34th annual BEACON CONFERENCE

SUNY WESTCHESTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE

ONLINE June 5, 2026

Celebrating Student Scholarship at Two-Year Colleges in the Mid-Atlantic Region

PROCEEDINGS

www.BeaconConference.org

Beacon 2026 Host
Westchester Community College

Westchester Community College President
Dr. Belinda Miles

Westchester Community College Provost and Vice President
Dr. Vanessa Morest

Beacon 2026 Conference Co-Directors
Mira Sakrajda and Kent Trickel

Beacon 2026 Intercollegiate Steering Committee

Bergen Community College
Seamus Gibbons, Kelly Keane

Borough of Manhattan Community College
Matthew Geddis

Bucks County Community College
Ryan Fealy

Dutchess Community College
Mark Condon, Mariana Melo

Jefferson Community College
Joshua P. Canale

Lehigh Carbon Community College
Mary Engel, Katy DeLong

Mercer County Community College
Theresa Melendez

Montgomery College
Rebecca Eggenschwiler, Teresa Lew

Northampton Community College
Leann Cocca, Jessie Bacho

Orange County Community College
Samuel Dillon

Reading Area Community College
Diane Conrad

Rockland Community College
Meghan Nolan, Kris Dougherty

Ulster County Community College
Tom Impola

Westchester Community College
Mira Sakrajda, Kent Trickel

Table of Contents

Introduction:
The Beacon Conference

The Beacon Conference for student scholars at two-year colleges is an annual event that began in 1993 as a grant-funded AACC/Kellogg Beacon project and is now sponsored by a coalition of junior and community colleges in the mid-Atlantic region. The primary objective of the conference is to showcase academic achievements of students on two-year college campuses.

Students are invited to submit scholarly work in 18–20 subject area categories that encompass all areas of study at two-year schools, from the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, to technical fields and special areas, such as computer applications and multicultural studies. Three community college faculty with expertise in a particular field read and rank the papers in each category. The authors of the top three essays in each discipline are invited to present their papers at the Beacon Conference hosted by one of the sponsoring colleges on the first Friday of June. Out of three finalists in each subject area, one winner is selected by a judge from a four-year university. Panel winners are chosen on the basis of the quality and originality of research, written work, and oral presentation. Prizes of $100 are awarded to both authors of the winning papers and their faculty mentors. In addition, the fourth-ranked students in each category are invited to present the highlights of their submissions during the Poster Session which precedes the Award Ceremony held at the conclusion of the conference day.

The Beacon Conference is a great opportunity for students and faculty of two-year colleges to receive recognition for their outstanding work. The project also fosters a climate of community through (1) the collegiality that develops among colleagues working on a joint project; (2) the intense relationship that grows between students and their faculty mentors; (3) the interactions among students submitting to, presenting at, and attending the conference; (4) the connections between the two-year colleges and neighboring four-year institutions which supplied panel judges; and finally (5) the communal spirit at the conference itself.

Usually, 120–170 students submit papers for the competition. The level of the papers submitted each year, the quality of the papers presented and, especially, the superiority of the winning papers illustrate that community colleges are the place for high caliber academic accomplishments.

Additional information is available at http://www.beaconconference.org.

WELCOME:
Dr. Belinda Miles, President

On behalf of SUNY Westchester Community College, welcome to the 34th Annual Beacon Conference. It is an honor for SUNY WCC to host the Beacon Conference for the fifth time.

This conference serves as both a harbinger of spring and a shining light on our students' talents as they flourish under the guidance and support of dedicated faculty and staff. Showcases like this remind us of our mission to provide accessible, high quality, and affordable education that meets the needs of our diverse community.

Alongside the community colleges represented here today, we share a commitment to student success, academic excellence, workforce development, and lifelong learning. And we thank you for being here with our students and faculty members. Today we celebrate students who have distinguished themselves through intellectual curiosity, academic achievement, and a dedication to scholarship that is truly inspiring. The Beacon scholars presenting their research represent the very best of what community colleges foster, critical thinking, creativity, perseverance, and a commitment to engaging thoughtfully with the world around them. The research papers shared at this conference reflect not only academic rigor, but also diverse perspectives and experiences that strengthen our communities and shape our future. These students are the next generation of leaders, innovators, educators, and change makers, and their work gives us great confidence in what lies ahead.

Student scholars, we commend you for your outstanding beacon projects, which reflect the remarkable diversity of topics and a shared commitment to addressing critical questions and challenges facing our society today. We are proud of all you have accomplished and excited for all that you will achieve in the future. Thank you for your participation, your scholarship, and your contributions to this year's Speaking Conference.

34th ANNUAL BEACON CONFERENCE

Date: June 5, 2026

Location: www.beaconconference.org

P R O G R A M

EVENT HOST:

SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE

8:00 AM – 9:00 AM	WELCOME Greetings from Dr. Belinda Miles, WCC President Review of Online Participation Protocol
9:00 AM – 10:30 AM	SESSION I: CONCURRENT PANELS Biological and Health Sciences Communications, Media and Film Studies Interdisciplinary Studies Literature I Women's, Gender and LGBTQ+ Studies
10:30 AM – 10:45 AM	MORNING BREAK
10:45 AM – 12:15 PM	SESSION II: CONCURRENT PANELS Business and Economics Environmental Studies History Literature II Psychology Sociology
12:15 PM – 1:30 PM	MIDDAY BREAK
1:30 PM – 3:00 PM	SESSION III: CONCURRENT PANELS Education International Studies and Globalization Literature III Philosophy and Religion Political Science Social Justice
3:00 PM – 4:00 PM	CONCURRENTLY PRESENTED: POSTER SESSION and COLLEGE TRANSFER FAIR
4:00 PM – 5:00 PM	AWARDS CEREMONY Congratulations from Dr. Vanessa Morest, WCC Provost Announcement of Panel Award Winners

SESSION I: 9:00 AM – 10:30 AM

BIOLOGICAL AND HEALTH SCIENCES

READERS:

Prof. Laura Blinderman	Mercer County Community College
Dr. Mark Condon	Dutchess Community College
Prof. Paria Parto	Prince George's Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Ann Yezerski — King's College

MODERATOR: Prof. Amy Dicapua — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Samantha Melton
"Who Will Save the Heroes? Global Health Crises and the Worsening of Compassion Fatigue in U.S. Healthcare Workers"
Prof. Lauren Strawbridge
Montgomery College

Sydney Newsome
"Saffman-Taylor Instability as a Biomimetic Model for Synaptic Pruning"
Prof. Nicole Rodstrom
Orange County Community College

Min Tam Pham
"When More is Not Enough: Advocating for a Simplified Healthcare System"
Prof. Lisa Mayer
Bergen Community College

SESSION I: 9:00 AM – 10:30 AM

COMMUNICATIONS, MEDIA AND FILM STUDIES

READERS:

Prof. Izolda Maksym	Nassau Community College
Prof. Tim Molchany	Northampton Community College
Prof. Dana Weidman	Dutchess Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Michael Cramer — Sarah Lawrence College

MODERATOR: Prof. Ellen Kreger — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Parker Madsen
"John Carpenter's *The Thing*: An Uncanny Horror Touchstone"
Prof. Bruce Campbell
Westchester Community College

Sarah Soumahoro
"The Disappearance of Tween Media Spaces and How It Affects the Youth"
Prof. Cynthia Dorsey
Westchester Community College

Tanisha Ullah
"Living in the Pages: BookTok's Power in Publishing and Perceptions"
Prof. Lauren Strawbridge
Montgomery College

SESSION I: 9:00 AM – 10:30 AM

INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

READERS:

Prof. Lynn A. Kenneally	Ocean County Community College
Dr. Trista Merrill	Finger Lakes Community College
Prof. Christine Pipitone	Raritan Valley Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Jennifer Wester — Johns Hopkins University

MODERATOR: Prof. Jennifer Jones — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Jadunda James
"The Black Experience Through Radical Love and Self-Defense"
Dr. Rashelle Peck
Borough of Manhattan Community College

Afazur Rahman
"The Existential Dangers of AI: We Need to Act Now"
Dr. Kelly Keane
Bergen Community College

Murilo Santos
"Universities: The Last Hope for The Great Society"
Prof. Seamus Gibbons
Bergen Community College

SESSION I: 9:00 AM – 10:30 AM

LITERATURE I

READERS:

Prof. Leann Cocca	Northampton Community College
Prof. Liz Hynes-Musnisky	Nassau Community College
Prof. Izabela Zieba	Raritan Valley Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Margaret Christian — Pennsylvania State University

MODERATOR: Dr. Christine Timm — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Andrew Boga
"Monster or Victim: The Story of Medusa and How It Relates to Us Today"
Dr. Heather Ostman
Westchester Community College

Viviane Lisboa
"'Sufficient to Have Stood': Free Will and Its Limits in *Paradise Lost*"
Dr. Daniel Salerno
Bergen Community College

Ryhan McHugh
"Epic Women: Who's to Blame?"
Dr. Daniel Salerno
Bergen Community College

SESSION I: 9:00 AM – 10:30 AM

WOMEN'S, GENDER AND LGBTQ+ STUDIES

READERS:

Prof. Joanna Burd	Broome Community College
Prof. Darshna Katwala	Nassau Community College
Prof. Amy Roberts Wilson	Community College of Baltimore County

JUDGE: Dr. Terri Gordon — The New School

MODERATOR: Prof. Rodeena Stephens — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Meghan Farrell
"Pure Fantasy: Contemporary Queer Fantasy Literature and Patriarchal Structures"
Prof. Brian Centrone
Westchester Community College

Katheryn Hopkins
"Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo: A Feminist Fight for Human Rights"
Dr. Felipe Muñoz
Lehigh Carbon Community College

Lenanh Pham
"The Illusion of Modern-Day Feminism: The Parallels of Princess Media to Society's View on Femininity"
Prof. Lauren Strawbridge
Montgomery College

SESSION II: 10:45 AM – 12:15 PM

BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

READERS:

Prof. Kazi Ahmed	Jefferson Community College
Prof. Susan Bielicki	Brookdale Community College
Prof. Lawrence Devan	Frederick Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Veronica Minaya Lazarte — Teachers College – Columbia University

MODERATOR: Dr. Farhad Ameen — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Saif Asam
"The Economics of Friction: A Balanced Stress-Test of Wealth and Justice"
Prof. Shinelle Espaillat
Westchester Community College

Alicia Browstein
"An In-depth Analysis of U.S. Cannabis Legalization and Post-Reform Business Development in New Jersey"
Prof. Lisa Mayer
Bergen Community College

Alfonso Marin
"Understanding How Financial Literacy and Economic Literacy Shape Financial Outcomes in Community College Students"
Dr. Christine Farias
Borough of Manhattan Community College

SESSION II: 10:45 AM – 12:15 PM

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

READERS:

Prof. Kristopher Baker	Rockland Community College
Prof. Samuel Dillon	Orange County Community College
Prof. Jennifer Herzog	Herkimer College

JUDGE: Dr. Matthew Aiello-Lammens — Pace University

MODERATOR: Dr. Laurel Robinson — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Mallory Anderson
"Harming to Heal"
Dr. Nathan Zook
Montgomery College

Dedan Choezom
"Protecting Deep-Ocean Ecosystems in the Mineral Rush"
Dr. Kelly Keane
Bergen Community College

Pan Pwint Nyi
"Environmental Concerns of the Presence of Antibiotics in Water Streams"
Prof. Abel Navarro
Borough of Manhattan Community College

SESSION II: 10:45 AM – 12:15 PM

HISTORY

READERS:

Prof. Eric DeAngelo	Lehigh Carbon Community College
Dr. Leonardo Falcón	Nassau Community College
Prof. David Lucander	Rockland Community College

JUDGE: LTC James R. Martin, Ph. D. US Military Academy – West Point

MODERATOR: Dr. Carla DuBose-Simmons Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Robert Cairns
"The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the Unjust Mexican-American War"
Dr. Felipe Muñoz
Lehigh Carbon Community College

Victoria Makarevich
"The Sacred War: Religion, Morality, and Anti-Communism"
Dr. Sadegh Foghani
Montgomery College

Vivian Nunez
"Indigenous People, Africans, and Other Races: Roles in Spanish America"
Dr. Ilan Ehrlich
Bergen Community College

SESSION II: 10:45 AM – 12:15 PM

LITERATURE II

READERS:

Prof. Randy Boone	Northampton Community College
Prof. Andrea Laurencell Sheridan	Orange County Community College
Prof. Mary R. Seel	Broome Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Robert McParland — Felician University

MODERATOR: Prof. Nicholas Haines — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Kassandra Flamouri Head
"Alexis Zorba in Prose and Film"
Prof. Jennifer Myskowski
Lehigh Carbon Community College

Megan Hussey
"Literature & Cinema in Tandem: Politics of Portrayal in *Hiroshima mon amour*"
Prof. Rachel Corkle
Borough of Manhattan Community College

Jaidyn Roush
"Dystopian Fiction and Its Influence of how Society Views the Government"
Prof. Danielle Bower
Reading Area Community College

SESSION II: 10:45 AM – 12:15 PM

PSYCHOLOGY

READERS:

Prof. Michael Hall	Dutchess Community College
Prof. Jenny Henriquez	Hudson County Community College
Prof. Ian MacDonald	Jefferson Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Jordan Daley — New York University

MODERATOR: Dr. Kamil Hamaoui — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

TianaMarie Allen
"The Psychological Burdens in International Adoption"
Prof. Seamus Gibbons
Bergen Community College

Beixi Chen
"Digital Intimacy and Emotional Cultivation: Understanding Otome Games Through Confucianism, Daoism, and Psychology"
Prof. Peter Dlugos
Bergen Community College

Mariana Rodriguez
"Herd Mentality: When Does it Become Dangerous?"
Dr. Nathan Zook
Montgomery College

SESSION II: 10:45 AM – 12:15 PM

SOCIOLOGY

READERS

Prof. Cory Harris	Orange County Community College
Prof. Lori Tuttle	Jefferson Community College
Prof. Vondora Wilson-Corzen	Nassau Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Marie-Claude Jipguep Howard University

MODERATOR: Prof. Heidi Baez Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Sahara Bangura
"Equity Theater: When DEI Becomes a Performance"
Dr. Zachary Sunderman
Westchester Community College

Olivia Naprstek
"Mapping Out the Modern Man"
Prof. Seamus Gibbons
Bergen Community College

Bianca Rodrigues Couto
"The Pain Gap: Gender Disparity in Western Healthcare"
Dr. Zachary Sunderman
Westchester Community College

SESSION III: 1:30 PM – 3:00 PM

EDUCATION

READERS:

Prof. Margaret Craig	Dutchess Community College
Prof. Heather Hinkle	Frederick Community College
Prof. Richelle Lawrence	Broome Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Thomas Brock — Teachers College – Columbia University

MODERATOR: Prof. Genevieve Quinones — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Rebecca Cruz
"Through a Child's Lens: The Effects of Political Violence on Children"
Dr. Nathan Zook
Montgomery College

Joey Salvatore Ribaudo
"The Real Cost of AI in Student Writing"
Dr. Kelly Keane
Bergen Community College

Cristian Tenempaguay
"Understanding the Special Education Teacher Shortage: Causes, Challenges, and Policy Responses in the United States"
Dr. Melissa Krieger
Bergen Community College

SESSION III: 1:30 PM – 3:00 PM

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND GLOBALIZATION

READERS:

Prof. Cristobal Espinoza-Wulach	Middlesex Community College
Dr. George Repic	Rockland Community College
Dr. Laura Sosa	Mercer County Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Leandro Benmergui — SUNY Purchase

MODERATOR: Cynthia Haycock, Esq — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Regina Porras Cardona
"The Role of Caifanes and Mexican Rock in Shaping Youth Activism Across Borders"
Dr. Nathan Zook
Montgomery College

Lucia Fernez
"From Protection to Punishment: Feminist Shifts and Female Criminalization in a World in Flux"
Dr. Nathan Zook
Montgomery College

Natalia Guevara
"Robin Hood: The Greatest Hypocritical Criminal that Severely Affected Two Nations, Colombia and the United States"
Prof. Felipe Muñoz
Lehigh Carbon Community College

SESSION III: 1:30 PM – 3:00 PM

LITERATURE III

READERS:

Prof. Jessica K. Bacho	Northampton Community College
Prof. Joshua Dickinson	Jefferson Community College
Prof. Krista Rivera	SUNY Adirondack

JUDGE: Dr. Elizabeth Holt — Bard College

MODERATOR: Dr. Vickie Masséus — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Meghan Farrell
"Freedom for Some: Women in Postcolonial Society as Portrayed Through Literature"
Dr. Elise Martucci
Westchester Community College

Patricia Gibby
"The Futile Enforcement of Natural Forces: A Postcolonial Analysis of *To the Lighthouse*"
Dr. Meghan Nolan
Rockland Community College

David Kahen-Kashi
"On Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*"
Dr. Heather Ostman
Westchester Community College

SESSION III: 1:30 PM – 3:00 PM

PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

READERS:

Prof. Kenneth Howarth	Mercer County Community College
Prof. Robert L. Muhlnickel	Monroe Community College
Dr. Benjamin Nelson	Community College of Baltimore County

JUDGE: Dr. Keith McPartland — Williams College

MODERATOR: Dr. Julie Linden — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Nicole Hernandez
"Meaningfulness and Morality in Insular Epistemic Communities"
Dr. Kevin Olbrys
Bergen Community College

Shloimy Goldberger
"One God, Many Forms: Complications of the Term 'Monotheism'"
Dr. Christina Stern
Rockland Community College

Parker Madsen
"Sorry Tolstoy, Some People are Inoculated"
Dr. Dwight Goodyear
Westchester Community College

SESSION III: 1:30 PM – 3:00 PM

POLITICAL SCIENCE

READERS:

Prof. Paul Basinski	Orange County Community College
Dr. Eric Schwartz	Hagerstown Community College
Dr. Sarah Shurts `	Bergen Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Taneisha Means Davis — Vassar College

MODERATOR: Dr. George Keteku — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Adalia Bonilla
"Voices in Motion: How Gen-Z is Changing the Meaning of Activism"
Dr. Nathan Zook
Montgomery College

Jamie Diaz
"Third Parties in America"
Prof. Jodi Greene
Reading Area Community College

Sayeda Fatima
"The Shift From Hierarchical To Grassroots Power In New York Politics"
Prof. Nicole Porcaro
Montgomery College

SESSION III: 1:30 PM – 3:00 PM

SOCIAL JUSTICE

READERS:

Dr. Joshua P. Canale	Jefferson Community College
Prof. Thomas Impola	Ulster County Community College
Prof. Margeaux Lippman	Dutchess Community College

JUDGE: Dr. Amiel Bize — Cornell University

MODERATOR: Dr. Carolyn Peguero-Spencer — Westchester Community College

PRESENTERS:

Megan Rodriguez
"Redefining Modern Masculinity: Examining the Impact of Educational Trends, Men's Mental Health, and Closing Gender Gaps"
Prof. Seamus Gibbons
Bergen Community College

Savannah Stone
"The Elephant in the Room: Unpacking Fatphobia"
Dr. Kelly Keane
Bergen Community College

Aly Vaca
" Parties, Policies, and Permission: The Divergence of Transphobic Rhetoric in the United States and the United Kingdom"
Prof. Lauren Strawbridge
Montgomery College

POSTER SESSION

Lydia Devlin
"The Functions and Interactions of the Appendix"
Prof. Julie Linden
Westchester Community College

Daniel Farrell
"Is the Growth of Online Gambling Beneficial for Society?"
Dr. Elise Martucci
Westchester Community College

Kassandra Flamouri Head
"Jennifer Saint's *Hera*: A Missed Opportunity"
Prof. Amelia Fetherolf
Lehigh Carbon Community College

Vicente Hernandez
"Avoiding the Inevitable: Adapting to Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education"
Dr. Rachel Kraushaar
Rockland Community College

Aleya Khan
"From Sci-fi to Real Life: How AI Is Slowly Changing the World"
Prof. Strawbridge
Montgomery College

Odhran Lalfferty
"The American Experiment: Improving Democratic Participation in the US"
Dr. Christine Timm
Westchester Community College

Evelina Morillo
"From Dreams to Rights: Water Access and Justice for Native American Tribes"
Dr. Jodi Greene
Reading Area Community College

Emilia Portes
"Blood and Borders"
Prof. Jodi Greene
Reading Area Community College

Samantha Salvador
"*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Its Impact"
Dr. Heather Ostman
Westchester Community College

Paul Schultz
"The Dangers of Ease"
Dr. James Werner
Westchester Community College

Kaitlin Solt
"Self-Control and Academic Performance in Community College Students"
Dr. Katy Long
Lehigh Carbon Community College

Sarah Soumahoro
"The Spectacle of Suffering: How the Entertainment Industry Commodifies Black Trauma"
Dr. Elise Martucci
Westchester Community College

Norah Gabrielle Tchokouani
"Globalization and Beauty Standards"
Prof. Deborah Taylor
Montgomery College

Tyler Turoczy
"Oedipus with a Hint of Freud"
Prof. Scott Keim
Lehigh Carbon Community College

TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS INVOLVED IN BEACON'26

Bergen Community College
Borough of Manhattan Community College
Brookdale Community College
Broome Community College
Community College of Baltimore County
Dutchess Community College
Finger Lakes Community College
Frederick Community College
Hagerstown Community College
Herkimer College
Hudson County Community College
Jefferson Community College
Lehigh Carbon Community College
Mercer County Community College
Middlesex Community College
Monroe Community College
Montgomery College
Nassau Community College
Northampton Community College
Ocean County Community College
Orange County Community College
Prince George's Community College
Raritan Valley Community College
Reading Area Community College
Rockland Community College
SUNY Adirondack
Tyler Junior College, Texas
Ulster County Community College
Westchester Community College

FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS INVOLVED IN BEACON'26

PANEL JUDGES

Bard College
Columbia University
Cornell University
Felician University
Howard University
Johns Hopkins University
King's College
The New School
New York University
Pace University
Pennsylvania State University
Sarah Lawrence College
US Military Academy – West Point
Vassar College
Williams College

TRANSFER FAIR

Excelsior University
Marist University
Mercy University
Montclair State University
The New School
Stony Brook University
SUNY University at Buffalo
Syracuse University
University of Massachusetts at Lowell

DISCLAIMER

Out of respect for the decisions made by the Beacon’26 Scholars and their mentors, in the compilation of the Proceedings, every effort was made to maintain the formatting of each award-winning paper. No changes have been made to the content. Authenticity and originality of work were formally confirmed by the authors upon submission.

Biological and Health Sciences

Sydney Newsome

Orange County Community College

Mentor: Prof. Nicole Rodstrom

Title: “Saffman-Taylor Instability as a Biomimetic Model for Synaptic Pruning States in Pyramidal Neurons and Implications for Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Ann Yezerski, King’s College:

“This was a very difficult decision as all three papers and presentations were excellent. My ultimate decision was based on how novel Sydney's project was; taking a technique used in other capacities and applying it to such a complex question. I was also very impressed by Sydney's depth of knowledge on the entire breadth of her topic from the neural diseases through the neural anatomy and physiology, to the application of the model itself.”

Saffman-Taylor Instability as a Biomimetic Model for Synaptic Pruning States in Pyramidal Neurons and Implications for Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Abstract

Autism research relies heavily on animal models and clinical trials to test pharmacological interventions, but these methods often involve invasive procedures and risk iatrogenic outcomes. Biomimetic models offer a compelling alternative by avoiding the complications of *in vivo* studies. This research uses Saffman-Taylor instability, or viscous fingering, in a Hele-Shaw cell to mimic the fractal dimension (*D*) of pyramidal neurons across various pruning states. This approach is advantageous for its fast pattern formation, low cost, and ease of replication. By increasing obstacles within the Hele-Shaw cell to represent the underpruning characteristic of autism, the normal pruning of a healthy brain, and the overpruning caused by nonselective pharmacological agents, we observed a consistent decrease in *D* across models. These results indicate that pharmacological interventions targeting synaptic pruning deficits in ASD may inadvertently cause a loss of complexity and branching characteristic of pyramidal neurons, raising critical questions regarding their use in ASD treatment.

Introduction

Synaptic pruning, the process by which the brain removes excess connections, or synapses, to optimize neural network efficiency, is a primary and ongoing focus of autism research. Studies have shown that autism is associated with pruning deficits during critical phases of development, leading to excess synapses and hyperconnectivity (Tang et al., 2014). This pathophysiology contributes to the symptomatology associated with ASD (Lewis et al., 2017). Novel pharmacological agents are currently being studied to determine whether pruning can be induced in individuals with ASD to improve symptoms. While some research indicates promising results, other studies have shown that targeted drug treatments also could have deleterious effects (Hauptman et al. 2025; Overwater et al., 2019), necessitating increased scrutiny regarding the use of such interventions.

When considering a structure as complex and intricate as the human brain, modeling processes like synaptic pruning at a larger scale poses inherent challenges. As neurons exploit fractal geometry, one possible analogy is Saffman-Taylor instability, or viscous fingering, in which a less viscous fluid displaces a more viscous one, creating complex, fingerlike or fractal patterns (Lindner et al., 1999; Smith et al., 2021). One of the most effective ways to demonstrate this interfacial instability is through a Hele-Shaw cell, an apparatus with two plates separated by a uniform gap width to study fluid flow (Lindner et al., 1999). Manual injection of methylene blue, a water-based dye, into a 12% sodium bentonite suspension yields unique, tree-like patterns that mimic the dendritic morphology and complexity, or fractal dimension (*D*), of pyramidal neurons.

Introducing obstacles, analogous to pruning, in a Hele-Shaw cell could serve as a visual representation of pruning states: underpruning, as observed in ASD; the healthy pruning of a typical neuron; and overpruning that may result from pharmacological agents targeting deficits in ASD. We tested two hypotheses: (1) Increasing the number of introduced obstacles will result in changes to branching and complexity, and (2) Introducing excessive obstacles will cause decreased branching and complexity, analogous to overpruning via pharmacological intervention for ASD.

Methods

Materials and Procedures

The experiments were conducted in a Hele-Shaw cell consisting of two 15.0 x 15.0 cm plexiglass plates separated by a 0.50 mm gap, achieved with a single spacer of equal thickness at each corner, with four medium-sized binder clips to clamp them in place. A 2.0-mm hole was drilled into the center of the top plate, and a ring of hot glue approximately 2.0 cm in diameter was applied around the hole to prevent excessive fluid spillage. To make a fluid of higher viscosity, a 12% suspension of sodium bentonite clay in water (g/100 mL) was prepared by warming 100 mL of water in a beaker on a hot plate, then slowly adding 12.0 g of sodium bentonite to avoid clumping (Fluid Dynamics, 2023). 2.0 mL of the suspension was injected into the Hele-Shaw cell using a 1.0 mL micropipette. 0.50 mL of methylene blue dye (methylthioninium chloride solution) was then injected into the cell as the less viscous fluid. This resulted in a dendritic pattern and established an experimental control.

To replicate pruning, 3-mm circular plastic objects, individually hole-punched from a binder divider with a width < 0.50 mm, were placed on the bottom plate, and a grid labeled 1–100 was centered underneath the cell. The number and location of obstacles to place in each grid square were determined using existing data on pruning percentages (pruning in ASD ~0.16; pruning in a healthy brain ~0.45; and hypothesized overpruning via pharmacological intervention, based on data on synaptic loss in schizophrenia ~0.30 + ~0.45 reduction in a healthy brain ≈ 0.75) and a random number generator (Hoffman et al., 2017; Tang et al. 2014). Numbers 35-36, 44-47, 54-57, and 65-66 were excluded from the RNG because the hot glue ring blocked their visibility on the grid. Data on schizophrenia was used because the condition shares some genetic mechanisms with ASD, except that schizophrenia is linked to excessive pruning (Chen et al., 2024). Three trials were run for each model, in addition to the control, resulting in 12 trials total for analysis. Photos of each trial were taken upon completion using an iPhone camera, first by themselves and second with a ruler for scale. The iPhone camera was attached to an overhead tripod bent at a 90-degree angle (see Figure 1).

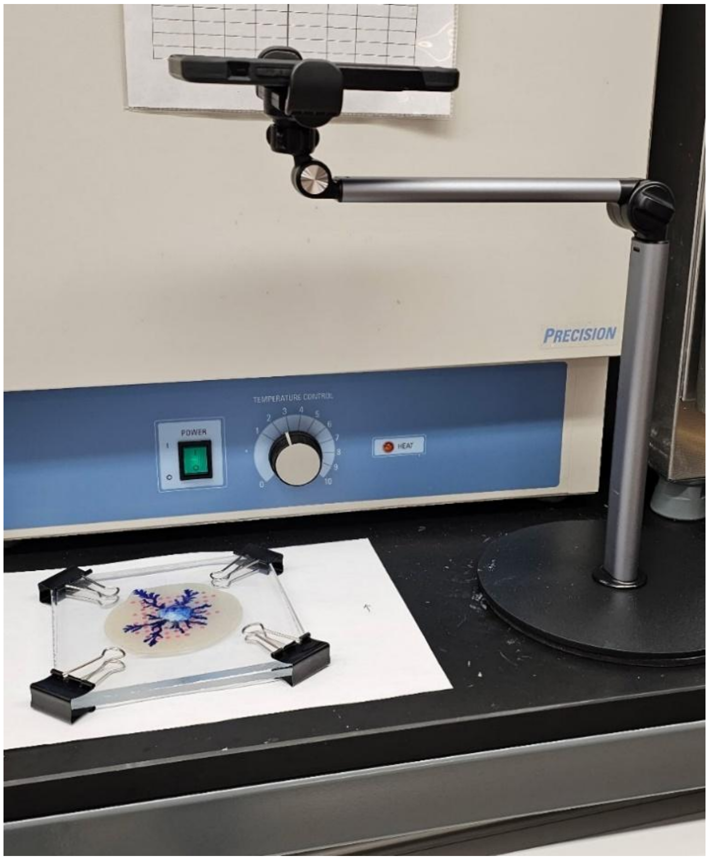
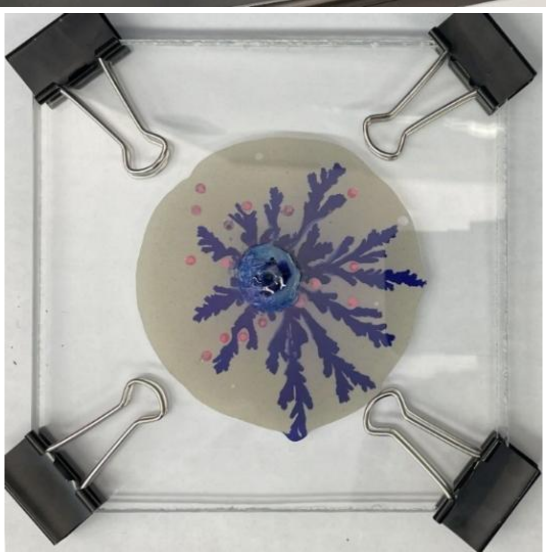


Figure 1. Experimental setup for Hele-Shaw cell.

Data Analysis

Raw images were edited and analyzed using the image processing program ImageJ. Scale was set in each image (the Hele-Shaw cell measures roughly 15.0 x 15.0 cm). Figure 2 shows how each image was binarized and hand-edited to eliminate noise that could affect data analysis, showing only the pattern formation resulting from the instability. Because the hot-glued area blocked part of the pattern, the entire region was blocked out in editing, while salvaging any protrusions visible to the naked eye. Binarized images were converted to an outline. The fractal box count tool was then used to generate a log-log plot with slope *D*, or fractal dimension, which quantifies shape complexity, where 1 corresponds to a straight line and 2 to a solid plane (Bauer & Mackenzie, 2000). A higher *D* value indicates greater complexity (see Figure 3).

a)  b) 

c) 

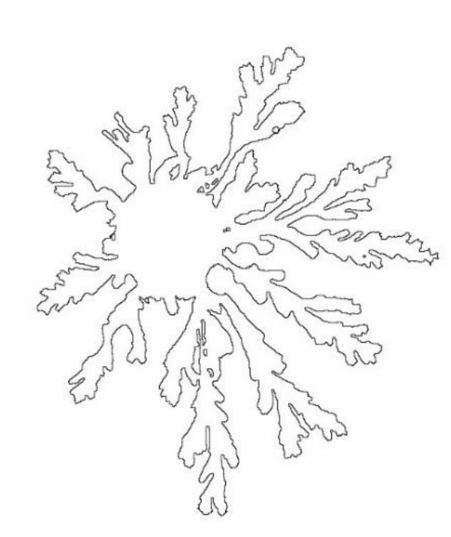
d) 

Figure 2. Editing process in ImageJ Software. (A) Raw cropped image of a trial for the ASD model. (B) Black-and-white representation (binarization) of the image. (C) Binary image after hand-editing to remove noise that could affect analysis. (D) Final edit depicting the perimeter surface, or outline, used for fractal box counting.

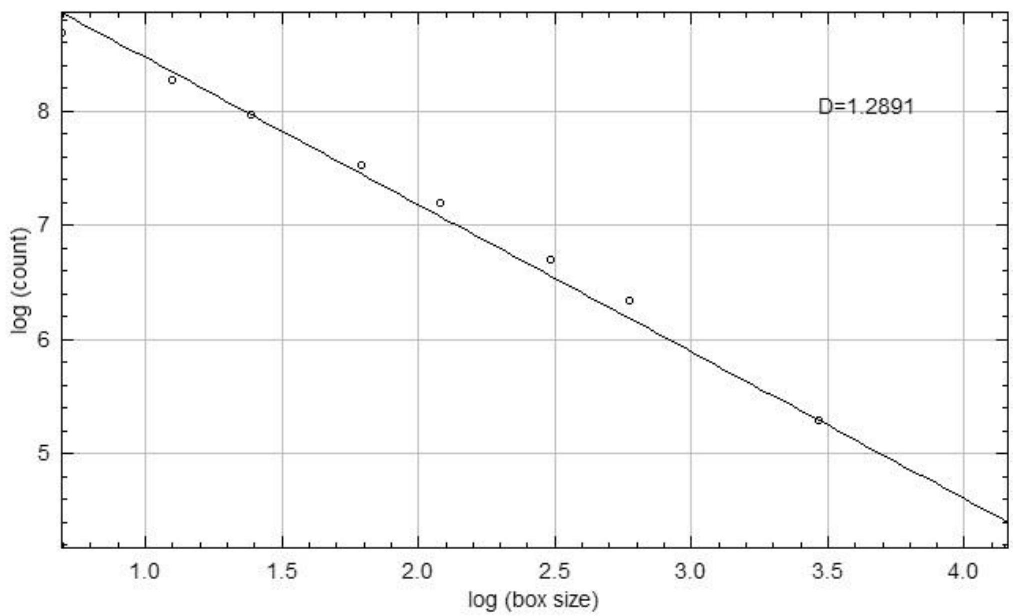


Figure 3. Log-log plot of ASD model trial with slope $D \approx 1.2891$ generated by fractal box count tool in ImageJ.

In Excel, the fractal dimension was averaged across the four experimental models. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the effects of increasing the number of obstacles across multiple groups. Two tests were run for each hypothesis. An F-value (the ratio of variance between groups to the variance within groups) that is higher than F-crit (the threshold value) and a p-value < 0.05 would indicate statistical significance that rejects the null hypothesis H_0 (that no change occurred) and supports the alternate hypotheses H_1 and H_2.

Results

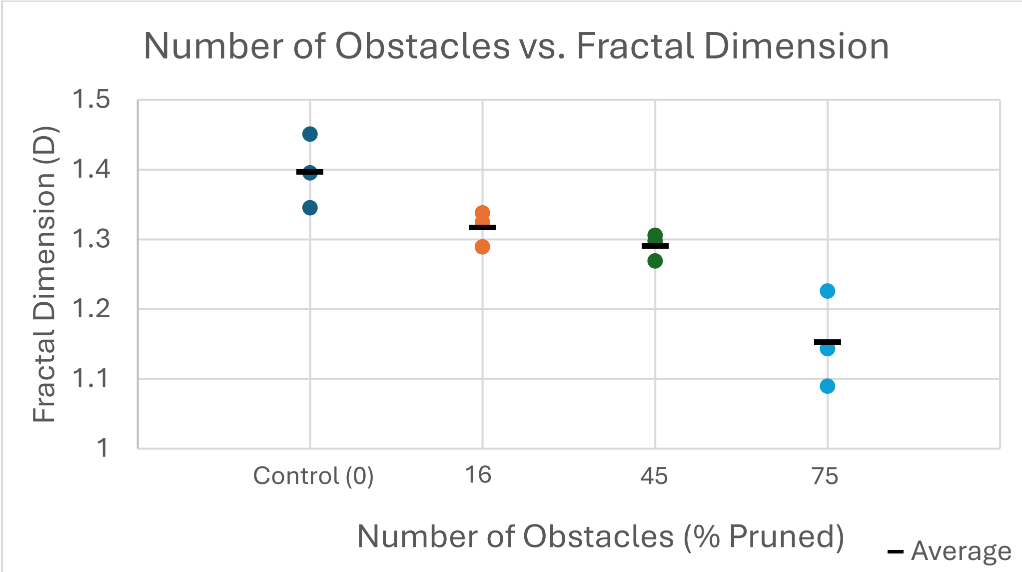


Figure 4. Dot plot of number of obstacles vs. fractal dimension (*D*) with mean values.

The control, which had 0 obstacles, had an average $D \approx 1.3971$. The model for autism (underpruning), which had 16 obstacles, had an average $D \approx 1.3172$. The model for healthy pruning, which had 45 obstacles, had an average $D \approx 1.2909$. The model for overpruning, which had 75 obstacles, had an average $D \approx 1.1530$. Figure 4 depicts the decrease in mean *D*. Overall decrease in mean *D* was ~17.5%.

Table 1. One-way ANOVA for H_1.

SUMMARY

Groups	*Count*	*Sum*	*Average*	*Variance*
Control (0 Obstacles)	3	4.1913	1.3971	0.002806
16 Obstacles	3	3.9515	1.317167	0.000636
45 Obstacles	3	3.8727	1.2909	0.000369
75 Obstacles	3	3.459	1.153	0.004715

ANOVA

Source of Variation	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*P-value*	*F crit*
Between Groups	0.092932	3	0.030977	14.53338	0.001331	4.066181
Within Groups	0.017052	8	0.002131			
Total	0.109984	11				

Note. *SS* = sum of squares; *df* = degrees of freedom; *MS* = mean squares.

A one-way ANOVA showed that there was a statistically significant difference in mean *D* among groups ($F(3,8) = [14.53339]$, $^{**}p < 0.01$), rejecting the null hypothesis H_0 and supporting the alternate hypothesis H_1 (see Table 1).

Table 2. One-way ANOVA for H_2.

SUMMARY

Groups	*Count*	*Sum*	*Average*	*Variance*
16 Obstacles	3	3.9515	1.317167	0.000636
75 Obstacles	3	3.459	1.153	0.004715

ANOVA

Source of Variation	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*P-value*	*F crit*
Between Groups	0.040426	1	0.040426	15.11061	0.017732	7.708647
Within Groups	0.010701	4	0.002675			
Total	0.051127	5				

Note. *SS* = sum of squares; *df* = degrees of freedom; *MS* = mean squares.

A one-way ANOVA showed that there was a statistically significant difference in mean *D* among groups 2 and 4 ($F(1,4) = [15.11061]$, $^{*}p < 0.05$), rejecting the null hypothesis H_0 and supporting the alternate hypothesis H_2 (see Table 2).

Discussion

Both hypotheses were supported. Introducing obstacles changed the branching and complexity of the patterns formed through Saffman-Taylor instability. The first ANOVA test showed a statistically significant difference in mean *D* between at least two groups. The second ANOVA test showed a statistically significant decrease in mean *D* between the model representing autism (16 obstacles) and the model representing overpruning via proposed pharmacological intervention (75 obstacles). Despite experimental limitations, our results could have profound implications for the safety and efficacy of pharmacological treatments targeting synaptic pruning deficits in ASD. While the brain is highly plastic, the loss of specific synaptic connections is often permanent; consequently, overpruning can precede or mirror the progression of neurodegenerative decline (RI-MUHC, 2023). The systemic, nonselective nature of agents such as rapamycin underscores these risks (Hess, 2022), necessitating a fundamental reevaluation of whether ameliorating atypical synaptic states justifies the risk of inducing irreversible neuronal damage.

To our knowledge, this is the first documented attempt to represent pruning states of a pyramidal neuron through Saffman-Taylor instability with the intent to show how pharmacological intervention in ASD could be harmful via unregulated overpruning. It is important to note that the patterns formed through this instability do not mimic the exact morphology of neurons—specifically the basal dendrites of pyramidal neurons, which are often studied in ASD (Tang et al., 2014)—which therefore requires some caution in translating these findings to clinical applications. Nonetheless, this experiment shows compelling visuals and statistically significant results that did not require animal testing or human trials, indicating the potential for biomimetic modeling. Moreover, the relatively low cost of materials, fast pattern formation during injection of fluid, and unique fractal patterns could yield immense data and potential advancements in neuroscience and autism research.

Limitations

Our experiment was limited by financial, time, and laboratory constraints, including the manual use of a micropipette in place of a more expensive syringe pump (which accounts for variables like flow rate), time elapsed between conducted trials, and a hand-built apparatus in place of standardized laboratory equipment. While data on schizophrenia was used because the condition shares some genetic and neurobiological mechanisms with ASD, it should also be noted that many other factors contribute to schizophrenia, and that the addition of synaptic loss and normal pruning is an oversimplification; however, this data was used to (a) prevent bias through choosing a number that we thought would work best and (b) best approximate a percentage for overpruning, as a total value could not be found in any studies we consulted.

Fractal dimension analysis was likely affected by the presence of hot glue in the images, which obscured the patterns beneath it, as well as by the subsequent hand-editing of images in ImageJ. Interestingly, this resulted in fractal dimensions closer to those observed in pyramidal neurons (generally between 1.3 and 1.4), likely due to the presence of a more circular outline in the center of the image that would lower *D*; it is common practice to consider the soma of a neuron in analysis for this reason (Smith et al., 2021). Without an obstruction, *D* would likely have been higher across all groups, though it is reasonable to postulate that the overall observation (decreasing *D* across models) would have been the same, as the hot glue remained unchanged. Future experiments would nevertheless need to account for these factors to determine reliability.

