

2020

OUTSTANDING

WRITING

AWARDS

Presented Digitally at
Transformations: A Student
Research & Creativity
Conference

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every year, SUNY Cortland's College Writing Committee celebrates student writing by sponsoring two simultaneous writing contests under the umbrella of the Outstanding Writing Awards: the Collin Anderson Memorial Awards in Creative Writing and the Writing across the Curriculum Awards in Academic Writing. These awards, as you can see from the table of contents, feature a remarkable array of diverse student voices across genres. We are grateful to the Provost for his continued support of these awards. We also thank the Anderson family for continuing to support these awards that honor Collin's legacy at SUNY Cortland as a gifted writer and inventive thinker.

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JACOB ANWEILER

Bepis climbed the hill, pushing his bike inch by inch. He had already pushed the bike for at least an hour, and by his estimate he'd gone no more than a mile. *This sucks*, he thought, visibly frustrated. The sweat, running through the crease marks of his furrowed forehead, dripping down his eyebrows and onto his nose, added another element of agitation, as he had to stop every few minutes to wipe his face. It had been a long day already. It was his birthday, after all, and to a kid a birthday is comparable to Christmas.

He stopped and glanced up the hill, squinting his eyes against the bright beating sun which obscured its top from view. The bike he pushed had been given to him only hours before from his mother. It was an older model, a Cannondale, not the newest version that the majority of his classmates owned. The rusty small chain and rear wheel sprocket had broken off less than fifteen minutes into its maiden voyage. The sun reflected off the matte silver coating of the bike's frame, only making Bepis heat up faster. Looked down in disgust at his measly gift, he noticed the silver paint chipping in most places, as well as the handle brakes worn to their last leg. His face morphed by repulsion, he took a final glance at his gift before continuing on.

The trail Bepis climbed progressively grew steeper and started to wind up the hill in a switchback formation. Bepis, being an amateur hiker, became slightly relieved as he knew the trail would be a little more tolerable. Bepis and the bike rattled on, pushing and driving up the hill to get home. He had planned to ride the trails around his house, taking in the summer energy and excitement so many kids sought after. When his bike failed him, Bepis thought a quick climb over the hill would cut out a majority of the long walk home. However, climbing a moderately sized hill while carrying an old heavy bike was something he greatly underestimated.

After going another half mile, he estimated, he stopped to take in his surroundings. Regaining his breath, he admired the vibrancy of his home and a smile escaped him. Living outside of Boulder, Colorado, Bepis never had to go far to find adventure. He gazed over the landscape and breathed in the thin Colorado air, feeling minuscule compared to the Rockies kissing the sky on the horizon. His attention turned to the hill's apex, which was now in full view. The peak stood exposed with the exception of a large, towering tree. Too far away still to see the tree's identity, he could still clearly outline the broad branches

that slow danced with the wind, in an everlasting trance. Feeling slight relief that the hard part was almost over, Bepis looked at his bike again, and immediately snapped back into his elongated ingratitude. *So, the one day that matters to me ends up like this, pushing this shitty bike all over the place. Literally the only thing that I asked for broke faster than I've been alive. I mean, how expensive could the newest model be? Every other friggin' kid I know has the best everything. They got new phones, new shoes, clothes, new everything! Is it that hard for mom to provide a little extra for me? I mean, what does she even do? She works all day, always saying she's "too busy and can't right now." She makes so many excuses too, most don't even make sense. When I asked for a new phone for Christmas all she said was, "We'll see, if not this year then next year," well, next year came and went and all I've to show for it is the same four-year-old phone, and now a chucked bike. At least she was sort of right this time, I did ask for a bike, but it's so shot it seems like she doesn't even care about me at all.*

Bepis had felt this way as soon as he'd ripped apart the newspaper that concealed his gift. Ironically, Bepis's favorite part about gifts was how they were wrapped. The newspaper gave him a sense of nostalgia, as it was how his grandmother had wrapped all his gifts until she passed. His dad wasn't there either, but that was expected. The last time he saw his father was three years ago. He said he was going out for cigarettes and never came home. As he reflected on the day, he could see his mother's-tired face only hidden by her radiating smile. She was plain — like Jane Eyre, like in the book his class had to read for Mrs. Julian — yet her mannerisms radiated hidden beauty. As Bepis thought about his mother, he felt guilty. As soon as his gift was revealed, he let out a look of disgust towards his mother, and her smile quickly changed to a face of defeat. *I mean maybe I didn't act the way I should of, but she should have known better. She should've known this bike was junk, so I shouldn't even feel bad. After all, it's her fault for not listening to me.*

Bepis began to walk again, trying to distract himself. He tried to redirect his negative energy into the hike, eventually putting his head down and grinding it out. Before he knew it, he had arrived at the top of the hill and at the base of the tree. He looked up and his eyes widened, as now he saw the trees full features. It was an ancient oak, a rare sight as most trees in the area fell victim to logging that ravaged the landscape for the last hundred years. The trunk was sturdy, and by the looks of it wide enough as to where three people could try and hug the base, and their arms would barely connect in a full circle. The branches he had seen earlier now snaked around and upwards to the sky, large enough that they could be their own separate trees. The leaves were vibrant and

healthy, whispering in the soft warm breeze, as if they were congratulating Bepis's climb.

In the midst of his tour de force, an uneasy feeling crept over Bepis, making his legs numb and his hair rise. He had been solo during his trek, yet in the eerie persona wilderness provides, he felt as if he wasn't unaccompanied. He cautiously glanced around, trying to give off a stoic demeanor. Noticing nothing in his immediate area, he inspected the tree once more, and upon his reinvestigation his breath nearly escaped him.

Halfway up the tree, nestled in a crooked nook of branches, rested what appeared to be some species of animal. From his root-level disadvantage, still frozen with apprehension and anticipation, Bepis could only make out a rough shape of the creature. From his position it looked nothing more than a black ball of fur, let alone its size ruled out the possibility of it being avian. After careful assumption, Bepis determined the only thing it might possibly have been was a black bear. Not too common now-a-days, but you could still run into them outside of town.

Expressing caution but relieved that the situation wasn't too severe (a mountain lion would have yielded a different outcome, one Bepis would realize only too late) he started backing away meticulously, watching the bear the whole time. Eventually his left foot betrayed him, accidentally snapping a dry twig. The dehydrated wood let out a quick but efficient snap, echoing in Bepis's head. Forcing himself to see if he poked the bear, he nervously craned his head upward, the anxiety and terror of the situation gnawing him alive. Now fully disturbed, its saucer-like eyes studied its new visitor with anticipation. Concentrating his vision, what Bepis thought was fur revealed itself to be feathers. Dark like a raven but still vibrant, they followed a pattern unique to birds of prey. Bepis froze, his feet taking root in the soil and refusing to give. Still walking his bike, his hands became vises around the handlebars, gripping so strongly that his knuckles became snow-white. His sight tunneled as his mind went into a slurry, unable to make sense of the situation, just as the sun's dying rays blinded him back to reality. With his mind regaining itself, he anxiously focused back onto his acquaintance.

Meeting its stare, the creature's eyes weren't sinister but rather wholesome, radiating the energy one would get if they caught a loved one's gaze. Graciously and effortlessly the animal or demon or hybrid unraveled its torso from under its neck, spinning a full half circle until its breast was in full view. All

while its eyes never left Bepis's position. It then spread its powerful wings and floated elegantly down to a low hanging branch a few feet above Bepis. Bepis gazed in awe, while his flight or fight response made him ready for anything. He wasn't totally sure what he was looking at or experiencing. His immediate thought was he was hallucinating, and his mind would soon correct his perceived phantom. After a few moments that felt like eons, Bepis came to and came to terms with the reality a couple footsteps away.

Bepis made the animal out to be an Owl, except this Owl was not ordinary. The branch where it was perched bent under its weight, and its torso was the height of a man. As it landed, it spread its wings to balance itself with each wing extending out ten feet.

After a few more painfully slow minutes of studying the new visitor with its piercing amber eyes, the Owl, in a calm but cracked voice aged only by time, said, "Hello."

"Uh...Hi," Bepis replied bewildered, "You...you...can talk?" Something about the Owl's voice was soothing, in the same type of way Morgan Freeman conveys his words.

"I can," the Owl replied now settling into his perch, the tree-trunk of a branch still canvasing down under its weight, "What brings you to my tree?"

"Well, I didn't come here intentionally," Bepis replied, his anxiety and fear slowly ebbing away, "My stupid bike broke down and I tried to take a shortcut home."

The Owl, now catching interest in the conversation, calmly said, "I'm sorry to hear that, why is your bike stupid?"

"Because it's a piece of junk!" Bepis exclaimed. "The friggin' wheel sprocket and chain broke off, and all the paint is chipping away."

"I don't see how all this makes a bike less desirable," the Owl rebutted. "After all, you have a bike, do you not?"

"I mean, I guess, but can you even really call this thing a bike?" Bepis replied, all his feelings of resentment returning. "All I wanted for my birthday was a new bike like everyone else I know has; I didn't ask for this piece of shit."

"You don't have to swear," said the Owl, his demeanor unchanged. "Who bought the bike for you?"

"My mom," Bepis answered. "She sucks, she never does anything for me. She never gets me anything nice, it's always a piece of trash."

I wouldn't say that," said the Owl. "She probably does more for you than you think—"

"Yeah right," Bepis retorted. "If she were doing stuff for me, she should be getting me new and better stuff, not second-hand junk that you find in the dumpster."

After hearing this the owl extended his neck outwards, moving fluidly like a snake's body.

"Well. I don't believe you," the Owl replied, his neck positioning his massive head eye level with Bepis. "What if I can prove you wrong?" the Owl said convincingly, slightly squinting his eyes.

"Yeah right," Bepis retorted, "What do you know? For all I can guess, all you do is sleep and hide away in this tree. You don't know anything."

"You have good reason to doubt me," said the Owl, now relaxing. "After all, you did find me dozing away up in this tree, letting time slip away."

"Exactly," said Bepis assertively.

The Owl then straightened himself back to his original perched position on the branch.

"I'll bargain with you," he then said. "If your doubts prove correct, I'll put you on my back and fly you the rest of your journey. But if you are wrong, your journey ends here."

Bepis thought about the Owl's proposition. He still had a long way to go, and by now the sun had started to drop away. The Owl's words resonated with him. What if the Owl was right? Bepis was sure he was wrong, after all he probably doesn't even leave this tree. Still, the Owl's confidence was definitely persuading. After thinking a few minutes, Bepis's arrogance overcame him once again.

You're bluffing," Bepis said with a smirk. "Let's see what you got."

The Owl then spread his wings, so far that they were lost in Bepis's peripheral vision. His long, dark feathers fell down and grazed the grass at the foot of the tree, while Bepis stood idly by, waiting for something to happen. Although still smug about his bet, he couldn't help but admire the regality of the Owl. With the Owl's wings reaching outwards, Bepis was able to see the intricate patterns and colors that made up the bird's appearance. Not a feather was out of place, and the Owl's massive size gave Bepis the impression of a deity or a mythological being.

Bepis was snapped back to reality when he noticed the feathers on each of the wings blending together, as if they had melted into one. When the feathers finished their dance, a scene began to appear out of the feathers haze. Bepis, thinking he was dreaming or lost in a trance, inched closer. As he focused his vision, he started to make out the images he was seeing. In one feather, he saw his mother working her job at the textile factory. Bepis could see the sweat dripping from her face as she pushed loads of cotton to and fro, never stopping to take a break. At one point she stopped to catch her breath, only to get berated by the floor manager threatening to replace her. Bepis could see the life drained from her, her face and body sunken in with a hollow look in her eyes. *No wonder she's always so tired when I see her.*

Bepis then glanced over the Owl's other wing. Bepis could again see his mother, heading into a sports store. His mom was looking at a piece of paper quizzically, as if running through a thousand problems and solutions in her head. She then walked to the counter and began to bargain for a bike that was on display.

"Please, you can't go any lower on the price?"

"I'm sorry, price stays where it is."

"This piece of paper is what I have left from my check this week, could this get me anything? Please, it's for my son's birthday all he wants is a bike."

"The cheapest I have is this one right here, but what you got there still isn't enough."

Bepis saw the bike the clerk was presenting and recognized it as his gift. In shock and disbelief, he continued to watch his mother haggle with the clerk.

"What if I give you this ring?" Bepis's mom said, her eyes now tearing up.

Bepis saw the ring's shape and immediately knew its significance. It was one of the last few things she had from Dad, its simple but sentimental bling reflecting the shop's light. Bepis watched as she handed the ring over to the clerk, and walked out of the store crying, but pushing his bicycle.

Bepis now turned to face the Owl, who was looking down on him with a mix of satisfaction and pride. Bepis stood there frozen, unable to comprehend what he had just seen. All the things he had said before now made him a fool, to which Bepis became overwhelmed with embarrassment. "H-How?" was the only word that could escape his breath, his voice too shaken by the array of sorcery he just witnessed. The Owl, humbly accepting his victory, tucked back his monstrous wings, the show and their work now over.

"It may look like I lazily sit in this tree, dozing and wasting time in this beautiful weather," the Owl exclaimed. "But I see everything, and all. This tree's roots spread far and wide, allowing me to see the world without ever moving a muscle. I knew you were coming long before you arrived and could feel the hate brewing in your every step."

The Owl paused and stared sternly towards Bepis. Bepis could feel his predator eyes, built for hunting and robust with amber hues, penetrate through him. Bepis could feel his adrenaline returning and clenched his bike. Ironically the one thing he despised became his security blanket. Like a toddler who thinks its blanket can deter monsters, Bepis assumed his bike would deter the Owl. Still, Bepis tried to appear brave. After mentally steadying his voice, he confidently said to the Owl, "Okay, you win. You proved me wrong, and I accept that. You did a nice job at making me feel like a terrible person and dragged it out long enough for the sun to set. Can you spare me the lecture, and let me get going?"

"But don't you remember the Deal?" The Owl said sinisterly said, "If you're wrong, your journey ends here."

Before Bepis had time to react, the Owl sprang forward like the bullet from a gun, moving so fast its articulate feathers became a heated blur. When the dust settled, all that remained on the ground was an old bicycle, surrounded by a few flecks of paint that chipped off after it toppled over. The Owl returned to its

original position in the tree, not even touching the ground throughout the whole ordeal. He settled himself, adjusted his feathers and looked at the last glimpses of red and orange rays as he drifted to sleep.

NATURE'S OBSERVATIONS

ALIZA BRYLINSKY

The majestic hawk soars through the fields of grape vines and wheat, keeping his eyes trained for any sign of mice slipping through the long grass below. It has been an unusual season. Not so far as the number of mice go, for those are always plentiful, but the huge metal birds that normally share some portion of the sky with him have lessened in number, and he no longer hears them rocketing by far over his head as often as he is used to. He thinks he should probably be grateful for such a fact. These birds don't come near enough to the ground to scare off the prey that he follows, but their noise still thunders through his head when he bothers to listen for it, and the sky is certainly a much more peaceful place now that they have lessened in number. Still, he had found himself envying them as they zipped by, how they could move so gracefully and look so elegant despite their large size. Given how they did not seem to linger in one area for long and did not take any of the prey within his territory range, he had been glad to share the skies with them. Now they are lessened.

If he was a more logical bird, he might ask why they had all but vanished. His mother has whispered to him tales of the chemical that farmers used to use upon their crops, a chemical that would turn egg shells to the consistency of morning dew so that they would crack under a mother's weight. A chemical that had almost led to several species of his raptor brethren vanishing altogether. He does not know what chemical could possibly affect a bird so large and powerful, and why it is only picking off the metal birds—but he fears for their safety all the same. He knows not what they eat, how they reproduce, the kind of mating rituals that they hold dear, but he values them as fellow sharers of the sky all the same. When will they return? Will their population recover? Will he hear their powerful throats thrumming out a song over his head again?

He does not know, and he cannot do anything about it. For now, he hunts, and hopes.

The rabbit leaps about within the tall grass, hiding from the watchful eye of the hawk. Predators are as constant as ever this year, and she must keep a careful eye out to ensure that she does not fall swiftly into the jaws of certain doom. For that matter, there are usually more people tending to the fields this time of year as well, bringing their foul-smelling diesel trucks that are loaded with workers. The rabbit will hide within the bushes, terrified that the slightest move could draw their attention and force her to run and run and run until there is no chance that they could ever keep up with her in the thick foliage, and watch them work. They will tie the vines back with twine and cut them with sharp-looking silver fangs, or they will put up bright balls and sections of fabric that shine in the sunlight and make her eyes hurt to look at them, or they will place strange boxes in the trees, boxes that make noises like a farmer's gun or the screeches of the hawks that she so desperately attempts to hide from. She hates the boxes most of all. The first time she had heard them, she'd cowered in fear for an hour, afraid to leave the shelter of the bush she had hidden herself in for fear that a hawk was waiting just outside in an attempt to make her show herself.

Those measures are still there this year, of course. But the people are different. Normally there's a sense that they are working together—as a herd? As a pack? Though she startles and runs from them the same

as any other predator that she comes across, the rabbit cannot be certain whether humans do view her as a potential food source or not. Normally they trust one another. They will draw close and slap each other on the backs (she had thought such a gesture was a dominance display at first, until she had studied their body language and determined otherwise), pass around drinks to share to combat the harsh summer heat. That has changed. They still work together, but they appear to spread out more when she bothers to observe them. There is no drawing near to each other, no friendly displays of comradery. If they must draw close, they wear bits of pelt across their face that display themselves in garish colors, looking like the bright poisonous berries that she had been told not to eat as a young kit.

She has not heard of anything like this happening before, in her lifetime or in the lifetime of her ancestors. Perhaps it is a time of battling among the humans, like the deer she has observed from afar during their rutting season. Perhaps it is something else entirely. She is not bold enough to ask, and she doubts the humans would be able to understand her anyway. Humans have always been strange and frightening creatures, after all, and perhaps this is just another odd part of their culture.

She will not dwell on it. She will leap about and hide from the hawks as always, and never know anything different.

The school of bass hiding within the lake's waters flick their tails as they travel through the weeds and rocks in search of prey, their scales shining even in the dim lighting of the lakebed. They have nothing to fear from the seasons turning harsher and the water turning colder, for they can easily move into the shallows where the sun strikes closer to the surface to warm them, or find a place among the stones of the bottom to hunker down in until food becomes more plentiful. All they have known is this underwater world and its various moods, and they navigate through it just the same as a land animal would through their own territory. They would hold derision towards the land animals if they knew how to articulate such a thing, for while the creatures of the earth have to develop thick fur or sleep throughout the harsher seasons or stock up on food to survive the chill of winter, they barely have to make any changes in their routine at all. In a way, they suppose that would give them an iota of an advantage when winter rolls around, though so many of the land's creatures still conspire to prey upon them when food elsewhere is scarce. That is one condition of their lives that never changes, no matter how much the water that surrounds them does.

Well. Save for one predator, at least.

They usually lose at least some of their number to the humans every year. The humans are conniving predators, and they know how to make that which is not a tasty insect appear as though it is, or that which is not an injured fish to look very injured indeed. They know how to make metal and plastic dance upon the surface of the water to make it seem alive, making even the most steadfast of fish approach in the hopes of gaining an easy meal. A handful of their number boast scars upon their lips and the inside of their mouths from the silver barbs of hooks—some of them are allowed to return from a journey above, for reasons they cannot quite quantify, and some of them never do. They will sense the vibrations of boats thrumming around the lake's waters when the warmer weather of spring comes, and know to head to deeper waters in an attempt to avoid such persistent hunters, but even then the humans have found ways of capturing them. It seems there is no truly safe place upon the lake when the humans emerge from their winter hideaways, and it would be enough to terrify them were there not still a healthy population of their

brothers and sisters thriving within the clear waters.

Now, there are less of the humans upon the lake. They still feel the vibration of the powerful boats, still fall for the same tricks that the hunters have used in the past to ensnare them, but there seems to be less activity this year. They might have been puzzled over it, had they been able to quantify just what about it was so confusing to them. Instead, they are grateful. Less humans patrolling their waters means one less predator to worry about falling into the clutches of, less competition for smaller fish to feast upon, and time to raise their eggs to maturity. The water will be less disturbed this year.

They do not worry about what such a thing might mean. Why would they have any need to concern themselves with the affairs of land creatures? The lake is thriving, just as it always has. There is no need for them to dwell on whatever strange habits the humans have picked up.

The dog watches his owners as they sit in front of the large rectangles that contain other human faces, and wonders. He has grown accustomed to being alone for long periods of time while his owners leave him in the iron enclosure that he calls home, so that he isn't allowed to get into mischief. Now they are with him all the time, either attending to the bright rectangles or bustling around and fixing their nests. He is glad that they are home more often, for he has missed them terribly when they were gone and found himself despondently gnawing on a bone and waiting for their return, but the solitude had become almost welcomed after some time. He'd been able to sit and collect his thoughts, trying to puzzle out the tasks that he would attend to that day—what sections of his territory to mark so that interlopers would know to stay well away, what kinds of animals might appear in the backyard that he could practice his chasing skills upon, what manner of table scraps he might be snuck if he behaved well and didn't cause trouble. Now his home is a whirlwind of activity more often than not.

He remembers when his family used to hold extravagant parties, where they'd invite large gatherings of other humans together and stand around talking to each other in loud voices. He'd linger and sniff at the strong-smelling liquid that they each held in oddly-shaped glasses, but for the most part he was forced to witness these gatherings from an outsider's point of view, being scolded if he tried to sneak food off of the table in the midst of all the chaos. Humans, from what he understood of them, were a largely social species, and they weren't afraid to engage in behaviors that most other creatures would see as dominance displays—wrapping their paws around each other, slapping each other on the back but in a strangely friendly manner, cooing and chortling and making odd noises whenever one member of the party shared a particularly interesting anecdote. It was...strange, to say the least, but it was something that had made these strange creatures that had taken him in feel more like a pack.

