lights and play hide and seek, have sock wars, and set small objects on fire. We would also fill the bathtub with water and Lego ships. We would play naked, but one night my little sister came to the bath in her bathing suit. No one commented; we all put on swimwear and continued playing. I had never considered whether to be naked or not before then, but that night I gained an awareness that it was strange to be naked with my siblings. Still, we would go to the nude lake every weekend with my parents. Some years later my step siblings went to live with their real mom, while my mom, dad, brother, six cats and a dog all flew back to the United States.

My dad eventually retired from the army in Valley Springs, California. He got a job working for Hertz and quickly became the district manager of Northern California. In place of army fatigues, my dad chose to wear light grey suits that had a pink hue. My dad is about 5’4, but he is built and has a large presence. Mom stayed home drinking and decorating while he worked. Our new house quickly adopted a smell of cat piss and incense. And my mom’s cat collection grew. She would take in strays mostly. Sometimes my mom would want to go to the pet store, where she would manipulate my dad into buying another cat. And sometimes after my parents would fight, my mom would refuse to interact with my dad for days. So my dad would try to appease her anger by buying her flowers, jewelry, clothes, and home décor. He would also try reconciling by taking my mom shopping and if none of his efforts made her happy, he would mend their relationship by getting another cat which always made her happy. Fighting inevitably meant more cats in our house. There were always cats on every bed, ledge, and lap. My mom
would make the house look nice. It mattered to her. She was constantly adjusting and buying new furniture, but the cats would just pee on it. She would shower the couch with Fabreze and light more incense as the cats sprayed the carpets and the walls. Then she would vacuum up all the cat hair while the cats seemed to follow her and shed their fur on purpose. My mother was outnumbered, yet she kept collecting cats and the cats overpowered the house. I imagined them forming their own bureaucracy focused on obtaining food, because whenever anyone would open the refrigerator, all thirty cats would swarm the kitchen demanding to be fed. Afterwards they would go back to occupying the entire house.

My little brother and I would go to school covered in cat hair and I would put on too much perfume. I would talk about the cats at school. People seemed interested but it wasn’t making me any friends, and I would never talk about my naked parents; my brother would though. He would talk about the cats, my parents, and World of Warcraft. I would tell him to filter what he tells people, but he always said whatever he thought, out loud. In a way, that made him cooler than me. When we would get home from school my brother would play video games in his room, while I listened to music in mine. My parents would watch television in the buff, but that wasn’t enough for my dad. He needed to be out with other naked people so he joined a nudist colony.

Laguna Del Sol is located in Wilton, California, near Sacramento. Like a little city, there were miniature paved roads where naturalists could drive in golf carts to get to the pools, tennis courts, and other naked activities. And there were always events and activities, but most of the time people would lounge naked by the pool. When at clothing optional resorts, I prefer the clothing option. It would have pleased my parents for me to be naked like them; still I would sit by the pool feeling self-conscious about my clothes. My brother also wore clothes, as did most of
the teens at the resort. The rule at most clothing optional resorts is that people only have to be naked to use the pools, hot tubs, and saunas. I never questioned this rule. It is nudist etiquette to carry around a towel to sit on and naturalists will tell you that it’s not about sex… but there was a lot of sex happening at the nudist colony. My parents would go every weekend and my mother would get drunk. When people get drunk they often tell crazy stories of how they took off their shirt or lost their pants, but my mom started off naked so her stories were always extra. My dad, however, does not drink or alter his mind in any way, so mom would be drunk while he did who knows what. If I were to ask him, he would say “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.” He was a Green Beret. In hindsight, he was probably right not to tell me, while my mom treated me as a confidant, sharing every detail. My parents had fun at the resort, but I was too self-conscious to have fun. I preferred to stay home, feigning work or illness.

One weekend, when my parents left for the lagoon, I had my friend Raylene over. Raylene invited our friend Brandon and Brandon invited so many people over. I was suddenly throwing a party. I remember sort of panicking because people kept leaving doors open so I took all thirty cats and put them in the garage. My brother was home, but he stayed in his room playing World of Warcraft the whole time. When I got all of the strangers to leave, I noticed that one cat was missing. Yoda was gone.

Yoda was a big white cat and since he was missing he was sure to become my mom’s favorite. My friend told me not to panic, that it was just a cat, but my mom didn’t have any pictures of her children on the wall, just cats. When I told my mom that Yoda was missing, she was furious. I was kicked out for losing the cat and I had to go back for my clothes. My friends drove me to my parent’s house and I told them to stay in their car no matter what. They thought that I was over-reacting, but as I talked to my dad I saw my mom through the window, marching
towards their car in her robe. My dad didn’t know what to do. He was trying to talk to me while my mom was screaming and creating a scene. As I was talking to my dad, my mom made her way back inside the house and we heard crashing sounds. It was time for me to leave. As I left, my mom was throwing my stuff outside and repeatedly slamming the front door. They found Yoda alive a few days later. I was seventeen at the time and I didn’t talk to my parents for a long time after that.

Ten years later, I was searching for a place to live when I came across an affordable yurt in the Santa Cruz Mountains. I was in my late twenties. The yurt was located at Lupin Lodge, a clothing optional resort. I liked the price of the yurt and I was desperate, so I convinced myself that I would not have a problem living there. The road to Lupin is a single lane, steep, unpaved, winding road. Plus the tollgate at the entrance is broken so it is often left open. People there live in cabins, trailers, yurts, and even tents. The yurts were located in a wooded area and dirt pathways were lit up at night. I lived in yurt three. I had been living there a week when my neighbor, who understandably assumed that I was a nudist, invited me to hang out in the hot tub with him. NO SWIMSUITs allowed in the pools or hot tubs. It is common for nudists to invite each other hot tubbing so my neighbors request was welcoming and neighborly, but it made me uncomfortable. I declined his hot tub invitation and then spent six months avoiding my all of neighbors. Unlike my father, I was not a nudist.

It had been many years since I had seen my dad and when we started talking again, he was still very much a nudist. He found me with the help of a private detective. He didn’t stay married to my mom long after I left. And though I have spoken to my mother over the years, I find that my life is less dramatic without her in it. After my parents’ divorce my dad met a woman at Laguna Del Sol who has become my new step-mom. I call her Terry. They moved to
Key West Florida and invited me to visit. They don’t have any cats. Though we did go on a tour of Ernest Hemingway’s House where there were well over thirty cats. We laughed. There are no nudists colonies in Key West, the island is only four miles long and two miles wide. However, there are gay bars with naked areas in the back so my dad had befriended a bunch of gay bears. On my visit to Key West my dad was being awkwardly supportive of my gayness. He kept pointing out lesbians and telling me to talk to them. He also took me to a drag show and put a fat stack of ones in the middle of our table. Then he wanted to buy me a battle axe necklace because lesbians like battle axes. I had never heard that before so I Googled it, and apparently the labrys is a double-bladed battle axe symbol that represented lesbian strength in the seventies. My dad’s attempts at getting to know me were awkward and endearing.

I started thinking that my dad is kind of cool for making an effort and that I had never made an effort to support his nudist lifestyle. And that it could be really awkward if I did. Nevertheless, I am mindful when he talks about it and I try not to make the subject feel taboo. I still feel it is unnatural, but if my dad can embrace my gayness so easily, I can learn to accept his nudity. When talking to people, I don’t lead with my nudist parents, but I’m willing to discuss it. Some people even think it’s cool. I love my dad and I’m glad to have him back in my life. I try to show it by simply responding to his e-mails. I still worry that he will be naked when I go to visit him. However, if he is naked, I will try to act natural. Our relationship is fragile. He calls to tell me about my siblings. How Sean works with computers and Erin works in Washington. Scotty is still playing World of Warcraft. After my dad tells me about my siblings the conversation goes cold and both of us struggle to get off the phone. He usually blurts out “Love You Bye” and hangs up.
ARGUMENT
BEST ESSAYS
I am an English major, currently working on my undergraduate studies at West Valley. Though my passion is literary fiction, my studies here have inspired me to work in other styles and genres. Drafted as a rhetorical analysis assignment for Nils Michals' English IA course, this essay is an observation of contemporary American society. Professor Michals always encouraged our class to apply critical thinking to our perception of society and culture. I wrote this essay as an analysis of the prevailing American religion. As traditional faiths continue to decline in prevalence, we can readily perceive the dominance of a new god. We, the rabble, are told we are unfit to experience this god directly, so it is a devout faith we employ to reconcile this doctrine with the reality of our immediate predicament. Like any decent god, this one is many faceted and goes by many names. His most terrestrial epithet is bill; dollar bill to be precise.

Proofs of a Dumbspiracy
-Noah Cooter-

If I told you this essay would make you smarter, would you keep reading? How about if I promised it would make you sexy? What if you had to choose just one of these upgrades? Easy choice, right? Sexiness is a popular ambition in our society. Moreover, popularity is sexy. We can all appreciate the endeavor to gain the acceptance of our peers. Why, though, does intelligence appear to serve as a stumbling block to this attainment? Let's face it, popular culture doesn't place much value on book-smarts, especially at the expense of being cool. Are these things mutually exclusive? To my knowledge, no screaming, soon-to-have-fainted fanatic ever threw their underpants up to the lectern to land at the feet of Steven Hawking. No, that degree of fanaticism is reserved for those who exhibit characteristics from another category, attributes such as smoldering good looks and a capacity for an unceasing undulation of the hips. To that end, the phenomenal nature of Elvis Presley's success is a seminal example of the vast marketing value inherent in pop-culture. His popularity can be directly attributed to a grassroots movement among young people. For the first time in American history, the youth were establishing an identity of their own volition. Cool was for sale, and all that Dick Clark had to do was follow closely behind with a big bucket to catch all the falling money. Despite the ensuing consumer
frenzy, it is important to note that the motive power behind this profitability originated from an independent source. Regardless of one's personal opinion of the crooner, he displayed an inarguably compelling combination of talent and charisma. Thus, we can identify a value in the goods that the Elvis camp produced. Moreover, Presley rode atop the crest of a popular trend which sprang directly from the collective social current. It is a crucial distinction to note that rock and roll rose up from the streets. What became a highly lucrative phenomenon, was originally considered financial anathema. Yet, the will of the people was too enduring to ignore, and soon the music industry was cashing in on this popular trend. The problem was, there was no shortage of Dick Clark types, but only one Elvis. If tycoons were to ensure the flow of capital, they couldn't just sit around and wait for the next superstar to appear. There was only one way to keep the cash flowing in. They were going to have to figure out how to manufacture the cool.

