

Gleanings:

A Journal of First Year at Siena Seminar Student Writing

Volume 16

Siena University

2025 - 2026



Cover Image: Statue of Saint Francis in the Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence, Italy

Photograph taken by Britt Haas, December 2025

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All the work included in this journal was written by students who were enrolled in First Year at Siena Seminar (FYSM) during the 2025 – 2026 academic year.

This required course prepares students for the intellectual rigors of college life and beyond by building critical thinking and communication skills as well as by fostering creativity and advocacy.

Throughout the course, students are encouraged to reflect upon and discuss the vast amount of reading and writing that they do both inside and outside the classroom.

Siena University is committed to showcasing the intellectual and engaging work being accomplished on its campus, so *Gleanings* was created as a means of celebrating some of the finest and most provocative FYSM student writing completed each year.

* * * * *

While editorial changes have been made to these works, they were purposely kept to a minimum. The FYSM faculty deems it important to preserve the authentic voices, the authorial choices, and the integrity of the assignments when compiling this journal.

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*In this research paper, the author balances a strong voice with clear use of evidence,
effectively building an argument that overcomes the naysayer.*

A Country Built with Cages:
Systemic Intentionality Regarding the Criminalization of People of Color

By Willa Babson

Prof. Glynn- Anti-Racism and Social Justice

Winston Churchill once claimed, “History is written by the victor,” suggesting that the narratives of the powerful, more often than not, overwrite the lives and realities of marginalized communities. In the United States, this narrative of the victor is frequently used as a way to frame the massive expansion of the carceral state as an entirely neutral response to rising crime rates rather than a calculated strategy to maintain social and physical control of minority groups. However, when examined critically, it quickly becomes apparent that the criminalization of people of color is an intentional facet of the American legal system that is driven by economic interests alongside the need to manage racialized crises. While some might argue that mass incarceration is a necessary measure required for public safety and that it is entirely separate from race, the disproportionate imprisonment of Black and Brown bodies is, in fact, a deliberate and direct consequence of racial capitalism, a capitalism designed to replace old systems of discrimination with a more modern, socially acceptable label: criminal. This issue must be raised to the forefront of political discussion because without the recognition that the modern-day carceral system serves as a mechanism for maintaining racial hierarchies and economic stability for the state, institutional reforms will remain superficial and will ultimately fail to address the bigger issues relating to persistent inequity in the United States.

In order to understand the nature of this deep-rooted injustice, one must first look at how the American legal system has historically policed the movement and autonomy of Black and Brown bodies. Following the formal end of enslavement, individual states were able to manipulate new legal frameworks to maintain control over labor and social order. In *The New Jim Crow*, civil rights lawyer and legal scholar Michella Alexander (2010) describes this evolution, arguing that the modern criminal justice system is functioning as a system of racial control, and it maintained this control

through adaptation after the formal end of segregation. This crisis of racialized control has only continued to intensify over the last decade, quickly evolving into a central focus in modern civil rights discussions as the system continues to adapt to contemporary political environments. As criminal defense lawyer and racial justice author and advocate Jonathan Andrew Perez (2021) explains in *Rioting by a different name: The voice of the unheard in the age of George Floyd, and the history of the laws, policies, and legislation of systemic racism*, “rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color ‘criminals’ and engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind” (p.89). This shift is a direct result of a series of sophisticated rebrandings of subjugation, where the criminal label serves as a legally unassailable mask for the same racial hierarchies that defined the antebellum era in the South. The process was further portrayed in the documentary *13th* (2016), which depicts how the Thirteenth Amendment's loophole allowing involuntary servitude as a form of punishment for criminals was exploited to rebuild labor forces while also maintaining a form of social control long after the Civil War. A conflict has arisen between those who believe the criminal justice system simply needs reform and those who argue for its abolition, claiming that the system is, in fact, not broken, but rather, it is functioning just as it was designed and that is the problem. Ultimately, viewing current over-policing through the lens of racial capitalism, it is clear that the state uses incarceration as a way to manage crises regarding labor.

The criminalization of people of color is an intentional mechanism used to uphold racial hierarchies rather than a passive reaction to increasing crime rates. Many critics of this view suggest that policing is a direct response to illegal activity and therefore colorblind. However, Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, an Assistant Professor of Geography and African American & Africana Studies at the University of Kentucky (2023), asserts that prison expansion was actually a strategic fix used by the state as a way of managing crises regarding capital, land, and labor. Furthermore, this intentionality is evident throughout the legal history of America's criminal justice system. As Perez (2021) points out, “if taken literally, policing and, by extension, criminal law, historically hinged on criminalizing and policing spatial movement of black and brown bodies” (p.114). Through tracing modern practices such as Stop-and-Frisk all the way back to 18th-century slave patrols, it becomes clear that the states used the label of criminal as a proxy for race. This purposeful response ensures that people of color will remain marginalized, corroborating the argument that the ending of enslavement was never truly

completed because all of the necessary democratic institutions to assure freedom were never put in place.

The reason for the drastic racial disparity in the prison industrial complex is due to the fact that the carceral state is fundamentally driven by economic interest, where the caging of bodies becomes a state-sanctioned tool for the management of structural poverty. When governments intentionally withdraw specific resources, social safety precautions, and economic opportunities from Black and Brown neighborhoods, a process which is commonly referred to as systemic public disinvestment, social crises will naturally intensify and reap havoc. While many critics argue that the cost of prisons is a financial burden to the state, carceral expansion has actually been historically proven to be financially beneficial, serving as a punitive solution to economic budget cuts. Pelot-Hobbs (2023) presents the criminalization of people of color as a “deliberate response to a state’s economic ‘organized abandonment’ of black communities” (p.7). Rather than investing in life-affirming institutions such as healthcare, mental health services, or education, states choose to instead rely on the criminal justice system to further ostracize and harm the very marginalized communities their economic policies have abandoned. This convergence of incarceration and capital is central to the preservation of racist structures due to the fact that it serves as a way to transform human captivity into a profitable industry that is used to sustain local economies, often providing forms of revenue and jobs to rural areas through the warehousing of urban populations. The Bureau of Justice Statistics 2022 report on incarceration perfectly illustrates the stark cost of this racialized economic project. According to the report, “Among male U.S. residents ages 18 to 19, the imprisonment rate of black males (340 per 100,000) was 26 times that of Asian males, 11 times that of white males, 4 times that of Hispanic males, and 2 times that of American Indian or Alaska Native males” (as cited in Carson & Kluckow, 2023, p.1). Mass incarceration must be properly understood not as a social service for safety, but as a capitalist enterprise that continues to thrive on the systemic dispossession of marginalized people.

Of course, there are some who might challenge this view regarding the intentionality of criminalization by insisting that the legal system’s sole purpose is to deliver justice, and as such, is an entirely neutral arbiter of public safety. Many critics of the Abolition Democracy framework are often quick to argue that the high rates of incarceration among communities of color are a result of higher crime rates rather than resulting from the framework’s inherent design. Some might suggest that the

state's primary motivation for the expanding carceral system is to protect U.S. citizens while also maintaining social order. According to this point of view, tough-on-crime legislation was an entirely necessary measure to curb violence, while any racial disparities were merely an unfortunate statistical byproduct of these laws being enforced. As Perez (2021) notes, there is often a heavy focus on individual criminal acts as a way of justifying aggressive policing, rather than the examination of the "persistent and poisonous inequities" that lead to these acts (p. 104). This pinhole focus on individual actions is an effective way to shield the much broader systems in place from any form of scrutiny. This allows those in power to continue maintaining their neutral, safety-first narrative, hiding the deliberate racial and economic engineering happening beneath it all.

As long as we, as a society, fail to address the systemic intentionality of criminalization, we continue to perpetuate the cycle of violence and inequity. This issue affects the lives of incarcerated individuals who are stripped of all of their political voice. As historian Meredith L. Roman (2020) argues, in her work exploring the blatantly unjust treatment of activist Angela Davis, those in power refuse to acknowledge the racist basis for America's carceral state. For much of the 20th Century, while civil rights movements attempted to secure rights for Black and Brown people by pointing out such injustice, she contends, "U.S. leaders and mainstream journalists dismissed the veracity of such claims and asserted that political trials and racism existed only 'over there' in the Soviet Union" (Roman, 2020, p.89). Even after the Cold War ended and there was no Soviet menace to place all claims of injustice upon, the refusal to acknowledge that the criminal justice system that silences Black and Brown voices in order to maintain the capitalist carceral state continues. Americans must reconsider our reliance on policing and prison industrial complexes as these institutions do not make society safer; rather, they continue to exacerbate the poverty and inequities Black and Brown people are subjected to.

The criminalization of people of color is an intentional tool used to support racial capitalism that was designed to manage economic crises while upholding racial hierarchies. The carceral state is not an accidental byproduct of rising crime rates; rather, it is a deliberate method to serve state economic interest. The current criminal justice system is still functioning as it was designed all those years ago—as a way to marginalize and control communities of color. We must learn to move beyond the narrow views regarding reform and recognize that the caging of human beings serves as a vital foundation for our current political economy. In the end, we must decide if our country is truly

committed to the ideal of freedom, or if it will continue to allow movements like the new Jim Crow to operate within the shadows of our criminal justice system.

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This poem expresses deep self-reflection embedded in social commentary, exemplifying the essence of the FYSM learning objective to help students develop personally and socially.

Boy

By Matt Carle

Dr. Stein- Out of Bounds

He is told to be strong before knowing what strength costs;
taught that silence looks like courage;
told that being silent is what makes a boy strong;
he learns early to swallow words and stand still;
he watches younger eyes follow his steps;
watching them mirror the way he breathes through pain;
he is shaped into the backbone of society;
expected to carry not only himself but those around him;
to be the one who holds everyone else's burdens without complaint;
to carry the weight and never ask why;
he stands so others learn how to stand;
even when no one is watching he must stand tall;
he is told to remain tougher than life itself;
never to bend when the pressure grows heavy;
never break even when it is hard;
never cry because tears are mistaken for weakness;
he learns that endurance is mistaken for strength;
he learns that strength is mistaken for silence;
the boy grows into responsibility before he is given a choice;
the boy becomes the man he once searched for;
the man becomes the strength he never received.

I wrote this piece after reading the poem "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid in my First Year at Siena Seminar class. Kincaid's poem describes the expectations and pressures placed on a girl by her mother, but also goes beyond that to speak to societal expectations of girls and women. Reflecting on the poem, I began to think about the pressures placed on boys and men. At the time, I was going through a difficult period in my life and felt a constant pressure to conform to society's expectations as to what a man should be, how he should act, and what he should feel. Writing this poem was a way for me to express my frustrations about how those expectations can harm a person. I wanted, especially, to show the pressure boys feel to appear strong regardless of the circumstances if they want to be a man. Young men are taught to deal with hardship quietly, take on responsibility early, and serve as examples for others. By describing my own transformation from boyhood to manhood, I hoped to convey the emotional weight that young men deal with and the challenges of dealing with that weight on their own.

By exploring required FYSM texts, this essay clearly explains the relevance of Franciscan values today, particularly in regard to compassion as a means to further justice.

Saint Francis as a Model of Compassionate Justice

By Thanya Chavali

Dr. Engh- Environmental Storytelling

Justice means more than just enforcing laws or defending individual rights; it also involves transforming one's relationships with others and nature. Today, justice is usually thought of in terms of criminal justice, associated with institutions such as courts, policing, and governments that enforce laws and regulate how people act toward one another. As a result, justice is often understood as a system of rules, punishment, and social control. However, in the stories about his interactions with the lepers and with the wolf of Gubbio, Saint Francis presents a different version of justice. Instead of relying on punishment, he chooses mercy over rejection, extending understanding and compassion. In so doing, Saint Francis provided an alternative model of justice rooted in care and connection. Through his willingness to put himself in uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous situations, he exemplified a just way of living by being courageous, empathetic, and sacrificing for others. Francis's example shows that justice often requires people to face their fears and prejudices in order to show compassion toward those society has rejected or misunderstood. This Franciscan understanding of justice as compassionate action redeems both individuals and communities instead of relying on punishment or exclusion.

In the story of his interaction with the lepers, Francis demonstrates that social justice requires care and consideration for the most marginalized groups of society, illustrating how individually transformed lives initiate systemic change. Lepers in medieval times not only suffered from severe physical illness, but were also socially abandoned, feared, and treated as non-persons. In fact, Francis acknowledged that "it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers," indicating that he once shared the social discomfort and disgust towards these diseased individuals who were cast out from society (Thomas of Celano 35). However, instead of continuing to avoid leper communities, he confronted his own discomfort and underwent tremendous personal transformation. When he approached a leper and even kissed him, this act signified his complete transformation from what he once felt and thought. He then goes further to live amongst the lepers and minister to them

directly by “washing all the filth...and even cleaning out the pus of their sores” (Thomas of Celano 35). Francis did not help from a distance; instead, he immersed himself completely in the lepers’ suffering to be in relationship with them and support them. He challenged the social constructs that rejected the lepers’ human dignity. This suggests that justice is not found simply in helping others, but in creating a social order in which all human beings are treated with respect as persons. His experience indicates that social justice must begin with the transformation of personal biases and the subsequent restoration of dignity to all marginalized people.

This idea that social justice begins with personal transformation and involves restoration of dignity is expressed in Francis’s interactions with the wolf of Gubbio, as well. The wolf is described to have “devoured men and women,” indicating that the wolf was physically threatening the community (“Blessed Francis Leads a Wolf” 482). This caused the destruction of social order and safety. The response of the townspeople can be classified as the normal responses of fear, hostility, and the desire to eliminate the threat posed by the wolf. However, Francis decided on a different response and approached the wolf not as an enemy that needed to be eliminated, but as a being capable of transformation. By calling him “Brother Wolf,” he created a sense of shared existence and mutual belonging in creation (“Blessed Francis Leads a Wolf” 482). Francis did not ignore the harm the wolf has done, recognizing that the wolf has “committed horrible crimes” (“Blessed Francis Leads a Wolf” 482). However, Francis chose to try to understand how the wolf came to be this way, later explaining that the wolf was acting out of “the frenzy of hunger” (“Blessed Francis Leads a Wolf” 483). This recognition shifted the focus from punishment to addressing the problem that caused the criminal acts. Francis created a binding agreement between the wolf and the townspeople in which the wolf promised not to harm anyone anymore, and the townspeople promised to provide food for the wolf. Therefore, he established a system of shared responsibility. Not only did the creation of this agreement resolve the existing conflict, it created ongoing peace as the wolf “lived for two years . . . harming no one” (“Blessed Francis Leads a Wolf” 484). This story shows that justice in the Franciscan tradition is not based on dominating nature and one another; rather, it is based on establishing balance and coexistence between humankind and the natural world.

Some may contend that the method Francis used to engage with the wolf was unrealistic and that the wolf was able to escape true justice. Such people would focus entirely on the fact that the wolf had harmed people, keeping the entire town in fear and forcing the residents to go out “armed

and guarded as if they had to advance toward deadly battles” (“Blessed Francis Leads a Wolf” 482). Focusing only on these actions, an adequate response would be to remove the criminal element rather than show mercy. Instead, Francis established a pact with the wolf, which required that the wolf “never harm any animal or person,” while ensuring that his needs would be satisfied (“Blessed Francis Leads a Wolf 483). By using this form of resolution, Francis not only stopped the immediate threat but created long-term peace between the wolf and the townsfolk. He gave the wolf an opportunity to show that he had the capacity for transformational personal growth. Furthermore, by implementing a form of justice based on shared responsibility to address a root problem rather than punishment for behavior, Francis provided an example of how true justice can be obtained through reconciliation rather than force. Today, many restorative justice programs continue to apply this process for repairing damage caused by offenders by addressing the causes of conflict and rebuilding relationships rather than relying solely on punishment.

The stories of Saint Francis’s interactions with the lepers and the wolf underscore a central Franciscan belief: justice must be brought about through care and compassion, which has the power to transform individuals and the community as a whole. Both stories show that Saint Francis was not only trying to address a problem, but also change the way people viewed and treated those who were socially outcast. Saint Francis’s method of exhibiting care and compassion both with people and the natural world challenges the common belief that justice requires punishment and exclusion. Saint Francis created an environment for damaged relationships to change, thus demonstrating that compassion can solve problems through working together instead of against each other. The Franciscan tradition encourages social justice by reaching out to the outcast as a means of standing up against fear, valuing the inherent dignity of all, and taking action to create lasting peace in our world. These values hold true today and demonstrate that achieving true justice is more about changing the world through love and understanding than by acting to protect ourselves from others.

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Adeptly structured as a They Say/I Say analysis, this research paper explores the impact of book bans on marginalized communities.

Black Stories Matter:
The Impact of Book Bans on Marginalizing Communities of Color

By Georgia Ellison

Dr. Stein- FYSM 200

In 2024, books were banned in America 10,046 times – that is almost 28 titles banned per day of the year. Of those banned books, those by and including people and characters of color were disproportionately affected by literary censoring, leaving library shelves increasingly less diverse (“Banned in the USA”). In fact, 44% of books that were banned in more than one school district included people or characters of color (“What is a Book Ban?”), and black authors were 4.5 times more likely to have one of their works banned than a white author (Goncalves et al. 3). In a society where diversity, equity, and inclusion are fundamental for producing harmony, these statistics are staggering. The importance of reading and access to literature should not be underestimated. Reading comprehension, the development of critical thinking skills, and openness to diverse perspectives are all things that unfettered access to literature influences, particularly for children. Banning books contributes to the increase of discriminatory rhetoric aimed at communities of color and further marginalizes them through erasing representation and diverse stories. This censorship sustains ignorance, cultivates harmful stereotypes, and perpetuates racism. Erasing the narratives of those different from oneself is not only ignorant, but inhumane. Instead, we must acknowledge and welcome more than one story into our lives.

To many concerned parents, banning books seems the best way to keep their children safe from potentially inappropriate or difficult topics. However, allowing fear and ignorance to dictate the depth and diversity of literature children have access to should not be acceptable. *The Hate U Give*, a novel by Angie Thomas that is banned in Florida, is a story of a young African-American woman grappling with the impacts of racism and police brutality after her friend is murdered by police; despite the graphic content, the book is appropriate for teenage audiences and safely addresses the experiences of people of color at the hands of police. Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, banned in Tennessee, explores racial injustice in the American south and the ways in which African Americans are forced to overcome discrimination. *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah Jones and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison both address slavery and its continuing impacts, and Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi’s *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* broadens the discussion to the systemic nature of racism in America; these books are banned or challenged in states like Florida, Iowa, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Restricting students’ ability to access, engage with, and be educated about these

topics is disastrous for communities of color and society as a whole. It is true that young people can learn about race-related issues and how racism still survives today without these stories, but that does communities of color an extreme disservice because these stories are based on the authors' experiences with how racism permeates American society. In attempts to censor critical race theory—the idea that racism is structural and systemic within American society—we limit ourselves to a world that lacks empathy for our fellow humans and does not acknowledge the privileges communities of color miss out on that white individuals take for granted.

Books are an important tool for understanding and empathizing with other people's experiences. As Rudine Sims Bishop, Ed.D, aptly explains in her essay, literature has the ability to be a window, a mirror, and a sliding glass door; books can offer readers a glimpse into the lives of others—a window—and they can even allow readers to step into the shoes of another—a sliding glass door. Most importantly, books can “reflect [readers'] own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience,” acting as a mirror allowing readers to see and affirm themselves as an important part of humanity (Sims Bishop 1). Despite the benefits literature provides, active censorship and erasure of representation through banning books is rampant in America today. Within the last five years, the prevalence of book bans has continually worsened: in 2021, 2,532 titles were banned, and in 2024, that number jumped to 10,046 (“Banned in the USA”). Representation is essential for communities of color, which is why schools must stop banning books that feature characters of color as protagonists. Banning books including and by people of color reinforces the cultural idea that there is no value in the “other” perspective and that their stories are not worth telling (Flannery). Representation not only helps children of color engage in their education and fosters positive ethnic-racial identities, but it also aids all children in participating in a diverse world with empathy and an open mind (Flannery). Empathy—an essential, but sadly lacking, virtue today—can and should be cultivated through diverse storytelling. Mary Ellen Flannery suggests that “often white students don't have windows into the racism that their peers face.” Banning books that discuss race and racism is severely counterintuitive to creating empathy for one's peers. Literature has the ability to allow readers to step into another's shoes and peer through their window for a day. Depriving young people of books representing diverse perspectives inhibits their development of empathy, maintains their ignorance, and limits their worldview at the very moment it should be expanding, which deeply affects communities of color that deserve wider understanding of their experiences.

Not only does banning books restrict important representation and limit the practice of empathy, but lack of access to literature perpetuates ignorance, leading to prejudice and discriminatory rhetoric. Some who challenge books based on racial content or characters may be well-meaning since literary depictions of racism can be distressing or triggering to readers. Nevertheless, these challenging topics are necessary for developing a well-rounded individual who is not only aware of racism and its impacts, but is ready to take action to improve outlooks for people of color. Literature featuring characters of color and themes of race and racism

force readers to acknowledge and confront their preconceived biases and challenge their ignorance. In fact, research has found that reading can reduce racism by decreasing egocentric biases (Castano, Martingano and Perconti 7). Banning diverse books villainizes communities of color and leads to a lack of knowledge that propagates both harmful rhetoric and racist actions. In 2021, the same year that 44% of banned books included characters or people of color (“What is a Book Ban?”), 53.2% of all 11,323 hate crimes involved a race or ethnicity bias (“Hate Crimes”), showcasing the prevalence of racism in America. These banned books must be taught because they provide the perfect opportunity to unpack and address not only unconscious biases of readers, but begin to challenge structural racism, too.