Now, they have no parties. Now there are only small gatherings, and at times they even keep their distance from individuals that they once welcomed with open arms, like there is an invisible tension there that he can't quite explain. He would consider that it's something like when the deer that live in the woods around his home have their rutting season, but he cannot remember such an event happening before. Nor can he remember humans wearing these bright bits of cloth over their face whenever they draw near to his home, looking like the berries he sees at the forest's edge or the caterpillars that crawl upon the grass in the summer—sending a silent warning of *danger! Danger! Keep away!* Might it be an odd dominance display? Might there be in-fighting among the humans that he wasn't made aware of? Perhaps the colors are

a way to signal loyalty to a certain pack, though there seems to be no common factor in their color or patterns.

He's heard the rumors, of course, that there is an illness going around that humans must protect themselves with. But he fails to see how a multi-colored bit of cloth will protect from any of the diseases he has heard about. It would be totally ineffective against ticks. So too would it offer no protection against distemper, or mange, or even the dreaded rabies that is only talked about in whispers. He is not certain that humans are able to catch kennel cough, and he does not think that they would understand even if he was to ask them. So what could it possibly be?

He doesn't dwell on it for long, of course. His humans are still here, still happy and healthy, and they still engage with him with just as much gusto as they had before. They've developed new and strange habits, of course, but he accepts this as a fact of life. He cannot do anything to change it, anymore than they can stop him from being a dog. All he can do is be there for them when they need something to distract them from the struggles and strife of the world and accept that they will take care of him in turn.

He has a good life. What is there to worry about?

The cat, on the other hand, so wishes that the humans would go away and leave her to her own devices in the house again. It used to be so quiet around here. The house would lie dormant during the day, and she could practice her stalking skills on the dust motes that filtered in through the windows or else nap on the surface of her choosing. Now there's a flurry of activity everywhere she looks. Her humans are always racing around trying to make improvements to their living space or talking loudly on those ridiculous rectangles that take up so much of their time. She really thinks they should be paying far more attention to her, but when she tries to yowl at them in an effort to get them to see the special way that she has groomed her fur today, she is scolded and lightly tossed out of the room.

There is too much noise and activity now. At least in the time before this fiasco, she could hide away from the noisiest periods in her home, when her humans would bring over others of their species and content themselves with cavorting the night away. Now there's seemingly no place that she can go for even a moment of peace. It's enough to make her fur bristle in irritation when she cares to dwell on it. There are no more extravagant parties or others of their species coming over—at least as often as there once were—and she thinks it should by all accounts be more peaceful around the house that she and her humans share. If only she could be so lucky. She'd never known just how much she had enjoyed the peace and quiet until it had drifted away from her, like autumn leaves whirling around in a sudden breeze.

Of course, she's heard the rumors. That something is going around that makes the humans nervous, makes them wall themselves up in their homes and not leave unless necessary. The cat finds this utterly ridiculous. If it's something that the humans are afraid of, it's nothing a good stare-down with the enemy won't fix. She personally knows of many a dog she has frightened away by giving it a well-timed smack on the muzzle with her claws. If only humans had the same weaponry, for their claws are short and blunt, more suited for digging in the earth or manipulating objects than engaging in combat. She has heard that they have other, more useful ways of settling some score with an enemy that they have identified, if only they would be bold enough to use it. Instead they seem insistent on hiding away in their nests and working their lives away. The cat would almost find it pathetic—and perhaps a little sad—if she had it in her to give

a single thought as to the affairs of humans.

Perhaps she should be more grateful. The humans being here means they can bask in her presence, give her the scratches under her chin that she so desperately craves, and critique her stalking skills. They can give her all the attention that she desires.

She just wishes they would be *quieter* and go out to confront the problem rather than hiding away from it.

Maybe take off those ridiculous pieces of cloth that they insist on wearing upon their faces, while they're at it. Don't they realize they're not intimidating in the slightest?

The earth watches and mourns.

With every passing moon, it becomes harder and harder for the living beings upon its surface to live their lives in peace. First it was the rising temperatures and sea levels, leading to storms that are increasingly violent with every year. Then it was the wildfires racing through the areas of its terrain that seem the most beautiful, in a cruel irony. Now it is a disease racing through the human population, far more wide-spread and deadly than most other calamities that have happened within the recent century. The earth is forced to witness the loss of so many of its inhabitants. It knows these things are not within its power to control, but anything would be preferable to seeing the creatures that it has given birth to suffer like this. It would take the blow of a thousand comets and meteors, scorch every inch of its surface, and pour smothering oil into every one of its oceans and lakes before it allowed harm to come to the most intriguing of its inhabitants, if it possibly could.

Humans are smart and capable, able to think up solutions to problems in the blink of an eye. The earth watches as they put measures into place to prevent this new disease, watches as they distance from each other and pull cloth over their faces and vigorously sanitize every surface that they can find. The earth senses that it will not be nearly enough. Not when there are those who wish to deny that such measures keep them safe, not when this disease that has sprung up upon its surface is so deadly and fast spreading. Not when members of their population can be perfect specimens of their kind one day and hooked up to machines the next. Not when the most that their healers can do is try to alleviate the symptoms, rather than cure the problem outright. Not when it witnesses so many families who will never get to have a proper goodbye when it comes to their loved ones.

It wishes it could do more. If it could, it would destroy this virus in a heartbeat. It would boil it and scorch it until it withered and died, it would locate the source of the problem and bury it beneath the largest landslide that it could possibly create. It would grow flowers and lichen over the resting places of those who have perished, to ensure that they knew at least a small part of peace in death. It would do all it could to aid the humans, if only it was permitted to. But it cannot rid people of their ignorance, can do nothing to cast out leaders who sit by and refuse to put the proper steps to contain the disease in place. It cannot comfort the millions of people who are suffering beyond measure. It cannot even find or reveal a cure to that which ails them.

Instead it watches, and waits. Even the worst of diseases that it has seen within its lifetime eventually fade

out, become less dangerous as time goes on. The earth knows this, and expects that this calamity shall do the same, even if it takes many years to do so. The population will heal. Life will go on. But it cannot take away the suffering, cannot take away the sadness that is all-encompassing. It can only spin around within its lonely orbit as a silent observer, hoping and praying that the humans will discover a way to combat this before it is all too late. Nature will always heal, but humans are not so resilient. It knows this from its many years watching them grow and develop upon its surface.

The earth wishes it could let them know that everything will eventually be sorted out. It wishes it could let them know that happier times will come.

But it cannot, for in the grand scheme of things, it is only another rock floating through the void.

GRIEF IS LOVE WITH NOWHERE TO GO

SARA SAMPSON

“Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.”

Separation, by W.S. Merwin

I've been trying to think of a sentence that would grab every reader's attention to introduce you to my friend Claire, but I can only think of her face—her Cheshire Cat smile, dark, voluptuous eyebrows, and skin as white as a winter storm—and how much I wish you could see it. I close my eyes, and I'm looking at her looking at me, and she's smiling coyly. She had such a delicate yet striking face. From the moment we met, she always greeted me with a scrunch of her shoulders and a half-smile. I remember the first time I saw this half-smile like it was yesterday, except it was 2014. Claire and I happened to be in the same Spanish 101 class. We sat on opposite sides of the room, but every day, our professor instructed us to form a circle with our desks so we could see everyone's face and more readily communicate with each other. It was a few days into the course when the professor asked us to go around the room and introduce ourselves in Spanish: Me llamo [your name] y soy de [where you're from]. *Me llamo Sara y soy de Ithaca. My name is Sara and I'm from Ithaca.* Claire looked up from her desk and smiled at me when I said “Ithaca.” I surmised she must have been from Ithaca, too. Claire and I didn't immediately become friends; it wasn't until the following semester, when we were, again, coincidentally, in the same Spanish 102 class that we hit it off.

Even after we exchanged cell phone numbers and started texting frequently and hanging out sporadically, I was a bit skeptical of her enthusiasm for me and our friendly rendezvous. Every time I saw her, I got that half-smile. I figured she kept her full smile for people she fully liked and that she was still on the fence about me. Especially considering we only ever saw movies together. I'd invite her to my apartment for a drink, and she wouldn't decline, she'd just not answer. She'd eventually share with me that she was sober, and I felt guilty and embarrassed about my assumption that everyone drinks alcohol. After years of friendship, I realized her half-smile was a signature of hers, and I grew to admire it deeply. Over the years, our dates would expand to lunch or dinner, Easter brunch at her parents' house, piercings, and drinks (Diet Coke for her) at the Argos Warehouse in Ithaca.

Claire was a hard egg to crack, and even after years of platonic intimacy, everything about her is still enigmatic to me. I think that's what I love most about Claire. She kept a part of herself for herself, and I envy that. Claire's sadness was subterranean. I always wanted to pry, to see if her sadness mirrored mine. To see if her sadness outshined mine. I felt compelled to know who was sadder.

I envy not lusting for everyone I get close to know about how fucked up I am. I envy not needing to externalize my fucked upness in new relationships immediately so as to fall back on it if the relationship sours. It's easier to blame the trauma that led to my fucked upness as opposed to my

identity (but, I suppose, trauma is and will always be a part of my essence). Claire was private and humble and unassuming, everything I am not.

I've called upon my trauma for the majority of my essays as an undergraduate student at SUNY Cortland. I tell myself I'm merely forcing my audience to empathize, but it isn't empathy at all. I want other people to feel my pain, but I also know they'd never feel it the way I did and still do. I've fooled myself into believing that if I could just understand my pain well enough, I can make it go away. Also, too, if I can make someone else understand my pain well enough, they'll know what to say and do to make it go away. I project these hopes onto them, and when they don't offer me an escape, a way out of myself, I reject them and feel defrauded. *Your love was supposed to make it all better.*

I'd never claim to begin to understand the particular pain of others, so I don't know why I beg others to understand and disburden me from mine. Pain functions like a loop, its initial effect is singular in the way that it shocks and destabilizes, and that singularity is reinforced every time you display your pain--implicitly in your actions and emotions and explicitly when you share the source of your trauma--for others only to realize your pain is untouchable by them. And then you pull it all back in and it sits heavy on your heart.

Over the summer, I came across a short Twitter thread that perfectly explained why I became obsessed with studying politics and gender relations that I had never been able to articulate until now:

@mspowahs

therapist: i've noticed that you use universalizing language in a way that obscures your own agency and distances yourself from your feelings and motivations

me: as one does

@NoahTzedek I feel seen. My therapist is like "you intellectualize instead of feeling" and I'm like "well that's very common with trauma survivors. Learning about trauma and abuse is like exposure therapy and helps create a feeling of control over chaos that we can't understand."

Aha! A breakthrough! I've finally unearthed the motivation for my scholarly zeal: *I intellectualize my pain instead of feeling it.* But what does that mean? What does it mean to *feel* it?

I remember discussing something adjacent to exposure therapy with Claire, i.e., how it could be possible that I've been raped not once but several times in my life, and by several different men, and she sent me a journal article about the correlation between trauma survivors and revictimization (due to an increased likelihood of survivors seeking and/or placing themselves in risky situations as a way of trying to reclaim control). The classical conditioning that occurs when a child touches a hot stove for the first time and subsequently learns to avoid the red hot coil in the future doesn't apply to the psychological phenomenon of rape victims being revictimized. I wish I still had the original article that she sent me so I could explain such occurrences in a much more scientific way, but I'm hoping you get my gist.

For years, I felt that I elicited this abuse—being (too) flirty, drinking too much, suggestive attire, hanging out with the “wrong” crowd, etc.—and while this new information didn’t absolve the entirety of my guilt—how do you get raped the first time, and then “allow” yourself to be raped subsequent times?—it did help me feel less alone. *This is a known thing that happens to others.* I may have a deep understanding of how the patriarchy and rape culture work, but it takes constant work to subvert decades of learned and internalized behaviors and attitudes, and even with constant work—weekly or bi-weekly therapy being a huge chunk of that work—an upheaval of that magnitude is hardly realizable. Trying to resist the structural dominance of rape culture on an individual level, i.e., not being reduced or erased by it, is hard enough, but trying to extract empathy from others, from the collective psyche, a psyche untouched by the direct effects of it, is like getting blood from a stone.

Claire and I intellectualized our pain together. Where her understanding of the effects of trauma may be murky, I’d illuminate it for her, and vice versa. But obviously there were fissures in our understanding that neither of us could fill for one another. Claire was pivotal in my growth as a student, a woman, and a rape survivor. And I’m reluctant to use the word “survivor”: surviving trauma is not as simple as it may seem, it is not isolated to merely (physically) surviving the incident.

Claire was a rape survivor until she wasn’t.

In the fall of 2016, Netflix came out with a documentary, *Audrie and Daisy*, about the rape of three teenage girls and the abuse and cyberbullying the young girls and their families faced following the assaults. Audrie Pott, a fifteen-year-old high school student, was sexually assaulted by three or more teenagers, and nine days later died by suicide. Daisy Coleman, a fourteen-year-old high school student, was raped by a teenage boy. Both rapes occurred in 2012, but the girls had no knowledge of each other and their experiences—Audrie lived in California, and Daisy lived in Missouri—but their pain, like the pain of other rape victims, was communal.

After the sexual assault, Daisy had attempted suicide on several occasions. And on August 4, 2020—eight years after her sexual assault—Daisy died by suicide. Ostensibly, both of the girls survived the assault, but Audrie died within days, and Daisy died within years. So what exactly does it mean to survive?

Following Daisy’s death, I read a poignant piece in Jezebel written by Emily Alford about the myth of “surviving”:

Coleman’s recent death by suicide is a grim reminder that stories around sexual assault—even responsibly told ones like *Audrie & Daisy*—are narratives crafted for audiences, not reflections of the real experience of surviving sexual assault. Grieving sexual assault isn’t a ladder, elevating the survivor until they overcome the horrible thing that’s happened. Grief born of sexual trauma is a ball of knots, the cycle beginning and ending afresh without warning, overlapping and intertwining so that the lines between emotions become difficult to parse and the edges begin to fray. “Why can’t you just get over it,” is a heartless refrain from rape apologists and deniers in the beginning. But over time, the push for a final,

permanent move to acceptance comes from all sides, not just the wrong ones. A story has to end.¹

In the years after her rape, Daisy co-founded the non-profit organization SafeBAE, which was a student-led national organization aimed at ending sexual assault among middle and high school students. Even as Daisy committed her life to fight for change; to prevent sexual assault; to combat the harassment associated with an assault; and to educate about rape culture, she couldn't protect herself from its grip.

According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network), ninety-four percent of women who are raped experience symptoms of PTSD during the two weeks following the rape; thirty percent report symptoms of PTSD nine months after the rape; thirty-three percent contemplate suicide; and thirteen percent attempt suicide.²

To quote from Alford's Jezebel piece again, "the very nature of PTSD means that the body is locked in a prolonged state of fight-or-flight response, playing out the trauma in fits and starts. Even the term survivor is inefficient, indicating that the person who has experienced sexual violence experienced it in the past and survived—not that they are currently surviving, day-to-day, an experience that is still happening irrespective of the actual date of the violence."

In closing her essay, Alford lambastes rape culture—prevailing social attitudes that have the effect of normalizing and trivializing sexual assault and abuse, and further, norms and institutions that protect rapists, promote impunity, shame victims, and force women to be proactive in preventing their own rape(s)—as a form of gaslighting:

In addition to surviving the assault, survivors must also survive the knowledge that law enforcement, the court system, their neighbors, and lawmakers simply don't care about their rapes or even believe that they happened. It's a cultural gaslighting—we applaud victims for coming forward while maintaining a legal system meant to protect rapists. [...] Even as we culturally elevate people like Daisy Coleman, applauding her courage while making her rape a highly visible representation of a greater problem, we erase the reality of rape survivors—rendering their long-term suffering invisible, even in a national conversation about their rapes.

I often wondered and still do wonder about Claire's loneliness. Even though we both shared a history of sexual assault, our particular circumstances and the way it shaped our lives could never be the same. We shared proximity in our pain, but we lived it in disparate ways.

Claire seemed impervious to pain, both emotional and physical. Our creature comfort the last couple of years was getting piercings together. She had been living in various boroughs of NYC for grad school and then law school, and I'd see her when she came home from school breaks here and there. We'd see a movie together, or get some appetizers at Ciao! or The Ale House in Ithaca, or our nipples pierced. I don't remember precisely when I got my earlobes pierced—my first ever piercing—but probably sometime in my preteen years. Since that piercing many, many years ago, I've never had another bodily piercing.

Claire and I were texting about what we should do when she made it back to Ithaca, and during the course of the conversation, she excitedly suggested we get piercings. I thought she was kidding at first and that the idea was a bit far-fetched—it's quite outlandish from our usual movie date—but I also thought *fuck it, why not?* Claire had several ear piercings already, and she planned to expand upon that. I had no idea what I wanted, and I fretted about it for weeks leading up to our piercing date. I settled upon a helix (the namesake for the piercing is also its location on the ear). The piercing itself hurt, but I enjoy a certain amount of pain.

The next piercing date we had, I got a tragus (again, name and location are synonymous), and Claire got her nipple pierced. I'd never given much thought to nipple piercings other than how tacky—and, to be honest, downright trashy—it looked to have both nipples pierced (both being the modifier in that sentence). (It made me think of a shirtless Matthew Lillard—probably one of his most notable performances was in the movie *Scream*—with his tongue hanging out and shrieking a breathy and wet “aah”—like you would at the doctor’s office, and they’ve got a wooden tongue depressor shoved down your throat to check you for strep—while pinching and flicking his nipples. Gross. I don’t know why I conjure this particular image when I think of nipple piercings, and I have no idea if I’ve even seen Matthew Lillard doing this in one of his movies, but that’s immediately where my mind goes.)

Claire and I were always in the same room together when we got our piercings (both for moral support and safety purposes). Claire took her shirt off and lied on the table while the piercer examined her nipple and placed two black Sharpie dots on either side of it. I gazed in awe at how perfectly round and perky her breasts were. My breasts have always been the same size—quite large, regardless of weight loss or gain—and I’ve never really liked them. When I lie down, they immediately retreat to my armpits instead of remaining in place like smaller, firmer breasts do. (I never admired my big breasts like others have—mostly men, but also women with smaller breasts—because I associated their bigness with the fact that I’m overweight, and although big breasts are enviable, being overweight is not, so I dissociate my admirable breasts from my unadmirable body. And yes, I am fully aware that this is internalized fat phobia. If I had Sydney Sweeney’s figure, then I’d be impressed with my breast-to-body ratio.) I stood next to Claire and held her cold, clammy hand (they were always cold and clammy). Her breasts and stomach were covered in goose pimples. I asked her if she was nervous and she said “no.” The goose pimples said otherwise, but I believed her. Claire’s expressions were always impeccably self-contained. I never really had any way of knowing exactly what she was thinking or feeling. She was impenetrable in that way. I was both puzzled by this and covetous of it.

Claire barely winced, if she winced at all, when the piercer skewered her nipple. I was freaking out internally and asked her if it hurt and she tittered—no pun intended; it was indeed a light, subdued laugh—and replied “no, not really.” I could tell the piercer was impressed by her tolerance of the pain—the only other body piercing that has the potential to hurt more than a nipple piercing is a genital piercing; they’re both erogenous zones—and I was impressed that she was my friend.

The third piercing date we had, I decided I wanted my nipple pierced. I liked the way Claire’s looked, and as I had ascertained from the act of getting it pierced, it didn’t hurt all that much. *She barely flinched!* Plus, I was growing more confident in my body, and I craved the exoticness a

nipple piercing would lend to my sex appeal. I also decided I wanted a daith (it's in the crux of the ear's helix). The piercer asked me which one I wanted to get pierced first, and I went with my nipple. Although I didn't think it'd hurt too bad(ly)—based on Claire's experience—I figured it'd hurt more than a daith, so I just wanted it done. *Give me the bad news before the good news.* More than I worried about the pain, I worried my nipple wouldn't get hard and what I, or the piercer, would have to do to get it there and how awkward that might be. But my fears were put to rest as soon as I took my shirt off—the combination of the office being air conditioned and me being nervous influenced my nipple to be cooperative. I don't know if the guy piercing my nipple was new to piercings, or if I just had exceptionally nice tits (I doubt it was the latter but one can fantasize), but his hands were shaking like a washing machine on spin cycle as he measured and dotted my nipple. As I lied naked from my waist up and watched him approach my tender nipple with trembling hands, I got nervous. He told me to take a deep breath before he jabbed the needle in my nipple, and for some inexplicable reason, he stopped halfway through. A paroxysm of pain erupted from my stomach and swept outward through my extremities. My body felt like it was experiencing its own earthquake. The piercer told me to take another deep breath so he could finish the piercing, but it was hard to focus on my breathing when my entire body felt like it was coming apart. I took a slight breath in and he slowly, like a train approaching a station—or maybe quickly; at this point, the pain had overtaken my senses and everything seemed to slow down—pushed the needle through the rest of my nipple. As he turned around to get the piercing jewelry from the counter, I looked up at Claire and mouthed *what the fuck?!*

I lied on the table, still topless, as he did my daith piercing. It hurt substantially less than my nipple, but it still hurt. Claire was next, and she got a rook, which goes on the inner edge of the uppermost ridge in your ear. The piercer had a hard time with Claire's piercing, and she bled a lot, making it even harder. Still though, she remained phlegmatic. Even as he jumbled around in her ear, causing her to bleed more and more, she smiled and reassured him that everything was satisfactory. I watched, horrified. Without moving her head, she glanced in my direction and widened her eyes as if to say mirror what I had mouthed earlier: *what the fuck?!* But I feel like it was more to reassure me than it was herself.

Claire and I left that appointment bleeding and sore. And to my surprise, the pain in my nipple dissipated quickly, but the pain from my daith throbbed in my ear and in my head. When I got home that evening, I took a picture of my tit and sent it to all of my close friends—it was not unsolicited, I had asked them all beforehand if they wanted to see it—and we beheld its attractiveness.