Who are today's hottest pop stars? That isn't a rhetorical question; I truly have no idea. You see, I don't have an internet or cable connection in my apartment, nor a TV, for that matter. As if this wasn't enough to ensure my uncool-ness, I also don't have a Facebook account, let alone Instagram, Snapchat, Myspace, Twizzler, Twaxxer, or Twindle. Needless to say, I'm super lame. But who could blame me? Without these essential sources of information, how am I supposed to know who or what is cool? After all, the nuances of popular culture are no longer readily ascertainable through a simple observation of our physical surroundings. The only cohesive behavior that is consistently found in society is that everybody has their eyes glued to a screen. Society, then, has moved online. Among the many profound implications of this radical shift in social interaction is the effect it has had on supply and demand economics. By flooding the social cloud with advertising content, producers and sellers of goods have a powerful opportunity to manufacture a perception of cultural popularity. The more often consumers are
exposed to a brand, the more popular we assume the brand to be. Therefore, the companies with
the largest advertising budgets will inherently dominate the online marketplace, effectively
monopolizing popular culture, itself. This scenario neatly exemplifies the notion that popular
trends are no longer determined by public will. Since these trends do not necessitate any initial
public consensus, they also do not require any tangible or visceral value. We are willing to pay
top dollar for worthless goods, deriving value, not from the worth of an item, but from the
ownership of that item. In fact, the purchase of a worthless item is commonly considered more
impressive than the acquirement of a necessity, because the superfluous purchase acts as
evidence of the buyer's elevated financial status. This behavior was already being scrutinized in
the 19th century by pioneering economist and leader of the institutional economics movement,
Thorstein Veblen. Dubbing this phenomenon conspicuous consumption, Veblen observed “The
superior gratification derived from the use and contemplation of costly and supposedly beautiful
products is, commonly, in great measure a gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading
under the name of beauty” (128). If blind consumerism was already attracting criticism well over
a century ago, we as consumers have surely relinquished any last vestige of independent thought
by now.

To return to our question at hand, who are today's biggest pop stars, and what value do
they offer? Living under a rock as I contentedly do, my dataset is limited. However, some trends
in popular culture are so pervasive, they succeed in infiltrating my informational vacuum. Justin
Bieber comes to mind as an interesting case study. I couldn't say exactly where I've come into
contact with his likeness, and yet, despite myself, I could easily identify the guy in a line-up.
What is compelling about the Canadian heartthrob's fame is that popular consensus seems to
hold that we all hate him. All I seem to hear about Bieber is that he's a dork and his music is
terrible. I've never indulged, so I can't personally weigh in on that one. The point is, despite public opinion, the Bieber estate is a financial powerhouse. By saturating the market with Biebermania, obscene profits are being garnered from a product that has arguably no aesthetic value. In today's market, the worth of a product is gauged by no more than the extensiveness of its advertising campaign. Whereas entrepreneurs of the past had to chase after popular trends, we now experience a market wherein the producers of goods are manufacturing the trends themselves. The cart has moved ahead of the horse. Through what process has consumerism evolved from its origins in popular folk tradition to its current state of deliberate contrivance? Surely, the cart does not get so far ahead by accident. In ascertaining just how streamlined modern consumerism has become, it can be illuminating to trace our economy all the way back to its origins.

If democracy was the radical new tenet on which our country was founded, the well proven efficacy of capitalism provided a secure foundation. We like to imagine America as having evolved independently from the established rule of England, but it is naïve to assume that the powerful parties who financed the colonies remained disinterested and aloof. Having long since mastered the delicate craft of exploitation, the European aristocracy must have drooled over the fruits of this fledgling market to the west. Lauded as the father of capitalism, Adam Smith wrote in his indispensable opus, *The Wealth of Nations*, “There is no art which one government sooner learns of another than that of draining money from the pockets of the people” (861). Thus began a new era in the science of parting fools from their money. The fundamental laws of this science are as follows. 1: The more fools there are, the more money there is to part them from. 2: The more foolish they are, the easier this parting becomes. By these standards, the success of an entrepreneur shares an inverse ratio with the intellect of consumers. Therefore, it
follows that capitalism not only thrives on stupidity, but moreover, encourages it. I do not think anyone will disagree that the acquisition of wealth is among the highest priorities of contemporary society. The attainable limit of individual wealth has only increased over time. Considering our premise, this would imply that the public has become proportionately dumber. In fact, Stanford professor, Gerald Crabtree, proposes that human intelligence actually peaked thousands of years ago, and we've been exhibiting a gradual descent into stupidity ever since. In his highly provocative article, “Our Fragile Intellect”, Crabtree writes

> It is also quite likely that the need for intelligence was reduced as we began to live in supportive, high-density cities that made up for lapses of judgment or failure of comprehension. Community life would, I believe tend to reduce the selective pressure placed on every individual, every day of their life; indeed that's why I prefer to live in such a society. (6)

To Crabtree, it is clear that humanity is becoming less intelligent with each passing generation. This is in direct contrast to the generally accepted doctrine, which holds that humans represent the pinnacle of intellectual development, as evidenced by our technological advances. However, when viewed from an objective standpoint, humanity can be described as the only species to have ever threatened its own sustainability through deliberate action. It has been technology, that very attribute cited as a proof of our superiority, which has fostered the exponential growth-rate of our destructive capabilities. By this measure, we might be considered the least intelligent species in history. It seems our poor taste in music might be the very least of our worries. Despite a growing awareness that our collective survival is under threat, we continue to destroy our home, deplete our resources and proliferate technology with the capability of wiping out the conditions that facilitate life on our planet. What can account for this definitively anti-Darwinian
behavior? To identify a motive, let us examine the question of who stands to gain from a
dumbed-down populous.

If your natural response is to bristle when the intellectual bell curve of our species is
called under question, you are not alone. In fact, this may be by design. Neither individual self-
scrutiny, nor critical analysis of our society are encouraged behaviors today. This is because the
ideas resulting from such observations would likely impede the wealth accumulation of those
who control the flow of information. Even a casual observation of society illuminates
innumerable examples of processes which simultaneously generate wealth while suppressing
intellect. For example, the Food and Drug Administration operates as a private business,
furthering the shared interest of its heads, and those of industry leaders. Meanwhile, industrial-
scale processed food, which lends to the deterioration of our bodies and minds, has become the
accepted status quo. Study after study has shown that agents such as high-fructose corn syrup,
monosodium glutamate and hydrogenated oils are wreaking havoc on the health of Americans.
Scientists know this stuff is killing us, as do informed citizens. Yet, the FDA hasn't conceded the
implications of this information, and these, in addition to countless other toxic agents, are still
perfectly legal. Simply put, the food industry, in partnership with its oversight committee, is
making billions, and knowingly poisoning us in the process. Though this should by all accounts
provoke collective outrage from the public, we do not rise up in protest. Instead, we shell out our
hard earned cash for the privilege to shove this stuff in our faces whilst consuming validation for
this behavior from the trembling pixels of our glowing screens. This brings up another striking
example of the profitability of public stupidity. We pay top dollar for devices which enable us to
waste more and more of our time staring dumbly at content which is typically devoid of
intellectual value. The collective accumulation of information that is the internet has become
something analogous to omnipotence. The public, however, prefers to engage with content fit for the lowest common denominator. We unquestioningly accept the wildly profitable communications industry as the ad hoc curator of our content, eagerly consuming whatever content happens to flash in front of our eyes. Since the profits of content producers depend on how much content we consume, there is no incentive to share information which would provoke critical thinking, thereby influencing us to put down our deceives in order to engage more directly with our lives. We are the wielders of micro-supercomputers with staggering processing capabilities and the ability to instantly transmit information to anywhere on the globe. The existential implications of this technology are profound, to say the least. Yet, we use it to browse Tinder. Meanwhile, the general public is wholly ignorant of how the world is operating outside its own sphere of perception. If our government is carrying out military actions in countries we've never heard of, we certainly aren't talking about it. My own perception of our society apprehends an intentional suppression of human intellect, designed to foster an easily manipulated populous. This, of course, would constitute no less than a vast conspiracy. As John Robison prophetically queried centuries ago in his *Proofs of a Conspiracy* “For what Illumination is that mind susceptible of, that is so blinded by the prejudice created and nursed by the habits of civil subordination, that it worships stupidity or wickedness under a coronet, and neglects talents and virtue under the bearskin cap of the boor.” (Robison 176). It is clear this tactic of the ruling class is nothing new. What is new, however, is the increased efficiency of the process, realized through the medium of technology and the overarching, draconian control of our physiological inputs. Perhaps there's an app to track the line-graph of human intelligence as it continues to plummet southward. Maybe we are destined to devolve into a simpler, more peaceful species, content to while away the days staring at screens which have evolved to grow
from our foreheads, shielding our eyes from the distasteful presence of reality. Personally, I'm not so optimistic. While the general populous obediently swipes left, there are less complacent factions at work behind the scenes. The aptly named Doomsday Clock, an indicator of the likelihood of a large-scale nuclear exchange, was recently re-calibrated at two and a half minutes till midnight, the lowest it's been since atomic bombs were first being tested in the 1950's. If we manage to escape that hairy fate, there are alarm bells sounding from just about every ecological system on the planet. Given all available evidence, it appears the public is complacent to the marching orders of our ruling class, even if it leads us right off the edge of the Earth. I can only hope my readers will take enough offense to my assertions that their actions will endeavor to prove me wrong.