The normalization of banning books sets an extremely poor precedent for schoolchildren because they learn that censorship is an inevitable part of education. Censorship has no place in the classroom; engaging in difficult, complex, or controversial topics in school is the best way to understand, analyze, and learn from them. Discussions of race and racism in school are even more important, as they allow for the deconstruction of inherent racism and bias that otherwise gets built into law, education, and society in general (Dixson & Anderson 122). Reading books with authors or characters who are people of color uplifts and validates their works and experiences and broadens developing minds to embrace different perspectives. Changing the literary canon to include more than just one dominant perspective is not only very beneficial, but critical for informing the education of the next generation. Otherwise, the risk of perpetuating racism runs high. Active engagement with and comprehension of diverse texts in the classroom will positively impact communities of color through increased awareness, empathy, and accessibility; book bans deny students and teachers this fundamental right to education.

The power of words is not to be underestimated. There is a reason book bans have—historically and today—targeted the words of diverse and marginalized communities in attempts to censor their experiences. Often, those banned books are the works of literature society needs the most, not just to read, but to learn from. They broaden access to diverse perspectives, help develop empathy, and foster critical thinking and comprehension skills. Banned books can challenge discriminatory rhetoric and stereotypical portrayals of communities of color, provide representation, and uplift those typically marginalized by society. All it takes is the willingness to turn the page—to step foot into someone else’s experience—and fight for everyone’s right to do the same. Banned books should not be illegal, but banning books should be.

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In this Heritage Unit essay, the author uses required course texts along with a short video to explore what heritage means and how it is best communicated and preserved.

The Living Inheritance: Truth, Creativity, and Connection in Plato, Palmer, and “Alike”

By Louis Frattarola

Dr. Stein- Out of Bounds

Heritage is not just the stories, ideas, and traditions we inherit; it also includes the struggles that we individually face in moving from false understandings and conformity to genuine truth and freedom. Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” Parker Palmer’s “The Community of Truth,” and the short film “Alike” show how people face misinformation, push back against silence, and relearn meaning in community. When combined, these ideas prove that heritage is actively preserved and passed down when individuals challenge the forces that confine them and turn towards relationships, creativity, and shared understanding. By examining how characters in each of the texts goes from being misled to accepting truth, it is clear that heritage is not in a passive state, but rather, it is active in creating a person’s identity and developing community.

The “Allegory of the Cave” shows the ways people confuse their distorted understandings of truth with actual reality. It opens with people who are living chained in darkness, thinking that shadows on a wall are reality. When a prisoner becomes free and is introduced to the real world outside the cave, he encounters confusion and pain. To explain this, Plato rhetorically asks, “And if he is compelled to look at the light itself, wouldn’t his eyes be pained and wouldn’t he turn around and flee?” (209). The brightness of the light causing pain represents how difficult it can be to confront and accept the truth after living in ignorance. The discomfort involved in awakening to false beliefs we have succumbed to is part of embracing our heritage. The prisoner’s journey out of the cave symbolizes humanity’s transformation from illusion to understanding, and from passive acceptance to active awareness. Throughout this transformation, Plato makes it clear that heritage is not only what is passed down to us, but what is changed when people search for enlightenment.

In spite of this, Plato does not finish the allegory with the prisoner's freedom and becoming enlightened; in fact, this is just the beginning. The freed captive goes back to the cave not to resume his previous life of ignorance, but to share his knowledge with the other prisoners. Plato asserts that if the enlightened prisoner tried to free them, the others would kill him (210). This response proves how people are often resistant to the truth, instead choosing the safety that illusion provides from

the challenge of developing a new understanding. Yet, the prisoner's decision to go back emphasizes a crucial part of heritage, which is the responsibility for a person to share their beliefs, ideas, and discoveries with others. Doing so converts the prisoner's personal enlightenment into a collective inheritance, even though the community is not prepared to accept it. It can be concluded that heritage is not preserved by blindly accepting what one has been told and remaining content in the dark. It is preserved when it is passed down by people who are brave enough to bring light to others, no matter what. Passing on one's knowledge to other people ensures that knowledge and truth remain paramount within a society. It is our duty to pass on what we have learned from our experiences but even more so to have the courage to seek enlightenment, ask questions, and continue to learn, despite the fact that it may be uncomfortable, and even painful at times.

Plato focuses on the individual's grueling journey to gain knowledge and realizing truth, but Parker Palmer explains that truth is created through community and that it only becomes meaningful when we choose to share it with others. In "The Community of Truth," Palmer says, "Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline" (92). The truth, then, is not fixed, but rather something that is dynamic and meant to be shared. According to Palmer, truth cannot exist by itself because one can only know reality by being in community with it (93). He contradicts the popular idea that knowledge is something held individually by people and instead claims that it is an effective partnership between the world and the people in it. In this, Palmer is in line with Plato in regard to sharing with the community: they both see truth not as an individual's possession but as something an individual has a responsibility to share. Heritage, what we pass on to others, is reliant on open dialogue and transparency. Truth thrives in relationships and it dies in isolation, so heritage is maintained not by rigidly holding onto one's beliefs, but by participating in honest conversations and through shared discovery.

Sharing knowledge and seeking the truth through community does not mean that individualism should be cast aside. The short film "Alike," directed by Daniel Martínez Lara and Rafa Cano Méndez, shows what happens when an individual's truth and creativity are silenced by conformity. The short film is about a father and son who live in a gray, dull city where everyone moves machine-like from home to work or school. They begin to lose color as they begin to conform to society's expectations and standards. When the boy stops seeing the violin being played,

symbolically representing his imagination and joy, he begins to fade to gray. Like Plato's prisoners, the people in the film are suppressed by systems that destroy individualism and self-expression and instead mistake shadows for reality. Their creativity is almost nonexistent and seems to have been undone by routine and predictability. The father's adherence to societal norms demonstrates how individuals often relinquish their sense of wonder in order to conform. Their loss of color represents the shrinking of their creativity, and therefore their individuality. By using visual effects, the film depicts how conformity suppresses the uniqueness and creativity of an individual's imagination. The characters in "Alike" have become like Plato's prisoners who accept the illusion of life as their reality. The demise of their color indicates the characters have lost not just their identity but also the truth about their existence because they have lost creativity, individuality, and connection to one another. They therefore also lose their connection to the traditions that define them.

The turning point in "Alike" is when the father sees that his son's color is fading and attempts to connect with him through music. In a very heartfelt scene, he abandons their routine, fills the spot of the violin player, and thus brings color back into his son, which, in turn, brings color back into himself. This change shows that through love and shared experience, people can embrace the renewal of truth and identity. The father's transformation illustrates what Palmer emphasizes—that knowing is a human way of being in the world, not just a human way of thinking. Truth is not abstract, but relational. By bonding with his son, the father returns color to both of them, showing that community is where both creativity and individuality thrive best. The father is like the prisoner going back into the cave to share his knowledge, but whereas the prisoner was rejected, the father's efforts are appreciated and this brings color back into his son's life, helping him see the world as a place where he can share his individuality once again. Their shared moment of creative expression is a perfect example of living heritage—truth that goes beyond just discovery by being joyfully passed on through relationships.

Heritage, as depicted in these stories, is not an inheritance of or acquiescence to traditions or beliefs but an opportunity for transformation. Plato's allegory shows that individuals become enlightened when they push back against illusion and seek out their truth instead. Palmer extends this idea to claim that truth thrives in relationships and communities rather than isolation. "Alike" explores how color and vibrance are returned to people's lives when they choose to connect to others through imagination and love. When combined, these texts prove that our truest heritage is in

our will to question, to connect, and to create meaning together. Each act of moving from darkness to light, from conformity to individualism, adds to the living story of who we are and who we can become.

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*Here, the author stakes a strong claim and then skillfully builds an argument,
using political philosophy tenets to support it.*

No One is Above the Law: The Limits of Moral Justification

By Mia Garzone

Prof. Simonds- Villains

When people believe a law is unjust, they face a difficult choice: obey the law or follow their conscience. People often choose the latter, believing their actions serve the greater good of society. From civil rights demonstrations to modern political protests, acts of civil disobedience have often been defended as necessary tools for social change. Supporters argue that moral obligations outweigh legal ones. However, even when motivated by noble intentions, breaking the law poses too many serious risks to society. While people may feel justified in breaking the law for moral reasons, it is never acceptable to do so, as it undermines the social order and democratic process.

Laws exist to maintain order. Breaking a law, even for admirable reasons, creates instability as it encourages individuals to decide for themselves which laws deserve obedience. When people selectively follow laws based on personal beliefs, it becomes difficult to maintain an orderly society. While many people share basic principles of fairness, they often disagree about how those principles should be applied in real-world situations. If individuals begin to overlook laws in the name of personal justice, there is no consistent standard for what is acceptable. In “Maintaining the Rule of Law,” political philosopher Peter Ingram argues that even societies committed to the rule of law ultimately depend on human judgment when applying legal rules (360). Ingram's point is that laws do not enforce themselves; people must choose whether to follow them. Since individuals exercise judgment, disagreements about the correctness of any law are inevitable, and this leads to some people believing they can decide which laws to obey. Ingram later explains that there are legal ways for society to make and unmake laws, but once a law is enacted, the people are bound by it (Ingram 361). Laws can be counteracted through voting or protest, but simply breaking a law based on one's interpretation of it does not maintain order in society. Even breaking a law as a result of good intentions cannot justify the long-term harm done to the social structure.

There are legal ways to create change and bypassing them weakens the democratic system. The United States is a republic, which means that power in the government comes from the people, and the head of the government is elected. Citizens in the United States vote regularly for lawmakers

who then pass or amend laws. This system allows laws to be changed within a democratic structure. To have their voice heard, people have the right to petition, vote, protest, and elect new representatives. Breaking the law, however, suggests that legal change can only be found through illegal channels. This erodes people's trust in the government. In "The Measurement and Meaning of Trust in Government," political philosopher Stanley Feldman examines how mistrust in the government leads to substantial consequences for the political system, pointing out that it may lead to cycles of cynicism and dissatisfaction that affect citizens' willingness to engage through voting (Feldman 342). Ultimately, if people break the law whenever they disagree, the democratic system stops functioning properly.

Although some may argue that civil disobedience has led to progress, it is important to recognize a key distinction in how to lawfully practice civil disobedience. Supporters of civil disobedience may argue that without the actions of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights activists, segregation would have persisted much longer. They contend that traditional political channels had failed to address racial injustice, making civil disobedience necessary to confront the issue. While it is true that civil disobedience sparked attention from the media, politicians, and the general public, the true success of civil rights movements is marked in legal reform, not lawlessness. In this sense, civil disobedience may have accelerated change, but it was not sufficient on its own. Without the passage of laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Movement's goals would not have become enforceable or permanent. When civil rights activists, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., worked to combat injustice through nonviolent protests such as sit-ins, they accepted the legal consequences of their actions. In doing so, these protesters demonstrated respect for the legal system while simultaneously challenging specific laws. Although King and others active in the Civil Rights Movement shed light on injustice, the passage of the Civil Rights Act demonstrates that social change becomes lasting and enforceable only when it is incorporated into the legal system through democratic reform.

Although it may feel justified, breaking the law for moral reasons threatens the democratic process and harms social order. People's opinions on what is right and wrong may differ, but the law gives us clear standards on what is acceptable. Instead of lawlessness, injustice can be combatted in legal ways, all of which uphold the democratic process. Therefore, while moral intentions may be

compelling, unlawful action creates instability, encourages unpredictable behavior, and undermines democracy.

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*An insightful response essay to the required winter reading, James,
this author uses a variety of sources to support their original I Say argument.*

The Limitations of Knowledge as Power

By Kaitlyn Hartle

Prof. Glynn- Anti-Racism and Social Justice

I never watched *Game of Thrones* in full, but one scene I saw stuck with me. In it, the queen of a nation and her treasurer trade barbs, wherein he threatens to reveal a damning secret of hers, warning her, “Knowledge is power.” She, in response, orders her guards to seize and kill him, stopping them only at the last moment. The queen then says to the man who has just very nearly lost his life that “Power is power” (Benioff, Weiss, & Taylor, 2012, 37:53). This scene presents the limitations of knowledge; it can be very powerful if used wisely, but it is not paramount. Knowledge can generate self-identification as well as influence great change and meaningful action, but it will always be subject to those who hold more concrete forms of power, those gatekeepers who determine what power is truly valuable.

The belief that knowledge is entirely capable of granting some forms of power is nothing new. The philosopher Plato, writing over two thousand years ago, argued that knowledge not only could, but should grant power. He wrote that “uneducated people ... will never adequately govern a city” (Plato, 2004, p. 213), linking knowledge with the right to rule, one of the ultimate expressions of power. In his interpretation, knowledge rather straightforwardly conferred upon a person the right to wield power and served as a mark of capability to manage governance. Lawyer and social justice advocate Bryan Stevenson considers knowledge today slightly differently. He recognizes that in America:

[W]e have ... this dynamic where we really don’t like to talk about our problems. We don’t like to talk about our history. And because of that, we really haven’t understood what it’s meant to do the things we’ve done historically. We’re constantly running into each other. We’re constantly creating tensions and conflicts. (TED, 2012, 09:33)

When there are things people do not want to talk about, they will not be spoken of. There are events in American history, therefore, that are unlikely to be taught or discussed widely, restricting the knowledge about the uncomfortable but truthful parts to people who already know and care about it. Students are taught an uncomplicated, whitewashed history, and people who might otherwise make

an effort to enact some change will not even know that it is needed. It is clear that the power of knowledge is not absolute; it requires open discussion about historical atrocities and their long-term effects in order for it to move us forward into a more just future. Knowledge is capable of granting the extraordinary power to change society—to make it more just and fair—but that knowledge must be shared with many, not just possessed by the few.

Author Percival Everett considered how knowledge can be used as power in *James*, a retelling of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective of James, an enslaved man. In the story, James can read and teaches young enslaved people different methods of using speech to preserve their safety. Purposely using what appears to be uneducated and unintelligent language encourages their enslavers to underestimate them to their advantage. Through his literacy, James gives himself the power of self-identification, beginning his memoir by saying, “I am a man ... who can read and write, a man who will not let his story be self-related, but self-written. With my pencil, I wrote myself into being” (Everett, 2024, p. 93). James’s ability to write ensures that his words are his own, minimizing factors that might otherwise come between the story of his life and how it might be relayed to other people. A story related and then recorded by someone else, in contrast, could be modified in any number of ways with the speaker, unable to read, potentially never learning how his life was misrepresented. Literacy, then, as a form of knowledge, can be a significant source of power. James, however, has almost no access to the pencil and paper that he would need in order to record his own life; it must be stolen from someone else. As with Stevenson, knowledge grants the possibility of conferring power, but possessing it alone is not enough. In order to use his knowledge and tell his own life story, James had to obtain tools to convey it, and other people had power over access to those tools.

Knowledge does not stand in a vacuum, just waiting to be used. It is controlled by the already powerful. Plato, for example, was not just a philosopher, but also an aristocrat and an educator. Given his childhood education and status as an educator himself, it seems logical that he would prize education so highly. When he writes of knowledge, he speaks of “a craft concerned with how this instrument [the soul] can be most easily and effectively turned around,” a formalized education process (Plato, 2004, p. 212). The aristocratic teacher stands to gain even more power over students as well as managers of the state as a result of prioritizing knowledge while those with knowledge reap the benefits only knowledge can bestow. However, Lisa Delpit, Ed.D. (1998), writing on racial bias in

education, asserts that “success in institutions—schools, workplaces, and so on—is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power” (p. 283). General knowledge is not enough to grant power; one must gain cultural knowledge as well. Yet, simply an awareness of what is expected of oneself in a context does not fix the issue of being treated as an outsider, and therefore as less. Delpit (1998) explains why the introduction of “dialect readers” resulted in strong opposition, with the response from one parent that “My kids know how to be Black—you all teach them how to be successful in the White man’s world” (p. 285). Such knowledge is important because it grants access to the culture of power, which is necessary to thrive in a world dominated by a particular culture, and restriction of that knowledge reduces the chances for someone to succeed within it. The most material examples concerning the limiting of knowledge to the powerful are seen in the novel *James*. As James hallucinates after being bit by a snake, he reimagines his past experiences, noting, “I could see books in front of me. I had read them secretly, but this time ... I was able to read without fear of being discovered. I had wondered every time I sneaked in there what white people would do to a slave who had learned how to read” (Everett, 2024, p. 48). Direct access to books, the ultimate tool to gain knowledge, is strictly controlled, and James fears the potential outcome should he be seen to possess the knowledge of reading. This knowledge clearly provides him with no real power over those who already hold power over him.

Ultimately, power is power. Those who control the communication and spread of knowledge hold power over those who seek knowledge. Speaking again of failed attempts to address racial bias in education, Delpit (1998) wrote that the effort “[t]o provide schooling for everyone’s children that reflects liberal, middle-class values and aspirations is to ensure the maintenance of the status quo, to ensure that power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it” (p. 285). Even when knowledge is provided to those who lack it, the ways in which that knowledge is provided have a major impact upon how much power is actually granted as a byproduct of learning. Those who are already powerful control the way learning happens, and they can restrict how much power is given to students. Plato’s status as a member of the educated elite is inseparable from his writing, wherein he records that philosophers have been “bred ... to be leaders and kings ... better and more completely educated than the others” (Plato, 2004, p. 214), implying a level of biological difference based on inherited knowledge to the philosopher like himself who is somehow better and more capable than others. As a consequence of this view widespread among the educated elite to this day,

such people believe themselves to be superior to the uneducated masses in some objective manner and continue to control the passing on of knowledge itself. As they hold the power, they can pass on the idea that the possession of knowledge marks one as higher status at the same time they restrict the possession of knowledge to those already granted that status, primarily the rich and the White. Ultimately in the case of James, violence and destruction provide more power than his education. His knowledge, defined even more broadly than traditional education as “things people know,” is not entirely useless, as he figures out the wind direction and the relative dryness of a field in order to most effectively set it on fire (Everett, 2024, p. 301). This knowledge, though, only supports the act of seizing power through the glory of arson and gun violence; on its own, it cannot stand. James’s turn to violence as a way to exert power and control was necessary to achieve his goals. Knowledge supported this temporary seizing of power through violence, but it granted no control and therefore no freedom on its own.

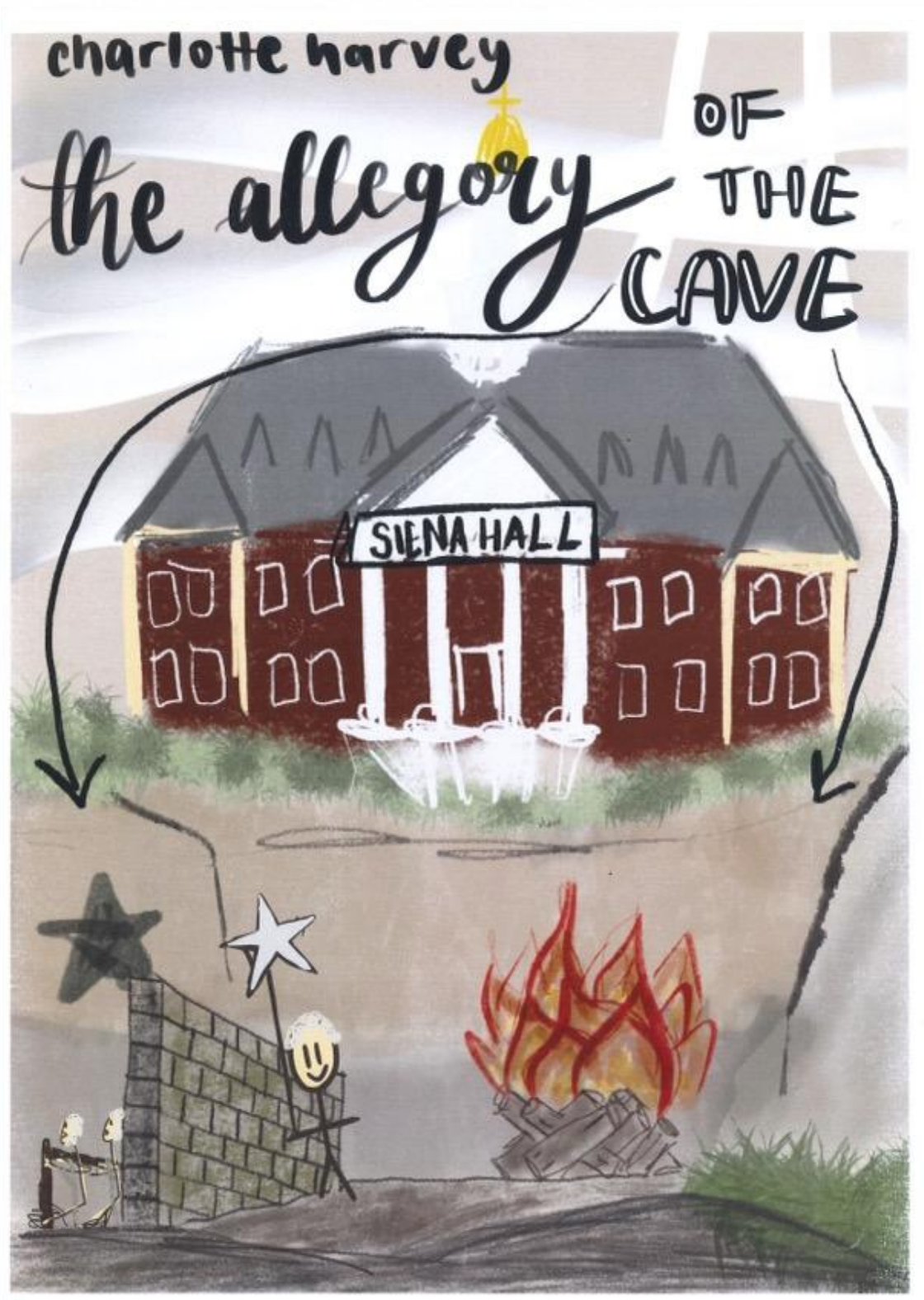
Knowledge does not constitute sufficient power to challenge those who hold more tangible forms of power, socially and/or physically. Returning to the inadvisable actions of the treasurer from *Game of Thrones*, even knowledge that presents the power to blackmail is limited by those who can have the blackmailer extrajudicially executed. This is perhaps not applicable to the lives of the vast majority of people, but still illustrates the point that just because knowledge can be a form of power lorded over certain groups of people does not mean that it grants power unequivocally. Instead, those who have power control how it is gained, sustained, and meted out to all members of a society.

