Acknowledgements

We are pleased to present the Best Essays Anthology 2018-2019. 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 perceptively and creatively. The panel of judges comprised three English faculty who read and rated the works anonymously.
Table of Contents

Narrative

Anna Novoselov, “Lost Amid the Night’s Shadows”
Noa Sigal, “The (Possible) Death of a Procrastinator”
Yi Jiang, “I Don’t Have a Community”

Textual Analysis

Corrinne Guinn, “Coercing Motherhood”
Samantha Vinson, “Elements of Queerkind in the Foundations of Psychology and Accessible Theory”

Researched Argument

Bennett Grisley, “A Real Education”
Tina Huynh, “Vampire Money”
Molly Wright, “The Art of Gentrification”

Literary Analysis

Ken Lee, “Crazy Smart Asians”
James Zetterberg, “Silk and Money, Labor Pain”
Ever since I was in first grade, I have been a bookworm. Devouring book after book, I traveled around the world and throughout time in the Magic Tree House Series, battled Voldemort in the wizarding world of Harry Potter, and discovered the realities of societies and human nature in classics like 1984 and The Lord of the Flies. Through literature, I began to appreciate the intricacies of words and their ability to interweave into stories; I began to love how the juxtaposition of phrases can expose readers to the raveness of experiences and allow them to experience the thoughts and sensations that flowed through your own body. This narrative recounts the fear, the disorientation and the wonder I felt when I was in the untamed woods of Mt. Shasta. It attempts to recreate one of my nights in the wilderness, where I experienced true freedom and thousands of emotions unexplainable on paper. In my future, I hope to continue exploring nature and literature as I find adventures through creating, reading and writing stories.

Lost Amid the Night’s Shadows
-Anna Novoselov-

The dark hands of the unlit night crept towards me as I glanced around frantically, trying to spot a familiar landmark in the depths of the forest. My tiny flashlight flickered like a burnt-out ember and meandered among the trees as desperate fear set into the creases of my mind. I didn’t know how far I had wandered or even what direction I was facing.

It was the summer before my sophomore year of high school. A couple of hours prior in the welcoming light of day, I had confidently laid out my sleeping bag and mat in a meadow, which was about a five-minute walk from the outskirts of the summer camp’s main campground near Mt. Shasta. I remembered the wonder I felt falling asleep in the open field while stargazing in the limitless expanse a couple years before, and I desired to experience the sensation again. This time, however, I would be alone, rather than guided by watchful adults.

If only I had not overestimated my sense of direction and spatial awareness! Most of the time, I rely on GPS to guide me, but I failed to consider this fact in the impulsive afternoon heat. I had walked to the meadow before, so I believed I would be able to retrace my path in the tenebrous night.

That evening, I bundled up in a sweatshirt and boldly set off into the woods, striding in the general direction of the wooden bridge that traversed the creek separating the meadow from
the forest. With excitement fogging up my thoughts, I continued mindlessly walking, pushing aside branches reaching into my path like elegant fingers and stepping through the thorns barricading my untracked path. In the daylight, I could have simply scanned the land to determine which direction to turn; however, the darkness prevented me from seeing more than a few feet in front of me.

Without thinking, I stepped off the narrow dirt path and trekked on, expecting to reach the bridge at any moment. The shortcut was sure to get me to my destination quicker! My steps marched to their own song as my thoughts danced around to the music roaring in my head. I began to feel a little uneasy, but I simply shrugged the feeling off as I soothed myself with baseless reassurances. After a few more minutes, however, my initial exhilaration completely faded, and I realized that I was lost.

Suddenly, worry began to tear at my reasoning. Instead of stopping to discern my location, I panicked. The previously elegant trees transformed into posts of barbed wire pricking my shivering body, the scattered rocks into traps designed to trip me. The gleaming stars of the night sky instantly dimmed as the canopy of treetops closed to block their faint glimmers. The darkness seemed to deepen and swallow my sanity.

I didn’t know what to do. Should I continue wandering? Should I scream for help? Should I lie down on the fallen pine needles and wait for dawn to rescue me?

My skin ran wild with tiny shivers as I hectically searched for familiar boulders or patches of grass. I restlessly walked around in a wide circle, trying to detect traces of a trail, but to no avail. I knew that distress was affecting my judgment, so eventually, I forced myself to slow my steps and let my pupils dilate to adopt the pitch black.

I recovered my breath, and my beating heart stabilized. Then, almost out of my own volition, my feet began to move in a direction that felt inexplicably right. Soon, in a matter of
seconds, I felt the gentle slap of the soles of my flip-flops against trampled dirt, and I looked down
to see that a path that had miraculously appeared underneath my feet. Carefully, I followed it.

There! There was the camp! After what seemed like hours, but must have been only a few
minutes, I spotted the faint bark of the teepees and the paint-splattered benches of the craft yard.

Breathless but relieved, I rushed into the clearing, where I was startled to see my friend,
Maddy May, bent over a craft dimly illuminated by her shining headlamp. She looked up, clearly
surprised by my frightened expression.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I...I got lost,” I finally stuttered, addressing the ground. “I wanted to sleep in the
meadow. And all my stuff is there... I don’t know what to do.”

Hearing my dejected whisper, Maddy leapt to her feet like an extended spring, her nose
speckled by a thousand faint freckles.

“Come on! I’ll lead you there!”

With my tail between my legs, I waddled after Maddy, who bounced along the path with
her limitless energy radiating in her wake. She boldly raced through the woods, as though she
instinctively knew which way to turn and where to leap over jagged rocks poking through the
ground. She didn’t even bother turning on her flashlight.

In a couple of minutes, the bridge emerged in front of me. The crescent moon shone
down on it from a sliver above the trees, and the wood planks seemed to sparkle under the stars.
The only sounds were the faint rushing of the wind and the faint trickling of melted mountain
snow over mossy rocks.

Maddy’s voice rose over the quiet rustles: “You’ll be fine from here?”

“Yeah! Thanks!”
Maddy’s thick ponytail waved me goodbye, and I gingerly waded through the damp grass in the meadow, the mud staining my exposed toes and sticking to the undersides of my flip flops. The stalks tickled my calves like stiff feathers inking designs onto my skin. I shivered slightly from the moisture.

The depths of the night had hauled me into the churning black waves of the sea, and sheer luck had thrown me a lifeline and hauled me to safety. As a result of my recklessness, I had overestimated my abilities and acted foolishly. My rashness took hold of my rationality, and I failed to think of the consequences of my actions. I knew that I should have marked the path I would take—either by memorizing landmarks, by forming a route with small rocks, or even by tossing breadcrumbs like Hansel and Gretel. Forethought can be the difference between success or disastrous failure, and I learned how crucial it is to accurately gauge your skills before setting off into the unknown.

Accepting my friend’s help didn’t make me a failure; it simply confirmed my status as a terrible navigator. That night, I lost a fraction of my ego, but I gained a much more valuable trait: the ability to chip away at some of my stubbornness and request help when I need it. In a society that values individualism and independence, people may struggle to admit shortcomings, yet setting aside unnecessary pride is integral to achieving goals. Everyone has faults and areas of difficulties, and asking for support should not be scorned upon.

I marched on.

My feet left shallow imprints in the ground. My steps became giddy with anticipation. My eyes wandered to the sky, and my mouth opened in awe.

The galaxy spread out above, painting the sky with beautiful swirls as I crawled into the warm cocoon of my red sleeping bag. A shooting star shot over my head, and I gazed up, wonderstruck.
“The (Possible) Death of a Procrastinator” was an English 1A assignment where I was responding to the essay “What Do We Do When We Write,” by Susan Wyche. In the essay, Wyche describes writing techniques and rituals that aid the writing process. I tried the tricks listed in Wyche’s essay for an essay assignment for an English class I was simultaneously taking, and then I analyzed my writing style for that essay in “The (Possible) Death of a Procrastinator.” Writing this essay meant a lot to me because I always dwell on my tendency to procrastinate, and writing this essay was a step in the process of forming new habits.

The (Possible) Death of a Procrastinator
- Noa Sigal-

I have a similar relationship with writing essays as I did with running the mile in middle school. As a kid, I was never a good runner, and I would psych myself out by thinking about how long the run was, how my legs would tire, and how my lungs would burn. When it came time to actually run, the second the workout became difficult, the voice in my head telling me that I’m not good enough would always win, and I would start walking. I dreaded the mile more than I dreaded any math test or speech. At my middle school, we had to run the mile monthly, and monthly, like clockwork, I would fall victim to some freak accident that prevented me from running. (Yes, I was that kid.) But the worst part was, no matter if I told my teacher that I had achilles tendonitis, bronchitis, fell in a sinkhole, or any other ailment, I would still have to run the mile on the makeup day with all the other loafers. I only had the power to postpone the inevitable. I’m now mature enough to typically avoid making dubious excuses for my shortcomings, but there are still striking similarities between my attitude towards the mile and my attitude towards writing essays. If I want to start an essay, all I can think about is how long and tiresome the essay will be to write. Those thoughts turn into extreme procrastination, so I repeatedly find myself up late the night before an essay is due, scrambling to make an analytical argument that appears to be rooted in premeditated analysis of the topic. Even when I finally get to writing, I find myself unable to hold consistent focus throughout writing the essay, and my
own self-deprecating thoughts often make me want to quit altogether. My poor writing habits often lead me to write papers that are not as thorough or as well written as they could be.

I knew my writing style needed to change. In my Middle College English class, I was assigned an analytical essay about the short stories “So Much Water So Close To Home” and “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” by Raymond Carver. When writing the essay, I used some techniques and rituals described in Susan Wyche’s essay “What Do We Do When We Write,” as well as other new techniques discussed in English 1A to see if they aided my writing process. Ultimately, the incorporation of new rituals and techniques into my writing process helped me avoid some of my typical bad habits, and I wrote a paper that I’m really proud of.

I started the process by applying the first tip on Wyche’s list of rituals. Her first idea was to “[c]onsider the times of day in which you are the most and least alert” (Wyche 248). Unfortunately, I didn’t have much time to choose from, because I got the idea to try out these ideas on a Tuesday afternoon, and my essay was due the following Wednesday at 2:30. Although I had less than 24 hours to write my essay, I still considered the first tip because I typically start writing at night, despite the fact that I’m more focused during the day. For this essay, I started working at around 3:00 PM, while I’d typically start writing an essay around 8:00 PM. I know this time difference might not seem significant, especially because I was still starting my essay the day before it was due, but I found writing during the day to be worlds apart from my typical nighttime routine. I think the main difference stemmed from the amount of natural light. Tuesday was an especially sunny day, and the visibility really improved my mood. Because of natural circadian rhythms, darkness cues tiredness in our brains. My house is mainly lit by windows, and the dimmed light of the evening and night often has a strong effect on my brain’s energy level. Also, at night, it’s typically just me and my mom at my house, and she goes to bed
early so she can get to work in the morning. Being alone in a poorly lit, old house often makes me a little paranoid, especially when I’m feeling tired and a little irrational, which makes working at night even more difficult. Writing during the afternoon made me more alert and allowed me to focus more on my essay.

Wyche’s second tip on her list of rituals was to “[i]dentify … activities in which ideas naturally occur” (148). I get a lot of ideas when I’m walking because I’m moving slowly and engaging with my surroundings, so I went on a walk and brought a small notebook to jot down some notes about what I should do for my essay. The walk helped me get some ideas flowing, and planning my essay out on paper cut down on the time I spent staring at my computer screen, thinking about what I should write.

While on my walk, I also addressed Wyche’s fifth suggestion: “Consider the conditions under which you work best…. Does music help you focus or does it distract you?… Do you work best when sitting, standing, or lying down?… Identify these needs and assemble an environment in which you are most comfortable” (Wyche 249). I work best in silence, but I have a hard time getting concentrated when it’s silent because I find myself looking for more mental stimulation. I typically write while listening to trap music for the same reason that I like drinking coffee before writing: it’s motivating and it makes me feel like I’m getting more work done than I actually am. Lyrics typically intercept my focus, so I decided to write while listening to one song on repeat. This tactic only worked because I got so annoyed that I was forced to ignore the music or go crazy. One song on repeat ended up being extremely frustrating, so I don’t plan on trying that again. However, I did improve my atmosphere by deciding that I should sit at my desk instead of on my bed. I typically write essays while in a half sitting, half lying down position while I write. Sitting up at my desk was really helpful for my concentration and engagement.
I also took breaks when I felt myself losing focus, but I kept the breaks to 30 minutes each instead of letting time pass without any discretion. I wrote the essay’s two body paragraphs first, took a 30 minute break, and then wrote my introduction and conclusion. After I ate dinner, I was about to sit down to write my introduction and conclusion when I noticed that I had a missed call from a person I used to be really good friends with. Curiosity enticed me into calling her back, and she told me that she had called to apologize for kissing my boyfriend when we were fourteen, because she often “feel[s] guilty when we hang out.” We have a lot of mutual friends and have spent plenty of time together since that incident freshman year, so her apology really couldn’t have been more random. While the situation really upset me when it happened, her apology was a few years too late, and I cared so little at this point so the conversation was actually pretty funny. Nevertheless, her call completely scattered my focus, and after hanging up the phone, my mind had completely left the topic of my essay. I decided that I should take another walk to see if I could refocus my thoughts. On my walk, I thought about the Raymond Carver stories, my life, my friendships, my relationships, and my close encounters. I realized that as a young woman in the world, I had enough life experience to relate stories of my own life to the themes of the Raymond Carver stories I was analyzing. Luckily, when a situation arose that rerouted my concentration, I was able to return to the positive ritual of taking a walk to refocus myself. When I got home, I wrote a short personal narrative for the essay’s introduction, and I then referred again to my narrative in the conclusion.