Works Cited


RESEARCHED ARGUMENT

BEST ESSAYS
I arrived at West Valley to study art history and the visual arts, with the goal of transferring to a CSU. Throughout the course of my studies here, I have had the opportunity to explore many subjects to deepen, nourish, and inspire my love of art. In my experience, there has not been any “one” mode of expression in which I can achieve artistic purpose. As time has progressed, my definition of art has expanded. Art is not just a painting, drawing, or sculpture, but a reflection of our time and ourselves. Art encompasses all forms of communication. My love for art and all that it can achieve through careful dialogue is what inspired me to investigate an issue close to my heart---women’s rights. Writing is a powerful tool to educate and influence, and in this particular case, it has served as the perfect outlet to explore the experience of a woman. It is my hope that with this essay, that the reader may consider alternative views through the eyes of compassion and understanding and ultimately, view life as a woman in America.

A Woman’s Right
-Felicia Alvarenga-

Since the founding of America, women have faced various forms of inequality. Pioneers, heroines, romantics, and common persons defending Women’s rights have unceasingly challenged repressive systems and advocated for change. One monumental victory in the history of the Women’s Equal Rights Movement is the U.S. Supreme Court decision of Roe V. Wade in 1973, which defended a woman’s constitutional right to form decisions surrounding her own pregnancy and ultimately legalized abortion nationwide. Today, women’s reproductive rights remain a primary concern in a volatile political atmosphere. Impassioned debates concerning the issue of abortion from Pro-Life groups have prompted restrictive legislative actions which negatively affect women and deny women their rights as “full constitutional persons” (Paltrow 17). These constraining legislations include limiting women’s access to safe abortion by imposing “mandatory waiting periods, pre-abortion counseling, sonogram requirements, and restrictions to late-term abortions” (Mollen 162). The significant consequence of such prohibitive legislation provides fewer opportunities for the woman to advance economically, politically, and socially and prevents passage to an entire spectrum of reproductive services. With current state
level restrictions in states such as South Dakota, Indiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia in effect joined with the possibility of the overturn of \textit{Roe v. Wade} by the Trump administration, maintaining legal abortion is crucial to protect a woman’s constitutional rights, secure her physical safety and her opportunities for social advancement.

The campaign for legalized abortion began years before the Supreme Court decision in the case of \textit{Roe V. Wade}. In the article “Roe V. Wade: Its History and Impact,” the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a health care provider delivering reproductive health care, sex education, and information to women, men, and youth worldwide, discusses the history and impact of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of \textit{Roe v. Wade}. The Planned Parenthood Federation of America identifies two pivotal cases that set the stage for \textit{Roe} (1). In the first case of \textit{Griswold V. Connecticut} in 1965, the Supreme Court found a state regulation prohibiting birth control was a violation to a married couples’ right to privacy (Planned Parenthood 1). Several years later in 1972, in the case of \textit{Eisenstadt V. Baird}, the justices established that this same right to privacy also pertained to single people (Planned Parenthood 1). Together, these cases inspired a social effort to amend criminal abortion laws existent in nearly every state within the country (Planned Parenthood 1).

On January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court decision in the case of \textit{Roe} concluded that the constitutional right to privacy encompassed a woman’s right to form personal decisions concerning her reproductive health and pregnancy (Planned Parenthood 1). The decriminalization of abortion allowed women to pursue higher education, advance professionally, and compete in economic life within the United States through their ability to exercise reproductive control (Planned Parenthood 2). The author of Roe, Justice Harry Blackmun, justified the ruling as “a step that had to be taken as we go down the road toward the
full emancipation of women” (Planned Parenthood 2). However, immediate objections regarding
the reversal of criminal abortion laws from anti-abortion advocates pressured federal and state
lawmakers to establish laws restricting or banning abortion (Planned Parenthood 2).

Since the decision of Roe, the Supreme Court determined a great number of abortion
statutes initiated by opponents of safe and legal abortion violated women’s right to privacy
(Planned Parenthood 2). Still, the court accepted the right to privacy is conditional and
authorized the state to restrict abortion after viability in the interest of safeguarding maternal
health and protecting the potential life of the unborn child, except in cases where the woman’s
life is endangered (Planned Parenthood 1). This decision permitted limitations on the
accessibility of abortion to many low-income women and young women beginning in the mid-
1970’s (Planned Parenthood 2). In 2007, the conservative majority of the court prompted further
restrictions on women’s reproductive choice (Planned Parenthood 3). In the case of Gonzales V.
Carhart and Gonzales V. Planned Parenthood, the court passed the Partial-Birth Abortion Act of
2003, which ruled specific steps in operating a second-trimester abortion to be a federal crime
(Planned Parenthood 3). By maintaining the ban, the court ultimately overruled the fundamental
element of Roe which stated the woman’s health is of primary concern in restrictive access to
abortion (Planned Parenthood 3). Ultimately, the court’s ruling in 2007 denied the safeguarding
of women’s health and influenced the state interest in justifying abortion restrictions (Planned
Parenthood 3). To this day, these legislations continue to have serious effects on female citizens
of the United States from a social, economic, financial, and reproductive health standpoint.

The American Public Health Association has accepted safe abortion as an essential public
health service to women within the United States (Gruskin 4). In the article, “Editor’s Choice:
Safeguarding Abortion: A Matter of Reproductive Rights,” Sofia Gruskin, the Director of the
Program on Global Health and Human Rights at the USC Institute for Global Health and Professor of Law and Preventive Medicine at the Gould School of Law, states, “Worldwide approximately 50,000 women die of complications from unsafe abortion each year…and a further 5,000,000 suffer a disability resulting from unsafe abortion” (4). Gruskin claims that nearly all of these instances occur within nations that outlaw the practice of abortion (4). The number of deaths resulting from an illegal abortion is significantly higher in less developed nations than it is in the United States, which is directly related to the decision to legalize abortion.

It is evident that the legalization of abortion and access to reproductive health care has had a positive effect on women’s health. Over the years, the United States has experienced a decline in the number of abortions performed and a number of deaths associated with illegal abortions. In the fact sheet, “The Safety of Legal Abortion and the Hazards of Illegal Abortion” provided by NARAL, a collective of men and women Pro-Choice advocates who ensures reproductive rights for women states, “Before [Roe] in 1973, 1.2 million U.S. women resorted to illegal abortion each year and that unsafe illegal abortions caused as many as 5,000 annual deaths” (5). Analyzing more current data in contrast to the findings in the Pre-Roe era, The Guttmacher Institute, a leading research and policy organization committed to advancing sexual and reproductive health rights in the United States reports in their fact sheet “Induced Abortion in the United States” that, “In 2011, approximately 1.06 million abortions were performed, down 13% from 1.21 million in 2008” (1). This information proves that safe abortion and access to reproductive health care is necessary to improve health outcomes for women (4).

Gruskin states in her article that while the legal right to abortion is upheld, the imposed legislations of “unregulated conscientious objection, third party and parental consent
requirements, mandatory (and often misleading) counseling requirement [or informed consent], waiting periods, and the targeting of [reproductive health care] providers…” have made safe abortion progressively challenging and definitively threaten the quality of health care available to women (4). NARAL explains that by delaying procedures and pressuring women to carry unwanted pregnancies to term, these restrictions compel women to seek unsafe abortion alternatives, ultimately threatening their health (6).

It is alarming that despite all evidence supporting legal abortion, various states continue to impose harmful and intrusive legislations. The Guttmacher Institute reports in the policy analysis, “Laws Affecting Reproductive Health and Rights: State Trends at Midyear, 2016” that by midyear, 17 states had passed 46 new abortion restrictions (1). The Guttmacher Institute shows that since 2010, states have adopted 334 abortion restrictions, which comprises 30 percent of all abortion restrictions established by states since the case of Roe (1). By the end of June 2016, four states, including Mississippi and West Virginia, enacted legislation to ban the most common method of abortion during the second trimester (Guttmacher 1). Additionally, South Carolina and North Dakota both authorized laws banning abortion at or beyond 20 weeks post fertilization without exceptions to the woman’s health (Guttmacher 1). Furthermore, 14 states including: Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee and Utah adopted various forms of abortion restrictions during the beginning of the year, containing legislation to enforce extended waiting periods, prohibit access to medication abortion, and impose regulations on abortion clinics (Guttmacher 1). However, the damage inflicted by these restrictions surpasses the limited availability of legal abortion services and physical harm to the woman (Gruskin 4).
Anti-choice rhetoric propagated by Pro-Life advocates has proven to influence the legal system in America, consequentially subjecting women to the possibility of arrest. In the article “Roe V Wade and the New Jane Crow: Reproductive Rights in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” Lynn M. Paltrow, the Founder and Executive Director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women (NAPW) and graduate of Cornell University and New York University School of Law, examines reformatory actions against Roe which endangers the reproductive rights and physical liberties of all pregnant women. Paltrow asserts that in our current system of mass incarceration, women are at risk of being incarcerated for having abortions (17). Attempts to establish separate legal “personhood” for fertilized eggs, embryos, and fetuses by Pro-life advocates have already been used as a basis for arresting and prosecuting pregnant women who have undergone abortion, suffered miscarriages and stillbirths, or who chose to terminate a pregnancy due to health complications with their child (18). Paltrow claims, “The decision in Roe explicitly rejected the argument that fetuses, at any stage of development, are to be treated as if they are separate constitutional persons under the law” (19). Nonetheless, various feticide laws and attempts to establish personhood measures are permitting the arrests of pregnant women in the states of Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, Nevada, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Utah, stripping them of their own personhood (18). The ramifications of the acceptance of Pro-life legislations have proved to influence various aspects of our society and debase women as second-class citizens.