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After reading Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," a required FYSM text, students in the Trauma Narratives class were tasked with drawing an illustration to explain the setting, plot, and main ideas Plato conveys. This is the drawing deemed to have most skillfully done so.

In reimagining Plato's allegory with a Siena Hall backdrop, the artist connects a timeless philosophical text to today, inviting viewers to reflect on learning, perspective, and the pursuit of truth.



In this event paper, the author adroitly uses a number of literary moves from They Say/I Say to assess the meaningful impact of Indigenous values on New York State environmental policies.

Learning from Indigenous Values to Protect the Environment

By: Henry Younghyun Joo

Dr. Liptak- Trauma Narratives

Since President Nixon's establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), America has spent a significant amount of capital to protect the environment. One of the factors that led to the establishment of EPA was the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*. In the book, Carson asserts that man-made pollutants severely damage ecosystems and marine life, posing a high risk to human health. While the best way to prevent pollution is still debated by environmentalists and scientists, Peter Reuben, the Director of the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Office of Indian Nation Affairs, proposes his own way to contribute to environmental protection: connecting and cooperating with Indigenous nations. Director Reuben's assertion is intriguing to me as his solution is a novel and alternative answer to the ongoing question of how to combat pollution, contrasting with the contemporary scientists' emphasis on statistical analyses and academic approaches. Some may criticize Director Reuben's solution as not applicable in modern urban planning and environmental protection due to the unscientific nature of traditional Indigenous knowledge. However, it is clear that Indigenous knowledge can provide our government with valuable guidance for allocating resources and funding more efficiently across environmental initiatives. I agree with Director Reuben's argument that working together with Indigenous nations is a crucial component of protecting the environment, and I further believe that both federal and state support for these nations should be expanded.

As the Director of the Office of Indian Nation Affairs, Reuben provides funds to and communicates with Indigenous nations to support them in protecting the environment. He worked with Indigenous nations that initially rejected New York State funding due to concerns about losing sovereignty after accepting such funding. He persuaded multiple nations to accept the funding, promising that the DEC has no intent to violate their sovereignty. After introducing himself, Reuben started his speech, "Care for Mother Earth," with *Gano:Nyok*, a Seneca Thanksgiving address that expresses a daily appreciation for all creation. The address praised how all creatures ultimately benefit us and enrich our lives. I was fascinated by how Indigenous people respect what they receive from nature, moving beyond mere praise to active stewardship. According to Reuben, Indigenous people believe there is no separation of nature from people's lives. Thus, they treat Mother Earth in the most respectful way to maintain the harmony between the people and the land. Reuben shared how he was introduced to traditional knowledge and environmentally friendly actions of the Indigenous nations. From

minute details to broad concepts, Indigenous people explained to Reuben their methods for successfully interacting with nature. Such consistent effort to extend the conversation between DEC and Indigenous nations led to successful incorporation of Indigenous actions into real world application. For example, DEC learned how to combat invasive species and prevent shoreline erosion by integrating Indigenous knowledge. I was so intrigued to learn more about how this knowledge could be integrated into the policies of DEC and environmental protection plans of New York State.

Tribal sovereignty grants tribes the right to make their own environmental protection laws, which lead to a significantly more conserved environment due to the tribes' prioritization of stewardship over monetization of the land. The laws often prevent companies from operating on Indigenous territories. This reminded me of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) located between North Korea and South Korea. In "A Silent Victim: How Nature Becomes a Casualty of War," Emily Anthes, a reporter for *The New York Times* and an animal health expert, writes about the DMZ, saying that "in the absence of people, it provides refuge for rare flora and fauna, including red-crowned and white-naped cranes, Asian black bears and possibly Siberian tigers" (Anthes). When people are not allowed to develop land for their own selfish purposes, nature flourishes. Both Anthes and Reuben assert that human activities often ruin the natural balance Mother Earth otherwise maintains. For me, it was hopeful to realize that areas unexposed to investors and companies, such as Indigenous nations in the United States or the DMZ in Korea, are free from the pressures of capital and development because similar efforts could be implemented more around the globe to preserve the natural world. Reuben emphasized how Indigenous nations influenced DEC's philosophy about environmental protection because, he says, "We also had to think about what does industry do ... What does human activity do to impact lifestyle, and what's in the world of an indigenous person" ("Care for Mother Earth" 00:25:39-56). Both Anthes and Reuben emphasize how lands without industrial influence are suitable for conservation. In the era of globalization, I have gained hope for a healthier planet and acknowledge the necessity to further expand federal and state support for tribal sovereignty.

It was a small glimpse I had into Indigenous people's wisdom about how to protect Mother Earth, but it was an impactful introduction to the perspective of Indigenous nations' ideas about environmental protection. Indigenous nations emphasize the humility of human beings in respect to Mother Earth. However, many people around the world still wrongly assume that nature exists as an infinite resource. Just as people ignore warning signs until they suffer a severe health crisis, humans exploit natural resources until they realize irreversible damage has occurred. Director Reuben's work inspired me to open my eyes to how we can expand the effort to protect Mother Earth by incorporating the wisdom of Indigenous nations.

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Addressing a very timely topic, the author of this research paper pulls together evidence from a number of sources to explore the injustice of the gender pay gap in sports.

The Gender Pay Gap: The Fight for Equality in Women's Sports

By Jalia Kacsh

Dr. Lewis- Constructing Identity

During the 2023 Women's Soccer World Cup, it was reported that female athletes earned 25 cents to every dollar in comparison to the male athletes (Scripps News, 2023). Through the history of athletics, there has been a prominent divide when it comes to gender prosperity, which is rooted in societal expectations about men and women. While women are expected to be domestic caretakers, nurturing, and physically delicate, men are expected to be competitive and dominant. This allowed men greater access to athletic competition and resources (Bell, 2008). For women, opportunities in athletics were severely limited and physical activity was often viewed as recreational rather than competitive. Even as women formed clubs and engaged in organized competition, their efforts were not recognized, and they lacked funding to provide for growing sports communities (Bell, 2008). These inequalities were then reinforced through the media, which revolutionized sports from local pastimes into global entertainment centered around male sports and athletes. Women who participated in sports were often seen as unladylike and masculine, reflecting deep-rooted gender biases. To this day, the persistent issue of the gender pay gap and investment in women's sports remains. Despite progress made by Title IX and the efforts of advocates for equality, female athletes continue to face unequal pay and recognition compared to their male counterparts; therefore, we must collaboratively address these disparities by increasing media coverage and resources in order to shift societal norms and create a future of equal opportunity.

One of the reasons women have had such limited opportunities in athletics is due to severe underfunding for female sports before the 21st century. According to Conner Barnes from the Illinois State Historical Society (2023), "In 1972, only 15 percent of intercollegiate athletes were women ... In 1973, the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC) spent \$2.5 million on their men's athletic department, and a total of \$4,500 of the entirety of their women's sports programs" (p. 84). Not for lack of interest, but for lack of investment, female collegiate athletics are continually under-represented. Of the college athletes at this large state university, only a very small percentage were female, and with fewer programs, the limited budget of \$4500 for women's sports was just .18% of the \$2.5 million men's athletics budget (Barnes, 2023). The lack of funding in women's collegiate athletics results in very few opportunities for women to further compete in professional athletics. While there are more opportunities today, this example reflects the long-standing gender inequality in sports and the need for equalized opportunity.

In an effort to address such serious gender inequality, the landmark Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 that prohibits sex-based discrimination in any federally funded program was passed (Barnes, 2023). Title IX gave hope to female athletes seeking greater participation and resources. However, “While Title IX undoubtedly advanced participation, funding, and representation in women’s sports, it also tried to put a lid on women’s activism, restricting the ideological framework and the material and cultural gains women could fight for within these institutions” (Barnes, 2023, p. 85). Title IX gave the appearance of equal rights; yet, women still struggled to reach the playing field in large part because it limited advocates' ability to demand more. Although Title IX was meant to address the widespread funding disparity between men and women’s athletics, universities believed it would bleed university money, “resulting in a loss of opportunity for both men and women athletes” (Barnes, 2023, p.84). Evaluating women's sports solely on direct revenue ignores benefits such as student recruitment, retention, graduation rates, and alumni engagement. Women’s athletics continue to experience disparities in pay and opportunities. However, research demonstrates that women's sports provide significant educational, leadership, and social benefits for athletes and their institutions (Indelicato, 2025). Not only does adding more women's sports allow for females to play at higher competitive levels, it improves the institution overall in setting and achieving higher standards. The battle that began in the 1970s continues to be fought by athletes from the little leagues to professional competitions.

Systemic underinvestment continues to create significant financial barriers for professional female athletes, further limiting their performance and career potential. According to a *Forbes* analysis (2024), “In 2024, the minimum salary in the WNBA was just over \$64,000 while the minimum salary in the NBA was just over \$1 million” (Choulet, para. 8), highlighting the massive pay disparity between male and female professional basketball players. This gap demonstrates that even in a popular sport, professional female athletes continue to earn a fraction of their male counterparts’ earnings, reinforcing the idea that their contributions to sport are less valuable. Choulet (2024) also explains that female athletes encounter additional challenges due to lower investment and resources. Specifically, “The reimbursement for medical and mental health services can be up to 50% lower for the WNBA side compared to the NBA side” (Choulet, 2024, para. 8). It is more of a challenge for women to afford the basic needs of a high-performing elite athlete, despite competing at the same professional level. This is on top of the fact that male professional athletes have much greater salaries than female professional athletes. For example, “Despite a record-shattering college career and a no-doubt No. 1 overall [WNBA] selection ... [Caitlin] Clark’s pay will escalate over the course of her four-year rookie contract, leaving her [only] with total earnings of \$338,056” (Vega, 2024). In comparison, the first overall NBA draft pick, Victor Wembanyama, signed a four-year contract with the San Antonio Spurs for \$55.1 million (Vega, 2024). With such a wide gender pay gap in the popular sport of basketball, the gap of financial stability is likewise widened. This is not a small inconsistency, but a difference of millions of dollars. As a result,

female athletes must spend a greater portion of their already limited salaries on maintaining their health, which is critical for professional level performance.

Athletics demand a great amount of sacrifice and commitment, both physically and mentally. Fewer resources and funding have “led to continued anxiety, resulting in almost two-thirds considering retirement from their sport due to financial pressures” (Choulet, 2024, para. 6). Optimal performance means their needs must be met with proper investment in facilities and resources. Sara Asbeck, based on her extensive knowledge as the manager of soccer operations, argues that “Female athletes often have access to inferior training facilities compared to male athletes. They may have less advanced equipment, fewer medical and support staff, and inadequate practice spaces” (Asbeck, 2025, para. 9). Inferior training facilities and inadequate practice spaces make the life of a female athlete more difficult, and potentially more dangerous. Female athletes who have a career in their sport depend on being paid equitable salaries. In the long term, when an athlete gets injured and is unable to compete, their families still depend on their financial contribution. This is the case for both male and female athletes, yet female athletes lack proper recovery time, well-equipped practice facilities, and proper medical attention.

Due to the continued underinvestment in women's sports, financial concerns force many female athletes to balance multiple responsibilities. Choulet (2024) attests that “[out of] 500 professional female athletes ... 78% earned \$50,000 or less from their sport in 2023, with 58% earning \$25,000 or less. For many of them, this income does not even cover the costs associated with competing at a professional level—travel, training, equipment, etc.” (para. 3). Often female athletes are unable to live off of these wages, while male athletes are earning much more. Since female athletes' income fails to cover basic training expenses, many of them need to pick up multiple jobs, creating additional stress and financial worry that interferes with their performance. In my experiences as an athlete for close to fifteen years, I have seen these differences at all levels, from the youngest sports program to college athletics. Women’s programs have less funding and female athletes have fewer opportunities to showcase their talent. Underinvestment in professional women's sports has a wide range of negative effects on both the athlete and their extended families.

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and funding for athletics, and it continues to prioritize male athletics while sidelining women. From a California State University study completed in 2021, Sarah, an interviewee using a pseudonym, points out that “when female athletes are seen in the media, they typically aren’t the main focus, and the female athletes who get the privilege to be showcased are the ones seen as the most successful and marketable” (Burt, 2008, p. 3). Referring to athletes as being “successful and marketable” measures females by their appearance. Although some women’s sports are covered, the depiction of female athletes in the media objectifies them and minimizes their talent. In the past few years, sponsorship and broadcasting have increased loyalty and media viewership. However, female athletics continue to suffer

fewer rights and unreliable sponsorships. Additionally, “Rights for women’s sports are currently priced much lower than they are for men’s sports, in terms of revenue per viewer hour” (Vonwiller et al., 2025, para. 4). This creates a cycle where fewer viewers mean the rights will be cheaper, resulting in lower salaries for female athletes.

Although there are gender disparities in terms of pay and resources in sports, strides have been made in the industry. Especially in tennis, there has been significant improvements in equalizing prize money and recognizing female athletes. Yet, tennis was not always this way. Tennis superstar Billie Jean King won 39 Grand Slam titles, while also advocating for gender equality. Despite being the number one ranked tennis player, “when she won the U.S. Open in 1972, King received \$15,000 less than the male champion” (Brandman, 2021, para. 5). After winning, King’s stance against the pay disparity was to say that she would give up her passion to play in order to show that women deserve equality without it needing to be earned. In 1973, King received global attention after winning a tennis match in the “Battle of the Sexes” against Bobby Riggs, a former professional tennis player (Brandman, 2021). By beating Riggs, King also defeated the idea that a woman is inferior to male athletes, having proved herself in front of a global television audience. King used her position as a successful female athlete to fight for a change. However, women should not have to constantly prove themselves in the fight for equality. Today, “All four Grand Slam tournaments now offer equal prize money to women” (UN Women, 2025, para. 6). In achieving this equality, tennis has demonstrated successes that can be achieved through persistent advocacy. Furthering the cause is the United States women’s national soccer team, which has been one of the most influential forces for gender equality in sports over the last decade. All 28 members of the team filed a federal lawsuit against the US Soccer Federation and reached a historic settlement that included a commitment to equalize pay. The 2022 settlement totaled \$24 million and became a landmark moment for women’s sports (Carlisle, 2022). This showcases the progress that can be made when successful female athletes advocate for gender pay equality.

Increasing viewership percentages and an effort to equalize prize money has allowed more female athletes the opportunity to compete. In a video by Scripps News (2023), a reporter from the 2016 Miami Open states, “Everyone thinks women should be thrilled when we get crumbs, ok, and I want women to have the cake” (0:05). Title IX, equalizing prize money, and slowly increasing media representation have been the so-called crumbs that women have fought for. Female sports have an opportunity to grow because when additional media channels broadcast women’s sports, viewership of women’s sports will continue to increase. “Between 2015 and 2021, total viewers for the women’s final have increased by 32%. While for men, it’s declined by 40%” (Scripps News, 2023, 3:19). This statistic proves that there is a growing fan base for female sports. Furthermore, when female athletes share broadcasting time and marketing promotions with men, the gap between viewer interest lessens. For instance, “U.S. audiences tend to be equally interested in male and

female athletes when it comes to the Olympics” (Scripps News, 2023, 3:55). Viewers can, and do, watch female sports. As American interest grows for women’s sports, progress toward an even playing field is becoming more apparent than ever.

While progress has been made, significant gaps in pay and resources remain. The media can help create a more equitable future and continue to challenge societal norms that otherwise keep women from the field and court. There is something special about a young girl seeing women on television compete and support each other. Through the efforts of past and current female athletes, with support from media outlets, improved resources have resulted from the enforcement of Title IX to the continued fight for commensurate opportunities. Society can continue to encourage the growth of women’s athletics. By closing the pay gap, expanding media representation, and investing in resources for female athletes, women will continue to move toward equality in sports.

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Using a clear They Say/I Say structure, the author of this essay for the Social Justice Unit delves into the necessary precursors for action to take place in order to build a more just society that aligns with Franciscan values.

“This Is Me”: The Empowering Anthem of Self-Worth

By Ro Yeon I. Lee

Dr. Haas- Music: The Soundtrack of Our Lives

A song that promotes self-empowerment challenges the underlying beliefs that sustain social injustice and therefore aligns with Franciscan values, which emphasize the inherent dignity of every human being and the importance of human flourishing achieved through compassion and inclusion. Empowering songs such as "This Is Me" by Kesha have been viewed negatively by many music critics who claim that although the music is powerful in terms of conveying the singer's emotions, it fails to address the root cause of social injustices. Critics believe that such songs emphasize boosting self-confidence and providing emotional comfort rather than sparking an actual collective push for societal change. However, what those critics fail to recognize is that music is a form of motivation for action against such social injustices. The lyrics of "This Is Me" address social justice themes by acting as an anthem for self-acceptance, empowerment, and the fight against marginalization. This matters since marginalization leads to greater inequality issues, such as unfair wages, lack of quality education, underrepresentation in government, and other society-destabilizing factors. Additionally, marginalization affects people on a personal level by causing depression and other mental health issues. Being mistreated or neglected by society leads to spiraling frustration and mental degradation that no human should ever have to face.

Kesha's "This Is Me" highlights the injustice of social exclusion by depicting how individuals are shamed for their differences. Shaming people for expressing individuality only hurts society by creating barriers among people. Kesha describes how some people make others feel shamed and excluded when she sings, "'hide away,' they say / 'cause we 'don't want your broken parts.'"¹ Although still feeling the pain from those hurtful messages, Kesha goes on to emphasize how she does not let that bring her down: "I am brave, I am bruised / I am who I'm meant to be, this is me."² Kesha makes the statement that regardless of the social injustices she faces, she will never let what others think of her change who she truly is. By empowering listeners to be themselves no matter the harmful treatment they face, Kesha offers a way to resist marginalization and exclusion. Encouraging individuals to recognize their worth helps create a society in which people are able to flourish, rather than feel ostracized, which is a core Franciscan value.

¹ Kesha, "This is Me," Track 7 on *The Greatest Showman: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, Atlantic Records, 2017, Spotify App.

² Kesha, "This is Me."

Listeners might argue that Kesha's message is limited, as self-acceptance is not a mechanism for institutional or policy change. From this perspective, the self-acceptance message seems more like a personal adjustment rather than a rallying call to listeners to protest broader societal issues. While this view is not necessarily incorrect, it does fail to consider the importance of culture in sustaining injustices. Society depends on shared beliefs. Those shared beliefs determine interpersonal behavioral boundaries, values, and ethics within a society. Changing those beliefs is a very necessary step toward broader reform of policies and social norms. This is reinforced by singer Sinéad O'Connor's open letter to Miley Cyrus regarding the music industry's treatment of her, where she says that "they will prostitute you for all you are worth and cleverly make you believe that it was what you wanted."³ This expresses O'Connor's view that exploitation and judgement of others has been normalized within the music industry, as well as society as a whole, which becomes problematic especially when it leads to mental degradation. Kesha confronts this social injustice issue in her song by unapologetically expressing herself and empowering others to do the same. By stressing the importance of recognizing the dignity and worth of all individuals, she promotes a more compassionate and just society, something the Franciscan tradition calls attention to.

The importance of "This Is Me" goes beyond its cultural impact. It speaks to listeners who feel marginalized, encouraging them to reject shame and instead defiantly embrace their self-worth. Achieving a more just society is not only about reforming policies or norms, but also about changing how people understand their own value as well as the dignity of those around them. This reflects a Franciscan understanding of human dignity, which holds that every person possesses inherent worth regardless of how society treats them. A society cannot achieve justice if individuals believe they are undeserving of that dignity because an inkling of social hierarchy leads to abuse of power and dehumanization. That contributes to the loss of confidence and mental health problems among those who are marginalized. By aligning with the Franciscan view of human dignity, Kesha's song pushes listeners to celebrate their own worth and shut out others' hurtful messages that cause doubt. Believing those messages tends to lead to deeper mental health issues, including depression, which only makes society more unjust and unhealthy. A just society is one that allows all individuals to flourish.