Eventually Claire would text me that her rook piercing just fell out one day. And I'd end up cutting my daith out of my ear with a pair of pliers. I took myself to convenient care afterward because I had a large, fleshy lump in my ear surrounding one of the piercing holes that wouldn't stop bleeding. I figured it must have been infected even though there was no purulent discharge, but the doctor informed me that it was a pyogenic granuloma. Apparently it's a fairly common reaction at the site of minor injuries, injuries such as piercings. It's a small, benign growth filled with blood vessels. The doctor gave me a steroid cream that I needed to swab on it for a few days. He said that it may disappear, but it wasn't guaranteed. Ironically, the growth looked and felt like a nipple. I did as the doctor instructed, and my ear nipple eventually shrunk into oblivion.

Getting piercings together was the most intimate experience we shared, and we'd never (have the chance to) get another piercing together. As we continued to build and expand on our piercings, I wondered when or if we'd decide we were done.

In the months before Claire's death, she was posting collages on Instagram that her therapist recommended she create. Art therapy was a new aspect of Claire's therapeutic repertoire, and it seemed she quite took to it. One of the collages contained her sobriety clock. She had been sober for nearly seven years. I was always so proud of her for her commitment to sobriety. Claire never discussed her sobriety in detail, so I never knew how easy or difficult it was for her to manage. In that same collage was a picture of her and I from earlier in the year. It was winter, and we had just gotten piercings—I think maybe when I got my tragus. In all the years I knew Claire, we had never taken a picture together, and I didn't want to take this picture either, but she insisted precisely because we had no pictures together. I look sad and vacant in every shot she took. Partly because it's hard for me to feign a smile on command, but also partly because I was entering a difficult emotional phase in my life. I suppose I *was* sad and vacant. The rest of the pictures in her collage were either solo pictures of herself, or with her boyfriend, or her dog (a pug named Sid). In one of the selfies, she had a pink Furby on her shoulder.

Claire's caption for the collage she titled *MMXIX [2019]*: was a hopeful one:

Don't you gotta wanna hate that moment when 2019 is simultaneously the worst/best year you've yet to haunt the earth and everything you've been running from for double digit years hits you like a speedball laced with elmer's glue, and bro u are STRAIGHT UP not havin a good time but somehow in the process you collide with the loveliest creatures (including the love of your life & long furbz) that show you: that love isn't just a word on an overpriced Papyrus card, IT'S OKAY NOT TO BE OKAY, healing isn't linear and...You would do the whole shit show over again because climate change will soon kill us all {jk sorta}, it could be exponentially worse, I have access to all of the resources I need, and there is always hope

The caption was followed by two bat emojis. Bats and Furbies would have a significant presence in Claire's last few posts. And not just the typical Furby of the late 90s, but long Furbies. A phenomenon that was both horrific and darling, and as always, perplexing. But that was precisely Claire.

Claire was into everything weird and macabre, and we bonded over our shared obsession with true crime and serial killers. I came across a serial killer coloring book sometime during our friendship and added it to my Amazon cart as a reminder to buy it for her for her next birthday. But I never did. I'm not sure why. I bought the coloring book this past summer along with a 64-pack of Crayola crayons, and my boyfriend and I each colored a serial killer late one evening. He knew the significance of the coloring book, and although it creeped him out a bit, he happily humored me. He chose Catherine Wood, and I chose Ed Gein. In the 80s, Catherine Wood and her lover, Gwendolyn Graham, worked at a nursing home together and started smothering patients as some sort of cruel and odd "love bond." The pair started out choosing victims by name, in hopes of spelling M-U-R-D-E-R but devised a new plan after realizing it was hard to find certain letters.

(How many names start with “u”?) Ed Gein was a serial killer in the 50s made famous by the human paraphernalia authorities found in his house after his arrest: a belt made from female human nipples, a pair of lips on a window shade drawstring, nine vulvae in a box, and bowls made from human skulls among many, many other grotesque things. Gein’s gruesome possessions were both from people he murdered and graves he robbed.

I don’t remember sending Claire this, but I know I did because the text exchange is eternalized on her Instagram (the last vestige I have of Claire’s life and personality). I sent her a meme of Kermit the Frog talking to evil Kermit the Frog where “normal” Kermit says to himself “don’t be weird at this social event,” and “evil” Kermit says “give strangers unnecessary information about serial killers.” The text I accompanied with it said “I saw this on goodreads and thought of you hahaha.” Claire posted it on her Instagram with a typical dark but clever caption:

“So did you know that Jeffrey Dahmer had a spaniel mix named Frisky? Also many people theorize that Dahmer’s behavioral problems began around age 4 after he underwent surgery to correct a double hernia. Further, his favorite color was navy blue and he really likes the new mango Diet Coke flavor.” Oh wait that last one is actually about me.

Claire had the most intricate and superlative sense of humor. I was often impressed at how sharp and transcendent her wit was. In one of our numerous chats about Claire, her boyfriend and I both shared how much we revered Claire’s sense of humor. I never had the chance to meet him, but I’m happy to know he cherished that aspect of her as much as I did. It comforts me knowing he loved her fully.

“PlushieCouture” on Etsy has nearly 1,300 Furby variations: tardigrade Furby (they call it a sea pig, but it most definitely looks like a tardigrade); octopus Furby; Beetlejuice sandworm Furby; Buzz Lightyear Furby: a piece of toast with Barbie legs Furby; stick of butter Furby; TMNT Furby; Cat in a Hat Furby; Remington bullet Furby; Spine furby; Tooth with plaque Furby; and California Raisin Furby, among so many others. You’d be surprised how quickly they’re sold and how quickly new variations drop.

One of these custom Furbies will set you back about \$100. I’ve been browsing Etsy intermittently over the last few months trying to find the long or odd Furby—there are some vendors that create strictly “long” furbies, and then there are others like PlushieCouture that make “odd body” furbies—of Claire’s dreams. My desire to buy a long or odd knockoff Furby to the tune of \$100 or more is the grand fiction of consumerism, that having something tangible will bring me closer to whatever the commodity is meant to represent, in this case, one of sentimental value. The presence of a long, or odd, or long and odd Furby will not dissolve Claire’s absence. If anything, it will magnify it. I know this, but I want it nonetheless.

I asked Claire’s boyfriend about the significance of long Furby, and he said there was “NO rhyme or reason. They’re just so weird looking that they were entrancing. Like who does that?! Sews a furby [sic] into a snake?” *Indeed, who does that?* Everything about Claire was mysterious but transfixing. Like how and why did she discover long furbies? The subculture seems occultish, but leave it to Claire to find and exalt it.

When I first connected with Claire's boyfriend, Charles—or, I suppose, her ex-boyfriend; he shared with me that they had broken up shortly before her death—I was bent on insinuating myself into his life. I thought about offering to visit him in the city so we could meet at a coffee shop and reminisce about Claire. I wanted him to tell me how happy Claire was and what their relationship was like. I know she loved him dearly because one of her last Instagram posts mentioned her finding the love of her life. Claire never spoke in such ways. I wanted to meet the man who comforted and nourished Claire's delicate heart. I wanted to hold his hand in mine and feel what Claire felt. I've also wanted to ask him why they broke up, how it could be possible for two people who loved each other so much to go their separate ways. But I also didn't want it to seem like I was digging for the cause of their breakup as a means to unearth a motive for Claire's death—I was fully aware that even asking a question like this could imply that he had something to do with Claire's death. And as much as I wanted to know every detail about Claire's life in her months and weeks and days, that question would have been unfair to him. Besides, it was none of my business. I wish I could say I was above speculating why and how Claire died, but I'm not. I want to know exactly everything she was thinking and doing in the days and hours and seconds before she died.

I often wondered—and still do wonder—what I could have done to prevent Claire's death. Feeling like you may have caused someone to harm themselves by not doing enough to prevent them from doing so is a hard feeling to shake, even when you fully realize a text or a phone call or a visit won't be a pivotal healing moment precisely because a text or phone call or visit didn't and couldn't lift me out of my despair when I was actively suicidal. Depression is so often described as a pit for a reason. A text or phone call or visit may be a thread in the rope that pulls you out, but it's only a thread. And, again, I found a twitter thread that illuminated what I couldn't put into words:

@garrcie I love all the suicide prevention posts, but to me the “check in with your friends” language isn’t helpful. People don’t die because no-one checked in on them, and its [sic] not fair to their family members or friends to imply they could’ve been saved with a texr [sic]

@garrcie Its’ [sic] also not fair to people who are suicidal to increase the helpless victim based language around mental illness. many [sic] of them are deeply loved, and acting like a check in [sic] would save them really minimizes a condition that is real, and multifactorial

@garrcie the narrative blames people who are suicidal “how are you feeling this way when you are loved and supported?” and it blames their loved ones because “you could’ve [sic]/shouldve [sic] done more to prevent this”

@garrcie suicide prevention is about a lot more than hotlines and check ins [sic]. Suicide prevention is about access to quality mental health care for everyone, affordable housing, culturally competent providers, LGBTQ resources,

@garrcie de stigmatizing seeking care for mental illness, destigmatizing men's mental health, harm reduction for substance misuse, parenting classes, and more

@garrcie ultimately suicide prevention is about creating a world where people don't need to rely on 1 am phone calls to stay alive

@garrcie i obviously don't mean to minimize the importance of social factors and support, of course humans need love to survive. but [sic] we need to think about and talk about suicidality as a [sic] institutional problem not just a personal one

It wasn't until the end of August or maybe even sometime in September that I finally mailed Claire's parents the card that I had bought for them shortly after I learned of Claire's passing. I was angry with them for shrouding Claire's death in secrecy, robbing the people closest to her of the news. I told them how very sorry I was to learn of Claire's passing and how I couldn't imagine the pain and grief of losing their only child, especially a child like Claire. What I said was true, but what I didn't say was *what the fuck is wrong with you?* I shared with them a strange and persistent vision I had of Claire: her, as a bridesmaid, at my wedding. I wasn't planning a wedding—I didn't even have a boyfriend. And even if I had had a boyfriend—and a relationship serious enough to warrant a wedding—a wedding wasn't something I wanted. I had been married before, and I didn't picture myself doing it again. Maybe because my first wedding was to a very bad man, or maybe because I've never aspired to the stereotypical feminine things in life. Either way, a marriage wasn't on my radar, but all of my best friends gathered in one place, wearing beautiful gowns and holding flowers and smiling the smile of love was. I wanted to bask in love with Claire.

I gave Claire's parents my cell phone number, my email, and my home address, hoping they'd get in touch with me, but they did not. Considering how guarded they were about Claire's death, I didn't expect to hear from them, but I really hoped their understanding and empathy of my love for Claire would trump the ignominy they felt about Claire's life and death.

I also sent them a print of a digital illustration that I had a woman on Etsy make of Claire. I took a screenshot of my favorite photo of Claire from her Instagram, and I told the artist she had complete creative authority for whatever she produced.

Shortly after Claire moved to the city for graduate school, she posted a photo on Instagram of her and her pug, Sid. She's kneeling and wearing a black dress with a flower print, a pair of black Ray Bans, bright red lipstick, and she's holding Sid, who's dressed in a taco costume. Claire and I shared more than just an affinity for true crime: we also loved bold lipstick. I bought her a glittery green lipstick in 2016 that she modeled in a separate Instagram post.

What the artist made was more fantastic than anything I could have ever imagined. It captured Claire's luminescence in a way that made her seem ethereal. I framed the print, and it hangs above my bed along with a framed print of a bat that I bought from Society6. I have no idea what, if anything, Claire's parents did with the print I sent them, and my only hope is that they, too, see Claire's brilliance and that they don't hide it like they did her death.

When I thought about Claire's death, and her parents having to come down to the city to clean out her apartment, I thought about my parents having to clean out my apartment in Cortland if I ever gave in to my suicidal ideation. I don't know if relating Claire's actual death to my hypothetical death was empathy or theft. I think it's probably a bit of both. But I do know one reason for not taking my own life is abhorring the thought of my parents having to go through my things, deciding what to keep and what to get rid of, crying as they worked through the detritus of my life. You collect all these things in the course of your life that have, on some level, meaning and/or worth, and in an instant, it all becomes junk.

Did Claire's parents keep or throw away the green lipstick I bought her?

I spend large portions of my time coveting what my friend's have and daydreaming how much better my life would be if I were them. I envisage the things I'd do differently if I was them and other things I'd appreciate more if I was them. When Claire first moved to the city, I asked for her address so I could send her packages and cards. It took a year or two before I googled her address to see exactly where she lived. Curiosity quickly evolved to astonishment. The price of a studio in her apartment complex was more than three times what I was paying for my apartment in Cortland. She was only about six blocks from Central Park. She lived alone with her pug and cat. She was going to graduate school and dating in one of the largest cities in the US. Even though I knew Claire to be a bashful person, I drew her into a fantasy of a woman-about-town, living life in a glamorous yet raw way, like if you mashed the shows *Sex and the City*, *Gossip Girl*, and *Girls* together. I pictured her walking her dog around the streets of Manhattan, and going to SoulCycle classes, and sitting in grad school lectures, and flirting with hot men on Tinder—the quality of men you could only find in someplace like NYC—and going to lavish nightclubs. I wondered how she couldn't be ecstatic with life.

I blotted out Claire's lived experience and only considered the one-dimensional conceit of the American Dream that, as a society, we've believed to be real and achievable. *What isn't there to love about living in the dreamiest city in the world?* And then I question whether anyone looks at my life and does the same thing and wonders how I, too, am not ecstatic with life. This wasn't fair to Claire, and it isn't fair to myself, but I keep doing it. Why am I sad? Why can't I just get over it?

Wherever you are, there you are.

I sent Claire a few messages in early March that I hadn't received a response to, but I wasn't immediately worried. It was normal for days and sometimes weeks to pass before we answered each other or before one of us reached out simply to say "hi" or "I miss you" or "I love you" or all of those things. But when I went to send her another message a few weeks later and noticed my previous messages had sent as text messages—and not as iMessages that are typical of Apple to Apple devices—while simultaneously noticing that the message I was actively typing was also a text message and not an iMessage—the blue "send" arrow was green—my stomach immediately dropped. My first thought was *oh my god, she's dead*. But I know I tend to be fatalistic, so I considered other options: she was too busy with law school so she turned her phone off; she was going through a hard time and turned her phone off; she was in a several week long inpatient

program and her phone was off; she got sick of her phone and just got rid of it; she couldn't maintain her relationship with me anymore and blocked me; she got a new phone and it was an Android, and she hadn't responded to me for any of the reasons above. I was spiraling and couldn't make sense of this green message. To be sure of her safety, I googled her full name plus the word "obituary." I didn't want to hit "enter," but my gut compelled me to. I found her LinkedIn but nothing else. Some of the pressure eased, but I still didn't have a good feeling. I decided to follow up with an email. Still no response.

I didn't want to think anything bad had happened to Claire, so instead I got angry with her. I willed myself to believe that she had "ghosted"³ me, and I was angry with her for being so flippant toward our relationship and my feelings. I text my friends and told them how angry and hurt and confused I was that Claire had apparently ghosted me, and I asked them if they had ever been ghosted by a friend. I also ran through the list of other possible scenarios with them, and no one agreed with me that she might be dead, especially because there was no sign of an obituary. It just didn't make sense. Their refusal to jump to the same conclusion I had pacified my delirium slightly. I was a bit embarrassed that I even thought she *may* be dead. *Of course Claire is alive.* She may be struggling right now, but she'll pull through whatever this is because she always pulls through. If she needed to cut me out of her life in order to heal, then so be it. I didn't want to think of myself as having a toxic role in Claire's life and therefore needing to be cut out of it, but Claire would occasionally cut out poisonous relationships—good for her!—and I'd much rather have her be alive and safe but no longer wanting me in her life.

But the thought that she was dead would linger.

Months passed before I'd find out that Claire had died. And I let the months pass. As much as I wanted to know, I also didn't. I didn't want to know if she ghosted me, and I certainly didn't want to know if she was dead. I had every opportunity to reach out to Claire's boyfriend on Instagram and ask, but I chose not to. To this day, I still don't know what happened to Claire, and I probably never will. I have a few suspicions, but they'll always be suspicions. Sometimes I think not knowing confounds the grieving process, and sometimes I think it's better that I don't know so that I can't compartmentalize Claire and the life that she lived to her last moments. She was an infinite number of moments.

I had a dream about Claire recently. I was in a freight yard, running through the shipping containers and trying to escape the laser blasts of the people chasing me—their guns were like something out of Star Wars. As I lost energy and my chasers closed the ground between us, I vanished into a shadowed area the size of a small closet. My plan was to wait in this sliver of poorly concealed space until my hunters gave up and retreated or found me and put an end to my escape. But Claire foiled my plan. She manifested out of nowhere, grinned at me, jumped into the light and started shooting at my mysterious chasers. I was hesitant to join her but her fervor for the fight rallied me into action. I jumped out and we started blasting our guns in every direction. They were closing in on us, and our demise felt imminent, but we were laughing. The action and near calamity of the situation felt both real and like a video game. I was terrified for my life but intoxicated by Claire's presence and the urgency and excitement of the fight. As the gun battle came to an end—no one really "won," the enemy just disappeared like smoke from a

fire—Claire and I dropped back into the shadows and looked at each other, panting from the thrill of the fight and laughing hysterically. I couldn't stop staring at her. Just as I began to relax and contemplate her smile—it wasn't a half-smile, it was full and uninhibited—I realized something was amiss. Even as I was fully immersed in the dream, I became conscious that it was just that, a dream. Her presence was palpable, but she was a chimera. I felt both cheated and gratified. I started sobbing. Sobbing because I knew my dream could shift at the drop of a hat, and she'd be gone just as quickly as she had appeared. Sobbing because I was so happy to see her. Sobbing because she was so happy to see me. Sobbing because she was alive and this was real. Sobbing because she wasn't alive and this wasn't real. Before I could say or do anything, I was jolted into consciousness. I was paralyzed in my bed, sobbing.

Years after my sexual assaults—some at the hand of the very bad man—I still struggle with shame, guilt, fear, anger, embarrassment, mistrust, helplessness, hopelessness, worthlessness, numbness, loneliness, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation. For me, grief has become praxis and learning that healing isn't linear, that even if I think I've dealt with/accepted/moved past an overwhelming emotion or experience, I may, once again, be at the mercy of its reemergence. And even if I continue therapy and antidepressants for the rest of my life, I'll never know what life is like minus trauma. But I do know I can soften its effects.

I'd like to think the persistent confusion and devastation over Claire's death comes solely from a place of selfless empathy, but I'm aware enough and honest enough to know that that isn't the case. Of course Claire's death is devastating in and of itself, but it's also a foretoken of the sexual assault survivor curse: suicidality—for the percentage of survivors who experience suicidal ideation—haunts you like the cursed videotape in the movie *The Ring*. If you know the movie, you know that once you've seen the video, you're doomed. There is no escaping death. (I'd almost feel guilty using a movie to compare Claire's death to suicidality, but she loved horror films, and I know she'd approve of this reference.)

Existence is perpetually in doubt.

I've been following the poet Chen Chen on Twitter for a few years now, and he recently tweeted a Mary Oliver poem and his thoughts about the poem that perfectly elucidates the struggle I've experienced trying to negotiate my will to live with my will to end things. Something I'm working toward is realizing this isn't a separate self—it's all me.

@chenchenwrites

We shake with joy, we shake with grief.
What a time they have, these two
housed as they are in the same body.
--Mary Oliver, "We Shake with Joy"

@chenchenwrites thinking about how this very short poem is composed of all single syllable words, until the end, with the word "body"—
how this two syllable word is the (trembling) container for both joy and grief

My body both trembles with joy and grief. My will to live and my will to die are nurturing forces inside me that stem from the same root. I have an intimate relationship with both of these selves—how could I not? I live so I can macerate in love, to waste away life rapt in humiliating devotion. To become softened by love is also to become hardened by it. In order to let love fray the edges of your heart, you also have to become hardened to its disappointments. Without expectation, you cannot love, and you cannot love without expectation. To expect is to wait and to anticipate, and the very act of waiting and anticipating is yielding your heart to someone else. Its beauty is as unparalleled as its ability to devastate.

My life feels like a waiting game. A game where I'm trying to outwit and outpace the trauma that has been slowly trying to pull me under. A game to see whether or not an old trauma could do me in, or if a new trauma will deal the final blow. I've often found my autonomy and agency subjugated to both external and internal forces that are beyond my control, and death is one of them. And I often wonder if Claire felt the same way.

I wonder if and hope I'll get to a place where I'm no longer waiting. But I do know, in learning to love myself and continuing to open my heart to others, I am wishing for a future. And that is good enough for now.

In the same conversation I had with Claire's boyfriend about the significance of her admiration for long Furby, I also asked about the significance of the bats. He told me that Claire loved bats because "they are small and cute and kind of look like dogs but they're also spooky and gothy." He dedicated a plaque in remembrance of Claire and her affection for bats at a bat sanctuary in the area, and the owner told him he placed the plaque in the "Geribatic" ward for old bats—a pun so perfect you'd think Claire had a hand in it.

I had always been loath to use the term "goth" when it came to Claire and her personality because I always associated gothiness with "posers," people on the fringes of society that place themselves there with the duplicitous purpose of rejecting mainstream society while also coveting its acceptance. I lumped all Goths into this category of dark, dramatic grunge, and I wouldn't allow myself to see Claire in that light. *She isn't a poser, so how could she be goth?* Maybe I did this precisely because there were so many aspects of Claire that were unknown to me so I filled the gaps with my own narrative. I'm disappointed that I allowed myself to indulge in this kind of gross stereotyping—and just how reductive it is—of Claire. I failed to embrace her fully. And so did her parents. We owed her so much more.

I recently got a tattoo of a bat on my right ring finger. It's a minimalist outline of a bat, and some of the lines are barely noticeable because the tattoo artist had a hard time tattooing my finger while holding the skin taut. I hoped the pain of the tattoo would mimic the pain I felt the last time Claire and I got piercings together. I hoped the pain would summon the pain of my grief, but it didn't. I barely felt it. And I was disappointed. I wanted to feel more. Is it possible to feel *too much grief*?

How do I mourn Claire unselfishly? I almost wrote "how do I mourn Claire's loss" unselfishly, but the way the question is framed centers myself and my feelings in Claire's death. *Claire died.* How

do I mourn Claire? How do I mourn Claire's death (to me)? How do we mourn death altruistically?