I wasn’t sure if my teacher would like the essay, but I personally thought that it was one of the best essays I’ve ever written, and I was really happy with what I produced. The commentary was well thought out and my personal connection that I included was both appropriate and attention grabbing. The next morning, I woke up, edited my essay, and turned it in. The response was overwhelmingly positive. My teacher said that it was the best essay that I’ve
submitted to him, which made me feel a lot of pride in what I’d written. When I write essays, I typically stress about starting or what my reader will think about my writing the whole time. By trying some new techniques, I didn’t feel as much pressure and I felt more like I was doing some investigative field research on how to write a better essay. Because I could remind myself that I was simply trying out some new tactics to see how they worked, I felt way less anxiety about finishing the essay. The feedback and personal gain that came from the essay I wrote was impactful enough that I plan to incorporate the rituals that I tried into my writing process while also keeping my writing more relaxed by sampling new techniques and habits. I can’t say that after writing one good essay I’ll never procrastinate again, but I no longer want to accept procrastination and self-deprecation as my norm because I feel way better about what I produce when I apply myself versus when I look for ways around hard work. My sophomore year of high school, I joined the rowing team, and I was required to run multiple miles at a time on a regular basis. As it turns out, running isn’t that hard, but you have to actually do it to improve.

Works Cited

I came to the U.S. almost thirty years ago and worked in high tech companies in Silicon Valley for about twenty years. In recent years, I find myself in an awkward situation. It is so easy for me to talk and associate myself with other Chinese people, like when meeting a friend’s friend, or an amiable restaurant owner. However, I often feel unstimulated by the familiar conversational topics of our Chinese immigrant bubble. At the same time, my lack of ability to carry on a conversation in English has prevented me from fully expressing myself either in a class setting or in a group where people come from different cultural backgrounds. Yet the new topics we discuss oftentimes are interesting to me. So I decided to improve my English by taking English 1A. Through the process of writing this essay, I have learned how to better understand and accept myself, my history, and my cultural identity.

I Don’t Have a Community

-Yi Jiang-

I have fallen into a chasm with my hands still clutching on to the ropes which come from two opposite banks. One rope is my mother tongue, culture, parents and a few old friends; the other is my curiosity about the world and the love for the country that I now live in and my children belong to. My feet cannot reach solid ground, a place I call community. I actually had my communities along the way, but I lost them all. Looking back, I realize that finding, losing, and then continuing to find a community would probably be my destiny from the moment I decided to join the immigration tide.

I grew up in communist China and lived in a forced community where people who worked together also collectively resided together. Family dormitories, which were assigned by authorities, mingled with office buildings where people worked; children knew each other’s parents and even their statuses on promotions or demotions at work because all parents gossiped about their coworkers at home. My dad was politically persecuted for nearly 20 years, so it is not hard to imagine my life as the ugly duckling growing up. To me, the community was a curse. I desired freedom.

I came to the US, a free country, as a graduate student. Even though I had crammed English vocabulary and grammar into my head before my departure, I still felt devastated that I couldn’t understand a single announcement in the airport. After arriving in the US, I stayed
strictly within the Chinese student community on campus. We were a group of newcomers; we
didn’t like cheese and uncooked vegetables, and we joked that people who ate salad were like
sheep eating grass. The smell of basil once gave me a headache. Our weekend entertainment
was watching Chinese movies from VHS tapes. We expected nothing more than some nighttime
poker after midterms and finals. We helped each other by exchanging information about how to
switch majors to find a job, for staying in the US was our ultimate goal. I was both lucky and
unlucky—I didn’t need to study English very hard because my adviser, who was from Spain and
spoke with a heavy Spanish accent, was a genius. He could understand me even before I opened
my mouth.

I still didn’t need to use much English after I found my high-tech job in the Bay Area.
The high-pressure environment at work and huge time commitment involved in raising kids
made me exhausted. Because I didn’t have much energy left, I couldn’t join in on the excitement
of China’s rapid rise as much as my high-tech Chinese community did. While some of my friends
were keen on buying big houses, investing in the stock market, and entrepreneurship in both
America and China, I felt uneasy about these topics. Gradually I grew apart from them. I turned
to God. Religion had always been a piece of pure land, an impression I had gotten from
translated classic books like *Les Miserables*. Fellowship with my new Christian friends, the majority
of them being Taiwanese, became my weekly routine. I found peace in Jesus.

As my daughters grew up in American society, I learned many new things, such as what
“itsy bitsy” meant in that one spider song and who Dr. Seuss was. After being exposed to school
lunches and other children’s birthday parties, my daughters became McDonald’s breakfast fans
and loved to dine at Olive Garden. I then switched my weekly shopping from the Chinese
supermarket to American grocery stores. All kinds of cheeses and Italian herbs gradually
appeared on my shopping list. Basil, fresh or dry, became my favorite ingredient in salads and
soups. I read the famous book *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*. When my kids no longer wanted to go to Sunday school at our Chinese church because of another child’s rudeness, I too found myself uncomfortable with the church’s paternalistic, guilt-tripping preaching style — the style I secretly related to my old Chinese culture. We decided to try something new.

We transferred to an American church. I found out that I could only understand sixty to seventy percent of its Sunday messages. However, I felt the urge to improve my English and was willing to take on the challenge because I had to communicate with the outside world beyond my workplace. We decided to stay. Most of the women in the church were stay-at-home moms. Male leadership and the female’s obedient role in a family were stressed in this church’s teachings. When I was in China, women had been encouraged to work outside of their family. At the same time, women were morally and culturally obligated to be the primary caretakers at home, raising children and doing house chores. Because of this, I found comfort in the church’s singular role for women after so many years of double expectations. Over time, my English listening ability greatly improved. I also learned a lot of personal life management skills from the church’s evening classes, such as emotion control and boundary setting.

As time passed by, I gradually sensed subtle judgments from other women in the church that I was too worldly and not Godly enough because I kept working outside of the family. Then, Trump started campaigning the same year my older daughter went to college. Conservatism and liberalism became a hot political topic in my church and my family. In the summer, my daughter came back from college. She somehow became a young political tiger cub. She was upset at the teachings she had received from the church, particularly concerning women’s roles, the exact teachings that had comforted me years ago. She refused to go to church. We fought, and she won. I was actually awakened by her, and I started to look into the history of Christianity and
ponder the differences between religion and spirituality. My husband and I agreed with my daughter that we were going to find a progressive church.

Now I am part of a new church. I was very moved to see one of the pastors from my church holding a sign that read, “You are my friend, I will keep watch while you pray” in front of a nearby mosque during a grief-prayer meeting after the recent New Zealand tragedy. Individuals that identify with the LGBTQ community are comfortable in the church. I am satisfied with the church’s teachings. However, I am not sure if I could find my community here. After a long journey of finding and losing my communities, I became skeptical. Could I really find my community here at an English speaking church?

I have often visited my parents in China in recent years. My hometown has gone through dramatic changes since I left. I feel like a stranger to the city every time I step out of the airport. Our neighboring roads are so wide that I lose my sense of direction when I am inside of a taxi. Skyscrapers rise at the place where our old apartment building used to be. Only when I get close to the bottom of the 23-floor building where my parents live can I find the scene I have always been familiar with — groups of elderly people scattered around outside the building, chatting and laughing, or quietly sitting together, watching pedestrians and enjoying the sunset. They are a group of people who had worked together and known each other their entire lives. In 1980, the authorities publicly renounced the political accusation against my father. My parents, now 90 and 81 years old, live peacefully among them and enthusiastically participate in organized activities. My mother is the conductor in her senior choir, and my father is a superstar in the senior calligraphy exhibition. These elderlies are the last generation still living the bygone lifestyle in the same communities organized by old communist China. People of my generation have already moved out all over China and around the world.
I sometimes envy my parents, that they belong to where they have always been, a lifelong community. Among the “three pillars of self-determination—autonomy, competence, and community” for human beings, they at least have a community and “feel connected to others” in their old age (Junger 22). I am not sure where I am going to end up at my old old age. Walking on a campus full of youthful vibrancy, I am alone pursuing my childhood dream—art and writing. I am trying to grip the pillar of competence. A community which I really belong to and can settle down with may be something I can never find.

I am an ape swinging through the trees in a forest. One of my arms holds my mother tongue, culture, parents, and a few old friends; the other holds a curiosity about the world and love for the country I now live in and my children belong to. I don’t need to find solid ground. I like to fly among the treetops and to see the faraway mountains. I accept my destiny.

Work Cited

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS
BEST ESSAYS
My essay was originally written for an English 1A assignment in which we were instructed to find a TED Talk that appealed to us and expand upon the speaker’s presentation. About a week prior to the assignment, I happened across Christen Reighter’s TED talk, “I Don’t Want Children- Stop Telling Me I’ll Change My Mind,” and was moved by her message. I deeply connected with her story; it was refreshing to hear this perspective on motherhood, or rather this choice to abstain from motherhood- one that is often vilified and discounted as unnatural. As soon as I read the prompt for the assignment, I knew I wanted to use Reighter’s TED Talk as the basis for my essay. It was challenging to write about such a sensitive subject; the message I wanted to share goes against our social scripts and cultural norms, and I was worried about the way my beliefs would be perceived. Despite my fears, I allowed myself to be vulnerable and direct with my feelings, which I was most proud of in the end. I want to thank both Professor Vicky Kalivitis and Cathy Jones for their feedback and encouragement that gave me the confidence to share my paper. I am touched that my essay was well received and I am honored to be selected for this distinction. I hope that in sharing this message, we can continue conversations about the way we view women’s self-worth.

Coercing Motherhood
-Corinne Guinn-

We are all familiar with the social narrative expected of women. As women, our destiny, our duty is to create life. We are conditioned to believe that having children is the norm, and any woman who does not desire to be a mother is selfish and heartlessly disruptive of the long awaited calling that is motherhood. Christen Reighter rejects this social narrative: “You see, a value that I have always understood about myself was that I never wanted children” (Reighter 0:58-1:03). In her heartfelt TED talk, she discusses the hurdles she faced to receive a tubal ligation and the scrutiny she endured from strangers, family, colleagues, and medical providers who were unable to separate being a woman from being a mother. Like Christen, I felt alone and believed “women who didn’t want children were so rare” (Reighter 3:38-3:39); in reality, one in five American women will not have a biological child in their lifetime- some by choice and others not. Regardless of the reasons why women abstain from childbearing, society vilifies those who do not adhere to the norm, and in doing so belittles each woman’s purpose. Imposing motherhood onto women is detrimental not only to their self-concept, perceived worth, and individual ambitions, but is also wildly unfair to the product of this ideal: children and their well-being.
Over the last two centuries in Europe and North America, mortality rates have declined; today, “births outnumber deaths by three to one” (Pison 2017), and the human population continues to rise steadily. With seven and a half billion people inhabiting the earth, the need to procreate for survival of the human species has long passed, yet the expectation for women to provide children remains the social norm. Certainly, some principles surrounding motherhood have shifted over the years, such as the rise in median age of first-time mothers and increasingly accepting attitudes that women can be more than just stay-at-home mothers— that they may now pursue successful careers and educations alongside their parenting responsibilities. Despite these changes, the social narrative speaks to the inevitability of maternity, rather than the choice of it. “I recognized the roles that were placed on me very early. One persistent concept that I observed—existing in our language, in our media—was that women are not only supposed to have children, they are supposed to want to” (Reighter 0:13-0:31). We can see this societal expectation enforced in the way we raise children from a young age, and we need not look further for evidence than to one of the most common toys we give little girls: baby dolls. Even from infancy and childhood, young girls are conditioned to be nurturing and to believe that they will need to someday be a mother. This belief is ingrained in our culture, and is further goaded by mainstream media.