The lyrics of Kesha's song "This Is Me" address the social injustice issue of marginalization by acting as an anthem for self-acceptance and empowerment. This message aims to prevent excluded or marginalized individuals from developing mental health issues, such as depression, by emphasizing that each person has

³ Sinéad O'Connor, "Open Letter to Miley Cyrus," *The Guardian*, October 3, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/03/sinead-o-connor-open-letter-miley-cyrus>.

worth. Although the song may not necessarily bring about changes directly, it encourages listeners to feel differently than society would otherwise make them feel, which leads to the necessary steps toward social reform. “This Is Me” reinforces the Franciscan belief that every individual possesses inherent dignity and should be able to flourish without feeling shamed or excluded. Therefore, songs like Kesha’s are the needed spark for the engulfing flames of social justice reform.

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For their field trip, the Story Matters FYSM class saw Becky, Nurse of Salem, which served as a starting point for the topic of this essay. The author brings in both class-assigned and other texts along with real life examples to support her claim.

What is a Witch, and What is a Woman?

By Audrey Mason

Dr. Liptak- Story Matters

The Salem Witch Trials are famously known, inspiring most of the modern portrayals of witches in movies such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Hocus Pocus*. These movies include characters who are witches but ignore the history behind the term. This contributes to people's ignorance about how labeling a woman a witch was actually a way of persecuting them. Since the actions taken during witch trials are often disregarded as crazy, not much thought is given as to why such actions were taken. This is troubling because the reasoning behind the killings is very much present today. Violence against women is largely ignored by the media and therefore the general public, yet it continues throughout the world. One of the main reasons women still face persecution today is due to the inability of the media to present women in roles that depict them as something other than the stereotypical unruly woman or damsel in distress. These tropes, which have contributed to centuries of violence, have warped society's view of what it means to be a woman. For any advancement in gender equality to occur, the media must first change how it depicts women for it has the most significant influence upon misogynistic culture.

The trope of the unruly woman is used to shame women who stand up against oppressive gender norms. Women who question authority and, especially, the patriarchy, are presented as unlikable, rash, and stupid. This prejudice is not at all new; during the Salem Witch Trials over 300 years ago, independent and intelligent women were accused of being demonic and evil. These accusations resulted in the torture and killing of many women. As Emily Warrender, a senior editor at Open Access Government states, "The prejudices that led to witch hunts haven't completely disappeared. It's still the case that women—especially odd-seeming, mouthy ones—often feel the anger of the men" (Warrender). Vocal women were and are still ostracized for acting outside ladylike societal expectations. Women who knew how to read, practiced medicine, or attempted to partake in leadership activities within their communities were commonly accused of witchcraft. The idea that outspoken women are unruly has not gone away, largely due to how women are portrayed by the

media. The most significant creator and reinforcer of culture is the media, for it both reflects and shapes how people view the world. When people see unruly women portrayed in the media, such as Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City*, they begin to associate the outspoken, free women as irrational, flawed, and unlikeable. This is not to say that women in the media always need to be likeable or perfect, but when creating a character who opposes gender norms, a great deal of caution is necessary. As with Carrie Bradshaw, and most other depictions of the unruly woman, the true violence of the patriarchy is glazed over, making the woman seem irrational or stupid for fighting against the patriarchy for no clear reason. The unruly woman is not unlikable because she is independent, but because she is created specifically to be unlikable. For the audience, though, her characteristics blend together and the woman becomes unlikable simply because she is independent. By reducing the complexities of oppression and the struggle for autonomy under the patriarchy to just the trope of the unruly woman, people begin to view the unconventional woman as detestable. Thus, women tend to avoid boisterous and outspoken behavior as it is portrayed so unfavorably in the media.

Rather than being autonomous, the traditional gender norm for women is that they are dependent on men. Women being viewed as weak and helpless coexists with the characterization of strong women as disobedient and unrestrained. Thus, the most common depiction of women in the media is the damsel in distress trope. This trope is present in almost every genre, from superhero movies to horror films; the woman in need of saving is a consistently prevalent cliché. To see just how extensive the damsel in distress trope is in our society, it is important to look at how we tell history. Women are often presented in history as secondary leaders who are reliant on men. This idea is apparent when Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones makes the argument that the Civil Rights Movement “pave[d] the way” for women’s rights. Even though women fought for their rights through years of turmoil and oppression, their struggle is being portrayed as piggy backing off of black people’s battle for equality during the Civil Rights Movement. This creates the idea that women were given their rights, handed them by men who worked harder than they did. The concept that women, even when fighting for their essential rights, are dependent on men, is deeply sexist. Dependency is inherently a sign of weakness, a highly resented characteristic in our society. The media constantly portrays women as weak, the most common example being the classic fairytale princess. The weak woman waiting to be rescued by the strong prince is one of the most common

tropes in media, spanning throughout almost all genres of film. Disguised under romance and heroism is deep rooted sexism. As the trope is repeated over and over again, the audience begins to find the damsel irritating and useless, creating a layer of dislike associated with women who lack autonomy. Simultaneous with this growing hatred towards weak women, the idea that women naturally lack autonomy is pushed by the media, and therefore women are yet again viewed negatively.

The overuse of the damsel in distress and unruly woman tropes in the media enable men to view women as inferior human beings, either because they are loud and unlikable or because they are weak and lack autonomy. By continually portraying women onscreen as one of two dislikable tropes, women in real life are similarly categorized. Real life women are pushed into these dislikable tropes, facing the same hatred fictional women do. Witches, the ultimate depiction of unruly women, are now commonly and unquestioningly portrayed in the media as evil monsters, which ignores the fact that women accused of witchcraft were persecuted, tortured, and executed. As Warrender tries to remind people, "Thousands of innocent people were executed, leaving behind a legacy of fear, trauma, and social disruption." By focusing on the physical and psychological impact of the trials, Warrender encourages compassion and understanding. She emphasizes that these women were victims, which is very unlike how they are portrayed in the media today. It is important to note that not only outspoken women were killed during witch trials, but also women who were seen as weak. Women who seemed dependent on men, and thus easily targeted, were often beaten, accused, and killed (Warrender). Although the patriarchy uplifts and praises the dependent woman while villainizing the independent one, both categorizations yield the same result: violence against women.

The negative portrayal of women in the media through the overuse of these tropes not only distorts men's view of women, but women's view of themselves. The conflicting expectations for women makes it impossible for women to navigate their identity and avoid the threat of violence. The ideal woman, someone who is viewed as an equal to men, does not exist in any form of media, as it does not exist in reality. There is no blueprint for a woman who can be viewed positively, leaving women only with examples from the media of what not to act like. This leads to a hypercritical analysis of women judging themselves as well as the women around them. During the Salem Witch Trials, a large percentage of the accusations actually came from women and young girls, showing how oppression can make women turn against one another. The lack of unity among

women is not a phenomenon nor an accident; it is a direct effect of the patriarchy. One would rarely see African Americans who do not support Black rights, or gay people who are against LGBTQ+ rights, yet it is common to see women speaking against other women and the feminist movement.

Many argue women turning on other women is simply because in such a large heterogeneous group, there are bound to be more extreme differing opinions. However, this ignores the history of women in America and the entire world. Due to the ignorance about the violence and sexism women face, sexist tropes continue to shape how society views women. This is seen when Hannah-Jones, while attempting to retell the history of America in a more accurate way, writes about lynching of Black Americans in Mississippi for crimes such as “entering a room occupied by white women, bumping into a white girl or trying to start a sharecroppers union.” Here, Hannah-Jones chooses to make two out of her three examples focused on women, rather than focusing on the men who actually murdered African Americans. This ignores the fact that women were only defended in this vile way because men viewed them as weak and helpless, and she also ignores the fact that women at the time were also being violently oppressed. White women of the time were characterized as damsels in distress in order to undermine women and demonize Black men. This is not to say that what Hannah-Jones was saying is untrue; many African Americans were, indeed, lynched for even glancing at white women. By choosing examples specific to women, though, Hannah-Jones focuses the blame on women of the time. Although perhaps not intentional, this is an example of how women judge and persecute fellow women. This is because our movies, TV shows, history books, newspapers, and so much more have pushed sexist tropes of women, creating a society where women despise each other.

The constant media portrayal of women as either the damsel in distress or the unruly woman creates harmful expectations for women in real life. The combination of historical violence and enforced expectations on women has led to a lack of unification among women, preventing gender equality. This allows for violence against women to continue throughout the world. According to the United Nations, almost 140 women are killed every day, equating to one woman every ten minutes, while over 1,000 women are raped every day, often by close family or friends (UN Women). The portrayal of women in the media gives little room for women to be seen as human beings, allowing for a cultural acceptance of this extreme violence against women. Change is necessary in order to unite women and help end such violence and that change must begin with

how women are portrayed in the media.

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The 39th annual Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King Lecture Series keynote speaker was Dr. Stella Safo. This author examines Dr. Safo's remarks and the impact they had on his own conception of justice and social change in this response essay.

Looking Beyond: Health Equity, Justice, and Systemic Change

By Drew McDonnell

Dr. Stein- Out of Bounds

In February I had the opportunity to sit in on a lecture by Stella Safo, an advocate for equality in healthcare, and I learned that a decade of life can separate two people living only a few subway stops apart. Dr. Stella Safo's lecture challenged me to understand why disparities like this exist and what justice requires us to do about them. The MLK Jr. lecture presented by Dr. Safo caused me to shift my perspective about justice-related issues. I walked into the lecture thinking that we would learn about healthcare disparities. I was not expecting to leave with such a clear understanding of how equality, equity, and justice are different, or to heed the pointed charge to pay attention to systems rather than just outcomes. Dr. Safo tied her lecture to Dr. King's words and legacy by focusing on systems of power, structural inequality, and moral agency.

Dr. Safo communicated many important points, but what stood out to me most was her breakdown of fundamental concepts. She explained that disparity simply means there is a difference being measured between two groups. However, equity asks us to think about why there is a difference and who benefits from that difference. Justice goes one step further by remedying the systems that create such differences. We often learn about issues like systemic racism and think only about outcomes. When studying redlining, for example, we can look at statistics and loss of wealth without considering how policies created and reinforced those outcomes. Dr. Safo helped me connect the concept of root cause to such effects. For instance, she discussed how food deserts (areas where affordable nutritious foods cannot be found very easily) lead to higher rates of high blood pressure, and how those food deserts are linked to segregated neighborhoods and historic housing discrimination. Past policies create systems that cause outcomes we see today. Acknowledging disparity or advocating for equity will not fully address those outcomes because they do not affect the systems in place; seeking justice, however, does just that.

For me, looking at the disparities in life expectancy between neighborhoods in NYC clearly showed the importance of focusing on justice to fix the systems that created uneven outcomes in the first place. I had not considered that a person living in one NYC neighborhood could accurately be

predicted to live over a decade longer than a neighbor just a few subway stops away. Some areas provide much less opportunity than others. Policies and systems already in place, that we have little control over, end up dictating our health. It made me think of how fortunate I have been to grow up where I did with the opportunities that I have had. Access to grocery stores was never a concern. I never once worried about whether the doctors taking care of me knew how to treat me or whether the medical devices they used would work accurately on me due to my race. Sometimes doing justice work means first noticing one's privilege.

It's not enough, though, to acknowledge privilege and its counterpart, implicit bias. Dr. Safo pointed out that there has been implicit bias training for healthcare workers for decades and it has not moved the needle on healthcare outcomes because so often inequities are embedded in the healthcare system. When she explained how kidney function is still calculated using race-based algorithms and how pulse oximeters often under-read oxygen levels in darker skin patients, it was infuriating. Racism is not always intentional or obvious; it is often built into so-called objective tools, which then serve to maintain systemic oppression. The only way to rectify this is to move beyond acknowledging racism to seek justice.

As a physician and a patient, Dr. Safo learned how biases in the healthcare system can influence how patients are perceived, treated, and cared for. When she spoke about not being believed by medical professionals until they realized she was a doctor herself, it made me think about how perceptions can be altered purely by one's status and profession. While I have never been faced with racist perceptions of me in a healthcare setting, I, like most, have had people underestimate me or make assumptions about me. Listening to Dr. Safo made me realize times that I might have also made assumptions about someone based on how they presented without considering the systems that may have created the behavior I observed. Dr. Safo's lecture reaffirmed that we need to lean into the discomfort of self-reflection so that we can begin to acknowledge disparities and inequities if we are ever going to help bring about justice.

To bring about a more just society, we need leaders. Dr. Safo's lecture made me think about how I define leadership. Dr. Safo is a leader not just because she is a physician; she is a leader because she names the problem, designs a solution, and then extends the invitation for others to do the work with her. As I think about my future and working with people in organizations within systems already in place, I know that structural inequity will be something I will constantly

encounter. Whether I end up working in healthcare or not, I will endeavor to use the lens she taught me: look at the root cause, question the institution's practices, and invite those who are affected to the table. This kind of leadership is vital for changing unjust systems.

In a way, this is restorative justice at work: looking at a problem, naming harm, working to redress it, and returning to the community to uphold a solution is a kind of restorative practice. It emphasizes healing, accountability, and community repair. Dr. Safo asserted that "those closest to the pain should be closest to the power." There is a disconnect when it comes to who gets to make decisions that affect marginalized communities. Those who experience the least negative effects from inequity are often the people in positions of power making such decisions. Dr. Safo's healing arc framework necessitates acknowledgement of harm and engagement of those most affected by healthcare inequalities in the design of solutions. Her work focuses on the experiences of marginalized patients and communities as a means to challenge the systems and practices that perpetuate disparities in healthcare, a form of restorative justice.

The current political climate complicates efforts to acknowledge and address inequality, as concepts related to equity have become increasingly politicized. The negative connotation associated with the label of someone being woke and the constant criticism of Critical Race Theory causes people to avoid conversations about systemic inequality. Hearing that even large organizations, such as hospitals, will step back from doing equity work because they cannot discuss such things is truly disheartening. However, as Dr. Safo said, we cannot let our enemies set the terms of our justice work. Just as Dr. King was met with resistance in his time, seeking justice is never an easy path to follow.

Dr. Safo tied Dr. King's legacy to today's fight for justice by discussing health inequity. The opportunity to live a long, healthy life should not be a privilege. Access to resources that can prevent diseases or manage chronic illness should be available to all. Dr. Safo's lecture emphasized the need to recognize systemic injustice and individual moral responsibility. But more than that, her lecture challenged me to consider my own role within the systems I exist in. Instead of looking at disparities as alarming statistics, I now view them as the effects of systems that can be identified and changed. And that is how I believe we will move closer to justice.

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This writer reflects on cultural exchange as a means for cultivating empathy as a result of her class field trip.

From Tacos to Understanding: Reducing Biases Between Americans and Refugees

By Natalie E. Melvin

Prof. D'Souza- Exploring Food

Refugees flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence. Unable to return home, they apply to resettle in a country such as the United States in hopes of living in a safer, more stable environment. After a laborious process of background checks and screenings, likely two years have passed, and they can finally make a new home. Yet, even after years of tedious applications and vetting, refugees frequently encounter an environment where their presence is met with uncertainty and hostility rather than openness. Upon arrival, they are often racially profiled and unfairly persecuted by native born citizens and even the American government. Refugees are forced to accept that the country they hoped would protect them is now targeting them, and that some Americans are complicit in this because of incorrect assumptions they have about refugees. As a result, the barriers between refugees and citizens grow larger, and are reinforced with confirmation bias. To reduce the ever growing disconnect, everyone should put more effort into cultural exchange, which would allow each side to ask questions and learn from the responses, thus creating empathy.

Cultural exchanges are simple to arrange and can significantly change native born Americans' views of refugees. One organization that facilitates such cultural exchanges is the West Hill Refugee Welcome Center, based in Albany, that is committed to helping "connect individuals and families with support services, resources, and safe housing. The Refugee Welcome Center also advocates for education and other skill-building opportunities that contribute to the personal success and self-sufficiency of refugees, as they rebuild their life and adjust to our diverse area" ("Our Story"). Our class visited the West Hill Refugee Center to participate in a cooking demonstration by a Mexican refugee named Alejandra. She showed us how to make tacos, a dish native to her home country, but also one of the most popular and widely consumed foods in the U.S. Most Americans do not consider that this well-liked food was brought here by Mexican refugees. While Alejandra cooked, we were encouraged to help her prepare ingredients and ask questions. Several students, including me, spoke to her in Spanish. Even though there were varying degrees of fluency and comprehension in the room, that display of engaging with her culture is an example of how easy it is to break down the barriers that otherwise keep refugees and Americans separated. Conversing in Spanish allowed us to establish a deeper connection. It made me think about how human beings are all the same because when someone makes an effort to show they care, it makes a person feel like they belong. Especially after a person leaves their home country and moves to a new one, it must be particularly meaningful to hear their native language, make ancestral foods, and have their culture celebrated. As I was slicing pineapple, I wondered why some people

continue to believe negative stereotypes about refugees because the woman I got to know was not the kind of person presented in the negative narratives present in many Americans' minds. Alejandra was kind, encouraged students to participate, and made us feel welcome. Our visit with her was a meaningful cultural exchange that allowed us to correct the narrative we have heard and learn more about one another, which lessens the social gap between Americans and refugees.

Cultural exchanges centered around food are not only easily orchestrated, but also historically important. Sarah Khan, former Editor in Chief of *Condé Nast Traveler Middle East*, and award-winning freelance travel writer, wrote about the historical significance of cultural exchange through food in "Eating Bunny Chow in Durban." In her travels to the coastal city of Durban, she recounts how bunny chow, an Indian South African dish that consists of a hollowed-out loaf of white bread filled with spicy curry, came to be. The Indian population in Durban, she notes, stems from "the indentured laborers in the 1860s, followed soon after by an opportunistic merchant class who opened businesses catering to this growing community" (Khan). Before Apartheid, Indian and black South Africans lived closely, sharing language and food. As a result, traditional Indian cuisine evolved by using South African techniques and spices rather than ones from the motherland, making it unique to this region. During Apartheid, however, these ties lessened. Under harsh racial codes and strict policing, the Indians of Durban had to improvise. As Khan explains: "When a cuisine is exiled from its homeland and the threads that bind it become more and more frayed, and when it's pollinated thousands of miles away with politics and oppression, a culinary evolution like Durban's is inescapable. And in that context a bunny chow is not so much a cultural quirk as it is a symbol of survival" (Khan). As black South Africans were increasingly excluded from most restaurants, Indians began to serve them curries in bowls of bread instead of dishware, without a piece of cutlery or container to show for it, to avoid suspicion. Instead of allowing fear of punishment to stop them from interacting, black and Indian South Africans came closer together by maintaining their shared cuisine, even when it was frowned upon to do so. In this sense, bunny chow emerged as a record of how cross-cultural exchange under oppressive conditions can create resilience and goodwill among oppressed groups. When there is a desire, people find ways to avoid nonsensical policies and reject negative stories that they have been told about a group labeled as foreign in order to create meaningful cultural exchanges that break down the barriers among people, whether that is half way around the world or in our own community.

Visiting the Refugee Welcome Center was more than just slicing pineapple and eating tacos; it was about changing our perspectives and allowing for peaceful cultural exchange between people who are frequently pitted against each other. When we are compassionate and curious about one another, we can correct the stereotypes built on unchecked bias, replacing fear with familiarity.

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This personal reflection essay was written to fulfill a family interview assignment. In it, the author's strong voice comes through, compelling the reader to deeper understanding of what it means to be Afghan American.

Between Privilege and Deprivation: The Consequences of an Afghan American Identity

By Samia Musleh

Dr. Stein- Out of Bounds

Some people are shaped by a single place, while others are shaped by the distance between two. As an Afghan American, I have always struggled with an internal conflict over which side of opposing extremes resonates with me more. My day-to-day life is similar to that of the average American, but my blood, the values my family holds, and culture is not. Many times, it feels as if I don't belong anywhere at all. My gender is treated as unholy back home, and my faith is treated as terrorism in the United States. The closest I can come to understanding the realities of my lineage is by listening to the experiences of my family members who lived it firsthand. In doing so, I realized that my Afghan American identity is more contradictory than I thought, torn between two worlds of privilege and deprivation.

Unlike many other Americans, my lineage is clear to me as my parents themselves are immigrants. In my family, our cultural background is taught from a very early age, so when I conducted an interview with my grandmother, I found that I already knew a lot of what she told me. However, one thing that particularly struck me was my grandmother's calm response when I asked her about the education ban for women. She responded in Pashto, "It is what it is; it is a bad thing of course, but at least people are not dying." Honestly, I found it quite sad that the bar for happiness is so low for my people. I believe a lot of this has to do with the phenomenon of geographical luck or the idea that a person's quality of life and future prospects are predetermined by where on the map they were born. My grandmother's life reflects the consequences of this reality. Born in Afghanistan, she was forced to leave school due to the Soviet invasion and move to Pakistan where my grandfather was brutally murdered by a nativist mob. Because my grandmother was not as fortunate in where she was born, she lost both her education and her love. Such experiences have unfortunately become common amongst my people because of the long years of war, and so just the bare minimum is enough to make them content. It does not matter that the country is at an utter economic and social plateau since half of the population can't receive an education because the absence of consistent violence and death reveals a form of base-line stability that was never available for people who have

only known war. The interview taught me less about what my family lineage is, and more about the differences in perception between my grandmother and me as a result of who has had privilege and who has not.