It's weird to have relics of someone's life after they've gone. I visit Claire's Instagram page and scroll through it as if she could post something new any day now. And I visit often. I still have a free sticker I nabbed from a live "Last Podcast on the Left" show we saw together at the Haunt in Ithaca. I don't listen to podcasts, and I had no idea what Last Podcast on the Left was, but Claire loved it so I happily joined her. The one relic that I never want to lose, but I also feel like could become too much to hold on to, is our text thread. I'm not sure how far back it goes, but at least a year or more. It sits at the bottom of my Messages app, buried under active conversations. Claire's number could easily be someone else's by now, and the idea of that breaks my heart. I can't believe the world continues to rotate without her.

DECLARES THE LORD

MADISON SCHEUNEMAN

I remember reading Jeremiah 29:14 at my uncle's funeral when I was eleven years old. My aunt framed the verse for me with pictures of my uncle glued to it. The light brown frame and false vintage paper sits on the dresser in my bedroom where I've tucked my grandfather's funeral card in the corner of the frame. One of the empty shells from the 21-gun salute in my grandfather's honor sits in front of that frame next to a jewelry box that contains two necklaces: one for my deceased dog and the other for my deceased cat. But every once in a while I'll look at the frame and read the verse trapped within: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you to exile.'"

It's a beautiful verse, and I can understand why my uncle found a great deal of peace in it while he was alive, but I call bullshit. The only feeling I get when I reread that verse is guilt. I didn't know my uncle. He was an addict, and my grandma says he was a good kid who had it rough. For a long time I never really understood how his life could've been worse than the rest of his six siblings because they all lived in the same house, but I now know that no two siblings ever really live in the same house. While I may not know the exact details that pushed my uncle toward the path that he wound up on, I can say for certain God declared that he had chosen that path for my uncle. And I know for certain God would claim him as one of His children. So why would *the Father* let one of his children poison himself to death? I'm sure my uncle called out to Him and asked for help, and he wasn't given it. I'm sure my uncle sought Him out with all of his heart and he did not find Him. Where was God and why wasn't he listening as declared he would?

But I digress...

This isn't supposed to be about God and how He lacks the guiding hand of a father--despite being known as *the Father*. This is about something else. I don't necessarily feel bad for not knowing my uncle beyond my own infancy, I was too young to control that; what I feel guilty about is reading at his funeral. While I didn't know my uncle, I knew my grandfather. I spent almost everyday after school at his house--or more appropriately my grandmother's. He would yell at my cousins and me for being too loud while he watched *M*A*S*H* reruns from his green recliner in the corner of the living room. Even after he had his stroke he was almost always in that chair, where my entire family watched him deteriorate in front of our eyes. But it was there that he sat when he asked me about softball even after I stopped playing. It was there that he sat when he told me I was his favorite because I took the time to talk to him. And yet, when asked, I refused to speak at his funeral. I can't tell you why I said no, I was fifteen at that point and still I chose silence on the day of my grandfather's funeral. Why is it that we're braver when we're younger? Is it because we're afraid God will take us back from this "captivity" we're attached to? But what about those of us who have abandoned the Father that has abandoned us? What is it we have to fear exactly?

But I digress...

My grandfather's ashes stayed at the funeral home for about a year if not more; my uncle's ashes were collected almost immediately and spread at Thunder Rocks in Allegany. Allegany, specifically Thunder Rocks, had been the one place on the entire Earth where my uncle had been able to find solace. I could understand why. Even on the hottest days it is always cool there. The moisture from the mossy rocks cools everything underneath the canopy of trees. And under just about any piece of wood on the ground you can find a salamander. But it's the giant rocks that everyone goes to see and climb that I suspect gave my uncle clarity. I imagine he climbed the biggest one and felt as though he could stay up there forever. With his ashes there, I think maybe he got that wish. Maybe he's perpetually reliving childhood memories, unaware that his mother refused to come because she didn't want her son cremated, worried it would affect his chances of getting into Heaven. But didn't the Lord declare that He would bring His children home? Was my uncle not captive in a place he was unhappy? What kind of a father would not let his child home because of what he had done with his body?

But I digress...

I've always wondered what the funeral home director was thinking when he called my grandmother and asked if someone was going to pick up my grandfather's ashes. He knew our family, but I doubt he *knew* my family. I've heard the reason my grandfather's ashes were left for so long was because they had to arrange for his ashes to be buried with his mother. But I suspect my grandma was, deep down, happy to have him out of the house. He had cheated on her with her best friend, who showed up on Father's Day with kids in tow telling my grandfather to take them for the day. He left her screwed over with finances that she had to find a way to fight legally. And he really became a self-fulfilling prophecy of the crotchety old man. I don't mean to speak ill of the dead, I'm just saying my grandmother had her reasons and I don't think anyone blamed her. She didn't care that my grandfather had been cremated.

I have a feeling she doesn't care about a lot of things. My grandfather, apparently, would have disowned anyone for coming out, but my grandmother would have embraced it and them. I know this because when a family friend my siblings and cousins and I call "aunt" came out my grandmother didn't feel any different about her even though two of her children did. We always think of younger people as being more accepting, but my grandmother has lived too long to let hate and judgement fill her heart, so what's God's excuse? He created the universe and all of its people according to legend, but He is unwilling to accept His creations for what He made them to be. But how does that work? If we are created in His image, is it us who are really the problem?

But I digress...

My grandmother had seven children: one is my mother, one is my mother's twin, one is my Godmother, one overdosed, one lives in Tennessee, and two love making my life a living hell. My uncle began questioning my sexuality because I played softball, before I ever got a chance to start thinking about it myself. I'm writing this at his daughter's house as I babysit the sons she had out of wedlock while she and her husband are in New York City in the middle of a global pandemic. I love her children as if they are my own, partly because I will never have my own (sorry mom). Like her father when I come home from school she doesn't ask about classes, she asks if I have a boyfriend--the answer has always been no--and then with a smirk, as if the idea is a joke--

she'll ask about having a girlfriend. I hope one day I'll find the courage to say not yet rather than no, but then I'd have to explain asexuality and panromanticism and I'm not sure I want to deal with that. I've heard my family discuss LGBTQ+ identities, and it's clear they don't understand anything beyond "gay" and "lesbian" no matter how hard I try to explain the other queer identities that exist. They can't comprehend the different kinds of people that inhabit this Earth so they brush it off as attention seeking for the most part. But attention is the last thing I want.

Because attention in my family means criticism. My aunt is really great at doling it out as if she is untouchable. It's always one thing or another that she thinks I should change. For a while she told me I dressed like a boy--as if there is such a thing as gendered clothing--because I wore sweatpants and t-shirts almost exclusively, but I never told her I only did that because she shattered any confidence I had. Her comments about my weight made me hate wearing jeans, and nice clothes. I still don't wear dresses and skirts, but it's no longer because of her, it's because dresses and skirts are not me. To be fair, my aunt gets a lot of the credit for my attitude. Because of her I learned not to care about the way people talk about my clothing and weight, it's not their life I'm living. Apparently it's the one God planned for me. I'm just following the path to the future the Lord declared he had chosen for me. But why did he choose to make it so damn hard to get there? Aren't fathers supposed to try to make things easier for their daughters, not harder? So much for declaring He'd give the gift of hope, perhaps it had never escaped from Pandora's box.

But I digress...

I don't want to talk about my mother's siblings anymore, I have two of my own to worry about. And worry I do, like a second mother. I love my siblings more than just about anyone else on this planet; I would lay my life down for them, I really would, but it hadn't always been that way. Being the oldest sibling is a complicated thing, because I went from being an only child who was read to almost every night by my mother and played with my father on his days off to sharing the spotlight. There were times for sure when I wished I didn't have siblings, like when I first got my license and was deemed their chauffeur, or whenever I had to change their diapers, but probably the most when they went through the simultaneous biting phase. But there are more times, especially now, where I can't imagine my life without those twin terrors in it. Like the moment, years ago, when my brother had a nightmare and in his sleepy haze came to my room for comfort and slept in my bed the rest of the night. Or the time my sister sent me the *Peppa Pig* dvd that showed Peppa trying to figure out what she wanted to be when she grew up because I was away at school and it was a way to keep an inside joke alive. Or when my brother asks me to play *Call of Duty* with him when I get home from school, and we sit together eating snacks while he reminds me how to play. Or the days when my sister and I just can't stop laughing at one another, and we're sent away by our mother because she's sick of hearing us screech. Their existences are what makes me feel alive. I love them unconditionally; the way God is supposed to love all of His children.

But God doesn't love His children with tattoos. God doesn't love His children who wear mixed fabrics. God doesn't love His children who plant different crops in the same field. God doesn't love His children who cheat. God doesn't love His children who lie. God doesn't love His children who end their own lives. God doesn't love His children who want too much. God doesn't love His children who get angry. God doesn't love His children who eat a lot. God doesn't love His children who are proud of themselves. God doesn't love His children who want what others have. God doesn't love His children who are "lazy." God doesn't love His children that desire

pleasures of the flesh. God doesn't love His children who have children before marriage. God doesn't love his children who alter their body for their own happiness. God doesn't love His children.

It is God who chose to create this Earth, or so I was taught in Catholic school. And it was God who chose to create man in his own image. And it is God who takes away our free will so we will walk the path he has chosen, but still, he doesn't not love his creation unconditionally. He punishes us for being human, even though He is the most human of us all. Our Father who art in Heaven we see thy sins.

This time I do not digress.

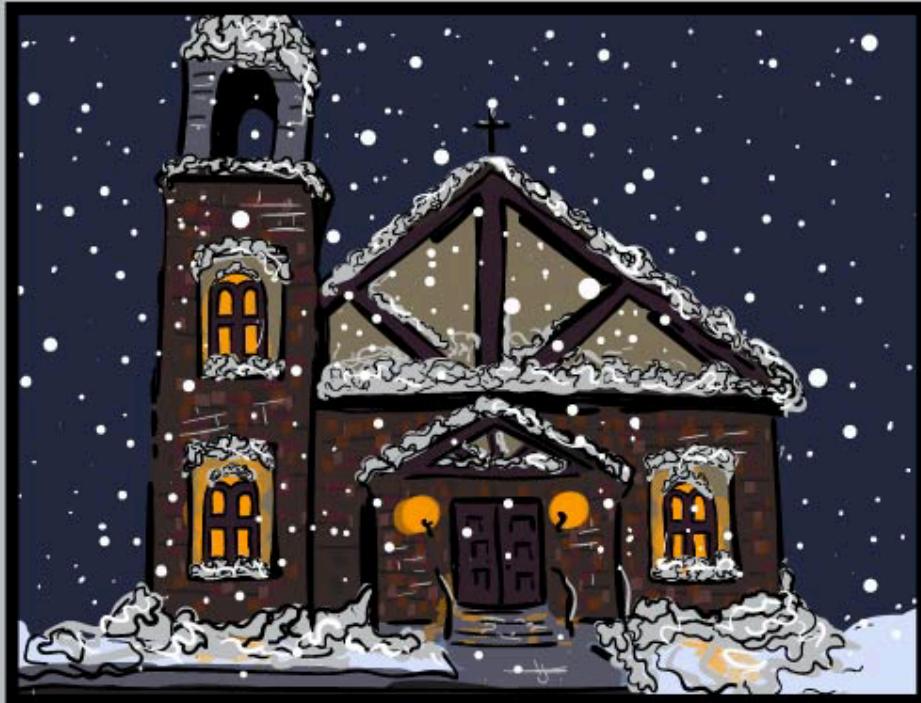
ANONYMOUS

KIMBERLY WELCH

"ANONYMOUS"

A STORY BY
KIMBERLY WELCH

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, MY MOTHER TOOK ME TO CHURCH WITH HER TWICE A WEEK. ON SUNDAYS, WE DROVE OUT TO LIVERPOOL FOR THE TEN O'CLOCK SERVICE. ON THURSDAYS, WE WENT TO OTISCO FOR THE SEVEN O'CLOCK ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS MEETING.



1



I GOT THE SENSE,
EVEN BEFORE I REALLY
UNDERSTOOD WHAT
WAS HAPPENING, THAT
THERE WAS SOMETHING
INAPPROPRIATE ABOUT
MY PRESENCE.



SOMETIMES,
IF I DIDN'T HAVE
SOMETHING TO DISTRACT
ME, I COULDN'T HELP
LISTENING IN.
AT THE TIME, I DIDN'T
KNOW WHAT THE WORDS,
"I'M AN ALCOHOLIC" MEANT,
AND I CERTAINLY DIDN'T
UNDERSTAND THE WEIGHT
THEY CARRIED.
BUT I COULD TELL IT WAS
HEAVY.
I COULD SEE THAT EASILY
ENOUGH.



THEY WOULD ALWAYS END WITH THE SERENITY PRAYER. TO THIS DAY, I CAN RECITE THE SERENITY PRAYER BETTER THAN I CAN THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE OR THE NATIONAL ANTHEM, BUT I'VE NEVER UTTERED THE WORDS ALOUD.



INSTEAD, I LOOKED UP AT HER. I DIDN'T KNOW IT THEN, BUT I WAS LUCKY TO BE IN THOSE ROOMS. MY MOTHER NEVER SHIELDED ME FROM THE TRUTH. SHE SHOWED ME, AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE, EVEN THEN, THE WORK SHE WAS DOING TO STAY SOBER.



The End

THE STYLE AND SUBSTANCE OF WES ANDERSON

BENJAMIN SMITH

Wes Anderson is one of the most unique filmmakers in the industry. He is a true auteur with an unwavering distinctive voice. His imprint is clearly seen in all aspects of his films. The style of his films is very distinguishing, and fans of his work can spot his films instantly. All components of Anderson's films are meticulously created. Visual aesthetic, set design and costume design are all vital to his style. The intense detail and peculiar idiosyncrasies are synonymous with Anderson as a filmmaker. He "has consistently exhibited a distinctive aesthetic that features axial symmetry, retro stylization, block colors, off-beat characterization, and an ironic or quirky tone" (Wilkins 151). Anderson's films, including *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, all feature his uniquely particular style. Nuanced production design elements and a relentless attention to detail are staples of Anderson's work and are prominent in all of his films. Critics of Anderson claim his work is all style and no substance. They condescendingly call his work kitschy and chic, while not giving credence to the seriousness and thoughtfulness of his stories. While it is true that Anderson's work is stylistically driven, there is plenty of substance, too. Family dysfunction, grief, and loss are often at the heart of Anderson's work. These relationships and themes can be overshadowed by the stunning visual aesthetic Anderson creates, but they are no doubt present. Make no mistake, the films of Anderson are full of both style and substance.

The visual aesthetic Anderson creates is omnipresent. The artistic choices made by Anderson feature straight lines, flat composition and symmetry. These components work hand in hand to create a large part of his unique style. The flat composition usually entails characters directly in front of the camera. They are head on, right in front, with no awkward angles. This way of shooting also creates lines and symmetry with many shots. Background items or different elements of the set design are specifically and meticulously placed to create a visual that is pleasing to the eye of the audience. Anderson avoids lines that are not parallel, and by doing so, can center subjects directly in the middle of the shot. This style can also lead to the rule of thirds, another photography method that splits the shot into three equal parts. This technique can afford the filmmaker many stylistic choices, including symmetrical balance or imbalance. Either way, the shot is clean and visually appealing. In *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, Zissou, played by Bill Murray, and Ned Plimpton, played by Owen Wilson, are seated next to each other directly in front of the camera. They are wearing the same attire, a desk statue and wall art are centered between them and they are flanked on either side by wall sconces and lighting fixtures. It is a perfect example of symmetry- one that Anderson duplicates many times in all of his films. Similarly, there is a scene in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* where Zero (F. Murray Abraham) has dinner with the writer (Jude Law). The scene bounces back from the two characters, who are sitting on opposite sides of the small, square table. They are each perfectly centered in the shot with symmetrical backgrounds and straight lines apparent throughout. Peter Sloane, author of *Kinetic Iconography: Wes Anderson, Sergei Parajanov, and the Illusion of Motion*, asserts that "There is a studied depthlessness to many of Anderson's most iconic shots, in which depth of field does not exist in any meaningful sense" (Sloane 256). This is not meant to be a negative critique of Anderson, but more of an assertion of his unique style. So often Anderson perfectly centers his object in the foreground of the shot and though there is a lack of depth literally in the frame, there is no such lack of depth in the construction or meaning of the shot. It is this method, so like many of the decisions Anderson makes in his films that sets him apart from other filmmakers. He

chooses to build these perfect shots of symmetry, a no-no for many others, because of the way he tells his stories. He is quirky and different, and it is these straight lines, flat composition and symmetry that set Anderson apart. These differences are absolutely vital for Anderson and his thematic substance because it is in this method, with these artistic choices, that his characters exist. The themes and tones work hand-in-hand with how Anderson blocks scenes and how he shoots his characters. Similarly, the visual aesthetic created adds to the thematic undertone. Deborah J. Thomas, in her article *Framing the ‘melancomic’: character, aesthetics and affect in Wes Anderson’s Rushmore*, asserts that Anderson uses “a series of strategies in relation to framing, camera angles, shot scales...that are designed to unsettle the audience’s experience of proximity to, and hence intimacy with, the characters” (Thomas 1). It is the way in which Anderson shoots his characters that allow a different feeling and connection for the audience. He uses his unique cinematography to develop characters through his framing and composition. In addition to how the films are shot, what the cameras are filming is just as important.

Extravagant and purposeful set design is another hallmark of Anderson’s work. Some filmmakers do not put forth much effort into the details of set design. They relegate the duty to people specifically hired to perform that task. This is not the case with Anderson, however. His movies cultivate a sense of reality that is unique to his characters. In *The Royal Tenenbaums*, their home is a richly decorated enclave that matches its inhabitants. Each character’s room is a representation of their personal intricacies. Any background item or prop, if moved to another floor or room, would seem completely out of place. These artificial constructions are tremendously important to the story Anderson tells. The films feature particular detail when it comes to personal items of the characters and the space they occupy. Nothing is out of place; everything has meaning. Anderson places specific emphasis on these details because “homes are created as personal territories through the presence of collected objects that signify the accumulation of past moments within the space” (Wilkins 168). In addition to the meticulous detail of background items and other props, colors play a large part in the set designs. Vaughn A. Vreeland, author of *Color Theory and Social Structure in the Films of Wes Anderson*, states, “The interplay of Anderson’s light and color with his characters and other objects produces fascinating visual effects in the eye of an observer” (Vreeland 1). In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the spectrum of red to white is predominantly featured. The exterior of the hotel is pink on the bottom few floors and turns to a creamy white on the top floors and the interior sees red and pink dominate the landscape- from carpets to wallpaper and wood paneling to lights, everything contains the color theme. Set designs, room layouts, and “a distinct aesthetic style that is easily recognizable through...use of striking color palettes” (Vreeland 1) are all incorporated into the vision Anderson sets out to create. He also goes on to say that Anderson uses “exuberant color tied to somber themes” (Vreeland 1). The audience is transported into the world of the characters because of the particular attention to detail that is shown through the camera. Set design contains many stylistic choices, but they are not the only artistic facet of Anderson’s work.

Complimentary to set design, costume design also is featured prominently in Anderson’s aesthetic. Much like the way the characters belong to their surroundings, the clothes and apparel belong to the characters. Every clothing decision was painstakingly made and in most every case, each character is supposed to be wearing exactly what he or she is, and as an audience member, one would not think it appropriate for that character to be wearing anything else. *The Royal Tenenbaums* features Chas Tenenbaum, played by Ben Stiller, and his two sons, Ari and Uzi, wearing matching red and white Adidas jumpsuits. Danny Glover portrays Henry Sherman, an academic, who, of course, wears a splashy colored suit with a bowtie. Raleigh St. Clair, played by Bill Murray, a neurologist conducting research on a patient throughout the film, is clad in the

stereotypical tweed jacket over a turtleneck and sports a big, bushy beard while smoking a pipe. This seemingly light-hearted, whimsical world created by Anderson sees his characters attire mimic every other artistic choice in his work- detail-laden and purposefully meticulous. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* features Zero Moustafa, the young bellhop played by Tony Revolorio, in his bellhop uniform adorned with the small, circular hat, that always seems to be tilted or falling off as he's scurrying to cater to the hotel guests. The amusing aspect of the hat alone is a welcomed accompaniment to story being told. It is with this reverence that Anderson treats every aspect of style and artistic choice in his films. Costuming also plays a role for Anderson to temper the seriousness of some of his characters, according to Vreeland, who states, "Colors and costuming foil the neurotic personalities associated in his films" (Vreeland 1). The costumes do not subtract from the substance, however, they just add another layer to the intricacies of the characters. They bring a stylistic component and a sense of lightheartedness to themes that otherwise would be mired in the ultra-serious. In the case of Chas and his two sons wearing the matching red Adidas jumpsuits, there is purposeful reasoning for it. Chas' wife and the boys' mother Rachel died in a plane crash a few years earlier and because of that Chas has been extremely overprotective of his sons. As Timothy Shary explains, "Ironically, in his attempts to avoid being physically and emotionally absent in his kids' lives, Chas smothers them with an overbearing presence that alienates them from him just as effectively as his own father did to him" (Shary 110). He has never properly dealt with the loss, and the matching jumpsuits, though seemingly an odd intricacy on the surface, allows Chas to feel like he is in control and able to keep his remaining family together. Again, seemingly a cosmetic choice by Anderson to have them all wearing matching jumpsuits, like many of his artistic choices, has much deeper meaning than can be seen on the surface.