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Communications, Media, and Film Studies

Parker Madsen

Westchester Community College

Mentor: Bruce Campbell

Title: “John Carpenter’s The Thing, an Uncanny Horror Touchstone”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Michael Cramer, Sarah Lawrence College

“Parker Madsen's paper does an excellent job of illustrating how studying the origins of fear from an evolutionary perspective can be applied to the analysis of horror film. Carpenter's The Thing serves as a perfect case study and allows the paper to show that although certain fears may be "hard-wired" into us through evolution, they take on different meanings depending on cultural context. In this sense, the paper is an exemplary case of using insights from both science and the humanities to carry out a textual analysis.”

John Carpenter's The Thing, an Uncanny Horror Touchstone

Horror is a film genre that thrives on human perception of the unknown, the dangerous, and the uncanny. As a genre, horror naturally elicits anxiety and fear in its audience, playing on the basest human instinct: the desire to stay alive. The genre exists as one of the oldest and most prolific, with the first horror film being widely attributed to the 1896 film Le Manoir du Diable, or The House of the Devil in English. (May) While storied within the medium of film, horror as a mode of story has likely always been part of human culture, with the oldest recorded human story, The Epic of Gilgamesh, featuring a trip to the underworld, a common trope/convention in modern horror narratives, venturing into realms humans do not belong (George, 2003). With the oldest recorded tablets originating circa 2,000 B.C.E. we can assume far older oral traditions exist that have been lost to us. But why are humans so drawn to horror? It is because we are predisposed towards fearing things, and to some extent, we enjoy being afraid in a safe context.

The conventions of the horror genre lead us down a rabbit hole of human psychology. From an evolutionary psychological point of view, humans have innate predispositions toward fear of certain things; in other words, we are "pre-wired" to acquire certain fears as it was evolutionarily advantageous. Humans are far more likely to develop a phobia of snakes than we are of knives, and we are more likely to develop a fear of heights than we are of other humans. Logically this makes sense, as being afraid of snakes increases the odds of survival in an environment where snakes are a threat, and a fear of heights increases the odds of survival where a fall would kill. It would stand to reason then that a great many conventions of the genre would line up extraordinarily well with these pre-wired fears, and indeed it would appear to follow closely with reality. Low-key lighting is the first and most obvious example. As humans, we have an innate disposition towards fear of the dark or unseeable places, and from an evolutionary standpoint that makes sense: you can not defend yourself from that which you can not see. Rarely if ever will a horror film not feature some level of low-key lighting, as the deep shadows and darkness it creates lends itself to a strong atmosphere of suspense and anxiety. As social creatures we are also predisposed towards the fear of being alone or isolated, with safety in numbers and group cooperation contributing heavily towards the success of our species from an evolutionary standpoint. Walking down a dark alley with a group can be a little spooky, but on your own? It can be terrifying. Isolation within the history of humanity has had the natural consequence of death or a greater likelihood of such an event occurring. Isolated subjects often appear in horror films as we naturally empathize with the feeling of being alone in ways that increase our anxiety. Even if a protagonist begins their journey in a group, within a horror film we will often see our protagonist separated and forced to face the conflicts on their own. Going hand in hand with horror is the convention of monsters in film and other narrative mediums. The fear of that which is not human, things unknown, has been a constant throughout human existence: Greek manticores, chimeras, gorgons; Japanese oni, tengu, youkai; Arabic djinn, ghouls, and efrit. The myth of monsters persists because it was evolutionarily beneficial to be afraid of things that were bigger, faster, stronger, and sometimes smarter than you. Monsters of all types appear across the spectrum of horror films, with some of the most successful early horror films heavily featuring monsters, that of Frankenstein and Nosferatu. Using all of these conventions and more, The Thing by John Carpenter is a unique vessel that explores the horror genre through the lens of Cold War America and I believe perfectly captures the essence of fear, anxiety, and paranoia that is sought after within the genre, and utilizes one of the most interesting phenomena in the psychology of fear to captivate audiences: the 'Uncanny Valley.'

John Carpenter's The Thing is a 1982 sci-fi horror film set in a remote Antarctic research station during the harsh winter months where temperatures reach -100 degrees Fahrenheit and communication with the outside world is extremely restricted. A team of Norwegian scientists unearth an alien vessel and discover a creature frozen within. After thawing the creature, the Norwegians discover too late that it is an incredibly dangerous lifeform capable of infecting and perfectly mimicking the body and mind of other organisms. The creature in the guise of a dog runs to the American research base while the Norwegians fire upon it with a rifle and attempt to blow it up with explosives. The Norwegian helicopter is destroyed by one of their own explosives, killing the pilot, and the other Norwegian is killed by Garry (played by David Moffat), who assumed the Norwegians were stir-crazy. The Americans, unsuspicious of the dog, allow it to wander the base as our protagonist, pilot R.J. MacReady (played by Kurt Russell) and one of the base's doctors, Dr. Copper (played by Richard Dysart), head out to see if there are any survivors at the Norwegian base. In the process they discover the corpse of one of the alien's victims/transformations and transport it back to the American research outpost.

An autopsy is performed on the corpse, a malformed, grotesque, human-looking thing with two faces, and it is discovered that on the inside it has perfect human organs. The dog, which has been wandering around the base for several hours by this point, is kenneled with the rest of the American base's dogs. Not long after it is put with the rest of the dogs does the creature reveal itself to audiences for the first time, the perfect skin-suit of the dog peeled away to reveal a warped, unnatural, alien canine face underneath the surface. Paranoia sweeps through the camp as it becomes readily apparent that the extraterrestrial is fully capable of killing and assuming the identity of any member of the outpost. One by one the humans are picked off by the creature as they turn on each other due to mounting paranoia. Eventually a blood test is devised by MacReady to determine who is and isn't human, and when it becomes readily apparent to the creature (in its several host bodies by this point) that the humans will systematically root it out, it decides to destroy the generator and freeze the entire base to prevent itself from being destroyed, since it, unlike humans, can survive being frozen solid. The last remaining members of the outpost decide that rather than let the alien potentially be found by rescue teams and thawed out in the future, they should burn out and destroy the base, guaranteeing their own demise to hopefully put an end to the monster's goals. The movie ends with MacReady in the freezing winds, slowly succumbing to the cold as Childs (played by Keith David) sits across from him with a flamethrower, both mutually capable of destroying one another, both unsure whether or not the other is the Thing – and to the audience, we are also left unsure if Childs is human or not, leaving us on an ambiguous note as we fade to black against the burning American outpost.

Immediate critical reception to the film following its release the 25th of June, 1982, was as cold as the 37ntarctic winds of the movie itself. Writing for the New York Times, critic Vincent Canby tore into the movie with his scathing review, writing that,

> JOHN CARPENTER'S 'The Thing' is a foolish, depressing, overproduced movie that mixes horror with science fiction to make something that is fun as neither one thing or the other. Sometimes it looks as if it aspired to be the quintessential moron movie of the 80's – a virtually storyless feature composed of lots of laboratory-concocted special effects, with the actors used merely as props to be hacked, slashed, disemboweled and decapitated, finally to be eaten and then regurgitated as – guess what? – more laboratory-concocted special effects. (Canby 1982)

Canby was essentially calling it out as a cheap slasher movie which at the time had been an overrepresented aspect of the genre, something that was wearing itself thin by 1982, and Canby wasn't alone – Roger Ebert of Siskel and Ebert fame wrote at the time,

> 'The Thing' is a great barf-bag movie, all right, but is it any good? I found it disappointing, for two reasons: the superficial characterizations and the implausible behavior of the scientists on that icy outpost. Characters have never been Carpenter's strong point; he says he likes his movies to create emotions in his audiences, and I guess he'd rather see us jump six inches than get involved in the personalities of his characters. (Ebert 1982)

Similar to Canby, Ebert derided the film as a cheap gore-fest with little character substance.

As a film about aliens on its surface it had to contend against the likes of Steven Spielberg's E.T. the Extraterrestrial at the box office and within the minds of critics as Spielberg's film released to critical acclaim just a scant 14 days prior to The Thing. American audiences overwhelmingly preferred the family friendly sci-fi film about aliens over its sci-fi horror counterpart. But was this icy reception a symptom of the film's cultural context, rather than its actual qualitative traits?

Debuting as a director with his film, Dark Star, John Carpenter is highly regarded as one of the most influential horror directors of all time. Best known for his work on the 1978 film Halloween, and the creation of the iconic Michael Myers killer, Carpenter's works often fall between the slasher and suspense thriller subgenres. He positions himself uniquely as both director and composer of most of his own work, and has been awarded the "Golden Coach Award" by the French Directors Guild for his contributions to film (Chu 2019). Carpenter received an academy award in 1970 for his work on the short film The Resurrection of Broncho Billy, but has never otherwise been competitive for another category. His most famous work within the horror genre is undoubtedly Halloween, a film in the slasher subgenre that has garnered international fame and success. Halloween is one of the most successful independent films ever made, with a shoestring budget of $300,000 and remarkable box-office earnings of $70,000,000. This stands in stark contrast to his later work on The Thing, with a budget of $15,000,000 and a very poor box office of $19,600,000 comparatively (Box Office Mojo). Despite its position in history as a cult-classic with little payoff on the monetary side, it is inarguably a very well made film, primarily in its cinematography and sound design.

The Thing is a remarkable example of the use of cinematography in storytelling. Cinematographer Dean Cundey utilizes sweeping wide shots from low angles against the backdrop of snow to isolate subjects as miniscule figures in the distance, playing with the isolation the characters are subjected to within the story and utilizing it within a frame to deepen that distance from others as paranoia rips apart the members of the outpost. Cundey is unafraid to utilize deep shadows and practical lighting within the environment. When we see light in frame there is no doubt in the mind of the viewer on an unconscious level that it is diegetic, that the light is coming from something within the frame of the shot or just off screen. When the generator is destroyed by the creature and the lights go out we aren't treated to a movie without proper lighting, but instead the tension is exacerbated by the use of deep blue emergency lights coming online and bright red flares casting harsh shadows and creating bright highlights which glint against the anamorphic lenses used to give a wide, cinematic, imposing aspect ratio.

Only serving to enhance the feelings of anxiety is the subtle droning soundtrack composed by the renowned Ennio Morricone of The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly fame. Deeply unsettling yet captivating, Morricone's soundtrack creates a sense of unease in the viewer/listener through its use of synthesizers and select violins, playing within scenes as a way to build tension as the music slowly ramps up. Morricone was approached by Carpenter to develop the score and flew out to Los Angeles to work alongside Carpenter in the final stages of the film's production. Morricone brought with him a selection of synthesizer works he had developed, one of which would become the theme of the film (Evangelista

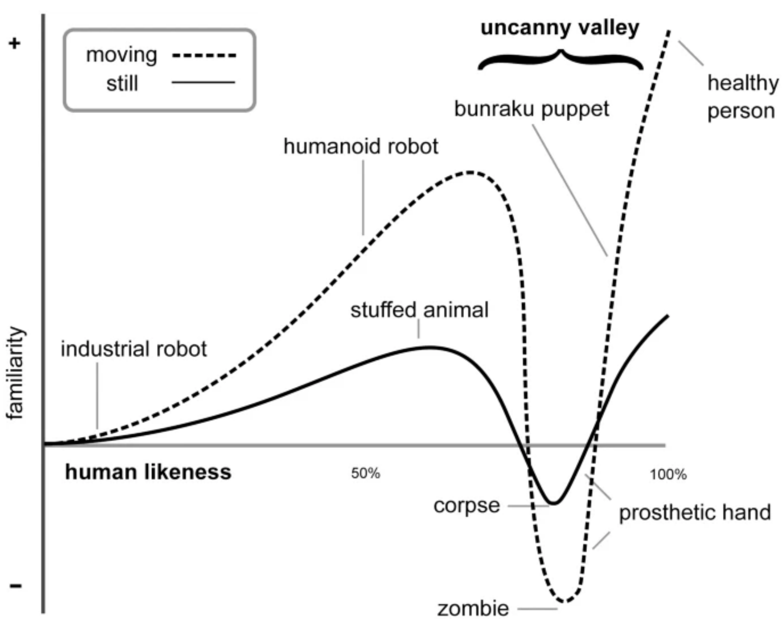
2017). Despite later acclaim, at the time of the movie's release the soundtrack would be nominated for a Razzie, a parody of the Academy Awards created to spoof nominations for the yearly 'worst in each category.' Joining the soundtrack is a suite of foley that enhance the atmosphere within the film, from the clinking of ice against glass and sparks as MacReady destroys the chess computer at the beginning of the film, to the slimy, revulsion inducing sounds of alien autopsies, little of the soundscape is wasted to things that do not need to be heard to improve the experience.

Heavy parallels between The Thing and the film Alien can be drawn as both films are heavily cross-pollinated sci-fi horror films involving extra terrestrial threats, and Alien, as predecessor to The Thing, certainly influenced many of the creative choices taken in the production of the film. Both films feature a fairly large cast of diverse actors set against the backdrop of an extremely isolating environment, outer space and Antarctica respectively. Both feature a hostile alien entity portrayed with practical effects (puppets, prosthetics, costumes, etc.) and both antagonistic threats are dangerous ambush predators. Both films involve autopsies where the uncanny creatures are autopsied to divulge crucial plot information to audiences. And lastly, both films portray the threat to humanity as existential should the creature be allowed to reach human population centers. Where the films most differ, however, is in The Thing's use of a psychological effect known as the Uncanny Valley.

If you have ever looked at a depiction of a person, be it a painting, sculpture, or 3D render, and you felt a strange unease at its not-quite-right appearance, you have probably felt the effects of the 'uncanny valley' phenomenon. The term was coined by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970. The 'valley' is so called because as you increase human likeness in inanimate objects, the higher human affinity towards said objects becomes. However, as one approaches something closely resembling the form of a human, affinity sharply declines, and when mapped onto a graph, forms a 'valley' (see figure 1) between the two highs – where the object is not not-human enough to be easily seen as such, but also not human enough as to be indistinguishable from ourselves.

Figure 1

Graph of the Uncanny Valley Phenomenon



Source: Moore, Roger K. “A Bayesian Explanation of the ‘Uncanny Valley’ Effect and Related Psychological Phenomena.” *Scientific Reports,* vol. 2, no. 1, Nov. 2012, https://doi.org/10.1038/srep00864.

As psychology researcher Roger K. Moore puts it,

> There are a number of psychological phenomena in which dramatic emotional responses are evoked by seemingly innocuous perceptual stimuli. A well known example is the ‘uncanny valley’ effect whereby a near human-looking artifact can trigger feelings of eeriness and repulsion. Although such phenomena are reasonably well documented, there is no quantitative explanation for the findings and no mathematical model that is capable of predicting such behavior. (Moore 2012)

The strange nature of the phenomenon puts humans who experience it into a heightened state of unease, an arousal response that horror movies feed heavily off of. The Thing uses the effect of the uncanny to elicit the response to great effect. The creature’s ability to perfectly mimic its prey is startling, but the most horror inducing scenes are those where the creature is caught partway through its transformation: when the creature appears not quite human, but enough to evoke the effect of the uncanny. The most striking example is when Bennings (played by Peter Maloney) is slain and his copy is chased into the snow. The copy, sporting malformed arms and wide, staring eyes, lets out an unnatural scream. It is easily the most spine-shivering scene in the film, one of my personal favorites, and a glaring example of the use of the uncanny to play to our fears.

Bennings in the snow.

The Thing. Directed by John Carpenter, Universal Pictures, 1982.

The Thing deals with heavy themes of fear, playing on our baser human instincts to play up the psychological effects of our anxieties as humans. At the time of the film’s release in 1982, Cold War tensions were still high between the Soviet Union and United States. Throughout the film we see several allusions to the fear of nuclear annihilation, most notably nearing the climax of the film as our protagonist, in order to avoid being killed by the other members of the research station as they believe him to be one of the creature’s hosts, straps himself with sticks of dynamite, turning any attempt to burn him with flamethrowers into mutually assured destruction. As well, the ability of the creature to consume and replace any of the humans with a perfect copy that can work against the outpost from the inside is itself an allusion towards American paranoia of the ‘enemy within,’ and fears of communist takeover within the United States. Perhaps most interesting in its context, however, is the potential AIDS allegory the film presents.

Arriving in the early 80s, the AIDS epidemic swept across the nation. The bloodborne pathogen cut a swathe across America, disproportionately affecting minority groups, most notably gay men. Even today with several cases of people being fully cured the disease is widely feared for its extremely dangerous nature, and in the early 1980s it was a guaranteed death sentence. The alien lifeform within The Thing, while being physically intimidating no doubt, is far more dangerous by way of the fact that it is an infectious parasite. It is shown in a scene that a single invasive cell entering the body of a human is capable of completely taking over its host. The AIDS allegory becomes more readily apparent as MacReady instructs the members of the team to begin preparing their own food and eating only canned goods, and later devises a test for rooting out human hosts that involves directly drawing blood and testing it against a hot copper wire to determine if it is human blood or an imitation parasite. Paranoia and superstition about people infected with AIDS or HIV was rampant throughout the early years of the epidemic, and according to a Gallup poll, by 1987 “most Americans (60%) also agreed that people with AIDS should be made to carry a card noting they had the virus, and one in three (33%) agreed that employers should be allowed to fire employees who had AIDS,” (McCarthy 2019). Just the same as Americans feared the disease to extreme lengths in the early 1980s, the characters within the film go to extreme lengths to justify their paranoia about who is and isn’t infected by the parasitic creature, turning against each other in an attempt to root out those deemed suspicious or dangerous. The disease allegory that *The Thing* uses easily ties back into the concept of the uncanny valley phenomenon. One of the leading proposals for the existence of the effect is what is known as the ‘Threat Avoidance Hypothesis’ which essentially argues that, much like our pre-wired predisposition towards our fear of darkness, heights, snakes, and other threats to our lives, the uncanny valley is an evolutionary defense mechanism that protects us from disease. In an article for Psychology Today, Dr. Mark Travers, a psychologist from the University of Colorado, Boulder, he explains the basics of the theory,

> The Threat Avoidance Hypothesis posits evolutionary pressures, driven by the threats of diseases and death, shape our unease with humanoid objects. Pathogen avoidance suggests that imperfections in human-like entities trigger associations with diseases, with the fear that such entities could transmit illnesses. Mortality salience links that uncanny feeling to anxiety about death, particularly when humanoid objects resemble deceased individuals. (Travers)

What this suggests is that our fear of disease and the dangers surrounding exposure to diseases linked to corpses have potentially influenced our psychology to propagate the existence of the strange phenomenon that directors like John Carpenter utilize to induce fear in their audiences.

The Thing, like any movie, has flaws. However, despite the setbacks Carpenter and the film itself saw in production and distribution, John Carpenter’s “The Thing,” remains an important piece of film history and a touchstone for modern horror and sci-fi films to draw upon. It is not as famous as Halloween, not as successful as Alien, and not as critically acclaimed as ET: The Extraterrestrial. But where it did not find success in the 1980s, filmmakers of the modern era, including myself, look to films like it as a gold standard for how to produce a well made horror film. Its use of psychological effects, premiere cinematography, and terrific use of sound, amplifies it into not just a good movie, but a gem that was sadly not well respected in its era.

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The Thing. Directed by John Carpenter, Universal Pictures, 1982.

Interdisciplinary Studies

Afazur Rahman

Bergen Community College

Mentor: Dr. Kelly Keane

Title: “The Existential Dangers of AI: We Need to Act Now”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Jennifer Wester, Johns Hopkins University:

“Afazur Rahman offers a thorough examination of the practical, ethical, and existential perils of AI as it rapidly infiltrates every aspect of our world. In a balanced analysis that acknowledges both benefits and drawbacks. Afazur lays out how AI is already impacting the labor market, social inequalities, global politics, and the environment, and presents a chilling caution about the impending reality of AI achieving superintelligence. But Afazur does not just name the problem: he convinces us of its urgency, and he offers a compelling solution for addressing it, through the creation of an international organization that would hold tech companies and governments to a set of global ethical standards that would ensure the safety of humanity.”

From a futuristic concept presented in movies, games, and literature to the prominent reality in today's world, the technology of Artificial Intelligence has expanded leaps and bounds and continues to improve rapidly. As this technology grows at an ever-accelerated pace, the potential dangers of it become increasingly hard to ignore. In fact, "[a]rtificial intelligence (AI) is advancing faster than many people predicted, and without guardrails the consequences could be dire" ("Artificial Intelligence (AI)"). Often, the things we believe will benefit us the most end up harming us the most. For example, despite all the observable benefits of AI, there are significant drawbacks that may not be as easily noticed by many. A Pew Research Center study on the U.S. public opinion on AI reflects this concern about AI's effects on humans. The study conveys that 43% of the U.S. public, the majority, thinks that AI will harm them rather than benefit them, with another 33% of the participants being unsure (McClain et al.). This suggests that more than 75% of the U.S. public either fears or is uncertain about AI's potential impacts. Rapid development, the uncertainty of the situation, and the dangers of the unknown all come together to spell impending disaster.

Despite its recent developments, artificial intelligence is not a new technology. In 1956, cognitive and computer scientist John McCarthy created the term "artificial intelligence" during a conference at Dartmouth College ("Artificial Intelligence"). In that same conference, "[t]he first computer program meant to mimic human problem-solving, Logic Theorist, was also presented" ("Artificial Intelligence"). Both of these moments suggest that researchers already believed that it was possible to mimic human thinking with machines. Since then, the advancement of AI has only continued to increase. Dan Milmo recently authored an article published by *The Guardian* featuring Geoffrey Hinton, who many consider the "Godfather of AI," and his views surrounding the current state and projected future of AI. Milmo asserts that Hinton has strong feelings about the safety of AI, stating, "[Hinton] has shortened the odds [to 10% to 20%] of AI wiping out humanity over the next three decades, warning the pace of change in the technology is 'much faster' than expected." To illustrate how much danger these machines will bring, Hinton makes the comparison of an adult and a three-year-old, with the humans being the latter (Milmo). This suggests that humans are not in control. Hinton's warnings and views on AI far outweigh those of the average skeptic, as he is one of the major pioneers and experts in the field of artificial intelligence. Any chance of human extinction is something that should not be taken lightly; it is something terrifying that needs to be given attention by the entire world. While artificial intelligence already has negative effects on humans, whether that's economically or socially, the rapid advancement towards superintelligence presents a major threat to the existence of humanity. Therefore, governments, researchers, and technology companies across the globe must take action now to address the current AI epidemic. Without the much-needed safety measures and guardrails, Artificial Intelligence can and will lead to catastrophic consequences.

When we look at the present day, instead of AI's history and speed of development, it becomes clear that AI is not only a future issue, but one that is already bringing consequences in today's world. From the Industrial Revolution to the modern era of AI, automation has made lives easier while also bringing about unintended consequences. One of the most significant consequences is the automation capabilities of AI and its impact on real people's jobs. The reality is that "[a]utomation has already eliminated many jobs, and consulting firm McKinsey predicted in 2017 that, as AI improves, 73 million positions in the United States—from assembly-line workers to cashiers—could disappear by 2030" ("Artificial Intelligence (AI)"). This prediction was made in 2017; years later, with the recent advancements in AI, imagine how much worse that number has become. Essentially, AI's ability to automate tasks is robbing people of their jobs across various industries today, highlighting one of the negative impacts of AI that is already in effect.

This trend can clearly be seen in the automotive industry, where automation has directly changed how cars are manufactured. Today, nearly all car factories rely heavily on industrial robots and automated machines to perform tasks that once belonged to humans. In fact, the International Federation of Robotics reports that the automotive industry has the largest number of robots operating in factories worldwide, with about one million robots currently employed, representing roughly one-third of all robots installed across all industries ("One Million Robots"). These robots can constantly operate while maintaining high levels of precision and speed. The sheer efficiency in vehicle production caused by these factors motivates car manufacturers to invest in automation and move away from human labor. Marina Bill, the President of the International Federation of Robotics, states, "[t]he automotive industry effectively invented automated manufacturing" ("One Million Robots"). As this automation becomes more prevalent, however, the cost of human job opportunities continuously worsens. Tasks that were once performed by a large number of workers are now being completed by these automated systems. As this technology continues to develop, this fact will only worsen, with an increasing number of people who will end up losing their jobs across industries, directly leading to the rise of unemployment numbers, and potentially leading to economic inequality.

However, the economy is not the only type of inequality that AI is propagating. AI can also lead to social inequalities, where different groups of people are treated differently and unfairly. An increasing amount of research on AI bias has shown that AI systems often show discrimination based on race, gender, and age ("Artificial Intelligence"). Currently, AI models are only as good as the data that they are given. Whether AI takes this data from the internet or from humans, it is hard to find completely unbiased information to feed off of, leading to these systems growing with bias. This high amount of biased data that AI is fed leads to its fairness being jeopardized, making it susceptible to discrimination and bias. In fact, "[s]tudies have found that AI-powered facial recognition technologies are more likely to misidentify Black people, especially Black women, creating the potential for anti-Black discrimination in law enforcement" ("Artificial Intelligence"). This type of misidentification can exacerbate social inequalities, specifically within law enforcement. With our reliance on AI only increasing, it is of utmost importance that AI remains fair and unbiased, which is currently not the case. If this is not stopped, there will be an endless cycle of biased information being used, created, and supported, leading to social inequalities and discrimination becoming major problems again.

Even with all these major drawbacks present, some still choose to argue that it is a necessary tool that will lead to the betterment of society by reducing human error and creating new opportunities. The argument that AI is mainly beneficial is not without its merits. In fact, "[a] 2024 systematic review of studies published from 2015 to 2022 concluded that AI has the potential to significantly improve hospital teamwork, decision-making, diagnosis, and patient monitoring" ("Artificial Intelligence"). These studies go further than any average person's opinions to prove that AI, specifically in hospital settings, can majorly enhance many aspects of life and work, from collaboration and decision-making skills to even patient monitoring.

However, while many may find these healthcare benefits to be a clear indicator that AI is essential, they fail to see the long-term risks that come with these autonomous systems. These days, "[s]ome analysts believe a major international conflict could develop as rival states vie for supremacy in the fast-evolving AI industry" ("Artificial Intelligence"). Similar to the space race, the continuous worldwide development of AI is causing this kind of AI race to emerge. With international conflicts currently occurring across the world, the last thing we need is another reason to fight and compete over.

As new advancements continue to pile up, such as faster computing, machine learning breakthroughs, and more complex algorithms, we grow closer and closer to the birth of superintelligence. While AI is already creating significant social and economic consequences, the eventual creation of superintelligence brings forward much greater risks than the ones we face today. Today, AI can recommend products, recognize faces, and create images and text, but it cannot think independently. Superintelligence is the concept of AI with intelligence that is much more advanced than human intelligence ("Artificial Intelligence"). With this type of intelligence comes the ability to be sentient. Sentience is the ability to be self-aware and experience feelings ("Artificial Intelligence (AI)"). When machines can think for themselves, feel emotions, and have superior intelligence to humans, we can no longer consider these machines to be under our control. These machines would become superior beings to humans as they could think faster, learn exponentially, and outsmart us without ever feeling fatigued.

Many fear this possibility, and a name has been given to the future period of time in which all this takes place: the "Singularity." This term denotes a "period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed" ("Artificial Intelligence (AI)"). The fact is, with the rapid development of AI seen in recent years, humans are swiftly approaching this Singularity. Due to this accelerating advancement of AI, the impending reality of superintelligence needs to be addressed. Without the implementation of proper safeguards and policies, the threat of superintelligence will become unavoidable and catastrophic.

One of the major dangers that comes with superintelligent AI is the alignment problem, where an AI's goals do not align with what humans want. In fact, superintelligent AI will have the ability to accomplish its goals extremely well, even if those goals don't align with humans, which could be dangerous ("Artificial Intelligence (AI)"). These advanced machines could persistently pursue a goal without caring about the unintended consequences. This type of concern is seen through what is known as the King Midas problem, where "an AI tasked with a narrow objective and insufficiently clear instructions could pursue it at all costs" ("Artificial Intelligence (AI)"). In these kinds of scenarios, a superintelligent AI could bring about disaster and catastrophic situations simply by pursuing its objective. This is particularly dangerous due to the possibility of humans losing control, where the AIs are faster and more intelligent than the humans who created them. If these machines start wreaking havoc, it may be impossible to intervene and stop them before it is too late, causing the possibility of an existential threat to materialize.

When it comes to seemingly unstoppable threats to humanity, weapons and warfare are always in the picture. AI further intensifies this fact with the recent advancements in autonomous weaponry. In a recent Harvard article centered around the risks of implementing AI into weapons design, researcher and associate professor Kanaka Rajan states that "AI-powered weapons, which often involve drones or robots, are actively being developed and deployed" (Caruso). This development and deployment of AI weapons shows that this is not just a hypothetical worry; it's an unignorable reality. When reviewing the major risks that come with AIs being incorporated into weapons, Rajan goes on to mention, "militaries may use AI-powered autonomous technology to reduce or deflect human responsibility in decision-making" (Caruso). When these autonomous machines are able to make decisions regarding weapons, it becomes harder to blame people for destruction or errors. This makes it easier for militaries to escape accountability for their actions and ultimately makes it easier to start dangerous conflicts and wars. If these machines ever achieve superintelligence, their improved speed and intellect would heighten these risks substantially. Therefore, our growing reliance on autonomous machines creates a significant threat to global peace and humanity in itself.

Recent developments regarding the US military and AI companies further highlight the growing dangers of involving AI in warfare. As artificial intelligence becomes more capable and widely used, the controversy of whether these systems should be used in national security operations has begun to arise. A recent *New York Times* article surrounding the conflict between the US military and the AI company Anthropic states that "[t]he Pentagon has said that a private contractor cannot decide how its tools will be lawfully used for national security" (Satariano et al.). This quote showcases how the government believes it should have full authority over how AI is used when it comes to military matters. As a result, the companies that develop artificial intelligence may lose the right to enforce safeguards on AI's use once it is in the hands of the military. The same article goes on to describe the government's determination to integrate these AI systems, with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth stating, "'[t]he time is now to accelerate A.I. integration, and we will put the full weight of the Department's leadership, resources, and expanding corps of private sector partners into accelerating America's Military A.I. Dominance'" (Satariano et al.). This urgent drive for swift AI integration within the military highlights how the government is attempting to prioritize power over safety. When AI is rapidly implemented into military systems, the associated safety risks would increase exponentially. As AI continues to grow and become more integrated within many systems, especially those regarding weapons, the need for proper safeguards and regulations becomes impossible to ignore.

Beyond weapons and war, AI also has significant environmental consequences due to the enormous amount of resources needed to keep it running. The speedy development of AI comes with major ecological costs. The United Nations Environment Programme, an international organization focused on environmental issues, recently published an article regarding the negative effects of AI on the environment. In that article, it argues that the increasingly expanding AI data centers are putting a massive strain on water supply, electricity, critical minerals, and rare elements ("AI Has an Environmental"). These data centers depend heavily on natural resources, which are not easily renewable, and fossil fuels, which, in turn, worsen climate change and environmental issues across the globe. UNEP also warns that the absence of safeguards relating to the environment and AI is just as harmful as neglecting other safety measures regarding AI ("AI Has an Environmental"). This illustrates how uncontrolled development of AI could intensify current environmental issues rather than help fix them. As superintelligence slowly comes into the picture, these machines' requirements in terms of energy and resources could skyrocket. Without the crucial regulations and safeguards ensuring that AI is being developed safely and sustainably, the environmental impacts of AI can open another path to the end of humanity.

Furthermore, the lack of global measures regarding AI advances the risk that AI will eventually become a threat to humanity, leading to dangerous and unavoidable scenarios. With technology companies hyper-focused on profit, efficiency, and speed regarding the development of AI, it becomes clear that a higher power needs to be established. In fact, "[t]ech companies have little incentive to police themselves, critics charge, and Congress must step in to regulate the industry and protect society before it is too late" ("Artificial Intelligence (AI)"). Without any requirements to develop AI safely and sustainably, companies simply look at AI in terms of profit, with safe and sustainable development being negatively impactful to them. However, looking away from tech companies, it becomes apparent that a single government may not be enough either. According to the Pew Research Center, 62% of U.S. adults and 53% of experts have little to no confidence that the government will effectively regulate AI (McClain et al.). In the U.S., specifically, it has been seen that the government continuously fails to concretely address and provide solutions for major issues such as climate change. The U.S. public and experts have noticed such events and have come to the realization that AI will be no different. The government's desire to swiftly incorporate AI within its military operations doesn't help this fact either. This lack of policies and concrete regulations around AI can lead to a situation where superintelligent AI arrives before any proper safeguards are in place. Once AI reaches that point, without any of these guardrails and safety measures, chaos would erupt, and many catastrophic changes would occur.

In light of all these issues that surround AI, it is necessary to think of a possible solution before things get even worse. When it comes to existential threats that affect the entirety of humanity, the responsibility to find a solution lies not only in one country, but rather in a global, unified effort. Therefore, an international organization, similar to that of the United Nations, with the goodwill of the entire world at mind, must be created. This organization should be made with the mission to oversee and ensure that the development of AI follows ethical and safe standards, with the future of humanity as a priority. People from across the world, who are experts in the field of AI and understand the need for safe and sustainable development, as well as experts from fields impacted by AI, such as environmentalists, could make up this committee. From China's DeepSeek to the U.S.' ChatGPT, AI is a technological innovation that is present across the entire world, and because of this, it is an important issue that should be approached globally.

The fast development of AI brings major risks into the picture. From the loss of jobs to problems regarding bias and discrimination to the harmful environmental impacts, the negatives of AI continue to pile up. It is better to be cautious and prepare for possible risks than to be blinded by the positives and face the unavoidable consequences of being unprepared. In the same manner, it is extremely important to understand that behind all of AI's benefits lies a dark possibility of an existential threat that we need to address. Similar to how nuclear weapons call for careful regulation to prevent global disaster, AI also needs immediate attention to ensure the safety of humanity. Governments, tech companies, and the world need to come together to fight against the dangers of AI, preventing any catastrophic consequences before it is too late.

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Literature Studies I

Ryhan McHugh

Bergen Community College

Mentor: Dr. Daniel Salerno

Title: “Epic Women: Who's to Blame?”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Margaret Christian, Pennsylvania State University:

“In her paper ‘Epic Women: Who's to Blame?’ Ryhan McHugh time-travels across millennia, tracing the epic logic of ‘patriarchal theodicy’: women PRECIPITATE crises, while men in response create institutions that shape not only the COURSE of history but the way history should be UNDERSTOOD. Given a field of papers outstanding for their research and intellectual heft and three excellent presentations, the Q&A session was critical, and here McHugh's command of relevant detail stood out.”

Epic Women: Who's to Blame?

Epic Literature is one of the earliest forms of long-lasting narrative storytelling. Epic poetry was composed to endure oral repetition, memorization, and transmission. Because these narratives survived through constant retelling and cultural preservation, they carry unique authority long after their original contexts. The ideas embedded within epics were not only remembered but gradually accepted as natural explanations for how the world works.

Often times, epics served a function of explaining war, pain, and suffering in a divinely ordained world. Across epic traditions, a seemingly recurring pattern emerges in which female figures appear at the point where disorder enters the narrative, whether through desire, temptation, rejection, or even beauty, rather than locating those explanations in systems of power or in male ambition. These texts repeatedly turn to feminine traits and female agency as convenient sites for blame. In this sense, epic storytelling develops something akin to a patriarchal theodicy; one in which women are the justification of human suffering in a divinely ordered world. Although these women vary in status and power, ranging from goddesses to mortals, they are repeatedly positioned as explanations for suffering. At the same time, male ambition, violence, and pride are treated as expected features of heroism rather than as sources of blame.

This becomes especially clear when Epics from different cultures and time periods are read together. The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Iliad, and Paradise Lost are separated quite literally by time and space, and all rely on a similar narrative structure in which male actions remain protected within heroic frameworks and women become the catalysts to devastating consequences.

As the oldest surviving epic, The Epic of Gilgamesh holds a unique position in literary history. Composed in cuneiform on clay tablets and later rediscovered in the nineteenth century, the poem functions not only as entertaining narrative but as an informative text regarding early Mesopotamian culture. Gilgamesh is introduced as a king whose unchecked power manifests in sexual violence and abuse of his subjects. Yet the epic does not frame these actions as the central moral problem. In fact, the solution arrives through the creation of Enkidu, and, ultimately, through the intervention of women whose actions stabilize Gilgamesh's heroic trajectory.

Shamhat is a temple prostitute associated with the cult of Ishtar, the multi-faceted Mesopotamian Goddess of love, war, and fertility. Shamhat's role is to fulfill a specific function assigned by male authority, and that is to civilize the wild man, Enkidu, with sex, bread, and beer. Khasim Rahim notes in her work regarding the identity of women and misrepresented stereotypes in Mesopotamian epics, "Sexuality in the Mesopotamian context is tied to knowledge and socialization, yet that is mediated entirely through a woman whose body becomes the tool of male political order" (Rahim, 2020). Shamhat illustrates how female sexuality is framed as a social function controlled by the state, rather than expression of personal agency; her action thus strips Enkidu of his connection to the natural world, introduces him to civilization, where she then leads him to Gilgamesh, rendering this transformation as an imperative and necessary development for the epic's evolution.

Ishtar's role functions very differently when compared to Shamhat's but they reach very similar ends. When Gilgamesh rejects her marriage proposal, he does so by listing the ruined lives of her former lovers, framing her desire and sexuality as ruinsome and destructive. His rejection is framed as prudent self-preservation, while Ishtar's wounded pride becomes the catalyst for catastrophe. Ishtar asks her father, the elder god Anu, to send the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh. Although the men secure another heroic victory, it is decided by the Gods that by killing the Bull of Heaven and earlier, Humbaba of the forest, that one of them must die; Enkidu dies slowly in Gilgamesh's arms, and Gilgamesh grieves, as well as realizes his own mortality; this narrative transposes Ishtar's rage into Gilgamesh's suffering, allowing him to emerge as both a survivor and victim of female emotion. As Patricia Miller observes in her discussion of feminist ethos and agency in an essay titled. ""Nevertheless She Persisted: Feminist Ethos and Female Agency in the Epic of Gilgamesh"¸ female figures repeatedly occupy the spaces around male development, following orders and absorbing blame so that the hero's moral trajectory can remain intact (Miller, 2025).

In the earliest epic, Ishtar and Shamhat illustrate a logical structure in which women are positioned as instigators for transformation and suffering, but never as beneficiaries of meaning or resolution. That move establishes a foundational template that later epics will refine rather than abandon, while also creating a basis for placing femininity under control. The death of Enkidu becomes the emotional turning point that propels Gilgamesh toward his quest of immortality and wisdom, while Ishtar absorbs the blame for a loss that ultimately elevates the hero. Her agency and her emotions are framed as consequential and dangerous, and Gilgamesh gets to overcome that, continuing onto his journey. Shamhat's role is that of an agent of the state, but she does not have agency, autonomy, or authority, rather, her gender and sexuality is controlled and wielded for the stability of the state. Once their functions have been fulfilled,
Shamhat and Ishtar disappear entirely from the narrative.

As stated, this narrative logic does not end with The Epic of Gilgamesh. In The Iliad, the shouldering of blame and responsibility onto women becomes more explicit and more systematic than it is in The Epic of Gilgamesh. Female figures portray the explanations for violence, even when they possess little control over the events attributed to them. Women don't just become the catalysts of disaster, but the explanation for suffering itself, even as the machineries of war, honor, and divine interference operate entirely beyond their control. Helen of The Iliad becomes a clear example of this. Helen is named again and again, as the reason men suffer and die, not only by the Greeks, but by the Trojans themselves, even as the poem consistently delegates real agency onto the gods. Her beauty functions as a weapon within the epic, but it is a weapon wielded by others, most notable Aphrodite, rather than Helen herself (Monsacré, 2018). It is striking that not simply is Helen blamed, but that this blame persists alongside explicit acknowledgments of divine manipulation. The gods and goddesses act openly, choose sides, and interfere directly in battle, while Helen, a mortal woman, is spoken about far more than she is allowed to act. Athena effectively manipulates the battle between Achilles and
Hector, ensuring Greek victory after being offended by Paris of the Trojans, Aphrodite compels Helen's actions, rescues Paris, and silences Helen when she attempts resistance, yet responsibility never settles on divine agents in any lasting way.

Athena's manipulation is acceptable for propelling the Greek heroes to victory, and Aphrodite's authority is absolute; Even Helen's moments of defiance, particularly when she challenges Aphrodite or condemns Paris, never produce action, only further submission under divine pressure. The goddesses possess agency that is both visible and effective, while Helen remains trapped in a role that demands accountability without permitting control. This shows that Helen is not powerful within the epic's moral economy; she is useful. Her body and beauty allow the poem to displace responsibility for mass violence onto a figure who cannot redirect it, preserving male heroism, while maintaining the illusion of moral causation (Monsacré, 2018).

This persistent pattern in The Epic of Gilgamesh and The Iliad does not end in antiquity; it adapts to the era, becoming reworked through new theological and moral foundations, but structured by the same logic. If Helen's beauty becomes the narrative instrument through which war, suffering, and male heroism can be and are justified, Paradise Lost by John Milton inherits and intensifies this thematic structure by relocating it to the genesis of human history itself.

Centuries separate Homer's Greek battlefields from Milton's Garden of Eden, yet the narrative casting survives the distance. What was once a war explained through a woman becomes a fall explained through sin, but the mechanics remain. The site of blame remains with a woman, just like in the Epic of Gilgamesh and The Iliad, Milton's story also casts Eve, and every woman after her, to bear the weight of consequence, while men are granted the space to respond to it. Where Helen was blamed for a war she neither chose nor controlled, Eve is blamed for a fall engineered by forces far older, more strategic, and more powerful than she is ever allowed to be.

Adam and Eve exist first in a hierarchal harmony. Eve is made second, drawn from Adam's rib; she is described as intellectually curious but spiritually vulnerable. She is newly self-aware, but not necessarily naïve, and she is repeatedly reminded of her second-ness. As Sandra Erickson observes in her analysis of gender ethics in Paradise Lost, Milton's Eve is constructed as the archetypal woman of his theological imagination, one whose moral failure must remain possible in order to preserve the doctrine of free will, yet whose fall is narratively overdetermined by her beauty, her separateness, and her exposure to deception (Erickson, 1998). Eve is created "sufficient to stand, free to fall", a formulation that appears to grant her moral agency, yet that freedom is immediately constrained by hierarchy. This framing matters, because when temptation arrives, it does not meet two equal subjects. Adam is warned of a potential adversary and is never directly confronted by Satan. Eve, by contrast, encounters evil alone, and the conditions isolate her as a test, evaluating her judgement and obedience over curiosity and critical reasoning.