In a continuum between privilege and oppression, I am definitely located on the end of privilege. I have been privileged enough to be born with a roof over my head, have access to education, and have a sense of security that I am not promised to have in Afghanistan. Even if I face racism in the U.S., nothing will compare to the loss my family and my people have endured. I can think of hardly any instances where my family back home has experienced privilege. After being forced to flee their homeland because of war, they were only further oppressed in Pakistan. Even in a so-called safe zone, my family was never fully at peace, nor did they have an established sense of security. While I can feel out of place in the U.S. from time to time, I still have a place to call home; the rest of my family simply never had that. The one privilege my immediate family did have was the opportunity to come here. While our situation is one of privilege compared to my relatives struggling back home whose papers were not approved, that does not mean our lives are completely comfortable. In a conversation with my father about the Trump Administration, he told me how despite being a citizen, he still does not feel like he belongs. Having taken advantage of the opportunity the United States had to offer him and providing security for his family, he said he is jealous of people who stayed in their country of origin and tried to make a living because at least they had a sense of belonging. Although my family and I are privileged enough to live in the United States and receive its many benefits, no amount of wealth can compensate for the loss of identity. I have learned it is a great and overlooked luxury for one to succeed in their country of origin.

The gaps in privilege between those who have spent the majority of their lives in a war-torn country and those born in a first world country not only shape what they know, but how they perceive it. From a young age I have been educated about my lineage, the food we eat, what we wear, what we sing, how we celebrate, and of course the most prevalent of all, our country's recurring presence in the political world. What I failed to realize prior to this interview is the difference between my perception of Afghan culture and the perceptions of my older family members. It is due to privilege that some of my concerns are the least of their concerns. Given the general lack of privilege my family had and the relative opportunities I have been blessed with, I feel it is my responsibility to take advantage of them. My family background has inspired me to try to

become the best version of myself. It has inspired me to appreciate every aspect of a secure life. It has inspired me to stand strong in the face of oppression. Despite the struggles associated with being born there, my family continues to love Afghanistan, as if it had fed them endless amounts of wealth. Even in the face of bloodshed and warfare, the memory of one's homeland is unlike that of any other place. Perhaps one day I will gain even more privilege and be able to visit my country in a time of peace. Considering Afghanistan is strategically placed at the heart of Asia, surrounded by only power-thirsty enemies, and has an unstable government that shifts in power against the will of the people, I am not sure when that time will arrive. Hopefully one day I will see Afghanistan on the news for winning at the Olympics and not for being bombed, and see spots of pomegranate juice on the mountains instead of bloodshed, and to hear echoes of laughter through the bird markets that once only knew the sound of explosions.

In this research paper, the writer uses a wide variety of sources to explore the centuries of injustice meted out to Indigenous people and how that injustice highlights the flaws rife within the American legal system.

Between Law and Land: Indigenous Rights Confront American Legal Hypocrisy

By Abigail O'Neill

Prof. Glynn- Anti-Racism and Social Justice

Imagine a group of colonizers stealing your land, and not honoring your rights and culture for centuries, and then they steal your ideas, too. This is the situation facing Indigenous people—the one activists such as Winona LaDuke have fought against for many years. The American government's treatment of Indigenous people has not gotten better, but it has changed. Physical battles have been traded for legal battles, characterized by a cultural divide between the parties making these battles more complex. Ironically, as these battles are fought in courts, Indigenous restorative justice ideas are being appropriated to try to reform America's flawed criminal justice system. Although some justify this appropriation by suggesting that using these ideas honors Indigenous people while fixing a flawed system, the reality is that the criminal justice system using these practices highlights its inherent racism and hypocrisy. The hypocrisy comes from using these Indigenous practices for other people in our legal system, but not allowing the founders of the ideas to use them to fight for their own rights.

There were many ways that Indigenous activists fought for their rights other than through the court system. These included protests, rallies, and other forms of speaking out. In response, though, "Indian activists [were] harassed, jailed, and, sometimes, even killed" (Arlen, 1980). This led to the concept that non-legal ways of fighting might not work. The violent responses suggested that such people did not respect Indigenous lives, let alone their ideas. There had to be a safer way to go about fighting those who attempted to hold Indigenous groups down and steal what was rightfully theirs; thus, Indigenous activists turned to the courts.

Legal battles replaced violent clashes, but that did not mean the outcomes were better. Brett Clark (2002), a sociologist from the University of Oregon, explores this shift to the legal system, noting that in Washington in the 1960s, "Native Americans ... won several court cases establishing the right to fish lands that were promised in the treaties" (p. 419). Establishing that court cases were occasionally won is important; however, it is also important to acknowledge that if this was the only way for Indigenous people to regain the rights to their lands, it would be a strenuous and costly

process. Court cases often take an extremely long time. In addition, no two cases are the same, so the outcomes are unpredictable. Some people might assume that the move toward adjudication is a good thing because it created more justice for Indigenous people. Nothing could be further from the truth. Something as simple as the right to ask companies not to pollute the land on which a person lives should be a guaranteed win in a court case, especially when there is a treaty that prohibits such things. Yet, this is not the case, as not every decision has been in the Indigenous peoples' favor. Court cases replacing violent clashes has not often produced good results for Indigenous people.

In addition to court cases often not being decided in Indigenous people's favor, the cultural differences between the United States legal system and that of Indigenous groups are difficult to navigate. To do so, one must first understand that there is a cultural disconnect. This is not to say that Indigenous people are not smart enough to understand the American legal system, but simply that, as scholar activists J. Kehaulani Kauanui and Winona LaDuke (2018) note, "You couldn't explain to people what was going on, because they didn't have a way to describe it conceptually" (p. 159). Indigenous plaintiffs will not have a fair chance if they do not understand the nuances of the U.S. legal system. This results in their reliance upon third parties like LaDuke to help with these proceedings. LaDuke was involved in many lawsuits but because she was not a formal legal representative, she could not be present in court, leaving the Indigenous plaintiff again at a loss. Some might say that Indigenous people should simply seek representation when they go to court, but legal representation is costly, and the Indigenous population remains the "most impoverished racial group in the United States" (Clark, 2002, p. 411). Without proper representation, Indigenous people face a serious obstacle to getting their lands back.

It is not just the courts that present serious difficulties for Indigenous people; the executive branch can do much harm, as well. Americans often elect people based on the principles they promise to uphold, principles like guaranteed rights and equality, but they do not always act according to such principles, particularly when it comes to Indigenous people's rights. LaDuke expressed her disappointment in the Biden Administration for its lack of respect in honoring promises made to Indigenous groups (Marchese, 2021). LaDuke felt as many Indigenous people do—betrayed—because she had advocated for Biden and he then supported a new project involving a pipeline being built right through a reservation of the Ojibwe tribe (Marchese, 2021). This lack of respect for Indigenous people in the legal and political systems is the basis for the justice system

failing them. It is evident in how the courts have allowed “lumber companies and other nonnative groups to take over more than 90 percent of the land” (Brandman, 2021) that belongs to Indigenous people. This practice was not just something that happened hundreds of years ago when White people moved to the Americas; it is still happening today. Some people would argue that Indigenous people having the right to petition the court should be enough since in some other countries even this right is denied, but this right does not have much meaning if justice is not served.

When the colonizers took control of Indigenous lands, Indigenous groups already had a legal system. The colonizers, though, considered this legal system illegitimate. Yet, today there are efforts to implement reforms involving restorative justice practices, which are based on principles with Indigenous legal system roots. This kind of cultural appropriation is problematic, as noted by scholar and social activist Fania E. Davis (2019), who points out that “the indigenous ethos of restorative justice is not to sanction cultural appropriation” (p. 20). It is hypocritical to adopt Indigenous practices and then not use them to actually help Indigenous people in their legal battles to retain and reclaim their land. The specific restorative practices currently getting a lot of attention focus on the concept of community, especially that “a person is a person through their relationships” (Davis, 2019, p. 18). This conceptually means that an individual’s personality, their values, and the core of who they are is developed based on who they surround themselves with. While it is popular to think that an individual is their own person who thinks and acts independently, people’s actions are most influenced by who they are around, for better or worse. The American criminal justice system is influenced by those who control it and therefore the reforms are sending a mixed message: first, that these are beneficial reforms that should be implemented and second, that those who created the ideas these reforms are based on are not worthy of getting to use them. The hypocrisy driven by racism that is extremely evident within the legal system makes the system much less effective. It is hard to trust a system that has adopted the motto that justice is blind. This has been at the forefront of our legal system as a way to ensure equality of all before the law. However, justice cannot be blind for the average citizen and biased for Indigenous groups. If this is the case, then justice is no longer blind and unbiased. Indigenous people are not able to use their own systems, not because of anything they did, but simply because of who they are. Allowing Indigenous groups to have a voice when it comes to legal procedures is of the utmost importance, and once these restorative practices

are allowed to be used by their founders, then the legal system will be more just.

Addressing hypocrisy is incredibly important for addressing the root of the racial issue. The first step to addressing the injustice meted out to Indigenous people is to get rid of negative stereotypes and negative images of Indigenous people. These stereotypes, often based simply on someone's appearance, are incredibly harmful and lead to justifications that Indigenous people do not deserve the legal rights to their land. Yet, Indigenous individuals who do try to assimilate are criticized for "no longer corresponding with the image of natives living in harmony with nature" (Cooke & Hezri, 2021, p. 217). Such judgments often cloud the criminal justice system's treatment of Indigenous plaintiffs. Winona LaDuke is striving to make progress on this front through the White Earth Land Recovery Project, which is "one of the largest reservation based non-profit organizations in the country," currently advocating for and supporting projects whose goal is to improve the circumstances surrounding Indigenous peoples' rights to their land (Center for Humans & Nature, 2026). Centers like these are incredibly important for supporting Indigenous groups in their time of need. With the support of different organizations, it is more likely that Indigenous groups get more help with legal battles, which in turn increases the chances of a positive outcome. In the ongoing fight to reclaim their land and their rights, this support is essential.

It is important to understand that the legal system lacks justice when it comes to Indigenous groups. Undertaking reforms based on traditional Indigenous practices without utilizing those practices in dealings with Indigenous people highlights the systemic racism and hypocrisy in America's legal system. Indigenous people were stripped of their rights and their lands. The only just way to address this is to acknowledge and overcome the racism inherent in the legal system.

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Relating their experience of an on-campus event to the required summer reading text, Belonging, by Geoffrey Cohen, this author makes the case that Siena could better live up to its Franciscan ideals if students made more of an effort to connect with one another.

How the World Can Be Connected as One

By Logan Opalka

Prof. Glynn- Anti-Racism and Social Justice

Belonging happens when an individual feels included in a group of people who are actively creating a welcoming environment for them. Today, sadly, this does not often happen. Before people can make others feel supported and accepted, they must become more aware of and willing to acknowledge those who have different cultures, races, and ethnicities. This awareness can bridge the individual divides that otherwise exist when people focus only on differences and allow those differences to cause separation. Without a sense of belonging, issues commonly arise on college campuses, even here at Siena University. On a daily basis, students do not take the time to acknowledge one another. To build a stronger community here at Siena, we need to emphasize how important it is to create a sense of belonging because it affects everyone. We need to take action and avoid contributing to a world where people continue to divide because of a lack of knowledge of others.

To increase awareness of others and bridge the divide that separates, people must first resist creating or continuing to hold misconceptions about others who are unlike themselves. This is especially important on college campuses because there are many students who feel isolated due to how others react to their background or appearance. Geoffrey Cohen (2022) explains that “people can be oblivious to the real reasons they hold the thoughts and feelings they do” (p.199). When college students are not aware of their own biases toward others, they are likely to avoid engaging with them, and this often comes across as judgment or lack of empathy. Cohen (2022) advises that “simply ... getting to know each other better, building more authentic relationships and learning how to provide more individualized support” can make a significant difference (p.201). Making connections allows people to learn about one another and how to provide the support someone needs, all of which would help increase their sense of belonging. Although it can be initially difficult to connect with people and understand them, Cohen (2022) says:

We can’t, and shouldn’t, try to stop getting a good read on others. Positive social interactions

and the connections that support belonging depend to some degree on people's ability to read others well ... Our misreadings too often rewrite situations for the worse. (p. 206)

When we continue to misread others, we miss out on positive interactions. Our judgments keep us from talking to new people, which, in turn, does not improve our confidence in reaching out to people in the first place.

Misreading others is especially apparent on college campuses, including Siena University, and causes many students to just walk past each other in an unfriendly manner after making quick assumptions about them. As a Franciscan institution, we should make the effort to have positive interactions with one another. That way, our community will be more connected, and everyone will feel accepted. Being accepted allows people to feel more psychologically safe in their surroundings. In her TED Talk, scholar-activist Carin Taylor (2022) explores the importance of establishing connections for reducing unfair judgment based on how someone looks. Feeling judged leads to a lack of psychological safety, an important tenet of belonging. Making the effort to be friendly rather than judge someone not only helps them, but helps you become a better person because it develops empathy, which is another important tenet of belonging sorely lacking on college campuses.

Creating a sense of belonging is not just something we do for other people, then. Taylor (2022) explains that belonging is, in fact, a two-way street. We need to make sure other people feel like they belong in their surroundings. However, we also have to feel like we belong at the same time. A person cannot create a welcoming environment for others if they do not feel like they belong. We all want to experience the feeling of belonging, of being embraced. This means we are accepted and have the support we need. If a person feels like they are the only one experiencing something, they will not feel like they belong (TEDxSonomaCounty, 2022). When people are ignorant of others' racial, ethnic, or cultural background, then those students will feel isolated from everyone else. No one at Siena University should be made to feel alone. As a Franciscan institution, one of our core values should be to make our community close and embracing. Our community should hold high regard for the way each individual is treated and create that sense of belonging as a two-way street.

It is imperative that we begin to make our Siena community more about belonging for everyone because not doing so has implications in the wider world we will one day be a part of. In the real world, there are so many people who feel alone in a racist society. In Roger Ross Williams's (2023) *Stamped from the beginning*, the first statement made is that there are multiple made-up

stories where Black people were stereotyped as animal-like. Since the time when slavery was legal, members of the Black community have felt like outsiders. Despite this, they attempted to assert their humanity. Phillis Wheatley, the first Black woman to publish a book of poems, pushed against the idea that she was lesser than anybody else (Williams, 2023). Wheatley was rebelling against the society that wanted to oppress her by using her writing to foster a sense of belonging among her people. This sense of belonging continued through many civil rights struggles and led to Ida B. Wells exposing the lynching of African Americans during the Civil War (Williams, 2023). After the Civil War ended, she continued to document the violence against Black individuals and other civil rights groups took up the cause to secure rights for people of color. Such efforts continue to this day, and it is important to be aware that, at bottom, these efforts are largely about creating a sense of belonging for Black people in America.

Increasing awareness of others' backgrounds helps create the bridge to understanding each person's individuality. Siena University has a space, the Damietta Cross-Cultural Center, that is specifically designed to help people get to know one another in order to develop a general sense of belonging on campus. Members of the Center seek to broaden the sense of belonging by offering events where students can become more aware of others' racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. One such event was called *Art, Power, and Media*. At the start of the event, students walked around and looked at various artworks that showed many aspects of injustice. Students discussed their artwork in depth and explained what they were trying to represent. The event allowed students to learn about others' backgrounds through discussing the artwork, but also by creating connections between the artists and viewers, which fostered a sense of community and belonging. Siena needs to embrace this mentality more broadly and rather than depending on one Center to provide such interactions, we should all be looking to make such connections on campus daily.

Everyone wants to feel like they belong. It is important to understand each other by becoming aware of others' backgrounds. Too often people avoid those who are different from them or people who do not believe in the same things as them or people who do not look like them. We, at Siena, need to continue to make strides to understand one another. Students should feel like they belong without having to overthink their existence on a campus. No matter a person's culture, race, or ethnicity, there should be a sense of belonging allowing every person to be seen as a whole. This makes the campus and the wider world more meaningfully connected.

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In this field trip response essay, the author incorporates the FYSM required reading James by Percival Everett and the play Confederates to analyze how intelligence and literacy are used to establish Black identity and lay claim to power.

Literacy and Intelligence as Subversion in *James* and *Confederates*

By Catherine Philip

Dr. Larkin- Human Rights

During the era of slavery in nineteenth-century America, literacy functioned as a powerful weapon for survival and a bridge to independent thought. Both Percival Everett's novel *James* and Dominique Morisseau's play *Confederates* explore the transformative power that literacy provides. Although set in different historical periods, these works demonstrate that while literacy is a path to liberation, Black individuals must constantly adapt and code-switch to survive in White-dominated environments. Both texts depict literacy as a means of developing one's identity, while also revealing the persistent culture of fear associated with Black intellect.

In both *James* and *Confederates*, literacy functions as a fundamental threat to Southern power structures. For the enslaved individuals in *James*, the ability to read and write is an act of rebellion as the titular character notes, "it was a completely private affair and completely free and, therefore, completely subversive" (Everett 73). He understands that his ability to read and write allows him to exist in a mental space where his masters cannot govern his thoughts. Reflecting on the inner lives of enslaved people, James wonders aloud if Whites "knew the danger" of leaving slaves alone in their own thoughts, "working and waiting" (Everett 151). Here, James emphasizes that although enslavers recognize the threat posed by literacy and attempt to suppress it, they underestimate the capacity of enslaved people to think and reflect beyond their masters' control. The danger James identifies lies in an intellectual autonomy that persists within a system designed to eradicate it. This sentiment is echoed in *Confederates* through the character of Sara. When her brother, Abner, warns Sara that there "Ain't a faster way for a gal to get lynched then to be actin' smart," he highlights the lethal stakes of Black intellectualism (Morisseau). His warning illuminates how displays of knowledge, whether through basic literacy or even thinking critically, are perceived as acts of defiance that threaten White authority and invite brutal retaliation. Ultimately, both works show that literacy creates an internal freedom of thought that challenges the White power structures rooted in the control of Black life and consciousness.

Linguistic performance became a necessary strategy for Black individuals to protect their intellectual autonomy and navigate in societies that viewed Black intelligence as a threat to White power. James describes his mastery of language through his ability to perform slave talk to disguise his true intelligence and highlight the innate adaptability to White power slaves must have in order to survive. He even gives language training to slave children, teaching them to feign ignorance and act less clever than they truly are. His ability to mask his true intellect allows James to move undetected through much of the White world. Similarly, in *Confederates*, Sandra, a professor, and her student, Malik, discuss the “culture of fear and resistance to the authority of a Black woman professor” (Morisseau). Malik, meanwhile, explains how he is compelled to exert a greater effort in his work compared to his White counterparts, like Candice, while simultaneously seeming agreeable and ensuring that his outspokenness does not provoke fear in others. Despite the centuries of time between their respective experiences, James and Malik both recognize that education does not necessarily grant them the freedom to speak their truth, as it often requires a façade to ensure their survival in White-dominated institutions. Similarly, Sandra’s experiences reveal how this pressure to outperform creates a culture of self-censorship, in which silence becomes a means of protection.

Despite having to deal with White efforts to limit Black literacy, the ability to write out one’s own thoughts serves as the ultimate act of forging one’s identity. In the novel, James spends much of his time seeking paper and a stolen pencil to document his journey. Eventually, he uses these items to declare his humanity and individuality, writing, “My name is James” and “With my pencil, I wrote myself into being” (Everett 93). This act of naming himself is a direct counteraction to the dehumanization of the racist slurs used by characters like the conmen and plantation owners. In *Confederates*, Sara transforms her literacy from a liability to a national asset by copying office documents to sabotage the Confederacy. Empowered by their intelligence, both James and Sara transform from being an object of history to the subject of their own story.

James and *Confederates* illustrate that intelligence gained through literacy is far more than a mere academic-based achievement, but instead a weapon of resistance. Whether through acts of secret literacy, intellectual resistance, strategic code-switching, or demands for academic accountability, both works argue that true freedom begins with the power of literacy to reclaim one’s voice against the systems that seek to silence it. While the two institutions in the works, the plantations and the university, attempt to police Black intellect, Everett and Morisseau portray the

pursuit of knowledge as an act of resistance that allows Black people to challenge oppressive systems. They champion characters who refuse to suppress their curiosity and intellect, choosing instead to pursue knowledge and define their own futures.

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Expressing an original argument, the author of this research paper uses a philosophical perspective and a wide variety of sources to build a compelling argument against the use of generative AI in music.

Perpetuation of the Starving Artist:
The Problematic Integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence into Music

By Andrew Pratt

Dr. Haas- Music: The Soundtracks of Our Lives

In the current technological era, it is entirely possible that one may enlist their eager, artistically vying child into an art contest, only for the judges to rule that a piece of art made by artificial intelligence (AI) is superior. The rapid advancement of generative AI (GenAI) means that the odds of this dystopian injustice occurring grow worse each day. To understand why this is unethical, one should turn to American philosopher John Searle. In 1980, Searle proposed The Chinese Room, a relevant thought experiment: suppose a man is locked in a room with a hole for written messages to pass through. The man inside is tasked with interpreting and replying to a handwritten note in Chinese. The man does not know Chinese, but locked in the room with him is a vast library of books containing procedures that he can use to decode Chinese linguistics, and develop the ability to write replies. If the man follows a procedure to decode the message, then promptly sends his newly written reply back out of the room, it does not necessarily follow that he knows Chinese. Uncannily, the logical deduction is that the room itself knows Chinese, not the man; he never developed Chinese linguistic skills, only a procedure that works that he does not understand.¹ Such is a springboard for the case against the validity of a machine's capability of producing art. Specifically, music-making GenAI apps like Suno, ElevenLabs, and Mureka have found their place in the musical zeitgeist as extremely polarizing. Using GenAI to manufacture music is, in fact, a defilement of art and culture because it undermines the point of music, severs the connection between the songwriter and their audience, and actively pushes back against the humanitarian instinct to create beauty and enrich culture. In addition to the humanitarian concern, AI-generated music threatens the music industry's ability to financially compensate human artists for their contributions to the art form. This must be

¹ Amy Kurzweil, *Artificial: A Love Story* (New York: Catapult, 2023), 68-70.

remedied because it jeopardizes music's value to the human experience as an arbiter of social justice, a hobby, a lifestyle, and a career.