Critics argue that Anderson's work is style over substance. The British term *twee* refers to something being excessively or affectedly quaint, pretty, or sentimental. It is often used as a pejorative term that is used condescendingly by critics. Anderson is seen by some to stand for "disengaged flamboyance" (Hertweck 129) and has been a "whipping boy of the hipster establishment" (qtd. in Hertweck 129). These allegations surmise that Anderson is shallow and cosmetic, lacking any substance in his work. The most common of the arguments against him say he is "too pretty or too clever, Anderson is a pleasure to watch but has little of substance to say" (Hertwick 130). These shallow arguments lack any merit as it is clear Anderson provides substance and serious issues in his work. Parental abandonment is a massive theme in many films, including *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. Situations in both of these movies provide tense, melancholic moments that are anything but unsubstantial. In his book *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*, author Timothy Shary further discusses Anderson's proclivity for a spotlight on patriarchal figures, stating "they remain entranced by the patriarch and consolidate his power by making him their narrative focus while marginalizing alternative viewpoints that detract from his centrality" (Shary 102). The power of that focus shows that the father figures, especially in *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, are the most flawed characters in the films. Because of this, their actions, or inactions, are at the heart of the plotlines, and are deeply probed by Anderson. Family dysfunction and loss of innocence are also themes in both of these movies. In fact, "Anderson's characters are often figures on the cusp of crisis; many experience existential malaise, trauma, or grief, and some attempt suicide" (Wilkins 152). It is a fair assessment to say that Anderson's work can be defined as stylistically driven, but to say that said work lacks substance is pure fallacy.

Wes Anderson, as a filmmaker and auteur, can be described as quirky, stylistic, and even whimsical, but he cannot be labeled as shallow or devoid of substance. Anderson uses his style to enhance the substance of his stories, and it shows with every artistic decision he makes, from the way he shoots his scenes to set and costume design. Each decision he makes is thought out and purposeful. His imprint can be felt on every aspect of his films, which are equal parts style and substance.

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LIPINSKI'S FIVE RULES APPLIED TO FIVE DRUG TARGET CLASSES

JASON EVANS

Summary

Paul Ehrlich, who won the 1908 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his founding work in the field of immunology, envisioned a “magic bullet” that could one day cure disease without harming the body. While such a profound treatment remains elusive if not implausible, the process of drug discovery aims to come as close to these ideals by finding efficacious medicines with few side effects.

Many of these side effects can be traced to how drug molecules are absorbed, distributed, and metabolized. Before entering the bloodstream, the drug must first survive the acidic environment of the stomach. Once solubilized in the aqueous and acidic stomach, it must then pass through the hydrophobic lipid-bilayer of the stomach’s epithelial cells.

These two environments are as distinct as a drop of oil in a puddle of water, and necessitate a balance between water- and fat-solubility. Even if the drug meets these criteria, there is no guarantee that it will get past the liver and kidney, greedy to make foreign substances more water-soluble so that they can be eliminated through urine. At any of these steps, toxicity can arise because the drug isn’t being cleared quickly enough or too much drug arrives at unintended organs.

Christopher Lipinski developed his “rule of five” as a scientist at Pfizer to provide a general outline for how water- and fat-soluble drugs should be. These rules have assisted researchers in discovering efficacious new medicines since Dr. Lipinski published his rules in 1997. New and emerging treatments that mimic the activity of peptides and proteins, sometimes termed “biologics”, may challenge this trend however.

I analyzed 117 drug approvals between 1996 and 2016 and determine that drugs during this time period fit well within Lipinski’s rules. Therapeutic areas and drug targets are found to group tightly based on principle component analysis. Naïve Bayes classification indicates that the number of hydrogen bond donors is the most positively indicative feature for 2 of 5 drug target classes, agreeing with the Pearson correlation. Finally, drugs that targeted hormone receptors were found to deviate the most from Lipinski’s rules, especially in regard to molecular weight.

Introduction

Small-molecule drugs, traditionally well characterized by Lipinski's five rules (molecular weight < 500 daltons, < 5 hydrogen-bond donors, < 10 hydrogen-bond acceptors, partition coefficient < 5), have been the most prominent chemotherapies during the last century. Recent and emerging modalities, such as biologics, enable innovative treatments and may shift the trend towards "large molecule" drugs that do not follow these rules. I wished to determine how this shift correlates to Lipinski's five rules for FDA submissions approved in the last 25 years. Additional questions include how drug-target classes and treatment area correlate to the parameters in Lipinski's five rules.

Evaluated are five different drug-target classes: Angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, and inhibitors and activators for nerve growth factor receptor-1, somatostatin receptor-1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, thyroid receptor-1, and various androgen receptors. All five drug target classes include FDA new molecular entity (NME) submissions within the last 10 years, and their natural substrates or allosteric activators are diverse including hormones, polypeptides, and proteins. A total of 117 compounds were evaluated using the FDA NME database and ChemBL Drug-Target Interaction (DTI) database.

Data

The FDA NME database was used to compile a list of drugs submitted since April of 1980. Relevant features included the brand name of the drug and year of approval. Categorical variables such as target-interaction and approved treatment, and features including molecular weight were then pulled from ChemBL's DTI database. The resulting list included over 12,000 entries.

Features such as PKA, hydrogen-bond donors, hydrogen-bond acceptors, and coefficient of partitioning had to be pulled manually from PubChem. For this reason, the analysis was limited to five drug-targets. Using a random-letter generator the first letter of the drug-target was chosen, and then a drug-target containing less than 100 entries was picked.

The resulting list contained three categories: Drug-target (e.g. somatostatin receptor), target-substrate class (e.g. the drug mimics a polypeptide, such as with angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors) and therapeutic area (e.g. heart disease). Features included: Number of hydrogen-bond donors and acceptors, molecular weight, PKA, and the partition coefficient between water and n-octanol, xlog(p). PKA was the only feature not to be fully represented in all drugs, at 26.5%.

No drugs were represented in multiple categories. Natural products, such as testosterone, were removed from the list, however derivatives of natural products (e.g. ethylestrenol), salt forms (e.g. testosterone undecanoate) and esters were included.

The final list was pared to 117 drug submissions among Angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, and inhibitors and activators for nerve growth factor receptor-1, somatostatin receptor-1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, thyroid receptor-1, and various androgen receptors.

Methods and Analysis

Data tables were compiled in Microsoft Excel (Version 2015. Redmond, WA) using the FDA NME database, ChemBL DTI database, and the Pubchem website. Data was analyzed and visualized in Orange (Version 3.27.0. University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia).

A linear plot demonstrates the five features present in Lipinski's Rules among drug-targets (Figure 1). The molecular weight of all drugs is represented by both plot and size of dots. Drugs classified as "biologics", sometimes also known as "large molecules", may be characterized by having a molecular weight of >900 Da. Only six large molecule drugs were represented, and all targeted somastatin receptors. For this reason, drugs targeting somastatin receptor had the highest average molecular weight while drugs targeting androgen receptor had the lowest (Figure 2).

Molecular weight further played a prominent role in Pearson correlations, with the strongest overall correlation found to be 0.883 against hydrogen bond donors (Figure 3). Additional correlations in order from strongest to weakest include hydrogen bond acceptors versus donors (+0.876), hydrogen bond acceptors versus molecular weight (+0.868), and hydrogen bond acceptors versus XlogP₃, or the partition coefficient (-0.7) (Fig A1). For hydrogen bond

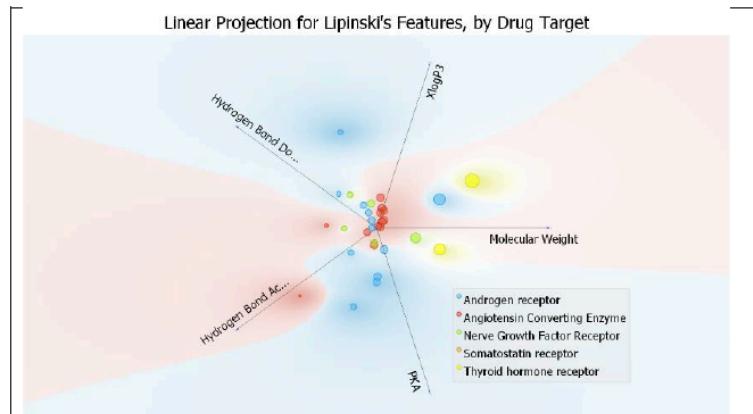


Figure 1.) Lipinski's five rules plotted on a linear projection. Molecular weight is both plotted and also represented by the size of dots.

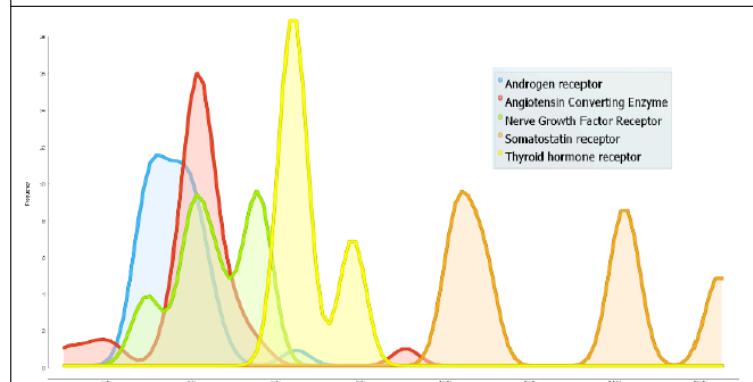


Figure 2.) Kernel density model of molecular weight for all drug targets. See appendix for method to fit Kernel model.

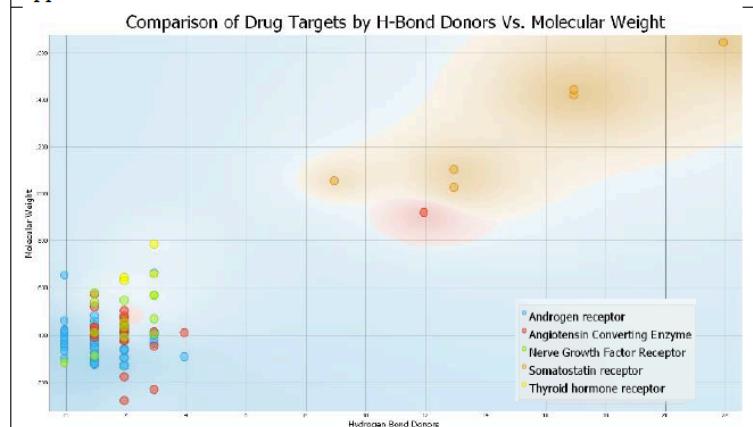
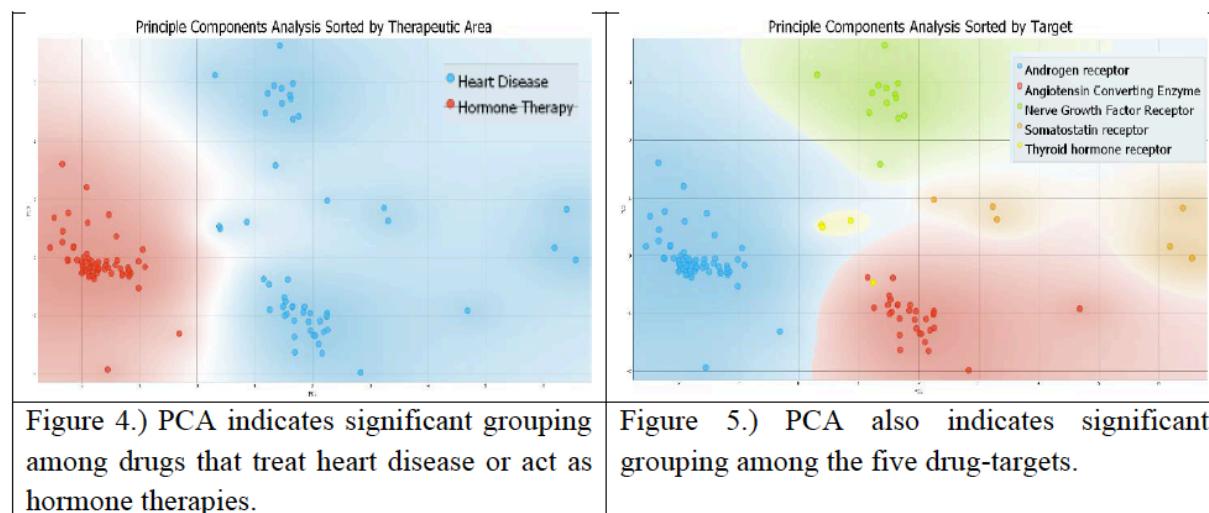


Figure 3.) Pearson correlation indicated that molecular weight versus hydrogen bond donors was the strongest correlator among drug-targets.

acceptors versus the partition coefficient, the negative correlation indicates that as hydrogen bond acceptors increase in number the partition coefficient decreases.

Principle component analysis (PCA) shows 43.0% of drugs were well described by one principle component and 82.4% well described by 3 principle components. For therapeutic area, strong grouping is demonstrated when plotting principle component 1 against principle component 3 (Figure 4) and drug-target grouping (Figure 5). The PCA analysis indicates that each therapeutic area and each drug target has significant similarities that could potentially be used to create a predictive sorting algorithm.



Naïve Bayes nomograms were then constructed using the drug-target as the model target (Figure A2). The nomogram indicates how strongly a single feature associates with the target: In this instance, a positive score represents that that region of the feature is well represented in the target. For drug-target androgen and nerve growth factor receptors, the most positively correlated feature is the number of hydrogen bond acceptors, and for angiotensin converting enzyme and somatostatin receptor the number of hydrogen bond donors. This agrees with the Pearson correlation. Because PKA is only represented in 26.5% of the sample set it was omitted from Naïve Bayes analysis, as it appeared to bias the other five attributes present in all samples. Partition coefficient was not found to be a top correlator in Naïve Bayes analysis or Pearson correlation. A high partition coefficient in this analysis indicates that the compound was more soluble in n-octanol than water.

Of the 117 drugs characterized only 20, or 5.85% of the total number, had at least one violation of Lipinski's rules (Figure 6). At least two of each drug-target class was represented. 16 of the 20 violators had a molecular weight above 500 daltons (Da), followed by 9 of 20 violations having a partition coefficient greater than five (Chart 1). The 4 of 20 violators that did not have a molecular weight above 500 Da had a partition coefficient greater than five. Only six drugs (edotreotide, lanreotide, octreotide, oxodotreotide, pasireotide, and saralasin) violated four of the five rules. Five of these six drugs were found to be hormone therapies. The "tide" suffix in the drug names represents that these drugs mimic peptides and glycopeptides.

No drugs were found to violate all five of Lipinski's rules.

Conclusion

Using Orange, parameters relating to Lipinski's five rules were modeled and analyzed. Most of the sample set is described well by Lipinski's rules, with notable exceptions for molecular weight. It was found through principle components analysis that each treatment area and drug-target class could be predicted based on their features, and Naïve Bayes and Pearson correlation suggests that molecular weight, hydrogen bond acceptors, and hydrogen bond donors play the most prominent roles.

For Lipinski's five rules, only 5.85% of the total number of drugs analyzed had at least a single rule violation. Of these 20, 11 targeted either androgen or somatostatin receptors, both hormone receptors. None violated all five rules.

Further analysis should focus on expanding the number of drug-targets represented in the data set. Pulling data manually from Pubchem proved tedious and possibly error prone, which became the primary factor for limiting this reports scope. From the FDA NME database over 500 drug-targets are available, and while the drug-targets were selected randomly the lack of population diversity indicated by PCA may be indicative of this analysis simply being limited. If drug-targets can continue to be separated through the forementioned methods a reliable predictive model could be created, which could be used to guide future drug development strategies.

Violations of Lipinski's Five Rules			
Molecular weight	xlogP	H-bond donors	H-bond acceptors
16	4	5	6

Chart 1.) Total number of violations categorized by feature.

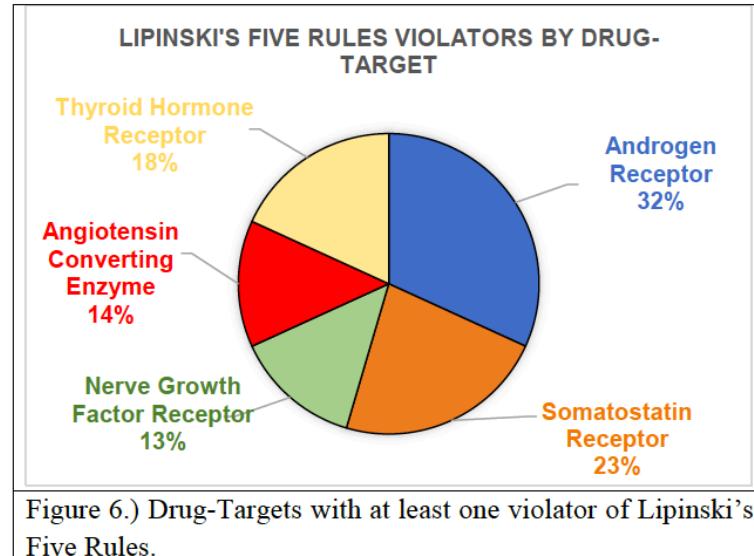


Figure 6.) Drug-Targets with at least one violator of Lipinski's Five Rules.

NEVADA'S AB4: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND IMPACTS ON NATIVE AMERICAN VOTING RIGHTS

MOLLY KRAUS

Democracy and Political Equality

Though the U.S. Constitution does not expressly name voting as a right, it places the election of representatives firmly in control of "the People" (U.S. Const. art. I, sec. 2). Additionally, several amendments enumerate the various ways in which the assumed right to vote cannot be denied. Exercising political power through voting is how citizens can formally express their needs and desires (Wang, "Politics of Voter Suppression"). Without equal citizenship and political participation, there is no guarantee for the interests of all to be considered by those who hold the decision-making power to enact laws that affect the general electorate (Dahl). Consequently, political equality is essential in a well-functioning representative democracy.

In addition to the explicit power to directly elect House members in Article I of the Constitution, four amendments – the fifteenth, nineteenth, twenty-fourth, and twenty-sixth – all extended the right to vote. These expansions affirmed that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote" cannot be curtailed or denied based on "race, color, or previous condition of servitude," on account of "sex," "failure to pay poll tax or other tax," nor on "age" (U.S. Const.). Further, the Supreme Court, in 1964, ruled that basic civil rights are predicated upon "the right to exercise franchise in a free and unimpaired manner," and thus, the right to vote "is a fundamental right protected by the Constitution" under the Equal Protection Clause (*Reynolds v. Sims*, 377 US 533). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) also states that "the most fundamental principle defining credible elections is that they must reflect the free expression of the will of the people" ("Supporting Free and Fair Elections"). This expression translates into political power, the equality of which requires that all votes be counted equally and for all citizens to have the meaningful opportunity to vote (Dahl). The vacillating path toward political equality, despite progress, still faces many challenges today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly exacerbated those challenges, particularly for populations who remain at the intersection of historical disenfranchisement, oppression, and low socioeconomic standing: Native Americans. Traditionally, the franchise of voting has expanded to include more citizens, albeit over a long, arduous process in a non-linear pattern. From the development of how elections are administrated to the evolution and debate considering what qualities confer citizenship, voting rights in America continue to be influenced by many fluctuating factors. As a result, specific policies influence both negative and positive growth in expanding the electorate.

Overall, Native Americans have been subjected to 500 years of racism and genocide (Native American Rights Fund "NARF"). The coinciding issues that stem from this history directly affect registration status and voter participation rates today (NARF). The combination of an active deadly pandemic, historical disenfranchisement, systemic socioeconomic factors, and barriers to the ballot for Native Americans during an election year compelled Nevada to pass Assembly Bill 4 ("AB4") in August of this year. The state's original emergency voting changes in June, which included a move to conduct the primary election by mail-in ballot entirely, were intended to

combat the COVID-19 outbreak. Nevertheless, this modification further disenfranchised Nevada's Native American population.

The most recent measure, Assembly Bill 4 (AB4), provides crucial accommodations for Native Americans, but some key provisions have provoked claims of fraud and unconstitutionality from members of Congress and even President Trump (Cegavske; Baker). As is emblematic of this country's voting rights history, contrasting views regarding measures that make voting more accessible and broaden the electorate have led to a struggle in the courts (and on Twitter) and to an uncertain future for the political power of historically oppressed groups.

Election Administration and Procedures

Rather than a single, national system, the United States has a decentralized administration system for elections, in which states and municipalities share most of the responsibilities. The distribution of duties and each system's function varies significantly between and within states (Shanton). This design allows states and localities to alter or construct procedures and policies that either ensure equitable access or impede the right to vote for all citizens.

For the first 100 years of the nation's existence, in-person voting by voice was most common, and prior registration was not required to participate. By the mid-nineteenth century, nearly all states required written ballots in place of oral public voting. Eventually, printed ballots replaced handwritten ballots, and requirements became more formalized by way of voter registration, private ballots' development, and voting machines' advancement (Keyssar). Clearly defined state laws regarding the administration of elections began to take shape. Likewise, states and localities formed a relationship with the US Postal Service (USPS) to deliver and return registration materials and ballots between voters and election officials (National Conference of State Legislatures).

Some features of the election system remained undetermined: the more complex and contentious aspects concerning residency, eligibility, proof of citizenship, and other requirements addressing fundamental characteristics about a person's value in the U.S. As part of the process for determining to whom voting rights should extend, a working definition and classification of race—whiteness—had to be developed. The result was large swaths of the population who lacked political rights (Keyssar).

Native American Citizenship and Voting Rights

The vague citizenship status of Native Americans under the newly formed United States government locked them into a precarious place within society. To Justice Marshall, Indian tribes were "domestic, dependent nations" (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 30 U.S. 1). Thus, individual Indians living within their tribes were considered foreigners. This legal framework of tribal sovereignty meant that these "distinct independent political communities" nevertheless remained under the United States' power (*Worcester v. Georgia*, 31 US 515). However, disavowing ties with tribes, moving out of tribal land, and paying taxes to the U.S. government still did not grant former tribal citizens any means toward U.S. citizenship. In 1857, the *Dred Scott* decision stated that non-taxpaying American Indians did not have the right to vote. The only path toward citizenship was through a ratified treaty or legislation. The process of naturalization was not available to them because those laws only applied to whites and foreigners (Tennant).