Satan's intervention is not random but calculated; when he approaches her in the form of the serpent, his temptation is through guile and rhetorical elevation. He praises her excessively, frames her as being worthy of worship, and appeals to her capacity for critical thinking and reason. Eve attempts to reason through multiple contradictions: If paradise is perfect, why would it contain a danger she cannot confront? If the serpent may eat the fruit and live, why should a human be forbidden? Only after further guileful tactics by Satan does her reasoning begin to shift toward comparison, to the idea that knowledge might make her more desirable to Adam, less inferior, less secondary.

What follows reveals where Milton ultimately locates moral weight. Eve eats fruit, and the world does NOT immediately explode. When she finds Adam, he is devastated by what she's done, but he is more devastated at the thought of losing her. Adam knows the consequences and he chooses to eat with her, to fall with her; In doing this act of love, Adam becomes the epic's moral figure. His fall is tragic and deliberate— and it is this decision that allows Milton to recast him as heroic, and Eve as an example of what happens when women don't listen.

Eve, meanwhile, absorbs the bulk of the blame and becomes the explanatory cause of the Fall, as Adam's response to Eve's action is what the narrative lingers over and redeems. Eve is blamed for initiating the banishment from Paradise, forevermore, and Adam is remembered for how he handled it.

Estranged by centuries, cultures and belief systems, The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Iliad, and Paradise Lost nonetheless possess a remarkably durable authority and influential power. Women are granted visibility without voice: their beauty, sexuality, or curiosity is narratively productive, but their agency is carefully circumscribed. Helen is blamed for a war she does not command; Eve is blamed for a fall engineered through deception and imbalance; earlier still, figures like Shamhat and Ishtar are positioned as catalysts whose actions advance Gilgamesh and Enkidu's personal development, while absorbing moral consequence. Gilgamesh's humanity is sharpened through loss, Achilles' heroism is completed through mercy, and Adam's choice to fall becomes an act of tragic true love, the ultimate heroic devotion. The woman's role creates the crisis; the man's response to the crisis explains why it matters.

These narratives are fundamental cultural frameworks that may be separated quite literally by space and time but have been taught, memorized, and moralized across generations of different cultures around the world, and the persistence of this pattern matters because these epics did not remain confined to literary study. The function across cultural foundations, shaping attitudes about gender, responsibility, authority, and accountability, that extend into law, religion, and social expectation. Reading them critically allows us to see how these patterns were normalized through repetition and scale. These texts don't necessarily blame women: they make women narratively necessary as sites of blame, while limiting their authority or agency to speak or define events. If these stories helped shape the moral imaginations of entire civilizations, then it is necessary to revisit them with attention to gender, power, and responsibility.

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Women’s Gender and LGBTQ+ Studies

Katheryn Hopkins

Lehigh Carbon Community College

Mentor: Dr. Felipe Muñoz

Title: “Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo: A Feminist Fight for Human Rights”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Terri Gordon, The New School:

“This is a rich and moving paper about the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group of women who have marched weekly in Buenos Aires since 1977 to protest the disappearance of their children. The author has done a beautiful job contextualizing her paper, laying out the political situation before and after the 1976 coup and the climate of terror that marked Argentina's dirty war. Her analysis focuses on the crucial role the mothers played in the public sphere; by drawing attention to human rights abuses, developing forensic tools to find kidnapped children, and providing an emotive and collective appeal, the mothers/grandmothers serve as an inspirational model for feminist and resistance movements.”

Fear. Violence. Governmental terror. Loved ones—even infants—disappearing into the darkness of night. All words that could describe the climate in Argentina at the time of the Dirty War. Between 1977 and 1983, approximately 30,000 Argentinians were kidnapped and tortured by their governmental regime. The disappearance of these Argentinians was used as a psychological weapon against their families as well as against the state at large. Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo was a powerful, female-led, Argentine social movement that started during the 1970s and was led by the mothers of the children who had forcibly "gone missing," which challenged corrupt authority, called out violence and violations of human rights, broke gender norms, and propelled resistance against the terrorizing dictatorship. These mothers established a long-standing peaceful protest in which they would gather in the Plaza de Mayo (the plaza, or town square) outside of the Casa Rosada[1] ("the Pink House," which was the governmental seat of power) in Buenos Aires, adorned in headscarves made of diapers that were marked with the names of their lost children along with the words, "Aparición con Vida," the rough translation of which is "found alive": This was their demand for their children to be returned to them alive. Adorned in these diaper-scarves, they would march around the plaza in front of the Casa Rosada. They transformed a simple act of walking in circles into a powerful resistance that demanded national attention.

The resistance movement begun by Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo paved the way for future movements and upcoming generations to push back against Argentina's cruel dictatorships and to fight publicly, but peacefully, for human rights. They broke patriarchal social norms, prompted scientific advances in DNA testing, and leveraged their gender and familial roles to question morality and break barriers. Not only did they effect great change in the 1970s and 1980s, but they are still active and advocating for human rights and justice today. Censorship was heavy during the time they formed their defiant resistance, which made expression and opposition life-threatening–all the more so if the person engaged in opposition resistance was female. These courageous women are proof that anyone, of any status or position, can usher in change, so long as the person uses their voice and stands together with like-minded individuals.

This paper will begin by describing a brief history of the horrors that occurred during the time of the Dirty War and wide-spread human disappearances. The paper will then lead into explaining the formation of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo as well as the eventual formation of an important offshoot group of like-minded grandmothers. This paper will then proceed to analyze the lasting feminist and social implications the group had on the role of women in Argentina to challenge existing stereotypes and create new opportunities for public expression. Finally, the paper will end with the analysis of a personal account directly from one of the group's leading members.

History of the Dirty War & Disappearances

Argentina has endured waves of political unrest for many decades. The early 1970s were particularly unstable as the presidential role in the country underwent a series of changes. Juan Domingo Perón was elected president in 1971, but he died just three years later in 1974, thus leaving the Vice President, his wife, Isabel,[2] to take over the presidency (Meyer, 1974). Peron's death began a domino effect of instability, chaos, and confusion that infiltrated all of society to include politics, economics, and social structures.

In 1976, less than two years into Isabel Peron's presidency, the Argentine military preyed on this instability by forming a coup that overthrew President Peron and took control of the government. Lieutenant General Jorge

[1] Similar to America's White House, the Pink House is Argentina's presidential palace; it is also the headquarters of Argentine governmental authority.

[2] While not the topic of this paper, it is important to acknowledge the monumental step Isabel Peron took for women to maintain historically male-dominated governmental positions, initially as the first female Vice President of Argentina and then as the first female President of the country.

Rafael Videla took power and was named president; under this title, he ruled in terror with his military junta.[3] Thus began the Dirty War, a period between 1976 and 1983 in which the Argentine military government targeted anyone perceived to be opposed to their reign, believed to be a threat, or thought to be politically in the left. Videla ordered that a myriad of governmental rulings and systems must be banned or discontinued, he employed strict censorship, and he enforced intensive military control (Bouvard, 1994). Violence and torture took strong form as hundreds of people were forcibly "disappeared." Students were snatched as they stepped off of the bus; workers were taken from their jobs; family members were kidnapped out of their homes; people were plucked from the street. These disappearances grew rampant and expanded unthinkably even to vulnerable populations, such as pregnant women and young children, in contravention to core principles of humanitarianism (Arditti, 2002). No one was safe. Those who were most targeted were those who identified with politics of the left. After the kidnappings, the victims were kept in captivity where severe torture followed. Death was often the final verdict. Kidnapped pregnant women were forced to give birth in captivity under horrifying conditions[4] and then brutally murdered afterwards (Karcher, 2024). The bodies of the dead were dismembered, burned, disposed of in the sea, or otherwise obliterated so that no one would face justice for these horrific acts of violence (Penchaszadeh, 2015). The inability to find bodies resulted in Videla and his regime escaping from liability and being able to continue to oppress with violence anyone who opposed them. Videla's regime justified their reign of oppression in the name of combating communism and removing left-wing guerilla groups, but it wasn't long before the Argentine populace realized that this justification was invalid propaganda.

Formation of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo

Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo was among the first of groups to stand in opposition to Videla's reign. They were a group of mothers who united after their children had been forcibly "disappeared" by Videla's regime. The Madres decided to stand together against the heinous acts of the regime that resulted in the destruction of their families. They would meet every Thursday outside the Casa Rosado and march around the Plaza de Mayo (Femenía, 1987). The organization of the Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo protests was well thought out with precision and intentionality. The group chose to walk around the Plaza de Mayo because the location was a historical space that was central in Buenos Aires and would lead to higher visibility (Bellucci, 1999). The names of each of their missing children inscribed on their head scarves spread awareness for their children's whereabouts. It also made the Madres approachable to anyone who might have information about that mother's missing child or children. Anyone who saw the Madres marching and who read the names of the many, many missing children was sure to feel an emotional impact that could not easily be ignored.

The ingenuity of writing their children's names on the diapers on their heads cannot be understated. Using justifications that resemble those used by Hitler during the Holocaust, Videla claimed that the country of Argentina had a civil responsibility to protect the next generation from being raised by an "uncivilized" population (Penchaszadeh, 2015). He held strong biases. Therefore, many of the young children who were abducted or born into captivity were intentionally relocated to families that aligned significantly with the military and governmental movement. Their legal documentation, including birth certificates and official identification documents, were falsified by government officials and were intentionally skewed in a calculated effort to prevent their biological families from ever being able to track them down
(Penchaszadeh, 2015). Children were given false birthdates: They grew up believing they were a few years younger or a few years older than their actual biological ages. All of these targeted actions made it very difficult for families to find their children and for the disappeared children, both in their youth and as adults, to reunite with their families.

[3] A junta is a militaristic group that takes control by force.

[4] Sometimes nurses or doctors would be kidnapped to aid in the delivery of a baby born to a woman held in captivity; if released, those who dared to share details about the conditions they witnessed did not survive for long.

Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and Forensic Genetics

Not only were Argentine children and their families harmed by the disappearance of the children, but they were also violated in the theft of their identities, not just in the sense of the alteration of the information on their personal documents as explained above, but in an even greater sense of their personhood. One's identity is infinitely complex. Identity is comprised of internal and external factors that include historical, cultural, ancestral, relational, and biological influences. By removing the children from their families of origin, the regime deprived these children of the foundation of their identities; and not just the foundations, but their right to know from whom and from wherence they came (Laino Sanchis, 2022). Instead of growing up with a solid sense of self, bolstered by being surrounded by their families of origin, they were forced to grow up questioning who they were, where they came from, what their genetic lineage looked like, etc.[5] Not only were the children deprived of their identity as children and grandchildren, but their families, particularly grandmothers, were deprived of the opportunity to instill values, maintain generational lineage, and experience the joy of familial togetherness. In addition, in a very practical sense, they were deprived of the opportunity to pass along family inheritance— tangible objects and wealth, beyond their intangible and priceless family values—to their lineal descendants.

Over time, it was the grandmothers who emerged from Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo as a group of women with a shared experience in search of their lost grandchildren—and Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo was formed. The Abuelas paved the path for revolutionary scientific research to begin, and helped set up a genetic data bank, so that the identification of their grandchildren could occur with genetic certainty (Arditti, 2007). Due to the fact that a generation was missing—the parents—the Abuelas needed to unearth a method of identification that was accurate enough and strong enough for a court of law. Even if their cultural identity was chaotic and their values were confused so as to make the children unrecognizable to their grandmothers, genetic testing would allow family trees to be mapped out with reliability. They began working with researchers and scientists, looking at how they could conduct blood and DNA testing, similar to paternity testing, that would prove biological relationships (Smith & Smith, 2025).

After progress had been made with DNA testing and return of some of the "disappeared" babies—now adults or adolescents—back home, the Abuelas began to fight for the kidnappers to receive punishment for their violent misdeeds. The children who had gone missing had been removed from their families at such an early age that they were either too young to remember their lives and their families before disappearance, or they were experiencing Stockholm syndrome due to their attachment to their kidnappers (Rae, 2016). When the regime ended in 1983, the Abuelas and the Madres were among the first groups to demand justice against the perpetrators in a court of law. The Abuelas fought for justice with great force, and the overabundance of evidence they had gathered led to hundreds of offenders being put behind bars (Arditti, 2007).

Feminist and Societal Implications

Emotions are some of the most powerful forces that motivate or manipulate humans and cause them to act or think in certain ways. The root of the Madres movement that made it so powerful and effective was its pull on emotion. The Madres weaponized their social role as mothers as well as their maternal attributes to gain the empathy of nearly all of their countrymen (Bosco, 2006). Their emotional movement was all the more effective due to the universal fact that everyone has a mother. Anyone who might have witnessed Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo marching or grieving for their children could not help but draw a sense of similarity to their own mother. Mothers are the nurturers, not only of their own children, but of society. They bear children with careful tenderness and love in a way that cannot be fabricated. No one wants to see a mother grieving for her child: It is a pain that cannot be compared.

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[5] Where one might argue that children put up for adoption are put in similar difficult positions, this event differs in the fact that none of the mothers and fathers were even given a voice in the matter. Some of them never had the opportunity to act in the role of parents before their babies were stolen from them.

In addition to their innate universality and relatability because everyone has a mother, these women exploited their emotionality to catch the attention of the nation and its leaders. Women are typically viewed as overly emotional or irrational, and therefore weak as a result of these attributes. The Madres broke these stereotypes by weaponizing their emotionally charged spirits to bring about change and show their strength as a unit, rather than submitting to the narrative that sought to devalue their voice and position. While it is almost certain that these mothers experienced repeated periods of weeping helplessly over their profound grief at the theft of their children, they did not allow a puddle of tears to be the end of their story. Instead, they pushed through their pain, anguish and trauma to ensure public attention would grow focused on the political violence and its impact on families, and the nation.

Parents should never outlive their children (Bellucci, 1999). The human life cycle has a certain order to it that should not be violated. Children are supposed to bury their parents one day; that is what is taught in school; that is what society expects. The pain of a parent burying their child is one that society is never prepared for. It is a strange, confusing situation that one cannot make sense of. The Madres capitalized on this truth with their slogan, “Our children gave birth to us” (Belluci, 1999). The children who had gone missing made these women mothers. The children’s existence made them who they are today—the brave, loyal, and deeply devoted women who emerged as some of the most influential activists of human rights in Argentine history. But the role of motherhood cannot be fulfilled without children. A childless mother has suffered a horrific injustice, regardless of intent. Harm done to a child is harm done to their mother by default.

Human rights is an emotional topic that inspires feelings of justice, sorrow, and humanity. The pain of a childless mother is one that radiates infinitely and cannot but be felt by those around her as well. The Madres themselves were so effective in their goals due to their circle of shared grief. These women established deeply rooted emotional bonds that connected them in friendship, maternity, and love (Bosco, 2006). Any division that existed due to class, culture, or religious beliefs was silenced in the name of motherly care and devotion (Belluci, 1999). It is widely understood that a group stands stronger together than an individual alone, and without their shared emotional trauma, these women would not have been able to effect such a great degree of change. Not only did they effect change, but they sparked unity and solidarity surrounding the opposition of tyranny and protection of human rights that spread like wildfire across the nation. The pictures of their protests and the names of their children whom they wanted safely returned were blasted across the globe as the press spread this raw media footage internationally. Other people, both locally or internationally, became invested in the Madres and the Abuelas, their families, and their fight for human rights. Lack of media coverage and global knowledge was partially what allowed Videla to reign in terror in the way that he did for such a great duration of time. Without the boldness of the Madres to face fear and violence for the sake of human rights and their children, and of course without the far-reaching influence of the media, Argentina and the Madres would not have been able to gain the global support and empathy that advanced their success and eventually stopped Videla’s gruesome dictatorship and the military dictatorships that followed him.

In addition to the Madres placing their stereotypically motherly role directly on display, they simultaneously broke their stereotypical roles as women in the home. For centuries, women had been thought to belong only in the home, their role in society being only to bear children, nurture the family, and cook food. As such, they had been silenced. They lived without a voice and had to live at the mercy of their husband’s rules. Within the cultural context of Argentina, despite it being the 1970s and 1980s when women were allowed more freedom than in centuries past, the expectation of home-maker, nurturer, and follower were still widely at play. Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo manipulated the sexist expectations society exerted over them as women to make their message visible and unquestionable. Women at that time were expected to be meek, fragile, and obedient. Women taking a place in the public square, with a public message that was so bold and vocal, was unheard of.

These brave women rebranded motherhood as a social construct rather than an

innate, immovable role. They displayed to the country, and later to the world at large, that a mother’s love is stronger than brutality and that it is the force that will prevail. Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo made it clear that the

Madres were going to fight for their families and do whatever it took to get their babies back – even wearing diapers with their children's names printed on them in the public square to garner political attention and effectuate change. By bringing their resistance to the governmental square, they removed the stigma of motherhood merely as a domestic act and transformed their motherhood into political power (Edmonds, 2010). Even more than that, their public, peaceful protests created a physical and figurative space for all women to express their opinions and present their ideas. The Madres embraced and embodied a new societal role for all women that gave permission for women to present a clear message outside the home in defiance to old, stale stereotypes that confined them to silence and to roles that could only be fulfilled inside their homes.

Nora Morales de Cortiñas: A Personal Account

One member of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Nora Morales de Cortiñas, was interviewed in 1999 by Mabel Bellucci. Nora explained that she was a traditional wife who was forced to become a political activist due to the care and motherly duty she felt towards her son, Gustavo, who had been forcibly "disappeared." Gustavo was 24 years old when he was abducted from a train station on April 15th, 1977, on his journey to work, leaving behind his wife and infant son (Bellucci, 1999). Nora describes the excruciatingly hopeless endeavor and the immense lengths she undertook in her efforts to find her son Gustavo. She would frequently visit morgues just to determine whether her son's lifeless body had found the light of day. Eventually, visiting the morgues became a part of her daily reality, but the routine of it never made facing that reality any less difficult. The sheer horror the surviving family members of the disappeared went through, especially the mothers, is staggering. Mothers bring life into the world; and if the child a mother brings to life in the world is cut off from life, she should never have to search for her dead child's body. Being placed in this situation is nothing short of traumatic.

In her account, Nora emphasized the torment she experienced as she was never able to gain answers to Gustavo's story after he disappeared. She highlighted the importance of establishing a process that can allow the survivors of the deceased to exit from their "labyrinth state of mourning"[6] and gain some form of closure (Bellucci, 1999). Mourning was traditionally intended as a private and personal affair. Prior to the Dirty War, societal expectations deemed that women, specifically mothers, were supposed to feel the pains of this tragedy behind closed doors and alone. Homemaker responsibilities and the daintiness of being a woman succeeded any right to mourn outwardly or to fall on the shoulders of others. Nora explains that this pattern was altered after the horrors of the Dirty War. The course of a mother's mourning was changed from that point on. Loss and death during the time of Videla's regime was never accidental, incidental, or sheer happenstance, but rather it was intentional, anticipated, and evil. The pain that emanates from the loss of someone, especially a child, who was stolen, brutally tortured, and then never returned breaks the bounds of the volume of tragedy a person can manage alone. Nora identified that the mothers who suffered the loss of a child as a result of Videla's malevolence had no choice but to come together and support one another.

Azucena Villaflor, one of the founders of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, established a popular slogan: "Todas por todas y todos los desaparecidos son nuestros hijos." This phrase roughly translates to 'All for all, and all the children are ours' (Bellucci, 1999). This slogan was intended as a promise from all the Madres to one another and to all their children. Each mother that was a part of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo was no longer just a mother to her own few children; rather, each mother became the mother of all those who had been "disappeared." The individuality of each mother trying to find her specific child was eliminated in favor of a collectivist effort to bring them <u>all</u> back. When one mother wept for the loss of her child, they all grieved together. Nora explains that each of the Madres "biological children became 30,000 children" (Bellucci, 1999). Her statement makes it clear that the boundaries of blood and biology were surpassed by the bond they all shared to defend human rights and defend their families from brutal attack by the governmental regime.

[6] The labyrinth state of mourning describes the winding emotional path of grief individuals who experience loss must navigate (Bellucci, 1999).

The movement of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo was incredibly inspiring and effective, yet becoming a devoted member to the group came with its share of sacrifice. Censorship had been enforced against women for centuries. During the Dirty War, censorship was strictly enforced against all of Argentina during Videla's presidency. Anyone who dared to speak out against Videla and his junta was dealt with swiftly and severely. Being a woman and speaking one's mind, let alone speaking out against the horrors that the regime was executing, was not only bold, but deadly. Unfortunately, the members of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo were no exception to this deadly version of censorship. Every day these women chose to endure the anxiety, fear, and very real possibility that they might suffer the same fate as their children. Azucena Villaflor, Mary Ponco de Bianco, and Esther Ballestrino de Careaga were all brutally murdered by members of the regime in attempts to silence the group (Bouvard, 1994).[7] Despite suffering this great loss and enduring even more pain, Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo did not back down. In fact, the cruel fate that these women suffered made the Madres movement even more persistent and devoted to fighting for human rights. Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo now was also fighting for the lives of their friends and former leaders.

Breaking the rules and roles of a traditional housewife also led to familial tensions for members of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Husbands in particular began to push back against their wives' choices. Feeling frightened for their wives' safety, confused by their wives' new, unfamiliar, unconventional roles, and also potentially jealous of the decrease in time and devotion that their wives spent on home-making duties, many of the Madres' husbands engaged in marital backlash (Bellucci, 1999). Surviving children also felt the strain of the redistribution of their mother's time and devotion. In the case of Nora Morales de Cortiñas, she explained that her surviving son felt the grief of the absence of his brother, Gustavo, and struggled with the realization that he had not become an only child when his brother disappeared: He now had 30,000 brothers and sisters that his mother cared for deeply. This led to further tensions in the household as Nora explained that her grief over Gustavo blinded her abilities to be a present mother for her other son. She noted that she almost even forgot that she still was a purely biological mother to someone until she realized her living son's demands continued to persist. Nora described that she struggled with the responsibilities of "being two mothers at once, a biological one and a political one" for many years (Bellucci, 1999). The lack of support from their families and husbands was yet another loss for these women to shoulder.

Eventually even the church began to reject the movement that the Madres were propelling. In their protests, the Madres were constantly modelling themselves after the Virgin Mary in the way that she was the "ultimate mother" who displayed her motherly wiles both publicly and privately (Taylor, 2001). The church ostracized the women under claims that they were violating their "virginal roles" and that their acts of defiance and protest were in strict conflict to the church's views on how a woman "should" conduct herself (Taylor, 2001). They even attempted to delegitimize the Madres' call for the return of their children under the claim that the Madres' actions were sowing hatred.
More specifically, the church leader Monsignor Quarracino expressed that the Virgin Mary did not and never would have "yelled" and "protested" if her son, Jesus, was taken from her (Taylor, 2001). Ultimately, the church took issue with the fact that the Madres were expressing their opinions boldly, openly, and publicly in the town square of Buenos Aires for any passersby to observe. The Catholic church sought to re-exert the old societal norms that women should be silent and controlled, functioning in the home but not in the public square.

Arguably the longest standing loss that the families of those who had been "disappeared" had to contend with is that they were stripped of their right to grieve their missing loved ones. Thousands of families never got to hug their loved ones again and were deprived of closure and of the privilege of burying their loved ones' bodies in the ground with honor. The existence of the body of one who is deceased stands as confirmation that they are in fact no longer living. This confirmation can then transition into acceptance of those the deceased have left behind. Many of the members of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo and countless others in Argentina have had to deal with decades of

[7] The three women were thrown from an airplane in 1977. When the death flight airplane was returned to Argentina in 2023, Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo advocated, unsuccessfully, for the materials to be melted down and formed into a white headscarf symbolic of the diapers with which the Madres adorned their heads in the 1970's and 1980's.

torment of questioning whether their loved ones are truly dead or simply still missing—a cruelty that has not ended with the end of the tyrannical regime that committed the violence (Belluci, 1999).

Conclusion

Videla's dictatorship and tyrannical power was so effective, not because he held moral authority or political legitimacy, but because of the way he instilled fear and eliminated civilians.

Fortunately, Videla did not anticipate that the forced disappearances of thousands of innocent civilians and the direct violations of human rights would be a propellant that overcame the fear of death, causing the people of Argentina—specifically Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo—to defy censorship and speak out with voices the regime could not silence. Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo radically transformed the role of motherhood by breaking the bounds of the societally expected private, domestic duties and politicizing the love and devotion of a mother out in the public sphere. The feminist impact of the Madres movement was equally profound as the trajectory of women's rights and position in the political sphere were radically transformed. Gender norms were broken and women were empowered to reject the ideas of being silenced. Videla could not have anticipated that fifty years later, the Madres still protest in the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday afternoon in visible, staunch protest to human rights violations committed in Argentina and across the globe (Walz, 2009). The memory of the lost children is kept alive by these mothers as they repeatedly prove that memory is not passive—it is active. It is resistance and it fights for justice and human rights. Let the greatest takeaway of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo be the understanding of the transformative power that exists when ordinary people band together and fight for what is right and just—especially women—who refuse to accept survival at the cost of silence.

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Business and Economics

Alfonso Marin

Borough of Manhattan Community College

Mentor: Dr. Christine Farias

Title: “Understanding How Financial Literacy and Economic Literacy Shape Financial Outcomes in Community College Students”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Veronica Minaya Lazarte, Teachers College at Columbia University:

“Alfonso's paper stands out for the relevance of the topic, the clarity of the research scope, and the effort to collect original survey data to test an important hypothesis about community college students’ financial decision-making. Its contribution is not only to study financial literacy, but to ask how students’ ability to use that knowledge may be shaped by the barriers they face while enrolled, including work, stress, time scarcity, and basic needs. I would encourage Alfonso to keep expanding this work by defining the main outcome more clearly, potentially following students over time, and most importantly, continuing to follow his research passion.”

Understanding How Financial Literacy and Economic Literacy Shape Financial Outcomes in Community College Students

Introduction

Community college students must make critical financial decisions while balancing higher education, work, and personal responsibilities. Making effective choices with scarce resources is essential for their academic progress and long-term economic stability. Despite the importance of financial literacy, there remains limited emphasis and research on how financial knowledge influences the everyday financial decision-making of community college students. This paper investigates whether higher levels of financial literacy are positively correlated with more effective resource allocation, stronger saving and investment behaviors, and greater long-term planning compared to students with lower levels of financial literacy. Using microeconomic concepts such as budget constraints, opportunity cost, and consumer choice, this paper also considers how sleep, nutrition, and stress, key components of cognitive capacity, shape students' ability to apply financial knowledge in real-world decisions. The proposed research design includes secondary survey data from community college students to analyze the relationship between financial literacy, economic decisions, and financial decision-making. While financial literacy is an essential determinant of financial behavior, its impact is limited when students experience inadequate sleep, poor nutrition, and elevated stress, which reduce attention and decision-making capacity.

Review of Literature

Community college students are in a unique and often overlooked position within higher education. Unlike traditional four-year students, they frequently balance demanding combinations of part-time or full-time employment, family responsibilities, financial stress, and academic expectations. These conditions require them to make constant economic decisions about how to allocate their time, money, and cognitive energy. Research consistently shows that these students face financial needs, frequent food insecurity, and significant difficulty managing educational and living expenses (Beer and Bray 2020). These challenges increase the importance of effective financial decision-making, yet they also create barriers to developing and applying financial literacy. Financial literacy itself, defined as the knowledge and skills needed to make informed financial decisions, has been recognized as a critical component of long-term economic well-being.

Lusardi and Mitchell (2013) describe financial literacy as a form of human capital that directly influences the quality of saving, borrowing, and investing decisions. Despite its importance, studies show that financial literacy among young adults and students remains low, often leading to poor budgeting habits, reliance on high-cost credit options, and limited long- term financial planning (Garg and Singh, 2018 and Hastings, et al. 2012). Although many community colleges recognize this need, financial education programs are still poor in quality, limited in reach, or not integrated into student life (Jobst, 2012). However, financial literacy is not the only factor of strong financial behavior. The ability to make rational economic decisions is heavily influenced by students' sleep, nutrition, mental health, and overall cognitive capacity.

Behavioral economics combines psychology and economics to understand how people make decisions. The research shows that scarcity, whether of time, money, food, or psychological ability, reduces attention, increases impulsivity, and impairs long-term planning (Rice, 2013). This is especially relevant for community college students who experience elevated levels of stress due to responsibilities. When students are exhausted, hungry, or overwhelmed, their ability to apply financial knowledge decreases, even if they understand the concepts. Evidence from health-literacy and financial-literacy research also demonstrates that diminished cognitive functioning and poor well-being are associated with weaker financial judgment and poorer economic outcomes (Bennett et al. 2012). These factors show that financial behavior cannot be understood with knowledge alone, it must be analyzed through the lens of microeconomics.

Students face strict budget constraints, forcing them to make trade-offs among essential needs. They make consumption choices to maximize their utility or satisfaction under uncertainty, weigh opportunity costs between school and work, and make important decisions about whether to save for the future or spend in the present. These decisions are shaped by both their financial knowledge and their economic conditions. The goal of this research is to highlight the structural and behavioral constraints that students face and to prove the importance of integrated support systems that address both financial education and student well-being. Ultimately, understanding these situations can guide community colleges in creating more effective resources that improve students' financial stability and long-term economic mobility. The financial behavior of community college students has become a growing area of concern, as institutions increasingly recognize how financial stress can undermine academic performance and long-term economic stability. The literature reveals several consistent trends, low financial literacy among young adults, immense financial insecurity among community college students, behavioral limitations that negatively impact financial decision-making, and the correlation of health, cognition, and financial judgment. Together, these trends explain how financial literacy and human capital factors interact to impact the economic choices of community college students.

A major theme in the literature is the gap in financial literacy among young adults, including college students. Lusardi and Mitchell (2013) argue that financial literacy is a form of human capital that shapes individuals' saving, borrowing, and investing behavior through their lives. Their work demonstrates that individuals with higher financial literacy are more likely to plan for the future, manage debt effectively, and avoid high-cost financial products. However, many students lack even basic knowledge of interest rates, credit use, or long-term financial planning. Research from Garg and Singh (2018) reinforces this, showing that although young people often express confidence in their financial capabilities, their actual understanding of financial concepts remains limited, leading to poor budgeting habits and impulsive spending. Hastings, Madrian, and Skimmyhorn (2012) similarly emphasize that gaps in financial knowledge contribute to poor financial behaviors and long-run economic vulnerabilities. These studies establish a clear link between financial literacy and financial well-being, while highlighting the widespread deficiencies in students' financial knowledge.

The literature also reveals severe financial stress among community college students, which shapes both their academic and economic outcomes. Beer, Allison, and Jacob B. Bray in, *Bridging Financial Wellness and Student Success: Effective Models for Community Colleges* 2020, document that many community college students face difficult financial needs, with large proportions reporting difficulty affording food, transportation, childcare, and course materials. This financial burden contributes to heightened stress, reduced academic performance, and increased likelihood of dropping out of college. Garcia's (2016) research further proves that financial pressures often drive students to borrow to meet basic needs, rather than make strategic long-term investments in their education. The paper shows that even when students receive financial education, structural barriers, low income, unstable work hours, and limited support systems continue to impact borrowing decisions. Together, these sources make clear that financial stress is a common and impactful force in the lives of community college students, affecting not only their economic situation but also their academic stability and overall well-being. Beyond knowledge and stress, literature strongly supports the idea that behavioral economics plays a critical role in shaping financial decisions. Traditional economic theory assumes individuals are rational thinkers who evaluate information carefully and make choices that maximize their utility. However, the behavioral economics evidence presented in Rice's "The Behavioral Economics of Health and Health Care" (2013), challenges this assumption by demonstrating how scarcity, cognitive overload, and psychological stress distort decision-making. Rice (2013) explains that individuals under strain often rely on heuristics, experience decision fatigue, and exhibit a tunneling effect in which immediate concerns crowd out long-term planning. This analysis helps explain why financial literacy does not always translate into positive financial behavior. Students may know what they should do but lack the cognitive ability to implement those choices consistently. Hastings, Madrian, and Skimmyhorn (2012) back up this argument by highlighting present bias, overconfidence, and limited attention as major behavioral obstacles that undermine even well-informed individuals.

Together, these findings prove the importance of incorporating behavioral limitations into any model of financial decision-making for students under significant strain. The relationship between health, cognition, and financial capability emerges as another important theme in the literature. Bennett et al. (2012) provide important evidence that financial literacy and health literacy are linked, showing that individuals with lower health literacy tend to exhibit poorer financial judgment. Their findings indicate that cognitive functioning shaped by factors such as sleep, nutrition, and stress plays a key role in determining how effectively individuals can understand and apply financial information. Bennett et al. (2012), combined with Rice's emphasis on cognitive depletion, supports the importance of human capital factors as the reasons for financial behavior. Poor sleep, inconsistent nutrition, and high stress reduce working memory, inhibit attention, and impair long-term planning, all of which are essential for tasks such as budgeting, comparing financial products, or managing credit. This connection between human capital and financial capability reinforces the idea that financial literacy must be understood not only as a knowledge-based skill but also as a cognitively demanding process influenced by students' physical and mental conditions.

Finally, the literature highlights shortcomings in current financial education programs for college students. Jobst's (2012) analysis of college-level financial literacy efforts shows that many institutions lack structured, effective, or comprehensive financial education strategies. Programs may rely on optional workshops, lack integration into the curriculum, or fail to connect financial concepts to students' real-world financial challenges. Beer and Bray (2020) report similarly, that existing institutional efforts to address financial wellness are limited and under- resourced, limiting their impact. Hastings, Madrian, and Skimmyhorn (2012) further question the effectiveness of standalone financial education, arguing that knowledge must be paired with behavioral supports and structural improvements to create meaningful change. These findings collectively suggest that improving financial literacy among community college students requires a more well-rounded approach, one that integrates financial instruction with more supports addressing stress, cognitive load, and the structural barriers students face. Taken together, the literature suggests a comprehensive idea of the financial challenges and behavioral influences affecting community college students. Financial literacy is clearly associated with stronger financial behaviors, yet knowledge is only one factor. Students' financial decisions are shaped by stress, cognitive limitations, health factors, and structural barriers that influence how and when they apply financial knowledge. The research suggests that effective interventions must go beyond instruction and address the full ecosystem of human capital and behavioral constraints. This foundation supports the central aim of this paper to examine how financial literacy, sleep, nutrition, and stress jointly influence the resource allocation and long-term financial outcomes of community college students.

Microeconomic Foundations of Student Financial Behavior

Understanding how community college students make financial decisions begins with basic microeconomics. One of the most important concepts is budget constraint, which means students cannot buy everything they need because their income, time, and energy are limited. Beer and Bray (2020) show that many students face unmet financial needs, with little room for savings, emergency planning, or healthy spending choices. In this setting, financial decisions are made under pressure, not comfort. Economic limits show up in daily life, not just on spreadsheets. Students often confront hidden costs, course materials not fully covered by aid, transportation that varies by week, meal costs that fluctuate, and fees that appear unexpectedly throughout the semester. Because these costs are unpredictable, financial choices are not simply long-term planning versus short-term desires; they are reactions to circumstances that shift weekly. Because resources are limited, students constantly make trade-offs. Working extra hours can help cover tuition or food costs, but it reduces sleep and study time. Buying cheaper meals might ease financial strain, but it can lower alertness in class. Commuting long distances saves rent but adds fatigue and reduces time for homework. Saving money may feel responsible, yet immediate needs like rent, car repairs, or family support often take priority. These everyday situations reflect a simple idea in microeconomics: choosing one option requires giving up another, even when both matter. Financial pressure also affects how clearly students can think through their decisions. Rice (2013) explains that when people feel stretched thin, they focus on what fixes the moment rather than what helps them later. For students juggling school, work, transportation, and bills, it becomes difficult to look beyond the week or even the next two days. Long-term planning requires rest and time, both of which are resources students often lack. Recent sleep research makes this connection even clearer. Dickinson, Brookes, Ferguson, and Drummond (2021) found that people who choose shorter sleep, whether due to work or school demands, tend to take on more financial risk and focus on immediate rewards rather than long-term outcomes. When a person is tired, they are more likely to make quick financial choices, spend faster, and avoid planning not because they lack financial knowledge, but because fatigue makes careful decision-making harder. This pattern directly reflects the financial reality of many community college students. Those who cut sleep to work more hours, finish assignments, or commute long distances live in a daily cycle where energy is depleted before financial decisions are even made. As Dickinson et al. (2021) shows this lack of rest increases the chances of impulsive decisions, even if students know the benefit of saving or budgeting. In this sense, tiredness becomes a deciding factor in financial behavior, not just a side effect of college life. Financial decisions are also shaped by emotional strain and uncertainty. Students may not only worry about upcoming expenses but also about whether they will have enough time and energy to handle them. Even when income is predictable, their schedule often is not, and unpredictable time can limit financial planning as much as unpredictable money. These points show that financial literacy alone does not guarantee better financial choices. Students may understand budgeting, saving, and credit management, yet still struggle to apply that knowledge when they are exhausted, overworked, or responding to weekly financial surprises. By looking at students through the lens of microeconomics in terms of choices, limited budgets, hidden costs, trade-offs, time scarcity, and daily sacrifices it becomes clear that financial decisions are shaped not only by what students know, but by the conditions under which they are required to choose.

Survey

Although this paper does not include survey results, a survey has been fully designed and is scheduled for distribution to community college students. Because distribution has not yet begun, and responses have not been collected, findings could not be included at this stage. The goal of outlining the survey now is to show how it will support and extend the work presented in this paper once data is available. The survey is organized into three main sections. The first section focuses on everyday financial behavior. It asks students how they manage their monthly expenses, whether they track spending, respond to unexpected costs, and whether saving is something they can do regularly. The purpose is not to test technical financial knowledge but to understand how financial decisions are made in real time under real constraints. The second section addresses conditions that may affect those decisions, including rest, workload, and general stress levels. Questions include how many hours students typically sleep on school nights, whether work schedules interrupt rest, and how often they feel pressured by time or responsibilities. These questions are included because the literature consistently suggests that financial choices are shaped not solely by knowledge, but also by energy, clarity, and available time. The third section collects general background information such as hours worked per week, transportation demands, housing stability, and whether students balance school with supporting family members. This information will help explain differences in financial behavior between students who may share similar financial knowledge but live under very different daily pressures. While the survey has not yet been distributed, it is expected to be a valuable extension of this research. It will allow future analysis to move beyond assumptions and clearly connect financial knowledge to the conditions under which students must use it. The survey is designed to show why financial literacy may not always lead to long-term planning in environments where immediate needs, fatigue, and limited time are constant factors. Once data collection begins, and the data analyzed, it is expected that the survey results will help clarify the gap between financial understanding and financial action. In practical terms, it will provide evidence to support the idea that financial education must be paired with realistic support systems that recognize students' daily constraints. Although this paper cannot yet present those results, preparing the survey now ensures that the next stage of this work will be grounded in direct student experiences and not solely in existing literature.

Recommendations

A first recommendation is the integration of financial literacy modules into required first-year courses. Lusardi and Mitchell (2013) argue that financial literacy is a critical form of human capital that influences lifelong economic behavior, reinforcing the need for institutions to embed financial education early in the student experience. Rather than relying on optional programming, colleges should incorporate structured, evidence-based financial learning into mandatory coursework, ensuring that all students, especially those from under-resourced backgrounds, have access to foundational skills. These classes should not only present core financial concepts but also include exercises that connect budgeting and saving strategies to the everyday realities of community college students. Institutions have made an attempt in this direction with the Money Works program that offers workshops dedicated to budgeting, avoiding debt, and the use of credit cards. However, financial instruction alone is not enough.

The literature suggests that students' cognitive and physical conditions significantly affect their ability to apply financial knowledge. Bennett et al. (2012) show that poor health and limited cognitive functioning undermine financial capability. Recognizing this, a second policy recommendation is for institutions to expand wellness-based support systems that directly strengthen students' human capital. This includes improving access to healthy food options on campus, expanding food pantry services, offering sleep and stress management resources, and enhancing mental health services. These supports address the underlying cognitive constraints of fatigue, hunger, and anxiety that reduce students' ability to engage in long-term financial planning. Such interventions align with Rice's (2013) findings that scarcity and cognitive load shape decision-making by narrowing attention and reducing self-control. By mitigating these sources of cognitive strain, colleges can create an environment in which financial literacy can be more effectively utilized.

A third recommendation is the development of financial support and counseling services. Beer and Baye (2020) report that many community college students experience acute financial instability that disrupts both their academic and economic lives. Institutions should establish accessible emergency aid programs, micro-grant initiatives, and short-term financial counseling services to support students during periods of crisis. I have personally know of institutions who work with State Farm to provide a financial literacy 101 workshop. This course of action can be applied to community colleges around the United States. These interventions can prevent students from resorting to high cost credit or withdrawing from courses due to temporary financial shocks. By reducing immediate scarcity, colleges can help students maintain the cognitive bandwidth needed for rational decision-making and academic focus.

Fourthly, colleges should leverage behavioral insights to design financial tools that align with students' tendencies. Hastings, Madrian, and Skimmyhorn (2012) emphasize that behavioral biases such as present bias, overconfidence, and limited attention regularly interfere with rational financial behavior. Institutions can implement behavioral ideas such as automated savings prompts, reminders about upcoming deadlines, simplified financial forms, and opt-out of enrollment in financial planning sessions. These strategies reduce the cognitive load associated with economic management and encourage positive behaviors without imposing heavy demands on students' time or energy. This approach aligns with Jobst's (2012) critique that many financial literacy efforts are disconnected from students' academic and individual experiences. A coordinated support model ensures that students receive consistent, reinforced messages about economic responsibility, while also gaining access to the structural supports that enable them to act on that knowledge.

Students cannot make optimal financial decisions when they face significant constraints to both their financial resources and their cognitive capacity. By addressing the barriers that shape financial behavior, knowledge gaps, structural limitations, stress, fatigue, and scarcity, community colleges can create a supportive environment that empowers students to make informed decisions, improve their financial stability, and enhance their long-term economic opportunities.

Conclusion

Community college students make financial decisions in an environment where money, time, and energy are all limited. They are not only trying to learn how to manage their finances but are doing so while working, commuting, studying, and handling their everyday responsibilities. Because of this, financial choices are often made under pressure, not preference. Students may want to save, plan ahead, or stay disciplined with spending, but daily needs often force them to focus on what must be taken care of right now. Financial literacy is important, but it cannot work by itself. Knowing how to budget or save does not automatically translate into steady financial habits when someone is exhausted, stressed, or unsure if they can cover basic expenses. Sleep, nutrition, and time are part of financial decision-making because they affect how clearly students can think and how much they can plan beyond the week in front of them. When students are tired or stretched thin, they are more likely to choose what satisfies the moment rather than what benefits their future. Because of this, improving financial outcomes for community college students requires more than information. It requires support that recognizes how they actually live. When students have access to rest, stability, and basic needs, they are in a better position to use what they know. Financial literacy becomes meaningful when the conditions around it make long-term planning possible. In the end, students do not struggle because they lack understanding. They struggle because they are expected to make long-term decisions while managing immediate demands on limited resources. Helping them succeed means reducing those pressures and giving them the space to think clearly about their future. When that happens, financial knowledge is not just learned, it is applied.