The most pressing and recurring issue that arises in the midst of discourse about the humanitarian and ethical concerns about integrating GenAI into music is the inability for people to agree upon what makes music valuable as art. "Can AI art be morally entered into competitions alongside human competitors?"² is a question whose answer is contingent on one's understanding of the Chinese Room. To understand that the man does not know Chinese is to understand that GenAI does not make valuable music, which is true because there are three immaterial forces responsible for the promotion of music to valuable art. These forces were discerned by Aristotle in Book 8 of his *Politics*, where he contends that "music should be studied, not for the sake of one, but of many benefits, with a view on education, [catharsis], and enjoyment."³ First, education is used here as an umbrella term that refers to what music teaches humans: listeners learn emotional awareness, players learn discipline, producers learn physics and sound engineering, etc. Second, catharsis refers to the sculpting of a human's psyche and morality through the purgation of their emotions and/or ideas. Third, enjoyment refers to recreation and relaxation. Aristotle providing these three most valuable aspects of music is useful because it serves as the epistemological, ethical, and cultural backbone of music's *raison d'être*. Therefore, when music veers away from seeking to achieve these three benefits, it loses value as art—which is exactly the case with AI-generated songs.

GenAI should not be used to create music because it cannot properly educate, nor experience catharsis, nor enjoy the creative process. Even more pressing, the person using an AI music generator to create a song is stripped of these indispensable benefits. GenAI lacks the personability to make exactly the song that the user had in mind, no matter how specific their prompt. The nature of adversarial networks is too chaotic to reliably reflect the user's ideas, which leads to a poor reflection of those ideas. Granted, GenAI is capable of creating a song with the potential to educate, but even so it does worse than any human instructor could. A user may use a large language model (LLM) to teach themselves how to play an instrument or learn music theory, which does indeed have benefits over traditional lessons. Self-teaching with AI is mostly free, as opposed to human instructors who need compensation. Even still, this is a compromise because human instructors are significantly

² "Is AI-generated Art Actually Art?" University of Plymouth, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/discover/is-ai-generated-art-actually-art>.

³ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 8.5.

better at picking apart the exact mistakes players make or bad habits they develop and adapting to their pupils, as opposed to an AI model. GenAI cannot educate users and raise them to the same echelon that a human teacher can. Another pro-AI argument could point out that because AI-generated music cultivates enjoyment via its audience, it should follow that GenAI does in fact possess the benefit of enjoyment, aligning with the third of Aristotle's three values. This is a weak argument because it misses two details: Aristotle's use of the word recreation, and the other half of what he meant by enjoyment. Humans use music as a hobby and to relax, which cultivates enjoyment in not just the audience listening to the music, but also, crucially, the human playing it. The enjoyment of music is necessarily two-fold, affecting the audience and the player. GenAI cannot feel enjoyment and therefore can only cast surface-level enjoyment outwardly to the listener—the machine itself cannot feel enjoyment. According to Aristotle's philosophical doctrine, music ought to be an art form that invokes education, catharsis, and enjoyment in humans. GenAI models, while they possess the ability to manufacture songs with rhythm and melody, lack the ability to do so with the intent to communicate or purge an emotion or idea (i.e. catharsis). Therefore, the songs that GenAI apps create are completely devoid of any humanitarian, artistic, emotional, or intellectual value. GenAI has no place in music because a machine hosting AI is incapable of experiencing catharsis or enjoyment and serves as a much worse instructor than a human; thus, failing to accomplish the things that music ought to. Music that fails to do these things cannot progress the art form, which leaves human musicians in demand to keep creating and innovating to promote the welfare of culture.

Instead of appealing to Aristotle's three values of music, AI-generated music only appeals to aesthetics; it fails to cultivate meaningful connections among people because it omits the possibility of complex common emotions and shared life experience between the musician and listener. There is a disparity of meaning between a song written by a human and one generated by a machine. A human necessarily creates a song out of some sort of urgency—perhaps a singer-songwriter has an emotion or idea that must be expulsed to grant peace of mind, or a label is demanding a producer make more tracks with the promise of financial security, or a song/genre is being used as an arbiter of social justice. People find comfort and meaning in music in knowing that another human being has

been through a similar experience as them.⁴ The biography behind the musician(s) at work adds inherent value to their craft because it adds urgency and material to the education, catharsis, and enjoyment of their songs, thus increasing their value. The nature of AI-generated music treats urgency and biography as afterthoughts, which is devastating to a song's ability to do anything important. This crippling of music's ability to do important things simultaneously reduces its inherent value while severing the connection between musicians and their listeners.

A valuable example of music that connected musicians to their audiences would be civil rights anthems. Social change in the Civil Rights Movement came largely due to the unity formed via singing songs that spoke of racial injustice. This was effective because oppressors were induced to see humanity in the sacrifice, bravery, and hard work that were communicated through these songs. GenAI is unable to be an arbiter of social change because its lack of race or social class disallows it to weigh in on social issues; and its lack of a physical presence disallows it to sacrifice, be brave, or work hard. Granted, a human may input socially relevant lyrics for a GenAI app to create a song with, but in a medium where the humanity of an artist is so crucial to the point they are trying to make, this leaves their intent as an afterthought. Filmmaker Guillermo del Toro describes this kind of music as "illustrative of something not lived," because the machine running the GenAI programs has not experienced the ideas behind the lyrics they process.⁵ The pragmatic nature of computers halts their ability to grasp concepts as humans do. This is exactly what Searle warned of with his Chinese Room thought experiment—GenAI's lack of urgency or biography in conjunction with its procedural nature suggest that no matter how convincing its output, it can never speak on behalf of a group to weigh in on a sociopolitical or philosophical issue. Social change ought not to be contingent on this kind of unintentional messaging found in AI tracks because humans cannot meaningfully connect to a simplified mimicry of their complex issues. Using AI to create music severs the connection between songwriter and listener, therefore making it a poor arbiter of social change.

Human musicians are more valuable than ever because of their ability to combat AI music. It would be logical to assume that they should be receiving more financial support than ever, but, on the contrary, musicians' welfare and careership is being harshly threatened by AI music. Certain

⁴ Ivan Castro, "How Music Helps You Understand Yourself," produced by Velvet Itch on Feb 8, 2026, YouTube Video, 22:54, <https://youtu.be/SRySa1xD3o4?si=XLhPecB3M9WIYbGm>.

⁵ "Guillermo del Toro Says Generative AI 'Vandalizes the Fact That Art Without Pain Is Illustration,'" *Consequence*, December 16, 2025, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://consequence.net/2025/12/guillermo-del-toro-generative-ai-interview/>.

people and labels have adapted to the new industry market and tapped into mass-producing AI music as a lucrative scheme. Roughly 10,000 fully AI-generated tracks are published daily on streaming platform Deezer and rewarded with the same financial treatment that a normal song would be.⁶ On top of that, Spotify reports that about 30% of music consumption is a result of their AI-powered DJ feature that automatically plays songs based on the user's preferences and AI algorithms.⁷ A household name like Spotify openly adopting AI suggests a bleak pro-AI future for the company, and with the "opaque proliferation" of AI-generated versus human-made tracks, it is inestimable to what extent AI music oversaturates the market.² A 2026 study published in *Telecommunications Policy* underscores the music industry's problematically lopsided financial distribution between musicians and mass AI track producers. Researcher Dr. Alberto Arneal and his colleagues assert that "the overload of music supply is a direct consequence of the music streaming business model. The pro rata distribution scheme creates perverse incentives that impact music streaming platforms, rights holders, and creators ... Rights holders—including major labels—and creators also face significant challenges, given that AI-generated tracks compete for the same pool of monthly income. If AI-generated content increases its share of the revenue pool, the financial consequences for human artists are inevitable."⁸ AI-generated music—through its superfluousness particularly in online music streaming services—directs monetary support to people or labels who automate the creation of the tracks, ergo away from the human artists that put education, catharsis, and enjoyment into their projects. The nature of the music industry incentivizes this model, rewarding labels that mass-produce AI tracks significantly more than the musicians who prioritize quality over quantity. Career musicianship is being threatened from the inside of the industry. AI-generated tracks fight for the same pool of monetization as human-made music, and because the oversaturation of AI tracks is drastically increasing, money is being siphoned from subscribers to AI mass-producers. The pre-existing bar for entry of music on top of the dwindling hope for financial success as a career musician will certainly drive people away from contributing to the art form and therefore reduce cultural progress.

⁶ Alberto Arneal et al., "Artificial Intelligence in the Music Streaming Value Chain: Exploring Artists' and Users' Perceptions on Content Creation and Algorithmic Consumption," *Telecommunications Policy*, 2 (2026): 2, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2025.103129>.

⁷ Arneal et al., "Artificial Intelligence in the Music Streaming Value Chain," 5.

⁸ Arneal et al., "Artificial Intelligence in the Music Streaming Value Chain," 6.

This trend towards the defilement of art and culture goes against humanity's biological instinct to create beauty and enrich culture. A 2023 study conducted by social scientists at Tampere University proved that humans not only have a sense for deducing manmade art from AI-generated art, but also have a preference for manmade art. As per psychologist Atte Oksanen and his colleagues, when subjects were shown these two types of art without knowing which was which, "human-made art earned higher ratings in composition, expression, and aesthetic value."⁹ A Columbia University study resulted in similar findings, reporting that subjects "often view human work as more impressive. This bias against AI stems from its perceived inability to convey the deep emotions we instinctively associate with art, reaffirming the special resonance of human creativity."¹⁰ It necessarily follows that GenAI is incapable of creating new forms of beauty, especially in music, because of this special resonance of human creativity. In an aptly parallel way with Aristotle's three values of music, the act of creativity also has three modes: combinational, exploratory, and transformational. Oksanen and his fellow researchers at Tampere University explain that "AI can combine things (combinational creativity) and explore new possibilities (exploratory creativity), but it has not reached transformational creativity, in which new ideas are generated at a new conceptual level ... In music, this means, for example, not only composing music for a particular genre but creating a totally new genre or a sub-genre."¹¹ This reinforces the idea that AI-generated music can only appeal to aesthetics and only be aesthetically cliché. Combinational and exploratory creativity can only mashup pre-existing ideas to create something similar and unoriginal. AI-generated music lacks the crucial third aspect of transformational creativity that is required to musically innovate, create a new form of beauty, and enrich culture. Culture is founded upon humans creating, exchanging, and adapting to each other's ideas; GenAI cannot meaningfully enrich musical culture unless it creates new ideas that are adapted and exchanged by humans. By continuing the use of GenAI to create music, humans actively push against their instincts by defiling beauty and culture.

GenAI ought to not be used to create music because it strips humans of education, catharsis, and enjoyment, ergo undermining music's *telos* (a Greek word meaning ultimate end goal). It also severs the connection between songwriter and audience because connection is cultivated

⁹ Atte Oksanen et al., "Artificial Intelligence in Fine Arts: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research," *Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans* 1, no. 2 (2023): 7, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbah.2023.100004>.

¹⁰ "When Machines Mimic, but Don't Create: Why AI 'Art' Isn't True Art," Columbia University, January 6, 2025, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://business.columbia.edu/press-release/cbs-press-releases/when-machines-mimic-dont-create-why-ai-art-isnt-true-art>.

¹¹ Oksanen et al., "Artificial Intelligence in Fine Arts," 2.

interpersonally, which is impossible if the songwriter is inhuman. On top of that, it is actively compromising and worsening the financial security of the career path for musicians by oversaturating the market. In addition, it does not create beauty or enrich culture, which is in direct opposition to human instincts. The removal of all AI-generated tracks from streaming platforms ought to be swift so as to allow human musicians to thrive once again and have financial security. Humans must take back their agency to progress as people by rejecting the idea that GenAI has a place in music. It is the task of man, not machines, to uphold the *telos* of music, promote the exchange of ideas and emotions, keep each other paid and fed, create beauty, and enrich culture.

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In this Heritage Unit essay, the author explores the origin of universal human rights by analyzing the differences in the intentions of authors of ancient, Enlightenment, and post-World War II documents that presented early ideas about human rights.

The Road to Human Rights

By Shreeya Pullela

Dr. Larkin- Human Rights

Human rights, even if not explicitly stated, have been interwoven in documents since ancient times. From ancient texts like Hammurabi's Code all the way to pivotal World War II documents, the idea of human rights seems to find a way to become center stage, intentionally or not. However, there has been a long-standing debate as to when the concept of universal human rights specifically originated. Some argue that human rights originated in ancient times, while others may suggest it was during the Enlightenment, or perhaps right after World War II. The concept of human rights occurred as a byproduct of ulterior motives during ancient times and only included a subset of people during Enlightenment times. Thus, people around the world only agreed to standardize universal human rights after being confronted with the atrocities that occurred during World War II.

Human rights were not always the main reason ancient codes and religious guidelines were formed. Nevertheless, many ancient rulers and religious leaders unknowingly laid the foundation for human rights while writing them. Hammurabi, for instance, the ruler of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Babylon, accomplished this with his Code of Hammurabi. His provision that "If a man has knocked out the eye of a patrician, his eye shall be knocked out" reflects the human rights concept of justice for victims ("Code of Hammurabi" 10). In other words, the punishment was equal to the crime. Although Hammurabi's main focus when writing his code was to prevent crimes and anarchy in his city, he unwittingly introduced the human right to justice. However, codes like Hammurabi's were not the origin of human rights because they did nothing to prevent discrimination between social classes. This is shown in Hammurabi's statement that the price of a patrician knocking out the eye of a plebeian is "one mina of silver" ("Code of Hammurabi" 10). Hence, crimes against the commoners were treated as less severe, showing that there were still high levels of discrimination and proving that this is not the origin of universal human rights.

Religious leaders also unintentionally contributed to the foundation of human rights by

providing a set of moral guidelines that followers should adhere to. Buddha is a good example of this phenomenon because he asserted that “A son should serve his mother and father,” “A pupil should serve his teacher,” and “A husband should serve his wife” (“Buddhist Teachings” 120-121). Buddha’s intention with these guidelines was to provide social stability for his followers and establish mutual respect. By doing so, he also unintentionally set the early foundation for the human right to dignity. However, this is not the origin of human rights because the guidelines still reflect inequality. For example, when Buddha laid out the six quarters, he placed “slaves and servants as below; and ascetics and brahmins as above” (“Buddhist Teachings” 120). Buddha’s moral guidelines placed slaves as inferior to higher class groups. This is because Buddha’s original intent was to establish social order, not universal rights for all. The concept of human rights originated during ancient times as a byproduct of rulers and religious leaders trying to control populations and prevent anarchy. However, a standardized set of universal human rights rooted in equality did not occur during this time.

The Enlightenment also contributed to the idea of human rights because it was one of the first times people questioned what rights were automatically entitled to people by birth. Philosophers were prompted to ask these questions in response to the rigid social and political hierarchies of the Middle Ages. Manfred Nowak, a human rights expert, highlights how this could be the key motivator by describing how social contract theorists thought that “human beings decided to create States mainly for the purpose of protecting their natural and inalienable rights” (13). In other words, during the Middle Ages people were subjected to oppressive governance that forced people to figure out a way to speak up for themselves to prevent such governance from being instituted in the future. In the development of states, the concept of inalienable rights was put into political and social practice. This makes the Enlightenment a major component of the foundation of human rights, though it does not make the Enlightenment the origin of universal human rights. The concepts conceived by philosophers during this time were limited by their own biases and the social structures, therefore the rights that were thought of and put into practice did not include all humans. Mary Wollstonecraft exposes these limitations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* when she writes that if men’s human rights are being discussed heavily, “those of woman, by a parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test” (3). Not only were women’s rights ignored by Enlightenment philosophers, their biases also led philosophers to exclude other people from the discussion of who deserved rights, such as slaves. Therefore, while the Enlightenment served as an important milestone for human rights, the

ideas were limited by the biases and social structures of the time, and therefore universal human rights did not originate then.

While ancient rulers, ancient religious leaders, and Enlightenment philosophers laid the foundation for human rights, it was not until after World War II that universal human rights truly originated because of documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which the United Nations General Assembly adopted in 1948 with the intention to provide rights to all human beings, not just a select few. World War II was a turning point that transformed a philosophical concept into an urgent global imperative because the world was confronted with many human atrocities such as the Holocaust and the devastation of the atomic bombs in Japan. The question as to how “so many delegates from so many different nations and cultural traditions could come to an agreement about a universal moral code” highlights how the drafting of the UDHR was a global effort in response to a global war (Morsink 36). The document aimed to guarantee inalienable rights to all human beings from all backgrounds. To accomplish this, delegates from all around the world were included in the drafting of the UDHR, marking this as the origin of human rights because the intent of universalization was at the forefront. The efforts to make the UDHR as universal as possible are demonstrated by the list of protected categories; it makes it illegal to discriminate against a person’s “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (United Nations General Assembly). This attempt at making a rights-based document is unlike ancient times when the intention was to control populations, or the Enlightenment when the intention was to provide rights to only a select few, particularly men of a certain social class. What makes World War II unique is how people from around the globe responded to the atrocities of the war, ultimately leading to the impetus for the UDHR. The revealing of the cruelties committed during this time was a key motivator because following “the devastation of World War II, world leaders were seeking to establish the conditions considered necessary to achieve global peace and stability, and respect for human rights was seen as a vital one of these conditions” (Özler 397). A universal standard to protect human dignity and life had become an urgent need. The war made the protection of human rights necessary for global peace, which was not the main focus during ancient times and the Enlightenment. Therefore, World War II marks the origin of human rights because it was the first time people from all over the world were confronted with the horrors of the war and collectively made a set of guidelines in order to grant and protect universal human

rights.

Human rights is not a new concept. The idea unintentionally wound up in ancient documents as a byproduct of ancient rulers and religious leaders attempting to create social stability. The Enlightenment marked one of the first times human rights was considered inalienable and protected by the government. However, these eras do not mark the origin of human rights because there was no intention of providing universal rights. There was still considerable discrimination due to the biases of the writers, thinkers, and social structures of the time. World War II marks the origin of universal human rights because it was the first time the global community was forced to find a way to prevent such atrocities from occurring again. People from all over the world came together to create a set of universal rights that every human being is entitled to. The question left for humanity, however, is whether or not those universal rights can be truly upheld.

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The impetus for this research paper was the author's own observations in pre-k through second grade classrooms and discussions with those classroom teachers. She adeptly unpacks the evidence to support her I Say claim.

The Invisible Burden: Rising Post-Pandemic Burnout Among Female Early Childhood Educators

By Elizabeth Scheuermann

Dr. Haas- Women: Their Voices, Their Values, Their Vision

Female pre-k through second grade public school teachers experience higher rates of burnout than their male counterparts due to intensified gender expectations that exist for them in being equally dedicated to their work and their family. These disproportionate expectations have always existed but have been magnified by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Female early childhood educators who are also wives and mothers must juggle the emotionally taxing responsibilities that come with their career along with expectations at home, all while being unsupported by their districts, having little classroom autonomy due to strict standardized curricula, and feeling underappreciated by students, administrators, and their own families. This imbalance is rooted in entrenched societal expectations that label women as intrinsically nurturing beings who have a natural drive to care for youth, which pressures female early childhood educators to take on more unrecognized roles than their male colleagues. Yet, these added roles are mistakenly viewed as willful volunteer work rather than the result of societal and workplace pressure, so administrators are mischaracterizing burnout as individual failure, rather than a widespread systemic crisis. Therefore, state departments of education must take action to support the wellbeing and work-life balance of these female early childhood educators since individual school districts are legally required to follow their policies. Such changes must be made at the state-wide level or the rising psychological burnout among these women will continue to drive them out of the profession before they reach their full potential as educators, exacerbating national teacher shortages.

The expectation to be innately nurturing towards children exists for all women, but for those in the early childhood education field, this expectation is a requirement. Early childhood education is a female dominated field; in fact, “nearly 99% of early childhood educators are women” while male educators typically teach at the high school and college level.¹ These women are viewed as glorified babysitters because their job entails caring for young children, whereas male teachers are educating high school and college students on

¹ “Protecting Teacher Mental Health: Women in Education,” Total Mental Wellness, published December 28, 2024, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://totalmentalwellnessfl.com/protecting-teacher-mental-health-women-in-education/#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20most%20significant,can%20take%20a%20significant%20hit.>

more sophisticated content. According to Vanessa Rodriguez, Ed.D, and her colleagues, for female early childhood educators, “their identities are formed, in part, by silent, albeit gendered, expectations— unspoken agreements that uphold the gender hierarchies in place.”² In particular, they are influenced by gendered societal expectations to be self-sacrificing, leading them to take on more roles and become more emotionally involved with their students than their male colleagues. Rodriguez and her colleagues assert that these heightened expectations lead to an increased risk of burnout because they “go beyond their job description, such as participating in extracurricular activities, handling administrative tasks, and supporting school events.”³ Some may argue that female early childhood teachers are picking up these added roles by choice, but it is the society-wide gender expectations that guilt these women into overcommitting themselves. Early childhood education is an under-respected career field because it is female dominated, and gendered expectations pressure women into overexerting themselves by taking on more roles and emotional responsibility than male teachers.