Occupying this ambivalent space within American society as equal parts foreigners and residents of domestic (yet dependent) independent communities, most Native Americans could not participate in the very political system that influenced and shaped their lives through court rulings and passed legislation. Still, only those considered "white" were eligible to vote. In 1884, the U.S. Supreme Court again denied citizenship to Native Americans in *Elk v Wilkins*. The Dawes Act (1887) granted citizenship to those who "adopted the habits of civilized life" and those who accepted land grants. Other means of citizenship came to women who married U.S. citizens and World War I veterans. Finally, in 1924, Congress declared that all Native Americans "born within the country's territorial limits" were citizens (History.com Editors).

Access to the Franchise

For most of our nation's history, English-speaking, literate, white males have had the sole opportunity to participate in shaping public policy. Women were incorporated into the franchise a century later. Despite a constitutional amendment that secured the right to the ballot for African Americans, basic political rights continued to be denied to many minority populations across the country (Gerken).

The passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA), which banned poll taxes and prohibited literacy tests, was an important step toward guaranteeing the right to vote for all citizens. Those policies, coupled with intimidation and violence, severely impeded the right to vote for Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American citizens (The Center for Legislative Archives). Notably, section 5 of the Act required states and localities with a history of race-based voting rights discrimination to submit any proposed changes to their voting procedures for approval. These changes could only be approved if they did not negatively impact citizens' voting rights based on race, ethnicity, or language (Liptak).

In 1975, Congress expanded the Act to cover "language minorities," which included Native Americans. By then, poll taxes, literacy tests, and "good character provisions" were abolished. Property and tax requirements were virtually eliminated, the definition of residency had evolved to incorporate more potential voters, and the voting age had been lowered to eighteen (Kumar). However, states with the largest Native American populations continue to devise disenfranchisement methods. This sustained exclusion of the Native American electorate altered numerous political races' outcomes, resulting in different policies, judiciary appointments, and taxes. Even by 2017, Native Americans living in majority Native areas were "twice as likely than white citizens to report discrimination in the workplace and legal system, and more than four times as likely to report discrimination in voting or political participation" (NPR et al.).

Without the power to elect candidates who support a policy agenda that addresses issues specific to their lives, Native Americans have diminished influence over their self-determination and general well-being. Without political power, vital support for language assistance, a sufficient number of voting locations, well-maintained roads, quality school building for education, or even clean running water remains mostly elusive (Solomon et al.).

Voter Participation Rates of Native Americans

Native Americans have a higher not registered to vote rate of 34% as compared to the 26.5% rate of non-Hispanic Whites. Nearly two out of five eligible are not registered to vote, which translates

to roughly 1.2 million eligible Native voters. Likewise, the turnout rate among registered Native American voters is 5 to 14 percentage points lower than that of other racial and ethnic groups, even when socioeconomic levels are controlled (Wang, "Ensuring Access").

When Native voters turn out, their power has been substantial in certain races (Keyssar). For example, Senator John Tester of Montana won his 2018 re-election race with less than 20,000 votes, many of which came from citizens of tribal nations. Senator Tim Johnson of South Dakota was re-elected in 2002 by a mere 500 votes, the critical final votes coming from the Pine Ridge Reservation (National Congress of American Indians "NCAI"). Higher voter turnout and participation of Native Americans lead to elected representatives that care about and understand Native issues and correlates to electing more Native citizens into office, which improves overall life outcomes for Natives (NCAI).

According to the 2010 census, the Native American population totals more than Iowa and New Hampshire combined; Native people are a critical voting bloc for many states and, depending on turnout, can change party power at all levels and influence party platforms and agendas (Givens).

Current Barriers to the Ballot, Suppression, and Disenfranchisement

The Native American Voting Rights Coalition held public hearings in which more than 120 witnesses from dozens of tribes testified. This study's subsequent report detailed some of the main barriers that depress Native voter turnout and issues that limit their political participation. The report concluded that long travel distances to register or to vote, geographic isolation, inadequate or non-existent roads, low levels of access to the internet are obstacles. Further, various other challenges limit Native American political participation: English literacy and fluency, low socioeconomic conditions, transportation access, non-residential addresses, difficulty accessing mail, homelessness and housing insecurity, ballot collection bans, and remote rural post offices (Native American Rights Fund "NARF").

Often, Native Americans who live in rural communities lack residential addresses and usually rely on P.O. boxes in a town closest in proximity. Dirt or gravel roads on reservations are often low quality, unmarked, and subject to impassability after storms or other extreme weather events. This makes the ability for the USPS to deliver mail to those living on reservations extremely difficult. Many residents have to travel anywhere from 70 miles to 100 miles in one direction to receive mail from the nearest post office (NARF). Similarly, there are often no voting locations on tribal lands, necessitating hours of travel to access the nearest one. In Arizona, for instance, this varies from 60 to 200 miles roundtrip (NARF).

Registering to vote online or updating one's registration can be challenging because of voter I.D. laws and unreliable or no internet access. In fact, only about half of tribal homes have access to high-speed internet (Wang, H.L.). Native Americans are less likely to have a compliant form of I.D. with residential addresses. Of tribe issued I.D.s, many do not include addresses at all. Often, counties end up reassigning addresses to voters because of confusion surrounding nontraditional tribal addresses. Accordingly, this leads to the rejection of I.D.s and voters being denied a ballot (Boone).

In 2013, the Supreme Court handed down a ruling that rendered Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act irrelevant by invalidating the preclearance formula (in Section 4b) to identify the municipalities

and states with race-based discrimination history (*Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 US 529). Since the *Shelby County* decision, hundreds of "harsh measures make it harder to vote" (Brennan Center for Justice). Purging inactive voters from the rolls, closing polling places, shortening the window for voting, and implementing strict photo I.D. requirements are just a few of the restrictions that disproportionately suppress the vote and diminish the political power of Black, brown, and Native populations. Some of these impacts were evident during the 2020 primaries, amongst the adoption of protective public health measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (Solis).

COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Voting Rights

As the United States' death toll from the novel coronavirus continued to climb throughout the fall, concerns about the November general election intensified. From the shortage of poll workers to social distancing guidelines, necessary protective inevitably impacted voting rights. Policies that either address public health concerns or aim to ensure protections for the right to vote are in a perpetual interplay, the balance between them precarious.

COVID-19 infection rates among Native Americans, states the CDC, are three-and-a-half times higher than non-Hispanic whites (Hatcher et al.). Nationwide, they are 3.3 times more likely to have died than whites, accounting for age (AMP Research Lab). In Arizona, where they account for 4.5% of the population, Native Americans account for approximately 18% of COVID-19 deaths (Hardy et al.). According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' report "Broken Promises: Continuing Federal Funding Shortfall for Native Americans," Native Americans experience distinct health disparities, such as higher infant mortality rates and shorter life expectancies, as compared to the national population. Moreover, the pandemic negatively impacted the already-underfunded Indian Health Service/Tribal/ Urban Indian Health (I/T/U) system (Sharp).

Expensive medical care and curtailed economic mobility, coupled with structural racism and income segregation, mean that lower-income Americans have higher mortality rates. Relatedly, lower-income individuals are often uninsured and work in riskier jobs with less flexibility or access to sick leave or paid time off. Thus, they also have a higher likelihood of exposure to COVID-19 (Human Rights Watch).

According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau report, voters with household income from \$15,000 to \$20,000 had only a 31 percent participation rate in the 2014 mid-term elections. Early evidence indicated that a deadly pandemic during a general election year would impact equitable voter turnout, especially for communities who already face systemic obstacles like lower socioeconomic status. Compared to the above rate, households making above \$150,000 had a 57 percent voter participation rate (File). These reports are relevant because nationally, 12 percent of Native Americans live below 50 percent of the poverty line, and 26 percent live below 100 percent (U.S. Census Bureau). Native Americans, then, are the group with the largest proportion of people living below the poverty level (Wang, "Ensuring Access").

The Vote-By-Mail Movement

Mail-in voting has been steadily gaining popularity: 7.8 percent of voters cast their ballots via mail in 1996; by the 2016 election, this number had tripled (McCarthy). In 2018, seven states reported over 50 percent of ballots cast by mail (USAfacts). Overall, "the percentage of voters who cast their ballots at a polling place on Election Day has declined steadily over the past decade" (U.S. Election Assistance Commission). The severity of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted many states

to utilize emergency powers in anticipation of obstacles to the polls for the primary elections, and then, for the general election.

As previously stated in a preceding section, Native American voters are less likely to have mail delivered to their homes promptly, or at all, for a variety of reasons. Vote by mail, mail-in voting, and absentee voting are terms that all denote states mailing a ballot to all registered voters. Nevada's decision to conduct all voting by mail for the June primary election aimed to mitigate infection risk, yet inadvertently weakened the state's Native residents' political power. Equal voting rights for Native Americans remain elusive, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this. Many policies enacted to combat suppression tactics and make access to the ballot easier significantly impact democracy but can actually further disenfranchise Native Americans without other safeguards or expansions.

Reverberating effects from the pandemic on state voting systems in the 2020 primaries resulted in long lines, technology issues, and an influx of unexpected absentee ballot requests (Kamarck & Stenglein). For instance, a perfect storm of circumstances and decisions in Wisconsin resulted in hours-long line waits and more than 50 positive coronavirus cases among poll workers and voters. These included the legislature deciding against delaying their April primary, the state Supreme Court striking down the Governors' executive order postpone in-person voting, and the U.S. Supreme Court ruling against extending the deadline for absentee ballots (Bauer).

As a remedy looking toward the general election, many states began to pass legislation to alleviate further issues, thereby triggering fraud and "illegal" vote claims by some (Ng). Further, political attacks on the United States Postal System exacerbated concerns about the institution's ability to meet heightened demands. Amidst such an unprecedented general election, disinformation and misconceptions regarding election administration procedures and state voting laws threatened to undermine the integrity of the process itself. Still, opponents of vote by mail say that the system lacks transparency, security, and oversight, among other things.

The Introduction of Nevada's Assembly Bill 4

In August of 2020, Nevada introduced Assembly Bill 4 (AB4) to safeguard equal opportunity to the ballot and mitigate more significant suppression under the pandemic. The provisions included: the automatic mailing of ballots to registered voters, the ability for third parties to collect and deliver ballots for someone else, the acceptance of a ballot with an unclear postmark as long as it received within three days of November 3, and the requirement of the state to provide a minimum number of in-person polling places for in-person voters both on Election Day and for the early voting period (Milhiser). Similarly, five other states—Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, Washington—all have permanent automatic mail-in ballot systems. Under these universal systems, every active voter receives a ballot that they can subsequently return by mail or at designated locations (NCSL). The other mail balloting system requires the voter to request an absentee ballot. Almost one-quarter of U.S. votes (33 million) were cast by either of these methods in 2016 (West). Moreover, early, absentee or by mail more than doubled from 2004 to 2016 (U.S. Election Assistance Commission).

Some of the provisions of AB4 specifically address Native Americans' access to the franchise. Nine (out of 14) reservations in Nevada have no post office. Additionally, not all mail is postmarked, and sometimes the date on a postmark is illegible (Milhiser). Another problematic circumstance can arise when the post office neglects to place a postmark upon arrival or if the

postmark is undated. The provision to accept ballots with unclear postmarks directly affects Native American voters because of the distance to post offices and longer routes for Native American ballots to reach county seats (NCSL). In their brief seeking to intervene in President Trump's lawsuit against the measure, the tribes' attorneys conveyed the many obstacles to picking up and dropping off mail for Native Americans means that it is standard for those living on reservations to do this for each other. Before AB4, this was a criminalized act, subject to "imprisonment for a minimum of 1 year and up to 4 years, and a fine of up to \$5,000" (Rodriguez). Thus, AB4 offered assistance to disproportionately affected Native Americans by suspending the ballot assistance bans (in times of emergency).

In *Donald J. Trump for President v. Cegavske*, the Trump campaign and the RNC claimed that the expansion of voting by mail and extended acceptance of ballots violated federal election law and the Fourteenth Amendment. They reasoned that by accepting some late ballots, Nevada would count ballots mailed after Election Day. They also claimed that AB4 "makes voter fraud and other ineligible voting inevitable" (Rodriguez). However, U.S. District Judge James Mahan granted a motion to dismiss the case, stating that the campaign lacked standing while clarifying that "the key provisions of AB4 apply to all voters." He also maintained that they "failed to allege a substantial risk of voter fraud" and that the state "has its own mechanisms for deterring and prosecuting voter fraud" (SCOTUS blog).

Potential Problems of the Transition to Vote-by-Mail

The number of ballots cast by mail has been steadily increasing in recent years, from 7.8% in 1996 to 20.9% in 2016 (Hartig et al.). Nevertheless, under the pandemic conditions, a swift transition to vote by mail (VBM) systems in some states has revealed problems. For the process to be as effective as possible, election officials and administrators must work diligently to educate potential voters on the proper processes and request a ballot (if not universal) to timelines and deadlines.

The transitions can cause problems. For instance, Wisconsin dealt with the aftermath of requested ballots not being sent, some ballots marked as sent never received, and many postmarked too late to count (Corasaniti & Saul). New York City's June primary resulted in the mishandling of thousands of mailed in ballots (Lai). In fact, around 21% were rejected (Campanile et al.).

Rejected and Disqualified Absentee Ballots

Ballots, even if received in a timely manner, can be rejected for various reasons. An estimated 4% were not counted in the 2016 election (Dahl). In the 2020 primaries, more than 550,000 mail-in and absentee ballots were disqualified, and more than 23,000 mailed ballots were rejected in the presidential primaries in Wisconsin alone (Fessler & Moore). New York City threw out more than 84,000 ballots during the primaries. Additionally, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled to throw out "naked ballots," mail votes that are missing the required secrecy envelope, which has the potential to invalidate hundreds of thousands of votes (Lai; Thompson).

Voter Fraud

Perhaps the most forefront issue in the aftermath of the 2020 general election concerns claims of fraud. One of the most prevalent criticisms is the concern over the increased likelihood of voter impersonation and coercion. According to MIT's Election Data and Science Lab, many experts who agree that widespread fraud is very rare also agree that VBM fraud is somewhat more likely

when compared to standard in-person voting. In 2016, President Trump, claiming that between 3 million and 5 million ballots were illegally cast, assembled a voting integrity commission to investigate the presidential election. An analysis of administration documents revealed no evidence to support claims of any voter fraud of such pervasive nature (Associated Press).

In over 100 million mail-in ballots that the state of Oregon has sent out over the last 20 years, it has only 15 documented cases of fraud--0.00001 percent of all votes cast (Heritage Foundation; New York Times editorial board; Weiser & Ekeh). Colorado has discovered only 14 cases of fraud out of a similar total since 2013, and Utah, merely one case in the past 970,000 ballots (Kamarck & Stenglein). Washington, which has used mail-in ballots since 2005, partnered with other states to analyze data on duplicate ballot casting or voting with a deceased person's name. Following the 2016 election, the system has found only 74 questionable votes in Washington State (out of 3.2 million), which were subsequently sent to election managers for review. That review revealed that many of the votes were legitimate and a product of data errors. Further scrutinization by investigators indicated no significant fraud (Baker).

Ballot Collection and Voter Rolls

Often called "ballot harvesting" by opponents, AB4 provides individuals to turn in ballots for others to prioritize those who have limited access to transportation to the post office. In states where this is legal, approved third parties can collect completed ballots and drop them off at polling places or election offices. Detractors say this practice is susceptible to fraud through ballot tampering or discarding the ballots. Supporters maintain that vulnerable populations such as seniors, citizens with disabilities, and those in low-income communities, rely on measures such as this to make voting more accessible (NCLS).

Inaccurate voter rolls are another concern for opponents, who say that the chance a ballot could be sent to someone who has died or no longer lives at the address on file creates an opportunity for fraud. FBI officials have said that they have no found any evidence of mail voting fraud. In fact, it is extremely rare, when it does occur, it is not even close to substantial enough to impact outcomes (Ng).

Election security experts emphasize just how exceptionally challenging it would be to succeed in any fraud attempt that would be large enough to affect the outcome. One of the biggest security measures includes a unique barcode and specific serial number for each ballot that must be matched to the individual's voter record. Anyone attempting this kind of fraud would also need access to voter registration records and somehow obtain a ballot to vote in someone else's name. To do this, one would either need to stake out mailboxes and try their luck that way or manually alter a voter's address to send the ballot somewhere else instead. However, this would become even more difficult in states that offer ballot tracking. The other problems to overcome would be signature requirements, state identification, and the last four digits of the social security number to verify the voter's identity. If one makes it past all of these measures, they would then need to repeat upward of thousands of times to have a chance of actually affecting the outcome of an election (Ng).

United States Postal Service

As voting by mail emerged as a more appealing option for people who did not want to risk going to the polls, the USPS came under harsh scrutiny. Among the 13 postal districts in presidential

battleground states, four failed to meet delivery time goals between April and June (Scheck, et al). Many criticized the USPS for failing to inform voters about voting by mail procedures adequately. A nationwide postcard campaign that aimed to advise voters on requesting mail-in ballots created confusion. State election officials have also expressed that the USPS failed to properly communicate with them in preparation for the increased number of ballots (Abramson).

Additionally, delays in receiving mail-in ballots contributed to Election Day uncertainty. Not only do states' vote by mail deadlines vary, but many do not begin to tally the results from mail-in ballots until Election Day itself. For instance, New York City's primaries took weeks to tally up its mail-in votes. As of this writing, eight days post-Election Day, votes are still being counted in Georgia, North Carolina, Arizona, and Alaska, among others (France).

Doubt, Misinformation, and Disinformation – Confidence in Election Integrity Impacts

The longer the delay in calling states for a candidate, the greater chance for disinformation and skepticism. State and election officials and journalists tried to prepare the public for a whole host of scenarios. Despite continuously addressing how votes would come in and the low likelihood of knowing the outcome for days or weeks after polls closed, a period of uncertainty and confusion swept the nation, leading to vast conspiracy theories, dozens of lawsuits, and distrust in the integrity of the election outcome.

A significant piece of the puzzle is social media, which acts as a conduit for the metastasizing of misinformation and disinformation. For instance, the Wall Street Journal found more than 100 tweets from President Trump attacking mail-in voting to be factually inaccurate. However, reports about these inaccuracies do little to impede the knee-jerk impulse of thousands of retweets and cross-posting to other social media platforms (Volz & Glazer). Election officials also must contend with cyberattacks, investing in security platforms to test for vulnerabilities. Though, in the event of a cyberattack successfully affecting our elections, paper ballots and hand counting could mitigate the damage.

Managing disinformation, though, remains the more challenging foe. According to a recent investigation, almost half of Facebook's top posts about mail-in voting were classified as misleading (McCarthy). Convincing people to believe that results are illegitimate does not depend upon any fraud actually occurring –by then, the damage to faith in the institution has already been done (Ng).

Financial Concerns and Election Costs

As comprehensive, accurate data will not be available for quite some time after the 2020 election results certification, we can look to data collected from the impacts of Colorado's Voter Access and Modernized Elections Act of 2013 as an example. The Act mandated that mail ballots be sent to every registered voter for most elections, established voter service and polling centers, authorized in-person same-day registration, and shortened the state residency requirements for voter registration. Initial findings include decreased costs by an average of 40 percent in five relevant categories (Pew Charitable Trust).

The costs associated with training, pay, and recruitment for poll workers significantly decreased for some states and jurisdictions that have moved to all-mail elections. However, the increase in

printing costs and postage costs for mailing ballots can offset savings in some instances (League of Women Voters Chicago).

Voter Turnout

Some reports suggest voter turnout increases because of the convenience. Specifically, they show single digits increases for presidential elections and increases in state and local elections (League of Women Voters Chicago). Proponents of this reasoning assert that more choices to vote means a higher turnout, as it provides a multitude of opportunities to participate in democracy. A Stanford University vote by mail study found a 2 percent increase in turnout. Despite claims of partisanship voting tendencies, there is no evidence to suggest that it favors one party over another (Yoder, et al.).

Voter Experience and Tradition

Though some critics say that the move toward vote by mail means a loss of the meaningful civic experience of voting with neighbors, some surveys have demonstrated nearly identical satisfaction rates with the voting experience of mail and in-person voters (Pew Charitable Trust). Proponents say one benefit to citizens is that they can take as much as needed to study the issues and examine the ballot. Voters often express enthusiasm for all-mail elections. (League of Women Voters Chicago). Allowing a person to cast a vote from their home's comfort is more convenient (Hernandez).

Looking Forward

Vote counting continues, but as of this writing, 66 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot in the 2020 election (Krawczyk; Schaul et al.). Experts project that turnout in almost all states will surpass 40-year records (Schaul et al.). Reports so far show that voting by mail and early voting impacted the increased turnout (Kamal). According to the Nevada Secretary of State's office, about 70 percent of the state's active registered voters had cast ballots on or before November 3. For a further breakdown, around 47 percent returned their mail ballots by Election Day, while 43 percent voted early. Election Day in-person voting totaled about only 10 percent (Davis).

The provisions in AB4 involving the minimum number of polling places and expanded vote by mail are only activated during elections that happen to fall within a declared state of emergency. Other provisions like ballot collection are permanent. As more states adopt provisions such as these over time, and residents of states like Nevada become more accustomed to voting differently, it remains to be seen whether the upward trend of civic participation will continue.

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PRACTITIONER INQUIRY PROJECT: CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN EDUCATION

BECCA GRESSENS

Research Question

How does culturally relevant pedagogy affect students in white suburban schools?

Memos

A. Memo #1

Coming from a predominately white suburban area and identifying as white myself has shaped my views and will affect my pedagogy as a future educator. As someone who is likely to be teaching in a white suburban area, it is extremely important to teach with culturally relevant pedagogy. Being aware of unconscious bias that I hold is necessary for self-development. Racism deeply benefits white people and those who identify as white are less likely to want to promote a change in our system (DiAngelo, 2018). Racism has given me a life of privilege for which I am both thankful and disgusted by. I am rarely uncomfortable because of my whiteness. Culturally relevant pedagogy gives students of color the chance for representation and comfort in the classroom. By simply ignoring race and focusing on everyone as individuals, our racist systems continue to be a detriment.