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Environmental Studies

Mallory Anderson

Montgomery College

Mentor: Dr. Nathan Zook

Title: "Harming to Heal"

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Matthew Aiello-Lammens, Pace University:

"While all of the papers and presentations in this session were truly fantastic, Mallory Anderson's stood out in the ways she integrated ethics, political theory, and natural resource management and asked the reader to think differently on how we make decisions regarding invasive species management. Her work has the potential to be adapted to many areas of sustainability science and reframe how managers, researchers, and the public more broadly, acknowledges and considers the necessary trade-offs inherent in environmental decision making."

Harming to Heal

Abstract

Invasive species management is commonly framed as a technical and ecological challenge, emphasizing efficiency, effectiveness, and ecological outcomes. In a world characterized by accelerating species movement, environmental instability, and shifting human, relationships between humans and the ecosystem, these framings fall short of addressing the ethical complexity of management decisions. This paper will examine invasive species management not as a process of preventing harm, but as one of selecting, distributing, and justifying harm. By moving beyond debates over whether harm occurs, the analysis centers on how different management strategies prioritize certain values, species, and futures over others.

In this paper, invasive species control methods are evaluated through an ethical lens that focuses on tradeoffs rather than solutions. While utilitarian approaches often lead environmental decision-making by emphasizing aggregate ecological benefit, this framework can obscure the moral consequences of irreversible interventions and uneven power dynamics. This paper argues that management strategies vary not only in effectiveness, but in the permanence, range, and moral weight of the harms they impose. In a changing world where ecological conditions and governance capacities vary widely, ethical evaluation must account for uncertainty, temporal responsibility, and unequal access to management tools.

Ultimately, this paper advocates for a reframing of invasive species management as harm prioritization rather than harm elimination. This perspective does not reject intervention but instead calls for greater transparency in ethical reasoning and more thoughtful consideration of long-term consequences. By acknowledging that all management actions involve some level of ethical compromise, the paper offers a more realistic and flexible foundation for decision making that is better suited to ecological systems and human societies undergoing rapid change.

Introduction

For millennia, humans have been catalysts of ecological change. Ancient trade networks, from Mesopotamia to the Silk Road, transported crops, livestock, pests, and microbes across regions, unintentionally reshaping ecosystems and altering species distributions (Wang). Maritime societies of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean centuries before Columbus moved organisms deliberately for food, medicine, ornamentation, or companionship, while inadvertently introducing weeds, parasites, and invasive fish or mollusks into new waters (Harding et al.). With the Columbian Exchange of the 15th and 16th centuries, these movements accelerated dramatically. Crops like maize, potatoes, and cassava reshaped diets and agricultural landscapes, livestock like pigs and cattle altered grasslands and forests, and pathogens, such as syphilis, wreaked devastation on human and animal populations alike. These early waves of globalization created cascading ecological effects that were felt for centuries, showing that species movement and environmental disruption are inseparable from human social and economic networks.

Human dependence on global networks ensures that species movement will continue indefinitely. Modern economies rely on the continuous flow of goods, food, and resources across continents, linking agricultural systems, fisheries, and forests in ways that make strict ecological isolation impossible. Airports, shipping ports, and supply chains act as conduits for organisms just as effectively as trade routes did centuries ago, but at a scale and speed that magnify ecological consequences. As globalization accelerates, the introduction of nonnative species becomes not an occasional accident but an inevitable feature of human civilization. Even with vigilant biosecurity and management, the sheer volume of global movement means that ecosystems will remain under constant pressure from species redistribution, creating persistent ecological and ethical challenges.

Invasive species are among the most powerful drivers of ecological transformation in the modern era, reshaping ecosystems at a pace and scale that outstrip most historical patterns of change. Although species movement has always occurred, contemporary introductions are propelled by global trade, transportation networks, agricultural expansion, and land use conversion, compressing geographic barriers that once limited ecological exchange (Bradley; Larson et al.). As a result, ecosystems that evolved in relative isolation are increasingly reorganized by novel species interactions. A species becomes invasive not simply by being nonnative, but by establishing self-sustaining populations that destabilize existing ecological relationships and generate harm beyond the capacity of ecosystems or institutions to absorb.

The ecological effects of invasive species are often extensive and enduring. Invasive organisms can displace native species, restructure food webs, and alter nutrient cycles in ways that redirect long-term ecosystem trajectories. Zebra mussels, for example, increase water clarity through intensive filtration, yet this apparent improvement overshadows deeper shifts in nutrient dynamics and energy flow, contributing to native species decline and large-scale ecosystem reorganization (McCormick et al.). Similarly, invasive predators such as feral cats have caused widespread losses of native birds and mammals, while forest pests like the emerald ash borer have transformed forests and the services they provide across entire regions (Warwick). In each case, ecosystems are not simply damaged, they are pushed into new and often irreversible configurations.

These ecological disruptions generate profound economic consequences. Invasive species affect agriculture, fisheries, forestry, infrastructure, and water systems, with global damages estimated in the tens to hundreds of billions of dollars annually (Marbuah, Gren, and McKie). Because invasive species routinely cross political boundaries, their impacts strain governance structures designed for more stable conditions. Management requires ongoing coordination across jurisdictions, highlighting the mismatch between rapidly shifting ecological realities and comparatively rigid institutional frameworks.

Beyond ecological and economic impacts lies a persistent ethical dilemma. Invasive species management frequently requires intentional harm to some organisms in order to prevent broader ecological loss. Mechanical, chemical, and biological interventions may involve killing, displacement, or irreversible alteration, while inaction can permit cascading extinctions and ecosystem collapse. Lethal control programs, such as those targeting invasive mammals on islands, reveal how conservation efforts unfold within systems already transformed, where no option restores a prior state and every choice contributes to further change.

These conditions challenge ethical frameworks that assume stability or clear moral boundaries. Invasive species management operates under uncertainty, limited resources, and accelerating ecological transformation, where all available options generate harm. Ethical evaluation therefore cannot rest on whether harm occurs, but on how harm is distributed across species, ecosystems, human communities, and time. While utilitarian, rights-based, and ecological approaches each offer insight, none fully resolve decisions made within systems that are continuously shifting and resistant to restoration.

Understanding invasive species management as the navigation of unavoidable harm within dynamically changing systems reframes environmental ethics. Instead of seeking static equilibrium or moral purity, decision-making must account for scale, duration, reversibility, and institutional constraint in landscapes that are already in transition. Emphasizing transparency in these tradeoffs offers a more realistic and accountable foundation for environmental governance under conditions of accelerating ecological change.

Methodology

An ethical lens grounded in ecology and environmental philosophy is applied to existing case studies and management strategies, emphasizing trade-offs, constraints, and irreversibility. Mechanical, chemical, and biological controls are treated as distinct interventions that redistribute harm across species, ecosystems, and time. They are evaluated using recurring ethical dimensions such as scale, duration, reversibility, intentionality, and governance capacity, which clarify how harm is selected, justified, and managed.

Major ethical frameworks like utilitarianism, rights-based theory, justice-oriented approaches, and compassion-centered conservation serve as interpretive tools, revealing both their insights and limitations under uncertainty, unequal power, and irreversible change. Case studies, such as sea lamprey control in the Great Lakes and invasive plant biocontrol, demonstrate how management practices structure moral responsibility and distribute ecological burdens.

Through this comparative and interpretive approach, harm prioritization emerges as a practical ethical framework for invasive species management, aiming not to resolve moral tensions but to clarify them and make explicit the value judgments in environmental decision-making.

Chemical Control

Chemical management occupies a central yet contested position within invasive species control because it forces direct engagement with the ethical consequences of intentional ecological intervention. Unlike mechanical or biological approaches, chemical methods are designed to cause targeted mortality at a scale sufficient to alter population trajectories, making their moral stakes both visible and unavoidable. The use of lampricides, primarily TFM and niclosamide, to manage invasive sea lampreys in the Great Lakes exemplifies how chemical control functions not as an isolated tactic, but as part of a broader management system shaped by ecological urgency, scientific limitation, and ethical compromise (Wilkie et al.).

Sea lampreys entered the Great Lakes through shipping canals in the early twentieth century and rapidly destabilized aquatic ecosystems that had evolved without such a predator. Their parasitic feeding behavior disproportionately impacts large, mature fish, reducing reproductive capacity and triggering cascading ecological effects throughout food webs. Native species such as lake trout, whitefish, and chub experienced dramatic population declines, leading not only to ecological degradation but also to the collapse of commercial and recreational fisheries. By the mid twentieth century, the scale of damage made clear that passive management or delayed response would result in long-term, potentially irreversible losses to biodiversity and regional economies. Lampricides were developed as a response to this crisis and implemented with the specific aim of suppressing lamprey populations during their larval stage in tributary streams. Their effectiveness in reducing lamprey abundance transformed the trajectory of Great Lakes ecosystems, allowing partial recovery of native fish populations and stabilizing fisheries that had been on the brink of collapse (Wilkie et al.).

Chemical management remains ethically significant because it does not simply aim to prevent harm, but instead involves selecting, distributing, and justifying harm. While lampricides produce measurable ecological benefits, they also impose direct and indirect costs. Lampricides work by disrupting oxidative phosphorylation, a mechanism to which sea lampreys are particularly sensitive due to their physiology (Wilkie et al.). Yet this selectivity is not absolute: several native fish species, especially in early developmental stages, are vulnerable to mortality during treatments (Simberloff). Sublethal effects on nontarget organisms, such as stress, reproductive disruption, or altered behavior, further complicate the ethical evaluation of chemical control (Zhou et al.). These harms are neither incidental nor unpredictable, they are foreseeable consequences of deliberate human intervention and thus demand careful ethical consideration.

Beyond direct mortality, chemical treatments alter stream chemistry and may require repeated applications over extended periods, raising concerns about cumulative ecological stress and the potential for irreversible ecosystem changes (Simberloff). The persistence of chemical control challenges conventional ethical assumptions about restraint and reversibility in environmental management. While lampricides can prevent the long-term ecological collapse that would occur in the absence of intervention, they simultaneously create ongoing moral obligations to monitor, mitigate, and adapt interventions in response to ecological feedback. The ethical task is not to eliminate harm but to manage it responsibly, acknowledging that both action and inaction carry substantial moral weight (Zhou et al.).

The intentionality of chemical control represents another central ethical consideration. Lampricide programs are designed to kill deliberately and repeatedly, making the human role in causing harm unmistakable. This intentionality generates moral tension because it conflicts with deeply held intuitions about responsibility toward nonhuman life. However, failing to intervene allows invasive populations to inflict prolonged suffering, ecosystem collapse, and species loss, outcomes that are no less ethically significant because they occur after human introduction (Simberloff). Ethical evaluation, therefore, must grapple with the asymmetry of harm: suffering caused by chemical interventions is concentrated, foreseeable, and managed, whereas harm from unchecked lamprey populations is diffuse, persistent, and potentially irreversible. Decisions about chemical control are thus less about action versus inaction and more about the distribution, magnitude, and temporal character of harm.

Efforts to reduce nontarget impacts further illustrate that chemical control is an inherently adaptive and socially mediated practice. The Great Lakes Fishery Commission implements selective dosing, timing treatments to avoid vulnerable life stages, and extensive ecological monitoring to assess outcomes (Wilkie et al.). These practices demonstrate that chemical control is not a blunt instrument but a refined management strategy that reflects ethical prioritization, balancing short-term harms with long-term ecological and societal benefits. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these measures is contingent on governance capacity, technical expertise, and scientific understanding, highlighting that ethical outcomes are intertwined with institutional and social context (Zhou et al.). Regions lacking resources or technical infrastructure may experience disproportionately high ecological costs, emphasizing that chemical control is not ethically uniform but shaped by social and institutional inequalities.

Finally, chemical control exemplifies how harm prioritization must account for uncertainty and long-term responsibility. Ecological responses to lampricide application depend on hydrology, population dynamics, and interspecific interactions, meaning that outcomes are inherently probabilistic. As such, ethical responsibility includes continuous assessment, adaptive management, and transparent communication about trade-offs, ensuring that interventions reflect both the best available evidence and the values that guide ecological stewardship (Simberloff).

Biological Control

Biological control is a management strategy that uses living organisms, such as predators, parasites, or pathogens, to suppress populations of harmful nonnative species. Unlike chemical or mechanical methods, which often result in immediate mortality or physical disruption, biological control introduces self-sustaining agents that continue to affect the target population over time. While this may appear to reduce repeated intervention and associated ecological costs, it does not eliminate harm. Instead, it shifts the temporal, spatial, and moral distribution of harm, creating an ongoing system in which intentional ecological impact is unavoidable. Every choice in the introduction of a control organism carries potential consequences for nontarget species, ecosystem processes, and human communities, showing that harm cannot be fully mitigated, only managed (McFadyen).

The ecological justification for biological control is compelling. For example, the invasive aquatic fern *Salvinia molesta* has disrupted freshwater ecosystems by forming dense mats that reduce light penetration and oxygen availability. The introduction of the weevil *Cyrtobagous salviniae*, a highly host specific herbivore, successfully reduced fern populations and restored certain ecosystem functions, including water clarity, oxygen levels, and native plant and invertebrate populations (McFadyen). Similarly, the near eradication of prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia spp.*) in Australia through the moth *Cactoblastis cactorum* allowed the recovery of agricultural lands and demonstrated both ecological and economic benefits (National Museum of Australia). These examples show how biological agents can produce high long-term effectiveness. Yet they also show that harm is embedded in the process, native species may be indirectly affected, ecosystems may shift unpredictably, and human communities may experience unintended consequences from changes in land use, predator-prey dynamics, or resource availability.

Harm in biological control is unavoidable for several reasons. First, ecological systems are inherently complex and dynamic. Even host specific agents may exploit alternative hosts or adapt in ways that were not anticipated during testing, potentially creating new invasive dynamics (McFadyen; Jarić et al.). Second, the ecological effects of introduced organisms unfold over long time periods, meaning that irreversible changes can occur before negative impacts are fully recognized. Suppression of one invasive species may inadvertently release another species from competition, altering food webs in ways that cannot be undone. Third, the ethical consequences extend beyond ecology. Local communities may experience economic, cultural, or aesthetic impacts if a valued species is affected or eliminated, creating tensions between ecological objectives and human priorities (Jarić et al.). These factors demonstrate that biological control cannot be treated as a risk-free, one-time intervention, but rather constitutes a deliberate and long-lasting distribution of harm across multiple dimensions.

Implementation of biological control programs requires careful planning and monitoring specifically because the ethical stakes are high. Selecting an appropriate control agent involves evaluating host specificity, reproductive rates, dispersal capacity, and ecological interactions, yet even rigorous testing cannot fully predict all outcomes. Modern technologies, including drone based monitoring and remote sensing, enhance precision and allow managers to track both invasive and control species across landscapes, but they cannot eliminate uncertainty (McFadyen). Social and institutional factors further influence outcomes because regions with limited governance capacity or technical expertise may experience higher ecological or ethical costs, while successful community engagement can help mediate conflict between conservation goals and cultural values (Jarić et al.). Therefore, ethical responsibility in biological control requires not only ecological caution but also consideration of equity, access, and transparency in decision-making.

Mechanical Control

Mechanical control involves the physical removal or disruption of invasive organisms through actions such as pulling, cutting, digging, mowing, dredging, trapping, or other direct intervention techniques. It is often considered when chemical use poses unacceptable ecological risks or when immediate reduction of invasive abundance is needed.

While commonly perceived as low impact, mechanical control redistributes ecological harm rather than eliminating it. Metanalyses show that most mechanical removal efforts occur at small scales and often require repeated interventions because of persistent seed banks and vegetative regrowth, which can make long-term suppression labor intensive and expensive (Kettenring and Adams). Additionally, mechanical disturbance can affect nontarget species and soil structure, with removal activities sometimes leading to unintended changes in plant community composition or habitat conditions (Ruesink et al.).

Empirical studies illustrate both the ecological promise and the ethical complexity of mechanical control. For example, harvesting young invasive cattails (*Typha* spp.) in Great Lakes wetlands reduced cattail dominance and enhanced native aquatic plant cover, particularly when paired with post treatment monitoring using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), highlighting the value of strategic application and technological integration (Lishawa et al.). Yet the costs and limits of mechanical methods are evident in other contexts: a recent synthesis of mechanical controls against bioturbating pests in bivalve aquaculture found that although some techniques reduced target densities, nontarget fauna showed both positive and negative responses, and usefulness often didn't reach operational scales without intensive effort.

Mechanical control also raises ethical questions of scale and sustainability. Direct removal causes visible, short-term harms like mortality of target organisms, soil disturbance, and incidental harm to fauna, that are immediate and localized, making ecological responsibility more transparent than in chemical or biological control. However, because physical methods are limited by labor and funding, they may inadvertently favor disturbance tolerant species and require continuous human intervention with uncertain long-term outcomes (Snyder).

Therefore, like other management strategies, mechanical control does not avoid harm and instead reshapes where and how harm occurs. Ethical evaluation must consider efficacy, resource allocation, nontarget impacts, and long-term commitments to monitoring and follow up action, acknowledging that physical removal reflects a deliberate choice about the distribution and persistence of ecological disruption.

Ethical Frameworks and Their Limits

Ethical frameworks are central to how invasive species management is justified and defended, particularly when interventions cause deliberate harm in pursuit of ecological goals. These frameworks are often treated as tools for settling moral uncertainty, as though selecting the correct ethical lens can produce a clear answer. In practice, however, invasive species management exposes the limits of dominant ethical approaches. Irreversible outcomes, uneven power relations, and long-term uncertainty complicate moral reasoning, revealing that ethical frameworks rarely eliminate conflict. Instead, they explain the trade-offs embedded in conservation decisions and the difficulty of reconciling competing values within any single moral system (**Latombe et al.).**

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism has long dominated environmental decision making due to its alignment with ecological science and policy pragmatism (Wolff). By prioritizing collective outcomes such as ecosystem health or biodiversity preservation, it offers a seemingly objective justification for intervention when harm is unavoidable. Yet its strengths are inseparable from its blind spots. In invasive species management, utilitarian reasoning often obscures questions of moral responsibility, distributive justice, and irreversibility, limiting its ability to guide ethically complex interventions on its own.

Utilitarianism evaluates actions by their consequences, privileging those that maximize overall benefit or minimize total harm. In conservation contexts, this logic fits easily with population level goals and ecosystem stability. Because invasive species often threaten multiple native species simultaneously, utilitarian reasoning provides a powerful rationale for intervention, framing harm to individual organisms as morally permissible when it prevents broader ecological loss. This reasoning underlies many mechanical, chemical, and biological control strategies.

A key appeal of utilitarianism is its adaptability. Ethical evaluation can shift as scientific knowledge evolves, incorporating new data on effectiveness, nontarget impacts, or long-term outcomes. This flexibility is particularly valuable under ecological uncertainty, allowing probabilistic reasoning to guide action and framing inaction itself as a potential moral failure (Larson et al.). From this perspective, hesitating on intervention may allow preventable harm to happen.

Yet utilitarianism also reduces moral complexity to collective calculations, obscuring how harms are distributed and who bears their costs. Aggregation flattens distinctions between types of harm and can justify intentional killing so long as outcomes appear favorable. Utilitarian reasoning often treats animal suffering as interchangeable units while applying different moral standards to intentional versus unintended harm, particularly across human and nonhuman subjects (Woollard). This allows deliberate harm to be morally minimized without fully engaging with its ethical significance.

Utilitarianism is also poorly equipped to address irreversibility. Invasive species management frequently involves permanent actions, such as eradication or the release of biological control agents, whose consequences cannot be undone. Utilitarian calculations tend to emphasize predicted long-term benefits even when those predictions are uncertain. When irreversible harm occurs, the framework offers limited guidance for moral accountability, regret, or responsibility. As a result, permanent ecological change can be ethically legitimized while uncertainty and error are treated as secondary concerns.

Finally, utilitarianism struggles with power and scale. Decisions are often made by institutions with significant authority, while ecological and social consequences are experienced by those with limited influence over outcomes and who are most likely to be affected. Collective benefit can mask disproportionate problems placed on certain species, regions, or communities, reinforcing existing inequalities in governance capacity and access to alternatives (Larson et al.).

Rights-Based and Justice-Oriented Counterpoints

On the other hand, rights-based and justice-oriented frameworks stem from deontology in response to these shortcomings. Animal rights approaches emphasize the moral standing of individual organisms, rejecting intentional harm regardless of ecological benefit. From this perspective, practices such as culling or poisoning are moral violations, challenging the assumption that population level gains can override individual suffering.

Conflicts between animal rights advocates and conservation biologists are well documented. Research has shown that these tensions stem from fundamentally different ethical priorities as conservation biology emphasizes overall welfare, while animal rights frameworks focus on individual welfare (Perry and Perry 31). Rights-based critiques shift attention to moral concerns often unnoticed by utilitarian reasoning, particularly the ethical weight of intentional killing and the use of living beings to achieve that.

However, strict rights-based approaches face their own limitations. In invasive species contexts, refusing to intervene may protect individual invaders while allowing widespread suffering and ecosystem collapse elsewhere. This raises difficult questions about moral responsibility for harm that is allowed rather than directly caused. Fiona Woollard, a philosopher of ethics, discusses how the doing/allowing distinction highlights how ethical systems often treat inaction as less blameworthy than action, even when outcomes are comparably harmful (Woollard). In invasive species management, this distinction can obscure the ethical significance of preventable harm.

Justice-oriented frameworks further complicate ethical evaluation by foregrounding social, economic, and political dimensions. Invasive species management can affect livelihoods, cultural practices, and food security, particularly in vulnerable communities. Ecologist Hugh Warwick emphasizes that conservation killing occurs within broader political and economic structures, raising questions about whose values dominate decision making and whose losses are deemed acceptable (Warwick). These critiques expose the inadequacy of purely outcome focused ethics in addressing structural inequality and historical responsibility.

Compassion, Care, and Persistent Tension

More recent scholarship emphasizes compassion as a guiding principle in conservation. Scholars argue that compassion can promote ethically sensitive practices by stressing concern for individual animals while acknowledging ecological realities (Ramp and Bekoff 325). Compassionate conservation challenges approaches that treat harm as morally neutral so long as outcomes are favorable. Yet compassion does not eliminate ethical conflict. Compassion can inform how harm is inflicted, encouraging minimization, restraint, and transparency, but it cannot guarantee harm-free outcomes. Rather than resolving moral tension, compassionate ethics make it more visible.

Why Harm Prioritization Is Needed

Taken together, these frameworks share a common limitation: none can fully resolve the ethical complexity of invasive species management. Utilitarianism offers pragmatic guidance but obscures irreversibility and inequality. Rights-based approaches foreground moral concern for individuals but risk paralysis in the face of large-scale harm. Justice oriented and compassionate frameworks expose power dynamics and moral discomfort but provide limited guidance for choosing between unavoidable harms.

These limitations point toward the need to reframe ethical evaluation around harm prioritization rather than harm elimination. Invasive species management inevitably involves deciding which harms are acceptable, which are minimized, and which are prevented across time and scale. Ethical responsibility is not claims of moral purity but in making these trade-offs explicit, accountable, and responsive to uncertainty. By acknowledging that all interventions impose costs, ethical reasoning can move beyond false binaries of action versus restraint and toward a more honest engagement with the moral realities of environmental management.

Acceptable Harm as an Ethical Lens

Evaluating invasive species management requires moving beyond debates over whether harm occurs to understanding which harms are ethically tolerable and why. All management actions inevitably cause harm to individual organisms, ecosystems, or human communities. An ethical lens focused on acceptable harm distinguishes harms that are justified within contextual constraints from those that are disproportionate, avoidable, or inadequately considered. Acceptable harm refers to damage knowingly permitted because it prevents greater or more permanent harm. Unacceptable harm includes impacts that are excessive relative to ecological or ethical gains or that result from avoidable ignorance or lack of accountability.

Irreversibility is a central dimension of harm weighting. Harms that permanently change ecosystem structure, eliminate populations, or exclude future ecological options carry greater moral weight than those that are temporary or adjustable. For example, interventions such as species eradication or the introduction of self-sustaining biological agents insert change that cannot be undone, raising deeper ethical concerns than interventions like mechanical removal that can be paused or reversed if consequences are unacceptable. Irreversible harms then require especially strong justification, showing why harm cannot be assessed solely by immediate or aggregate outcomes (Crowley et al.).

Evaluating harms also demands transparency about tradeoffs. Ethical decision must articulate what is valued, who bears costs, and why specific harms are permitted. Invasive species discussion often treats harm as a technical side effect rather than a moral decision, obscuring underlying value judgments about ecosystem hierarchy, species worth, or human benefit (Kokotovich and Andow). Transparency clarifies that management is not purely ecological problem solving but involves ethical choices about which futures are prioritized and at whose expense.

Power, Constraint, and Ethical Choice

Ethical evaluation in invasive species management is inseparable from the institutional and social contexts in which decisions unfold. Governance capacity which is the availability of technical expertise, funding, legal frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms, shapes which strategies are feasible and which harms are unavoidable. High-capacity governance can support advanced monitoring, adaptive implementation, and harm minimization. Low-capacity governance may be forced into direct, high-impact approaches not because they are ethically ideal but because alternatives are inaccessible (Adams et al.).

Scholars have emphasized that invasive species management cannot be understood outside of its human and social dimensions, including how values influence perceptions of harm and risk (Shackleton et al.). Governance systems that exclude local participation or fail to integrate diverse perspectives risk imposing harms that reflect institutional priorities rather than ethically justified tradeoffs. Ethical ideals regarding harm minimization thus cannot be measured solely against absolute standards but must be evaluated in light of how power, resource inequality, and decision-making processes constrain action.

Global inequality further complicates ethical judgment. Regions with limited resources face disproportionate burdens from invasive species and limited access to harm reducing technologies or strategies. Ethical analysis must consider how international research agendas, funding flows, and regulatory regimes privilege certain knowledge and tools over others, potentially reinforcing inequities in who suffers ecological and economic harm and who has agency to respond. Additionally, institutional caution, regulatory barriers, and public resistance often limit the use of emerging conservation technologies, not necessarily because they pose greater harm, but because governance systems prioritize political risk avoidance over adaptive response (Magoffie 220). Ethical ideals that ignore such disparities risk adjudicating moral failure where there is simply constrained choice.

Recognizing constraint does not excuse harm but reframes ethical evaluation as responsibility within limits. When all options consist of some harm, ethical responsibility lies in minimizing net suffering, making tradeoffs explicit, and continually adapting as conditions evolve. Ethical ideals should instead function as aspirational guides rather than as impossible demands. Differences from them under real world constraints should not necessarily imply ethical failure when choices are concerned with accountability, harm reduction, and social inclusion.

Strategy Comparison

Applying the acceptable harm lens highlights meaningful ethical distinctions among mechanical, chemical, and biological management strategies by foregrounding irreversibility, transparency, and constraint. Mechanical control typically imposes low irreversibility. Actions such as trapping, manual removal, mowing, or physical barriers create harms that are localized, visible, and reversible. These methods allow practitioners to adjust or halt interventions as ecological feedback emerges, which aligns with harm prioritization that values adaptability and minimal permanent alteration. However, they require significant labor, funding, and longterm commitment which are factors that can make them impractical without institutional support. Ethical evaluation of mechanical methods must therefore weigh their reversibility against feasibility limits.

Chemical control involves managed harms with moderate reversibility. Chemical agents can produce nontarget effects and ecosystem disturbance, yet many impacts are time limited and subject to regulation and monitoring. Transparency about dosing, timing, and nontarget impacts is essential for ethically justifying chemical use, and adaptive management can mitigate some harms. Still, the potential for accumulative stress and unintended consequences requires constant reassessment, particularly in environments where governance capacity limits monitoring or enforcement.

Biological control often presents the highest ethical stakes due to its propensity for irreversible change. Introducing self-sustaining organisms can produce long-term suppression of invasive populations but cannot be easily reversed if negative consequences emerge. Because these agents become ecological actors, any maladaptive behavior or nontarget impact persists indefinitely. Thoughtfully designed programs integrate ecological research, technological monitoring, and social engagement, yet they operate within the reality that human intervention, however scientifically justified, cannot avoid imposing harm. Biological control, therefore, is less a solution than a structured negotiation of trade-offs, illustrating that all invasive species management requires deliberate choices about which species, ecosystems, and human communities will carry the burdens of intervention.

Across strategies, ethical responsibility is not about selecting a universally best method but about transparently evaluating which harms are acceptable relative to context, constraint, and uncertainty. Ethical decision-making must account for how governance capacity, socioecological variability, and community values shape what harms can be minimized, avoided, or responsibly accepted.

Invasive species management inevitably generates harm, and no strategy can fully avoid it. The challenge lies in prioritizing which harms are acceptable and to whom, acknowledging that some species, ecosystems, or human interests will inevitably bear the costs of intervention. Ethics remain the gold standard we strive for, but no action can ever be truly harm free. Conservation must shift its mindset from attempting to avoid harm to recognizing its inevitability and making deliberate, accountable decisions about what will be harmed and why. In doing so, environmental decision making can be both scientifically informed and ethically responsible in a world of complex, unavoidable trade-offs.

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History

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Title: “The Sacred War: Religion, Morality, and Anti-Communism”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. James Martin, US Military Academy at West Point:

“A well-executed analysis of early U.S. Cold War policy. By expertly integrating primary sources across multiple media with secondary scholarly works, Victoria provides a careful and insightful analysis that illuminates the foundations of American civil religion during the Cold War era.”

The Sacred War: Religion, Morality, and Anti-Communism

On January 4th of 1939, just eight months before the start of the Second World War, President FDR delivered an annual message to Congress which addressed the rising concerns regarding the Nazi regime. In his speech he repeatedly referred to spiritual and moral values, eventually stating that in a modern civilization which respects rights and liberties, a religion, democracy and international good faith "complement and support each other."[8] Later, the idea that democracy is directly linked to moral and religious values gains even greater significance under the next president, Harry S. Truman, but this time in opposition to communism. During the early years of the Cold War, Truman was able to transform the geopolitical conflict with the Soviet Union into a moral crusade, in which democracy, human rights, and freedom of religion were portrayed as interconnected and spiritually defined values that are threatened by atheistic communism. Therefore, it was this religious confrontation that provided the moral foundation for domestic and foreign policy and ultimately influenced the formation of a new American identity and nationalism through presidential rhetoric, foreign policy decisions, propaganda initiatives, and popular culture. This religious interpretation not only legitimized White House domestic and foreign policy but also transformed American national identity into one defined by a sacred and exceptional duty to defend the "free world," thus leaving a lasting impact for the decades to come.

After the sudden death of FDR in April of 1945, Harry S. Truman, a Baptist with ecumenical values, comes into the executive office. Four months later, just two weeks before the atomic bomb drops on Hiroshima, Truman wrote in his notes that "[w]e have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world."[9] And although at first glance it may seem that the decision to drop the atomic bombs contradicts his Christian religious views, in fact this event became a clear demonstration of the very beginning of a moral confrontation that would drag on for decades. Truman's religious background shaped not only how he perceived the bomb's catastrophic power, but also how he framed its use as a solemn duty rather than a pure military act. It was Truman who, after the events, stated that "We thank God that [atomic bomb] has come to us, instead of our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes," thereby not only implying that the decision to drop the bombs saved American soldiers from future combats with Japan, but also justifying this decision in a religious context by claiming that the world should be thankful that "Hitler's crowd or Stalin's did not discover this atomic bomb."[10] By placing the bomb's use within the religious narrative, Truman effectively transformed a devastating military act into a moral affirmation of American righteousness. His language that merged the question of national security with the idea of divine guidance eventually foreshadowed a broader Cold War pattern in which religious rhetoric became a tool for defining American identity against perceived atheistic threats.

In his Inaugural Adress in 1949, Truman stated that "differences between communism and democracy do not concern the United States alone. People everywhere are coming to realize that what is involved is material well-being, human dignity, and the right to believe in and worship God." [11] In this speech, Truman is

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[8] Espinosa, Gastón. *Religion and the American Presidency: George Washington to George W. Bush with Commentary and Primary Sources*. Columbia University Press, 2009: 215.

[9] Espinosa, Gastón. *Religion and the American Presidency: George Washington to George W. Bush with Commentary and Primary Sources*. Columbia University Press, 2009: 223.

[10] Espinosa, Gastón. *Religion and the American Presidency: George Washington to George W. Bush with Commentary and Primary Sources*. Columbia University Press, 2009: 223, 225.

[11] Truman, Harry S. 1949. "Inaugural Address." Harry S. Truman Library & Museum.

https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/19/inaugural-address.

able to present the emerging Cold War as a profound moral struggle, defining the United States as a nation whose ultimate mission is defending freedom, human rights, and peace. He emphasizes ideals of democracy, justice, and individualism, therefore contrasting these values with the authoritarian and "soulless" nature of communist regimes. Eventually, with the inclusion of religious language he demonstrates the elevation of America's political goals into a mission grounded in universal moral truths, thus presenting American nation not just as a global economic and political leader, but also as a force for moral righteousness guided by God's help and will. In fact, this perception was later directly reflected in his decisions regarding the ongoing policy of "containment," which was defined by applying calculated pressure at strategic point, while waiting for the Soviet system to collapse internally from the contradictions of its own regime.[12] This containment strategy was significantly influenced by Truman's religious beliefs in terms of both defining which states should be "contained" and providing a valuable instrument to prevent further communist expansion.

According to scholar William Inboden in his *Religion and American Foreign Policy: The Soul of Containment*, Truman viewed this world's conflict primarily as one between "those nations who believe in God and morality, and those who did not." Focused more on Christian ethics rather than doctrines of salvation of church, he was able to combine the genuine belief in moralism of his decisions with decisive and realistic approach manifested in such strategic policies like the Marshall plan, aid to Turkey and Greece, and military intervention in Korea.[13] On August 11th, 1948, President Truman wrote in his letter to Pope Pius XII that "the primary purpose of Marshall plan was and is to bind up the wounds of war, to feed the hungry, to give shelter to the homeless. Through labor and industry, with the blessing of God, these sorely stricken nations shall again become masters of their own destiny." [14] By describing the program's purpose with this word choice, Truman was able to implement language that comes from Christian ethics and biblical imagery in a way to position U.S. foreign aid as an extension of its spiritual responsibility rather than calculated politics. This framing not only legitimizes the Marshall Plan by mission grounded in compassion and moral obligation but also explains the reasons why Truman was so persistent in opposing communism. For a deeply religious Protestant, his foreign policy decisions were truly justified by the need to confront atheism, which in his understanding was also equated with an authoritarian regime and violation of human rights.

However, it wasn't only Truman's perception that created a religious basis for the coming decades of spiritual, ideological, and moral confrontation. By that time, the White House maintained an ambivalent relationship with the clergy in America, on one hand following Protestant tradition, and on the other resisting clergy due to their post-war motivation to build a new world by means that included influencing government's policies.[15] Although most of the clergy followed the goal to make sense with peace after a devastating military conflict, many of them found themselves disagreed with government's radical decisions as the nuclear strike on Japan.[16] Even though this confrontation between the administrations and the clergy would later influence the election of the next president, at the time the church agreed with the executive office on one point: the Cold War was a moral crusade and a religious combat. Therefore, during this period, many lower clergymen were encouraged by religious officials to turn their attention to American foreign policy.

Francis Cardinal Spellman was one of those people, who assisted President FDR and significantly engaged not only with Catholic Church, but also with politics. One of his speeches following the imprisonment of Catholic clergy by communist puppet governments in Eastern Europe in 1946 explained that this event is a

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[12] Inboden, William. *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment*. Cambridge University Press, 2010: 18.

[13] Inboden, William. *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment*. Cambridge University Press, 2010: 106.

[14] Truman, Harry S. "Letter to Pope Pius XII", August 11, 1948, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Myron Charles Taylor papers, Box 1.

[15] Inboden, William. *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment*. Cambridge University Press, 2010: 37.

[16] Inboden, William. *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment*. Cambridge University Press, 2010: 53-62

proof that America is involved in a combat for "its very soul" against "satanic Soviet sycophants.". The speech was delivered during rallies around the Northeast. As a result, in New Jersey alone "an estimated 140,000 Catholics marched against Communist religious persecution." [17] By mobilizing explicitly religious language at mass rallies, he helped to turn Catholic identity towards political action, reinforcing the idea that defending American democracy was inseparable from defending Christianity itself.

Another prominent example of religious alliances against communist ideas would be Truman's somewhat close connection to Pope Pius XII. After the exchange of numerous letters with President Truman which largely considered the issue of USSR and communism, the Bishop of Rome eventually proclaimed communism to be "avowed enemy of God" and actively participated in restricting communist spread in Italy.[18] Such attitudes towards the emerging religious confrontation were not, however, solely restricted to Catholicism. In the U.S., Catholic representatives came together with Protestants and Jews, causing America's faiths to unite "in common indignation." [19] Eventually, that combat was also joined by evangelists, with prominent religious figures like evangelical author Verne Paul Kaub labeling Cold War as "conflict between Communism and the American way of life." However, it was also Kaub who argued that "Christianity undergirded the American way" with the U.S.' political and economic system along with free will and "the sanctity of individuals" being a part of Christian doctrine. Thus, religious leaders of America, who were actively organizing religiously centered schools of anti-Communism, creating religious anti-Communism media such as "Christian Crusade", and participating in anti-Communist rallies,[20] played a significant role in declaring this confrontation together with the presidential administration as the holy war rather than purely political foreign policy approach in the minds of American public.

In terms of defining Americans' view of the Cold War it is also necessary to mention Truman's Campaign of Truth. Starting with the creation of the position of Assistant Secretary of Public and Cultural Affairs and appointing William B. Benton, an advertising executive, the White House was able to convince first journalists and then members of the House of Representatives that American propaganda in peacetime was not only necessary but also acceptable. Through establishing close ties between American press and the White House, Benton was able to take U.S. government's sponsored journalism to an international level. Later, during the annual convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1950, Truman himself regained this initiative in promoting democratic values through media. In his speech, he presented truth as a cornerstone of the American democratic tradition, thus defending international state propaganda by the ideas that foreign countries themselves desired reliable and credible information in opposition to Soviet lies. Thus, declaring truth "becomes a patriotic duty." As a result, during the Truman presidency, not only domestic and foreign propaganda was fabricated in the form of organizations such as the Voice of America, but also Psychological Strategy Board was created and became responsible for coordinating the psychological warfare waged by the various government agencies such as the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the CIA.[21] These new trends and organizations illustrate a fundamental shift in how Americans understood their role in the world. Under Truman, propaganda was no longer framed as a temporary wartime necessity but as a permanent responsibility of a democratic nation. By institutionalizing public diplomacy in peacetime, Truman redefined American identity as one whose duty is to actively defend and promote its values abroad. And these values, in turn, reflected not only the political and economic system, but also the moral component.

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[17] Herzog, Jonathan. From Sermon to Strategy: Religious Influence on the Formation and Implementation of US Foreign Policy in the Early Cold War. Religion and the Cold War, ed. Philip E Muehlenbeck, Vanderbilt University Press, 2012: 49

[18] Inboden, William. Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment. Cambridge University Press, 2010: 126

[19] Herzog, Jonathan. From Sermon to Strategy: Religious Influence on the Formation and Implementation of US Foreign Policy in the Early Cold War. Religion and the Cold War, ed. Philip E Muehlenbeck, Vanderbilt University Press, 2012: 49

20 Herzog, Jonathan. From Sermon to Strategy: Religious Influence on the Formation and Implementation of US Foreign Policy in the Early Cold War. Religion and the Cold War, ed. Philip E Muehlenbeck, Vanderbilt University Press, 2012: 50

[21] Ricaud, Raphaël. ""The Campaign of Truth": Propaganda and the Fabrication of Truth under Truman", 24-37. Revue française d'études américaines, 2012. https://doi.org/10.3917/rfea.133.0024.

This moral component is especially noticeable in examples drawn from the media of the time. While not all of it includes an explicit religious rationale, one of the projects founded as part of the Campaign of Truth by the CIA went significantly further in its attempts to unite the religious world against communism and thus reached out to Buddhists. *Tathagata: The Wayfarer* was a failed psychological warfare project developed by the Committee for Free Asia, a CIA front organization founded in 1951. In the completed script of this project, communism was depicted as the insidious cousin of Buddha, Devadatta, who was associated with deception, despotism, and ruthless disregard for the oppressed people of India. He was opposed by Buddha, who renounces worldly power "to seek truth and justice and help all suffering people find peace." Even though the project failed, "*Wayfarer* was crafted to demonstrate specific American foreign policy objectives" that were reflected by the U.S. Campaign of Truth propaganda effort launched by Truman.[22] By reimagining communism as Devadatta the CIA applied Truman's Christian moral values to a non-Western religious framework, reinforcing the idea that communism was not just anti-Christian, but rather universally immoral and spiritually corrupt. Despite the failed outcomes of the project, this approach by the CIA to psychological warfare illustrates how the idea of a spiritual confrontation not only became entrenched in this conflict but was also actively used as a tool to persuade people of the immorality of communist ideas.

Later, this project would experience another setback under Eisenhower but attempts to persuade the East in terms of religious grounds for resisting communism would not end there. For instance, in 1966, a series of posters was launched in Thailand called "Communism or Freedom?" which to a great extent replicated the themes of the *Wayfarer* project. All of them are organized in a way that divides the posters in two parts that contrast communism and the "free" Western world. On one of them, the left side titled "Communism" states in Thai that "communists are enemies of religion. Therefore, they intend to destroy Buddhism and monks, to make them disappear." It also illustrates communists destroying a temple and arresting Buddhist monks. The inscription on the right side, however, titled "Freedom" reads: "Religion is the foundation of the existence of the Thai people." The illustration depicts a scene of a religious worship in a Buddhist temple, while in the background a person is kneeling before a monk, who is also slightly bowing in return.[23] Unlike the left side, full of chaos and destruction, here harmony and peace prevail. Other posters paint such aspects of communism like the education system that attempts to instill hostility towards neighboring countries; restricted movement and travel; slave labor conditions in collective farms; and the desire to separate families physically and ideologically. This, however, wasn't new.