Not only do female early childhood educators take on added unpaid responsibilities, but if they are working mothers, they face additional pressure to be fully dedicated wives, mothers, and homemakers when they are not in the classroom, creating challenges when it comes to work-family balance. Jess Smith, an ex-elementary teacher, described the feeling that many women in the profession face when she said, “my limit was when I had a baby and my life wasn’t so easily compartmentalized anymore” because she did not want to miss out on time with her newborn, but she also felt obligated to continue supporting her students and their needs to the same degree.⁴ This poor work-life balance makes such women feel as though they are working three shifts a day where they are constantly caring for others before, during, and after the workday. Before these women head to their classrooms, they wake their children up, get them ready for school or daycare, get themselves ready for work, put their children on the bus or drive them to school, and make it to work on time. A group of psychiatrists at Total Mental Wellness emphasized that during the school day, “women often face additional pressures related to emotional work in the classroom, such as managing the emotional needs of students, resolving conflicts, and providing emotional support.”⁵ This heightened emotional labor expected from female teachers stems from the societal belief that women should take on caregiver roles and fully support children without a second thought. Oftentimes, these women cannot express their real emotions because showing frustration or anger as a teacher is frowned upon.

² “Silent Expectations: An Exploration of Women Pre-Kindergarten Teachers’ Mental Health and Wellness During Covid-19 and Beyond,” PubMed Central, National Library of Medicine, published December 22, 2021, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8692129/>.

³ “Silent Expectations.”

⁴ Jess Smith, “Teacher Burnout is Real | Hot Mess Teacher Express,” produced by Hot Mess Teacher Express on November 28, 2022, YouTube video, 18:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YXWh2hV3dU>.

⁵ “Protecting Teacher Mental Health.”

In a study done on emotional exhaustion among female teachers by Psychology professor Noor M. Noraini and her research assistant, it was found that “faking emotional expression, and at the same time realizing that the expression is actually fake, where one could not be her real self, makes one extremely emotionally tired, predisposing her to burnout and other negative outcomes.”⁶ Women are expected to go home after experiencing this phenomenon known as surface acting, or SA, and continue to care for others before themselves, leaving no time to process their emotions from the day before transitioning into yet another form of caregiving. Noraini discovered that this becomes dangerous for female teachers when their “combined work and family responsibilities” lead to “high SA because they have to constantly regulate their emotions,” leading to increased family-work conflict and higher rates of emotional exhaustion, which results in burnout.⁷ In the early childhood education profession, many women experience intense burnout symptoms due to the high demands that exist for them not only in the classroom, but at home, as well.

In addition to challenges regarding work-life balance, public school early childhood education teachers experience very little classroom autonomy, creative freedom, and trust from an administration standpoint, which can lead to increased feelings of anxiety and helplessness. As stated by Psychologist Jana R. Benson and her colleagues in their study on burnout rates among Montessori and public-school teachers, “autonomy is a psychological need that is essential in all professions if engagement is to be achieved.”⁸ In today’s public school system, standardized curricula have largely replaced teachers’ abilities to design their own lesson plans and create a classroom environment molded to their individual students’ needs. Some may argue that this lack of classroom autonomy affects all teachers and may even make teaching easier since lessons need not be developed from scratch, but female early childhood educators are disproportionately affected because their field is more closely monitored by administrators. Early childhood is when students are learning the building blocks of their academic and social skills, so administrators more closely observe and put more pressure on the women teaching these grades than they would a male high school teacher. Thus, making female early childhood educators more susceptible to an increased risk of experiencing stress and symptoms of burnout.⁹ Furthermore, the observations and data recorded by female early childhood educators are not taken seriously by their administrators. Instead, standardized tests are used to determine a student’s skill level. Gabbie Stroud, an elementary school teacher who left the profession due to chronic burnout described this frustration in her memoir. She was in a meeting with administrators and other teachers, reviewing students’ state exam scores,

⁶ Noraini M. Noor and Masyitah Zainuddin, “Emotional Labor and Burnout Among Female Teachers: Work-Family Conflict as Mediator,” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 14, no. 4 (2011): 289, accessed April 23, 2026, Academic Search Premier.

⁷ Noraini and Zainuddin, “Emotional Labor and Burnout Among Female Teachers,” 290.

⁸ Jana R. Benson, Anthony R. Perry, and Anthony R. Napoli, “Autonomy, Transformational Leadership, and Burnout in Montessori and Traditional Public Elementary Teachers,” *North American Journal of Psychology* 26, no.

3 (September 2024): 529, accessed April 23, 2026, ProQuest.

⁹ “Protecting Teacher Mental Health.”

which were depicted as dots on a graph. Stroud wrote, “I have pages of work samples and projects created by those students. I have tons of comments and observations I have written about them. I can tell you so much more than that little dot right there tells you.”¹⁰ This is a sentiment felt by female early childhood teachers all across the globe; they went to school, got their degree, completed student teaching, and yet they are not trusted to produce valuable lessons and successfully educate their students. According to Maslow's hierarchy, autonomy is a psychological need and without it, teachers cannot reach self-fulfillment, leading to feelings of worthlessness and anxiety. The lack of classroom autonomy granted to female early childhood educators due to strict standardized curricula and closely watching administrators is a factor that is worsening the burnout crisis among these women by harming their psychological wellbeing.

Although the immense burnout felt by female early childhood educators is nothing new, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst that exacerbated and brought these feelings to light. While the pandemic increased stress for all teachers due to academic challenges imposed by virtual learning, working mothers in early childhood education experienced an intensified version of this stress. They had to adjust their teaching to meet increasing student needs, while caring for their own families in the same way they did pre-pandemic, causing them to feel stretched too thin. A group of psychiatrists at Total Mental Wellness who studied the mental health of female early childhood educators specified that these added responsibilities “significantly impact their mental health, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, where they may be expected to manage increased personal and professional demands simultaneously.”¹¹ While troubleshooting virtual learning with students aged three to seven years old, the expectation to be nurturing and care for their own children remained. These women struggled to compartmentalize their lives during this time because they were home all day and felt responsible for their own children’s education, while attempting to virtually educate their students. As noted by Rodriguez, and her colleagues, “pre-K teachers were the first to return for in-person learning. In contrast, high school teachers, a male-dominated profession, still had not returned for in-person classes in NYC as of February 2021.”¹² Not only did early childhood teachers return to school first all over the nation, but they also faced extreme learning deficits and increased emotional needs in their young students caused by the break in regular schooling. Often, these needs could not be met because of the lack of freedom early childhood educators have in their classrooms, leading to increased feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness. In a study done in 2024 on the differences in burnout between Montessori and public school teachers, it was found that public school teachers reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion burnout and depersonalization burnout, which results in detachment from others, as well as lower levels of personal

¹⁰ Gabbie Stroud, *Teacher: One Woman's Struggle to Keep the Heart in Teaching* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2018), 275.

¹¹ “Protecting Teacher Mental Health.”

¹² “Silent Expectations.”

accomplishment than Montessori teachers.¹³ In other words, public school teachers tend to experience more emotional fatigue and feel less successful at their jobs than Montessori teachers because of their inability to decide how their classroom runs. Then, when early elementary students reentered schools after the COVID-19 lockdown with new academic needs, their teachers struggled to address them because they had very little flexibility within the strict daily curricula they had to follow. The COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst that brought the widespread burnout crisis among female early childhood educators to light by increasing the demands on them, which they were unable to meet.

Since this rising prevalence of psychological burnout among female early childhood educators is a widespread systemic crisis, it is crucial that state departments of education create policies to improve their work-life balance and wellbeing. Psychiatrists found that “teachers report higher rates of anxiety symptoms (11.4%) compared to professionals in other fields, including healthcare workers (11.2%)” and this anxiety is heightened for females in the early childhood field.¹⁴ Yet, administrators refuse to view these issues as something they need to resolve because they unconsciously succumb to gendered stereotypes and believe the women are personally responsible for their burnout. According to Benson and her colleagues, “supportive school leadership leads to higher levels of motivation, well-being, and efficacy in teachers,” but in many schools this is not reality.¹⁵ Unfortunately, many elementary school administrators use the term burnout as an excuse for the masses of teachers leaving the profession, yet they do not feel at fault for the existence of this widespread burnout. For this reason, administrators have made little effort to improve conditions. Their insufficient efforts to address the problem often involves mandated attendance at mental health workshops that require these women to stay at work past contracted hours, or they might give out treats in the faculty room, instead of creating real change.¹⁶ It is clear that individual school districts will not solve this issue on their own, so it is time for state education departments to take action since public schools are legally required to follow their guidance. Even the most qualified administrators cannot fix the psychological burnout that is pushing new female early childhood teachers out of their career before reaching their full potential because this issue is embedded in long standing gendered expectations and a broken education system. It is vital that state departments of education create policies that allow more freedom and flexibility within the female dominated field of early childhood education if this psychological burnout crisis is to be solved.

Women with careers in early childhood education experience higher rates of psychological burnout as compared to men in the field, but with the start of COVID-19 this disproportionality has been exacerbated.

¹³ Benson, Perry, and Napoli, “Autonomy, Transformational Leadership,” 534.

¹⁴ “Protecting Teacher Mental Health.”

¹⁵ Benson, Perry, and Napoli, “Autonomy, Transformational Leadership,” 531.

¹⁶ Smith, “Teacher Burnout is Real.”

Female early childhood educators are viewed as glorified babysitters and gendered expectations label them as innately nurturing, leading them to self-sacrifice and take on more unpaid work than their male counterparts. The taxing emotional labor of this profession is intensified by the role that these women are expected to play in caring for their families, the strict standardized curricula they must follow, and the inability to process their emotions before transitioning from work to home. To make matters worse, administrators do not recognize that female early childhood educators are overcommitted; instead, they view this as a choice, rather than the result of harsh societal and workplace pressures. Administrators refuse to acknowledge the role they play in overworking these women because they view burnout as individual failure rather than the widespread systemic crisis it is. It is crucial that state departments of education create policies that support the work-life balance of female early childhood educators that individual school districts must legally implement, thus working to resolve the burnout crisis that is pushing these women out of their careers early on.

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The author of this Diversity Unit essay uses her distinct voice to explore a gender-related issue not often discussed in music circles, allowing her to develop a compelling original analysis.

She Must Be Crazy: The Difficulties of Being Alternative as a Woman

By Elkë Sorensen

Dr. Haas- Music: The Soundtrack of Our Lives

Women in alternative rock music have been seen as more radical than men, not only because women in the industry are less common, but because socially unacceptable actions taken by men in alternative rock, such as drug use, using profanity, and making choices to separate themselves from the rest of society, are overlooked in comparison to the backlash that women face for performing those same actions. Because of this, women in alternative rock often make headlines for being sexually explicit, drug addled, and too outspoken, contrasting with male alternative rock artists who have been able to apply that behavior to their cool guy image. This has led to the creation of a suffocating box into which women in alternative rock have been placed for presenting in a way that is perceived as edgy or unfeminine, perpetuating patriarchal stereotypes and often framing women in alternative music as insane or out of line. The impact goes beyond alternative rock; it harms women everywhere, disheartening them from trying to be themselves if doing so might disassociate them from the expectations of the gender binary.

Women are misrepresented in the music industry across all genres; however, rock and roll has been historically male dominated, gaining it a masculine connotation. Many women in rock feel that they need to prevent themselves from presenting as feminine to authentically represent the genre. Regardless of how many women do succeed in the alternative music industry—Delores O’Riordan of The Cranberries, PJ Harvey, Gwen Stefani of No Doubt—there remains a large gender gap between male and female producers. Men make up the overwhelming majority of music producers, 93.5%, which puts up a massive roadblock for female producers trying to succeed, and for female artists to hold autonomy over their art, as at least some major aspects of their music will be controlled, and likely changed, by men.¹ Even alternative rock bands viewed as powerful girl groups like Veruca Salt or Courtney Love’s band, Hole, include male musicians, and Veruca Salt had their albums produced by men. Some women do break through this mold, though, as Kim Gordon from Sonic Youth produced albums for Hole. The fact that this is an obvious exception reveals the unfortunate nature of the

¹“Share of Producers in the Music Industry in the United States from 2012 to 2023, By Gender,” Statista, last modified 2026, accessed June 12, 2026, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/801248/share-producer-music-industry-us-gender/>.

alternative music industry, which largely prohibits women from succeeding independently, making it difficult to name nearly as many popular female alternative artists as males.

One of the most (in)famous couples of all time, grunge legend Kurt Cobain and his wife, Courtney Love, frontwoman of Hole, made headlines not only due to their tumultuous relationship, but also because Courtney Love was seen as a constant annoyance, and still is to this day. While it is indisputable that Love has made horrible choices, including drug use while pregnant, it must be acknowledged that she was foremost seen as a disturbance to the patriarchy, and that is what supremely bothered many. Cobain did use his platform to speak out against the patriarchy and advocated for women's rights and the rights of homosexuals. However, due to the straight, white, male privilege that he was born with, referred to by Peggy McIntosh in "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" as an "unearned advantage," he had fewer personal issues to speak for than Love.² Due to that unearned privilege of his, Cobain's claims about atrocities, such as harm against women, were perceived as more socially acceptable than Love's, likely deemed easier to listen to and respect simply because they were expressed by a man. Courtney Love is a classic example of a woman who is hungry for change, but considered too radical for loudly using her platform as a famous female alternative artist. That kind of delivery is often more palatable when delivered by men, who are allowed to be rambunctious and unappealing. These narratives teach people polarizing ideals that only men can be respected change makers, and also that women have no place in alternative rock music.

Not only is speaking one's fed-up mind looked down upon more so when they are a woman, but so are certain actions that are considered responsible for giving alternative music its unique edge. While sexual liberation is not always an overarching theme of alternative music, it is forever considered taboo when sex is discussed by women; yet, it's expected to be discussed by men. Men in alternative music like Layne Staley and Jerry Cantrell of Alice in Chains, as well as Chris Cornell of Audioslave and Soundgarden, would frequently remove their shirts while performing. This is something that is not at all uncommon for male artists of any musical genre, and sometimes goes without sexualization. However, regardless of what female alternative artists like Bikini Kill or Courtney Love were wearing on stage, they were constantly sexually harassed and even assaulted. Men in the alternative music industry often stage dive free of fear, but when women descend into a crowd, it becomes a mob of people hungry to grope and take advantage of them. Moreover, it is often unfairly seen as the female artist's fault for choosing to put themselves in such positions, which is a gross misplacement of judgement because those who feel it is okay to inappropriately touch someone should be

² Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 71.

held accountable. Women's search for safe sexual liberation and destruction of patriarchal stereotypes did not begin with these artists of the 1990s. Ellen Willis, writer for *Rolling Stone*, discussed Janis Joplin's cultural revolution of the 1960s, highlighting that "a crucial aspect of the cultural revolution was its assault on the rigid sexual styles of the Fifties."³ Joplin acted sexually with her audiences to prove a point that women could do it, too, but unfortunately faced slander similar to that of women in the later alternative rock movement. Women attempting to make statements about the hypocrisy of the music industry have been turned down, and let down, by harsh pushback. This prevents important changes from being made, and even needs from being recognized, allowing the perpetuation of the societal expectation that women must act purely and compliantly.

Women in alternative music are so often accused of stepping out of line. This idea of there being a line at all stems from harmful patriarchal stereotypes about the masculinity of alternative rock and the ability for men to get away with more shocking behavior than women. These false ideas need to be called out by more women in alternative music, as well as people who perform and listen to all musical genres. Alternative music needs to be stripped away from the gender binary and continually pushed to become more accepting and inclusive, thereby limiting gender discrimination.

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Thoughts coalescing from her Political Science; Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and FYSM classes were the catalyst for this author's research topic. This paper adroitly demonstrates how to fully and succinctly develop an argument.

Harassment Is Political:

How Online Harassment Deters Women from Serving in Congress

By Zoey St. Gelais

Dr. Haas- Women: Their Voices, Their Values, Their Vision

Gender-based online harassment directed at women running for U.S. Congress reflects broader patterns of sexism in politics. This harassment, often strategically deployed as an opposition campaign tactic, targets women's appearance, qualifications, and personal lives in ways male candidates rarely experience, with progressive women facing particular scrutiny. Institutional protections are limited as sexual harassment laws do not prohibit the most common forms of online harassment. This not only impacts women running for office and their individual campaigns, but also discourages prospective candidates from entering the race, thus functioning as a political deterrent that undermines gender equality and weakens democratic representation.

Online harassment can take many forms and abusers use this to their advantage when targeting women running for office to effectively threaten, intimidate, and humiliate them.¹ The most common types of online abuse include the posting of private information, impersonation, sending repeated threatening messages, and cyberstalking. However, it is important to recognize that these are not the only types and that there are also subcategories. For instance, online gender-based violence, or GBV, is a subcategory that includes all harmful digital acts directed at an individual because of their gender and is a direct result of differences in access to power between people with different gender identities.² An example of online GBV that primarily affects women is non-consensual pornography (NCP) which is described by legal scholar Mary Anne Frank as "sexually explicit images and video disclosed without consent and for no legitimate purpose."³ NCP is also referred to as "revenge porn" because it is frequently employed by scorned ex-spouses as a tool of blackmail, control, and humiliation.⁴ The limit is endless when it comes to the forms that online harassment can take,

¹ "Women in Politics Discuss Online Harassment," WMC Speech Project, Women's Media Center, November 7, 2017, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://womensmediacenter.com/speech-project/nameitchangeit>.

² "An Unrepresentative Democracy: How Disinformation and Online Abuse Hinder Women of Color Political Candidates in the United States," CDT Research, Center for Democracy and Technology, October 27, 2022, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://cdt.org/insights/an-unrepresentative-democracy-how-disinformation-and-online-abuse-hinder-women-of-color-political-candidates-in-the-united-states/>.

³ Sophie Maddocks, "Feminism, Activism and Non-Consensual Pornography: Analyzing Efforts to End 'Revenge Porn' in the United States," *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 7 (2022): 1642, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1913434>.

⁴ Maddocks, "Feminism, Activism and Non-Consensual Pornography," 1642.

which not only makes it increasingly accessible for abusers, but also far more difficult to address, thus effectively acting to intimidate women from running for Congress.

Former Congressional Representative Katie Hill was a victim of NCP shortly after she took office. Her husband was mentally and emotionally abusive, promising to ruin her reputation should she ever leave him and he did just that. Hill's staff informed her that nude photos of her and private text messages, provided by her ex-husband, had been published on a right-wing interest group's website called RedState. She recalls feeling like the future she had imagined, where she made a difference as a leader in Congress, was over.⁵ Hill resigned midway through her first year in Congress due to the negative attention she received online. While she continues to advocate for women, had Hill not been publicly exploited during her time in office, she would still be influencing Congressional decisions affecting them and the rest of her constituents.

While the direct motivation for Hill's ex-husband was to humiliate her, the motivation for the interest group was to force Hill out of Congress because she was a Democrat. The group's motivation to eliminate progressives from Congress is shared by many online abusers. This not only includes interest groups but also extends to the representative's political opponents and members of opposing parties. By using online harassment as an opposition campaign tactic, abusers attempt to create a negative image of women and reduce their electoral support. This tactic, while often employed while candidates are campaigning, is also used against female politicians who currently hold office to turn their constituents against them. A prominent example of this is when Donald Trump expressed his disapproval of Governor Gretchen Whitmer's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Michigan on Twitter.⁶ The President repeatedly attacked Governor Whitmer online, referring to her with atrocious nicknames that belittled her gender and intelligence. Due to the publicity of the harassment, the President set an example for right-wing extremists that it was acceptable to continuously abuse Governor Whitmore. This resulted in a group of extremists constructing a kidnapping plot against the Governor that put her and her family in imminent danger. While her situation was taken much further than most, it has been normalized to ignore how female political leaders' physical safety is jeopardized as an outcome of online harassment, especially when the abuse stems from someone with as large a platform as the President.

Physical safety is not all that is at stake, however. The mental effects of online harassment are detrimental and can impact the campaigns of women running for office. Politicians who are abused online report symptoms such as stress, insomnia, and anxiousness, and admit that the experiences make them

⁵ Katie Hill, *She Will Rise: Becoming a Warrior in the Battle for True Equality* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2020), 28.

⁶ Gretchen Whitmer, *True Gretch: What I've Learned About Life, Leadership, and Everything in Between* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024), 13.

reconsider their political careers.⁷ Katie Hill discusses her mental health during her campaign and after becoming a victim of NCP in her memoir *She Will Rise*. She explains how social media posts targeting her qualifications kept her up at night and how the insomnia impacted her efficiency on the campaign trail. Hill also opens up about her battle with depression and suicidal ideations after the images were released. Unfortunately, Hill is not alone in this because more than half of the victims of cyber exploitation contemplate suicide in the aftermath.⁸ The mental harm caused by online harassment directly limits women's effectiveness in campaigning, ultimately contributing to their underrepresentation in Congress.

Online harassment is particularly common in the weeks leading up to elections, which is not surprising given its ability to impact women on the campaign trail. By targeting women during high-visibility periods, perpetrators can maximize both the psychological impact on victims and the potential to influence voter perceptions at crucial moments.⁹ This is concerning for female politicians because not only does online harassment result in a loss of support, but it also creates a serious disincentive for young women to consider a political career.¹⁰ Women comprise the vast majority of victims of documented cases of online sexual harassment, and young women seeing the female politicians they look up to be reduced to sexual objects is extremely discouraging.¹¹ To have the focus be on their appearance rather than their political ideas, particularly if the focus is sexually motivated, implies to young girls that they are not fit to run for Congress or have an opportunity to equally influence the policies of the United States. When women choose not to run for Congress, it severely undermines fair representation and therefore compromises American democracy.