Nationwide, women endure various forms of societal violence which hinders women’s ability to arrive at their full potential (Donohoe 221). In the book, Public Health and Social Justice, Martin Donohoe, MD, FACP, asserts that, “societal violence against women involves
economic, legal, political, and educational structures; repressive, entrenched belief systems; and social phenomena that deny women basic human rights…” (221). Donohoe argues that the threats to women’s social standing in our society have been bolstered by the anti-choice hyperbole and the federal administration’s philosophy (238). Debra Mollen, Ph.D, examines beliefs concerning abortion within the sociopolitical context of pronatalist ideology in the article, “Reproductive Rights and Informed Consent: Toward a More Inclusive Discourse.” Mollen describes the pronatalist ideology which socializes individuals to believe that their social worth is based on the ability to procreate (164). Mollen argues the pronatalist culture perpetuates the idea that parenthood is the ideal role for women to adhere to (Mollen 174). Mollen states the research suggests adults who decide to deviate from pronatalist norms are vulnerable to “marginalization and negative stereotypes” (174). This data proves the confining political and social atmosphere of pronatalism contributes to reducing women as second-class citizens and impairs their ability to advance economically, socially, and politically.

Perhaps the most confining social atmosphere of all is being created for women at this very moment in history. The results of the 2016 Presidential election have severely devastated the Women’s Rights movement and upset the liberal momentum with the newly appointed President-elect Donald Trump and his chosen administration. Donald Trump, a member of the Republican Party, has bluntly and contemptuously voiced his stance on abortion and women’s rights throughout his presidential campaign. Maggie Haberman, a political correspondent for The New York Times, and a political analyst for CNN and Matt Flegenheimer, a metro reporter for The New York Times discuss in the article, “Donald Trump, Abortion Foe, Eyes ‘Punishment’ for Women, Then Recants” Donald Trump’s Pro-Life stance, and his views on the consequence for women who undergo abortion. Haberman and Flegenheimer states that Donald Trump openly
believes women who seek abortions should be subject to “some form of punishment” (1). Donald Trump has frequently exhibited misogynist tendencies throughout his career and his campaign for president and has influenced many to follow by his example. Trump and his cabinet have made their conservative agenda evident to the public, and make passionate promises to carry through with their actions. What remains unsettling is the number of Trump supporters who subscribe to his ideology. Trump has managed to perpetuate a patriarchal society which controls the choices and role of the woman. A woman will no longer be able to decide her future and will be at the mercy of the law. For these reasons, the potential of the overturn of Roe is an unsettling reality for the women of America.

In conclusion, prohibitive legislations including, mandatory waiting periods, pre-abortion counseling, parental consent requirements, and restrictions to late-term abortions imposed by Pro-life advocates infringe upon the woman’s individual right to privacy and poses threats to women’s reproductive security. We must uphold the decision of Roe V. Wade and maintain safe and legal abortion to allow women to adequately participate in the economic, social, and political advancement of our country. We must not become complacent in this fight for womanhood. We must challenge each obstacle presented with as much fortitude as our predecessors. We must not allow 43 years of tenacious action, 43 years of evolution, to obliterate our rightful authority by our incoming administration. We must continually advocate for a woman’s right to safeguard her health, social standing, and most importantly, her life.
Works Cited


My name is Mirian Leon and I have been at this school for far too long. I graduated high school in 2012 with hopes of spending no more than 2 years at West Valley and then transferring to UC Berkeley, my dream school, but life happened. In this essay I reveal a very intimate part of my life and it has taken a lot of courage for me to finally share the trauma I endured. I hope that my story can provide courage for all victims to either recognize that they too are victims or they may develop the strength to also share their stories. My message to them is that they are not alone and their story is valid. Please enjoy my essay, and I hope you learn something.

How America Silences Victims of Rape
-Mirian Leon-

I had a friend, not just any friend but a best friend. He and I did everything together: we would go on hikes, go to the beach, have sleepovers, race go karts, and my family loved him. Everyone in my family always wondered why he and I were not a couple, but I could not see him as anything more than a brother. One night on my 21st birthday my best friend, a male friend of his and I drove out into the hills to smoke some celebratory weed. As the night progressed, the conversation began to get weirder. They began asking me if I would ever be open to having a threesome, and I laughed it off replying, “of course not” assuming it was a hypothetical question. I remember being in the back seat of the car while the two of them were in the front. The moment I saw them opening their doors to move to the back, my heart began to race. I kept telling myself that nothing bad could happen because my best friend would never hurt me. Both guys continued to try and convince me that it would be fun, and I repeatedly said “no,” but it was as if what I was saying did not matter; it was as if my refusal was an invitation for them to touch me in ways I did not want to be touched. Each guy sat at my side and slowly created the worst birthday of my life. When everything began to happen, I felt like I couldn’t move, and I thought of ways to escape, but I didn’t know where to go because we were in the middle of nowhere. So I closed my eyes and chose to let my mind go blank in hopes that I would soon feel nothing. When it was over, both guys acted as if nothing had occurred which created a sense of confusion in me.
I asked myself, “Was I raped?” or “Is that just what sex is supposed to be like?” My body was violated and began to feel like it was no longer my own; someone else had taken advantage of it, and I had no say in it. I felt similarly to the way Brock Turner’s victim felt the day after she realized that she had been raped. She shares in her letter, “I don’t want my body anymore[...]I wanted to take off my body like a jacket and leave it at the hospital with everything else (Baker).” Like Brock Turner’s victim, I felt like I wanted to get rid of anything that reminded me of that night, and that included my body. Because my voice did not matter that night, I believed that any other part of myself didn’t matter either. I felt like a used up rag doll that you throw out because she has run her course.

Another thought that crossed my mind was why I didn’t say anything during the time I was being raped, why it was more comforting for me to stay silent instead of shouting out my pain. After two years, I ended my silence and shared my story with my mother. The first thing she did was yell out that she was going to kill him. The next thing she said broke my heart: she said, “There is no way we are taking him to court because this justice system will somehow manage to favor him.” Hearing this come from my strong and independent mother, who once yelled at my school principal because my second grade teacher had sent me to the English Language Learners program, was even more painful than rape. All of my life she was my protector, and for the first time, I saw my mother’s mortality. I finally saw that my mom is a woman of color and therefore cannot win every battle she fights.

In America we tend to believe that there are always two victims in rape: the actual victim and the rapist. We somehow manage to justify the actions of a rapist by placing blame on the victim. There is a specific case that is an excellent example of what rape victims and rapists are treated like in our country. The case is formally known as “People v. Turner.” One night a
woman decided to join her younger sister to a fraternity party. The older sister will be referred to as Emily. Later in the night, Emily was ready to walk herself home while her sister stayed at the party. Although Emily does not remember much of her night, she gained consciousness the next morning on a hospital gurney. Once the nurses explained to her that she was violently raped, Emily began to digest the horrifying news. Emily was found by two Stanford students. They spotted Brock Turner, her attacker, leaning over her naked body. They were able to easily see that Emily Doe was not fully conscious. Emily’s genitals had abrasions, and she was covered in bruises and scratches. After Emily absorbed the news her horrific night, she expected justice to be served. Instead Brock Turner’s lawyers found, “details about my (Emily) personal life to use against me, find loopholes in my story to invalidate me and my sister, in order to show that this sexual assault was in fact a misunderstanding” (Baker). This is a perfect quote that proves how the justice system works in America. Although I am certain that Turner’s lawyers knew he was guilty, they were being paid to make him seem innocent, and in order for him to seem innocent, Emily Doe had to seem guilty. Because Emily Doe was not conscious the night of her rape, Turner and his lawyers took advantage of that fact and made sure that whatever she said would be invalidated by her confusion from that night. Furthermore, Brock Turner’s father wrote in a letter to the jury that Turner did not deserve a prison sentence for, “20 minutes of action.” Nowhere in the letter does he mention the life-long side effects that Emily Doe will have to endure because of those, “20 minutes of action” (Gray). Side effects, such as, depression, PTSD, trust issues and more. Instead Turner’s lawyer that, “Brock has a lot at stake so he’s having a really hard time.” The media glorified Brock Turner’s swimming career at Stanford and ignored the damage he caused to a young unconscious woman who was simply trying to get home.
I hate my best friend for causing me to question myself every day, thinking of everything I could have done differently when the fact is, it wasn’t my fault. According to Judy Aulette, nearly half of rapists are friends or acquaintances of the victim (Aulette 127). I am not sure why rapists do not take the time to think about the effect they will have on their victim. They must know that they are not ruining just one night in the life of their victim, but they are causing many years of depression, PTSD, sleeping disorders, distrust of others, anger, flashbacks, and “feelings of powerlessness” (Gluck 1).