My past schooling experiences have shown how whitewashed a school system and curriculum can be. I cannot explain feelings of experiencing racism to my students of color or make connections with them on that level because of my whiteness. Mansplaining racism only benefits white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). However, I can create an environment that welcomes all my students and teaches the importance of removing implicit and unconscious bias from their lives. As a white teacher, I need to recognize other's races and cultures and embrace them in my teaching, rather than ignoring them and following the footsteps of white fragility and racism.

B. Memo #2

One of the things children learn while growing up is to sort items into groups based on different or similar characteristics. They put items together that look alike. In Chrysanthius Lathan's article, *Dear White Teacher*, she discusses how white teachers at her school would always send or ask her to deal with the students of color and their families. I feel we use this method of sorting that we learned at such a young age to associate people together. The black teacher should help with the black student because they may have similar lives. However, this is just stereotyping and racism. I feel I may have unconsciously acted in this way before reading this article.

Sorting people into categories is what keeps us segregated. Children of color notice when their white teachers push them to the side. I should not fear my students and their families, and they should not fear me. It is not okay to freeze up in situations where students need support because a white teacher feels they are ill-equipped to handle a student of color. As Lathan says, "continual bias is hurting everyone, including the teachers who send them away" (Lathan 2018). As a white person, I must recognize that

removing myself from the situation is not beneficial to anyone. To build trust and create relationships with my students, I need to be there for them and not pass them off or expect less of them. As this only contributes to the racist system already in place (Lathan, 2018). To effectively teach all my students I need to adapt my mindset from sorting to supporting.

C. Memo #3

Our implicit biases shape the way we educate our students and interact with people every day. As a future educator, I need to be aware of my implicit biases and how they can negatively affect my students. By teaching in culturally relevant ways, I feel I can remove some implicit bias I may hold. However, this will not fix the issue, it will just make my students' learning experiences more meaningful. As someone who identifies as white, I benefit from the racist system in place. Instead of being angry that I cannot fix the entire broken system, I can instead work to amend my teaching and create environments where all my students feel comfortable and seen.

The Harvard Project Implicit Race test found that I had a "moderate automatic preference for Black people over white". When I first saw this result, I was slightly shocked. I assumed I would receive the opposite result as many peers in my class did. When I told my friends, who were not in the class of this result, they laughed and said "Your boyfriend is Black. What did you expect?" Comments like these make me uncomfortable and I never truly know how to react. I do believe that my interactions with my boyfriend and his family affect my perceptions of Black culture but, they do not remove the implicit biases I have for being a white person in a society dominated by white privilege. My friend's responses show that implicit bias and stereotyping is real and damaging. You never know whom you are hurting with the actions you take when you do not stop to think about how they are affecting the people around you.

D. Memo #4

In discussions of culturally relevant pedagogy, I wonder about the outcomes and what it brings to the table. How can having a culturally relevant pedagogy truly benefit students? In a primarily white suburban school, students of color and students from minority cultures are often under or not represented at all. Using culturally relevant pedagogy can give students empowerment, allow them to see their culture expressed in a classroom setting, and let them learn about how society functions (Minler, 2010). The outcomes of using culturally relevant pedagogy cannot truly be shown through testing as teaching in this style extends beyond what can be learned through a test.

By using culturally relevant pedagogy in a white suburban school, empowerment is not only given to students who are not normally represented, but also to white students in the form of advocacy for others. Bringing new cultures into a classroom setting allows students to learn about and "gauge contradictions and inequities both in school and outside of school" (Minler, 2018, pp.69). Being able to advocate and fight against injustices they see is an important skill for white students to learn. Seeing multiple cultures not only allows minority students to be represented and see what their cultures give to society (Minler, 2018), it can also help to alleviate implicit bias a student may hold

against another culture or race. Creating culturally relevant classrooms forms students that are more culturally competent and aware of what is happening around them.

4. Data collection (Names have been changed for privacy)

A. Data Source A

A White Suburban View on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:

For this interview, I talked to Emily Clark, an elementary school educator at Klem South in the town of Webster, New York. Webster's population is 92% white, making its schools part of a white suburban school district. Clark identifies as white. When asked, as a white educator, if she feels that she can effectively teach and connect with her students of color, she responded by saying that it is not that she feels she is not allowed to have a culturally relevant pedagogy or that the school district will not let her, it is that the curriculum being used has not been culturally diverse. The school district has only just started focusing on the importance of having a culturally relevant pedagogy within the past few years. She mentioned that she does not always think about adding different perspectives to her assignments. When creating a project, her focus is more on if the standards are included and less on the cultural relevance of her teaching.

In the last three years, Clark's school district has implemented expeditionary learning modules or ELs into the reading and writing curriculum. She finds that these modules allow for a much more culturally relevant pedagogy in literacy. The ELs offer multiple perspectives through historical events in which she and her students have had their eyes opened. However, these modules are set with specific material and curriculum, so it is difficult to dive deeper into topics that would benefit a culturally relevant pedagogy. Clark believes that if a teacher is willing to take the extra time to make sure their teaching is culturally relevant that they can, but it would be challenging. The school district had all the teachers watch a video created by the students of color in the high school discussing their experiences. A particular student stuck out to her. This student was an African American girl, and she said that she had never heard anything great about the people in her culture until high school. Before that, the focus had always been on slavery or white people. Clark stated that this significantly impacted her and wants to start working to make her pedagogy more culturally relevant, however, this had been difficult to implement with COVID this year.

When asked about her classroom décor, Clark stated that her classroom is not decorated in ways that represent multiple cultures or global backgrounds. "All I have is white people stuff. Nothing culturally based, it's all content" she said. Clark believes that her race has not impacted her ability to connect with her students of color or their families. While her teaching may not be focused on cultural relevance, she believes that does not affect the connections that are created. Clark stated that skin color and culture should not be barriers when connecting with students. She enjoys the change and challenges that come with being a teacher. The fact the district is focusing on having culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms is exciting. Clark is willing to change and update her practices, as she wants to stay relevant for her students. She believes that change toward culturally relevant pedagogy is a good thing and that it is needed to create classrooms that are truly benefiting all students.

Analysis: I chose this data source because Clark is an educator in a white suburban school, which is the focus of my research. This source provided insight into how culturally relevant pedagogy is utilized in primarily white schools. Clark helped to demonstrate that this style of teaching is not a focus and that it can be challenging to implement with the current curriculum. Having a culturally relevant pedagogy is starting its emergence in white suburban schools, but still has a long way to go to make a significant impact on the students and educators.

B. Data Source B

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a City School:

For my second interview, I talked to Veronica Smith. She is an elementary educator at Martin Luther King Jr. School No. 9 in Rochester, New York. The city of Rochester's population is about 47% white. The other 53% of the population is made up of various ethnic groups, allowing for their schools to be highly diverse. Smith told me she identifies as white but that it does not affect her ability to connect with and teach her students in her racially diverse classroom. Her school focuses a lot on teachers having culturally relevant pedagogies. The majority of her students are Black and Hispanic. She makes sure to include text, experiences, and field trips in her teaching as well as to celebrate Black History and Hispanic Heritage Month in her classroom. Smith also stated that before Covid-19, her school held dinner celebrations where families would come into school and celebrate the student's work throughout the month and put-on cultural performances for the families. Having a culturally relevant classroom space and teaching practices is something she strives for but can always improve upon.

Smith stated that while her school provides some material for the curriculum, she provides and funds most of it. This allows her to have a lot of freedom in making the curriculum culturally relevant for her students. She feels there are always limits to what can be taught in a classroom with standard restrictions and trying to get her students ready for testing. However, there are always opportunities to introduce culturally relevant pedagogy into the curriculum, and that teachers should try their best to incorporate it whenever possible to allow students to feel connected to the content they are learning. While Smith's class spends little time in the classroom this year and what can be on the walls has been restricted because of Covid-19, she still tries to decorate the classroom in ways that represent multiple cultures. She has posters depicting several races and quotes from famous people of color up on the wall. The work her students create is displayed during the family dinner celebrations and especially during the cultural performances. When asked about her use of culturally relevant books, handouts, and materials, Smith responded that her school's library has a wide variety of materials that are representative of multiple cultures and that she accesses these resources often. She has also purchased a lot of her own supplemental material as well to further her student's ability to connect to what they are seeing in the classroom.

Smith feels that as a white educator she can build strong and positive relationships with the parents of her students. She does this by reaching out before the school year even begins. When she receives her class list, Smith stated she sends home student and parent letters in the mail to reach out and build that connection. During the school year, she continues to grow these relationships by connecting to her student's parents through phone calls, conferences, and text messages. Smith stated that it is vital to establish

positive relationships with parents and students. It leads to student success and achievement. Having a culturally relevant pedagogy is extremely important to Smith because of the students she teaches. She hopes more teachers can integrate culturally relevant practices into their pedagogies and classrooms.

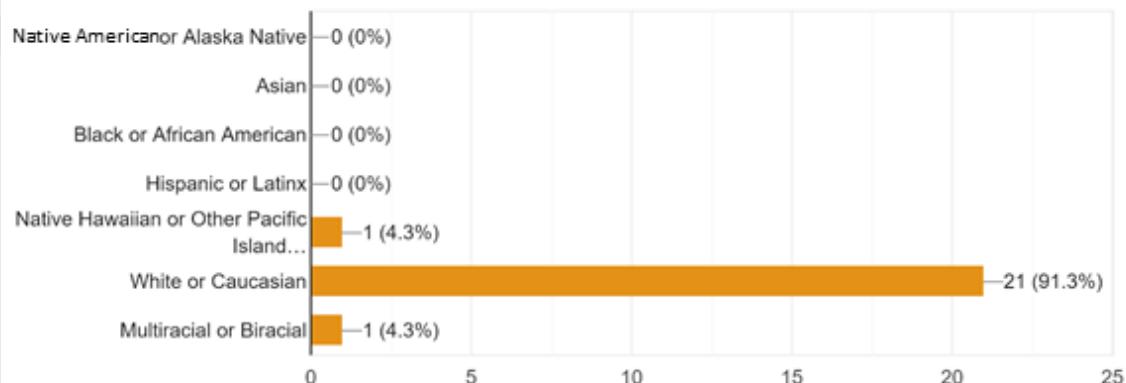
Analysis: I chose to use this data source because the Rochester city school district directly contrasts the Webster school district. This data source shows the perspective of a white educator in a primarily Black and Hispanic school and how she teaches her students. Smith demonstrates the importance of having a culturally relevant pedagogy with students of color. Having a culturally relevant pedagogy is not impossible and needs to continue to be implemented in schools no matter the race makeup of the student or staff population.

C. Data Source C

Student Survey on Cultural Relevant Pedagogy
Klem South Survey Data (Questions 1a-6a):

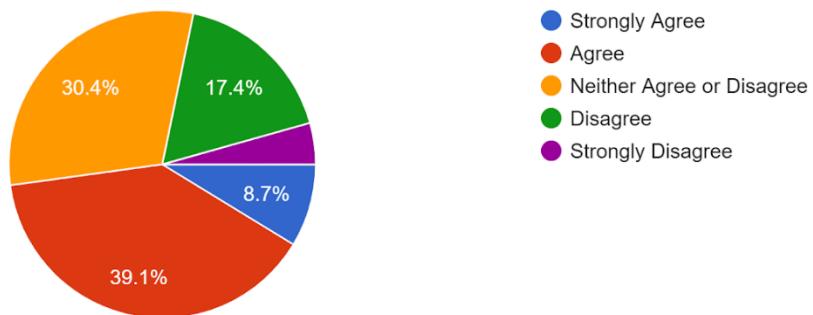
1. Which culture below best describes you?

23 responses



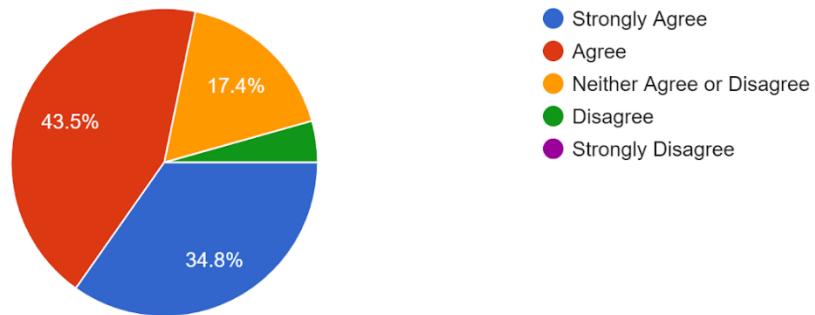
3. I learn about my classmates' cultures in my classroom.

23 responses



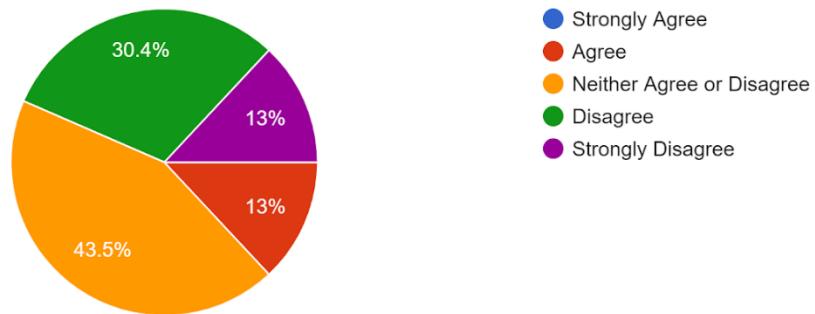
6. I wish I could learn more about cultures other than my own.

23 responses



7. My current classroom/previous classrooms have been decorated in ways that show multiple cultures.

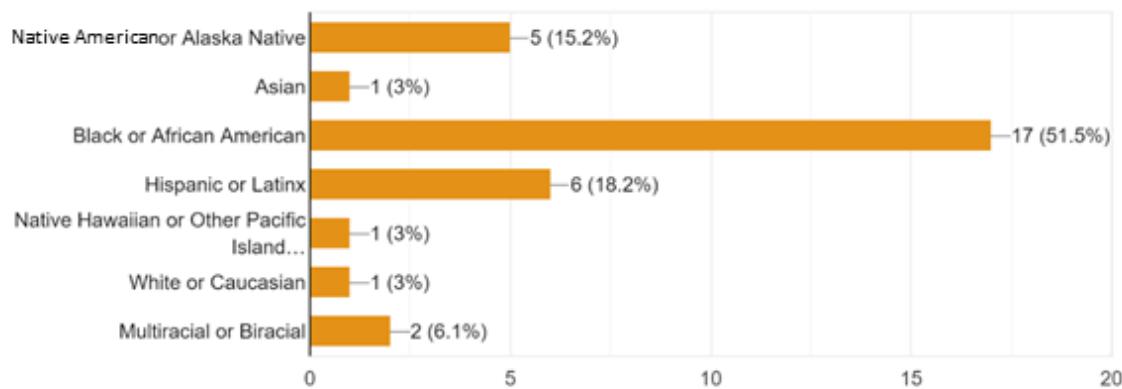
23 responses



Martian Luther King Jr. School No. 9 Survey Data (Questions 1b-6b):

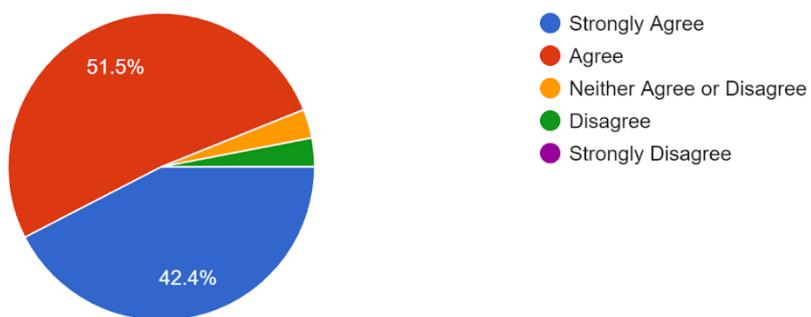
1. Which culture below best describes you?

33 responses



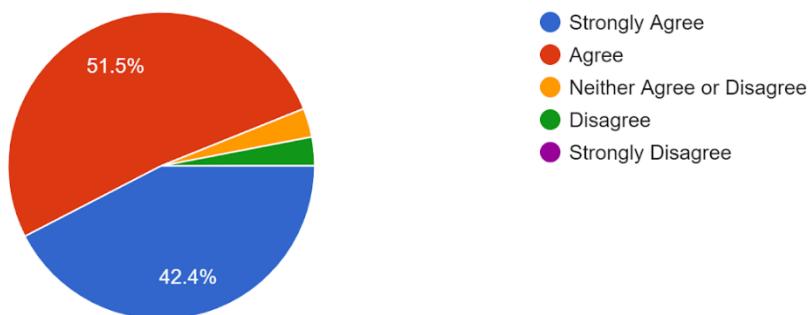
2. We learn about my culture in my classroom.

33 responses



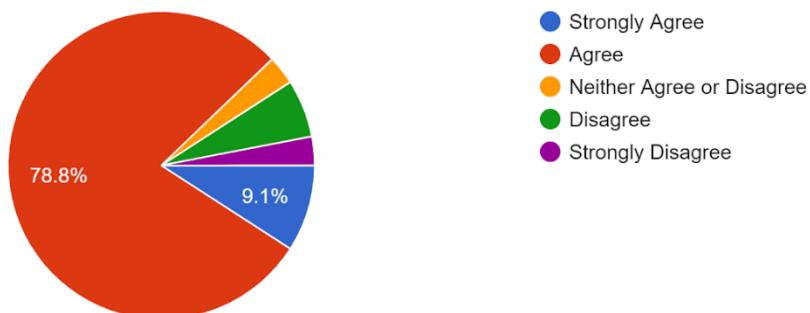
2. We learn about my culture in my classroom.

33 responses



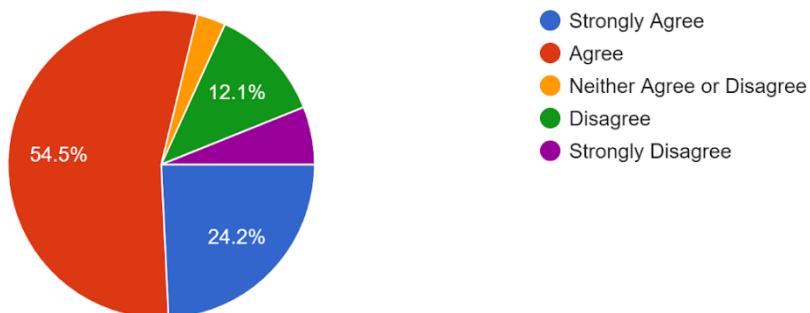
3. I learn about my classmates' cultures in my classroom.

33 responses



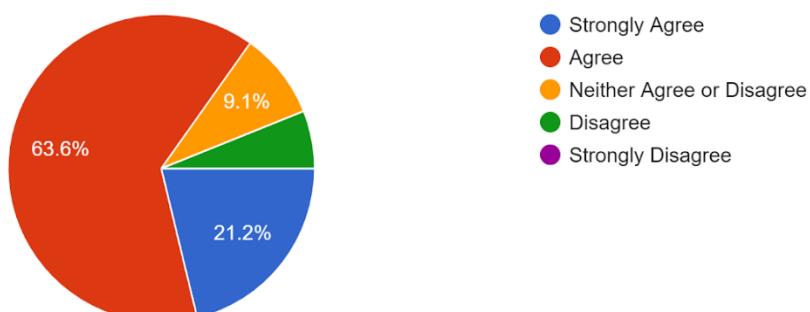
4. Books, handouts, and other materials given by my teachers show my culture.

33 responses



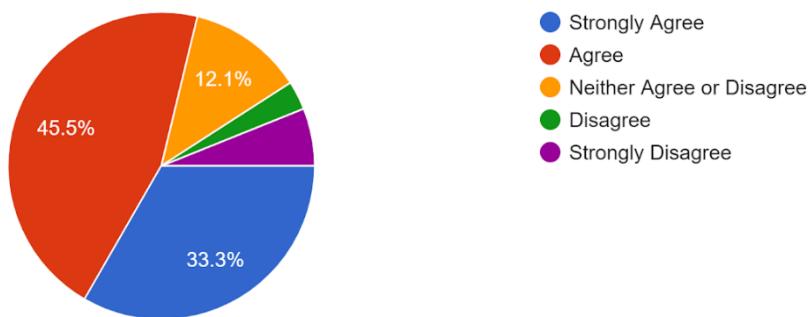
6. I wish I could learn more about cultures other than my own.

33 responses



7. My current classroom/previous classrooms have been decorated in ways that show multiple cultures.

33 responses



Analysis: I created this survey on Google forms and asked the two teachers I previously interview, Clark and Smith, if they would be willing to have their classes take the survey. I met with both teachers individually and went over each question to make sure there would be no confusion in what I was asking. The teachers then conducted the surveys, and I received the pie chart data from the Google form. The first question I asked was used to gather information on each classroom makeup based on race. Questions 2 and 4 were asked to see how much of one's culture students believed they saw in the classroom. Questions 3, 5, and 7 did the opposite by asking how much of other cultures students saw to gauge the use of culturally relevant teaching in the classroom. I felt that it was important to ask question 6 because it shows that most students want to learn about other cultures but just are not being given the chance to yet.

I chose this data source to show the perspective of the students in two racially different school districts and how they experience culturally relevant teaching. The Klem South data depicts that the students in this predominantly white classroom feel like their own culture is expressed but not the culture of others, whether it be through teaching, classroom décor, or materials. The school No. 9 Data expressed the opposite with a predominantly Black and Hispanic/Latinx classroom, in that the students felt both their own and other cultures are expressed through the teaching, classroom décor, and materials used. This data source helps to answer my research question as it shows the experience of students in a culturally relevant classroom and those not. The majority of both surveyed groups wish they could still learn more about other cultures in the classroom other than their own.