Our society looks to the media for social cues. As we see the media’s portrayal of many important life events and feelings, we are regularly fed the media’s warped perception of motherhood. When we think of some of the most popular or longest-running television shows on air today, we notice a common element running through female characters. Marriage and pregnancy are commonly used to enhance a female protagonist’s storyline. Pregnancy, or motherhood in one way or another, is the television writer’s fallback, a default plotline to bring a female character into the spotlight or progress her character, which is a great disservice. Many
shows seem incapable of portraying a woman as dynamic without also making her a mother, yet so often after the birth of her child, they fail to accurately show her being an engaging mother who faces the realistic commitments and obstacles childcare puts on her. This creates misrepresentation of the ease and expectations of motherhood to society, and not only influences women in their decision to become mothers, but negatively impacts their child as well. Examples of this can be seen on the hit television show Friends, where all three female main characters become mothers in some regard. Their individual storylines each rely on their pregnancy for a duration of episodes to create drama and humor that captivates audiences. However, after birth, their children are hardly ever featured on the show. Their motherhood is trivial, used only as a trope to further their plot temporarily; then the child is cast aside as an afterthought. This leaves a harmful impression on viewers, especially young women. Often, maternity is glamorized: these television mothers receive love, attention, excitement, and drama that is displayed in desirable environments for young women. This fuels a perception that I see in many of my peers and throughout younger age groups: many do not imagine motherhood’s responsibilities past the joyous events of childhood. A father dreams of teaching his son how to throw a football; a mother envisions the memories she can create reading to her child. People enjoy the idea of children who are malleable, ones who can be shaped to be ideal to their parents, children who are bright and adored by friends and family. In this fairytale idea of motherhood, many do not think of their children as eventual adults. Motherhood does not end at the child’s adolescence, and for many, by that time their expectations have long been tainted and may leave women feeling regretful.

A 2016 German survey found that “8% of 1,200 participants said they regretted becoming parents” (Mackenzie 2018). Many women who question if they truly want to have a child are coaxed into motherhood by the promise that their feelings will change later in life, or even after they have a baby, which creates these regretful mothers. Society goes to great lengths
to convince women succumb to motherhood, yet an uninterested or ill-prepared mother does not create a loving, nurturing environment or happy, well-rounded children. Casting aside personal desires to accept standards is deemed selfless by society, but is it more self-regarding to adhere to these standards for the classically narcissistic argued reasons: “Don’t you want someone to take care of you when you are old?”; “Don’t you want to leave something behind?”. Motherhood certainly can be fulfilling and enriching, but society need not guilt women who do not feel this way to fit into this social script. Rather, consider the valid fears and motives behind rejecting maternity, and the decision is clearly not always a selfish one.

Christen touches on some of the reasons why women may choose to abstain from motherhood: “The risk of passing on hereditary illness, the danger of having to stop life-saving medication for the duration of your pregnancy, concern about overpopulation, your access to resources, and the fact that there are 415,000 children in the foster care system in the United States at any given time” (Reighter 2:30-2:53). I find myself overwhelmed with existential concerns when I think of reasons why I do not want to be a mother. I think of our environment, and the current issues we face with our planet’s health depleting; do I want to leave a child behind to face the unknown of catastrophic changes? I imagine the negative traits I could potentially pass on to a child, as studies show strong genetic correlation to heritability of mental disorders, with heritability estimates ranging “between 31% to 42% for major depressive disorder and between 20% to 40% for anxiety disorder” (Taporoski et al. 2015). I think of experiences in my life that I would never want anyone else to endure; it seems cruel to put someone in a position where they may experience pain that I have felt in my lifetime. Women are commonly told that their life is empty without a child, that they will never know the true meaning of love or fulfillment without having children. I do not feel a void in my life by not having a biological child to care for, yet I do not feel selfish for this. I share my time, love, and care with my existing
family and friends and through volunteer work. Additional considerations are more concerned with my personal well-being. Prominently, I have struggled with body image issues for the majority of my life, and pregnancy would alter my body, both permanently and temporarily, in ways that would cause substantial distress. A great deal of society believes reasons like these are selfish, and again we see the value of an ideal is placed higher than the value of a woman.

Society desperately clings to the social norm that childbearing makes a woman whole and gives her life purpose. Those lacking this desire, like Christen Reighter or myself, face disrespect and callous labels that undermine women’s self-worth. “I’ve always believed that having children was an extension of womanhood, not the definition” (Reighter 12:45-12:48). The social narrative protects maternity so much so that it interferes with women’s decisions over their own body, with obstacles and requirements in place to prevent surgical sterilization for women. If a woman determines that motherhood is not an integral part of her identity, she should be supported rather than vilified with the understanding that her realization will prevent unwanted children, create a higher standard for parenting, and cultivate happier women who can succeed in their goals as individuals, rather than succeed by fulfilling social scripts.

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This essay was originally submitted as an analysis of the parallels and dissenting opinions of voices throughout the evolution of queer theory. In our class, Critical Thinking and Writing with professor Leigh Burrill under the Honors program, my classmates and I based our discussion around the graphic novel Queer Theory: A Graphic History. Each page of the novel, authored and illustrated by Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele, described a complex concept, a groundbreaking event, or mountain-moving figurehead under the metaphorical “queer umbrella,” which prompted three weeks’ worth of hour-long discussions about the intersections of identity and the obstacles along the way to representation and liberation. The pages of Queer Theory: A Graphic History that I chose to further dissect included brief summaries about three individuals whose work held a great influence over the perception of queer identities—for better or for worse—as well as the concept of intersectionality and accessibility for queer individuals.

Elements of Queerkind in the Foundations of Psychology and Accessible Theory

-Samantha Vinson-

In Women’s and Queer Studies disciplines, many focal points lie within classic literature, social sciences, and psychology. The basis of literature and science reflect the times in which the ideas, concepts, and beliefs were created. In literature, we’ve historically observed timeless banned books lists that take queer voices and voices of color off the shelves and suppress the nature of humankind as if it could be made invisible. In science, the driving questions about gender have always seemed to carry an inherent bias. When biologists ask questions of how and why people orient toward queer partnerships and ways of life, they seek answers to those questions, generating the roots of essentialist ideas and advocating for damaging argument for purist nativism. In the foundation of psychology, many ideas about sexual behaviors and gender differences became the driving force for research about the brain. Sigmund Freud, called the “Father of Psychoanalysis,” is one neuroscientist and researcher who contributed greatly to the field of psychology in both productive and grossly misinformed ways. Throughout time, many have critiqued the work of Freud for producing particularly phobic attitudes toward natural human behaviors that seeped through the fundamental understandings of people and the human psyche. Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are two profoundly notable queer theorists who
worked to unpack the centuries-long conceptions about human nature as it pertains to sexual orientation and gender identities.

Most, if not all, of the propositions about queerness in scientific fields hold much more weight in society than in fact. As researchers aim to isolate the “gay gene,” or identify biological “causes” to particular ways humankind behaves, the public adheres to the idea that one’s identity can be fixed from birth. While a feeling of being “born this way” may empower many, as it does today, the roots of psychology have a darker implication for society. Although no genetic site has been identified as a precursor to homosexual desires, many people across the globe have adopted essentialist ideas about sexuality that lead to overt discrimination. Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalytic practice, was one particular individual whose ideas about human nature became the seeds from which rotten ideas of sexuality and gender grew. While his work in finding the neurological basis of dreaming, the importance of and definition of catharsis, and psychological properties of anxiety have been particularly positive and long-standing in the field, many of his ideas regarding human nature are problematic. Much of the basis of psychological academia stemmed from Freud’s theories, but distinct ideas about psychosexual desire (or “libido”), female sexuality, homosexuality, and non-binarism are especially pervasive. As the concept and practice of psychotherapy became more well known, many misconceptions about gender also surfaced. Freud theorized the Psychosexual Stages of Development, which raise serious concern about the basis of science regarding female reproduction and childhood development. What Freud defined as a universal trajectory for humankind is a prominent example of the scientific field’s injury to people’s perception of sexuality within the male-female gender binary. Not only did it reinforce the rigid categorization between men and women, leaving no space for intersex and gender-nonconforming individuals, but the theory deliberately places female-pattern people into genetic submission.
Claiming that one can “fixate” in a certain stage--oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital--became a foundation upon which many researchers after Freud developed homophobic, misogynistic, and overall narrow-minded perceptions of human sexuality. Freud’s stages of sexual development begin with the oral stage, which is said to be the first year of a child’s life. In this phase, the child learns through stimulation of the mouth--breastfeeding, and putting toy blocks or other small objects in their mouths in order to “understand” them in their infant way. He then discusses the proceeding anal stage, which is from the ages of about one to three years old as the child begins potty-training, and then moves into the phallic stage. The phallic period, which occurs from about three years old to six, is where some of Freud’s most problematic ideas arose. Freud imposes that if a male-pattern person were to become fixated in this stage, they may develop an attraction to the “opposite-sex” parent. This gave rise to the infamous Oedipus complex, known for its incestuous implications for developing boys yet prominently regarded within psychology to this day. This belief is distinctly harmful, as it implies a universal stage of development wherein boys experience feelings of hatred for their fathers, seeing them as “competition” for their mother’s romantic or sexual affections. This “finding” of Freud’s is more accurately regarded as a deep flaw within the psychoanalyst’s own self-perception rooted in traumatic childhood experiences. On the other side of the coin, Freud claims that if young girls fixate in the phallic stage, the result is the lesser-known and equally untrue phenomenon of “penis-envy.” He claims, here, that developing girls experience anxiety in realizing that they don’t have male-pattern genitalia. This theory was proposed as a sort of explanation for certain behaviors in women, which speaks more to Freud’s imposition of inherent sexism and misunderstanding of women’s minds and emotions into the foundation of the psychological field and psychoanalytic practice. The latent period, which follows the phallic stage of Freud’s sexual development hypothesis, is known as a time that psychosexual desires halt from about six years old until the child reaches
puberty. After this, individuals enter the genital stage: another site of problematic research on Freud’s part that implicated seriously homophobic and heteronormative views. He insisted that the goal of reproductive development is to reach this stage, wherein people demonstrate strong sexual interest in others. Not only does this definition exclude those who don’t experience sexual desire, Freud also imposes the idea that if people develop “normally,” without fixation in any previous stage of reproductive evolution, they will be attracted to the opposite sex. Even Alfred Kinsey’s polarizing Kinsey Scale created an inclusive “X” marker to demonstrate no sexual feelings at all amidst the one-through-six scale between heterosexual and homosexual desires, as explained through Ryan Posey’s presentation in class.

Freud’s idea of the “Gold Standard” relies heavily on heterosexual dominance in society’s perception of sexual behaviors; he explicitly states that penis-in-vagina sexual intercourse is the goal to be strove toward in pursuit of “normal” development. Only if someone encountered a “problem” in the stages that Freud himself proposed would someone fail in their reproductive pursuits and become fixated in a stage that, he claims, wouldn’t be as gratifying as sex between two polarized sets of genitalia. This is to say that people can’t happily exist in the grey area beyond gender bounds of male and female, penetrative sex, or oral and anal desires which are deemed as troublesome fixations in this theory. Researchers following Freud quickly adopted these views as fact, and carried on inquiries based on inherently sexist, homophobic, exclusive, and heteronormative perceptions held by the established 20th century psychoanalyst.

The foundation of psychoanalysis has been critiqued and reconstructed through decades of unpacking established notions of gender and further, although minimal, research on female sexuality and reproduction. In our class discussion of *Queer Theory: A Graphic History*, authored and illustrated by Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele, Nathan Payne discussed the topic of sexual scripts as they pertain to contemporary society. He stated that these norms will continue to
dominate over society as we let them. Its seeming permanence only reinforces the idea that the socially endorsed, heterosexual, androcentric way of life is the only way to be, and that deviations from such behaviors cause “disruptions” in the way people think and feel. Nathan encouraged the notion that in order to combat the norms that quiet our uniqueness, we have to be our authentic selves and serve as first-hand representation of the intersecting identities that make us human. Audre Lorde and bell hooks are examples of two individuals who unapologetically lived their lives and demanded that the sexual scripts adhere to them, rather than the other way around. These individuals, and each person in our class this semester, are trailblazers in the application of queering the ways in which society, science, and psychology have molded conceptions of human nature.

Another scholar whose work in the queer domain challenged long-held views of gender and sexuality is the transdisciplinary French philosopher Michel Foucault. A revolutionary in the structuralist and post-structuralist eras, he authored eleven published books, including a few which critique the corruption within societal power dynamics, the prison system, and medical institutions. Mental Illness and Personality (later revised as Mental Illness and Psychology), the History of Madness, and many more of his works evaluated the ways in which people behave outside of the scope of acceptable norms. He was deeply versed in the disciplines of psychology, sociology, history, and philosophy, but he trained his focus to a sociological view of history. He was particularly curious in dealings of how ideas formed and prevailed throughout the past and how they relate to the present. This made him an incredibly important cultural figure, even being named a “Godfather of Queer Theory.” In his analysis of ancient Greek and Roman literature, he found that although homosexuality was prevalent in society, its acceptance depended heavily on power dynamics of class and gender. Only high-class men were celebrated and seen for their sexual endeavors, while female sexuality was almost entirely suppressed through literary works
and anyone poorer than an aristocrat was hardly visible at all. Foucault also cited many societal shifts ancient cultures, finding the most prominent one to be the shift from a community focus to personal. He advocated that we strive for this again, because with the demand for representation comes the responsibility to be our authentic selves. He argued in perhaps his most influential piece, the *History of Sexuality*, that rather than view sexuality as a repressed facet of human nature, members of society discuss individual experiences and liberate those parts of humankind for the betterment of the society as a whole.