As stated earlier, our country has a tendency to blame the victim for causing their own rape. People who judge victims of rape use phrases such as, “She was asking for it,” or ask, “What was she wearing?” When saying that a rape victim is “asking for it,” they are implying that a person actually desires for their body and mind to be violated by another person or group of persons. Then when they ask what the victim was wearing, does the person asking the question believe that men are not in control of their own sexual urges? That somehow they are manipulated by what a woman is wearing and can therefore not take responsibility for their actions? It saddens me to know that society genuinely believes that a rape victim could have done something to prevent her own rape. There is a documentary on Netflix entitled, “The Hunting Ground,” which provides personal interviews with young women from prestigious universities such as Brown University, Harvard, UC Berkeley, Dartmouth, Stanford and others. In each interview, the young women share their stories of being raped on their school campus. As if it can’t get any worse, these brave women share the horrific responses their administrators gave them after reporting their rape cases to them. One administrator at University of North Carolina tells Annie, a rape victim, “Rape is like a football game Annie, and if you look back on the game what would you do differently in that situation?” (The Hunting Ground). This type of
response to a tragic situation creates confusion and self-blame for the victim. After a rape victim has found the courage to share their story out loud, the last thing they need is to be told that they deliberately placed themselves in a position to be raped. When women know that they are going to be blamed for their rape, they immediately shut down and choose to not say what happened. According to *The Washington Post*, 88 percent of women sexually assaulted do not report their cases (Foundation). Our society has not been designed to embrace and help heal rape victims but instead to question their statements and find a way to prove that it was their fault. So how can we expect rape victims to feel comfortable reporting their perpetrators when they know they will have a Scarlett letter “A” placed on them the moment they walk out of their administrator’s office? David Lisak, a clinical psychologist, believes that the reason universities choose to underreport the sexual assault that occurs on their campus is because, “Universities are protecting a brand, they’re selling a product,” (*The Hunting Ground* [01:17:03]). This may or may not be an accurate theory, but in no shape or form does it justify what universities are doing to their students. This is a place of education that should be protecting its students from harm, and if some of those students are harming other students, then universities should be bringing justice to the situation, not covering up the crimes. Doing this only encourages rape and proves that their students are not safe and are not worthy of protection.

So we need to take a step back and ask ourselves, *why*? Why does society respond to rape victims by immediately blaming them? Why do we ask victims what it is they could have done to prevent their rape? Shouldn’t we ask how we can stop rapists from raping or how we can stop raising rapists? Thankfully I am not the first nor last person to have asked those questions. According to the “Just World Theory,” composed by Lerner, people blame victims of crime because they have to believe that the world only allows good things happen to ‘good’ people and
bad things happen to ‘bad’ people (Stel et al. 2). In other words, if people were to accept the reality that rape and other such tragedies can occur to anyone, then they would have to swallow the fact they too may be a victim of rape one day.

Although many facts and statistics exist to prove rape is not a myth, society, specifically men, continue to claim that women are lying about their rape stories. When men do this, they slowly diminish the stories of all the men and women who so bravely shared their truths. In The Hunting Ground, there is a news clip from the 1990’s about Brown University students writing the name of rapists on the bathroom walls. This is what one white male student had to say about the women who wrote on the bathroom walls: “Idiots, I have a lot of friends on the list and by no means are they rapists. They might be aggressive at parties, flirtatious and if girls carry a grudge, they call them rapists” (The Hunting Ground [01:14:28]). This quote represents the ignorance that surrounds rape victims. This young man quickly jumped to defend his rapist friends either because it is difficult for him to believe that his own friend could hurt someone in that way or because he knows that the way he treats women will also qualify as rape. After seeing this news clip, I realized how important it was to the news cast to place a platform for those young men’s ignorant opinions. This causes me to think about the intelligent women who were trying to make a statement about rape. Instead of the news shedding light on the young women who wrote the list of rapists on the bathroom walls, the news cast chose two white males to share their desperately needed opinion. The second opinion shared in this news clip is the opinion of a male student on the rape list. This is what he has to share, “And to be saying that just because a woman says ‘no’ and because you have sex, those are the facts, a woman says ‘no’ and you have sex, then are you a rapist automatically because of that” (The Hunting Ground [01:14:16]). The oblivion in this statement is horrifying. This student has difficulty fathoming the fact that he is a
rapist because he has a completely different idea of what a rapist looks like. His image of a rapist is probably of the story women have been told: the big scary man hiding in the bushes who jumps out to grab you and rape you. Therefore, this male student does not see himself as a threat to women. He views himself as a kid pursuing his education at a prestigious university. According to him, smart white males are not capable of being a menace, but in fact “57 percent of rapists are white males” ("Perpetrators of Sexual Violence"). This fact not only emphasizes the entitlement of white males in America, but it deteriorates the stereotypes of minorities, such as African Americans and Hispanics being rapists.

In the end, rape is something that must be discussed and not silenced. The story of every rape victim is important and must be validated by society. Each human being who has endured the pain of being violated, must trust that society will give them justice. In terms of prevention, I believe that we must begin to change the values by which we raise our boys. For instance, we can stop telling boys and girls that boys hit girls because they have a crush on them. This is only telling boys that an appropriate way to express their feelings is through physical violence. The way that adults and universities can take action to stop rape is by bringing justice to sexual assault and rape victims, by making sure that each victim feels heard and not questioned. Because if we cannot create a country in which rape victims feel safe and empowered, then we are only creating a country in which violence continues to be a norm.

Works Cited


Gluck, Samantha. “Effects of Rape: Psychological and Physical Effects of Rape.” Healthy Place


Gray, Emma. "This Letter From The Stanford Sex Offender's Dad Epitomizes Rape Culture."


_Huffpost_, 6 June 2016.


5 May 2017.


Originally published in _British Journal of Social Psychology_, vol. 52, no. 3, Sept. 2013,

pp. 397-411.
First, a word of supreme thanks to Leigh Burrill, one of the most excellent professors I have ever had the pleasure of learning from. I had the joyful opportunity to attend three of her courses during my enrollment at West Valley Community College. She is why I am in this publication. She taught me to think far more critically than I had been inclined to before, and for that my world fell apart in the most beautiful way possible. Thank you. Regarding myself, as a Japanese-Caucasian woman living in the 21st century, I find it necessary to constantly analyze the world around me. There are numerous lenses I am privy to and allowed to see through because of this strange position I find myself in. Many social circles and cultures automatically categorize me as insignificant or benign because of my ethnic makeup and sex which allows me to unsuspectingly navigate a myriad of communities to further ponder on the philosophical life questions an individual usually asks, such as: “Are we the result of nurture or nature?” “Is there existence after death?” and finally, “Am I actually hungry or just bored?”

Government Citizen, Societal Outsider: Post-Colonialism’s Baby, the Socially Rejected.
-Haley Fumiko Jernigan-

There is a Hawaiian term “hapa,” which literally means “half,” derived from the word hapalua. Hapa started as a derogatory term for the mixed-race children of Asian immigrant plantation workers in Hawaii. Now it has been reappropriated as a term of pride for all those who are half Asian. I am hapa. I wish hapa was a box on official forms, under ethnicity. I would check the hapa box with immense pride. Instead, I always check the “mixed” or “other” boxes, which in my mind really say “outsider” or “racially nonexistent.” I was fairly young when I first noticed these small systematic filings of race. I was annoyed by this generalization of me as just “asian” or “other,” because I was neither; I am me, who just happens to be half caucasian and half Japanese. Yet there have always been these boxes, not just on official documents but, also in society and in the representation of marginalized peoples. My frustration transcended the flaccid groupings of races by continent, into something larger, less tangible, a hidden want, an identity out of reach. It would nag at me when I was mistaken for Latina, or when friends would innocently state I was not white, but then in my “motherland,” I would be seen as nothing more than a tourist. I was wrought with an identity crisis. Am I who I am, as an individual? A
personality, an accumulation of traits and actions? Or are people just their race, and if so, how could I exist as an individual in such a society?

My existential questions would be deemed radical to any white man or woman before the mid-20th century. World war hadn’t occurred before 1913, and although colonization was still a practice, the degrading effects had not been voiced as publically as they would in the coming decades. When the great British Empire began to step back from their aggressive expansions, the United Kingdom was left with a metaphorical child, a social elephant in the room no one wished to talk about. It was the emergence of the national and ethnic “other” or “outsider.” Recognized under the Union Jack as citizens, these individuals were nonetheless met with aversion or fear. The *White Man’s Burden* had prepared no one for a minority or foreign-born citizen to come speaking the English language, seeking the same riches and joys of life as their paler fellow citizens. Many prolific writers emerged because of the horrors of colonization and the continuing bleak aftermath. Two notable writers from the post colonialism era are British-Dominican Jean Rhys and British-Pakistani Hanif Kureishi. Both Jean Rhys and Hanif Kureishi, being outsiders themselves, write about the realities and ramifications of colonialism. These two prolific writers found themselves belonging nowhere and constantly questioning their identity in regards to a state of national, and even at times, ethnic belonging. Although each writer emerged from a different period of British imperialism, both authors delve heavily into themes of identity and belonging in a colonial and postcolonial world and attempt to make sense of the xenophobic hand dealt to much of the modern world through imperialism; while Rhys’ work illustrates the realities found in British colonial society through symbolic imagery and subtext, her themes of displacement are complemented by Kureishi’s ruminations on real experiences of an *outsider* in a postcolonial Great Britain; their works come together to share themes of the marginalization of
human lives and cultures by British Imperialism, and jointly beg the question: did colonization create the social issues regarding race, sexuality and elitism that humanity suffers from today?