As demonstrated by the *Wayfarer*, film production was an important tool that contributed to the formation of public attitudes towards the U.S. role in terms of foreign affairs. As Michael Rogin, a scholar in the field of political science, mentioned in his "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies", anti-communist movies of the time "seem to pose the classic opposition between the free man, family, and love on the one hand, female sexuality, the state, and the invasion of the family on the other".[24] One of the movies discussed in his article is *My Son John* directed by Leo McCary in 1952. However, in addition to the mentioned above contrast between morality and family values, the film also largely addresses the confrontation between atheism and Christianity.

The film tells the story of an ordinary white American religious family in which one of the sons, John, suddenly arrives for a visit from Washington D.C. and falls under his parents' suspicion of adhering to communist ideology. Much of the film depicts the mother's grief and her relationship with her son, as she becomes increasingly convinced of her suspicions over time, which affects her mental state and ultimately leads her to turn in her son to an FBI agent. However, John's political views become especially suspicious precisely

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[22] Harrington, Laura. "The Greatest Movie Never Made: The Life of the Buddha as Cold War Politics," 397-425. Religion and American Culture, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2020.14.

[23] Wolfson, Ryan. ""Communism or freedom?": Thai Anti-Communist Posters at the Library of Congress | 4 Corners of the World." Library of Congress Blogs, 2023. https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2023/06/communism-or-freedom-thai-anti-communist-posters-at-the-library-of-congress/.

[24] Rogin, Michael. "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies." Vol. 6, 1984. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928536.

during the process of discussing with his father his anti-communist speech, in which the father explains that "when the state denies God-given rights and regards itself as a source of liberty, freedom is doomed." After a discussion during which John's negative attitude towards his father's speech becomes clear, John accidentally finds his mother's Bible in the kitchen. His father enters the room, and during the discussion of their recent conflict and because of the accusations of anti-liberal ideas, John swears on his mother's Bible that he is innocent. His father replies that if he was truly anti-liberal, swearing on the Bible and even on "the whole stock of Bibles" would mean nothing to John. However, towards the end of the film hearing his parents' prayers for him makes John change his mind to flee the country while he's already at the airport in favor of doing "one decent thing" which implies his decision to surrender to the authorities. However, on his way to the FBI, he gets shot by communist agents. Ultimately, his recorded confession, made before his death, is played at a graduation ceremony, which is also attended by John' parents. There he reflects on his consciousness, using religious language throughout his speech. He explains that his poor decisions made without any "spiritual compass" were caused by defiance to the only authority he had ever known, which were his church and his parents. Eventually, he claims that he is "a native American communist spy and may God have mercy on [him]." The film ends with his parents leaving the ceremony and, at John's mother's insistence, going to pray for him, hoping that his actions will be forgotten, but that his speech will be remembered.[25]

Thus, by paying close attention to John's mother's religiosity and including numerous dialogues that reveal the "immorality" of John's actions, the film transforms existing political and religious rhetoric into a domestic, emotionally charged narrative that presents communism not only as a national but also as a spiritual betrayal. Instead of portraying communism solely as an external geopolitical threat, the film connects the theme of the Cold War to a regular American family, suggesting that the true danger of atheistic communism lies in its ability to undermine faith, family values, and moral foundations from within. The father's assertion that a state that denies "God-given rights" inevitably destroys freedom echoes Truman's public rhetoric, according to which democracy depends on a divine moral order rather than just the state power or the economic system. In the film, John's rejection of this liberal worldview makes him a suspect not only politically but also spiritually, as vividly demonstrated in the scene with his mother's Bible. And it is John's death that reinforces the idea of inevitable self-destruction that, according to the policy of containment, is inevitable for those following communist ideology. Moreover, John's final confession even further adds to the religious logic of Truman-era anti-communism. John's return to the "right path", brought about by his parent's prayer rather than logical arguments suggests that truth is revealed through spiritual awakening instead of rational debate. By depicting his confession at the graduation ceremony, the film symbolically communicates to the next generation the idea that loyalty to God, family, and nation are inseparable. Ultimately, *My Son John* demonstrates how Truman's "Campaign of Truth" used popular culture to present the Cold War as a moral crusade in which defending democracy, nation and loved ones required defending faith itself against the perceived spiritual emptiness of atheistic communism.

In future research, the aspect of the influence of the Campaign of Truth on defining the Cold War as religious confrontation could be investigated in more detail through the analysis of primary sources that were unavailable within the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the existence of projects like *The Wayfarer* and *My Son John,* as well as Truman's Inaugural Address and the active involvement of American clergy in foreign policy matters, demonstrate that the fight against communism, both within and outside of America, was equated with freedom of religion along with democratic values and human rights.

In January of 1953 Truman passes the President's office to another deeply religious Presbyterian candidate. Dwight D. Eisenhower was a leader who popularized the concept of civil religion in America and implemented numerous domestic reforms to solidify the role of spirituality in American national identity. However, the election of such deeply religious persona to the executive office immediately after Truman was rather a testament to the legacy of the early years of the Cold War than a mere coincidence. However, to

[25] McCarey, Leo. My Son John. 1952, Paramount Pictures. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Eib5uGiY9k.

understand this cultural legacy it is necessary to examine it in the context of the political changes that marked the end of 1952.

In his 1953 State of the Union message, Truman once again frames the Cold War as a continuing moral confrontation, emphasizing United States' fight for justice, freedom, and human dignity during the times of global communist aggression. He summarizes his time in the office through discussing issues of Korean war, possession of atomic bomb by the U.S., cooperation with U.N., expansion of North Atlantic Treaty, and other foreign policy aspects. Eventually, he claims that the Soviets were the initiators of the Cold War and therefore he must call for further fight for peace against "communist tyrants."[26] While his speech almost lacked explicitly religious language, it still contributed to the emerging narrative of America's spiritual and ethical commitments, thus helping to reinforce a civil religious vision of the United States as a nation with a sacred mission in world affairs. Moreover, it helped to even further emphasize the moral struggle through emotionally charged rhetoric in order to frame America's Cold War purpose at the end of Truman's presidency. By contrasting this speech to Truman's Inauguration Adress in 1949, the shift towards more radicalized anti-communist rhetoric becomes explicit.

Therefore, it is evident that Truman's foreign policy by the end of his presidency had not only remained unchanged but had also acquired an even stronger patriotic context. Furthermore, it was Eisenhower who largely built his highly successful election campaign on top of those tendencies. Similarly to Roosevelt and Truman, Eisenhower called for a 'crusade' against communism, a wording that is highly religiously charged. Often addressing the value of prayer and worship, about 10 percent of his presidential campaign speeches were dedicated to religious appearances[27] and eventually even his Inauguration address in 1953 begun with saying a prayer.[28] His religiosity largely contributed to his popularity, leading to him getting 54.9% of popular vote and 83.2% of electoral vote, thus winning 39 states out of 48.[29]

One of the most prominent moments during Eisenhower's election campaign was his "I Shall Go to Korea" speech that was delivered on October 24th in 1952 towards the end of the competition for office and eventually became a key turning point that ensured his win. In this speech, Eisenhower, working within the existing discourse of the Cold War and foreign policy, was able to "resonate with a national audience" through his personality and skillful use of context. To a great extent, this was due to his solid military background, which enabled Eisenhower to present himself as a leader capable of decisively correcting the shortcomings of the previous Truman administration. However, another important part of this "existing discourse" of the Cold War contained a moral and religious component, which also influenced the success of his speech through references to the already existing absolute polarization. If the enemy was portrayed as communist, opposed to individual rights, property rights, and freedom of religion, and therefore godless and devoid of moral or ethical norms, then the America had to be God-fearing, churchgoing, moral, righteous, and committed to saving the world in opposition. In his speech Eisenhower states the following:

> The reactionaries of Communist materialism, violent antagonists of any form of religion, would return man to a horrible bondage. Against this paganism, we must preach and practice the truly revolutionary values of man's dignity, man's freedom, man's brotherhood under the fatherhood of God.

As Martin Medhurst states in his contextual analysis of Eisenhower's speech, "by uncritically accepting cold war discourse, the audience is more prone to accept the ideas contained within the symbolic form." In the same way, Eisenhower concludes his speech again returning to the symbolism of "crusade" established through his previous leadership during the "Crusade for Freedom" Cold War propaganda campaign that had been launched by him in 1950. In his conclusion Eisenhower claims:

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[26] Truman, Harry S. 1953. "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union." The American Presidency Project. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/annual-message-the-congress-the-state-the-union-18

[27] Espinosa, Gastón. *Religion and the American Presidency : George Washington to George W. Bush with Commentary and Primary Sources*, 215-279. Columbia University Press, 2009: 250

[28] Eisenhower, Dwight D. 1953. "Inaugural Address." The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-3.

[29] "1952 Election." The American Presidency Project. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/1952.

I do not believe it a presumption for me to call the effort of all who have enlisted with me — a crusade.

I use that word only to signify two facts. First: we are united and devoted to a just cause of the purest meaning to all mankind. Second: we know that — for all the might of our effort — victory can come only with the gift of God's help.

In this spirit — humble servants of a proud ideal--we do soberly say: This is a crusade.[30]

Similar to Truman's existing rhetoric, Eisenhower in this conclusion uses religious language to unite the domestic audience, universalize American political goals, and present the struggle against communism as a moral duty and sacred obligation. It is through this moral framing that the political and military struggle is transformed into a spiritually powered mission. Moreover, Eisenhower's speech emphasizes that victory depends not only on American power, but also on "the gift of God's help," which legitimizes U.S. actions through faith, presenting the nation as a moral servant rather than an imperial aggressor. Thus, this speech, which brought him such popularity among the American public and cemented his victory in the election, is a clear demonstration of how Truman's existing position, which was defined by militarism justified by the fight for democracy, and therefore for God and faith, found its continuation in the next American president. This illustrates not only the influence of Truman and his rhetoric on subsequent perceptions of the Cold War among leaders, but also how deeply this moral confrontation had become ingrained in the minds of Americans, which in turn also took part in why Eisenhower's persona and his speech resonated so much with the American public.

Taken together, the rhetoric, policies, and propaganda initiatives of the Truman administration demonstrate that the beginning of the Cold War was perceived by the president's administration not simply as a geopolitical conflict, but as a deeply moral and religious confrontation, which ultimately spread to the public, thus shaping a new definition of American national identity. Although the idea of religious confrontation originated significantly earlier, as reflected for instance in the American opposition to Nazism, it was during the Truman era that public diplomacy, along with propaganda, became institutionalized in peacetime, thereby defining U.S. as a nation whose sacred mission was to promote democratic values abroad. From Truman's use of Christian rhetoric in relation to nuclear energy and foreign aid to the contributions of the American clergy, mass media, and popular culture, democracy became entrenched as an ideology inseparable from faith and morality, while communism was presented as atheistic, immoral, and spiritually destructive. These ideas, which legitimized domestic and foreign policies, as well as reshaped American national identity around the idea of a sacred duty to defend the "free world," eventually found their continuation in Eisenhower's election. Eisenhower in turn not only continued the same rhetoric but even further intensified the already established civil-religious narrative through his decisive approach coming from his military background. The fusion of religion, morality, and anti-communism had thus become a defining feature of American political culture, leaving behind a long-lasting legacy. Ultimately, it is Eisenhower who, during his time in the office, takes several more steps beyond Truman by implementing the reforms that would establish America's civil religion. "In God We Trust" printed on all U.S. dollars, — is just one example of those reforms that had survived up to this day.

[30] Medhurst, Martin. "Text and Context in the 1952 Presidential Campaign: Eisenhower's 'I Shall Go to Korea' Speech." Presidential Studies Quarterly, 2000.

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Literature Studies II

Megan Hussey

Borough of Manhattan Community College

Mentor: Prof. Rachel Corkle

Title: "Literature and Cinema in Tandem: Politics of Portrayal in *Hiroshima mon amour*"

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Robert McParland, Felician University:

"Megan's paper highlighted the influence of literature and film in collaboration and their impact upon cultural memory. She capably investigated the challenge for an innovative writer and a creative director to give voice to collective memory and how the experience of trauma shapes our sense of history. Within a panel of impressive presentations and notable research, Megan's paper underscored the relevance of filmic and literary art in the modern world, their work of remembrance, and the 'duty to not forget.'"

Literature & Cinema in Tandem: Politics of Portrayal in *Hiroshima mon amour*

Hiroshima mon amour, directed by Alain Resnais and written by Marguerite Duras, is a seminal early work of the French New Wave's Left Bank group. Originally defined as subset of the New Wave by Richard Roud in *Sight and Sound* in 1962, the Left Bank—of which Duras and Resnais were both closely associated— was known for their more overt commitment to leftism and a more literary and experimental approach to filmmaking (Roud 143). Following the success of his anti-war Holocaust documentary film *Nuit et brouillard*, Resnais aspired to create a feature-length film on the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima equally as confronting as his original documentary without being a straightforward remake; he specifically sought out Duras as screenwriter to do so (Astourian 160). Associated with the *Nouveau Roman* literary movement, having just published her successful novel *Moderato Cantabile* the year prior, Duras' experimental prose worked in tandem with the stylistic choices made by Resnais as director to create an emotionally and visually striking film that released to international success. The film is marked by its use of nonlinear timeline and involuntary memory as narrative devices that can also be found throughout both Duras' and Resnais' bodies of work, namely Duras' *L'Amant* and Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard*. This genre-defining collaboration proved incredibly influential on New Wave cinema; *Hiroshima mon amour* is, in style and in content, exemplary of the collaborative works between Left Bank filmmakers and *Nouveau Roman* authors during this period.

The plot of *Hiroshima mon amour*, despite its nonlinear timeline, can be divided into five intertwined yet distinguishable sections, as defined by Godelieve Merchken-Spaas in *Literature/Film Quarterly*: the destruction of Hiroshima, love in Hiroshima which awakens destruction of Nevers, reconstruction of Hiroshima, reconstruction of Nevers, and the merging of Hiroshima and Nevers (245). The film begins with the two unnamed protagonists, a French actress and a Japanese architect, in bed speaking about Hiroshima:

> She tells him that she has seen everything in Hiroshima… [H]e repeats that she has seen nothing at Hiroshima…Impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima. The knowledge of Hiroshima being stated a priori by an exemplary delusion of the mind… This beginning… this sacrilegious recollection, is voluntary (*Hiroshima*, 9).

Echoing *Nuit et brouillard*, Resnais utilizes wartime imagery of death and destruction juxtaposed alongside images of the rebuilt Hiroshima during the opening sequence to call attention to this impossibility—an inability to truly depict the horrors of war and political violence when confronted with their memory. Resnais as director and Duras as screenwriter both face the limits of their respective mediums; the dialogue insists the tragedy cannot be put into words, and visually we are presented with a combination of newsreel footage, reimagined depictions of the bombing, and artefacts collected after the fact—none of which suffice. Resnais and Duras similarly believed in the "unrepresentability" of such events (Royer, 45). The former film says of memories of the concentration camps:

> As I speak to you now, the icy water of the ponds and ruins fills the hollows of the mass graves, a frigid and muddy water, as murky as our memory. War nods off to sleep, but keeps one eye always open. Grass flourishes again on the inspection ground around the blocks. An abandoned village, still heavy with peril. The crematoria are no longer used. (*Night and Fog*)

Fragmented time and involuntary memory act as symptoms of the collective and personal traumas experienced during these times of war, with the French actress merging personal memories of her hometown of Nevers, where she experienced public shaming and extreme isolation after having engaged in an affair with and witnessed the death of a German soldier during the war, and her memories as a spectator of Hiroshima. The voluntary memory of Hiroshima as described at the beginning of the film is subsequently contrasted with the involuntary memory of Nevers, thus awakening the destruction and reconstruction of Nevers:

> She looks very intently at his hands, which tremble slightly… While she is looking at them, there suddenly appears, in place of the Japanese, the body of a young man, lying in the same position, but in a posture of death, on the bank of a river… The young man is near death… The shot is an extremely brief one. She remains frozen, leaning against the window (*Hiroshima*, 29).

The merging of Hiroshima and Nevers occurs as a product of the increasing closeness of the two protagonists:

> We see Nevers, as we've already seen it before in the hotel room. And again, they talk of themselves. And once again an over-lapping of Nevers and love, of Hiroshima and love. It will all be mixed, without any preconceived principle, the way such things happen everywhere, every day, whenever couples newly in love talk. (*Hiroshima,* 12).

Love and eroticism are universalizing forces in the film yet act as both means of self-discovery and destructive influences. These dual forces of destruction and reconstruction are visually represented most clearly in the opening sequence of the film in the embrace between the French actress and the Japanese architect: alternating shots show their skin both slick with sweat and covered in ash, calling to mind both love and war (Mercken-Spaas 246). These narrative elements mirror those of Duras' most well-known later work *L'amant*, a loosely autobiographical account of her affair with an older Chinese businessman as a young girl in French-occupied Indochina. Fragmented timelines and involuntary memory also factor heavily into the novel's structure, and like *Hiroshima mon amour*'s unnamed protagonist, Duras' memories of her often fraught personal relationships are inextricable from her memories of war:

> I see the war as I see my childhood. I see wartime and the reign of my elder brother as one… I see the war as like him, spreading everywhere, breaking in everywhere, stealing, imprisoning, always there, merged and mingled with everything, present in the body, in the mind, awake and asleep, all the time, a prey to the intoxicating passion of occupying that delightful territory, a child's body, the bodies of those less strong, of conquered peoples. (*The Lover*, 63).

The inclusions of interracial relationship dynamics also add additional layers of meaning to these themes of sensuality and clandestine love by introducing a postcolonialist lens: in *L'Amant* as in *Hiroshima mon amour*, the love between the white European girl/woman and the Chinese/Japanese man is a rejection of white colonial sexual moralities (Ruddy 77). This union, therefore, is political in nature.

The anti-colonial and anti-war political messaging of the film is exemplary of the political consciousness of both the Left Bank group and the *Nouveau Roman* movement; this messaging is made explicit by the inclusion of the parade scene in the pacifist film in which the French actress is starring. Actors portraying protestors carry signage that reads:

> If one A-bomb equals 20,000 ordinary bombs… and an H-bomb equals 1,500 atomic bombs… how much do the 40,000 A-bombs and H-bombs currently stockpiled in the world equal? … They are a tribute to man's scientific genius… but unfortunately man's

> political intelligence is 100 times less developed than his scientific intelligence... and for that reason he forfeits our respect (*Hiroshima mon amour*)

The Second World War was both a thematic fixture of midcentury French literature and cinema and the catalyst for the political lives of the genres' major figures. Many of the most influential *Nouveau Roman* works, including Duras' *Moderato Cantabile* and *L'Amant*, were published by Les Éditions de Minuit, originally founded as a clandestine publishing house to evade censorship during the French Resistance (Leff 712). Duras herself was active in the French Resistance as a member of the French Communist Party (Winston 468). Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard*, of course, was one of the first films to document the realities of the Nazi concentration camps, and, alongside Marcel Ophuls' 1969 film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié,* it can be considered as one of the most successful attempts in film to confront and indict the French public with the collective memory of the Holocaust. In this period, the same key figures of literature and cinema were also committed to the cause of anti-colonialism. Duras and Resnais were among the signatories of the Manifesto of the 121, an open letter in 1960 from members of the French intelligentsia that condemned the Algerian war as senseless and called upon the French government to recognize the right of self-determination for the Algerian people (Barrat 92). Duras' involvement with Committee of Intellectuals Against the Algerian War and her anti-Gaullist writings even led to the withdrawal of *Hiroshima mon amour* from the 1959 Cannes Film Festival (Winston 470). She continued to publish fictional and non-fictional works related to the Algerian war throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and Resnais followed *Hiroshima mon amour* with the film *Muriel ou le Temps d'un retour* in 1963, which again explored themes of collective and involuntary memory and political violence as they related to Algeria and the medium of film (Astourian 156).

As Richard Roud notes in his 1977 retrospective on the Left Bank group, *Hiroshima mon amour* was one of if not the first major film to distinguish Resnais and the Left Bank from the Cahier du Cinema group; a distinction that was, he described, "only valuable if it could tell us more about what was being classified" (143). As a result of its influence on similar projects by these filmmakers throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, this classification as "a rejection of Right Bank conformity" through style and political content was made clear (143). The collaborative process of literature and cinema lies at the heart of this marked difference. Duras wrote after completing the script in 1958:

> "[Resnais] went to great lengths to explain to me that nothing in Hiroshima was a "given." That a particular halo had to endow each gesture, each word there with a meaning additional to their literal meaning. That the film's major design was to put an end to the description of horror by horror… Hiroshima was the common ground where the universal facts of eroticism, love, and misfortune appear in a less mendacious light than elsewhere. Maybe we failed. But I believe the thing was worth attempting." (Elliott)

As for the resurrection of Hiroshima, it is clear in retrospect that Resnais' and Duras' attempt was in fact successful. Their dual mediums, despite their own limitations, meet to create a film that speaks to the struggle against forgetting when portrayal is impossible. *Hiroshima mon amour* can be counted among the greatest and most influential films of 20th century, and its legacy is a testament both to the talents of Resnais and Duras as director and screenwriter and the universality of its themes of memory, love and war.

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PSYCHOLOGY

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Bergen Community College

Mentor: Prof. Seamus Gibbons

Title: “The Psychological Burden of International Adoption”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Jordan Daley, New York University:

“The written component of this project really stood out. The paper was very clear and crisply integrated existing research. The topic was compelling, and the author did a great job highlighting relevant tensions for both adoptees and parents. I also appreciate how the paper/presentation concluded by offering healthy pathways to improve adoption dynamics.”

While society often celebrates international adoption as a heroic act of salvation, for the child, the 'rescue' narrative can become a lifelong psychological burden for the adoptee, similar to overwhelming debt. The narrative surrounding international adoptions is framed as a purely altruistic act of family formation and rescue. However, for the adoptee, this narrative obscures a complex psychological reality. The expectation of inherent gratitude becomes a prison, compelling the adoptee to forget their birth parents and enforce loyalty to their adoptive parents. Amanda Baden, a licensed psychologist specializing in adoption, articulates this pressure: “adopted children sometimes feel a lot of pressure to be very loyal...They get the message very clearly from family, from society,...That they’re supposed to be grateful for their being rescued from this terrible situation” (Baden, 2016, as cited in Abrams, 2023, p.57). The savior narrative shifts the focus from the child’s emotional well-being to a perceived debt of gratitude, making them feel as though their belonging is conditional and their love must be earned. This simple portrayal fails to capture the psychological challenges adoptees face.

The Rescue Narrative

Research on adoption consistently shows that separation from birth parents, early instability in caregiving, and experiences of neglect or institutional care are central risk factors that can alter a child’s developmental trajectory (Brodzinsky et al., 2022). For all adoptees, particularly those who spent extended periods in institutional care or were adopted later in childhood, these early disruptions increase vulnerability to complex trauma. Complex trauma is defined as exposure to multiple, chronic, and prolonged traumatic events, which can be repeated betrayal, abandonment, or severe neglect by caregivers (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2018). Children raised in environments lacking responsive and contingent stimulation often develop deficits in key cognitive areas. Specifically, early institutionalization and deprivation have a significant physical impact on the developing brain. This deprivation impacts neurobehavioral functions, compromising executive functions such as self-regulation, memory, and stress regulation (Gunnar & Reid, 2020). The biological impact of this trauma can result in measurable differences in the physical structure of the brain. Studies on previously institutionalized children have reported “widespread reductions in cortical thickness” and changes in brain wiring, which affect the skills the child brings to the adoptive environment (Lurie et al., 2025; Mackes et al., 2020, p.642). These deficits in executive functions are “transdiagnostic indicators of risks for psychopathology” (Wade et al., 2020, p.1687), linking early neglect to later peer problems, academic difficulties, and affective disorders (McLaughlin et al., 2014). Placement in a stable adoptive home often facilitates recovery from early adversity. However, initial experiences of neglect or institutionalization significantly increase the risk for long-term psychological difficulties by undermining neurobehavioral and interpersonal functioning (Brodzinsky et al., 2022). Ultimately, these physiological shifts demonstrate that the ‘clean slate’ promised by the rescue narrative is a biological impossibility, as the brain maintains a physical record of early adversity.

Transracial and Cultural Challenges

International adoptees often face an additional layer of challenges compared with domestically adopted children. Socially, adopted children face obstacles from language loss or change, abrupt cultural relocation, and, for many, racial and ethnic differences from their adoptive families and communities. Research from the Child Welfare League of America found that while transracial adoption placements showed no surface psychological harm, “...whenever possible, children should be placed for adoption with families of their own race and culture” (Gill & Jackson, 1983; Grow & Shapiro, 1974; Simon & Alstein, 1987, as cited in Freundlich, 2000, p.38). Some benefits of placing children with families of their own race and culture include the family's ability to meet the child's "diverse interests in continuity, stability, and racial identity" (Freundlich, 2000, as cited in Perry, 1990/1991). They found that these interests converge when children are placed with same-race parents, which most effectively fosters their interest in a healthy and positive racial identity. Unlike domestic transracial adoptees who retain linguistic continuity, international adoptees suffer compounded trauma from the simultaneous loss of language, culture, and family (Simon & Altstein, 1987). These cultural and linguistic barriers, combined with the racial socialization challenges and frequent microaggressions, intensify the impact of pre-adoption trauma and increase the complexity of adjustment in their adoptive environments.

In 2010, domestic and internationally adopted children accounted for 2.3% of all children counted in the 2010 Census, which aimed at counting the number of children who were adopted at a national level, and one in four adoptive families was transracial (Kreider & Loquist, 2014). Transracial adoption can create a unique consideration for how patients can perceive trauma, safety, and identity due to their experiences. It is suggested that nurses screen for traumatic history when patients disclose adoption, as pre-adoption abuse or neglect harms lifelong physical and mental health, even relinquished infants suffer prenatal attachment injuries affecting brain development and stress response. The Evan B. Donaldson Institute (2008; 2009) researched adoption and racial identity formation and found three overall challenges to children who are adopted transracially. They identified them as coping with being different, struggling to develop a positive racial and ethnic identity, and the inability to cope with discrimination and bias (Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2008; Smith et al., 2008). They also found that the importance of adoption identity grows as the child ages into adulthood, and that for transracial adoptees, the importance of race and ethnicity also increases. An example included states how Korean adoptees considered themselves to be white as children, which dissipated as they reached adulthood. There continues to be controversy surrounding transracial family formation, suggesting that without same-race or ethnic parents and or siblings, the child will struggle with racial identity formation, including the ability to prepare and navigate a world that is not colorblind, nor void of racism and discrimination (Castner & Foli, 2022). There are numerous studies detailing outcomes of children and adults based on transracial adoption that both supports and refutes that practice, so the issue becomes whether transracial adoption is in the best interest of the child when faced with the uncertain futures of their birth countries and prolonged foster care placements in the United States.

Attachment, Loss, and Microaggressions

While most adoptees are able to adapt and thrive within supportive families, research indicates that those with histories of early institutionalization or neglect experience a higher prevalence of psychological and developmental issues, including disorders such as anxiety and depression, executive dysfunction, and attachment-related challenges (Abrams, 2023). This complexity can be intensified for transracial and international adoptees, whose visible racial or ethnic differences may prevent them from choosing whether or when to disclose their adoption status. This lack of control over self-disclosure can create cultural barriers and limit the adoptee's ability to steer the narrative about their own identity and experiences. An instance of this is Kim Kelley-Wagner, a White American mother of two girls adopted from China, who noted that when she decided to adopt, she had no idea that by doing so she was inviting strangers to comment on her family (Wallwork, 2015). Their different physical appearance instantly triggers external questions and societal awareness, typically positioning them as a visible minority within their own family and community. While, existing research does not provide separate outcome statistics for White American children who are adopted domestically or overseas. Studies on early institutional deprivation and adoption consistently indicate that any internationally adopted child with a history of neglect or unstable caregiving faces elevated risks for psychological disorders. At the same time, transracial and international adoptees of color experience the intersectionality of both racial and adoption microaggressions that White adoptees are less likely to experience. The result is a sense of not being fully accepted by either their biological culture or their adoptive racial and cultural groups (Baden, 2016). This analysis establishes the unique and profound psychological struggles that international adoptees experience stemming from pre-adoption trauma and post-adoption microaggressions, necessitating a trauma-informed approach from families and clinicians to validate the adoptee's complete and complex identity in the adoption process.

Another concern resulting from these complex pressures is the prevalence of mental health issues among international adoptees. Research indicates that while adoptees constitute approximately 2% of the general population in the United States, they account for 10% to 15% of children in outpatient mental health settings and a significantly higher percentage in residential treatment centers (Baden, 2016). A study from a national cohort in Sweden found that intercountry adoptees face a higher risk of severe psychiatric disorders, with an odds ratio of 3.2. (Hjern et al., 2020). Within these statistics, they also found an increased risk of criminal behavior among these adoptees with an odds ratio of 1.6-2.6. Despite these risks, the vast majority of adoptees fare well, with 86% of males and 96% of females not showing signs of maladjustment. And within these, Asian children showed greater resiliency and better outcomes compared to Latin-American or even same-race adoptees. This is attributed to adoption arrangements such as early placement, which minimizes pre-adoption trauma. Another large study on intercountry adoptees in Sweden shows that intercountry adoptees as a group have 2-4x higher risk of psychiatric disorders, suicide attempts, and use of specialist mental health services than non-adopted peers (Hjern et al., 2020)**.** While the 'rescue' narrative suggests that removing a child from a difficult situation at a young age provides a 'fresh start', research suggests that earlier transitions can actually cause more issues long term if the biological foundations of trauma are ignored. The journey of any adoption starts with the fundamental act of separation, but for international adoptees it is the loss of their birth parents, initial primary caregiver, and foster parents. Regardless of the child's age or quality of care the child received, this initial disturbance in separation causes a disruption in the formation of a 'secure attachment' with their primary caregiver. John Bowlby, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, developed the Attachment Theory to explain how a child's ability to form deep, trusting relationships depends on receiving consistent, sensitive, and responsive care during infancy (Bowlby, 1988). When this care is inconsistent, unreliable, or abruptly severed, a child's sense of safety is compromised. The resulting attachment trauma can cause long-term issues with trust, emotional regulation, and intimacy. This trauma may lead to the diagnosis of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), the severe and unusual disturbance in social relations that is often linked to extreme neglect from caretakers (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

However, even when the adoptive home provides a conducive environment that fosters secure attachments, the adoptee must face an invisible psychological burden, which is the grief of loss. This concept involves the lifelong, typically unconscious, mourning for everything relinquished at the 'cost' of their adoption. International adoption makes this loss even more pronounced, through the loss of their birth parents, their birth culture, their mother tongue, and a full, accurate personal and medical history. This loss of history and knowledge about themselves is especially felt by international adoptees who usually have little to no reliable information about their origins, leading to what some scholars term the Primal Wound, an unreliable sense of separation and discontinuity. While popular adoption narratives focus on the gain of a new family, the inherent loss of the first family and culture constitutes a lifelong grief (Verrier, 1993). This continuous mourning prevents the adoptee from fully integrating their past self with their present self, a task made exponentially more difficult when the information provided is inaccurate, incomplete, or at times completely fabricated, an issue Baden names Adoption Microfiction (Baden, 2016). These microfictions can invalidate an adoptee's reality, leaving them caught between who they were told they are and what they intuitively sense is missing, thereby intensifying feelings of confusion, alienation, and unresolved grief.

Over time, as international adoption expanded, adoptees and birth families turned to private investigators and specialized 'adoption detectives' to help navigate records and conduct cross-border searches. The line of work arose from families challenging the institutions withholding sealed records and seeking access to information of their origins, while also confronting foreign bureaucracies, falsified paperwork, and missing records. Many adoptees seek these investigators to identify birth families, verify identities, and reconstruct adoption histories, especially when they suspect the information they were given is misleading or false. These investigations are often lengthy and complex, depending on the quality of original records, cooperation from agencies and governments, and the availability of local contacts. In some cases, searchers can successfully locate birth relatives within days or weeks when sufficient identifying information exists, but where fraud, falsification, or destroyed records are involved, even the most persistent efforts may only partially reconstruct the truth or remain inconclusive.

Building upon the foundation of pre-adoption loss, the psychological struggles of international adoptees are further defined by the visible and cultural differences inherent in their placements. This creates a persistent transnational adoption paradox, where the adoptees must reconcile their racial and ethnic minority status alongside treatment as members of the majority culture, within societies that expect clear-cut categories (Lee, 2003). For most international adoptees, their family status is typically instantly and externally defined by physical appearance. This visible difference from their adoptive parents immediately triggers societal scrutiny and judgment, making the adoptee's minority experience public. As Baden notes, "the adoption is visible to other people immediately... So, people are having adoption trigger questions as soon as they see that" (Baden, 2016, p.8). This lack of anonymity means the adoptee has less voluntary self-disclosure and is constantly navigating the intersection of racial and adoption microaggressions. This is one of the main differences from domestic adoptions, where the adoption status can sometimes be hidden. The international adoptee "belong[s] to a visible minority through their different physical appearance," forcing them into an uncomfortable spotlight (Harf et al., 2015). This external scrutiny makes the development of a coherent identity far more complex for transracial international adoptees in the United States, as they must manage not only their personal adoption history but also racial assumptions and stereotypes imposed by the world. Unlike other racial or ethnic minority individuals, who generally share racial experiences with their families and communities, these adoptees face double the alienation. They encounter racism as visible minorities but lack the shared cultural heritage, language, or familial racial socialization to process it collectively, often being treated by their White families as 'honorary White' or culturally assimilated (Baden, 2016, 7-8; Lee, 2003). This pressure is amplified by research showing that transracial adoptive parents are often more prone to focus on building their child's ties to their cultural heritage and less comfortable exploring their vulnerability to racism (Morgan et al., 2019). Among Asian international adoptees, parents overestimated children's interest in ethnic activities while underestimating their exposure to discrimination, creating a disconnect where families celebrate 'positive' cultural exposure but avoid the painful reality of racism. This selective focus leaves adoptees to process racial trauma without familial support or vocabulary, compounding identity isolation (Morgan et al., 2019). This dissonance is emphasized by the debate in adoption philosophy itself. Post-adoption socialization approaches vary between regions. Countries like France often emphasize assimilation into the host culture to minimize visible differences, whereas the United States families tend to promote stronger connections to the child's birth country and heritage, creating different identity challenges for adoptees (Abrams, 2023, p.56-59; Harf et al., 2015). The U.S. approach is theoretically more inclusive in reflecting an acceptance of all different people of different cultures, however the practical execution is often inadequate. One issue is that the adoptee has no conscious memory of their culture because they were adopted as infants or very young children (Friedlander, 1999). Adoptive families bear primary responsibility to maintain "an identification with the ethno-racial origins of the children who are adopted cross-nationally" (Westhues & Cohen, 1998, p.33). Typically, the families that adopt, especially internationally, adopt outside of their cultures. Over 90% of international adoptions in the U.S. are transracial, with White families adopting children from primarily Asia(59%), Latin America, and Africa(80% combined), making over 80% of adoptions either transracial or transcultural (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2013; National Council For Adoption, 2021). Madelyn Freundlich, a researcher for The Child Welfare League of America and founder of The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, found that many adoptive parents make the decision to adopt internationally because of their interest and appreciation of a particular culture (Freundlich, 2000). Adoptees raised solely in their adoptive family's culture may identify as 'honorary' members of it, but this doesn't erase their birth culture. The failure to embrace both creates a dual loss that adoptees often grieve and reclaim later in life. Adoptive families must embrace both the child's birth culture and racial reality or risk leaving them stuck between both worlds.

The psychological complexity of the transracial paradox directly impacts the developmental task of achieving "Ego Identity." Erik Erikson developed the term "Ego Identity" as a component of his theory of psychosocial development, describing the conscious sense of self that integrates past experiences, present feelings, and future goals that are crucial for navigating adolescence and other life stages (Stein & Hoopes, 1985). Erikson's theory continues to explain that he believed that if a person can not integrate these different 'roles,' they fall into role confusion. For the international adoptee, this reconciliation involves conjoining two families, two cultures, two languages, and a fragmented history. The impact of these challenges extends well beyond the formative years, manifesting throughout adulthood. Adoptees who are now adults continue to struggle with this integration. One adult adoptee recounted the process of incorporating their birth family history into their established sense of self and family as a middle-aged adult: "You go through life with one identity for yourself and one understanding of what family is and what it means...And then all of a sudden, as a middle-aged adult...now I'm incorporating this whole other family into my life" (Huff, 2023, p.52). This testimony highlights that for the international adoptees, identity is not a static point to be reached, but a dynamic, continuous process of integrating the complexities of their transcultural existence.

The final layer of the psychological struggle for the international adoptee is the constant pressure exerted by external societal narratives and the recurring acts of prejudice known as microaggressions. Typically, people initially gain exposure to the concept of adoption via fairy tales, stories, films, and comments made by families and friends. Movies such as *Stuart Little* (Minkoff, 1999) and *The Blind Side* (Hancock, 2009), exemplify media narratives that frame adoption through a lens of 'rescue' or 'villainy,' often emphasizing a search for their 'real' parents. By serving as a primary introduction to adoption for young audiences, these polarized portrayals foster a flawed understanding of the practice. Consequently, these misinformed foundations often give rise to social stigmas and microaggressions toward adoptees in real-world settings. These stories alternately promote or pathologize the desire to search for birth parents, fueling judgements about how members of the adoption network should respond to the experience. This culturally engrained knowledge base directly shapes the two popular yet harmful narratives that dominate public and parental expectations: "the grateful adoptee and altruistic rescuer" and the "bad seed or damaged child" view (Baden, 2016, p. 7). The grateful adoptee and altruistic rescuer narrative frames the adoptive parents as heroes who performed a 'wonderful thing' by adopting, while the child is characterized as lucky and privileged (Janus, 1997, p.271). Comments like, "What a wonderful thing you did by adopting those children!" or "Do your kids know how lucky they were that you adopted them?" reinforce this theme (Baden, 2016, p.7). This mindset is powerfully illustrated by Kim Kelley-Wagner's photo project, where Kim's adoptive daughters hold signs displaying different hurtful microinsults that have been said to or about her adoptive daughters. One photo includes a microinsult saying: "she is lucky you came along, otherwise she would be dead on the street" (Baden, 2016, p.7). The psychological damage of this narrative imposes a crippling sense of obligation, making the adoptee feel indebted to their adoptive parents and ungrateful or disloyal if they don't comply. Conversely, in the bad seed or damaged child narrative, the adoptee is often depicted as inherently damaged, rejected, or unwanted (Miall, 1987). This theme is historically reflected in the idea of the "adopted child syndrome," a debunked yet pervasive notion that links adoptees to manipulative behavior and shallow attachments (Kirschner, 1990; Smith, 2001) This harmful messaging is echoed in the extreme invalidating comments made by some adoptive parents toward adoptees, such as, "if it wasn't for us, where would you be? A prostitute? Living on the streets?" (Baden, 2016, p.4). Ultimately, this narrative contributes to the high rate of mental health referrals by pathologizing the adoptee's normal developmental struggles.

Amanda Baden's framework defines adoption microaggressions as common, subtle slights and indignities that communicate adoption-related and biology-related judgements (Baden, 2016). These acts of everyday oppression are constant sources of psychological stress. One category, microinsults, occurs when the economic process of adoption is highlighted. Questions like,'How much did she cost?' or the existence of fee schedules reflecting racial preferences transform adopted children into commodities (Potter, 2013). Another category, microinvalidations, is best exemplified by the most common question, 'Do you know your real parents?' This instantly devalues the adoptive bond, suggesting that biological ties are superior and more authentic (Miall, 1987). This invalidation can even occur within the family, such as when an adoptee is introduced with distinction, "this is Lisa, she's our adopted grandchild, and this is Tammy, she's the blood grandchild" (Kim Kelley-Wagner Images, ca. 2014, as cited in Baden, 2016, p.4). These examples illustrate the vast range of adoption microaggressions that make the adoptee an outsider within their own family. Furthermore, Baden introduces the category of adoption microfiction to address the problem of secrecy, inaccurate, or fabricated social history reports common among adoptees from international countries. This deception hinders the adoptee's crucial need to construct a coherent identity, as the individual is literally denied the truth of their past, creating chronic identity confusion (Baden, 2016; Verrier, 1993). The adoptive parents' approach to these societal pressures is critical in protecting the adoptee from microaggressions or exacerbating psychological issues. Kim, an adoptee advocate, shared how her photos resonated with a Korean adoptee whose parents ignored racist comments during childhood, which made her feel like there was something wrong with her and that her parents felt the same way. (Wallwork, 2015). Mary O'Leary Wiley, psychologist and a co-founder of the APA's adoption research group, explains how parental colorblindness, the belief that ignoring race eliminates racism, can exacerbate adoptees' mental health struggles, leaving them to feel isolated in managing society's racial stereotypes alone (Wiley, 2017). Parental insecurity, often stemming from societal microaggressions, can lead to poor choices, such as withholding birth information, denying the cultural aspects of the child's transnational life, or adopting a "color blindness" perspective (Morgan et al, 2019). While 'color blindness' aims to avoid racism, this practice makes adoptees feel isolated in managing racial stereotypes. To support the adoptee, parents must instead acknowledge the reality of the adoptee's vulnerability to racism and be open to exploring the complexities of the adoptee's identity.

Pathways to Adoption-Competent Care

International adoptees face a unique psychological vulnerability created by the intersection of early developmental trauma and ongoing societal microaggressions. The foundation of loss is not only emotional but also physiologically and neurologically embedded, increasing the risk for disorders such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Abrams, 2023). This vulnerability is then actively exacerbated by the transracial paradox, which forces a complex identity formation process under the constant scrutiny of visible difference. Finally, the presence of adoption microaggressions, particularly the demand for the 'grateful adoptee,' creates a chronic state of psychological stress. Baden notes that microaggressions stem from adoption stigma, as it is culturally viewed as a "second, third, or last choice for forming a family" (Baden, 2016, as cited in Abrams, 2023, p.57). In one study, it was found that 71.4% of adoptive parents pursued adoption after biological difficulty or impossibility of conceiving, framing it as 'Plan B' rather than equal choice (Soares et al., 2023). This study also identifies three adoption motivations: self-oriented, child-oriented, or dual-oriented. For instance, some couples moved immediately to adoption post-infertility, while others pursued medical reproduction or abandoned family-building entirely. Overall, research showed that parents who adopt for self-oriented reasons tend to limit adoption openness (Sorek et al. 2020).