This agreement between the freedom of individuals to live uninhibited and widespread social acceptance is a particularly impactful view in the realm of queer thought and representation, and many theorists following his work built upon the idea. In an article discussing the many contributions of Michel Foucault, Mark Kelly emphasizes the groundbreaking nature of the philosopher’s work within queer studies in conjunction with other theorists: “Foucault’s concerns with sexuality, bodies, and norms form a potent mix that has, via the work of Judith Butler in particular, been one of the main influences on contemporary feminist thought, as well as influential in diverse areas of the humanities and social sciences” (Kelly). Although an undeniably influential figure, Foucault’s work is incomplete without the voice and expertise of Judith Butler, his female counterpart in the “Godparenting” of Queer Theory.

Now a professor at the University of California in Berkeley, Butler illuminates issues of free speech, hate speech, and literacy. Her feminist activism circulates through over thousands of student essays, academic journals, textbooks, and other avenues of queered thought. Her inclusive, highly theoretical, and profound work in the intersectionally liberating field serves to dissect the role of gender and break apart the perceived sexual binary present in contemporary society. She has also made a massive impact in the conversations surrounding pornography as it relates to the feminist movement, shedding light on issues of choice and sex positivity and
negativity. Within her life’s work, Butler also tackled the long-silenced issues of homophobia in the armed forces, providing more visibility and acceptance among people hidden under policies of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Through all of the avenues that she has enlightened people about the intersections and validity of identity, the most prominent pieces she’s authored reside within the sphere of educational institutions. Butler maintains a strong academic influence across the globe for her contributions to the development and application of queer theory despite being criticized for her works being inaccessible for those outside the sphere of higher academia: “Even though Ms. Butler's work is highly theoretical -- one reviewer groused that her prose was so convoluted and opaque as to render her arguments nearly inaccessible -- she has achieved something approaching cult status outside the academy” (McMillen). Rightfully acknowledged and celebrated for her firsthand advancement of society through advocate work and feminist discourse, Butler is an incredibly important figure at the forefront of positive societal change. Vitally important to the discussion of queer theory is the voices and representation of queer persons of color. In Lizeth Zepeda’s essay “Queering the Archive: Transforming the Archival Process,” the author explains that the queering of archival information in academic and federal institutions is incomplete without the intersection of race and culture. As each figure presented in this essay--Judith Butler, Michael Foucault, and Sigmund Freud--are white, of American or European descent, it’s especially important to incorporate a critique of the exclusivity in widely regarded “foundational” queer theorists. To remove marginalized voices and thought from the conversation of intersectional visibility is to dismantle the concept as a whole. As Zepeda’s article explains, the erasure of queer of color communities in documented and studied history has severely impacted the perception of the queer umbrella because the underrepresentation of queer voices of color only further reinforces incomplete notions about queerdom by leaving out elemental pieces of the puzzle. She states that “queering the archive transforms the institution
with possibilities of inclusivity for social justice and the rewriting of histories. Traditionally, the archival institution has reaffirmed hegemonic power structures by erasing and ignoring histories of marginalized communities” (Zepeda). As Foucault strove to do in his sociological analysis of historical literature and policies, Zepeda underlines the importance of rewriting the previously biased narrative to accurately reflect history and demonstrate just how queer queer theory can be. By including voices from queer folks of all races, cultures, and religious denominations, the basis of queer theory can become truly and wholly intersectional.

The fields of social sciences, biology, and psychology have long been misled by personal biases of researchers behind them. Although regarded as a pioneer in sexual development research and psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud remained unconsciously blind to the unique reproductive development of every individual. The intersection between Freud’s ignorance to the reality of female sexuality and the imposition of his own mental experience into male sexual development provided a basis for psychology in matters of gender and sexuality, which has been consistently and accurately critiqued for decades following the end of his work in the field. Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, known as the “Godparents of Queer Theory,” are two of which individuals who refuted the grossly misleading theories of Freud and sincerely advanced the inclusive and dynamic discipline of queerdom. In conjunction with Lizeth Zepeda’s critique of the euro-centricity of early queer thought, the three theorists generate a complete, yet ever-evolving vision of anything and everything that queerness can be.

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This was my final for English 1A and looking back at the end of spring semester, it was a window into my experience returning to school after my first attempt at college almost 10 years ago. Professor Cuttler did an excellent job of exposing our class to a range of media that pointed at different ways of defining success and happiness, and the literature and TED talks she assigned helped me to create a lens to look more critically at my own life. Having recently returned to the college environment, it was easy to compare my happiness and success of my time as a student now versus 10 years ago; what I found was that even with a wife and a 2 year old at home, I am more successful and much happier now.

Our final paper was assigned as a topic of our own choosing based on the sources we had studied during the semester, bolstered by research. I looked to the comparison of my college experiences. I wanted to offer something to the younger version of myself, who attended college right out of high school, and struggled to the point of class failure and depression. This led me to the most challenging part of the essay, which was creating a sharp, concise thesis that I felt encapsulated the main cause of my tumultuous former college experience. I explored the causes of struggling students in my research, and not only was I able to craft my thesis but found parts of myself in the research.

The part I am most proud of is the fact that I gave voice to a part of myself that wasn’t completely enthused with college the first time around. Where I found myself formerly alienated by my adverse feelings about my college experiences of the past, it was empowering to come to a place in my research where I could highlight the fact that I wasn’t alone in my struggle and that there is a better way! My hope is that this message of connection is amplified through my essay to those who need to hear it.

A Real Education
-Bennett Grisley-

What does it mean to be a grown-up? The term is common enough, but the criteria is more elusive. Where an adult in the U.S. is defined as 18 years of age or older, a “grown-up” is defined as having the characteristics of an adult. This makes for a problematic definition. Are we looking at the characteristics of a 30 year old? An 80 year old? If adulthood starts at 18 and ends anywhere as late as the early 100s, what characteristics actually define someone who is grown-up? Is a grown-up someone with grey hair? Are you grown-up when you become a parent? How about when you have a full-time job? Not until you retire? This uncertainty may not seem like a serious issue, but the people who suffer the most from these undefined markers of maturity are those trying the hardest to grow-up: high school students and young adults, who are faced with a multitude of tough questions about their futures.
When it comes to facing these tough questions, young adults are sometimes ill-equipped. Anxiety and depression are rooted in our failure as a culture to support current generations in their difficulties in navigating life, but the place where we can have the most positive impact is in education. There is a plethora of educational offerings to support SAT testing for students to prepare for college, but when it comes to managing stress, we can see, by the rates of anxiety and depression in students, that there are major gaps. Introducing students to healthy methods for coping with stress will help to reverse the high rates of depression and anxiety in young people and offer them a healthy path to becoming a grown-up.

The Problem

The negative effects of poorly managed stress are prevalent in the world today. Regardless of social circles or age, we see depression and anxiety having a serious impact on the population as a whole. Gaydosh et. al., elaborate on these effects in their study of midlife crisis. Their research depicts the steady increase in depression of all tested groups as they aged from 20 to 40, furthermore, all groups tested had increasing trends in suicide, heavy alcohol consumption, and drug use (776). Stress is inevitable in life, and the need to cope with stress is a natural human response, but how we cope has serious long-term impacts. Grabbing a beer, smoking some pot, or even scrolling through Facebook may not seem like that big of a deal, but these are all outlets that tend toward dependency and decreased quality of life. There are better ways to cope, and we all deserve a better quality of life. Bringing the skills and strategies to create that life in the classroom mean more people start living better lives, and faster.

One of the places we see the stress of life having extreme effects on young adults is in the classroom. Patou Maskia Musumari, et al. cite a study about the occurrence of depression and anxiety in university students as compared to the general public. They found that the rates of
depression in students was 30% higher than the public on average, and, similarly, anxiety averaged 45% higher (1). With exams, tough classes and tight class schedules it is understandable that stress levels of students may be higher than the general public, but why is this elevated stress manifesting as depression and anxiety? This is best described by Dweck in her definition of a “fixed mindset”. She writes, “A fixed mindset makes challenges threatening for students (because they believe that their fixed ability may not be up to the task) and it makes mistakes and failures demoralizing (because they believe that such mistakes reflect badly on their level of fixed intelligence)” (1). For students, tough homework assignments and demanding classes are seen as threats rather than challenges, and grades below expectations are seen as failures rather than opportunities to better themselves. This perspective can become a clear source of depression and anxiety in students.

Academic stressors are not unique to the university level. Elisa Cargnelutti, et al., dig into the effect math can have on students in grades 2 and 3 (ages 7-10), and found that the beginnings of anxiety were present at that young age (755). The education system puts stressors on students, and without students having a healthy set of skills to deal with those stressors, the risk of inducing developmental issues and instilling negative patterns is high. Nelson and Tarabochia found evidence of this at the biological level: they write that “Reports indicated that during adolescence, the brain might be more responsive to glucocorticoids (cortisol) than adults. This is particularly troubling, as the presence of cortisol is believed to be a significant contributor to the negative consequences of the stress response” (6). The “stress response” referred to here is rooted in our physiology, meaning that the systems in our bodies will learn to handle stress based on our habitual responses, like lashing out at classmates or teacher, or shutting down and refusing to work or cooperate. When we place stress on students, but don’t give them a healthy way to
manage that stress, we are rewiring their brains and bodies to become severely depressed and anxious.

Dweck further zeros in on the idea that students’ beliefs about their own intelligence is what’s threatening (2). This detail is imperative because it shows that while workload may be a contributing factor to stress levels, it is a students’ personal beliefs that manifests as depression, anxiety, or both. This offers a view of the problem that is contrary to popular belief; it shows that while stress may be elevated by external factors like exams or homework, the internal makeup of an individual, and their personal strategies for handling the stress they induce, are what have hazardous implications. It is our relationship to these stressors that causes depression and anxiety, and this is something that we can change for the better.

**Effects & Management**

Our relationship to stress and adversity has huge effects on our performance and health. During his TED talk, Shawn Achor, an expert in the field of positive psychology, reveals that “your brain at positive is 31% more productive than at negative, neutral, or stressed”. We operate better as human beings when we think more positively - by a lot! Being able to bring ourselves into a positive state of mind makes facing adversity easier. To a student struggling with anxiety or depression about an exam or homework assignment, taking the emphasis off the stressor is not easy, but this simple practice of coming back to a positive frame of mind may be enough to prevent negative thoughts from snowballing into a depression.

Anxiety has just as profound of an impact. Elisa Cargnelutti, et al., reveal that there was a 27% difference in test performance between students who exhibited anxiety and those who did not. The students who were less anxious performed better (755). Again, these statistics point to the obvious fact that our potential to perform is put at a serious detriment by our inability to
handle adversity and stress. Our bodies are just as affected by our attitudes as our performance. Kaori Katoa, et al., confirm this in their study of aging, stating “Having a tendency toward positive attitudes, affect, and personality characteristics may be a key protective factor which may enhance emotion regulation and overall functioning in advanced age.” If we feel better, and are more positive, we are healthier. From our day to day performance, to the prospect of retaining health and function as we age, the implications for creating more positivity by educating everyone on stress management are profound.

**Education**

With such a glaring need for stress management education, where can it be learned? Public school systems seem ill-equipped for this type of curriculum. The emphasis on education resides with the very foundational view of the school in our culture; it is where we go to prepare for life. School is where we send our children, and where we ourselves went to learn basic skills that are supposed to help us perform in the world as we grow-up. The school system excels in certain aspects of preparing us for life. For example, the use of standardized testing has put massive emphasis on areas such as reading, writing, math and science, which has successfully helped propel students well into their later years of education (The Room 241 Team).

As we have seen, there is a large percentage of students who work their way through school at a serious disadvantage, plagued with preventable depression and anxiety. Nelson and Tarabochia cite a study conducted by the American Psychological Association:

1,018 teens were surveyed and reported that student stress levels increase during the school year and exceeds levels that are healthy. Teens reported that stress directly impacted healthy behaviors such as exercise and eating a healthy diet. Further, teens
reported feeling being overwhelmed, sad or depressed, and reported experiencing increased levels of fatigue. (932)

Not only are children left to themselves to find constructive ways to deal with stress, but the schools they are attending are accelerating their stress and with it, destructive coping tendencies.

As a culture, we all depend on the skills of future generations and their capacity to handle difficult situations. Doctors, nurses, and pilots, to name a few, all need extensive training to keep our communities healthy and safe, but does that education need to come at the cost of the individual’s well-being? Stress management and life skills should be a preface to any technical training, and should follow students through their education as demands on them increase, yet there is currently no infrastructure, no classes, or curriculum to answer this crisis. My solution is straightforward: curriculum on managing stress and adversity—essential skills taught alongside reading and writing in the classroom. Nelson and Tarabochia specify that it is the job of school counselors to provide these tools to students, and their proposed schedule and curriculum they lay out is an excellent example of what is possible in the field of educating students on stress management (27). This is not about reinventing the wheel; it’s about making these life skills important. The school system has the professionals and tools needed to provide this education. We need to shift our focus. Adopting the awareness that stress management, and the tools to handle adversity can have a lasting positive impact on all aspects of our lives.