Rhys was born on the island of Dominica in 1890; she had an English father and a Creole mother. Rhys led a tumultuous life, experiencing everything from prostitution to a brief time in prison. These sharp and painful experiences created a context in which Rhys truly could reflect and empathize with the position of the socially rejected. In Rhys’ short story “The Day They Burned the Books”, she takes the reader through the realities of British imperialism and investigates the emotions of the colonizers versus the natives subjected to colonization. One character, Mr. Sawyer, a personification of imperialism from the isles, is a man who is tormented by where he is but sees no paradox in subjecting the place to burden or violence. Indeed, this very man that hates the Caribbean island he lives upon, marries a woman native to it, but this marriage is fraught with tension and violence reminiscent of the actualities of life on a British colony. Rhys points out the contradiction of his actions while holding a mirror up to British imperialism: “Nobody could make out what he was doing in our part of the world at all [...] they never decided why he had chosen to settle in a place he didn’t like and to marry a coloured woman” (2593). These specific lines reveal more than just a hypocritical man; this is a society that would come, see, and feel a tyrannical duty to conquer wherever they went. Not only did British rule conquer, it continued to preach nationalistic and racist views to its colonies. The narrator of this short story is a young white girl born in a colony of the Caribbean, a seemingly typical child, running around with her friend into innocent adventures, yet one of her few dialogues in the story reveals the slow poisoning of racism as taught by her parents: “Whenever the subject was brought up--people’s relations and whether they had a drop of coloured blood or whether they hadn’t--my father would grow impatient and interrupt. ‘Who’s white?’ he would
say. ‘Damned few.’ So I said ‘Who’s white? Damned few’” (2596). The narrator’s reflections on her own father’s behavior and her Freudian slip reveal a dark indoctrination to her innocent child mind. This indoctrination of colorism and race is subtle and at times so subconscious she herself never considers herself guilty of hateful thought, yet there it appears, slipping out of her otherwise peaceful mouth. Rhys constructs a gloriously subtle symbol of how delicately racism is taught and propagated. In any family, a child learns behavior and morals from observing action and listening to speech. It occurs in casual, everyday situations that are often more influential than moments of purposeful teaching. Imperialism was a metaphorical parent to many societies, bringing behaviors and speech used for centuries in an already xenophobic and warmongering culture, to police these foreign cultures and societies. Racism was, and continues to be, a weapon in which to reinforce power. Colonialism harbored disdain for anyone or thing discordant to the English way, yet ironically British imperialism gave birth to the antithesis of colonialist supremacist culture. In Rhys’ short story, the narrator’s friend Eddie is the son to Mr. Sawyer. Eddie exemplifies the mixed or outsider under British rule: “The living image of his father, though often as silent as his mother -- who first infected me with doubts about ‘home’ meaning England” (2594). It is the actual child of colonialism that rejects the ideas of colonialism itself, seeing both sides, being a part of the indigenous peoples of the colony and also that of the colonizer.

We see the dismay and isolation of the outsider in the character of Mr. Sawyer’s wife. Upon Mr. Sawyer’s death, his wife burns his books with zeal. The books represent all things British. The main character, a young white girl, watches as Mrs. Sawyer emancipates herself from the shelves of propaganda: “I knew bad temper… I knew rage, but this was hate. I recognized the difference at once and stared at her curiously” (2595). Revealed here are the
different roles within a colony: the oppressed, Mrs. Sawyer, the oppressor, Mr. Sawyer and the result or outsider, Eddie. Eddie is trapped between the teachings of intercultural parents, socially forced to choose a culture and risk rejection or choose his own, risking even more. The classics that are included in Mr. Sawyer’s book collection, serve as a symbol of British elitism, forced upon Mrs. Sawyer, a native of the island, towering over her figuratively and literally in the library of her house, and she resents all of it. Rhys is establishing an avenue for the reasoning behind hatred toward the British from the standpoint of the colonized. Peoples of colonies were taught to applaud and revere their Queen and country, all the while being thrown down and treated as secondary citizens.

Kathleen Wilson, a professor of history at the State University of New York, sheds more light into the social mechanisms of imperialism. Her article “Rethinking the Colonial State” in The American Historical Review, reveals evidence of systematically implemented governances of racism, misogyny and violence in order to maintain “control” over colonies, specifically in the 18th century, in the colonies of St. Helens, Sumatra and Jamaica. She writes:

White dominance on the island was uneasily maintained through theatrical performances of privilege and terror. The conspicuous consumption, grandiose hospitality, and notorious brutality of Jamaican planters, who included some of the richest inhabitants of British America, were integral to the performance of power that enacted the distinctions of rank, caste, and class on the island. (Wilson, 2011)

Subjected to such a society, strange class systems evolved to include subgroups for the newly formed other or mixed, usually between, but not much higher in esteem as the native or those appearing the darkest. In a postcolonial world, the warped caste system propels a culture of colorism, a sinister remnant of a violently racist and misogynistic regime. In “The Day They
Burned the Books”, the reader is presented not only with the cruel caste system implemented by imperialists to maintain rule, but also with a confusing juxtaposition between the classes. Eddie, the son of a white man, inherits the social privileges of his father’s whiteness, yet he will always have the inability to claim true “Englishness” being born in a colony and to a colored mother. Even the narrator, a white girl, is unable to claim “Englishness” having being born in a colony, further removing her from human legitimacy in the eyes of British Imperialism, as well as being a female. Rhys is found deep within the subtext, questioning her legitimacy in the societies she lived in, her inability to find identity due to societal regulations, carries over into her work in a tone of emptiness and reflection. Rhys and Eddie transcend mid-century standards for race but lose their identity in trying to find it in western imperialistic standards. According to Wilson’s findings this appears to be the very goal of the colonizer:

.. it was the regulation of individual and collective behavior that polity depended upon, rendering “domestic order” within and without the state possible. In colonies, such regulation was taken on by masters and mistresses as well as governors and councilors, upon whose ability to “see like a state” depended the reproduction of national manners, the organization of coercive labor regimes, the exertion of moral and intellectual suasion, and the imposition of social hierarchies among their various charges. (Wilson, 2011).

Colony life strips the subjected individual to a state of utter learned helplessness, a state of secondary citizenry who is forced to love the country that came to “save” or “civilize” them. Such were the realities of the colonies.

British colonialism propelled the creation of the citizen outsider, the mixed individual, whether ethnically or through dual citizenship. Promises of a homeland and opportunity were quickly met with eager hearts and excited souls, ready to bask in the glory of the Great Britain.
Upon arrival these men and women were bitterly awoken to their lesser state in the country’s eyes. Such was the plight of Hanif Kureishi in his youth during the mid to late 20th century. Kureishi was born to a Pakistani father and an English mother in postcolonial Britain. He experienced first-hand the negative societal ramifications of centuries of imperialism. Kureishi ruminates on his youth as an outsider in his essay “The Rainbow Sign”, specifically in the section “You Will Always Be a Paki”, navigating his own confusion about being a citizen of Britain, but unacceptable as an Englishman, and even a secondary Pakistani to his relatives:

I only felt patriotic when I was away from England. But I couldn’t allow myself to feel too Pakistani. I didn’t want to give in to that falsity, that sentimentality. As someone said to me...we are Pakistanis, but you, you will always be Paki--emphasising the slang derogatory name the English used against Pakistanis, and therefore the fact that I couldn’t rightfully lay claim to either place. (2757)

Among his own society in Britain, Kureishi found resistance and ignorance toward his identity. Reflecting on his Pakistani uncles and their successful lives, he then compares them to what he was systematically being taught in school: “A teacher purposefully placed some pictures of Indian peasants in mud huts in front of me. I wondered did my uncles ride on camels? Surely not in their suits?” (2755). The unfortunate side effect of British colonialism was that the common man in England did not experience the colonies, and relied heavily on the erroneously racist tales or literature from those propagating imperialism. The outsiders traveled to the “homeland” in search of patriotism and community, only to find ignorance, exclusion and hatred. Kureishi exemplifies the loss of self in these circumstances and the desire to conform and be swallowed up into a biased and exclusionary society: “From the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed. It was a curse and I wanted to be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else” (2755).
Yet he mourns his inability to do so, due to his constant internal strife between pride and dignity: “I wasn’t a misfit; I could join the elements of myself together. It was the others, they wanted misfits; they wanted you to embody within yourself their ambivalence” (2756). Kureishi puts so simply the subtle, yet wildly apparent, racism of the “motherland” toward her quasi-welcome citizens from abroad. British society’s unspoken fear toward these citizens with their foreign cultures, foreign religions, dialects and accents, appearing in the streets, moving in next door, or even finding employment in England. During Kureishi’s reflections he can’t help but include the rhetoric of a staunchly conservative and anti-immigrant politician, Enoch Powell. Kureishi’s reflections on Powell offer insight into the dark ramifications of colonization. It’s utter disdain for its creation, this “outsider”. More troubling still is the contagion it creates, as our own present day country continues to see manifestations of hatred in our latest presidential campaign. Kureishi reflects on times of heightened politically charged xenophobia in Britain and the unsettling manifestations of racism it endowed: “As Powell’s speeches appeared in the papers, graffiti in support of him appeared in the London streets. Racists gained confidence. People insulted me in the street. Someone in a cafe refused to eat at the same table with me. The parents of a girl I was in love with told her she’d get a bad reputation by going out with darkies” (2756). “Darkies”, the derogatory slur is troubling enough, but then to add countless moments of oppression, after centuries of oppressive rule, makes one wonder if colonization ever ended.

For both Rhys and Kureishi, their realities were states of displacement. They were reduced to an alien species, no longer foreign, diminished to the ethnic “mutt.” Both writers boldly and sometimes somberly push against this narrative, bringing to light the realities of the intangible loss of humanity in being an outsider, void of social esteem from the colonizer and given an awkward acceptance from their actual ethnic roots. Their stories expose a harsh irony of
having been acknowledged into a country’s governmental system as citizens, yet are in reality treated as outcasts and wanderers within its society.