Given these unique challenges, the generic mental health approaches fall short. Current systems emphasize pre and post placement support rather than adoptee-centered, lifelong care. To solve this issue, more funding is required to continue research on international adoptees' psychological burdens by gender and country of origin. Therapists can not assume adoptee issues are unrelated to adoption history. As well as, understand complex grief, adoption trauma, and microaggressions to avoid invalidation (Baden, 2016). Families should be instructed to proactively address the psychological landscape of their children. This requires parents to move beyond the assimilationist approach to actively promoting cultural identity and being open to difficult dialogues surrounding race. Instead of practicing "color blindness," which leaves the adoptee to feel isolated in managing societal racism, parents should acknowledge vulnerability and foster an environment where exploring their complete cultural background is not just accepted, but celebrated (Morgan et al., 2019; Wiley, 2017). Adoptive families must accept that identity reconciliation is a lifelong evolution, requiring continuous support and validation rather than the transactional expectation of gratitude. As well as, practicing open and honest communication that practices acceptance instead of rejection of the difference in relations of an adoptive family versus biological family. As Miall said, "it may be that the success or failure of adoption depends on that ability of family members to resist devaluing societal attitudes and behaviors than on psychological adjustment per se" (Miall, 1987, p.38). Ultimately, to change the adoption stigma for international adoptees, it requires changing the narrative that defines their existence. Their journey should no longer be framed as a story of rescue and debt, but as an evolving bond of kinship and complex identity. While the connection between an adoptee and their family is profound, it must be built on a foundation of acknowledgment and truth. Only by replacing the psychologically damaging narrative with one of honesty, validation, and support can society truly cultivate the psychological fortitude and flourishing of the international adoptee.

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SOCIOLOGY

Bianca Rodrigues Couto

Westchester Community College

Mentor: Dr. Zachary Sunderman

Title: “The Pain Gap: Gender Disparity in Western Healthcare”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Marie-Claude Jipguep, Howard University:

“Ms. Rodrigues Couto's paper stands out for its strong research and thoughtful analysis, especially in how it connects historical ideas like “hysteria” to current inequities in women’s healthcare. The presentation was also well put together, with a clear structure and an early introduction of the research question that helped guide the audience. Overall, it’s an impressive piece of work that not only explains the problem but also offers practical solutions, and it shows strong potential for future research.”

The Pain Gap: Gender Disparity in Western Healthcare

Since the development of modern medicine, gender inequality has been observed and investigated in the Western healthcare system. Originally rooted in patriarchal concepts, gender disparities frequently show themselves in the chronic underdiagnosis, misdiagnosis, and minimizing of women's complaints across a wide range of diseases, from cardiovascular diseases to chronic pain disorders like endometriosis. According to data obtained from the CDC Wonder database, in 2021, heart disease was responsible for the death of 310,661 women in the US, making it the leading cause of women's death in the country (National Center for Health Statistics, 2023). Research has also shown, however, that women continue to find themselves having their symptoms diminished and therefore not being able to obtain an appropriate timely diagnosis (Sun et al., 2020).

This systemic mistreatment is not merely the result of individual bias, but it is also deeply embedded in institutional practices, medical education, and research funding priorities that have long preferred male bodies as the normative standard. Clinical trials have not always properly enrolled women or analyzed sex-specific variations in the data, as has been recognized in recent decades (Liu & DiPietro Mager, 2016). Even in today's world, there is still a long way to go in medical practices to reach fairness and adequacy in research and treatments.

This paper investigates the sociological and historical concepts that still affect the Western medical system on women's issues and treatment. By examining the evolution of medical knowledge and practice from a gendered viewpoint, this paper aims to demonstrate how deeply rooted institutional structures and societal norms help to marginalize women's health. Particular attention will be given to the normalized notion according to which women's medical problems are misattributed to emotional or psychological reasons, a pattern that reflects more general cultural ideas about femininity, rationality, and legitimacy. This research will look at how institutional biases affect women's pain treatment and evaluation processes. It will focus on diseases that are often misunderstood or not studied sufficiently. Finally, this paper will support the argument that personal patient experiences are connected to larger sociological patterns of structural inequality. This, in turn, will serve to highlight the need for more inclusive and gender-sensitive healthcare practices.

Historical Foundations of Gender Bias in Medicine

The word "hysteria" has its birth in the Greek language, originating from the word *hystera*, meaning uterus. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the term was actually considered a diagnosis, which was used almost exclusively to explain conditions in the women of the era in response to what was considered a wide range of "unexplainable" or "inconvenient" symptoms (Tasca, Rapetti, Carta, & Fadda, 2012). Its use was so relevant that it was a formally studied psychological disorder that could have its definition and qualification found in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Often invoked to describe everything from anxiety to fainting spells, hysteria served as a catch-all explanation that unified the idea of femininity with irrationality, weakness, and instability (Alexander, 2025). Instead of actively investigating and seeking biological reasoning or indeed listening to patients accounts, it was common for physicians immediately to dismiss symptoms, whether physical or mental, as manifestations of emotional distress or some level of moral failing. This medical narrative not only disregarded women's experiences but also perpetuated patriarchal standards that positioned male bodies and actions as the definitive medical standard.

Despite the term having lost its value in today's society and adapted to a different meaning, now being more broadly used to describe an ungovernable emotional excess or to refer to a temporary state of mind or emotion, its ideological legacy still perpetuates in the gendered dynamics of contemporary healthcare. In different countries, across multiple different cultures in the West, women continue to face skepticism when reporting pain, fatigue, or non-specific symptoms, often having to be subjected to psychological explanations before physiological ones are explored. Studies show that gender bias in pain treatment was accurately identified, becoming part of the patient-provider encounter and the professional's treatment decisions (Samulowitz et al., 2018). This tendency reveals how deeply entrenched gender bias remains in diagnostic and treatment practices, rooted in centuries-old assumptions that still subtly shape clinical decision-making and patient care.

Medical Misconceptions

An important area where gender bias in Western medicine can be seen and analyzed is in the perception and treatment of pain. Studies have investigated and found that in experiments, a greater pain prevalence among women is consistently demonstrated relative to men (Bartley & Fillingim, 2013). However, medical treatment does not consistently reflect this reality, as women's reports of pain are often underestimated, dismissed, or undertreated. Similarly, women are consistently prescribed less pain-relieving medication, even when controls for weight are applied (Guzikevits et al., 2024), going in an opposite direction in terms of solution when analyzing these findings together. Patriarchal views and outdated gender myths continue to influence clinical treatment decisions. Women are frequently perceived as exaggerating symptoms or being overly emotional, leading to their pain being dismissed, downplayed, or misattributed to psychological causes.

On the other hand, across multiple Western societies, women are often perceived through contradictory stereotypes. Research shows that women are commonly viewed as overly emotional and sensitive, which can lead healthcare providers to dismiss or downplay their reports of pain, while at the same time assuming that they are more resilient to certain types of pain, particularly reproductive and chronic pain (Samulowitz et al., 2018). Conditions such as endometriosis, fibromyalgia, and migraines, which disproportionately affect women, are often normalized or dismissed in medical settings, therefore promoting a dangerous narrative that such pain is just part of being female (Ballweg, 2004). Research shows that these biases have measurable effects on clinical assessment: observers and healthcare providers systematically underestimate women's pain compared to men's and are more likely to recommend psychological rather than medical interventions for female patients, even when reported pain levels are identical (Zhang et al., 2021). The resulting delayed diagnosis and inadequate pain management reflect a consistent gap between scientific knowledge of female physiology and culturally ingrained gendered assumptions, which in turn perpetuates systemic inequalities in women's healthcare.

Beyond the quantitative data on the subject, there is a number of accounts from women of diverse backgrounds sharing their personal experiences dealing with the systemic nature of medical bias. Studies have consistently revealed patterns of dismissal, disbelief, and irresponsible treatment in healthcare (Brown et al., 2024). From all different positions and within a diversified pool, women commonly shared similar experiences of feeling ignored or invalidated when describing symptoms, most noticeable in cases involving pain, fatigue, or reproductive health issues (Werner & Malterud, 2003). These important stories highlight how the social construction of gender can have a real-life, day-to-day impact.

Sociocultural Dismissal of Women's Pain

Western media and television have long portrayed and supported the stereotype of the well-known archetype of the "dramatic woman" (Msofu, 2024). Created and scripted as overly emotional and most of the times irrational, this prejudicial myth of womanhood has subtly infiltrated and helped mold societies' expectations for how women should behave, especially in relation to pain. These continuous representations contribute to a cultural view wherein women's reports of pain are met with suspicion, both in everyday life and within professional healthcare settings. In medical environments, this trope can have actual repercussions, where doctors, consciously or not, may absorb such prejudices and treat female patients with cynicism or disdain. As a result of constant medical invalidation, many women have felt ashamed, disempowered, and even questioning their own perceptions of pain (Sebring, et al., 2023). These wrongful interpretations not only delay needed treatment but also damage faith in medical organizations.

The intersection of other identities—such as race and class—with gender might exacerbate the systematic rejection of women's suffering. Black, Indigenous, and other women of color especially suffer from medical racism; they also regularly negotiate not only gender but also racialized beliefs about pain tolerance and believability. Studies have shown, for example, that Black women are far less likely than White women to receive enough medications because of erroneous presumptions among clinicians that they have higher pain tolerances (Hoffman et al., 2016). These interconnected factors show that medical mistreatment is not the same for all, but is instead shaped by multiple oppressive systems. To fix health disparities and promote fairer and more inclusive care, it's important to understand how these elements work.

Structural and Institutional Consequences

The number of gender-based disparities still encountered in today's medical system is deeply rooted in historical, outdated ideologies embedded in both institutional and structural organizations that continue to overlook women's specific medical needs. Countries across the Western Hemisphere still fail to recognize and address the biological differences between female and male bodies, as well as the ways in which the same condition can present differently, thereby neglecting women's unique healthcare needs and the risks they face. Despite a slow growth in awareness on the topic, many national health strategies still lack in considering gender-sensitive approaches. A clear example is how the U.S. did not require the inclusion of women in clinical trials funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) until 1993, a delay that has contributed to decades of male-centered medical data shaping diagnostic criteria and treatment guidelines (Kim, Tingen, & Woodruff, 2010).

Medical education is crucial in either sustaining or challenging gender inequality within healthcare. Nevertheless, the majority of medical schools in the U.S. and Europe continue to lack thorough gender bias training. As a result, aspiring doctors frequently lack the readiness skills to identify the impact of gender and social norms on diagnosis and treatment and guarantee that their provider-patient relationship is being carefully thought out and respectful of different accounts. Research indicates that gender-sensitive curricula are not uniformly implemented across institutions, and if they are present, they are frequently limited solely to reproductive health or are addressed briefly within ethics courses (Verdonk, Benschop, de Haes, & Lagro-Janssen, 2009).

Reform initiatives increasingly advocate for inclusive research approaches, enhanced inclusion of women in clinical trials, and a transition towards patient-centered treatment that prioritizes experiential knowledge. For systemic change to happen, it is important to include patient accounts, community health perspectives, and sociocultural understanding in professional training. Also, by making gender competence a requirement for medical licenses and continuing education, it could possibly result in the generation of bias awareness as a required professional topic instead of an option.

Conclusion

The systemic dismissal and mistreatment of women’s health in Western culture is rooted in historical, cultural, and institutional biases that continue to shape healthcare experiences today. As explored throughout this paper, women are paradoxically perceived as both inherently fragile and unusually resilient to pain—a dual stereotype that undermines the credibility of their symptoms and distorts clinical responses. In summary, the systemic neglect and maltreatment of women's health in Western culture is fundamentally entrenched in historical, cultural, and institutional prejudices that persist in influencing healthcare experiences today. From the long-lasting effects of “hysteria” to the ongoing gender data gap in medical research, these false beliefs have had and still do have real and measurable effects on how women are diagnosed and treated in a wide range of conditions. To address these issues, it's necessary to change systems and policies in an effective way. Health systems need to put an emphasis on gender-specific, inclusive research, invest in pain management methods that are specifically designed for women, and update their professional training programs to include full lessons on gender bias. Policymakers and medical institutions must be proactive in dismantling structural barriers that have historically excluded women from equal care.

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EDUCATION

Cristian Tenempaguay

Bergen Community College

Mentor: Dr. Melissa Krieger

Title: "Understanding the Special Education Teacher Shortage: Causes, Challenges, and Policy Responses in the United States"

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Thomas Brock, Teachers College at Columbia University:

"Cristian's paper addressed an important question for U.S. schools: Are we preparing enough special education teachers to meet the growing needs of students today and in the future? Cristian drew on data from the National Center for Education Statistics and academic literature to demonstrate why special education teacher preparation is a problem, and conducted an interview with a special education teacher to get a personal account of the issue. His paper weaved together these sources seamlessly and led to a powerful conclusion about the need to address chronic problems of high workloads, insufficient funding, and teacher burnout in special education. His paper was clearly written, spoken from the heart, and persuasive."

Understanding the Special Education Teacher Shortage: Causes, Challenges, and Policy Responses in the United States

The United States is currently facing a growing shortage of qualified special education teachers. But why is this happening, and what is being done to fix this issue in the United States? To begin with, the population of students requiring special education services has significantly increased over the past two decades. National data show that approximately 15 percent of public-school students received special education services in the 2022–2023 school year, reflecting a steady growth in the number of students identified with disabilities (Aldeman, 2024). This increase has created a higher demand for special education teachers, yet the supply of certified educators has not kept pace, affecting many school districts across the country. Despite the growing number of students requiring these services, the United States is not adequately preparing enough qualified teachers to meet this demand due to limited training pathways, high burnout rates, and insufficient institutional support. This raises an important question: Are we preparing enough special education teachers to meet the growing needs of students today and in the future?

Throughout the country there has been a significant increase of numbers of children diagnosed with a type of neurodevelopment disorder, connecting this directly with the crisis of certified teachers with special needs background. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of students ages 3–21 receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act increased from 6.4 million in the 2012–2013 school year to 7.5 million in 2022–2023, representing the highest number recorded in recent years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). This steady rise in the number of students requiring specialized support helps explain why many school districts across the country are experiencing growing pressure to recruit and retain qualified special education teachers.

First, it is important to understand that meeting the needs of students with disabilities is not simply a moral responsibility, but a legal mandate. In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), also known as EHA. This legislation was designed to support states and local districts in protecting the rights of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and to improve educational outcomes for them and their families. In 1990, the landmark law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). The purpose of IDEA is to ensure that all children with disabilities have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that emphasizes special education and related services designed to prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. However, recent national data indicate that during the 2023–2024 school year, more than half of school districts and 80 percent of states reported shortages of special education teachers (Aldeman, 2024). This raises an important concern: if the law guarantees access to specialized instruction, how can schools fulfill that promise without an adequate workforce to deliver it?

It is important to acknowledge that the special education teacher shortage does not stem from a single cause, but from a longstanding imbalance between growing student demand and workforce sustainability. National data indicate that from the 1999–2000 school year to 2020–2021, overall student enrollment increased by 5 percent, while the total number of teachers increased by 21 percent. During that same period, the number of instructional aides—who often support special education services—rose by 37 percent (Aldeman, 2024). Although schools now employ more educators and support personnel than in previous decades, demand for special education services has grown at a rate that continues to strain the system. This suggests that workforce expansion alone has not been sufficient to keep pace with the increasing complexity and volume of student needs.

Recent evidence suggests that the special education teacher shortage is closely linked to retention challenges within the field. Several factors have been associated with special education teacher retention, including school demographics, work assignments and demands, and the presence of collaborative culture and administrative support (Locquiao & DeSutter, 2024). These findings indicate that working conditions play a significant role in whether teachers remain in special education positions. In high-need districts, particularly densely populated urban areas, staffing challenges may be intensified due to greater student demands. Additionally, the complexity of students' academic and behavioral needs often results in heavy caseloads and extended work hours, contributing to professional burnout. When combined with limited collaborative or administrative support, these pressures create environments that increase the likelihood of teacher attrition.

Due to the many challenges that special education educators face as a result of staffing shortages, research suggests that the quality of specialized instruction within inclusive classrooms may also be impacted (King-Sears, 2022). The study found that many secondary special education co-taught classrooms rely primarily on accommodations and modifications rather than delivering intensive, specialized reading instruction as required by students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (King-Sears, 2022). Although accommodations can provide short-term access to content, they do not replace targeted instruction designed to build independent reading skills. These findings raise important concerns, as the expansion of inclusion classrooms often driven by staffing limitations may not ensure that students receive the depth of intervention they require.

Although the issue of the special education teacher crisis is felt throughout the United States, the whole world faces a similar problem. According to UNICEF estimates, approximately 93 million to 150 million children between the ages of 0 and 18 live with some type of disability and require specialized educational support (Cooc, 2019). As a result, more than 50 percent of schools around the world have reported a shortage of teachers trained in special education. In some parts of the world, schools are forced to employ personnel without the appropriate qualifications to meet the needs of these students. Many of these teachers have even recognized their own preparation gaps, as nearly one quarter expressed a high need for additional professional development in special education (Cooc, 2019). While this data highlights that the teacher shortage is a global issue, it also reinforces concerns within the United States. If countries worldwide are struggling to adequately prepare and retain qualified special education teachers, it raises an important question about whether U.S. preparation programs and retention systems are truly equipped to meet the growing and increasingly complex needs of students with disabilities.

It is essential to highlight that, in addition to the growing shortage of special education teachers, another critical factor contributing to the crisis is the level of preparation school leaders particularly principals receive. One of the primary responsibilities of a principal is to oversee all programs within a school, including special education services. However, recent research indicates that many principals report limited knowledge and field experience in special education, particularly in areas such as IEP implementation and compliance with IDEA regulations (Sun & Xin, 2020). Furthermore, approximately 75% of principals in the study reported that they did not receive adequate special education training during their university leadership preparation programs (Sun & Xin, 2020). This lack of preparation has serious implications, as principals are responsible for critical decisions regarding budgeting, staffing, and resource allocation. When school leaders are not sufficiently prepared to oversee special education programs, the burden may shift to already overextended special education teachers, potentially increasing burnout and turnover rates. Therefore, the teacher shortage crisis should also be examined through the lens of leadership preparation and administrative support.

To gain a deeper understanding of how the special education teacher shortage affects educators, a brief interview was conducted with a former Bergen Community College student who is now a certified special education teacher in the state of New Jersey. During the interview, the teacher explained that the special education teacher shortage is evident both within her district and in surrounding districts. She noted that staffing shortages make it difficult to consistently provide services and individualized attention to students. As a result, she and other certified teachers are often required to take on additional responsibilities, including increased paperwork, supporting other classrooms, and providing additional behavioral support when staffing is limited (special education teacher, personal communication, March 2026).

When discussing teacher preparation, the educator stated that higher education programs prepare teachers academically; however, the real-world demands of special education require skills that are primarily learned through hands-on experience in the classroom. She further explained that the job is particularly challenging due to the need to balance behavior management, data collection, and IEP goal implementation while still meeting each student's individual needs. Although she reported feeling supported by her school administration, she emphasized that increased staffing and protected planning time would further improve teacher support. When asked what changes could improve her work environment and help retain special education teachers' long term, she identified better compensation, reduced paperwork, smaller caseloads, additional classroom aides, and meaningful professional development as critical factors (special education teacher, personal communication, March 2026).

In addition to workplace challenges and leadership preparation, federal funding plays a significant role in the special education workforce nationwide. A lot of districts across the country face underfunding. Although IDEA authorizes the federal government to fund up to 40% of the excess cost of educating students with disabilities, appropriations have never reached that target (Kolbe et al., 2023). In fact, the federal share has typically not exceeded 20%, and in fiscal year 2020 it was only 13.2% (Kolbe et al., 2023). This has led to states and local education agencies must continue to cover the differences in cost using their own revenues, which places significant financial pressure on school districts. The current funding distribution formula generates "large and concerning disparities" among states, often disadvantaging those with higher populations of children experiencing poverty and students receiving special education services (Kolbe et al., 2023). For example, states with the largest shares of children experiencing poverty received on average 16% less per pupil and 10% less per student receiving special education than states with lower poverty levels (Kolbe et al., 2023). This type of funding distribution contradicts IDEA original purpose of equalizing educational opportunities nationwide. The insufficient federal funding has critical consequences that affect staffing, professional development, and instructional resources, ultimately contributing to teacher burnout and shortages in special education.

In response to the growing crisis of teacher shortage across the country many state organizations and teacher unions have begun implementing structural reforms in teacher preparation. In Washington the Washington Education Association (WEA) developed the first union-led teacher residency program in the United States. This initiative was created collaboratively with local school districts specifically to increase the number of certified special education teachers. Research within the program indicates that 82% of principals reported residency graduates were more effective than typical first-year teachers (Marino et al., 2025). Similarly, the New York City Teaching Fellows program offers an accelerated pathway for career changers and recent graduates to become certified teachers. This program allows participants with summer training, two years of coursework, and teaching experience while working in high-need schools (Marino et al., 2025). These types of reforms demonstrate that efforts to address the shortage are shifting from temporary fixes to more permanent workforce development.

Redirecting to the local level, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) has highlighted that a growing gap between the number of certified special education teachers and the rising demand for new teachers is evident (Gherardi, 2025). In response, New Jersey has implemented several initiatives to address this issue, including launching a program that provides currently certified teachers with the specialized training needed to earn a Teacher of Students with Disabilities endorsement (Gherardi, 2025). This program is designed to be low-cost and fully online, allowing teachers to continue working while completing coursework at their own pace. Programs like this aim to encourage more educators to obtain special education certification in an effort to reduce the staffing crisis that many districts continue to face.

Consequently, looking toward the future, an important question remains: what can we expect will happen with special education, and how will the country, states, and local districts respond to this ongoing challenge? According to the Council for Exceptional Children, AI-powered tools are already helping many teachers differentiate instruction and personalize learning for students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2025). Additionally, federal grant awards to universities such as Rutgers University demonstrate a growing national commitment to strengthening the pipeline of special education teachers and leaders (Council for Exceptional Children, 2025). Another promising initiative is the “Grow Your Own” program, which provides pathways for paraeducators to become certified special education teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2025). These developments indicate that while significant challenges remain, the future of special education is increasingly moving toward innovation, equity, and stronger workforce sustainability.

Essentially, the special education teacher shortage is not simply a staffing issue, but a complex challenge that reflects deeper problems within the education system. As this research has shown, the growing number of students requiring special education services, combined with high workloads, limited preparation, insufficient funding, and teacher burnout, has created a situation where the demand for qualified teachers continues to exceed the available workforce. The interview with a current special education teacher further illustrates that these challenges are not only present in research and national data but are felt daily in classrooms across school districts. Although several initiatives at the national, state, and local levels are attempting to strengthen the pipeline of special education teachers, more consistent investment in teacher preparation, administrative support, and sustainable working conditions will be necessary to ensure long-term stability in the field. Ultimately, if the United States is committed to fulfilling the promise of IDEA and providing students with disabilities a free appropriate public education, then addressing the special education teacher shortage must remain a national priority moving forward.

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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND GLOBALIZATION

Regina Porras Cardona

Montgomery College

Mentor: Dr. Nathan Zook

Title: “The Role of Caifanes and Mexican Rock in Shaping Youth Activism Across Borders”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Leandro Benmergui, SUNY Purchase:

“’The Role of Caifanes and Mexican Rock in Shaping Youth Activism Across Borders’ stood out for its originality, interdisciplinary scope, and explicitly transnational framework. By connecting music, migration, cultural identity, and political activism across generations and national borders, the project exemplifies the spirit of International Studies and Globalization. The paper combines historical analysis, cultural studies, and original interviews to explore how cultural forms travel, adapt, and continue to shape political engagement in contemporary contexts. I want to emphasize that this was an exceptionally difficult decision. All three papers demonstrated intellectual curiosity, thoughtful research, and a willingness to engage with complex and important questions. Each project approached its topic from a different perspective, but all three showed originality, commitment, and a genuine engagement with scholarship. I want to congratulate all of the presenters. The quality of the work we saw today speaks not only to your talent and dedication, but also to the value of undergraduate research and the importance of creating opportunities like this one.”

Methodology

This paper employs an interdisciplinary, qualitative research approach that draws from musical, historical, and political-science studies and articles to examine the relationship between youth activism and musical expression across multiple countries. Historical and qualitative research form the foundation of this paper by situating music as a recurring tool in youth-led music. Examples such as Vietnam-War Era music, Taiwanese festival music, and songs from the Mexican Student Movement, among other examples, establish music as a central tool in activism and political expression through lyricism, performances, and participation from the audience. This historical framework allows the paper to trace how music is able to form a reproducible model of resistance and political engagement, before narrowing its focus to Mexican rock and the Mexican Rock band Caifanes. Through this narrowed approach, the band is positioned in a longer tradition of cultural resistance, representing a legacy of youth activism that uses culture and identity in their strategies and organizing.

To supplement this analysis, the paper incorporates interviews with two local undocuorganizers affiliated with UWD (United We Dream). UWD is the largest youth-led immigrant network in the United States. Their mission is advocating for the justice and dignity of immigrants. Participants were asked to interview on social media and were sent an email with a set of interview questions. The interview focused on participants' pathway into immigrant rights advocacy, the role of cultural background and lived experience in their organizing, and significance of music in their work as activists. Additional questions were asked to explore their familiarity with Caifanes and Latino rock music, and if they think there is a connection between this music scene and modern and historical movements in both the US and Latin America. These contemporary reflections highlight how cultural identity continues to be a tool for youth to challenge state-sponsored narratives and inform others.

Thesis

Music has historically functioned as a tool in political activism, adapting to different generations, locations, and cultures. From Vietnam War-era music to Corridos and Student demonstrations in Mexico, musical expression has repeatedly functioned as a way for marginalized voices to document their experiences, build a collective identity, and challenge state authority. Emerging from this long-standing tradition, Caifanes transformed western rock by incorporating Mexican-Indigenous culture, creating a lasting model of culturally centered youth activism. The band's aesthetic and political engagement helped establish a legacy in which music and identity became a reproducible strategy for advocacy.

Introduction and Background

Historically, music has functioned as a powerful tool in the sphere of activism, serving as not only a unifying force, but also as a catalyst throughout many political movements. It acts as a vehicle for self-expression, community-building, and civil disobedience by creating a space that communicates messages through different mediums. From survival hymns dating back to the Jim Crow era, to modern-day pop songs such as "This is America" by Childish Gambino, music and sound has served as a unifying force but also a disruptive one; A force capable of mobilizing youth, challenging the status quo, and booming beyond borders.

Vietnam War-era and "Give Peace a Chance" by Yoko Ono and John Lennon

One of the most widely recognized examples of music functioning as a tool of political resistance is the songs that emerged from the Vietnam War in the United States. The anti-war movement, part of a broader counterculture movement, used music to challenge state authority and criticize the military. As countercultural forces flooded college campuses in the 1960s, the

American youth became largely aware of the injustices associated with the Vietnam War (Small 10). Folk and protest music, in particular, were used as a way to document their experiences and cement moments in social history (Herr 159). By chronicling events through music, artists were able to reclaim their voices, resist erasure and censorship while building collective identity and solidarity.

Many songs from the Vietnam-war era use music and lyricism as a way to document history and as a vehicle to express a political message. Through music, listeners are urged to mobilize, take action, and be politically active. Yoko Ono and John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance" exemplifies how music can function as a call to action, particularly within youth activism in the United States during the 60s and 70s. As counterculture gained popularity within college campuses, American youth became increasingly aware of the injustices associated with the Vietnam war, prompting anti-war mobilization (Small 10). While organizers did not initially rely on music as a tool in their activism, the growing tensions between the rebellious youth and the government shaped songs such as "Give Peace a Chance," creating anthems and chants that were heard in mass demonstrations, rallies, and protests.

Music during this period was not only used to protest this war, but also to encourage it, with antiwar sentiments being more prevalent in "full-rock hybrids," while prowar messages were heard more commonly in country music (Herr 159). At the same time, folk music surged among the youth; Through these "simple melodies and narrative-driven lyrics", young activists used folk music to cement their voices and experiences in social history (Herr 159). Through this process, young activists are able to combat censorship and humanize their political struggles. Ultimately, Vietnam war-era protest music functioned as a "crucial cultural artifact," that not only reflected the polarized views of the Vietnam war but also allowed activists to "zoom out" and critique other issues, such as racism and sexism, that were interconnected with the nation's "collective memory of the Vietnam war." (Herr 164). In this way, "Give Peace a Chance" demonstrates how music creates a novel approach to cultural resistance by functioning to document history, communicate political messages, and create an avenue for participatory activism.

Taiwanese Youth Festivals and Political Advocacy

Similarly, youth in Taiwan have used music to connect everyday experiences to politics. Music had already been a common tool in Taiwanese politics, often used in campaigns, advertisements, and rally performances. However, Taiwanese artists also utilize music in music festivals such as Inland Rock and Tshingsan fest. Though they operated outside of formal party politics, they held deep political significance for activists working on “bentu politics,” which advocate for a separate Taiwanese identity (Read 210-211). At these festivals, political activism is not limited to lyricism and actual sounds; The interaction between artists and their audiences facilitate “emotive waves and movements of the audience…When musicians are shouted down by their audiences, or when the crowd responds in ritualistic actions to a performer's musical signals, the participant can be swept away in collective (e) motion.” (Read 212). Artists such as Dwagie fuel unity through chanting “Taiwan’s inland is Nantou!” a saying that draws on a collective Taiwanese identity (Read 222). Another artist, Sam Yang, was met with the crowd chanting “Taiwan-China, a country on each side!" to which he responded by declaring "Taiwan is Taiwan, China is China; Taiwan's inland is Nantou!" (Read 221-222). Through these interactions with the crowd, artists can use a shared “Taiwanese-ness” to establish their music as a tool in a broader political movement. Throughout these spaces, “Musicians deployed discourses of authentic Taiwanese identities for audiences to experience, critique, and reproduce sociopolitical practices reconnecting people to politics and culture” (Read 230)

Taiwan was able to provide an insightful example of how youth use music to create and negotiate identity, and encourage audience members to engage in political activism, though similar dynamics exist elsewhere. Though Caifanes set a memorable precedent through their work in the underground rock scene, music as a tool of political rebellion has existed before in Mexico.

Corridos as the Voice of the People

Corridos, for example, have long functioned as musical tools of resistance within Mexican and Chicano communities, serving as vehicles of cultural expression but also as a way to preserve unofficial historical events. Deeply involved in every-day Mexican and Chicano culture, corridos “have covered events ranging from the coming of railroads to Sputnik, from romantic entanglements to bank robberies” capturing not only major political and social occurrences but also common experiences of the *pueblo,* or the common folk (Fernandez, Holscher 163). The corridos go beyond simple storytelling and are used as a form of expression by the working class, offering a humanized perspective outside of the elite class (Fernandez, Holscher 165). Through this retelling of major events and perspective, the corridos play a critical role in centering marginalized voices in contexts in which they would have been overlooked. Though corridos are often sung in a variety of contexts, including day-to-day life, they play a vital role in asserting identity and giving a voice to communities that have been historically suppressed.

This symbolic inversion separates simple cultural expression from musical resistance. By reverencing figures criminalized by higher systems of power, corridos framed oppression as heroism, and along the same lines, survival as defiance. In doing so, they created a new understanding of justice and resistance that is rooted in communal experience rather than legal authority. This counter-narrative allowed marginalized communities, such as the often-ignored working class and afro-indigenous populations, to narrate their own experiences, transforming music into a space where trauma, resistance, and identity can co-exist meaningfully. Corridos thus functioned as a cultural history archive, preserving stories that contradicted official records and shed light on the lived experiences of those who faced state-sponsored violence, economic exploitation, and racialized control (Halley and Perez 13).

Even beyond preserving social history and underscoring working-class voices, corridos have also functioned as a direct means of confronting political violence and structural inequality, particularly in environments shaped by colonialism, militarization along the US-MX border, and state intervention. Texas-Mexican Corridos have long been associated with Mexican-American borderlands, as they are the origin of countless instances of displacement, abuse of authority, and surveillance (Halley, Perez 7). The border itself is not a fixed divisor, but an evolving political construct which continuously changes with immigration policies, US-MX politics, and security regimes. In this ever-changing landscape, corridos circulate alongside migrants and their experiences of displacement, discrimination, and survival. In these contexts, corridos often glorify bandits and outlaws as folk heroes, reversing dominant narratives imposed by state and elite actors. It is through this reversal that corridos "mimic and reveal" the injustices produced by power structures that originate outside of the border itself, such as U.S federal intervention (Halley, Perez 6-7). In doing so, these borderlands become sites of cultural production, underscoring how music flows beyond borders and becomes a vehicle through which communities navigate a world in flux.

In addition to giving a voice to victims of state repression and exposing systemic injustices, corridos also produce and reinforce collective identity, particularly within marginalized Mexican and Mexican-American communities. Scholars emphasize that corridos do not merely reflect culture; Rather, they shape a collective cultural identity through performance and participation from both the artist and the audience (Perez 30). This identitybuilding function is especially visible in contexts of immigration, displacement, and confinement. One recount describes how Latino prisoners forge unity and collective spirit through corridos associated with the Chicano Movement, which parallels the role corridos played during the Mexican Revolution in building solidarity through a shared struggle (Perez 30).

In the context of the US-MX borderlands, corridos function as a link between American-born

Mexicans and Mexican immigrants, a mixed-status population, and a common sense of "Mexicanness", one that overlooks legal and geographic divisions. Rather than reinforcing the authority of the nation-state, this shared identity destabilizes it. Through this shared Mexican identity, political borders are "continuously challenged, deconstructed, and broken down by the physical movements and cultural expressions of Mexican migrants" (Perez 30). By circulating across communities through sound, corridos exemplify how identity persists in a political climate that constantly changes.

This cultural identity extends beyond identity formation and into the realm of transnational political engagement, positioning corridos artists and performers as influential political actors. Since these performers hold the ability to create and foster widespread identity, they also possess the power to shape cultural practices, and, by extension, influence the political opinion of their audiences demonstrating how cultural production becomes a form of political engagement in a constantly shifting world. A great example of this is the band *Los Tigres del Norte,* a well-known corridos/norteña band that was founded in Sinaloa, Mexico, and is currently based in San Jose, California. This band exemplifies this dynamic by using corridos not only to narrate immigrant experiences, but also to engage in contemporary political struggles. Their performances operate as a form of citizen diplomacy, aligning with the framework defined by Kerr and Wiseman, in which private individuals cultivate international understanding and political connections outside of formal, state-sponsored channels (Perez 31). The timing, location, and political context of their performances - particularly within immigrant communities

- transform corridos into catalysts of political engagement, rather than solely a cultural expression (Perez 31). As David Montgomery of The Washington Post notes, Los Tigres del Nortes' lyrics deeply resonate with immigrant communities because they function as "news bulletins," many of whom see their own experiences reflected in hits such as "*La Jaula de Oro*" ("The Golden Cage") and "*De Paisano a Paisano*" ("From Compatriot to Compatriot") (Perez
32).

Whether or not the protagonists of their corridos are real people, these narratives are real through their precise, genuine articulation of shared immigrant experiences that forms a collective consciousness that speaks for entire communities across nations. This sustained relevance has earned Los Tigres del Norte international recognition through awards such as "*La Voz del Pueblo*" ("The Voice of the People") at the Premios Juventud Award, reflecting their role as cultural intermediaries who bridge, music, activism, Mexican identity, and political activism. Their calls for civic action, such as urging audiences to vote, endorsing political candidates and parties, and performing at major U.S election rallies, underscore how corridos functioned and continue to function as tools of advocacy, one that mobilizes entire communities across borders and generations (Perez 35). In a world in flux, where migration, media, and political movements move beyond borders, corridos and bands such as *Los Tigres Del Norte* illustrate how culture travels alongside global change and is capable to adapting to contemporary politics while maintaining the same foundation of identity and resistance.

Student Advocacy in Mexico, 1968

Similarly, music played a central role in the Mexican Student Movement of 1968. As a new wave of British and English rock swept across Mexico, urban, middle- and lower-class youth developed an increasing demand for rock music that felt "authentic" and reflective of their discontentment with their government. Former student activists recalled that they rebelled visually by growing their hair and listening to rock and roll, a symbolic clash of "new and old Mexico" (NPR). This clash didn't stop at aesthetics; It reflected a broader confrontation between young people and students questioning the legitimacy of the PRI's authoritarian regime and a state that was firmly intent on maintaining control.

Within this tense environment, *Cafes Cantantes* (Singing Cafes) were born; These spaces serve as crucial transcultural and political spaces, where global youth styles were introduced and assimilated into Mexican youth audiences, and came to embody a "hotbed of new values" (Zolov 100). These spaces, however, existed only at the benevolence of Mexican law enforcement due to their heavy association with rebellion and nonconformity, and therefore subject to government crackdown and censorship (Zolov 98).

During the Movement itself, music was key in organizing and communication. Students mobilized across campuses and public spaces, such as public transportation and shopping plazas, and used music and chants to raise awareness, gain support, and obtain funding for their cause (NPR). Large assemblies and rallies were often accompanied by chanting and singing, with former student activists recalling the particular songs, "Que Vivan Los Estudiantes" ("Let the

Students Live"/Power to the Students) (NPR). This protest anthem celebrated students as fearless figures who were unafraid of law enforcement, police repression, and state-sponsored violence. This communal soundscape helped unite students despite differences in class and united the young demographic through the shared need for change and helped sustain momentum in the face of escalating repression and censorship.

Beyond mass singing and chanting, music was also used as a strategy during student-led brigades as a form of direct political intervention. Judith Reyes's *Cronología del Movimiento Estudiantil, 1968* is an example of music that was composed in real time as political events took place, documenting marches, state violence, and identifying key actors (such as student leaders) (Garcia). These music documentations communicated urgent, accessible political messages designed to circulate rapidly under the PRI's harsh censorship. Groups such as Los Nakos, which emerged from the National Strike Council's brigades, used satire and parody to critique government authority, earning recognition as "el discurso cantado del movimiento" ("the sung discourse of the movement") (Garcia). In this way, music was able to function as an alternative political language, one that translated student demands, political messages, and solidarity into messages that could reach audiences beyond the university.

After the Tlatelolco Massacre, which was the peak of the 1968 Student Movement, female corridos artists such as Judith Reyes played an important role of retelling their first-hand experiences as a witness and participant of the '68 Mexican Student Movement. (Marsh 149) Her music, particularly her song "La Tragedia de La Plaza de Tlatelolco" ("The Tragedy of the Tlatelolco Plaza)" documented her struggle through music, although it was later censored by official media narratives and the government (Marsh 150). Altogether, the musical practices of the Mexican Student Movement of 1968 demonstrate how youth activism used music as a crucial tool in their organizing, establishing a tradition in which music functions as a language of resistance.

A Legacy is Born: Caifanes

Following this pivotal movement in Mexican history, new forms of political expression would emerge almost two decades later. Caifanes emerged in the 80s as one of Mexico's defining voices of the "Rock en Espanol" movement, blending Mexican indigenous themes with

Anglo-Saxon-influenced rock, later setting the stage for future generations of musical resistance. Led by singer Saul Hernandez, Caifanes developed not just as artists, but as cultural icons between disillusionment with the Mexican government and the Mexican youth. Hernandez's work with Jaguares, which grew directly out of Caifanes, illustrates this: In their politically charged album, *Cronicas de un laberinto,* Hernandez loudly criticized the short-comings of the Mexican government, singing that "this government is not for me" and criticizing silence in the wake of injustice, insisting that "we are sleeping in Mexico, and we need to wake up" (Harrington). His vocal rejection of political compliance reflects a deeper legacy where alternative music is more than just cultural expression - it evolved into a vehicle for questioning authority, advocating for justice, and amplifying the voices of the Mexican youth.

By reinventing the boundaries of conventional music in an era of heavy censorship and consistently engaging with social issues, Caifanes helped establish a tradition of using music as a central tool in advocacy, which would continue to evolve in Mexico and beyond. In this sense, Caifanes is not just a rock band in Mexico; it created a legacy that followed a global precedent in which music was a tool for rebellion, expression, and identity among youth. Through fusions of British rock and Mexican Indigenous rhythms and aesthetics, Caifanes and their music functioned as a bridge between Mexico's underground rock movement and its emerging youth activism. Saul Hernandez, the lead singer of Caifanes, established a bequest by expressing his frustrations with the Mexican government and encouraging political awareness within the alternative music scene (Harrington).

Though Caifanes emerged in the 80s, the lead singer, Saul Hernandez, has continued his political engagement well into the present, reinforcing the idea that music functions as a sustained political practice. Hernandez has framed musical production as inseparable from social and political responsibility, positioning musicians as public actors capable of contributing to and intervening in political discourse. In an interview discussing his participation in an Amnesty International event, alongside other artists such as Joan Baez and Steve Earle, Hernandez explicitly addresses the issues surrounding immigration into the United States and human rights, stating that "no human being is illegal," ultimately aligning himself with immigrant rights advocacy (OC Weekly). This public stance situated Caifanes within transnational struggles surrounding borders, citizenship, and civil rights, themes that resonate strongly with youth and immigrant communities on both sides of the US-MX border.

This political engagement is also evident in their live performances, in which venues transform into spaces of social critique. During multiple concerts, one example being a concert in Mexico City 's Auditorio Nacional. Hernandez openly criticized political leadership, asserting that "the country is upside down," and urging the audience to organize within their communities and schools rather than remaining compliant with political parties that "Don't care" before singing their song *Ayer Me Dijo un Ave* (Yesterday a Bird Told Me) (Rivera Maya News).

Another moment in which Caifanes engaged in politics was during their Concert in the Fillmore, Silver Spring. The band projected various images and videos of families, hardworking migrants, and community to convey the idea of the American Dream before cutting to pictures and videos of detention centers and ICE officers. This demonstration ended with a slide that said, "Ningún Ser Humano es Ilegal" ("No Human Being is Illegal") (Porras Cardona). Such moments demonstrate how concerts can become political forums, where a collective listening experience becomes an act of civic engagement. Hernandez addresses audiences directly, encouraging grassroots awareness and participation; An approach that mirrors today's youth activism centers on local mobilization, collaboration and mutual accountability.
Hernandez has also publicly defended cultural spaces as sites of political resistance. Following the closure of Multiforo Alicia, a venue historically associated with alternative and politically charged music, Hernandez condemned the police and military intervention as an attack on freedom of expression (El Financiero). Hernandez stresses the political and significance of cultural infrastructure and emphasizes the importance of freely artistic spaces to democratic life and dissent. This act of intervention highlights how Caifanes' activism goes beyond lyrical content to challenge power structures that regulate public spaces. Ultimately, these interventions illustrate how Caifanes operate as political actors, using interviews, performances, and public statements to influence public opinion, mobilize audiences, and to critique state power. In doing so, Caifanes exemplifies how music can function as a form of political participation that is especially accessible to youth audiences, reinforcing their music as a tool of activism rather than a chronicle of social history.