Stress management programs have already been implemented effectively. Nikitha, et. al. found that the implementation of a stress management program gave students increased knowledge about healthy coping methods and outlets of support. The students’ levels of stress, avoidant coping behavior and total difficulty in school were significantly decreased (9). These students are proof that there are healthier means for dealing with stressors, and that it’s possible to avoid turning to potentially destructive coping methods like drugs or alcohol. When this
becomes commonplace, all the benefits of better performance and living healthier become the new normal, and we see this on all levels: “By implementing such programs in the schools, it is possible to have an impact on a range of children, not just those children who are reporting to clinics due to interfering psychopathology” (Pincus and Friedman 238). Everybody is affected by stress at some level, and the depression and anxiety in our culture is the product of our system only giving the skills to those seeking clinical help. If we are all to thrive, this needs to change. We have the power as a society to lift ourselves and future generations into a better state of living through stress management programs. The time for action is now.

Conclusion

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” ~Aristotle

Holistic education includes both skills to perform our duties and skills to help us manage our lives. The majority of our culture relies on the education of our public school systems, but they are not getting everything they need. We are not successfully educating our children if such a staggering number of them are addicted to damaging coping mechanisms like drugs or alcohol, or suffering from depression or anxiety. It is not enough to have high test scores and academic success. We need future generations who are resilient, motivated, optimistic and who can rise to new challenges in the face of adversity. It is our responsibility to help them get there.

Graduating from high school is a rite of passage into modern adulthood. Our public schools are where we need to teach all young people the skills to handle becoming a grown-up, whatever that looks like for them as individuals. There have been successful outcomes to teaching stress management to children, but this is only the beginning. If a healthier approach to stress is adopted on a large scale, the implications for every aspect of our modern society would be
overwhelmingly positive. There is a possible future that is free from depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol abuse, midlife crisis, and stressed work performance, and it starts with our relationship to stress. There is nothing wrong with the way we have grown-up, or the education we received, but now seeing the ways it could be improved makes us responsible, as stewards of our culture, to try our best to do so. It is more than just a courtesy to the future; it is the only way we survive.

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“Vampire Money” is my freshman year baby. Many hours were spent fitting each piece of this overarching story together. When I was first assigned this project to talk about any issue I wanted, I had several ideas, but I knew my heart was set on multi-level marketing (MLM). I already had some previous knowledge on the subject, but I didn’t know the exact data on how bad MLMs actually were. The research was done in bursts throughout a couple days, but the bulk of the essay was written in a single night. Starting the writing process is such a difficult ordeal. All throughout my life, very rarely have I ever completed an in-class essay; however, once the ideas start flowing, I cannot stop. It must be written. Every time I mention multi-level marketing, no one ever knows what I am talking about, yet it is a giant plague spreading across our nation. I always have to describe them as pyramid schemes--because that is what they are--just with a more legal sounding name. Through this project, I was able to interview two of my older sister’s friends that are in the MLM business. It was an interesting experience. My questions had to remain objective despite my strong feelings towards the topic, but it worked out great in the end. Remaining an objective interviewer allowed me to get such a genuine response from the both of them on how they feel about the business. These women are such sweet individuals, and they truly enjoy the product they sell; it is just the business model itself that is problematic in the long run. It really opened my eyes that the people behind these parasitic companies are not the workers but the mother brain based at the top. I am truly grateful this essay got the opportunity to be published as well in hopes that more people are informed about the dangers of MLMs--especially at West Valley. College students are at the most risk of being recruited by direct-sellers with promises of money and starting your own business. I did not want to see any of my classmates fall victim to these modern vampires.

Vampire Money
-Tina Hyunh-

Fun and colorful clothing brand—LuLaRoe—have gotten themselves into a $49 million lawsuit. Their supplier, Providence Industries, sued them for allegedly not paying their bills for 7 months, claiming that the founders—DeAnne and Mark Stidham—have been hiding company
assets in shell companies instead. The lawsuit identified 17 companies tied to their name used to buy millions of dollars in goods in a supposed scheme to “hinder, delay, and defraud the creditors” (Peterson). Other debts the lawsuit claimed LuLaRoe owed were $1 million to UPS and $3.1 million to other manufacturers. Reporter Hayley Peterson has followed the case diligently since it was first introduced. She wrote, “The suit claims Mark Stidham said on September 7, 2018: ‘Look guys, I am not going to pay you guys a f****ing dime unless a judge orders me to pay it, and DeAnne and I will take our two to three hundred million dollars to the Bahamas, and f*** everything’” (Peterson). LuLaRoe has been in the decline for several months. In June, 2018, the company laid off 127 workers from one of their two distribution centers. Unrelated to that incident, hundreds of former-workers who left the company of their own volition have been waiting for months on checks worth thousands of dollars for returned inventory. It is repugnant they hid money from the company to pay for their luxurious lifestyle rather than pay what they owe to their workers. They already make their clothing at a cheaper cost by producing them offshore; however, then they don’t bother to pay them at all for their
work. This mom-blog-ready, leggings company has had several run-ins with the law before which is nothing unusual for multi-level marketing.

Multi-level marketing companies (MLMs) are companies that have a non-salaried workforce that pay the company for inventory to sell the product directly to their community. These workers go by various names: distributors, associates, representatives, consultants, or other terms. Often, distributors have to pay a membership fee every year but get different discounts on the products based on the bulk of their order (Dionida). The devil comes in many names: multi-level marketing, network marketing, party plan, and direct selling. Some may even call them pyramid schemes. But that is where the controversy begins. There are so many synonyms for the same word in the realm of MLMs; it is very confusing. Perhaps it was done on purpose. MLMs will always deny being pyramid schemes, not even be labeled Ponzi schemes—which are, again, the same thing! Being as large and far reaching in their influence as they are, MLMs have the support of those within its world. The selling point of multi-level marketing is the opportunity to operate your own business within the comfort of your own home. There are many incentives MLMs offer their distributors. They give their distributors discounts from 20-50% off normal price, and the more inventory they buy in bulk, the less it will cost (Dionida). This allows the seller to gain a profit off of sales. The more the seller buys, the more points they get to redeem free items (Ikemoto). The company will also send little gifts every so often as a nice gesture such as gift cards, motivational apparel, and rare products. There is no rent to deal with. Since it is a legal business, everything bought or used can be tax-deductible such as a new camera for advertising, the receipt from business related dinners, and even the square footage of your home office (Dionida). MLMs tend to promote a happy and healthy lifestyle that resonates with many of its workers with motivational quotes as part of their advertising and the types of
products they provide like essential oils and tea. Some companies like SeneGence will certify their associates as professional makeup artists (Dionida). In their eyes, MLMs are empowering women who would not have had the opportunity beforehand. Capitalism defines America, so it makes sense for companies to chase profit. Companies are now outsourcing their production and factories to third world countries for cheap labor. Unemployment is at an all time low, and many people in America want the government to focus on improving our country instead of giving work to other countries. Therefore, it is to no surprise that people have turned to MLMs in their time of need. “In 2017, 18.6 million people were involved in direct selling in the United States, which is the world's largest direct selling market” (Direct Selling in the United States: 2017 Facts and Data). Here is a growing concern on the state of the workforce in America. This is something that affects our country. Of the Americans involved in direct selling, 85% of them are Caucasian, so this is not a matter of companies taking advantage of minorities (Direct Selling in the United States: 2017 Facts and Data). Multi-level marketing companies are influencing the majority population in America. “There is direct selling activity in every U.S. territory and state with Texas, California, New York, Florida, and Illinois as top five” (Direct Selling in the United
States: 2017 Facts and Data). Your coworker may be a distributor, maybe even your next-door neighbor, and you may be next. 

During my research, I had the opportunity to interview two current distributors for two different MLMs: Rhia Dionida from the beauty brand, SeneGence, and Valarie Ikemoto from an essential oils company named dōTerra. Dionida was first introduced to her company by a cousin that had given her a tube of Lipsense, SeneGence’s lipstick brand. Ikemoto was recommended dōTerra through a friend that worked for a similar essential oils company called Young Living. Although both come from similar backgrounds, Dionida thinks of her business as something fun to do on the side, while Ikemoto stated that she does not believe in MLMs as a business model despite being a part of one herself. Dionida is a mother of four, so every dollar counts. She has worked with the Berryessa School District for 17 years helping children with special needs and autism. Ikemoto also happens to be a mother and social worker for both a school and hospital. These women aren’t greedy, heartless bastards. They work out of necessity and for a taste of girl power. That is what these MLMs advertise—money and girl power. One is a sin and one is a dream. Just one signature and you too can become a garishly patterned, pH-balanced, boss babe with a hint of lavender. The business structure and beliefs of multi-level marketing companies mimic the ways in which a cult function, ultimately dragging down unsuspecting women and the future of conscious capitalism in the mud.

MLMs are a cult in the fact that they target vulnerable people in general, not just women. They target recently graduated students or those still in college that are struggling with finding their purpose in life. According to the Direct Selling Association (DSA) themselves, the highest percentage of their workforce are millennials—the butt of student debt jokes and the apparent downfall of humanity. The association claims “direct selling provides flexible, entrepreneurial
opportunities to all ages” right above this piece of data (Direct Selling in the United States: 2017 Facts and Data). In a case study done by Dr. Jon M. Taylor from the Consumer Awareness Institute, he found that:

The vast majority of commissions paid by MLM companies go to a tiny percentage of TOPPs (top-of-the-pyramid promoters) at the expense of a revolving door of recruits, 99% of whom lose money. This is after subtracting purchases they must make to qualify for commissions and advancement in the scheme, to say nothing of minimal operating expenses for conducting an aggressive recruitment campaign – which (based on the compensation plans) is essential to get into the profit column. (Taylor)

It is quite ironic that one debt shall just lead to another. In the context of millennials, Dr. Taylor is essentially saying that these recruits that have joined in the pursuit of money have entered a company that will most likely either send them spiraling further into debt or earn less than what a minimum wage job would pay. It is unfortunate that those from this group are lured by the idea of earning money that is not dependent on the country’s economy, and once they fail to turn a profit, the blame is shifted on them for quitting or not having enough character. Other targets include housewives, stay-at-home dads, and army wives that have too much time on their hands or the need for extra income. Research scholar, Richa Sethi found that “Because a high registration fee sends up a red flag to both regulators and prospects, registration fees are typically low. Even organizations that are ethically questionable tend to have low registration fees. [MLMs] try to get their money through other means” (Sethi). Women consumers are where the money is, so MLMs typically sell products that appeal to the female market. “Women drive 70-80% of all consumer purchasing, through a combination of their buying power and influence. Influence means that even when a woman isn’t paying for something herself, she is often the
influence or veto vote behind someone else’s purchase” (Brennen). Even though the majority of women have now joined the workforce, women still mainly control the use of credit cards in the family, thereby controlling the purchases. Therefore, MLMs want to create products that appeal to the typical female buyer, which is why the top categories of products submitted by the Direct Selling Association are wellness, services, home and family care/durables, beauty and personal
care, clothing and accessories, and leisure/educational (Direct Selling in the United States: 2017 Facts and Data). As a result, women are a large percentage of their following and consumer base.