When I discovered the term “hapa”, I was filled with pride. I belonged somewhere. My racial identity could be part of others sharing a similar life narrative, and thanks to the re-appropriation of the term hapa, stating I am hapa no longer has derogatory connotations. “Hapa” was like Zadie Smith’s “Dream-land”, in which I transcended western society’s elitist categorization of race and could see people for who they are because I had to learn to see myself the same way. Like the re-appropriation of the word hapa, brilliant voices like Rhys and Kureishi create cracks in a imperialistic culture of the west. Centuries of imperialistic and propagandist culture does not just sail away. The culture of class, elitism, race and nationalism remain, reducing cultures, religions and individuals to almost nothingness. Owning one’s self is the only weapon against these forces of cultural obliteration. Because Kureishi and Rhys paved the way, bringing to light the discrepancies and hypocrisy of colonialism, genius voices like Zadie Smith, Maya Angelou, Gene Luen Yang, or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and many others, have gifted the world with more voices against the brutal effects of not only colonialism but xenophobia and racism. These voices encourage each individual to embrace their identity, whatever it may be, and to reclaim one’s heritage or otherness as a powerful identity. British colonialism may have created many of western society’s social issues, but with it came a new voice, unheard before in its magnitude and cultural variety: the voice of the wonderful other.

Works Cited


My name is Naisargi Jaiswal and I am currently attending my third semester at West Valley as a South Asian Studies major. As I am always learning about the ethnology of different societies, this essay was especially enjoyable for me to write as I got to research the historical and cultural backgrounds of my sources and bring them all together to create an understanding of them. My goal for this essay was to do a close reading on ekphrasis, which is a literary description of a visual work of art. The poem titled “In Santa Maria del Popolo” written by Thom Gunn was his perception on the famous painting Conversion on the Way to Damascus by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Along with researching each creator’s personal life, my analysis is also based on research done on the time period the pieces were created as well as the period they are based off of. In doing so, I believe I was able to use each piece to create a deeper understanding of the other. Delving deeper into the lives of the people surrounding the pieces, brought about a whole new perspective each time. The tale of St. Paul, whether it may be true or not, definitely has some real life connections that if explored can reveal many elements that cannot be found just by observing a painting from the surface.

Falling on the Way to Damascus
-Naisargi Jaiswal-

“I do not believe in the creed professed...by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church. All national institutions of churches...appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit...it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.” The movement behind this quote by political activist, philosopher, and revolutionary Thomas Paine, instituted the criticisms and controversies linked to the power of the church and its implications. Thom Gunn’s description of Caravaggio’s Conversion on the Way to Damascus in his poem “In Santa Maria del Popolo” furthers this movement by indirectly criticizing the Catholic church and its hypocritical and imposing ways. Gunn articulates the visual, contextual, and situational elements of his experience of viewing the painting which is exhibited in the Cerasi Chapel of the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, in Rome.
It is initially the style of painting that Caravaggio utilizes that Gunn is in a conflict with. The painting is depicting the scene of Saul, a Jewish man who persecuted Christians, falling off his horse after Christ appeared and spoke to him on the road to Damascus and (as implied by the title) converting to Paul, a Christian who was a key figure in spreading the faith to the rest of the world. Caravaggio, in his style of tenebrism, incorporates a dark background among which the figure of Paul emerges. In this sense, the scene seems a bit exaggerated to Gunn. The leg of the horse which is bent probably in a state of movement as a reaction of Paul’s fall is illuminated. Because of this portion of light in the painting, viewers are gradually directed towards the subject of the piece, Paul. Through Caravaggio’s techniques of chiaroscuro, Paul’s image is given a 3D effect, emphasizing his pose of his outstretched arms. In this way, all attention is given to Paul and not the horse or the groom. The harsh lines and shapes heighten the scene and make it seem more forceful than natural, validating Gunn’s criticism.

Gunn’s first reaction to “the painting on one wall of this recess” is that he has to wait for “when the sun an hour or less / ... makes visible” because he notices the “shadow in the painting brims” with the “real shadow” which is “drowning” out all the shapes in the scene (1-6). The darkness in the painting causes the horse’s haunch to become “dim” and the center of the painting seems nothing more than “various limbs” (7). Because of this portion of obscurity, Gunn is lead to doubt the very subject of the painting, which is the conversion of Paul. Moreover, Gunn points out the “sprawled” figure of Paul beneath the horse and amongst the “one indifferent groom” (11). Even though Paul is the main character in the painting, Gunn notes that Paul’s face is partially “hidden” and “foreshortened from the head” (12). He praises the “wily” Caravaggio for “limiting the scene from a cacophony / of dusty forms” (14-15) to bring attention to not Paul but actually Paul’s pose. Thus he goes on to question, “what is it you mean /
in that wide gesture of the lifting arms?” (16-17). It is obvious to Gunn, that Caravaggio is intentional in emphasizing Paul’s outstretched arms. If this is really the moment of Paul’s conversion, as indicated by the title of the painting, why would the scene look exaggerated in such a way with such a gesture? This is what Gunn is challenging.

In the original story of St. Paul, Saul is on way to the city of Damascus where many Christians resided. He was going to arrest them all and take them to Jerusalem for trial. On the way, Saul was struck by an intense bright light that caused him to fall off his horse. There are accounts of the story that say that at that moment, Saul witnessed Jesus and heard him as well. The people around Saul saw no one but also heard a voice. Saul, blinded by the light, was taken to Damascus led by them. It wasn’t until three days later that the disciple Ananias granted Saul his sight back. And it was after that that he was baptized and later started calling himself Paul (“The Conversion of St. Paul”). What Caravaggio is insinuating by dramatizing the scene of Paul falling off his horse is that that is the particular moment when Paul’s conversion takes place. Paul’s “conversion on the way to Damascus” is characterized by him being blinded from a light and knocked to the ground.

Moving further in Gunn’s description, he challenges not only the story of Paul but also the credibility of Caravaggio, the painter, himself. Gunn mentions that “no Ananias croons” (18) pointing out the fact that Paul has yet to encounter the disciple and regain his sight. If Paul truly has reached enlightenment, having sight would be a key factor in his transformation. In fact, in the painting Paul is shown with closed eyes emphasizing his blindness. Thus, Gunn is questioning whether Caravaggio has successfully depicted the conversion of Paul. Such a pure and enlightening moment of conversion surely cannot be constituted by both the “candour and secrecy inside the skin” (21) of Paul which Caravaggio has painted. Gunn is referring to the
model or the “firm insolent/ Young whore in Venus’ clothes” (23-24) that Caravaggio painted his extravagant figures from. There is a stark contrast between Caravaggio’s depictions such as Paul who was considered a Saint and the models who pose as them further discrediting the scene. Caravaggio himself in the way he lived his life was very adulterated. He had police records and trial proceedings that filled several pages. In 1606, he killed a young man and fled to Naples. Due to another brawl later on in 1608, he was arrested and imprisoned (“Caravaggio Biography”). How could such a person possibly understand the event of an enlightening conversion and represent it in a painting? Gunn is indirectly targeting the Catholic Church for commissioning such a painting from Caravaggio in the first place. A church that uses stories like of “Saul becoming Paul” to send messages about faith and its profundness is exhibiting a painting by an outlaw like Caravaggio. Also, the church, in its hypocritical way, is sending a message of faith which is unrealistic and superficial.

Gunn goes on to further his accusations by depicting a scene of true faith. “Hardly enlightened” (27) by his viewing of the painting, Gunn turns towards the interior of the church. Like the painting, the church is also “dim”, but the clear faith he sees there is something which the painting lacks. The kneeling “old women” whose heads are “closeted in tiny fists” (28-30) are praying in the church. They are not capable of such a “large gesture of solitary man” (32) because “their poor arms are too tired for more than this” (31). Yet they “hold comfort as it can” (30) in their manner and continue. This poem was written in 1958. Just previously, in Italy, the country had faced the turmoil of the war under the reign of Mussolini. The citizens of the country must have inevitably faced some hardships under these conditions as well (“Italian World War 2 Events”). Taking this into consideration, the “old women” that Gunn describes are persistent in their prayer that even at such an old age and going through such hardships, they are still tightly
kneeling in the church in prayer. This, is what Gunn is saying what the true meaning of faith is. It
is not an exaggerated grand gesture which holds no meaning. It is believing despite the adversity
in life and offering all there is to offer whether is it grand or not. This is why, to Gunn,
Caravaggio’s painting of Paul is “Resisting, by embracing, nothingness” (33). In other words,
Caravaggio has missed the meaning of faith by depicting Paul’s embracement of what he thought
was a conversion or enlightenment.

However, it is possible that Caravaggio intentionally overlooked the moral of Paul’s
story, and painted his conversion in such a covert manner that also challenges the Catholic
church. We can see this when comparing Caravaggio’s painting with Nicholas Bernard Lépicié’s
Conversion of St. Paul (Lépicié). Both paintings are depicting the scene of when Paul fell off his
horse due to a bright light. However, Lépicié’s painting is much more dramatic and vivid. The
light blinding Paul is far more clear and brighter than in Caravaggio’s. Not only is Paul in a state
of disarray but so is his horse (who has also fallen) and the men traveling with him. One of the
men even has his arms stretched to Paul as if trying to steady him. In Caravaggio’s painting, the
horse and the groom are “indifferent” as Gunn describes them as if nothing has even happened to
Paul (10). So, if Caravaggio really wanted to dramatize the conversion of Paul, he could have
taken Lépicié’s direction of interpretation. However, his painting in comparison is much more
bland and fabricated. It is almost theatrical in the way Paul is largely embracing a light that is
barely there. Also, the hoof of the horse looks 3D and more emphasized compared to the rest of
the body. When looking up at this painting in the Cerasi Chapel, the position of the viewer would
lead one to get the illusion that the hoof above Paul is overbearing and shows tension in the
painting. It is almost as if the Caravaggio has painted it to look like the horse is stepping on Paul.
Moreover, the indifference of the horse and the groom could be Caravaggio’s way of mocking
the whole event of Paul’s conversion. So, it is possible that Caravaggio’s intention is in harmony with Gunn’s reasoning, and he has painted *Conversion on the Way to Damascus* to mock and criticize the Catholic church as well.