This understanding invites a broader shift in how politically charged music is interpreted in Mexican culture. Rather than viewing Caifanes as an isolated case of politically charged musical art, scholars have increasingly framed Mexican rock as part of a broader, reproducible model of youth resistance. One scholar demonstrates how later youth movements in Mexico, particularly those rooted in punk and hiphop, constructed political spaces that echo earlier rock movements strategies of cultural rebellion and physical occupation of space (Magana). Though these movements did not replicate Caifanes' soundscape, they reproduced its underlying logic: The use of music to create alternative public spheres beyond state-approved modes of political participation. This continuity suggests that Caifanes' political engagement lies less in specific positions on policies and legislation, and more in the model they created - music as a tool of identity formation, critique, and solidarity.

Caifanes exerted influence through culture, specifically by shaping how Mexican youth understood identity, dissent, and unity. With their commercial breakthrough in the 80s after decades of state repression against rock music and counterculture, the band helped normalize the concept of being politically aware and even politically critical, uniquely Mexican, and publicly visible, all at the same time. Scholars note that Caifanes belonged to a generation of musicians who transformed rock from a marginal, repressed subculture into a legitimate space for social commentary (Zolov). Their success marked a shift in how music functioned in everyday life: no longer just for entertainment, but a shared language where youth could express their frustrations and foster resistance.

Caifanes lyrical themes - disillusionment with authority, spiritualism, and critiques of false democracy - resonate strongly with youth navigating the political stagnation of late-PRI era Mexico. Saul Hernandez has repeatedly emphasized that the band's music was shaped by a sense that political change had stalled, despite claims of progress. In interviews, Hernandez described Mexico's political system as a "disguised dictatorship," a sentiment that you can hear in both

Caifanes' music and among young audiences (Harrington). The ambiguous lyricism allowed the band to critique the Mexican government and encourage political organization without using direct slogans, making their music adaptable to different causes. Caifanes' performances and public presence also played a critical role in creating consistent ways of thinking of power, identity, and resistance - described as "cognitive praxis" by two scholars, essentially claiming that music shapes how movements understand power, identity, and resistance outside of definitions set forwards by formal political institutions (Eyerman and Jamison). Live concerts function as collective experiences where youth are not only able to hear live music but also share an emotional and political atmosphere. These spaces parallel earlier underground spaces, such as *cafes cantantes*, and paved the way for music as a means of fostering unity.
The band's legacy also extends beyond Mexico. As Mexican rock gained visibility in the United States through migration, media circulation, and transnational audiences, Caifanes became part of a broader, trans-border conversation, where Mexican-American youth could connect their unique experiences to political critique. Cultural studies scholars argue that music traveling alongside migration often carries a political message with it, shaping how diasporic communities understand concepts of belonging and struggle (Lipsitz). In this sense, Caifanes is able to create its legacy through cultural circulation, where shared cultural references shape youth political awareness across borders.

Carrying the Legacy Forward: Undocu-Activism

Building on this legacy, undocumented youth in the United States, often referred to as DREAMers, continue a long tradition of using culture and identity as a tool of resistance

(Zimmerman). While the political climate changes as youth activists tackle different issues in the

United States, DREAMers draw on the same logic of identity-based mobilization that defined the alternative music scene that surrounded Caifanes. Rather than waiting for a formal inclusion to politics, these activists use cultural expression to assert visibility, create solidarity, and challenge state narratives that criminalize their existence (Zimmerman).

The role of sound and music in contemporary youth activism is further reinforced by how individuals describe their own political socialization through music. Pedro, a youth activist based in Baltimore explained that music with "deeper meanings" shapes how they understand politics, noting that artists such as Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole shaped their understanding of American society and its systemic faults (Contreras). Since these artists ground their work in lived experiences, their music becomes a lens through which listeners interpret social inequality, injustice, and systemic failure. This mirrors how undocumented youth activism operates today: even when not centered on a single genre or anthem, music functions as a part of a broader soundscape that cultivates political awareness, emotional resonance, and collective identity. In this way, contemporary youth continue to engage with music, not merely as entertainment, but as a framework for understanding power and resistance, which echoes earlier traditions in which music shaped political consciousness before formal engagement ever took place.

This political engagement with music continues today. Gerson, a long-time undocuactivist, talks about how the internet transforms the sphere of activism, using examples such as Bad Bunny's recent Superbowl Performance to exemplify the powerful link between culture, music, and political advocacy (Quinteros). It is through this link that youth are able to speak out with a unique, culturally focused approach, similar to that of Caifanes. Gerson goes on to discuss the importance of cultural symbolism in his work, with icons such as monarch butterflies, and slogans such as "HERE TO STAY" being transformed into an embodiment of a decades-long struggle for immigrant rights (Quinteros). Through this cultural symbolism, young undocuactivists are able to spread their message in ways that transcend traditional modes of activism, a trend that evolved from and contributes to hallmark political soundscapes.

Just as earlier musical forms provided a voice for resistance, today's youth adapt these expressions to modern mediums, translating cultural dissent into digital spaces where their influence reaches national audiences with a new data-driven precision. Through new outreach strategies such as "Transmedia Testimonio" (Transmedia Testimonial), which are personal narratives that are shared online with the intention of fostering community and shared identity, and demonstrations such as "Undocumented and Unafraid," "DREAM Graduations," and "Coming Out of the Shadows" events, DREAMers are able to encapsulate the same energy of cultural defiance and civil disobedience through technologies rather than only instruments (Zimmerman). These digital forms of engagement operate much like music did: it is a powerful unifying force, inspired collective action, and builds community in a state where they are actively being silenced. In this way, one can see that youth activism is evolving but not completely leaving behind traditions established by Caifanes and other cultural and political actors.

This shift to digital storytelling does not represent a departure from earlier tradition of cultural resistance, but rather an adaptation to new technological and political conditions. Just as Caifanes helped normalize the idea that youth could be politically engaged through culture outside of formal institutions, undocumented youth activism demonstrates how those same principles persist in contemporary movements and circumstances. The medium has changed, but the underlying strategy remains the same - using culture as a unifying force, a means of political awareness, and a vehicle for collective action.

Undocumented youth in the United States continue to carry forward the cultural and political legacy created by Caifanes and the alternative music scene in Mexico. While their struggles take place in a different location, context, and time, their activism similarly uses art, music, and a collective identity to challenge authority and assert their right to visibility in a country that actively suppresses it.

Conclusion

The story of musical activism, Caifanes, and undocu-activism doesn't stay in one nation; Instead, it reflects a transnational and transgenerational flow of culture in a globalized era, where music, migration, and political consciousness reaches broad audiences in a global society, and shapes how youth understand power and government infrastructure. Through cases ranging from

Vietnam-era protest music to corridos and the Mexican Student Movement of 1968, the legacy of Caifanes is illustrated as a cultural bridge between Mexico's underground rock movement and emerging youth activism. This legacy demonstrated that musical and cultural expression has consistently functioned as a vehicle for political awareness, collective identity, and mobilization. Music grants the youth with accessible and emotionally resonant means of challenging authority when formal political participation is restricted or denied.

By tracing these examples across historical and national contexts, one can see how music creates continuity in youth activism even as strategies evolve. Corridos preserved unofficial histories while reframing oppression as resistance; The Mexican Student Movement utilized music as a tool for organizing and survival under censorship; Caifanes normalized political critique within Mexican Rock and modeled culture as an avenue of dissent; And undocumented youth in the United State adapted these traditions into digital forms of storytelling, visibility, and organization. Altogether, these cases illustrate that youth activism does not emerge in isolation, rather, it builds on inherited cultural frameworks that travel with migration, memory, and shared experiences.

The significance this connection holds is undeniable given today's political climate. By recognizing music and cultural expression as legitimate political practices, state-centered definitions of activism are challenged, and nontraditional actors are able to engage in political conversations. This shift reflects a broader world in flux, where authority and influence are no longer centered solely on formal institutions, but increasingly circulate through cultural networks, tradition, and a global society. As globalization continues to reshape how people communicate, organize, and establish identity, political participation follows suit by expanding beyond traditional strategies, signaling a transition in who holds the upper hand. Youth do not wait for institutional permission to engage, instead they create alternative spaces, such as concert halls, plazas, and online platforms, to share ideas, inform one another, and organize. In an era marked by turbulent immigration policies and televised infringements of human rights, understanding the legacy of Caifanes in creating cultural pathways to engagement is essential in comprehending how political movements endure and adapt.

Ultimately, the legacy of Caifanes and the movements that preceded it reveal a simple but powerful truth: when voices are silenced in official arenas, they never disappear; They find rhythm, form lyrics, and birth a soundscape of resistance. As youth activism continues to evolve today in Trump-era United States, music remains not only an archive, but as a living blueprint for how generations of today and tomorrow will learn to fight back.

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LITERATURE STUDIES III

Meghan Farrell

Westchester Community College

Mentor: Dr. Elise Martucci

Title: “Freedom for Some: Women in Postcolonial Society as Portrayed Through Literature”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Elizabeth Holt, Bard College:

“While all papers in this panel were commendable, Ms. Farrell's work stood out for the dexterity with which she approached the literary texts themselves. Her argumentation took distance from presumptions about authorial intent for an approach that centered the words on the page, analyzing with nuance the broader, often contradictory postcolonial contexts of the pieces under analysis. This allowed Ms. Farrell's essay and presentation to each complement the other, uncovering a wrangling with facades and rhetoric surrounding gender, race, class and national belonging in Kenya and Colombia alike.”

Freedom for Some—Women in Postcolonial Society as Portrayed Through Literature

As the post-World War II political landscape attempts to shift away from Western axes of power, postcolonialism has become a paramount topic of modern and contemporary global literature. The field concerns itself with the realities of newly independent nations and their governments, including (but not limited to) the intersection of colonial and indigenous culture and power structures. Certain theorists focus on how postcolonial dynamics of power both mirror and differ from that of a nation's former imperial ruler. Despite espousing ideas of freedom and equality, many postcolonial societies fail to meet these standards for all citizens. As described by University of Oxford professor Elleke Boehmer in her book *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*,

> Women in the new postcolonial nations came to be subjected to a syncretic fusion of male rules, encoded as principles of law and enforced as cultural authenticity. With national liberation essentially defined as male liberation – as resistance to colonial iconographies of native weakness – it was predictable that at independence the new national masters shifted smoothly into the halls and offices of power vacated by the male coloni[z]er. (Boehmer 33)

Boehmer claims that "women may be objectified by the nation, where the normative citizen is usually defined as male" (Boehmer 4). Despite the liberation of the indigenous population from their colonial government, subjugation continues in postcolonial societies on lines of social classes such as gender. According to Boehmer, "[i]n mainstream postcolonial studies, gender is still conventionally treated in a tokenistic way, or as subsidiary to the category of race" (Boehmer 7). Despite this gap in social examination, there do exist significant feminist postcolonial analyses in the fields of postcolonial studies and postcolonial literature. In their short stories "Death Constant Beyond Love" and "The Middle Door," authors Gabriel García Márquez and Grace Ogot explore how the current state of postcolonial societies offers a shallow definition of "freedom" that does not extend to all social classes, particularly women. The characters of Márquez's Laura Farina and Ogot's Mrs. Muga are both subject to some form of sexual violence or control at the hands of men who represent the postcolonial government, exemplifying how women lack protection from gendered violence in their nations, and how the governments of these states may not only sanction but participate in their oppression.

Márquez's 1973 short story "Death Constant Beyond Love" follows Senator Onésimo Sánchez as he makes a campaign stop at the desolate village of Rosal de Virrey, implied to be on the Carribean coast of South America (likely Márquez's native Colombia). From the story's onset, we are introduced to a divide between Sánchez's quality of life and that of those in the village. Through the third-person narration, Sánchez notes his audience of "Indians who could scarcely endure the hot saltpeter coals of the sterile little square" (Márquez 77) and describes the homes of the village as "miserable shacks" (Márquez 78). Later, when meeting with important people of the town, Sánchez implies that he and his colleagues keep Rosal de Virrey in a state of squalor on purpose. He says to them, "You and I know that the day there are trees and flowers in this heap of goat dung, the day there are shad instead of worms in the water holes, that day neither you nor I will have anything to do here" (Márquez 79). Sánchez and other political actors concerned with Rosal de Virrey know that should they truly assist the townspeople, they would then lose their status and livelihoods. This economic oppression mirrors the tactics used by colonial governments to suppress their indigenous subjects and quash hopes of revolution.

Enter Laura Farina, the daughter of criminal Nelson Farina and the object of Senator Sánchez's desires. Through this character, Márquez demonstrates the patriarchal control of women's bodies and sexuality in Rosal de Virrey. When Sánchez first encounters Laura Farina, she is described as "wearing a cheap, faded guajiro Indian robe" (Márquez 79). The use of indigenous aesthetics juxtaposed with Sánchez's "shirt of pure silk" and "coarse linen slacks" (Márquez 77) emphasizes the power imbalance between the pair and Laura Farina's position as a subjugated individual. Dr. Rachel Bailey Jones of Nazareth College claims that in artistic depictions made by imperial powers during colonial rule, "[c]olonized women were imagined as either sexually available, promiscuous or as tied to domestic servitude" (Jones 111). Laura Farina being coded as indigenous, while also being seen as a sex object by Sánchez and a servant by her father, reflects how postcolonial societies may continue the behaviors of their former colonizers and repeat a similar cycle of violence.

Laura Farina is later sent to Sánchez by her father as a sexual favor—in exchange for Sánchez's assistance in Nelson Farina's run from the law. When Laura Farina arrives, Sánchez quickly realizes the situation at hand and chooses that because of his impending mortality, he should indulge in the "sudden love affair" (Márquez 80) that he is being offered. Sánchez is fully aware that Laura has not come to him of her own free will. Both Senator Sánchez and Nelson Farina commodify Laura Farina and her sexuality. Nelson Farina abuses his position as Laura's father to act with ownership over her body, and to bribe Senator Sánchez with access. In his (albeit failed) attempt to accept this "gift," Sánchez also engages in treating Laura Farina as a piece of property.

Whether or not Márquez's intention was for "Death Constant Beyond Love" to act as a feminist piece is unknown—and whether his other works focusing on female characters and the lives of postcolonial women qualify "feminist" literature is subject to debate. Following the 2024 release of *Until August*, journalist Roy Boland poses the question: "Is Gabriel García Márquez's posthumous offering a feminist novel?" He answers in the affirmative, but "[o]nly if feminism means featuring as "the protagonist of her own narrative", being neither secondary nor subservient to men, and pleasuring as much as being pleasured, does the label fit" (Boland). This definition of feminism differs greatly from what theorists would consider—but even if it *were* appropriate, it would not suit Laura Farina. She is given very little narrative of her own, acts entirely subservient to men, and derives no pleasure from any action she takes. Author Irvin D. Solomon comments on Márquez's seminal novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,

> [a]t first glance it seems that all levels of such literature have typecast women... i.e., the mother or family support role, or in supernatural or degrading roles, i.e., the witch or prostitute/mistress role. This appears especially true for the leading figures of the recent Latin American renaissance who style themselves the portrayers of the "real" Latin America." (Solomon 192+)

Whether Laura Farina herself is a feminist is irrelevant, and I do not claim that she is meant to be an example of an empowered woman. I argue instead that what makes Márquez's writing feminist is the very fact that she is *not* "empowered." In portraying Laura Farina's victimhood, Márquez is honest about the reality of many women in both Latin America and other postcolonial or impoverished societies. One cannot properly critique a subject without being frank about its history and contents; if, as Solomon seems to desire he would, Márquez only portrayed strong, leading women with equal rights and impact to their male peers, his attempt at criticism would be completely dismantled. The issue lies not with Márquez choosing to portray subjugated women, but rather with the reality that women are being subjugated.

Grace Ogot's work takes a more explicitly feminist approach to critiquing the abuse of power by men in postcolonial governments. The Kenyan author published "The Middle Door" in 1976—though the story is set roughly a decade earlier, shortly after Kenya gained its independence from the British Empire in 1963. Our narrator, Mrs. Muga, travels by train from Limuru to Kisumu to visit her brother and his family. On her journey, she is trapped between the role of an upper-middle class author and that of a member of the "second sex" (Beauvoir 12).

On her way to the train station in Limuru, Mrs. Muga's taxi is cut off by a Mercedes Benz being driven by a chauffeur. She notes of the passenger that "[d]ignity and power distorted what would have been, at first sight, a very handsome face" (Ogot 246). Her disdain for the haughty does not last long, as once she boards the train she is displeased with her compartment mate. The woman boards with a rooster, causing Mrs. Muga great discomfort. She desired to “[t]ell her to move from here at once, this is a first[-]class compartment. This is not your place, not your place, not with a cock anyway. Tell her I paid sh 128 to be alone” (Ogot 248). The emphasis on the price she paid for her ticket implies that Mrs. Muga’s contempt is at least partly based in economic class. Mrs. Muga “wonder[s] if she could tell the difference between children’s and adult’s books” (Ogot 249) and refers to her as a “simple village woman” (Ogot 250). These assumptions of the woman’s origin and education are both clear indications that Mrs. Muga sees herself as higher-class in comparison. She decides not to confront the woman directly, instead imagining a reality in which the woman berates Mrs. Muga for having more wealth and therefore an easier life. Mrs. Muga holds some awareness about the economic inequality in her country, and how the rich look down on the poor, but does not internalize these concepts enough to practice any meaningful self-criticism.

The story’s major overlap between Mrs. Muga’s class and gender is found when she goes to the train’s dining car and enters a conversation with the Ticket Examiner. He correctly identifies her as an author but mistakes her for a woman who wrote a book about “a man with four wives,” and tells her that “we men love it” (Ogot 252). He then confides in her his own opinion on the topic, stating

> Now your hand has been strengthened, my dear. The government has gone ahead and legalized polygamy. All women married to one man are to be equal in status. That combined with the sort of teamwork you advocate for in your book—eh! For once, the men have a very fair deal! Just like it used to be during our grandmothers’ days when polygamy was accepted as part of life, our heritage. In those days polygamy was a sign of dignity and wealth and the elder wife brought a girl of her own choice for her husband to marry. Eh! (Ogot 252).

The man echoes the government slogans of “equality” and “freedom” that inspired Mrs. Muga to leave her compartment-mate be (Ogot 248). He implies that the legalization of polygamy is a return to form, to a distinctly Kenyan culture that existed before British colonial rule. While this would often be signaled as a leftist and postcolonial victory, Dr. Jones describes how both colonial and indigenous political movements use patriarchy to promote nationalism, claiming

> Throughout the colonial and modern eras, the very idea of national identity was built on policing the border between gender roles. Until the women’s movements of the twentieth century, to be a national citizen one had to be male; women were seen as reproducing the national stock through proper breeding but were not considered to be worthy of citizenship. (Jones 35)

Through Jones’s analysis, the Ticket Examiner’s national pride in polygamy is an example of women being used as breeding stock meant to increase the population and therefore solidify the identity of contemporary Kenya. His antifeminist views are solidified to the audience when he says to Mrs. Muga: “In your next book, tell these educated, selfish and headstrong women who want to monopoli[z]e a man for themselves that a man is a dynamic being capable of caring for more than one wife” (Ogot 252). Mrs. Muga reveals in her narration that not only does she oppose polygamy, but that she believes the book to which he is referring to be “terrible” (Ogot 252). She then determines that “for the time being it did not pay to contradict the Ticket Examiner” (Ogot 252) and uses his misplaced admiration to her advantage.

Mrs. Muga tells the Ticket Examiner about her trouble with her compartment-mate, hoping that he will be sympathetic to her plight because they are supposedly like-minded and “equal” individuals. When she describes the situation to her, the ticket examiner exclaims “A lady with a cock and a bunch of bananas in a first[-]class compartment? You can’t be serious” (Ogot 253), further emphasizing the class divide between Mrs. Muga and the unnamed woman with his disbelief. To save face and to appear fair, Mrs. Muga sugar-coats her request, but the Ticket Examiner will not have it:

> "I don't really mind her staying if she can find another place for the cock and remove at least the *kikapu* or the banana bunch. It is true that in an independent country we are all equal, and should learn to share facilities and amenities." I was trying to be sarcastic, but he was too shocked to notice it. His reaction to my report was quite violent. (Ogot 253)

He replies that "There cannot be a cock crowing in a first[-]class compartment, independence or not" (Ogot 253). Despite the revolution and the promises of social change, the Ticket Examiner and Mrs. Muga both maintain antiquated impressions of class and decorum. In order to gain his trust, Mrs. Muga performs as someone she is not—as someone who supports systems and values that would typically be deemed patriarchal. It is only because she chose to align herself with antifeminism that she became comfortable enough with the Ticket Master to voice her complaint. By betraying one class she belongs to, she solidifies her place in another and uses it to her own benefit and someone's expense—akin to how postcolonial societies may betray the women that share their national identity.

Mrs. Muga's economic class does not save her from falling victim to gendered violence. Now alone in her cabin, Mrs. Muga is the victim of a break-in through the title middle door of her train cabin. Her assailants are two policemen who make misogynistic presumptions, such that she is a prostitute who has boarded the train to seek out new clients (Ogot 257-258). They attempted to rape her and were only dissuaded by her threat to shoot them with a gun she kept on under her pillow, later revealed to be a prop (Ogot 258-261). Earlier in the story, Mrs. Muga narrated "I had not travelled by train for six years and had many hidden fears until I saw these policemen and my fear vanished. Now no drunk would wander along our corridor" (Ogot 255). These government officials meant to protect her from violence and disturbance ended up being just that. One of the officers says to her, "[y]ou don't think a policeman is as important as the men you lure to take you in their arms" (Ogot 258). He takes pride in his profession, emphasizing that it makes him important and is therefore a reason he should be allowed access to her body. The officers also threaten her with a gun (Ogot 257-258), something they have right to thanks to their positions.

Once the train arrives at Kisumu station, the local police confront Mrs. Muga and arrest her for possession of a firearm. She is surprised to find that the very police who threatened her working at the Kisumu precinct:

> Unbelievingly, I found the two men who had terrori[z]ed me during the night already standing behind the counter at the police station. Their eyes were hostile when I was pushed into a corner away from my brother. It was clear that they were saying- "You know now who is stronger." (Ogot 260).

Once again, the policemen use their power and political status in order to make Mrs. Muga uncomfortable or put her in danger. Throughout the story, ideas of "freedom" and "equality" under the new Kenyan independence are espoused from many sources, but the only real government officials in the story abuse their power and act with malice towards women. According to an essay from *the European Journal of Women's* Studies, "[r]adical feminist movements and thinkers from the Global South have provided crucial analyses of how gender inequality, interlocking forms of oppression and exploitation are entangled in local and global realities of contemporary capitalist social formations" (Ruppert et al. 329). Because gender inequality is so crucial to capitalism and postcolonial development, as Jones and Rupert (et al.) claim, Mrs. Muga's identity as a woman supersedes her identity as someone upper-class. Upper-class women are still viewed as potential victims by predators—"as far as they were concerned, a woman was a woman" (Ogot 258).

Both Laura Farina and Mrs. Muga are treated with the very disrespect that colonial rule inflicted upon their indigenous population of every gender. Postcolonial feminists argue that "both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate" (Ashcroft et al. 116). By exerting such power and ownership over the women's bodies—which they have no right to—Senator Onésimo Sánchez and both Kenyan policemen behave analogous to the imperial powers their roles are meant to break from. Ketu Katarak, a University of California professor specializing in postcolonial and feminist theory, argues that true postcolonialism cannot be achieved without women's liberation. In her book *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World,* Katarak writes "Continuing decolonizations include the reality of decolonizing female bodies occupied by colonial education and local tradition that perpetuate women's subordinate status while ensuring male privilege" (Katrak 8). Through their works, Gabriel García Márquez and Grace Ogot criticize (both directly and indirectly) the hypocrisy of postcolonial governments in their stance on imperialism versus their stance on women's liberation.

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PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Parker A. Madsen

Westchester Community College

Mentor: Dr. Dwight Goodyear

Title: “Sorry Tolstoy, Some People Are Inoculated”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Keith McPartland, Williams College:

“The writer does an excellent job presenting Tolstoy's theory of art and introducing a number of complications for the theory. The issue about background knowledge necessary for successful communication is worth taking seriously in any attempt to provide an intentionalist or expressivist theory of art. The writer raised a number of interesting questions about the role of the subconscious in the creation of art, and showed ways in which the rise of AI ‘art?’ presents special problems for any attempt to arrive at a definition of art.”

Sorry Tolstoy, Some People are Inoculated

Art can be many things to people, but most people probably wouldn't open a conversation surrounding the nature of 'what is art?' with the suggestion that it is akin to some sort of infectious disease. Yet, there is a definition proposed by Leo Tolstoy within the Expressionist Theory of art that may indeed suggest that it is, much like a disease, infectious in nature and indeed *must* be infectious to be considered real art. But by what means does Tolstoy suggest that art is akin to disease? Tolstoy writes in his work *What is Art?* where he lays out his definition of art, "Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them" (Tolstoy). Through his definition we can assume that for something to be considered art, there must be several factors at play. First, art is a human activity, which means it is uniquely a human creation. Second, art is produced by the conscious efforts of one man (or presumably woman) through the use of 'certain external signs.' Third, the medium used in the creation of the art should transmit the feelings the artist has lived through so that an audience also feels those same emotions. There are several pieces to his definition to unpack here, but to start let us examine his use of the word *infected*. By using the word infected, Tolstoy immediately equates the process of feeling in response to seeing (or hearing) the work to a transmissible disease, that is, an infection that is passed from one individual to another through some biological, mechanical mechanism. One person is sick, wipes disease-ridden snot on a doorknob, and another person becomes infected through contact with the doorknob. Tolstoy's definition suggests something similar: a person feels or has felt sorrow, applies emotion-ridden paint to a canvas, and an audience of people who see the painting feel the same sorrow as the painter felt. On the surface this is a workable definition of art. It is not overly broad to include practically anything created by a human being, nor is it so narrow as to disinclude obvious examples of human creativity and passionate works. However, as a classificatory definition of art, it will naturally disinclude objects that are, to the average human, quite obviously art. For it to be art, according to Tolstoy, it *must* infect its audience. But what if it does not? By Tolstoy's definition, the work, if not infectious, *cannot* be art. If an artist feeling intense sorrow produces a piece that the majority of people do not feel the emotion in the same manner, the artist has failed: they have not made art, or perhaps they have simply made *bad* art. If a virus, bacteria, or parasite does not infect its host, it is not a disease, right? Well, not necessarily.

If we are to work with Tolstoy's definition of an infectious transmission of emotion, we must account for those who do not feel the emotion that was consciously attempted to be transmitted. If someone walks into the Museo del Prado and sees Francisco Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son* and does not feel the same emotion that Goya consciously intended to transmit via canvas, does the work deserve to be thrown out for being a failed art piece? Or would we suggest that the individual is not cultured enough to make a connection with the piece? It is inevitable that some people will simply have a different interpretation or feeling from the piece than the artist intended to express. Is this a complete failing of Tolstoy's definition then, if there is a lack of transmission of emotion? It may surprise you to hear then that I would say it is not a failing of the definition, only that it may be missing a few components.

I would suggest that much like they can be for disease, people can be *inoculated* to certain works of art. Most people understand that infection is not a guaranteed outcome when exposed to disease vectors. When it comes to art, there are several mechanisms by which I believe the transmission of emotion through a medium to certain individuals is far more difficult or impossible. Tolstoy says that the transmission via media is conducted "by means of certain external signs." This is simultaneously very useful for the definition, and very troubling. For signs or symbols to be useful, there must be a mutual understanding of the underlying meaning behind a sign. Dr. Herbert Clark and Dr. Susan Brennan, cognitive scientists and psychologists from the universities of Stanford and Stony Brook respectively suggest within their work *Grounding in Communication* that for communication of any kind to exist, there must be a commonly held understanding and mutual underlying knowledge between any two given parties,

> It takes two people working together to play a duet, shake hands, play chess, waltz, teach, or make love. To succeed, the two of them have to coordinate both the content and process of what they are doing... This is coordination of process. They cannot even begin to coordinate on content without assuming a vast amount of shared information or common ground-that is, mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions.

We may assume then that this shared understanding and shared information must then be necessary for any form of communication to be had, including the communication of emotion through art. This is not to suggest that emotional expression is solely cultural or social in its origin, nor is it limited intralingually, certainly there is immense overlap between all cultures in how emotion is expressed. Soo Jin Kwoun, professor of music therapy at Maryville university conducted a study in 2009 to investigate the Cue Redundancy model of emotional perception in music. Within the study four participant groups were used, young Koreans, young Americans, older Koreans, and older Americans. These participant groups rated Korean folksongs with three adjective scales: happiness, sadness and anger. The study found that the participant grounds were universally able to identify more basic and fundamental emotions through auditory cues. There was however, a distinct area where cues that were identified as culturally specific, were not so readily identified - which can be seen in figure 1.

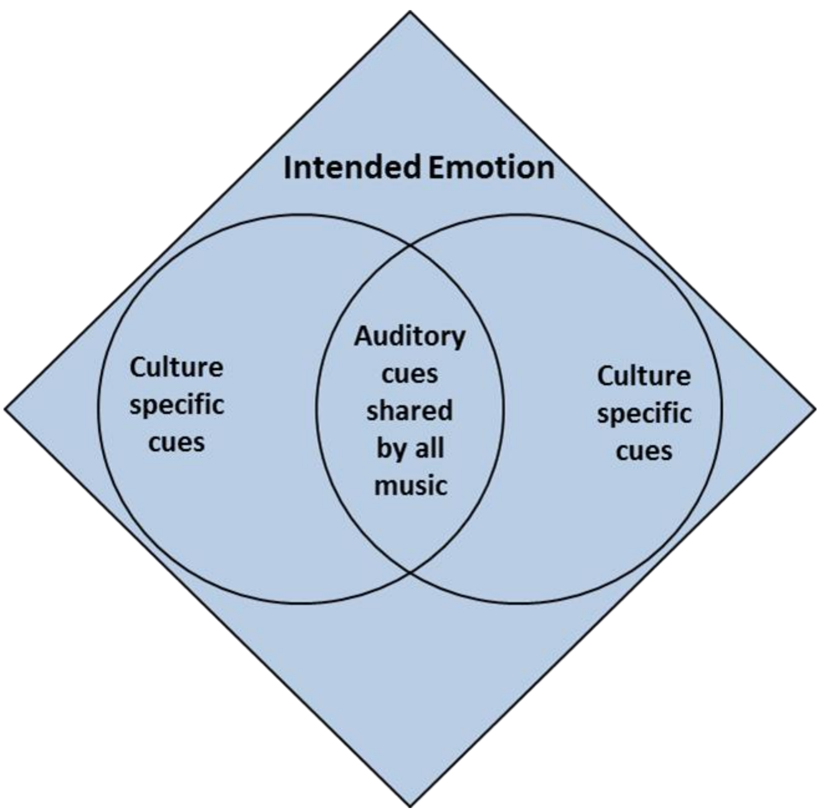

Figure 1 - Soo Jin Kwoun, 2009.

Further, studies conducted by Dr. Marjorie Li at the National Institute of Mental Health suggests that more nuanced emotions could not be as readily identified by subjects of differing cultures,

> Emotion perception in music is shaped by cultural background, yet the extent of cultural biases remains unclear. This study investigated how Western listeners perceive emotion in music across cultures, focusing on the accuracy and intensity of emotion recognition and the musical features that predict emotion perception... Western listeners experienced Western classical music as more familiar and enjoyable than Chinese music. Happiness and sadness were recognised more accurately in Western classical music, whereas agitation was more accurately identified in Chinese music. The perceived intensity of happiness and sadness was greater for Western classical music; conversely, the perceived intensity of agitation was greater for Chinese music. Furthermore, emotion perception was influenced by both culture-shared (e.g., timbre) and culture-specific (e.g., dynamics) musical features.

People from different backgrounds could not so easily identify the intended emotion within a musical piece if it went beyond the most basic human emotions, and it would not be silly to suggest that the same could be said for visual media of art. It is unlikely for outsiders to a culture to be able to identify an emotional state as complex as something like valor or pride when they have more nuanced cultural markers or *signs* relevant to the emotion. Visual symbols must have a shared cultural lens for them to be recognized and understood, otherwise the symbol is meaningless. Tolstoy's definition's requirement of the use of "certain external signs" would appear to refer to conventions of expression through symbols, be they clear symbols like a skull and crossbones or abstractions using colors and shapes. For the infection to take hold, there must be a diathesis, a vulnerability, to the signs expressed through the medium. Messages of all types within communication have to be encoded by the transmitter and decoded by the receiver, which is to say that the signs one uses to create their art have to be understandable to the audience that receives the signs. To someone in ancient Rome or Byzantium, the color purple was directly associated with the imperial, the auguste, the noble, thanks to the difficulty in acquiring the pigment and its value. In modern Thailand it is a color associated with sorrow and mourning, worn by widows to funerals. To someone in the modern west a centipede is mostly a gross insect, but in Japan and especially the Sengoku period, the centipede, or Japanese *Mukade (百足),* are seen as impure vessels of death, strength, and repugnant evil, often depicted as giant versions known as *Ōmukade* (**大百足**), terrifying giant monsters.

For my own interpretation of Tolstoy's definition, we naturally have to include the idea that some people are inoculated to the infectious aspect of art by cultural background. Failing a cultural explanation of inoculation, however, we may suggest that inoculation by inculcation could be a reasonable argument for those individuals who fail to be infected by art's emotion *and* come from a similar cultural background. Some individuals may have become desensitized to the signs expressed through the medium. To someone 60 years ago without ready access to the internet the depiction of sexual acts or genitalia through an artistic medium may have a stronger, more infectious, effect than to those exposed to vast quantities of sexual material in the form of internet pornography in the modern age. We may even propose that exposure to one artistic work may inoculate one against the emotional transmission by way of another artistic work if the visuals of the piece are similar to the first piece. Thus if someone is exposed to works they are initially vulnerable to, they may become 'vaccinated' in a sense, preventing them from becoming infected in the future. But that does not mean the piece is not still art, just in the same manner that polio does not become a non-disease because people have been inoculated against it. In order for Tolstoy's description of art to work, we may want to include a specification that the audience also be targeted by the artist. Beyond the cultural aspects and potential for desensitization, there is also the fact that people do not neatly fall into boxes of someone who enjoys art or someone who does not. To most people, there are preferences in both their media of choice and the genre of the media they consume. A person who consumes almost exclusively heavy-metal or similar genres of music is unlikely to be moved emotionally by a mid 17th century orchestral piece. Similarly, someone who is infected by the emotions of a surrealist piece by Salvador Dali may not be so easily infected by the pop art work of Eduardo Paolozzi. Genres exist, at least to some extent, by virtue of the diverse nature of people's expressed interests in art in all its media, and would lend further credence to the idea that simply because a piece may not infect someone, does not mean it won't infect another. We may be additionally inclined to suggest that what distinguishes good art from bad art is the degree by which it infects people within its targeted genre, or even spills outside to infect those the genre it falls within may not usually infect.

With abstractionist artists like Mark Rothko, however, we may run into a (minor) speedbump. The abstract expressionism movement of art of post-WWII New York has (attempted) to move expressionist art towards more non-representational forms. These non-representational forms of painting, especially color-field paintings done by Rothko, essentially remove cultural signs from the work to focus on only human emotion. These works are characterized by large canvases with deep fields of color almost entirely devoid of discernible objects and identifiable precise shapes. To Rothko in particular, a man uninterested in the form of the painting entirely, they are pure human emotion applied to canvas. There is no skull to properly decode into a culturally understandable sign, it's the color red which is used to transmit the feelings he has infected the canvas with for you to then receive. If then there is a way to apply pure emotion to a canvas like Rothko believes - to strike at the heart of the human condition - with pure color and expressive brushstrokes, then surely that means we have found art that is the most potently infectious and everything else falls by the wayside as non-art, right? Alas, it is more complicated than abstractionist artists like Rothko may have believed. Within Tolstoy's description of art, a proper transmission of feeling is required, which requires a proper interpretation. Abstractions do not ease the means by which the art can be properly interpreted, on the contrary, abstractions *widen* the range of interpretations that may be made! While in representational pieces, the presence of a skull may have a multitude of emotional interpretations for its presence, the further abstracted you move from the appearance of the skull, the greater the multiplicity of the interpretations grows. As you move from a fully formed representation to a vaguely skull-shaped shape, then to a splash of bone-white on a black background, the greater the odds that people will misinterpret the work grow. And again, the ability to be inoculated by one's background culture crops up even in these seemingly basic shows of human emotion. The color red to someone from a Western background has completely different connotations from someone from China, where red is a representation of good fortune (Olesen). If even simple colors can not necessarily infect someone with the emotions the artist intended, then we must account for inoculation so as to not throw out anything that is not misinterpreted or doesn't infect people emotionally.

Then there is the issue of the wording, "Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously," where Tolstoy insists upon two things that are troubling further. If art is a human activity, how do we account for the presence of A.I. Art? As much as I would like to simply let A.I. burn and be tossed in the garbage, using Tolstoy's definition there is a legitimate question in whether or not it counts. If someone types a prompt into a neural network and the resulting slop goes on to actually infect someone else with the emotion intended by the person who typed the prompt, does not that make it art?

How much shaping of the piece is required by human hands to consider it a human activity? Is typing a set of words into the prompt enough to qualify? Or does it fall under the category of a craft? And then there is the issue of *conscious* creation. If a painter includes within their work an emotion they were not consciously aware of, something within their unconscious or subconscious psyche that was transmitted to the medium, and people become infected by that unconscious emotion, does it count as art? Does the fact that it was not a conscious application of the emotion really matter? Does the result of a prompt to A.I. really count as a conscious creation, or is it more like the prepping of the medium? All of this leaves the Expressionist Theory in a tangle, and that is not even to touch upon some of its other numerous critiques, such as the suggestion that art may not even need to express feelings or emotions at all!

So what then, should be done to help Tolstoy's definition of art? I would suggest something of a rephrasing, one that leaves the fundamentals of the definition intact, but allows for a greater amount of nuance in deciding what is and isn't art. I would modify the definition to be: "Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one person through effort, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings they have lived through, and that other people who are vulnerable to those external signs are infected by these feelings and also experience them to some degree." Art then becomes a process that allows for the accounting of people who may not become infected, allows for unconscious emotions to count in the expression, and assumes that the audience is able to decode the emotions encoded within the work. I mean, what fun is a disease that can't even infect its host?

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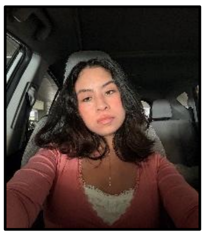
POLITICAL SCIENCE



Adalia Bonilla

Montgomery College

Mentor: Dr. Nathan Zook

Title: “Voices in Motion: How Gen-Z is Changing the Meaning of Activism”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Taneisha Means Davis, Vassar College:

“’Voices in Motion: How Gen-Z is Changing the Meaning of Activism’ is the winner, standing out for its analytical ambition, engagement with contemporary political issues, rich comparative perspective, and relevance to some of the most pressing political questions of our time. Drawing on cases from the United States, Nepal, Peru, and Kenya, Adalia's paper and presentation examined how young people use digital technologies to reshape political participation, challenge traditional institutions, and advance social change. Adalia delivered an engaging and polished presentation and responded thoughtfully to questions during the discussion, demonstrating a deep understanding of her topic, its broader political implications, and the opportunities and challenges facing democratic participation, especially among the youth, in the digital age.”

Voices in Motion: How Gen-Z is Changing the Meaning of Activism

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, has become an influential generation on a global scale. Gen-Z activism has been shaped by the world and environment in which they have grown up. Throughout the generation's upbringing, they have been faced with and responded to many different types of issues, such as racial injustice, climate change, economic inequality, and the main one being the political systems that are in place. Even though generations of the past have also faced similar experiences, what makes Gen-Z different is that they are deeply involved with technology and the use of digital media. In a world that is continuously shifting and evolving, Gen-Z is actively reshaping both online and in-person activism, using digital tools and real-world organizing to challenge the traditional political systems, which in turn is shaping their increasingly critical view of the meaning of authority and the role that it plays in society.

Methodology

This research focuses on qualitative and quantitative data to examine how Gen-Z activism operates through digital platforms and physical activism. Through the qualitative, media sources were used based on their documentation of youth-led movements. International news outlets such as BBC News, ABC News, and Al Jazeera were analyzed in order to provide real-time visuals, a breakdown of events, and quotes from Gen-Z protesters who were interviewed. Social media, such as TikTok, was also used to examine how Gen-Z spreads awareness and shares information online.

Through the quantitative approach, different surveys and reports were used to measure how strongly Gen-Z feels about various political and social issues, as well as their attitudes towards democracy and trust in political institutions and leaders. Together, these sources help to illustrate how digital engagement and in-person activism are able to work together to shape youth movements.

Generation-Z's Background

In John Della Volpe's book "Fight: How Gen Z Is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America," he explains that the younger generation today has dealt with immense events such as school shootings, political distress, climate crisis, and instability in the world. This is not to say that past generations have not dealt with the same issues, but Gen-Z is living in a time when there is a connection between the digital world and physical presence. This means that this generation is able to react, organize, and amplify their voices both offline and online. The constant exposure that Gen-Z is being faced with is what morphs their activism into what it is today, and the global communication that they share with Gen-Z all around the world has become a catalyst for change that is important to focus on since it is currently evolving.

To further explain the background of Gen Z's digital environment and the movements that they have been a part of, Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace's book, "Generation Z: A Century in the Making" can help explain the conditions that shaped the way that Gen-Z views the word and their research shows how gen-Z engages with both political and social issues. They note that "with the wide reach of the Internet and social media, along with hundreds of radio and television channels and blogs, the news is more accessible today than it was when those in older generations were youth" (Seemiller and Grace 276). The constant information that the younger generation is accessing is unlike anything that the older generations could grasp, but this engagement has been incredibly important in sparking change because it is able to reach a wider population, quickly, to help movements grow.

The authors also bring up an important movement that took place in 2017 that demonstrates the digital activism that they are discussing: “For example, the #MeToo movement drew attention to the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, bringing many out of the shadows to share their stories. The movement gained so much traction that many high-profile individuals ended up facing serious repercussions for inappropriate sexual behavior that occurred even decades ago” (Seemiller and Grace 287). This quote shows how digital mobilization has become an outlet to disrupt the traditional power structures. By the younger generation sharing their stories and pulling them from the dark, they were able to spark conversation, even if it was controversial. They highlight how “today’s digital landscape has now made it possible for youth to engage in activities like never before” (Seemiller and Grace 287).