The business model of MLMs is very similar to how feudalism worked. The king, or CEO, at the top makes all the money. The noblemen underneath the king are not exempt from the tax but can make more money themselves depending on how many peasants were under them to send money up the food chain. During his research on multi-level marketing for the London School of Economics, Detlev Krige found that “the agents who 'work' to recruit new members position themselves in this context as financial entrepreneurs and brokers who embody a range of seemingly contradictory discourses, drawing on discourses of 'empowerment', 'serf-help', 'entrepreneurship' and 'religiously sanctioned wealth and prosperity' in the course of their risk taking in the field of finance” (Krige). In my interview with Rhia Dionida, she informed me of two very important terms in the business: “upline” and “downline.” Upline are associates above your status in the company, while downline are associates that have joined under your name. Many of the women involved in MLMs do not make it that far up the hierarchy. Women like Ikemoto only have 3 to 5 orders at a time even with a Facebook page, a few regulars, and the support of friends. Although it is possible for distributors to earn commissions off of recruits who signed under them, they are also sabotaging their own business at the same time by creating a rival that will sell the same product within the same neighborhood. It is like the workers run their own economy within the realm of MLMs. “Failure and loss rates for MLMs are not comparable with legitimate small businesses, which have been found to be profitable for 39% over the lifetime of the business; whereas less than 1% of MLM participants profit.” (Taylor). Most of the people that are upline are the more intense distributors that are fully invested in this career as a full-time job. Upline is living the dream—self-titled, independent boss babes. They
have the confidence to walk up to people and advertise their product. They are given the title “Princess” or “Duchess” depending on how many downline are under them, and to reward their accomplishments for the company, they are given whatever car they wish as a company car (Dionida). Or are they really? In order to keep this high status within the company, upline must reach a quota of a certain amount of products every month. Therefore, if their business hit a drought period, the upline would have to pay out of their own pocket to buy the necessary inventory off of the company to keep both their nobility and transportation. “Recent efforts by the FTC (Federal Trade Commission) to get business opportunity sellers to disclose average earnings has been met with fierce resistance from MLMs and their primary lobby, the DSA…This by itself should be a red flag signaling something very wrong with MLM as an industry and/or as a fundamental business model” (Taylor). If working in direct sales is truly as profitable as they advertise to their consumers, they would willingly share the statistics and brag about their accomplishments. The fact that MLMs continually go through great lengths lobbying the FTC in attempt to hide this information makes the living situation of associates in MLMs extremely sketchy. “If you hope to bring in any income, then LuLaRoe isn’t a side business at all…Consultants manage their own inventory, marketing, invoicing, and shipping. At my volume, it is a more than a full-time job” (Cunha). These women in upline are so hard-working and desperate to make a sale that the Internet has had enough of being constantly bartered with products and have derogatively named them, excuse my language, Hunbots—due to their excessive use of their pronoun, “Hun.” They call everyone “Hun” to create a warm, motherly vibe that allows them to easily start a casual conversation whether it be in real life, Facebook, or Instagram. After they have lured their customer in, they start the sales pitch.
In their enthusiasm to make a sale, the Hunbots have created their own emoji-filled language to communicate with consumers. An emoji speaks a thousand words. Even Forbes has created an article specifically listing out ways on how to successfully utilize emojis in an advertising campaign (Forbes Agency Council). Some MLMs have what they call “unicorn items” that are limited runs of a product. A regular consumer could buy it, but another distributor could buy it off the fellow associate to sell for double the price after the initial run is gone. These MLMs are smart and resilient. They have boot camp for members have the upline hold gatherings with downline in order to learn about their new product to learn how to successfully advertise the product. They even hold giant conventions for distributors from all over the world to attend. As informed by Dionida, these conventions are typically held at luxurious locations such as Costa Rica.
Associates for MLMs often hold strong beliefs in their products. Admittedly, there are some benefits to using certain MLM products. As a social worker, Ikemoto wanted to research the benefits of aromatherapy for her clients. The essential oils dōTerra sold were too expensive, so she joined for the employee discount. Ikemoto was smart and researched her brand and the actual uses of essential oils before joining the company. However, some distributors take it into the realm of pseudo-science. According to Rachel Monroe’s in-depth research on the rise of essential oils companies, “Representatives of both doTerra and Young Living like to highlight the medical benefits of their products” (MONROE). However, the Food and Drug Association (FDA) prevents companies from making unfounded medical claims, so “they get around this by relying on abstract words like ‘vitality’ and ‘balance,’ and by talking in vague terms about general body systems or mild issues that don't rise to the level of disease. Young Living and doTerra have attorneys on staff to insure that product descriptions are within legal bounds” (MONROE). And people fall for it all the time. In 2014, the FDA wrote a strongly worded letter to dōTerra for claiming attributes fighting against cancer, brain injury, autism, Alzheimer's disease, and ADHD (MONROE). Within the letter, “The agency cited a tweet by a doTerra consultant using the handle Mrs. Skinny Medic that listed ‘oils that could help prevent your contracting the Ebola virus,’ and a Pinterest post by Wellness Empress that recommended peppermint oil for asthma, autism, bacterial infections, and brain injury” (MONROE). It does not help that due to the organic food craze, many moms want everything they give and surround their baby with to be natural. It is a recent trend for moms to share on Facebook and Instagram different ways in which essential oils can be used in daily life such as medicine or bug spray. Often, the pictures include bottles of the oil carelessly within reach of children. Tamara Reese, a consultant on Maternal and Child Health for the Washington Post stated “Essential oils should
never be given orally to infants or children. The majority of cases of essential oil poisoning involve accidents or incorrect dosing with young children, often between 1 and 3 years of age” (Reese). Although they may not look like it in their fancy packaging, essential oils are medicine, so parents have to treat it cautiously as such. The FDA does not regulate essential oils. For example, eucalyptus oil is a pretty common item for asthma and bronchitis, but it is unsafe for children to consume (“Eucalyptus”). It was first registered as an insecticide in the U.S. after all. Many of these “health-conscious” mothers like to diffuse essential oils; however, this is a disaster in the making since they could bring about sudden, unknown allergies or react badly in combination with prescription medicine, for “People who are allergic to eucalyptus oil might also be allergic to tea tree oil or other essential oils” (Reese; “Eucalyptus”). Just Google whether essential oils are safe for babies, and you will find thousands of mom blogs listing the best essential oil options for their newborns. To these mothers, oils can apparently cure anything with just the right ingredient. Happen to have a life-threatening illness? There is an oil for that. During her research, Monroe was able to interview David Hill—the chief medical officer of dōTerra. She wrote, “But the conclusions reached by scientists are beside the point for many consumers. ‘I'll use my wife as an example,’ Hill said. ‘She's not going to be able to tell you the first thing about chemistry. Put a research paper in front of her—zero interest. And that's probably how most people are. What's real to them is the experience they're having.’” (MONROE). Women have a natural affinity with one another. It shows in our school lives in the form of soccer moms, on the Internet through mom groups, and even in our media with shows such as the Real Housewives of whatever city is next. “Women around the world are more similar than they are different. They are united by their brain structures, hormone levels and biological role in birthing the human race. They are also united by their roles as caregivers, relationship builders and
communicators” (Brennen). MLMs serve as their own close-knit community where they can forget about outside responsibilities and just have fun as a pseudo-family. They share and talk about their products not unlike a book club. For many women such as Dionida, they are not very high up in the company and work full-time at a different job, so after a whole day of working, cooking for their family, and running a business, who wouldn’t take these company outings as an excuse to socialize and drink? MLMs capitalize on this natural behavior and expect loyalty. The workers can never leave. MLMs give so much to their lovely serfs; payment and continued loyalty is obviously to be expected. One particular MLM took loyalty to a whole other level. In 2003, Keith Raniere co-founded the MLM—NXIVM—that held personal and professional seminars in Albany, New York. Raniere taught an unconventional curriculum on how men had a need for polygamy while women must be monogamous. This eventually lead to the creation of the secret sex cult within the company—DOS—where he was the only male member. Sex trafficking, forced labor, and the physical branding of his “slaves” went on for 2 years until one DOS “slave” was able to escape and unravel his schemes ("Sex slaver' bust Fugitive NY cult
leader branded gals: cops”). This particular MLM has gone from being cult-like to becoming an actual cult.

In essence, MLMs are the bad children in the great orphanage that is capitalism. Some grow up to do great things. Some grow into noseless, power hungry tyrants. Not all MLMs are pyramid schemes. That’s racist...or rather business-ist. However, all MLMs are inherently bad for the future of capitalism. It is not a sustainable business model. LuLaRoe—the $2.3 billion legging empire—is falling apart at the seams. Only those at the top make big money. Once the CEOs at the top of LuLaRoe spent all the money the sellers sent up on funding their luxurious lifestyle, there was no money left in the company because all the money went to the top and they spent it all. Sellers heard wind of the situation and finally left the company in droves, leading to the current decline of LuLaRoe. Peterson reported, “Some who left say they've been waiting months for refund checks. ‘We are barely scraping by,’ said former LuLaRoe seller Merilisse Beyelia. She claims LuLaRoe owes her $7,000 and that she's struggling to afford diapers for her disabled children” (Peterson). John Mackey, Co-CEO of Whole Foods Market, co-wrote a book with Raj Sisodia about their idea of conscious capitalism. In their conscious capitalism credo, Mackey and Sisodia stated, “We believe that business is good because it creates value, it is ethical because it is based on voluntary exchange, it is noble because it can elevate our existence, and it is heroic because it lifts people out of poverty and creates prosperity” (Mackey). MLMs are the antichrist of this belief system. MLMs create poverty rather than the prosperity they promise. The CEOs of LuLaRoe took the money and ran. Some may think that the idea of conscious capitalism is wishful thinking and that it is impossible to achieve. Humanity has disappointed us time and time again. Companies would never place profit behind anything else.
Conscious capitalism is faith in the goodness of humanity. The people are right, it may never happen; however, it never hurts to strive towards a goal.

Consumer-rights advocate, Robert Fitzpatrick has researched multi-level marketing since the 1980s when he first joined a direct-sales model business. Since experiencing the “delusional behavior”—as he calls it—firsthand, he continues to lead the effort against MLMs and has served as an expert in the subject for several federal organizations, such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) (“Robert Fitzpatrick”). He stated:

They have bought a story…It’s a beautiful story, a self-indulgent story, a miraculous story—that in 2017, with all its job insecurity, there is, in America, an alternative, and that alternative is not run by Wall Street or the government. It’s a kind of mass hoax. It’s a psychological sale first, then an economical sale, and the two work together. The scheme tells you that the cause of the failure is not the system, but you: that you didn’t work hard enough at it. (Cunha)

This is not an advocacy for feminism. That is an entirely different war to be fought. This is a public service announcement on the safety hazard that is multi-level marketing. However, before MLMs can be brought to justice, pyramid schemes must first take the fall, for the two go hand-in-hand. That is difficult in and of itself because there is no legal definition for what a pyramid scheme is: “No national law or regulation offers a definition. When the FTC alleges a pyramid scheme, it cites a law against ‘unfair or deceptive’ practices. It has brought successful cases against pyramids, but there is ample debate over the implications of those rulings (and some rulings conflict with individual states' definitions)” ("Pharaonic creations; Multi-level marketing in America"). The government needs to reform their legal jargon to define exactly what a pyramid scheme in order for both the FTC and court to do their job accurately. The main
difference between a legal MLM and a pyramid scheme is whether the product is being sold to real consumers, or if the profit of the company is being made off of the distributors joining the scene and buying bulk of the product to sell to make a meager amount of commission off of it. The court of law cannot shoot down these gilded towers without the proper language fully locked and loaded.

Works Cited


---. Summer sale Instagram post. Jpg file.

---. Telephone interview. 2 Dec. 2018.


I grew up in San Jose. I know it like the back of my hand, but I'd argue that it knows me even better. It was, at a point in time, the perimeter of my little world; a play pin that I had no problem staying in all day. It watched me learn how to ride a bike down its streets, and drive down them 10 years later. It’s listened to me slander its name, but come to its defense if anyone else dare to. When I’ve cried in my car in the middle of the night, the only person on the road, it has been just the two of us with nowhere important to go. The windows of its buildings have offered me a mirror to take one last look at myself before my job interviews, and the grass of its parks has been my host on many of my days off.

Cities are skeletons and those who reside in them are their flesh. We all develop an intimate relationship with where we live and the way we utilize the spaces around us whether we’re conscious of it or not. When the city around us begins to gentrify, this relationship is rattled: People are displaced due to rent increases, mom-and-pop businesses are forced to close, or the city just becomes drastically different from the one you’ve gotten to know so well that you barely even recognize it. In this research essay, I analyze problems like these that rise when cities gentrify. More specifically, I look at the role artists play in the process. I was inspired to write about this topic because like many cities across the world, mine is gentrifying. I’d like the essay to empower artists to preserve the culture where they’re from and bring awareness to the issue.

The Art of Gentrification
-Molly Wright-

On a cold, drizzly October day, I walked into Wall of Sound, a record store on a corner in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood. This part of Seattle is full of character. From local indie bookstores, local coffee shops, video stores, and rainbow-colored crosswalks, Capitol Hill is undeniably artistic. It makes you feel like you're in a time warp, living in the early 2000's. Wall of Sound had just opened for the day; no one but me, my boyfriend, the 60-something year old worker, and the records were there. After spending an ample amount of time poking around, we made our way to the front with our new treasures. We mentioned to the soft spoken worker that we were from the Bay Area, and suddenly we found ourselves on the topic of gentrification. The worker, a Seattle native, told us stories of how the city used to be: the jazz night club scene; the grunge scene in the 90's; the hardcore punk scene in between -- he had been there through it all. He said at one point in the late 1970's, he was able to rent a beautiful 2,000 square foot loft for only a few hundred dollars a month. After the three of us rattled off a list of other places in the country that are also facing the problem of gentrification, the worker asked us a rhetorical
question in the most genuinely concerned way: “The dancers, the artists, the musicians, where are they all supposed to go?” As we stepped outside back onto the wet sidewalk, we were confronted by two enormous, modern looking apartment buildings being built across the street – literally facing the process of gentrification.

Capitol Hill, Seattle

Gentrification isn't a new problem, however. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, New York City was a place where artists, usually on lower incomes, could actually get by because housing was affordable. With so many artists residing in New York City at this time, it became a colorful place to be, essentially making it a playground for more affluent groups. The influx of newcomers ultimately raised the cost of living, changed the city’s culture, and displaced artists as well as prompted other artists to voluntarily leave as a response to the changes. A more recent version of this narrative is how people who worked in Manhattan, but couldn't afford to live
there, moved to Brooklyn because the rent was cheaper. This resulted in Brooklyn's average rent to skyrocket to nearly $3,000 per month. Ironically enough, Brooklyn's DUMBO neighborhood was named “by a group of artists hoping to deter development” (Iversen par. 3). But some people actually blame artists for the changes in a neighborhood. Take the ongoing conflict in Boyle Heights, a Latinx neighborhood in East Los Angeles, for example. Members of the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (BHAAAD) reject the openings of art galleries in their neighborhood because the galleries are essentially a symptom of Boyle Heights being stripped of its culture and the displacement of its long-time residents. This poses a question: What role do artists and their work play in the process of gentrification?