Ultimately, Thom Gunn and possibly Caravaggio as well are complaining against the Catholic church and the idea of faith and religion it imposes on Christians. Throughout history the church has always held an immense amount of power and control over the society. In a way, Gunn is saying that the church is misusing its power to impose a fake and superficial idea of faith which they want idolized and worshipped. Paintings like Caravaggio’s *Conversion on the Way to Damascus* glorify Christianity that causes people to lift their arms in a “wide gesture.” However, this is not the reality of true faith in the religion as seen by the simplicity in the prayer of the old women.

Works Cited


Ever since my sophomore year of high school, I knew I wanted to be an English major because of my love of books. Literature has always been an essential part of my life. When I started attending West Valley, I chose to pursue an ADT degree with the goal of finishing it within two years and then transferring to a CSU to continue my education. Ultimately, my dream is to teach English in a high school or college. I have enjoyed the opportunities my literature classes at West Valley have given me to analyze books and find the meanings within them. My essay explores the search for identity as it relates to four different characters.

Trapped by Society: *Mrs. Dalloway* and “The Waiter’s Wife”

-Ana Hahs-

The Late Victorian Period in Britain saw the country experiencing a severe breakdown and shift in traditional values and morality. As stated in the Norton Anthology, “By the dawn of the twentieth century, traditional stabilities of society, religion, and culture seemed to have weakened, the pace of change to be accelerating” (1889). At the turning of the century, Victorian mindsets of optimism and religious conviction, as well as their stubborn belief in the greatness of Britain, were thrown out the window. Instead, authors began to adopt a more depressing and cynical view of the world. World War I contributed to this disillusionment. Literature of the 20th century showed a strong focus on the individual and how he or she relates to society. It was an age of unrest and it raised the question, what is a person’s role within the fabric of society? Is it possible for anyone to have their own voice? Loss of identity was a major theme.

Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, set just after the end of World War I, explores such ideas. Her characters each find themselves trapped within their societal roles, unable to express themselves and unable to be fully understood. Writing almost three decades later, Zadie Smith grapples with the same problems in “The Waiter’s Wife.” Her characters are Indian immigrants, attempting to hold on to their traditional values in a completely different culture. What all these characters have in common is their search for identity and meaning, beyond the role society has
allotted them. The intense pressures laid upon the individual can serve to make him or her feel trapped. Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Zadie Smith's “The Waiter's Wife” both explore this theme of confinement through their main characters, who struggle to find identities outside of their roles in a society which does not appear to understand them.

The title character of Woolf’s novel, Clarissa Dalloway, is trapped within her role as a married, upper-class Victorian woman, even if she herself does not fully realize it. The fact that she is referred to as Mrs. Dalloway in the title, and frequently throughout the novel, is Woolf subtly reinforcing the idea that Clarissa is not her own person, but instead belongs to her husband, or in a broader sense to her position in Victorian society. The irony present in Clarissa’s character is that her stated need for independence is juxtaposed with an inner realization that she is in fact controlled by a fear of breaking from the mold. When reminiscing about her past, she states that she chose to marry her husband, Richard, over her other suitor, Peter, because he gives her “A little license, a little independence” (2159). However, it can be argued that the real reason she married him is because she knew Peter would require her to share everything with him. Clarissa is afraid of this because she is anxious to please, and this keeps her from expressing herself fully to people because of what they might think. At no point in the novel does she voice her uncertainties about herself to another person. Consequently, she is inherently isolated from other people even as she interacts with them.

Perhaps one of the lines from the novel that most aptly demonstrates this feeling occurs early on when Clarissa is out shopping. Woolf writes that “She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown…this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (2161). Thus, Clarissa realizes that she cannot make people see her as something other than the wife of her husband. This realization contributes to her desire to
keep her thoughts hidden. As argued by Veeran Bell in his analysis of Clarissa: “What Clarissa lacks is a meaningful connection to the real world. In this respect she is not only an expression of her class, but she exceeds the norm” (98). Victorian society has effectively assigned her to a specific role in life. A role which she can deviate from only in her thoughts. Her inner longing to perhaps be something more than Mrs. Dalloway is something she will never truly act upon. She may be discontented with her life, but Clarissa is too afraid to defy the societal norms that trap her within it.

This inner feeling of confinement is also expressed through the character of Septimus Smith in the same novel. A veteran of World War I, he is struggling to adapt to life after the war. It is clear to the modern reader that Smith suffers from some form of PTSD. He bemoans his apparent inability to feel real emotions and he also suffers from hallucinations. No one really understands him or his mental condition, making him isolated just like Clarissa. Smith spends the majority of the novel struggling to find meaning for himself and in his surroundings. His mental problems seem to stem from his friend’s death in the war. Woolf writes that afterward he “Congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably” (2204). Unfortunately for Smith, Victorian society does not really have an outlet for him to share the trauma he is going through.

As a result of his isolation from the physical world, Septimus Smith is driven to commit suicide. It is the only way he can think of to express himself. His wife does not understand him, and neither do the various doctors he sees. However, on a greater scale, it is the Victorian society that cannot and will not understand him because he is a reminder of the pain and suffering caused by the war he fought in. In the same way that people looking at Clarissa see her as Richard Dalloway’s wife, Septimus Smith is seen simply as a sick man. No one makes a real
attempt to discover why he may be acting this way. When Smith says “Communication is health; communication is happiness, communication” (2208), he is voicing both his inability to make others understand his experiences, and society’s inability to relate to him. Sadly, Smith feels the only way out is through death.

Although the same themes of isolation and confinement are present in Zadie Smith’s “The Waiter’s Wife,” the story itself features a set of characters who are very different from the protagonists of Woolf’s novel. The story centers around Samad Iqbal and his wife Alsana who immigrated to London from Bangladesh in 1975. Samad works as a waiter in a restaurant owned by his wealthier cousin, Ardashir. Although he does not say so, Samad resents his cousin for his greater success, especially since he is six years older than him. Samad works long and hard, but it seems he can never get ahead. He yearns to be seen as more than a waiter. Smith writes that he wishes he could wear a sign stating among other things “I am not a waiter. that is, I am a waiter, but not just a waiter. I have been a student, a scientist, a soldier” (3061). The reader clearly sees him struggling with the idea that all society sees him as is a waiter.

Samad wants desperately to have what is perceived as a normal lifestyle. He wants to live in a decent neighborhood, and make enough money to support his wife as well as their future children. However, he values highly what his other people think of him. This is one of the reasons he and his wife move to a better house, even though as she points out without a raise they cannot really afford it. His only defense to this is that “It is a nice area, we have friends here” (3063). Much like Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, Samad finds himself unable to voice his true feelings to anyone around him. Thus he is very concerned with keeping up appearances, because they validate his hard work, and are a way of convincing himself that he is not just a waiter.
Samad’s wife, Alsana faces a similar problem as she struggles to maintain her traditional Indian beliefs and values while living in a foreign country. Smith uses London society as a mirror through which to reflect how the norms Alsana inherited from her homeland are proving a source of confinement. Much like *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which Clarissa is first referenced to by her husband’s name, the title of “The Waiter’s Wife” refers to Alsana in the context of her husband’s position in society. She and her husband were brought together as a result of an arranged marriage, common in India, and moreover, he is significantly older than she is. He controls her throughout the story, beginning with their move to England which was entirely his decision. Alsana goes along with him because that is what she has been taught. Additionally, she never fails to defend her husband to other people. It is, however, important to note that unlike Clarissa who never expresses her discontent to others, Alsana does at times reveal her true feelings to her husband, although in the end she always goes along with his decisions.

Just like Clarissa Dalloway, Alsana is trapped by her cultural values. She pretends both to herself and to others that she is happy with her circumstances. When Neena her niece wonders at Alsana’s willingness to enter into an arranged marriage, Alsana replies with “It is by far the easier option” (3067). Because she chose to do what her culture expected of her, and Alsana reasons that she should be happy. However, Neena aptly describes Alsana’s marriage when she says “You don’t talk to him, he talks at you. You scream and shout at each other, but there’s no communication. And in the end he wins anyway because he does whatever he likes when he likes” (3066). Samad does not understand Alsana because he does not even try. Alsana goes along with him because she sees that as her only option. She has no choice but to be his wife and the mother of his children. Like Clarissa she is isolated because of her refusal to share what she really thinks with other people, or even to herself at times. Only at the very end of the story does
Alsana admit that her niece may be right about the problem with her marriage, but even then she argues that there is no use worrying about it. Her position is inescapable. In the same way Clarissa will always be Mrs. Dalloway, Alsana will too always be The Waiter’s Wife.

In conclusion, the characters in Woolf’s and Smith’s stories are all struggling to make sense of their positions in society. Each wants more than they have. Clarissa Dalloway is trapped within her role as an upper-class Victorian wife, too scared to attempt to break the mold. Septimus Smith is trapped by his war experiences and inability to make others understand what he is going through. Samad and Alsana each do what they feel they are supposed to do, in order to maintain their traditional Indian values in a foreign country. All of these characters are lost and misunderstood, trying for the most part to hide their discontent. They are all confined in one way or another. Ultimately the inner journey for each character boils down to a search for an identity, beyond what is assigned to them by the world they live in. However, they also struggle with the uncertainty of how to go about this, and a fear of what will happen if they do. One could argue that the only character who actually succeeds at escaping is Septimus Smith. Through his suicide he defies what was expected of him and frees himself from the burden of his emotional trauma. The fact that he felt led to such an extreme measure only illustrates the importance of people’s sense of identity. Mrs. Dalloway and “The Waiter’s Wife” were written at opposite ends of the 20th century. The fact that they carry such similarities only speaks to the timelessness of the themes they portray.

Works Cited