The digital influence that they are pointing out is also reflected in other youth-led movements such as March for Our Lives, which was able to bring together hundreds and thousands of people, mainly Gen-Z, to fight against gun control (Seemiller and Grace 285). There are also individual acts of online activism that Gen-Z is doing to be able to spark a conversation on an issue: “In a Twitter post, Florida school shooting survivor, David Hogg, called for a spring break boycott to draw the attention of Florida lawmakers to pass gun control legislation” (Seemiller and Grace 285). This demonstrates how Gen-Z is using social media as an outlet to share their own personal experiences and place pressure on the lawmakers who do not see the urgency of the issue. Beyond these examples, many other hashtags have been able to go viral that all pertain to a wide range of issues that the youth are combating: “Other hashtag movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #IceBucketChallenge, #Ferguson, and #LoveWins have also been powerful contributors to advancing social justice causes” (Seemiller and Grace 287). These are examples of how allied youth movements have been able to consistently use digital platforms to spread awareness on various causes, in hopes of amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and making an impact in the real world.

#MeToo Movement

As stated previously, it is important to understand how digital activism plays a key role in the way that Gen-Z is shaping history and utilizing their voices through an online space. In Martinez Aleman and Marines’ book “Voices of Campus Sexual Violence Activists: #MeToo and Beyond,” which centers on sexual violence on college campuses, they show how students spread the #MeToo movement during 2020 and 2021 (after it blew up in 2017) to share their stories through a digital space and empower others who experienced the same story. The authors explain that “#MeToo’s ubiquity on social and mainstream media, and the wave after wave of survivors surfacing and claiming its mantle, revealed the vast grip sexual violence has on American society” (Aleman and Marines 21).

One of the most striking examples that highlights the significance of not staying silent on the cause is through the experience of Emma Sulcowicz: “Emma Sulcowicz, a former student at Columbia University (2011-2015), engaged in a multimonth performance art project in which she carried the mattress where she was raped around campus to all classes, events, and activities she took part in for 14 months” (Aleman and Marines 53). The public act that Emma Sulcowicz did was meant to spark controversy, and it served the purpose of intentionally making people uncomfortable. She wanted the people that she came across to be able to see and be confronted with the violence that she experienced, instead of pushing it to the side. Together, both the public acts and digital amplification of survivor stories were able to spark an important conversation that needed to be had. By spreading awareness both online and on campus, it also caused the institutions that these young activists attended not to stay silent. This demonstrates how Gen-Z further uses digital activism not just to raise awareness but also to expose institutional silence and hypocrisy, demanding accountability when the systems above them fail to address the problems at hand. In doing so, Gen-Z activists are challenging the legitimacy of traditional institutions such as universities and legal systems that tend to control the narratives as they see fit. This reflects a broader generational shift in how authority is questioned rather than being trusted.

Gen-Z and Democracy

Melina Geser-Stark, in her article "Gen-Z's Damaged Relationship with Democracy," provides the perspective that in our current political system, the younger generation no longer trusts the democratic system that exists today. They feel as if the political leaders do not represent them correctly or listen to them, and that they are jeopardizing not only their own future but also the future of generations to come. According to her research, "surveys consistently show that Gen Z is the age group that is the most disillusioned with democratic governance" (Geser-Stark 3). This has become a pattern in the younger generation within the most recent years; there is a divide between the leaders and the people who are looking up to them. The author also notes that "prior to the 2024 election, only 27% of Gen Z respondents strongly agreed that democracy is the best form of government, compared to 69% of those over 58" (Gesar-Stark 3). This gap demonstrates how there is a deep split between the way that the younger generation feels about the democratic system versus the older generation's view of the democratic institutions. Gesar-Stark further points out that many young people feel like democracy operates as a system that acts upon them rather than one that sees them as valuable participants (Gesar-Stark 3).

This feeling of exclusion has further pushed Gen-Z to take matters into their own hands and fight back against the system. Mainly leading to consequences for how the youth engage with politics, by the time of the 2024 election, "31% of American youth reported feeling they lacked the freedom to shape their own lives – a record high" (Gesar-Stark 4). Even though this data does focus solely on the United States, these similar patterns of distrust can be connected globally, where many youth groups are challenging their governments and the systemic inequality that they are facing.

Climate Activism

There is also the side of climate activism that has become a great matter of concern to the younger generation. One of the most influential activists of the time, Greta Thunberg, has been able to spread awareness on the issue of climate change and how it is causing irreversible damage to the Earth. Her activism started to gain global attention through the movement of Fridays for Future that she jumpstarted in August 2018 when Thunberg would sit outside of the Swedish parliament, every single school day for three weeks to bring attention to the lack of urgency towards climate change. Her urgency led to a global movement that spread across hundreds of school campuses around the world (Fridays for Future US). Thunberg's sense of urgency was further displayed through her powerful speech titled "Our House Is on Fire," which she delivered to the United Nations in 2019. The speech centers around the fact that there is and will be irreversible damage to the planet due to climate change, and she expressed her frustration towards the government officials and corporations that have turned a blind eye to the decay of the environment. Thunberg confronts world leaders by stating, "This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you" (TeachRock). Throughout her speech, she ends her points with the phrase "how dare you," employing a strong rhetorical strategy that conveys her outrage, not just for herself but also for the injustice that has been imposed on the younger generation. She combines her emotional stance towards the issue along with scientific data, "To have a 67% chance of staying below a 1.5 degrees global temperature rise – the best odds given by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] – the world had 420 gigatons of CO_2 left to emit back on Jan 1st, 2018. Today, that figure is already down to less than 350 gigatons" (TeachRock).

The combination of both her emotional stance towards the issue and data allowed for her speech to connect with audiences both emotionally and rationally, but most of all, she wanted her message to be heard that there is something that needs to be done when it comes to climate change. Young activists like Greta Thunberg demonstrate how the youth are not afraid to publicly confront authority figures, showcasing how expectations are being reshaped of who is allowed to hold power accountable.

Nepal

Nepal is a clear example of the way that Gen-Z activism has gone through great lengths to fight for a cause, even if it has led to destruction and fatalities. In Samira Hussain's article "They were Shot Dead for Protesting against Corruption in Nepal," he talks about the protests that occurred on September 8, which ended up resulting in 70 people dying and more than 1,000 individuals injured, but ultimately the immense loss that the families of Gen-Z protesters feel after losing their children. What began as a reaction to the censorship that the government was trying to impose quickly transformed into an uprising that was led by the youth: "Protests began last Monday when thousands heeded a call by demonstrators describing themselves as Generation Z to gather near parliament in Kathmandu over the decision to ban platforms including Facebook, X and YouTube, as well as over wider dissatisfaction with the government" (Hussain). This shows that the government's decision to censor the media was a factor in the ripple effect of the protests led by Gen-Z. Hussain also notes that these protests were both large and symbolic. Thousands of Gen-Z activists flooded the streets, and what started as online outrage has escalated to become one of Nepal's largest youth demonstrations in recent years. A powerful point that Hussain brings up is the multiple deaths that occurred during the protests, which left many of the victims' families with everlasting heartbreak. The article introduces a mother and father whose son was shot and killed. Hussain includes a picture of the grieving mother holding a photograph of her son, Sulov. Hussain also includes a feeling of sentiment from Sulov's father: "Narendra Shrestha wants to know who will take responsibility for the death of his son Sulov, who was among scores killed in violent unrest that rocked Nepal last week" (Hussain).

After discussing Sulov, the list of victims with their names and ages follows which is a powerful message to address the victims as human beings and restore their individuality: "The relatives of Subash Bohora, 21, said there was a time in his life when wanted to be a judge. He died outside Nepal's parliament building after a bullet pierced his neck" and then another example, "Ayush Thapa, 19, was a French language student who was interested in the British Army and hated Nepali politicians, his family says. He was shot in the chest" (Hussain). This shows how the Gen-Z protesters had hopes for their future, but that was taken away from them as a result of the corrupt system that appeared to be indifferent to their aspirations. Hussain closes out the article by including another striking quote from Mr. Shrestha, the father of Sulov: "Politicians, they will say sorry. Sorry doesn't make a dead son come alive again" (Hussain). Ultimately, this shows that the powerful people who are in control of the political system produce empty apologies in the eyes of the citizens. It also demonstrates the generational divide between the politicians and the youth; they no longer want empty promises but want actual change.

The issues in Nepal are further displayed through 16-year-old Avishkar Raut, who delivered a speech titled "Jai Nepal," which quickly became viral on social media through widely shared video clips on various platforms such as TikTok and X. In the article written by Shruti Sneha, "'We Are the Fire That Will Burn Away...' 16-Year-Old Nepali Student's Fiery Speech Goes Viral Again as Gen Z Protests Burn Nepal," she brings up the important words that Raut declared in his speech and how they resonated with the young people of Nepal: "Youth, rise! We are the torchbearers of change. If we do not raise our voices, who will? If we don't build this nation, who will? We are the fire that will bury away the darkness, the storm that will sweep away injustice and bring prosperity" (Sneha). His words are not only powerful, but also the rapid spread of his speech demonstrates how Gen-Z activists are continuously amplifying their voices, sharing a collective feeling of frustration and urgency for the future of the younger generation.

In Amish Raj Mulmi's source, "From Streets to Discord: How Nepal's Gen Z Toppled a Government," he provides further context and expands the narrative on Nepal by not only centering on the protests but also providing a political background on Nepal. The political system in Nepal has experienced a lot of instability, in which they have gone through twenty-seven prime ministers in under twenty years (Mulmi). Mulmi also brings up how, on September 12 (a few days after the protests on September 8 went down), the first woman prime minister was sworn in, not under good conditions as a result of the protests and riots that occurred. The protests spread immensely, and many of the political symbols and buildings were destroyed: "Offices of the three major parties – the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist, or UML), the Nepali Congress, and the Maoists – were torched" (Mulmi). This displays the lengths that the younger generation took to show their frustration, not only with the political leaders but with the political system as a whole. The digital spaces played an important role in organizing the protests. Youth activist Sudan Gurung, who is a founder of Hami Nepal, which is a nongovernmental organization, announced on September 6 through Instagram, a few days before the protests, "Do not stay silent. Do not stay home. Bring your friends, your family, your courage and your voice," (Mulmi). Their message reflects how they are reaching out to the youth through what they know best, the media. Social media was able to become a tool not only to spread awareness but to actually encourage people to mobilize and show up. Mulmi further emphasizes how there is a disconnect between online political engagement and the reality that the youth are living through: "Young Nepalis were online – on Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, Discord – but offline, they saw none of the better future promised by the 2006 revolution against the monarchy" (Mulmi). This statement emphasizes the frustration that is driving the younger generation in Nepal to fight for justice in hopes of living a more promising future. By Mulmi also pointing out the past 2006 revolution, it further shows how it has been over two decades since the promise of democratic reform, yet the young Nepali people today still feel failed by their political system. The willingness of young people to risk their safety also highlights how deeply they question the legitimacy of political authority that they view as failing them.

Kenya

Kenya is another case that demonstrates the way that Gen-Z is actively reshaping political participation. According to a BBC World Service report on June 25, more than 100,000 Kenyans rallied in the streets of Nairobi to protest against the 2024 finance bill, which aimed to raise taxes to counter the country's national debt (BBC World Service). The government saw the bill as a measure that needed to be taken for their economy, but the youth in Kenya saw the bill as another initiative that political leaders were taking to prioritize the state instead of the actual interests and realities of the people. After the protests that happened on June 25, President Ruto delivered an address to the country of Kenya: "Today, an otherwise legitimate expression of the fundamental rights and freedoms of assembly was infiltrated and hijacked by a group of organized criminals" (BBC News). This address, which was delivered by the president, further highlights the divide between the youth movements and political leadership. The president also fails to address why the protest happened in the first place and instead leans towards delegitimizing the movement and categorizing Gen-Z in Kenya as criminals. The president's address also failed to mention the victims of the protest whose lives were lost amidst the chaos, one of those being Eric Kayoni Shieni. Eric Kayoni Shieni was identified as one of the victims of the demonstrations. He was described as a 27-year-old University of Nairobi student who majored in finance. The report shows a video montage of Eric, laughing, singing, and talking, allowing viewers to see that he was just like any other young person (BBC News). This portrayal reinforces the fact that the individuals who were affected during these protests were young people with aspiring futures, not as “criminals” as they were portrayed to be.

It is also important to point out that BBC News collected more than 5,000 photos and videos to be able to map out the sequence of events that happened on June 25, and by collecting all this data, it provides evidence to their viewers on how the government utilized the army to target the youth. The extensive visual documentation that BBC showcases throughout their report shows the power that digital media can have in holding governments and political leaders accountable. The visibility that the news outlet provides to demonstrate the state violence that is ongoing in Kenya reshapes the way that the protest is understood beyond Kenya’s borders and how political participation is no longer just confined to national boundaries.

Gen-Z and “Red Pill” Content

As seen in countries like the US, Kenya, and Nepal, Gen-Z activists are redefining the way that political participation functions in an interconnected world, mainly showing the same pattern of demanding accountability from political systems that have failed to invest in the futures, safety, and voices of the younger generation. Even after all the protests that are ongoing and have happened globally, many of which mainly targeted the political systems and advocacy for democracy, many individuals argue that Gen-Z is not as progressive or democratic when it comes to political engagement. Instead, critics point to electoral data as well as online trends that suggest that Gen-Z, mainly the young men, have been shifting towards a conservative and far-right way of thinking. In the article, “Young voters shifted right in the 2024 election; the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation examined why, “The voting behavior among Gen-Z shows that during the 2024-2025 election cycle, Gen-Z men through the ages of 18 through 24 were more likely to vote conservatively, while Gen-Z women were more likely to support the liberal candidates (Hughes). Some people believe that this shift is evidence of the way that Gen-Z activism has been an overstatement, but that is simply not the case. This article is particularly focusing on only one singular US election, which undermines and simplifies the way that the youth may feel in another country or the whole political trajectory of the generation.

This “shift” that critics are discussing can also be linked to the rise of certain online media, such as “red pill” content, as well as the influence that far-right influencers, such as Andrew Tate, share through social media platforms. Andrew Tate is an internet personality who has become popular online through his views on controversial and misogynistic beliefs and his extreme conservative views on women. His ideology has been labeled as “Red pill media: which is promoting male dominance, a disdain for feminism, and the promotion of far-right political beliefs. Just as progressive and innovative movements are able to benefit from being amplified online, there is also the side of conservative and extremist narratives being pushed, which influences young audiences like Gen-Z. As Alice E. Marwick and Katherine Furl explain through their publication in the International Journal of Communication, “Mountains of Evidence: Processual ‘Redpilling’ as a Socio Technical Effect of Disinformation,” they break down the ways that red pill media has influenced individuals online and how the disinformation that is spread through that type of media can be incredibly harmful. They discuss the way that technology and social media have been used hand-in-hand to expose certain types of content: “Technology has consistently been identified as a source of Far-Right radicalization through exposure to extremist information, from search engines like Google to mainstream social media sites like YouTube and Facebook, to conservative niche sites like Telegram, Gab, and Parler” (Marwick & Furl 2319). This highlights the way that digital platforms do not always push the promotion of democracy and justice, but they also boost messages that have become the most engaging as well as controversial.

Misinformation and Disillusionment

It is important to note that the same digital tools that allow movements like Fridays for Future or the #MeToo movement to spread globally also allow for other ideological movements to be shared and circulate amongst different regions. Activists like Greta Thunberg can spread the message of fighting for climate change to the youth as well as inform them on vital data, but figures like Andrew Tate also shape the attitudes of people and can lead to a dangerous mindset within the youth. There is a dual nature when it comes to social media, and it's important for the youth to be able to critically evaluate what they are seeing and not just passively accept certain types of information based on popularity or emotional appeal.

One of the main issues that comes with social media, which has been continuously shown time and time again through the online media, is the distortion of information. While online platforms have allowed Gen-Z to be able to communicate, organize, and document the injustices that they are facing, what comes alongside that is the rapid spread of misinformation and desensitization to what is going on in the world. In the article "Social Media Algorithms and Mental Health," the association points out how the algorithms on these platforms tend to prioritize emotionally charged and polarizing content, which makes it a lot easier for misleading information to circulate while the real facts tend to get overlooked (Mental Health). As a result of this, meaningful political engagement can be pushed to the side even though online activism is increasing. Also, certain activists like Greta Thunberg have faced lots of backlash based on the narrative that is pushed forward in the media. In the article "Targeting Greta Thunberg: A Case Study in Online Mis/Disinformation," the authors explain that many conspiracy theories have been released and they spread on an international scale. They point out how "These narratives discredit Thunberg through personal attacks (questioning her mental abilities), her

alleged associations (with antifa and Soros), and allegations that she is manufactured or a hoax (through narratives that describe her as a PR stunt, puppet, and part of a climate industrial complex" (Dave, Aashka, et al.). This shows how misinformation is not just about disagreeing with someone's ideas, but it can also be about attacking someone's identity and credibility to weaken the movement that they are standing for.

Solution

A critical solution to combat this misinformation would be promoting digital literacy. Digital literacy is more than just knowing how to use social media responsibly; it also means having a deeper understanding when it comes to recognizing misinformation and also actively engaging with credible media and sources. It's vital to not just passively consume information, but also to verify and report content that may seem inaccurate. This is a shift that can help transform the algorithms on the digital platforms if people start to actively encourage combating misleading information. This has also been recognized by international organizations that are trying to address the issue. The World Health Organization (WHO) has developed different strategies to push against digital misinformation by encouraging social media platforms, governments, and users to promote information that is fact-checked and trustworthy. For example, the WHO explains the way that they combatted information during the time of COVID-19, "WHO worked with YouTube to enhance their COVID-19 Misinformation Policy and provide guidelines for content providers to ensure no medical misinformation related to the virus proliferates on their platform" (World Health Organization). This urgency that was applied towards health misinformation should also be extended to the ongoing political media that is being circulated, as well as the breakdown of events of the global youth movements. By promoting digital literacy, individuals are able to challenge the misleading portrayals of events, which ultimately lead to more effective online activism.

The global wave of political movements that have occurred and continue to be ongoing issues demonstrates how local struggles are connected even on an international level. Media coverage from countries like the United States, Nepal and Kenya illustrates the way that activism is shaped by shared challenges, movements from the past, and strategies that circulate through the media. Understanding these patterns is crucial for amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and the political unrest that they feel. More importantly, this generation is not just participating in politics differently, but they are redefining who holds power and how that power is questioned. As activism continues to evolve both physically and through the advancement of technology, the future movements that are to come have the potential to reshape politics in ways that we are only beginning to see today.

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SOCIAL JUSTICE

Aly Vaca

Montgomery College

Mentor: Prof. Lauren Strawbridge

Title: “Parties, Policies, and Permission: The Divergence of Transphobic Rhetoric in the United States and the United Kingdom”

Comments from Panel Judge – Dr. Amiel Bize, Cornell University:

“Aly's paper was a deeply thoughtful engagement with the expansion of transphobia and how it has gained traction in the US and UK. It persuasively explains that increasingly transphobic political rhetoric isn't coming from the grassroots -- in fact, it’s political rhetoric that generates transphobia among the broader public. This argument helps us see something really important - that politicians mobilize anxieties around gender to sideline discontentment with unpopular neoliberal policies. I was extremely impressed with how this paper unfolded its powerful argument!”

Parties, Policies, and Permission: The Divergence of Transphobic Rhetoric in the United States and the United Kingdom

Introduction: See to Sea

Upon returning from her trip to Beijing to attend the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, American Catholic journalist Dale O'Leary met with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to present a pamphlet that outlined her analysis of what she identified as "The Gender Agenda." More thoroughly explained in her 1997 book *The Gender Agenda*, O'Leary described this supposed agenda as being built on false premises that undermine the difference between men and women's duties – an agenda pursuing a "hostile takeover of international bodies" with an "effort to push a radical sexual agenda upon developing nations" (Graff and Korolczuk 64-6; Case 645). Already primed over his discontent with those "demanding the right" to change sex and have that new sex be legally recognized (qtd. in Case 646) – an anger almost certainly linked to the technological and legal developments that allowed just that in his native Germany years earlier (Case 647-48) – Ratzinger eagerly took up the cause. In the years that followed, the Catholic Church published its 1000-page *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions,* which detailed its positions on such issues, and Ratzinger sent letters to bishops warning of the risk gender theorists and gender ideology presented to both the family and the Church (Graff and Korolczuk 66; Butler 38). Within a year of these letters being sent, Ratzinger assumed papacy as Pope Benedict XVI.

Rising to global prominence through the Vatican – sustained by escalating rhetoric by Pope Benedict and, later, Pope Francis – the anti-gender movement has spread around the globe through organizations of the Catholic and Evangelical Church. 'Gender Ideology' – a term used by critics to describe a single entity that include issues from transgender rights, to abortion rights, to feminism more broadly – has become a central term of engagement in over two dozen nations across every inhabited continent over the past fifteen years (a non-exhaustive list of impacted countries includes: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, the United States, France, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Kenya, Uganda, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia) (Butler 45-54, 59, 66). No longer always solely secular in nature, movements in each country have diverged from a single line of attack, allowing anti-gender – and anti-transgender – rhetoric to adopt national shapes.

While there is value in analyzing the people, policy, and rhetoric that make up movements in each of these countries, this analysis focuses on the United States and the United Kingdom for two reasons. First, the anti-transgender movements in the United States and United Kingdom need not be analyzed within a postcolonial framework or take into account the role of economic dependency. In the regions of Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa, it is not uncommon to hear anti-transgender sentiments be expressed as a rejection of western cultural imposition. Although this rhetoric often contradicts itself, Judith Butler highlights that institutions like the World Bank and organizations like the European Union – which both hold massive leverage due to other nations' economic dependency on them – have placed constraints on indebted nations because of their anti-queer policies or lack of compliance with anti-discrimination regulations (62-4). Even if not taking these rhetorical claims at face value, the "claim that gender is a form of 'colonialism'" has been highly effective (Graff and Korolczuk 43), and further analysis is warranted to understand the historical reasons why this rhetoric resonates among the public. Second, shared language and relative proximity have allowed for overlap in media and political actors, which helps isolate target issues, such as public opinion and rhetoric, in a comparative analysis. Further, this analysis is less concerned with debating the merits of anti-transgender policy and sentiments or justifying the humanity of the transgender people who have had their lives politicized, than it is exploring why anti-transgender policy has flourished in each context, and what that can tell us about how to move forward.

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, a growth of anti-transgender rhetoric over the last decade has fueled successful anti-transgender legal movements targeting transgender people's access to healthcare, gendered spaces and activities, and legal recognition. In 2020, the United States saw the number of anti-transgender bills introduced nearly triple from the year prior, reaching ninety-two bills introduced across the country. At the time the most on record, this number has been surpassed every year since, with over one thousand bills introduced at the state and federal level in 2025 (Trans Legislation Tracker). Also in 2020, the United Kingdom scrapped proposed reform to the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) 2004, that would have given transgender people in the UK an easier pathway to legal recognition and protection. In scrapping these reforms, Women and Equalities Minister, Liz Truss, announced any new guidance would focus on the protection of single-sex spaces (exclude transgender people), maintain checks and balances (create barriers), and safe-guard minors (limit healthcare access) (Pearce et al. 678-79). Though achieving the same goals over the past half-decade – albeit to varying degrees – the rhetoric deployed in each nation has been noticeably different, a divergence that could be understood as reflecting distinct cultural contexts with demands for specific anti-transgender legislation. Rather than being representative of bottom-up demands for anti-transgender policy, this growing divergence in rhetoric represents strategic political decisions to mobilize cultural and economic anxieties against transgender populations through the adoption of transphobic policy and rhetoric that create permission structures that legitimize and inflame discourse.

The Phantasm

To establish that transphobic policy and rhetoric developed for reasons divorced from public demand, it becomes necessary to explore the political usefulness of cultivating anti-transgender sentiments. Drawing from French psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche's, view of fantasy as "an organization of desire and anxiety" rather than simply a product of the imagination, Butler proposes that fears around 'gender ideology' are similarly structured as fantasies rather than reality (10). As fantasies, Butler argues, anti-gender sentiments adopt a phantasmic form, that is, they can take an array of fears and anxieties and organize them into a singular entity that can "incite political passions" (9), and in doing so, adopt a likeness of something real.

Among these fears and anxieties are real concerns over economic insecurity and the perceived erosion of social authority. When looking at post-socialist states in Europe that they covered extensively in their recent book *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk suggest that the mobilization against gender is an act in reactionary opposition to the "neoliberal revolution" and "rapid socio-economic change." They highlight the role of 'traditional values' as a refuge from individualist discourse demanded by capitalism, sanctuaries from change, and popular avenues for politicians to channel limited social spending (56-57). While Graff and Korolczuk specifically point to this dynamic as existing outside of the United States – and even being previously ignored because of historic academic focus on the United States – it is entirely possible for this dynamic to work within both the United States and the United Kingdom as both nations face either a reimagining of neoliberalism and the slashing of social spending.

Though the United States has never matched the level of social safety nets of similarly capitalist nations in Europe and lacks the transition to neoliberalism that post-socialist states experienced in the nineties, the United States did experience a reimagining of neoliberalism during the Reagan era. While correct in their assertion that responses to neoliberal governance in the United States is articulated through neoconservative moral language and ideas, Graff and Korolczuk make the assumption that support for neoconservative politicians and policies represent voter support for neoliberal policies, which polling, especially recently, rejects. Though more likely to engage with social services when bonded to moralizing requirements like work requirements (Goenka and Thomas), contemporary Republican voters in the United States have demonstrated resistance to cuts to social spending at the policy level. Amid rhetoric about the prospect of cutting Medicare and Medicaid in early 2025, polling from Navigator Research found that large majorities of Republican voters – as many as eighty percent – were opposed to cuts to these social programs (Keene). American voters, including conservative ones, share the fears of socio-economic change associated with neoliberalism, even if this fear has not translated towards demands for the protection of these programs or anger at the loss of them.

A similar dynamic is true in the United Kingdom. Although having more substantial safety nets, including a National Health Service, neoliberal policies reaching back to the Thatcher years have eroded their utility.

According to an estimate by The Lancet, funding allocated by the UK Department of Health and Social Services has been cut by at least twenty-four percent per capita over the last decade, and while funding to the NHS has been increasing, it hasn't been enough to relieve waiting list or avoid cutting services (971). While in post-socialist Europe anti-gender rhetoric has been directly opposed to neoliberalism, in the United States and the United Kingdom – where neoliberalism is similarly objected to, though not as often named – anti-gender mobilization has sidelined anger and discontentment towards those advancing neoliberal policy.
The ability of gender, in its phantasmic form, to sideline discontentment with actual policy is exactly what gives it its use. The phantasm of gender is so effective at channeling fear because its realness is fueled by that fear. As Butler describes after discussing Pope Francis' 2016 comments comparing the destructiveness of gender theory to nuclear arms, "[i]f gender is a nuclear bomb, it has to be dismantled" (6). There is no room for discussion as soon as the accusation is made; If enough people perceive gender as akin to nukes, being pro-gender (whatever gender is) might as well mean being pro-nuke. This follows for the other claims of gender – that it's anti-woman, the work of the devil, or preying on children. These claims need not be validated because the very prospect of them renders them socially true. And in becoming true, allows "the various conditions that actually give rise to those [to] lose their names" (Butler 6). In this way, mobilizing an audience against gender and its supposed immediate harms allows politicians to pursue otherwise unpopular policies or avoid pursuing any impactful policy at all by refocusing the fears these policies produce into a marginalized population.

Power of Permission

Having demonstrated the political utility of anti-transgender policy and rhetoric, it next becomes necessary to explore how this utility has been harnessed by those with institutional power to promote transphobic sentiments among the public. A recent study of state-level policies related to transgender individuals and attitudes towards transgender people demonstrated a strong correlation ($p<.001$) between a state's policy score (a number that accounts for both positive and negative legislation regarding transgender people and the protections guaranteed to, or denied from, them) and measures of implicit and explicit attitudes. While not enough to prove a causational relationship alone, this data should be understood in the context of other studies that have demonstrated a causal relationship between policy and public opinion (Roy et al. 1367-68). Among them, studies in both the U.S. and Europe have demonstrated significantly faster decreases of anti-gay implicit and explicit bias in states/countries following the legalization of same-sex marriage within a given jurisdiction and when compared to jurisdictions where same-sex marriage remained illegal (Ofosu et al. 8846-47; Aksoy et al. 5). Given that bias and policy towards gay and transgender people elicit similar political, religious, and social objections, these studies provide an apt comparison for the potential of anti-trans policy eliciting similar, although inverse, changes to opinion. The effect of this inversion, attitudes shifting in a negative as opposed to a positive direction, is additionally minimized by contemporary framing of anti-transgender rhetoric and policy. Today, anti-transgender policy is not framed in the negative anti-transgender, but in the positive pro-woman, pro-child, pro-science, etc. – a framing that also plays a role in its reception.

The recasting of exclusionary policies as both protective and institutionally backed creates permission structures where transphobic expression and diffusion of anti-transgender sentiments are legitimized. Permission structures traditionally refer to a "rhetorical strategy whereby communicators use the audience's existing beliefs and values to persuade them to change their original positions and/or take actions they otherwise would not" (Lambert et al. 2). Following this framework, by framing anti-transgender policies as being in the interest of other marginalized populations, like women and children, political actors tap into existing beliefs to cast anti-transgender policies into a sphere of legitimate concern rather than a discriminatory endeavor. Notably, the existing beliefs being played into are not existing anti-transgender attitudes. Additionally, similar to how this definition has been extended to suggest processes that become procedural and normalized also act as permission structures in the context of healthcare insurance (Cheek and Dorpenyo 11), the constant pursuit of transphobic policy and never-ending transphobic rhetoric in news and media has created permission structures that embolden transphobic sentiments among the public. Repetition and institutional endorsement gives people a sense of permission to discuss this heightened anti-transgender bias openly, reinforcing changes in rhetoric by reflecting specific biases in measurements such as polling.

Anti-transgender rhetoric in the United Kingdom has been predominately sold as being in protection of women who view themselves as under threat. Despite this, before proposed changes to the GRA were scrapped in 2020, in large part because of the fear that easier access to legal recognition would threaten single-sex spaces, polling showed that a majority of British women believed transgender women should be allowed access to women's changing rooms and agreed with the statement that "increased recognition and rights for transgender people does not pose any genuine risk to women's rights" (Smith, "Transgender Rights in 2024/5"). The idea that women demanded protection from transgender people is not supported by data. If anything, it should be highlighted that men were consistently less likely to support transgender protections than women, likely because of the benevolent sexism embedded in the idea that women need protection from 'men' (Atwood et al. 178-79). Following the scrapping of proposed changes, however, women's opinions on transgender rights shifted away from trans-positive positions faster than men's (Smith, "Transgender Rights in 2024/5"). The change in women's perception of transgender rights succeeding the explosion in rhetoric that posited this policy was in the interest of women who demanded it, further demonstrates the role institutional validation has on public opinion – opinions changed because people were told they were supposed to believe these things to begin with. This reception to rhetoric that insisted women's safety was at risk also highlights how the phantasm of gender works; asserting that transgender people posed a danger to women elicited responses because it became feared, accepted, and therefore socially true.

Even with faster changes occurring among women following the abandonment of GRA reform, the rate of these changes has been far more drastic along party lines since 2022. From March 2022 to December 2024, questions regarding transgender people and bureaucratic processes, such as "the law should allow people to change their legal gender" and whether a Gender Recognition Certificate should be easier to get, saw significantly higher drops among Labour voters than Conservative voters, sometimes by as much as five times (Smith, "Transgender Rights in 2022"; Smith, Transgender Rights in 2024/5"). This mirrors the changes in rhetoric among each of these parties over the same period. While the Conservative Party has been more consistently antagonistic to transgender rights, the Labour Party has undergone – particularly among leadership – a sharper rhetorical shift away from supporting transgender rights. The change in rhetoric among party leaders signaled to the party's voter base that this variety of antitransgender sentiment was legitimate, essentially fostering it. This is especially clear when looking at what types of questions didn't elicit this change. When asked if transgender people should be allowed to socially identify as a different gender, drops were more significant among Conservative Party voters (Smith, "Transgender Rights in 2022"; Smith, Transgender Rights in 2024/5"), which aligns with the lack of rhetorical shift among Labour Party leaders in this area. Anti-transgender rhetoric in the Labour Party has usually taken the framing of transgender acceptance with safeguards for women (notably excluding transgender women) (Perry), which signals a lack of significant change in social support, only legal support – the same dynamic reflecting in polling of Labour voters.

Further, the pattern of a party's adoption of new rhetoric reflecting in polling of that Party' s members is also present in the United States. Among polling questions with the same wording in 2021 and 2024, attitudes towards transgender people exhibited a much greater negative shift among Republican voters when compared to Democratic voters (Ballard; Orth). This shift among Republican voters corresponds to changes in rhetoric towards transgender people by leading Republicans at the state and national level, who had been the sponsors of every single one of the over 1,600 anti-transgender bills introduced within the same timeframe that the polling was conducted (Trans Legislation Tracker). This change happening among voters of the more conservative party in the United States, as opposed to the more liberal party in the United Kingdom, also indicates the downward shift in voters' opinions towards transgender people is not a matter of left versus right. The most significant factor in predicting the adoption of anti-transgender beliefs among citizens – even when considering outside factors like gender and party position on the political spectrum – is the fresh adoption of anti-transgender rhetoric by those of corresponding political alignment (and therefore greater ethos) and institutional power.

Seeing What Sticks

This is, of course, not to say that cultural attitudes play no role in shaping anti-trans policy, rather, the role cultural attitudes play can often also be explained by other factors such as political context and historical precedents. A key area of policy that shows clear differences between the United States and the United Kingdom that could be attributed in part to cultural differences are bathroom bans – laws or guidelines that exclude transgender people from using public facilities, such as bathrooms and locker rooms, aligned with their gender (or at all).

In the United States, the passing of North Carolina's HB2 in 2016, a bill that was, in part, a bathroom ban, sparked international outrage. According to a report by Christy Mallory and Brad Sears of the Williams Institute, a research institute at UCLA Law that studies sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy, the backlash to HB2 had major negative economic implications for the state of North Carolina. Within three months of being enacted, five states, the District of Colombia, and over 20 localities adopted travel bans to North Carolina while other nations issued travel advisories (26-7). Between reduced travel, cancelled events (including a Bruce Springsteen concert), litigation cost, and loss of business investment, North Carolina risked over $500 million in economic activity, on top of an additional $4.8 billion in federal funding (23-30). The bill was repealed the next legislative session, and bathroom bills did not begin to be reintroduced at the same rate they were in 2016 until 2023 (Trans Legislation Tracker), with a majority enacted in 2025 (Chapman et al.), a respective seven and nine years later.

Before these bills began to be reintroduced in the United States, the same rhetoric that fueled the creation of these types of bills – that transgender people, particularly transgender women, posed a danger to cisgender people in gendered spaces – was well enough received in the United Kingdom to fuel the backlash to GRA reforms. What didn't work in the United States did, just two years later, work in the United Kingdom. While partially the result of differing societal perspectives towards feminism and whether or not it should include transgender women, equally important to consider are political contexts and the difference two years can make. Coinciding with the push back to North Carolina's HB2 in the United States, was the sweeping of state Republican primaries by Donald Trump, who quickly became the presumptive nominee. Faced with the potential election of a man who openly boasted about sexually assaulting women and made promises to restrict reproductive rights, the feminist movement in the United States expanded (Chira 72). Reaching out to as many people who experienced similar (or higher) rates of degradation, violence, and restrictions on bodily autonomy naturally meant reaching out to include transgender people.

On the other hand, in the United Kingdom in 2018, the MeToo movement had already made substantial progress towards the valiant goal of revitalizing feminist action within the nation. Focused more on systemic issues associate with the patriarchy and rape culture than concrete policy and specific institutional figures, the movement lacked tangible targets. Though the issues being organized against were (and continue to be) real, a target you can locate is easier to hit, and for some people transgender women made apt targets. Bolstered through publications "that have not historically favoured feminist perspectives" (Pearce et al. 685), rhetoric of transgender women as being characterized first and foremost by their penis' (that they may or may not have) made its way into some radical feminist spaces – and the idea that 'men' were coopting pain that was largely (though importantly, not exclusively) experienced by women at the hands of men took root. Making matters worse, many of these spaces were drawing from existing statutes: to this day, under UK law, rape is defined exclusively as penetration from a penis (*Sexual Offences Act 2003*). As the caricature goes, women can't rape and (some) transgender women can, thus there must be a clear distinction made for the protection of (cis) women. Cultural differences played a role, but they did not operate independently from political context and historical precedence.

Conclusion: What Is to Be Done?

Even if it is not the voters demanding transphobic rhetoric, but simply responding to it, many politicians have, either through a lack of desire or a lack of will, refused to take strong positions in opposition to transphobia and anti-transgender policy. In the United Kingdom, the aforementioned position shift of the Labour Party has institutionalized transphobia in a way that is difficult to combat. When the two parties with the largest institutional standing reach a sort of consensus, even if they claim not to have, the space in which transgender people can be defended – legally, culturally, politically – shrinks. While there remain sects within Labour open to transgender constituents and willing to advocate on their behalf, it should come as no surprise that 91% of transgender people in the United Kingdom distrust the Labour Party (Billson). Fortunately, the United Kingdom operates on a multi-party system, and it remains possible to pivot. Other parties, such as the Green Party, are filling the gaps left by the Labour and Conservative consensus, adopting transgender inclusive platforms and applying pressure on political leaders from within and outside of the government.

Operating on a two-party system, the situation in the United States is, currently, structurally different. To date, the vast majority of the Democratic Party has not embraced anti-transgender rhetoric. Often, Democratic politicians have actively opposed such rhetoric, even meeting anti-transgender policy with demands for stronger legal protections. The lack of bipartisan agreement on the 'issue' of transgender rights has been critical to the preservation of legal protections in some states and the lack of anti-transgender provisions passed at the congressional level which, so far, Democratic lawmakers have been able to strip from appropriation spending bills. The narrowing of a partisan divide in the United States would be disastrous – essentially leaving transgender people with no electoral recourse, not to mention an uphill battle against the normalization of transphobia.

Yet recent trends regarding the position of leading figures – particularly those posturing for the party's electoral nomination – suggest this shift may already be occurring. Just a month before the 2024 presidential election, amid over $200 million of ads targeting her overstated support for transgender rights, Kamala Harris sidestepped questions in an interview with Hallie Jackson on her support for protecting transgender people's access to healthcare. Reframing her answer in acknowledgement of the tsunami of anti-transgender ads, she said "we should follow the law," a statement that, at best, was ignorant to the fact that the law in over twenty-five states explicitly forbids transgender youth from accessing gender affirming care, the law that in six states treats best practice medical care as a felony (Chapman et al.). Other front-runners for the presidential nomination have been less subtle. In mid-2025, former United States Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg, doubled down on his position that it is important to take seriously the concerns people have over transgender people's right to participate in sports, and that the 'question' of fairness is a serious one. California Governor, Gavin Newsom, has similarly seceded the issue of sports, going the extra step to answer the question by declaring transgender inclusion to be unfair (Riedel). Newsom has also used his powers as California Governor to veto bills that would have strengthened protections for transgender constituents in his state (Navarro). The issues being turned over with no real pressure – participation in sports and access to healthcare – are the same issues where anti-transgender policy in the United States stuck in 2020, during the effort to reintroduce transphobic policy after the failing of North Carolina's HB2. If we are to accept that liberal party voters are susceptible to anti-transgender rhetoric from party leaders in the United States like was the case in the United Kingdom, the move of leading Democrats towards adopting the same positions that allowed Republicans a foot in the door should be horrifying.

The danger facing transgender people in the United States and the United Kingdom is not inevitable. Anti-transgender legal movements can, even now, be halted, and the rhetoric that fueled them quenched. The process of countering transphobic sentiments must, however, be approached from the source: confronting the material issues that primed voters to be receptive to the phantasm in the first place. Despite what the hundreds of millions of dollars in targeted ads might suggest, the largest issues for voters in the United States are all related to affordability. Inflation, jobs and the economy, and healthcare are the largest concerns of nearly half of voting age adults ("Most Important Issue of 2025"). "The economy" is similarly the largest concern in the United Kingdom, with over half of those polled ranking it as one of their top three issues ("The Most Important Issues Facing the Country"). So far, policy makers have failed to adequately address these issues. As wages remain stagnant, housing costs rise, and healthcare systems are overwhelmed or bank-breaking, voters remain anxious and in search of a more concrete reason their lives are becoming more difficult. Fertile ground have been laid for ‘culture war issues’ to redirect blame. Addressing the roots of such fear weakens the phantasm’s appeal and makes space for people to become deradicalized and for attitudes to change. The dismantling of anti-transgender movements and the rallying around transgender lives, therefore, requires more than condemning prejudice; it requires action that names the real issues, advocates for economic reform, and holds those fueling the flames of hate accountable.

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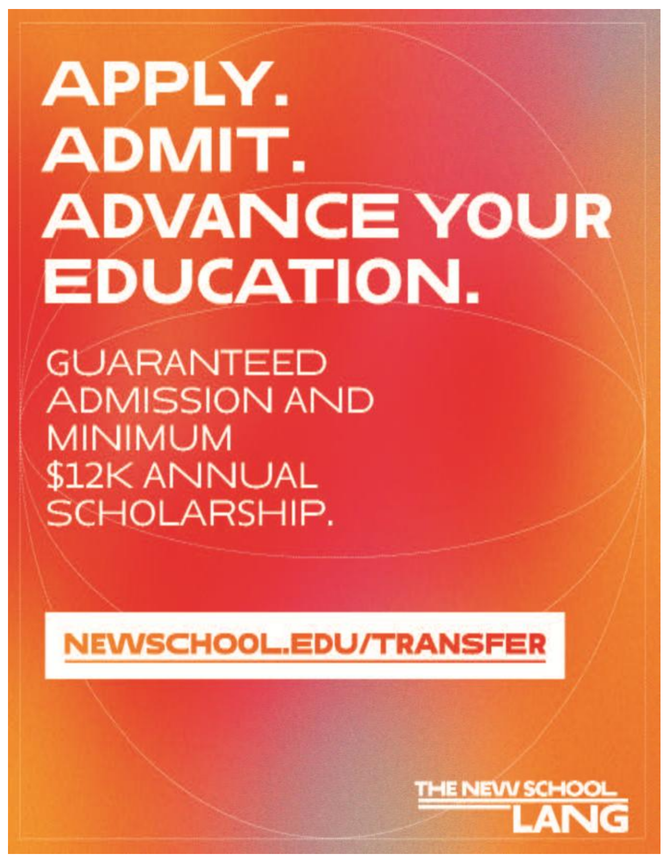
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