The term “artwashing” refers to “the process whereby a company buys advertising space within a gallery to cover up negative public image. But now accusations of artwashing are reaching beyond corporate sponsorship to apply to individual artists in local communities (Francis par. 4). The Boyle Heights community refuses to let their neighborhood be artwashed and eventually become gentrified; they have gone to great lengths to preserve the rich culture that has existed there for decades. Radical activists, such as members of Defend Boyle Heights, an anti-gentrification organization, aren't shy; they have made their feelings clear through consistently protesting. Defend Boyle Heights made a statement earlier this year spelling out what they want art galleries to do: “Pick up your shit and get the fuck out of our neighborhoods” (Ahn par. 6). The community's frustration is understandable and is probably representative of feelings long-time residents of other rapidly gentrifying cities have. However, a valid question to ask in response to this is the same question the Wall of Sound worker asked me in Seattle: Where are the artists supposed to go? The main reason Boyle Heights became overrun with art galleries is because artists were displaced from their own neighborhood, the Arts District in Los Angeles.
In the Arts District, “rents rose 140 percent in parts of the neighborhood in the first 14 years of the new millennium” (Nazaryan par. 17). This means that artists from the Arts District were now priced out of a neighborhood that they contributed to creating, similar to what happened in 1970’s New York. In need of a new place to call theirs, they ended up in Boyle Heights. While this doesn’t justify changing the culture in another neighborhood, it does expose the thorny cycle of gentrification: One group gets displaced and must relocate, potentially displacing another group already living in the place of their relocation.

A contributing factor to this problem is artists who move into a neighborhood “don't think of themselves as gentrifiers so much as they think of themselves as pioneers of a 'new community'” (Billard par. 5) While a community may be new to them, it's far from it for people who have lived there for practically their whole lives, and this is what is crucial for artists and other groups who are relocating to understand. Although, conflict isn't always between natives and transplants, sometimes the people involved are only separated by a bridge.

The Castro District, San Francisco, California
A copyright protected mural was created in 2015 by Precita Eyes, a local arts organization in San Francisco's Mission District. “One side was created by Mission youth and read 'Our culture is not for sale,' while the other [part] showed skeletons, skulls, and other references to Dia de Los Muertos” (Waxmann par. 5). The conflict began when an owner of the building “said that he was not a fan of the mural, which he considered too 'dark’” (Waxmann par. 6). The owner took it upon himself to commission East Bay artists to put a new mural in its place and chalked it up to part of the process of the renovations his new restaurant in the building was undergoing. He said he and his business partner wanted to “replace the mural with something more brighter in colors. With a nicer message. I think the mural was outdated and as owners we just wanted to give a change to the building” (Waxmann par. 9). This expresses blatant disregard of both Mexican culture and the efforts of Precita Eyes on the owner's part, while also revealing other common themes in gentrification: misunderstanding and selfishness. The owner of the building failed to recognize that the original mural depicting skeletons and skulls was not “dark.” He misinterpreted it that way. In fact, Dia de los Muertos is a day that celebrates the lives of the deceased; skeletons and skulls are usually shown dancing and smiling, symbolizing the belief in Mexican culture that the joys we experience while we are alive still continue even after death. The owner was only thinking about himself and his business in this equation, not the community as a whole. Much like the way people who move into a new neighborhood don't see themselves as the problem because they continue to do the things that have worked for them in the past without taking into consideration the new community they are a part of. Gentrification resistance isn't derived from a Starbucks simply popping up in place of a locally owned restaurant or a mural being taken down, but rather the message in which those actions send: Your family owned
restaurant doesn't matter as much as the money Starbucks brings in; your art and its meaning doesn't matter.

One possible solution to the artwashing of communities is inclusivity. If artists, displaced or not, acknowledge their role in being possible indirect contributors of gentrification, they can also ensure that they reverse the effects by including the neighborhood in their work and loving the neighborhood for what it is, not what it could be or what they want it to be. Perhaps the best example of this so far is a gallery in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn called HOUSING. The gallery's “goal is to de-gentrify the gallery space and foster support for local, long-standing businesses in the neighborhood” (Billard par. 7). Creative director of HOUSING, Eileen Skyers, articulates both the problem and solution for the relationship between art and gentrification quite well: “artwashing is a part of this whole... anxiety that demographic changes in a neighborhood cue an imminent hike in rent and displacement—a process that disproportionately affects women of color. Remaining conscious of this, and participating in its undoing in a small way, is the least that art spaces can do. We're not here to engage in 'urban renewal', or promote narrow notions of 'community.' We live here, and we are in love with the neighborhood exactly as it is. While we don't know how much we can truly counter some of these insurmountable issues, we still want to do our part: raising attention, exhibiting works that might resonate with people in the neighborhood, and urging others to support local businesses that have operated in the area well before it was 'up and coming.'" (Billard, par. 8).
Skyers adds, “Art is, in many cases, much better at exposing society's intricacies and contradictions than it is at intervening or mitigating them” (Billard par. 9). This exposes another opportunity that artists can take to resist gentrification – bringing awareness to the problem through their art. Society is essentially the artist's captive audience. Producing art and displaying it in the public eye is an attention getter. This way, people don't have to be passionate about or even care about an issue at all, but they are still confronted by it in the form of street art. This idea can enter murky waters because it can be seen as projecting unwanted views onto others. However, an issue as devastating as gentrification involves the people living in a gentrified area regardless of if they notice it or not. Art has the ability to comment on everyday life, and what better way to comment on everyday life than to make a movie about it?
Blindspotting was released earlier this year. This comedy-drama film written and produced by its main characters explores racism, cultural appropriation, police brutality, and gentrification against the backdrop of Oakland, California. The main characters are two Bay Area natives -- best friends and movers, Miles and Collin. One day on the job, they arrive at an old house to remove the last of the furniture and things that once lived there along with the family that moved out. When they pull up to the run down house, they see a perky, dressed up real estate agent standing on the porch and talking on the phone. Her voice is upbeat, and she is excited, talking about plans to “gut” the house. Next Miles and Collin enter the home where they look at left behind pictures of the family who used to live there, showing them gathered together for an event. This scene truly captures one of the root issues of gentrification: the real estate agent sees the house as merely a profit -- an opportunity to build a new, modernized home -- but doesn't think about the family that once lived there or the memories that were made in it. The movie in its entirety sheds light on the gentrification of Oakland while also bringing the many effects -- good and bad -- of a changed neighborhood to the forefront.

*First They Came for the Indigenous, Oakland, CA*
Another gallery in Bed-Stuy Brooklyn has also incorporated the conversation of gentrification into the artwork it showcases. Richard Beavers Gallery “shows and collects artists whose work depicts urban life and the rich culture of New York's long standing neighborhoods while also addressing the numerous political and social issues present in these communities today” (Billard par. 11). Through art, this gallery brings awareness to pending issues in their community. Active resistance can also be seen at a community center in New York. Mayday Space houses activist art group Mi Casa No Es Su Casa, who resists gentrification through the creation of neon signs. Some say: “Gentrification is the New Colonialism”, “No Eviction Zone”, “No Me Desplaces”, “Not For Sale”, “Decolonize The Hood” and “3 Generation Household.” “The group seeks to raise awareness about the struggles of those who are vulnerable to the forces of gentrification and displacement, and the onslaught of discrimination and harassment that often comes along with it” (Billard par. 12).

The role that artists play in the process of gentrification is rather complex. With tensions rising in many neighborhoods facing the issue of displacement, it's only natural that people look for someone to blame, which at times ends up being artists. But artists are subject to the same displacement; trying to stay afloat while being stifled by the economic forces of capitalism.

When you're driving, it's very rare that someone will let you merge lanes right off the bat without difficulty. But when you make eye contact with the other driver, something in them softens; they realize you're a person, not just a car. Perhaps this could also be true with large corporations and developers looking to make money by building new apartments and buying up local businesses just to turn them into a commercial space for profit. Maybe if they had a front row seat to the displacement their doings cause -- if they saw the people they're displacing as
people and not just a statistic in some article, things would begin to change. But until then, it looks like it's up to groups like artists.

“Many small people in many small places do many small things that can alter the face of the world.” Berlin, Germany
Works Cited


Reading the story "Two Kinds," from Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club really resonated to my personal Asian roots and instantly let me know that this is something I wanted to write about. Oftentimes, the hardest part of writing an essay is being able to show your own, unique voice through a paper that is supposed to be a monotonous literary analysis. However, trying to find any connection from the story to your own life is a method I found fairly successful to implement my voice into the essay. Figuring out ways and eventually producing my voice in the essay is what I am most proud of, and it is a component that amplifies writing that much more.

Crazy Smart Asians
-Ken Lee-

“Kenny! Hurry! You’re going to be late for your abacus class!”

Abacus class is the place where I honed the skill of using a mathematical tool invented in 2500 B.C in ancient Mesopotamia and the place my parents insisted was necessary to my success, a notion I vehemently objected to at the time. The same could be said for piano, Kung Fu, swimming, and a whole catalog of other lessons. Each class was just another box on a long list of monotonous classes that were deemed to be a vital part of any successful career. At first, I put up with each of these classes until I slowly quit them one by one: Kung Fu in sixth grade, swimming in eighth grade, and piano in eleventh grade. My parents slowly surrendered in trying to convince me to take anymore lessons. Similarly, Amy Tan, in her short story “Two Kinds” from her novel The Joy Luck Club, narrates her experience in dealing with the same pressure and expectations of an Asian household which ultimately results in her feeling excluded from her family and culture. Although communities throughout the world are vastly different in many intricate ways, the essence and role of parenting remains the same: parents, based on their past experiences, push their children to the most of their capabilities and as a result, are mistaken for wanting to boast of their children rather than helping their children achieve their dreams.

The beginning of an education starts with exploring and discovering one’s strengths and weaknesses. Similar to how a child samples different flavors of ice cream to determine their favorite, education develops in the same way; however, education is more strenuous and difficult
than simply tasting different flavors of ice cream which ties back to how children regularly argue with their parents about the amount of activities they are forced to explore. In Tan’s short story, she recounts her mother thinking she “could be a Chinese Shirley Temple” and subsequently took her to a beauty training school in hopes of turning her into a prodigy. This example of Shirley Temple is meant to relate to Jing-Mei’s own life because as a child, Shirley Temple was pushed and encouraged by her mother to develop her singing and acting talent. Jing-Mei’s mother tries to recreate this similar relationship through Jing-Mei’s talent in piano but Jing-Mei does not respond the same way that Temple does. Furthermore, parents, especially in Asian cultures, compare children to such high standards in order to encourage them and reaffirm the idea that anything is possible. However, in most cases, this has a negative effect on the children who live in the moment rather than setting long term goals — hard work and meaningful accomplishments are buried by instant pleasures such as playing video games and watching television. Jing-Mei expresses this exact sentiment which creates the initial rift between her and her mother. While dreaming of her future, Jing-Mei states, “In all of my imaginings, I was filled with a sense that I would soon become perfect” (336). The word “perfect” is italicized in order to emphasize the height of Jing-Mei’s expectations. “Perfect” is an impossible quality to attain, which highlights Jing-Mei’s struggle with her own expectations and her mother’s expectations. This short-sighted expectation coupled with impatience is ultimately the downfall of most children. Children do not perceive the views of their parents are and eventually turn on their parents believing that they know more about success than their parents do.

As a result of the pressures a parent puts on their child, the child often develops a rebellious side because children give up much faster than they can actually be motivated. Parents know better, however, and will continuously push their children until their full potential is brought out. Jing-Mei believes that the only reason her mother pushes her so hard is so she can
brag and display her “successful” daughter on a silver platter like a trophy. Jing-Mei only hears the literal gloating words of her mother, “It’s like you can’t stop this natural talent,” (340) and consequently wants “to put a stop to her foolish pride” (340). Furthermore, Jing-Mei describes her pent up anger at her mother when Jing-Mei tries to argue against playing piano, “Why don’t you like the way I am? I’m not a genius! I can’t play the piano” (339). These several lines of dialogue clearly depict the impasse between mother and daughter resulting in Jing-Mei feeling excluded from her family and culture. However, this was not her mother’s intended purpose: “[I] only ask you be your best. For you sake. You think I want you be genius? Hnnh! What for!” (339). Through the short sentence structure, exclamation marks, and the onomatopoeia of “Hnnh,” Jing-Mei only hears her mother’s angry tone and shock and thus believes that her mother is disappointed in her. However, Jing-Mei’s mother is actually trying to convey her message of putting in one’s best effort but it falls on deaf ears. Due to Jing-Mei believing that her mother does not understand her at all and ergo is making her life miserable, Jing-Mei steels herself and decides that she will not let her mother mold and sculpt her into a statue of the “perfect daughter”. Ironically in this moment, Jing-Mei finally emerges from her shell and the prodigy that her mother has been pushing for finally appears, “I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me—because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful” (337). Although different than what her mother wanted, Jing-Mei ultimately validates her mother's relentless efforts. Jing-Mei’s anger at her mother manifested itself into a tenacious will and determination which is her prodigal skill. Her determination to stand up for herself and rebel against her mother is the characteristic that makes her stand out above everyone else. From the beginning, Jing-Mei only heard pompous orders to play piano but in reality, Jing-Mei’s mother understood from the very beginning what Jing-Mei was capable of and continuously pushed Jing-Mei.
Mei never understands the underlying message in her mother’s orders when she finally plays the piano again after many years.