Some may argue that the online harassment men face is equally as detrimental to their political careers and that focusing on women is dismissive of the broader issue that affects all candidates, regardless of gender. While men do also get called names and receive threats online, the harassment against women is increasingly more personal, aimed at their appearance or qualifications, and often sexualized. In addition, the sheer volume of abuse against women is disproportionate, with 65% of female politicians across the world reporting having been subject to sexist remarks and 61% reporting that they believe the primary objective of the harassment is to stop women from running.¹² Women are the marginalized group that is not adequately represented in Congress, meaning to achieve equal democratic representation, measures must be implemented for their advancement.

⁷ Rasmus T. Pedersen, Niels Bjørn Grund Petersen, and Mads Thau, "Online Abuse of Politicians: Experimental Evidence on Politicians' Own Perceptions," *Political Behavior* 47, no. 1 (2025): 121, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-024-09944-8>.

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⁹ Adriana Stephan, "The Targeting of Female Public Officials," in *A Weapon Against Women in Politics: Reining in Nonconsensual Synthetic Intimate Imagery* (New America, 2025), <https://www.newamerica.org/future-security/reports/a-weapon-against-women-in-politics/the-targeting-offemale-public-officials/>.

¹⁰ Stephan, "The Targeting of Female Public Officials."

¹¹ Stephan, "The Targeting of Female Public Officials."

¹² "Women in Politics Discuss Online Harassment."

Unfortunately, taking action against online harassment is an incredibly challenging task due to the anonymous nature of most of the abuse. In most cases, regulation of harassment is left up to the social media apps themselves. This is an issue because the apps are inconsistent in identifying abuse and even less consistent in their removal of it. However, some action has been taken at the federal level regarding online harassment that is also deemed as sexual harassment. The TAKE IT DOWN Act, passed in 2025, prohibits the nonconsensual online publication of intimate visual depictions of individuals, both authentic and computer-generated, and requires certain online platforms to promptly remove such depictions upon receiving notice of their existence.¹³ While the passing of the bill does provide a sense of hope for the future, prohibiting all forms of online abuse, no matter who they target, is the end goal that, when reached, will allow for more female representation in Congress.

Targeting women who strive for leadership roles is not a new concept, and the rise of the digital age has only made this pattern of sexism more accessible. Whether the abusers are their political opponents, conspiratorial interest groups, anonymous trolls, or even their own ex- husbands, women running for office are disproportionately being affected by gender-based online harassment. It is undermining their professional campaigns and their personal lives. Without further institutional action, women currently serving will continue to be forced to resign, women running will continue to drop out of races, and women thinking about pursuing politics will reconsider their careers. Online harassment is a tool of political interference that is used to deter women from running for Congress. Acting against it by creating more laws at the federal level prohibiting all forms of online abuse and enforcing harsher penalties for perpetrators will not only positively contribute to overall gender equality but will also wholly strengthen the democracy of the United States.

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This essay's author examines the disconnect between economic privilege and environmentalism, arguing that adopting Franciscan values would help alleviate suffering and build community.

The Franciscan Tradition in Today's World: Active Responsibility Over Ignorance

By Jordan Strauss

Dr. Engh- Environmental Storytelling

Many people today are far removed from nature and largely unaffected by social problems, perhaps because they are not faced with extreme pollution or poverty. While this is a lovely benefit of modern innovations and luxuries, it often prevents such people from facing environmental and social justice issues head on. This creates a divide between the minority who are affected and the majority who have the privilege of ignorance. When people do not see an issue, it does not mean it is not there. One example of this is the slow loss of biodiversity, which contributes to gardens becoming less successful due to pesticides such as neonicotinoids. These chemicals kill the pollinators that ingest them. Similarly, people may be oblivious to the fact that just one town over from where they live, the majority of the population may be living below the poverty line and barely able to pay their bills. Because such individuals are so far detached from social and environmental issues, they do not even recognize the inequity. This resulting mindset based on ignorance, avoidance, and selfishness is the direct opposite of St. Francis's teachings, which emphasize humility, compassion, and respect for others as well as respect for the environment. Rather than ignore distress, the Franciscan tradition calls for action, prioritizing communities and relationships with others in order to build a better future and viable planet. Franciscanism challenges the modern detachment to suffering and poverty and instead calls for everyone to take active responsibility for those vulnerable to harm, which includes the environment, so as to sustain Sister Mother Earth.

Many people today believe that climate change is a hoax and they have no responsibility to care for the environment. Nature is seen as something that can be exploited and used for profit, with effects lasting for years to come. This is due to something called slow violence, which Richard Fisher, an accredited science journalist, editor, and academic lecturer, defines as "harm and damage that plays out over years or decades. The perpetrators may not be obvious but the victims are." Due to the push for profits, many companies are destroying forests, polluting rivers, and distributing poisonous products but the effects of this greed are not widely known until many vulnerable

populations are hurt. For example, there is a lower income community in Freetown, Louisiana that is disproportionately affected by industrial plants (Fisher). The chemicals that pollute their homes are a direct threat to the wellbeing of this population, something individuals with greater wealth do not have to worry about. Activism on behalf of minority communities that involve environmental protection is important because often the consequences of pollution are only seen after the damage has been done.

Like the privileged nowadays, Francis, too, at first lived his life selfishly and removed from suffering. He looked down upon those who had leprosy just like everyone else did. Francis went out of his way to ignore lepers completely, turning a blind eye to their struggles. But after he devoted his life to God, Thomas of Celano tells us, “he extended a hand of mercy to those who had nothing” (35). Francis, once exposed to the true horrors of leprosy, was enlightened and could no longer turn a blind eye. He instead helped individuals who were suffering, showing that involving himself allowed a further connection to this ostracized community and to his faith. Francis recognized the importance of helping those in need. His example demonstrates not only the benefit of exposing oneself to the discomfort of acknowledging injustices, but how such recognition should prompt action.

Francis also emphasized the importance of relationship and building connections in order to fully understand and embrace our God-given role as nature’s protector. In “The Canticle of the Creatures,” Francis helps us to think differently about the topics of environmental stewardship and the prevention of environmental destruction. Francis states, “Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs” (114). By using the term Sister Mother Earth, Francis emphasizes the rightful relationship between humans and the natural world, referring to her as a family member. Like a human mother, Earth provides nutrients and all of the necessities to sustain life. And like one’s human sister, we should protect and nurture it. Applying the values of the Franciscan tradition to how we view the environment would allow us to see how important it is to combat pollution, reverse declining biodiversity, and protect habitat loss.

The Franciscan Tradition directly combats the passive attitudes or denial that surround issues related to environmental protection and social activism. Its values provide a clear message for every person on Earth to overcome their privilege to engage with social and environmental problems. Through Francis’s encounter with the leper and his love for Sister Mother Earth, people today are

shown their moral responsibility to respond to injustices. In a world where many are distanced from true suffering and the consequences of our exploitative lifestyles, the Franciscan Tradition helps to shed light on the ways individuals can contribute to a solution. By embracing the teachings of St. Francis, society can help rehabilitate Sister Mother Earth and our human communities, too, in order to encourage younger generations to focus on environmental activism and social justice.

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Based on a clear I Say thesis that addresses the “so what,” this research paper exemplifies the They Say/I Say structure of presenting evidence and responding with one’s own original thoughts to build a convincing argument.

Tango Transformed:
Adaptation, Appropriation, and Cultural Identity

By Isabella Tramontozzi Porto

Dr. Haas- Music: The Soundtrack of Our Lives

When most people think about tango, they imagine an elegant dance born in Europe. Contrary to popular belief, however, tango originated in the Southern Hemisphere. Music genres must adapt to changing culture to persist over time, as this allows younger audiences to appreciate music that was created decades ago. Yet, adaptiveness must not be confused with appropriation, which occurs when outsiders reshape a genre to appeal to dominant groups, erasing its original cultural meaning. Tango, now known worldwide as a passionate and elegant dance, originated with the lower-class immigrant communities of South America where it was tied closely to social struggles and cultural expression. The addition of lyrics to tango, which was born as an exclusively instrumental genre, helped preserve its core identity as the themes of the songs remained relevant to the struggles of the lower classes. The widespread enjoyment of tango in Europe, even in the presence of a language barrier, has led to the claim that gentrification could not have occurred, as its popularity is seen as cultural exchange rather than appropriation. Yet, the element of tango Europeans most connected with, the instrumentation, was used to transform the genre into a style closer to a ballroom dance, indicating that there was a process of cultural gentrification. While tango remained popular internationally through its adoption by European audiences, this came at the cost of erasing the genre’s original cultural meaning and the voice of its lower-class creators. It is crucial to identify modern forms of colonialism like cultural appropriation, as the seizure of cultural expressions by dominant groups disconnects them from their original social and historical contexts, leading to a loss of communal identity. Recognizing the original roots of music genres builds collective memory and helps preserve cultural identity across generations.

Tango is globally known for being a high class, passionate dance. However, it originated with the immigrant lower classes in South America, specifically in the River Plate region. Buenos Aires and Montevideo both received a large wave of European immigrants during the late 19th century. These

cities became a melting pot of cultures, where the autochthonous rhythms blended with the instruments that were brought by foreigners. Initially, tango was exclusively a non-lyrical genre, accompanied by an improvised dance. In fact, the South American elites deemed it as vulgar and associated tango with brothels and poverty.⁴⁷ In the early 1920s, a wave of new tango artists emerged during the period known as *the Guardia Nueva*, introducing lyrics to the genre for the first time. This shift is reflected in the way musicians expanded upon earlier tango while redefining the genre. Music experts Kristin Wendland and Kacey Link emphasize the role of the emerging artists: “These musicians learned from the previous masters and then formed their own ensembles to perform new material, as well as innovative arrangements of tangos by the former generation.”⁴⁸ Tango transformed, which was essential for the genre to adapt to changing cultural contexts. Thus, in this way, tango developed while still preserving the essence of the genre.

The transformation of tango introduced new rising artists to the genre. One of the most prominent figures among the new generation of musicians was Carlos Gardel, who is nowadays considered the king of tango. The lyrics of his songs conveyed the daily struggles of the working classes in Buenos Aires, touching on the socioeconomic issues they were facing. The song “Yira Yira” reflects the theme of disillusionment, a central emotion among immigrants in Buenos Aires during a period of political crisis.⁴⁹ For many who migrated to Argentina in search of work opportunities, the reality proved to be just as difficult as the conditions they had left back home. With this, the lower classes began to feel connected to the themes of the new songs. As the British historian Simon Collier explains, “Unlike the waltz, the tango originated in the city concerned, for even though the waltz began its career of international fame in Vienna, it did not originally spring from within the city itself. The tango's connection with Buenos Aires, by contrast, started at birth.”⁵⁰ In other words, tango was unique in a way because it emerged directly from the culture of Buenos Aires, making its identity inseparable from the experiences of the people who created it. The emergence of the new style of tango became deeply connected to the territory where it originated, and the lyrics were strongly tied to the social environment. This was the initial transformation of tango, where it adapted from a non-

⁴⁷ Olivia Norbury, “The Cultural Phenomenon of Tango,” *Retrospect Journal*, November 18, 2024, accessed April 22, 2026, <https://retrospectjournal.com/2024/11/17/the-cultural-phenomenon-of-tango/>.

⁴⁸ “How the Tango Evolved, from Its Golden Age in Argentina to the Present: *Chicago Symphony Orchestra*,” Experience the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, August 25, 2025, accessed April 22, 2026, <https://cso.org/experience/article/25386/how-the-tango-evolved-from-its-golden-age-in>.

⁴⁹ Carlos Gardel, *Yira, Yira*. Odeon Records 18830, 1931, streaming audio, Spotify.

⁵⁰ Simon Collier, *The Life, Music, and Times of Carlos Gardel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986), 55.

lyrical music and dance form to a more relatable lyrical genre, while still conserving its original identity.

The new form of tango created a space for the lower classes to continue feeling connected to a genre that would soon be taken over by foreign audiences. Lyrical tango reached the rest of the world through the upper classes of Buenos Aires and for the genre to obtain worldwide recognition, artists believed it was necessary to attract foreign audiences. In 1933, Gardel announced in a radio program that he was traveling to New York to spread the essence of tango, believing it should be a respected genre given its artistic value.⁵¹ As he started gaining popularity abroad, tango was quickly appropriated by European and American elites. Some may say that the genre was accepted by the upper classes in Europe, as there was no change in content of the music itself. However, this overlooks the way tango was reshaped through Europeans' preference for musical elements, particularly instrumentation. Sociologists from the University of Amsterdam conducted a study on taste differentiation in music to understand what factors shape people's selection of musical genres. They found that "The highly educated respondents pay much more attention to the song's textual content or message, the quality of the composition, the instrumentation, the complexity of the rhythm, and the musicality of the performance."⁵² The researchers concluded that these are the elements the upper classes tend to notice across all music genres. In the case of tango, Europeans found a similarity to the instruments used in ballroom dances. The use of violins, pianos, and wind instruments made the foreigners appreciate tango more than other Latin American genres that did not have as many elements in common with European music. Some still might argue that gentrification could not have occurred because wealthy Europeans enjoyed tango despite the language barrier. From this perspective, foreign audiences may see this evolution not as cultural erasure, but as a natural transformation necessary for the genre to remain relevant. Yet, it is clear that the adaptation of the genre to European musical preferences demonstrates that gentrification took place. This process put tango's connection to its South American roots at risk, as the genre faded into the culture of a different community that does not share the same historical experiences.

The claim that tango's popularity in Europe preserved its original meaning ignores how the genre was reshaped to fit European tastes. There is a key element that characterized tango, which

⁵¹ Collier, *The Life, Music and Times*, 213.

⁵² Tito Bachmayer, Nico Wilterdink, and Alex van Venrooij, "Taste Differentiation and Hierarchization within Popular Culture: The Case of Salsa Music," *Poetics* 47 (December 2014): 72, accessed April 8, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2014.10.004>.

was the signature use of the bandoneon, an instrument responsible for creating passion, drama, and melancholic feeling in the songs. The emotional depth the instrument transmitted reflected the experiences of marginalized groups in Buenos Aires. However, as European audiences were more drawn to the aspects of tango that resembled their own musical traditions, the instrumental intensity became less important, and the focus shifted toward the dance itself. Thus, tango was converted into ballroom dance. This selective focus reflects a process of appropriation, in which elements that were appealing to European audiences were emphasized, while those that carried the genre's original cultural meaning were diminished. As a result, tango was adapted into a formal dance style that aligned with wealthy European standards, erasing the full emotional and social expression of its lower-class origins.

The gentrification of tango is also revealed in the way the world classified the genre throughout the 20th century; it was given a Eurocentric framework that redefined the origins. As art historian Agnieška Juzefovič explains, "In 1803, tango was defined as a variant of *tangano*, which meant a bone or a rock used to play the game bearing the same name. In 1925, according to the transformation of tango, its definition was also corrected to an American dance of high society, and only since 1984, tango was officially defined as an original Argentinean dance."⁵³ This continuous change in the definition shows that tango was long understood as a high-society dance rather than an inherently South American genre. Europeans did not preserve its original meaning but instead contributed to the erasure of its lower-class origins and cultural significance. This process reflects a modern form of colonialism, as the dominant perspective dominated and reclassified cultural expressions from the Global South. Widespread acceptance leads to cultural appropriation if the roots of the genre are not preserved because it displaces its original identity.

Tango continues evolving today, with non-traditional dance couples, like same-sex pairs, and by blending with genres like electronic music. Such transformations are valuable for tango to remain relevant as it continues to adapt to modern times. It is essential for a genre to evolve because it allows it to remain meaningful across generations while still carrying on its legacy. When this evolution happens without being co-opted, it ensures that the heritage of the people who created the genre is preserved and carried forward in a way that respects its origins. This is significant

⁵³ Agnieška Juzefovič, "Intercultural Origin and Philosophical Background of Argentinian Tango," *Filosofija. Sociologija* 27, no. 1 (April 4, 2016): 52, accessed April 22, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.6001/fil-soc.2016.27.1.6>.

because it prevents the distortion of cultural history, ensuring that the contributions of marginalized communities in places like Buenos Aires are still recognized nowadays. However, when music like tango is removed from its original social context, it can be redefined in ways that erase its meaning and disconnect it from the Argentine and Uruguayan people who created it. This leads to a loss of cultural recognition in the present day, where traditions rooted in working-class and immigrant experiences are changed to align with foreign expectations, reinforcing unequal power dynamics in how Latin American culture is represented globally.

Tango demonstrates how a music genre can evolve and remain relevant over time, but adaptation should not come at the expense of its cultural roots. People must have cultural elements that shape their collective memory and protect their historical significance. From its beginnings in the lower-class immigrant communities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, tango reflected the struggles, emotions, and stories of its people living in marginalized neighborhoods. While the genre gained international popularity with the incorporation of lyrics to the genre, it was reshaped to fit European standards, turning tango into a high-end ballroom style dance. This process erased its original meaning and social significance. Today, tango continues to grow, embracing new forms of expression and breaking traditional boundaries, yet it is essential to honor its history. By preserving its style, lyrics, instruments, and cultural identity, tango remains relevant while ensuring that the voices and experiences of those who created it are remembered.

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In this Nature Unit Essay, the writer cleverly utilizes a creative approach and foundational Franciscan values to examine humans' relationship with the Natural World.

Symphony of Ourselves: Human Disconnection from the Natural World

By Lauren Wasserbach

Dr. Haas- Music: The Soundtrack of Our Lives

Nature, at its root, is an orchestra that produces a layered sound. The elements of the natural world blend together to create a harmony in which all things can live rightfully in their respective place. When one part of the ecosystem is destroyed, it throws off the balance of the symphony. Listening to nature is innately beneficial to humanity in many ways. Being immersed in the natural world helps keep humanity grounded and reminds them that they, too, are members of this natural symphony. It is when humans think of themselves as superior to the natural world that they are able to justify its destruction for their own benefits. This soloist mentality is incredibly isolating for humans. Deforestation and pollution are proof of humanity's superiority complex and contribute to the discord of the natural world. Humans do not appreciate nature and, in fact, are destroying it. As a result, humans feel disconnected from the natural world and deny themselves the benefits that nature's song has to offer. Humans have to treat the natural world as the delicate composition that it is in order to be a part of its music.

The flora serves as the baseline for the natural world. Without the dirt and the vegetation sprouting from it, nature would have no foundation. The formation of plants is consistent and cyclical in the same way the baseline is for a song. Much of the other elements in nature depend on the ground for stability and recognize it as the opening note in nature's orchestra. Deforestation, the human destruction of plant life, mutes the baseline. Taking down greenery on a large scale not only silences the flora, but leaves the remaining elements in a state of confusion in which they have to guess at their entrances. This is a consequence that stems from the belief that the land should serve human interest, instead of the reality that humans have an obligation to tend to the land, and all other aspects of nature. The sound of the natural world continues to suffer as a result of humanity's droning egotism. Humans diminish any outside sound that is not made by their own hands and then complain that nature no longer sings to them. This position is lonely for humans, as they are unable to connect to the natural world around them. Humans do not hear the peace, order, or purpose that

nature calls to them. In *Laudate Deum*, “Pope Francis emphasizes that the human person is also a part of creation, and cannot be separated from it” (Cortas). Despite their persistent effort, humanity cannot completely drown out the beckoning sounds of nature. In order to regain a chair in the orchestra of the natural world, humans must get off the conductor’s stand and take their rightful seat on the stage.

The fauna is just as significant to the composition of nature’s sound. The wildlife is responsible for transforming a simple melody into a lyrical song. The way in which animals communicate through different sounds, pitches, and frequencies serves as nature’s voice. Each chirping of birds, squealing of chipmunks, and buzzing of bees is intentional and irreplaceable by human voice. When humans allow pollution to taint the environment, it is confirming that they view wildlife as inferior. Their disregard for life beyond themselves is detrimental to the natural world. The call of the fauna is distorted by piles of trash, as animals are suffocating in the face of humanity’s self-serving mentality. Without the chorus of the wildlife, nature loses its ability to sing, and humans forget the pleasure of listening. Humans fail to acknowledge that when treated properly, animals stand to aid them in many ways. The fauna provides food, companionship, and aural entertainment to those who blend into their orchestra. This relationship is essentially symbiotic, but humans live in ignorance and isolation because they blind themselves from this truth. In “The Canticle of the Creatures,” St. Francis writes that we are given life “through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us” (114). Humans misinterpret their value when they deem themselves as nature’s rulers, and in return feel as though they are missing something. Because they look for meaning in their own creation, instead of admiring what God has already given them, their lives will feel incomplete and meaningless.

Our society has become more and more out of touch with nature’s harmony because we manipulate its music to revolve around us. We disrupt parts of nature, parts that do not belong to us, to fuel our own egos and serve our own agendas. When considering how to reconnect with nature’s harmonies, we need to take more time to be in nature without considering just ourselves. Taking humanity out from under the microscope is the only way in which we can regain our rightful spot under the sun. Just as any good musician needs to consider all elements of their composition, all humans need to take into consideration the diverse and fragile elements of our natural world. From the smallest of organisms to the largest of predators, all of nature’s elements deserve respect and acknowledgement.

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