As a grown up, Jing-Mei, similar to most children, finally realizes and appreciates the efforts of her mother. As Jing-Mei finally plays the piano many years after her fiasco at the church hall, she is surprised at how difficult “Pleading Child” (345) is, but is also shocked by how easy it is for her to play the piece. As Jing-Mei continues playing and finally completes the piece, she realizes the title of the song on the other page of the book, “Perfectly Contented.” (345)

These titles were purposely selected to metaphorically depict Jing-Mei’s life coming full circle. Schumann’s *Scenes from Childhood* juxtaposed with the titles “Pleading Child” and “Perfectly Contented” symbolize how, as a child, Jing-Mei never understood what her mother was trying to accomplish by pushing her and thus kept “pleading” with her to give up. However, at an older age, reading and playing these pieces again, Jing-Mei finally understands and appreciates what her mother meant to her. Instead of feeling excluded and lost like she had before, she is “Perfectly Content” and feels included by her mother’s actions. Jing-Mei changes from a child, who was desperate for her mother’s approval, to an adult, who realizes where her mother was coming from in her childhood.

Throughout my own childhood I never understood why my parents wanted me to take such random and diverse classes. I despised going from class to class; I despised practicing piano; I despised doing abacus problems; I despised being “perfect.” However, like Jing-Mei, I now realize these classes came from the love of my parents, who withstood my screams and arguments because I was their priority. They immigrated to a different country for me and through their own past experience, knew what was best for me. Through the many different activities my parents forced me to go to, I ultimately legitimized my parent’s decisions because I did find hobbies that I love such as basketball. Those abacus classes that I thought were a waste of time
helped me succeed in later math classes in my high school life. Comprehending this later in my life, my parents wanted what was best for me and knew that my talents could be found in these areas all along. Now, whenever my parents remind me to study for my test or encourage me to sign up for a class, instead of being the screaming hectic child I was before, I recognize the reasons and intentions of my parents and listen to what they have to say.

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Seeing as this is a picture (introduction) taken of a picture (literary analysis of Karen Russell’s short story) of a picture (her story itself), my instinct is to say something about the original picture. However, that has already been done in the picture of the picture. Which brings me back to this: the picture of that picture of the picture. Instead of all that, I just want to meet Karen Russell and have a conversation about biohacking and consent. Read her crazy story. It is punishing.

Karen Russell’s short story immediately made me feel uneasy. I read through it with a mixture of seasickness and déjà vu. Adam Jones’ artwork and David Cronenberg’s strange sets and props give me a similar expectant taste in my mouth and an enervative humming in my mind. Her Marxist tale of pre-digital biohacking and indentured physiology has pertinence today, but the main difference is the consent, or lack thereof; women turned into silk-creating machines because their circumstances offered virtually no alternative differs from the voluntary self-hacking we see today.

This essay gave me the most anxiety out of all the assignments I finished for the class. Although I had clarity about my analysis, I felt as if I was treading on grounds that weren’t meant for me. After spending time one afternoon, asking open-ended questions to some of the women in my life about their experiences in the workplace, I came away with a more journalistic and observant lens. They helped to give a real foundation of experience to my anemic inkpool of hypothetical conjecture. Help usually comes from the most obvious of sources.

Silk and Money, Labor Pain

-James Zetterberg-

Ralph Lauren doesn’t sew his own polo shirts. In general, the people who hold the most power will not relegate themselves to the monotonous drudgery that generates their wealth. In “Reeling for the Empire,” Karen Russell’s character, Kitsune, narrates the short story of grotesque servitude and repurposed means of production set in Japan during the industrialization of the 1890s. Exploitative recruitment of labor begins to scrape down into the lower strata of the countryside peasantry, with agents hustling to fill factory quotas with the daughters, not the sons, of newly indebted men. There is a lower caste in any stratified society, with women further degraded as a substrata underneath. One form of repressive patriarchy is replaced by another in Japan, with women and girls remaining as the primary candidates for capitalist fleecing. These women populate Russell’s factory, turning gradually into mutant instruments of silk-making. The labor itself is biologically transformative to the worker’s body, and only the bodies at the lowest strata, powerless females with debt in their heredity, are offered up by the men in their families as
indentured sacrifices. The exploitation of women at work, in Russell’s story and in general, is intrinsically linked to the stratification of female biology; it is not conceivable for men to be the reelers because of entrenched ideas about gender, biology, and false empowerment. It is women, however, who find their way out of this box.

The men and boys of rural Japan do not populate these factories, partially due to the predatory nature of recruitment which relies on the disparity between the power of men and women to entrap their workforce. Kitsune is the target of the recruitment agent’s tactical seduction, and she recalls “I had never seen such a handsome person in my life, man or woman” (Russell 34). The women, “rented out by our destitute uncles,” “her father or guardian,” or “where single women cannot be procured, her husband,” are recruited as indentured servants to work off the debts of their families in the new factories of Japan (Russell 23, 26). Great prestige and importance is placed on the work of these women, “and we must all play a role now. Japan’s silk is her world export…silk-reeling is a sacred vocation—she will be reeling for the empire” (Russell 27). Appealing to the good nature and patriotism of these women and girls by burdening them with the fates of their families enables the recruitment agent to contractually tether the women to any task, even one that requires them to lose their humanity. The reputation of the factories being susceptible to “fire” and “tuberculosis” is brushed off as hearsay by the agent (Russell 27). Since the men of the family are already busy working off Sisyphean debts for the same Emperor and his capitalonialist partners, the daughters are the last employable pairs of hands.

Kitsune is the only known silkworm-girl who has chosen to drink the agent’s metamorphic tea without resistance. For all the other girls, “it took his hands around their throats” (Russell 36). Kitsune remembers granting herself fraudulent permission from her incapacitated father: “I wrote in the slot for the future worker’s name, my heart pounding in my
ears. When I returned it, I apologized for my father’s unsteady hand” (Russell 36). Incredible to
the enthusiasm in which Kitsune proceeds to down the transformative tea, the recruiting agent
says, “not one of you, ever—No girl has ever gulped a pot of it!” (Russell 36, 37). Kitsune’s
eagerness may be due to her father’s crumbling health and their family’s dire circumstances, but
the fantasies she has are additionally enticing. She rushes into the agreement, “still dreaming of
my prestigious new career as a factory reeler…and I even let myself imagine that the Agent
might marry me, pay off my family’s debts” (Russell 37). The agent trades on “her legally
mortgaged future” (Russell 27). Her status as a poor female in this scenario lends itself to
predation, as Kitsune represents the lowest rungs of the ladder of power. Her naiveté is
excusable: her family and others like them have been held in place by debts, and she mistakenly
believes “the hereditary classes had been abolished” under the new Meiji government (Russell
37). Going against her father, who “blamed the new government for my grandfather’s death,”
Kitsune assumes the family mantle and rebels in the absence of her father’s authority, bucking
the gender norms of the culture and showing her to be extraordinary in her chutzpah. As the
exception, Kitsune defines herself as different from the other girls reeling in the factory. This
awareness causes her pain, but proves consequentially beneficial; she schemes her way in, and
she can scheme her way out.

Kitsune describes a scenario in which one can assume she is taken advantage of in more
than one way by the agent. “He took me to a summer guesthouse in the woods…at the moment,
empty” where she feels “Something is wrong” (Russell 35). He “grabbed playfully at my waist” and
“let his fingers brush softly against my knuckles” (Russell 35). “Already the narcolepsy was
buzzing through me,” Kitsune remembers, describing being drugged and preyed upon, as “[t]he
Agent’s genteel expression underwent a complete transformation; suddenly it was blank as a
stump. The last thing I saw, before shutting my eyes, was his face” (Russell 37). While Karen
Russell may be using this scene to invoke a recognizable sequence of rape, and not necessarily imply that a rape is committed, the assumption is plausible; the charm the Agent employs while carrying out his cold, amoral mission suggests a sociopathic nature with a predisposition for successfully yoking young women. When persuasion doesn’t work, he obliges by putting his “hands around their throats” (Russell 36). It is not a leap to infer that the Agent, acting autonomously to fulfill a diabolic task in the countryside, has layers of power-based motives that include sexual assault. Kitsune mentions later in the story, when he has not checked on the silkworm-girls for a long time, that “the thought of the Agent, either coming or not coming, makes me want to retch” (Russell 41).

Even though she is destitute, Kitsune struggles to “weed the pride from my voice” when talking about how “we silkworm-girls combine all these processes in the single factory of our bodies” (Russell 28, 30). The mysterious tea the girls and women are forced to drink “is remaking your insides. Your intestines, your secret organs. Soon your stomachs will bloat. You will manufacture silk in your gut with the same helpless skill that you digest food, exhale…. A revolutionary process” (Russell 29). In this description, there are no biologically female organs needed for the manufacture of silk within the body. The women and girls are falsely empowered by the novelty of contributing to Japan through this ghastly undertaking, believing the females alone can abide this biological abomination. They are confined to a small factory with around twenty others, expected to use their bio-hacked bodies to produce silk for export. The idea of women, exclusively, producing something in their bellies and feeding it into a refining machine makes sense within the confines of any culture that isolates gender roles as mutually exclusive. Biologically, women produce someone in their bellies and socially feed them into the refining machines of school and work. For men and boys to be changed into silk-producing monstrosities is unthinkable in the context of gender norms; men may accept their fate of heroic sacrifice in
hard work and in war, but to be anonymously emasculated without glory in a pregnancy pantomime, manufacturing a feminine fabric for no wages, is certainly outside the threshold of culturally acceptable male humiliation.

To dehumanize the silkworm-girls’ conditions even further, there is a “zookeeper” outside their door at the factory, trading food for labor in this most basic of capitalist exchanges (Russell 28). Kitsune and the other women and girls are fed “mulberry leaves through the panel [of the grated door] with a long stick” (Russell 28), among other indignities. The zookeeper feeds them, and keeps the exchange simple: “no silk, no food” (Russell 50). If the reelers halt production, they won’t be fed. If they aren’t fed, they won’t produce. The reelers have realized that the power is with them, even though they exist in a worker’s prison. It takes the death of one of them, Dai, to produce a new mood of desperation and ingenuity among the remaining prisoners. The silkworm-girls are preparing their escape, using the natural skills they have to repurpose the valuable material they make for the fulfillment of their own freedom.

Kitsune learns that the original process of silk manufacturing requires stunting the silkworm’s natural metamorphosis to “stop them from undergoing the transformation…If the caterpillars are allowed to evolve, they change into moths” and “grow wings and teeth” that destroy the silk they’ve just made (Russell 46). It is the key to the silkworm-girls' escape. No titan of capitalism, no repressive government, no patriarchy would knowingly bestow wings and teeth on the bodies they subjugate. On the contrary, stifling any progress past the role assigned to the subordinate is a foundation of capitalist workforce productivity. Any advancement of skill or power must be granted by the superiors. The silkworm-girls help themselves without permission, using their imposed biological confinement to their own benefit, to escape with a vengeance.

“’These wings of ours are invisible to you’” (Russell 51): Kitsune whispers this to the Recruitment Agent as the silkworm-girls cement him into his silky coffin. “’And in fact you will
never see them, since they exist only in our future, where you are dead and we are living, flying’” (Russell 51). The factory owners, the recruiters, and the zookeeper are facilitating their own obsolescence by underestimating these “daughters of samurai” (Russell 23). The men who play key roles in the continuation of the exploitation of women’s bodies, and actively perpetuate a power imbalance for the betterment of industries that rely on women’s labor, lack the foresight to predict the frantic innovation of trapped genius. What the recruiters for the silkworm-girl factories and their superiors neglect to realize is they bestow an inadvertent gift on the women and girls they mean to profitably disfigure: the ability to create within their own bodies the means of escape. The assumption of female inferiority will go extinct, and the promulgators of sexism will never witness the freedom that their imprisonment necessitates, as “these wings of ours” spread a new paradigm (Russell 51). Necessity is the motherfucker of invention.

Through the framework of biology, women are reductively identified by a handful of traits that are all seen as detrimental to productivity. When entering the workforce, women seem to be left with a choice: either reshape yourselves into an unnatural mold by hiding aspects of your biology, or gradually change the paradigms and attitudes that exclude women on the basis of their gender. Russell offers another option, and it lies within the microcosm of the factory of silkworm-girls: use the chains to make a ladder.

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