5. Professional Literature Review

Standard 2.2 by the Council for Exceptional Children (2020) states: "Candidates use their knowledge and understanding of diverse factors that influence development and learning, including differences related to families, languages, cultures, and communities, and individual differences, including exceptionalities, to plan and implement learning experiences and environments" (CEC, 2020). Understanding diverse factors influencing students is the basis for having a culturally relevant pedagogy. Often in white

suburban schools, students are learning about whitewashed history. Diversity and other cultures are sometimes ignored or not expressed in the classroom. Teachers must use their knowledge of diverse factors to create experiences and environments where all cultures are appreciated. Students should be exposed to multiple cultures to help foster community in the classroom and prepare them for real-world experiences. Supporting different families, communities, environments, and cultures allows for each student's needs to be met. It is vital to include these aspects in a student's learning.

Standard 1.2 by Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2020) states: "Providers ensure that candidates use research and evidence to develop an understanding of the teaching profession and use both to measure their P-12 students' progress and their own professional practice." (CAEP, 2020). Teachers should use culturally relevant pedagogies in their classrooms to connect with their students and make learning more accessible and significant. By researching their student's cultures and backgrounds, educators can work with the curriculum to create meaningful content for all their students. This can be accomplished through professional development courses, reading articles and books, and learning from others of different cultures. Teachers must take the time to work with the standards, creating content that is meaningful and relevant for all students and other cultures. Using a culturally relevant pedagogy in schools allows students and teachers to develop and progress by opening their eyes to new experiences.

6. Academic Literature Review

Culturally relevant pedagogy may seem obvious but many schools across America do not use this instructional style. Classrooms should be spaces where students feel included, where they can see aspects of their cultures around them (Tenorio, 2018). Using this pedagogy is necessary in education as it creates classrooms that help prepare students for the real world and fosters communities within classrooms (Edmin, 2016). Culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on unique approaches to curriculum that would not occur in a classroom focusing on proficiency and testing.

While some people think children should not be exposed to topics like racism and bias because of their innocence, by the time children reach 1st grade "the centuries-old legacies of bias and racism in our country had already made an impact on their lives" (Tenorio, 2018, p. 348). Having culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms, allows students to broaden their awareness of issues in the world. It teaches them to advocate for themselves and others. Minler (2010) states teachers can help this process by building knowledge in the classroom and applying this knowledge to real-world situations. Students transfer the skills they learn from content areas like math, science, and literacy into their everyday life. Using culturally relevant pedagogy allows for this process to occur, just in the context of racism, biases, and inequity.

Having a healthy classroom community allows students to learn about diversity, equity, and ways to be culturally responsive. Using culturally relevant pedagogy helps cultivate classroom communities. Emdin (2016) reveals that within a classroom community, students develop connections with peers and the room when their social identities are clearly valued and represented. Embracing other cultures build connections between

students. Children quickly spot differences and overlook similarities. When they can make connections in and to the classroom, they will want to be engaged with the teacher and peers. Ladson-Billings (1995) shows that this pedagogy encourages students to learn collaboratively by teaching and learning from one another. Working together with others not only assists in learning but also creates a healthy classroom setting. Taking time to let children work together makes the community grow stronger.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is not only beneficial to students culturally, but it also benefits them educationally. Standards and tests are not designed with individualized student learning in mind. Edmin (2016) shows culturally relevant pedagogy puts the student first, developing learning that is unique and specific to each child. Ravitch (2016) illustrates lower academic performance attests to the degradation of curriculum content within schools that focus on testing and proficiency. While standardized topics are important to learn, culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on student needs producing content that creates well-rounded and knowledgeable students.

Teaching students through culturally relevant pedagogy helps create classroom communities that prepare students while working to reach each student's needs. This pedagogy style needs to be incorporated into all classrooms. By focusing on the majority culture in the classroom, everyone else is alienated. Teaching like this is biased, exclusive, and furthers the systemic racism and classism still seen in classrooms.

7. Data analysis

The use of a culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms is necessary for student growth and cultural awareness, no matter the racial or cultural backgrounds of the school's population. The data I collected from personal interviews, surveys, and various scholarly sources helped to demonstrate the positive effects culturally relevant pedagogy has on students. These data sources showed themes of cultural awareness, cultural acceptance and empowerment, as well as self-reflection on one's own identity.

Being culturally aware allows students to embrace what other cultures offer and learn from them. In the surveys conducted in Marian Luther King Jr. School No. 9 and Klem South Elementary School, about 75% of the students said they agreed or strongly agreed they wished they could learn more about cultures other than their own (Data Source C, Question 6a & 6b). Especially in predominately white suburban schools, cultural awareness and cultural education are not a focus. Students in white schools are not seeing multiple cultures represented around them or in their learning. As Clark, a white elementary educator stated "All I have is white people stuff. Nothing culturally based, it's all content" (Data Source A). By having a culturally relevant pedagogy in a predominantly white school district teachers are introducing their students to the diversity that society offers while fulfilling standard 2.2 for the Council for Exceptional Children (2020) by implementing the differences found between multiple cultures into the curriculum (CEC, 2020) and removing some of the bias and racism created through the whitewashed history that is normally taught in a predominantly white school district.

Implicit bias and negative stereotypes of other cultures are aspects that students can develop from their home life without even realizing it. Therefore, cultural acceptance is a large part of the importance of having a culturally relevant pedagogy. As Tenorio (2018)

points out, even by the time students reach first grade, they have already seen or experienced the racism and bias that is so prominent in today's culture. Having a culturally relevant pedagogy bringing cultures into the classroom, not only allows minority students to be represented and see what their cultures give to society (Minler, 2018), it also brings about cultural acceptance and can change a student's views. Smith, an elementary educator in a predominantly Black and Hispanic school, discusses how she and her students celebrate many cultures throughout the year and represent them in her classroom (Data Source B). This is not only empowering for the students of these cultures and backgrounds but, can also be empowering for the students who do not share in these beliefs as it can promote activism and a change in mindset (Minler, 2018). This is especially important in pushing white suburban schools to adopt using culturally relevant pedagogies as minority students that are in these predominantly white school districts may feel as though, they are underrepresented (Data Source A).

Self-reflection on one's own identity and behaviors is one of the most important benefits of having a culturally relevant pedagogy in white suburban schools. DiAngelo (2018) points out that racism deeply benefits white people and that it tends to be ignored because white people do not want to change a system that is benefiting them (Memo 1). However, by having a culturally relevant pedagogy in a white suburban school, the students can see different cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds and what they offer to society. They can reflect on their views and try to start change and advocate for injustice they see around them. As a white person myself, I can either contribute to the racist system in place (Memo 2) or make an active effort to change these aspects as a future educator by using a culturally relevant pedagogy. Often, people surround themselves with others who look like them. This can easily be traced back to the roots of segregation. Because of the way school systems are currently set up, white students are usually in classrooms with other white students (Data Source C, Question 1a & 1b). Culturally relevant pedagogy encourages self-reflection on identity because of the way it allows for connection and community to be built when it is utilized in the classroom (Emdin, 2016). When students can actively see other cultures being represented around them, they are to make connections and overlook differences. Students do just need to learn from just teachers when utilizing a culturally relevant pedagogy. Multiple culture representation in the classroom allows for students to teach each other about their backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995) which lets students reflect on their own identities and beliefs held and creates strong communities and allies.

There is a necessity for the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in white suburban schools in order to broaden students understanding of what the society that surrounds them is truly like while creating learning spaces that are empowering, inclusive, and no longer whitewashed. Why do we call our students the future leaders of America, but then not prepare them for the true realities that exist in our country? If teachers could create their own curriculums how many of them would be culturally relevant? Would having culturally relevant pedagogies change the way students perform academically?

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LETTER TO PRESIDENT TRUMP

LAUREN LEISTER

September 2020

To President Trump:

I am writing today in response to the remarks that you made at the White House Conference on American History earlier this month. As a future educator, I found your comments alarming and ethnocentric. I wish to share with you some vital information in favor of a history curriculum in the United States that promotes the whole truth. I firmly believe that in order to combat some of the deep seeded issues in our country that divide American people, we need to learn from the roots of division by examining multiple perspectives and critiquing the sources of history we are familiar with.

Your “pro-American” curriculum idealizes American history, shielding young people from many of the deplorable events in history that are integral in understanding the origins of racism, white supremacy, and ethnocentrism. I encourage you to consider the points below as I bring attention to specific examples from primary sources that discuss the Columbian Exchange and race in America, as well as identify examples of inaccuracies in current history curriculums. I will also offer methods and resources that teach multiple perspectives, including the idea of historiography and other ways to effectively teach true American history.

I will start by defending Mr. Howard Zinn. In your speech, you noted that Zinn “tries to make students ashamed of their own history” (Remarks by President Trump at the White House Conference on American History, 2020). Alternatively, I would argue that Howard Zinn has done incredible work in examining history from multiple perspectives to include minority groups and their role in the development of our nation. His use of primary and secondary sources to truly grasp the whole story is pivotal in helping us understand the issues of our country today. In Chapter 1 of “A People’s History of the United States,” Zinn uses Bartolome Las Casas’ account of what he saw when Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas. Las Casas says that “the admiral, it is true, was blind as those who came after him, and he was so anxious to please the King that he committed irreparable crimes against the Indians...” (Zinn, 2017, pg. 6). We can

consider this primary source from Las Casas book because it offers a different perspective than the accounts from Columbus himself, who justifies his crimes as a mission from God. By claiming that Columbus was a hero who did valiant work in “discovering” America, as you’re suggesting in your “pro-American” curriculum, students are learning that it is okay to annihilate an entire race for wealth and human progress. Is that really what you want educators to teach young people?

Let’s consider another primary source that might help you see clearly the importance of considering multiple perspectives. In Chapter 2 of “A People’s History of the United States,” Zinn examines the origins of racism in the United States. Recent events in the country you “lead” have confirmed the ideas of long standing racism in America. It’s a huge issue in our American culture. Although you seem to have ideas about white supremacy, I plan to teach my students the value of diversity, tolerance, and love for all people. Zinn helps examine history to see how color lines were drawn in early American history and why the idea of racism is so fervently ingrained in our culture. I plan to use these perspectives to help students understand why we have such divides across races. Consider this excerpt from a letter written by Brother Luis Brandaon to Father Sandoval after Sandoval asked if the capture and enslavement of African blacks was in accordance with church doctrine. Brandaon writes: “We have been here ourselves for forty years and there have been among us very learned Fathers...never did they consider the trade as illicit. Therefore we and the Fathers of Brazil buy these slaves for our service without any scruple...” (Zinn, 2017, pg. 30). This is proof that religious institutions were promoting the use of slaves and therefore further justifying the horrible treatment of Black people in the early 1600s. This is where many racist ideas originated and perpetuated. I would argue that students need to know that. Otherwise, the ideas of white supremacy will just continue for years to come.

The “1776 Commission” to promote a “patriotic education” is problematic in many ways (Remarks by President Trump at the White House Conference on American History, 2020). I fear that it will continue to show inaccuracies in our country’s history. I want to make sure you understand, as well, what those inaccuracies look like in a classroom. Below, I have outlined some common examples that I imagine would still be taught today if your idea is put into action. I also offer some methods and resources to teach these concepts the truthful way.

- 1) The idea that Indians are a part of the past: Students are taught that Native Americans are no longer a part of America. We instead need to recognize that millions of Native Americans live in our country and continue to practice their faith and maintain their livelihoods, whatever it may be (Bigelow and Peterson, 1998, pg. 32). Students can examine accounts from Native American populations that describe the modern struggles they deal with, as well as the foundations of their spiritual beliefs that honor the Earth. Students can also look at maps that show the many unique populations of Native Americans still living in the United States.
- 2) The idea that Christopher Columbus discovered America: In many classrooms, Columbus is still portrayed as a hero, despite the proven knowledge that he took over Taino land, committed mass genocide, enslaved people, and claimed the land as his own (Bigelow and Peterson, 1998, pg. 47). To teach the reality of this event, teachers can role play what it feels like to have something taken and claimed as their own. Students can examine the magnitude of what Columbus did after seeing a teacher, for example, take something from a student and say it's his or her's now. Students can also read different accounts of Columbus's story and see how authors show different accounts of his story.
- 3) The idea that George Washington is a hero: Students are taught that Washington is a noble founding father and an icon for America. In reality, there is proof that he fought against Native Americans, held Black people in slavery, and bought and sold native land to make money as quickly as possible (Bigelow and Peterson, 1998, pg. 56). To think about this myth on a deeper level, students should examine many of our "iconic" American figures to consider what hidden beliefs they might possess versus the image they portray. They should learn to question the nobility of many people we hold in high esteem.
- 4) The idea that Native Americans were savage and dangerous people: Textbooks use these words to describe Native Americans. It then makes it seem that the takeover of their land and killing of entire populations of Native Americans is justified. Instead, teachers need to teach students about stereotypes, analyze specifically the stereotypes against Native Americans, and then break them.

5) The idea that killing a group of human beings can be justified by Christianity and was necessary for human progress. Students are taught that if Columbus was sent on a mission by God to find wealth and prosperity, his crimes against humanity don't seem too bad. Religious diversity should be discussed in the classroom, without the goal of indoctrination or pushing one belief on our students. There should also be a clear understanding that nothing justifies the genocide of a minority population.

Notice here, Mr. Trump that these are just a few examples from one time period in history. I'm only touching upon Native American history and the Columbian Exchange. Now, consider the entire context of U.S. history. Educators should not be required to teach on the basis of lies, no matter how good they make America look.

Instead of teaching common myths like the concepts I mentioned, I suggest promoting the idea of historiography in the classroom. Historiography encourages students to use critical thinking skills to think about concepts in history. They are encouraged to view different historical events and figures from multiple perspectives in order to gain the complete picture of what happened. This is important when considering what you said about the removal of monuments and statues around the country. Once people learn the whole truth behind some of these figures, they then see that a lot of the people being praised and memorialized do not deserve to be seen in a heroic light. It inspires activism to remove false heroes and focus instead on figures and events that promote tolerance and diversity in the U.S. rather than celebrate someone that perpetuated ideas of hate. Additionally, students will also be able to understand the connections between the material written and the time period. Critical thinking skills are developed when students think about the context of the material they are reading. Historiography also promotes students to be thoughtful citizens. As James Loewen stated in "Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History," "Americans need history courses that make us thoughtful - that tell of our past honestly, warts and all" (Loewen, 2018, pg. 87). We need students to think about our history in order to make changes in the future.

The way to do this in the classroom is to have students do history, not simply read a textbook and internalize what the book says is true. There are a few effective strategies that teachers could implement in the classroom to access history in a different way. You should consider helping teachers access these resources instead. Let's say, for example, I'm teaching the topic of immigration. I know you have opinions about this, but it's actually a concept that is part of

the Social Studies curriculum in second grade. There are several ways to teach about immigration to help students understand what it is from different perspectives, rather than digesting information written by one textbook author. For one, teachers can encourage family and community members to come into the classroom. Maybe a student and their family recently immigrated to the area. They could talk about their experience, allowing students to learn about immigration from a firsthand source. In this way, the topic seems more approachable and relatable for students. Another thing to bring into the classroom is local history. Many cities and towns in the United States are formed by immigrant communities. Students could do projects to dive deeper into the people that made their town or city. Visiting local sites can help students notice more about their city and learn more about the people in it as well. I would also encourage students to study specific immigrant groups and come up with a final product such as a blog, paper, poster, or artistic representation to share their research. When students are able to learn from each other, the content becomes more interesting and engaging.

I hope you will consider what I have to say about the topic of U.S. History. Your comments earlier this month have me worried as an educator. I truly believe we have an important role as teachers to teach what really happened. In this way, students can learn about our history, know where ideas came from, and work toward becoming positive citizens in the future.

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APPLICATION OF BEHAVIOR CHANGE THEORIES TO HEALTHY EATING HABITS

SABRINA CORDARO

Introduction

Application of Behavior Change Theories to Healthy Eating Habits explains the implementation of six different theories/models to the process of changing my diet. The Theory Utilization section explains the six theories, in-depth detail. The theories I chose to use are the Health Belief Model, Social Cognitive Theory, Transtheoretical Model Processes of Change, Social Marketing, Attribution Theory, and Persuasive Health Message Framework. Each theory/model is unique in its own way but has the same ultimate goal of modifying an unhealthy behavior into a healthier one. After explaining the models, I used, I will discuss my weekly progress. Followed by that is a chart with an analysis of my up-to-date practices in comparison to my behavior before this experiment began.

Theory Utilization

Health Belief Model

The Health Belief Model (HBM) is one of the first theories used to explain and analyze health behavior and to this day remains one of the most commonly used theories (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). This is based on the beliefs about susceptibility and severity of a specific health behavior, concern, or belief. The model analyzes an individual's readiness to take action on a specific health concern or behavior (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). The HBM includes six constructs explaining the process individuals go through when deciding to take action. The constructs are as follows: Perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, cues to action, and self-efficacy.

The first construct is perceived susceptibility. This refers to the degree to which a person feels at risk for a health problem. The important concept to understand about perceived

susceptibility is that the individual's perception may differ from their actual susceptibility, but what they perceive is what matters in this construct (Simons-Morton et al., 2012).

Next comes perceived severity. This is mainly important when an individual understands their susceptibility (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). If the person is not concerned about their susceptibility to a health problem, then the severity may not be an important factor. The construct describes the belief that a health problem will or will not be severe. The individual will be more likely to take action if they believe that the health problem is severe.

The third construct is perceived benefits. This refers to the individual's belief that taking action can reduce the risk and/or the severity of the health condition (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). People are likely to evaluate their options based on information provided to them regarding the condition (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). Some individuals will take action due to the health problem as well as through a friend's influence (Simons-Morton et al., 2012).

The next construct is perceived barriers. Perceived barriers explain several factors that may potentially get in the way of an individual taking action. Barriers can include social, economic, and environmental factors (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). Understanding the barriers is important because some of these aspects can prevent the individual from taking action.

The fifth construct is called cues to action. A cue to action can be a variety of events or experiences that motivates a person to act (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). It can be a poster relating to the severity of the health condition, an individual who influences the person, or even other internal factors that the person contemplating change realizes (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). In general, a cue to action is something that grabs an individual's attention, influencing a change.

The last construct is called self-efficacy. This is not an original part of the HBM, but it is an important construct (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). It is described as a person's confidence in their ability to take action (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). Confidence is key in being able to successfully take action and maintain those behavioral changes.

For my behavior change process, I used perceived susceptibility, perceived benefits, and perceived barriers. Perceived susceptibility was used because diabetes is a common illness that runs in my family on both the paternal and maternal sides. Therefore, I am likely to develop Type II Diabetes if I do not practice healthier behaviors, such as healthy eating. Perceived barriers were used because I know that if I eat healthily, I can lose weight, which is an internal goal of mine. It will also give me more energy in my day-to-day routine because I will be consuming the right foods. Lastly, I used perceived barriers. One of the barriers I anticipated having was finding the time to go grocery shopping and cook healthful meals regularly.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) describes a unique process in which personal, environmental factors, and human behavior influence one another (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). The model states three factors are influencing a behavior: Self-efficacy, goals, and outcome expectancies. According to Theory at a Glance (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005), "if they do not feel that they can exercise control over their health behavior, they are not motivated to act, or to persist through challenges" (p. 20). So again, self-efficacy plays an important role in having control over one's behavior. In addition, as new behaviors become new norms for an individual, changes in the environment and the person will be seen. SCT includes six concepts: Reciprocal determinism, behavioral capability, expectations, self-efficacy, observational learning

(modeling), and reinforcements (US. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer institute, 2005).

The first concept, reciprocal determinism is defined as the relationship between the person, behavior, and the environment in which the behavior is performed (US. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer institute, 2005). Reciprocal determinism can be influenced by three factors: Cognitive, environmental, and behavioral. Cognitive factors are based on thoughts and actions, a behavioral factor is a motivation, and environmental aspects include cultural strategies and communication (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). A person's thoughts, beliefs, self-efficacy, social environment can affect behavior, while behaviors can affect the environment.

Behavioral capability is the second concept from SCT. This refers to the knowledge and skill an individual possesses to perform a given behavior (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). For an individual to effectively perform a behavior, the person must know what to do and how to do it. Strategies to improve behavioral capability can include learning through methods of skills training (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005).

The next concept in SCT is called expectations. The expectations describe the beliefs about the anticipated outcome of the behavior (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). Outcome expectations are developed through both actual and vicarious experiences through memories and emotions (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). People can predict the outcomes of their behaviors based on impressions they have already developed through preconceived thoughts.

The fourth concept of SCT is self-efficacy. It is defined as the confidence in oneself to successfully take action on a given behavior (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). This confidence can be influenced by a person's capabilities as well as environmental factors and barriers. Typically, self-efficacy is enhanced by successful experiences but weakened through failures and other negative experiences (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). This is the central component of SCT.

Next is observational learning or modeling. This means acquiring a behavior by watching the actions and outcomes of other individuals (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). Oftentimes people learn behavior practices from role models as well as other people that individuals may look up to in life. People are also influenced by the media; however, all of these sources should be credible and positive sources influencing behavior (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005).

The last concept in SCT is called reinforcements. This is defined as the response to a person's behavior that can either increase or decrease the probability of the behavior reoccurring (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). There are two types of reinforcements: Positive and negative. Positive reinforcement is like a reward, it will increase a person's chances of repeating a behavior. Negative reinforcements attempt to eliminate a negative stimulus to eliminate a behavior. Both types of reinforcement are used to encourage an individual's behavior and motivate that person to continue the positive actions (US. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer institute, 2005).

The concepts I used in my behavior change process include reciprocal determinism, expectations, and reinforcements. Reciprocal determinism is seen because I knew that eating healthy is important to my well-being and that it is something I can easily do with some

willpower. I knew that I needed to change the environmental and social factors in my life to make it possible. I expected that if I continued to eat junk food and not make the right choices, I would gain weight and increase my chances of getting Type II Diabetes. The reinforcements I used was rewarding myself with a piece of dark chocolate on the days I ate healthily. The days I did not, I chose not to punish myself because missing out on that chocolate was punishment enough.

Transtheoretical Model: Processes of Change

The Processes of Change Model is part of the Transtheoretical Model and also involves the Stages of Change Model (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). The Stages of Change Model is a broader way of looking at the behavior change process. Processes of Change include ten processes: Conscious reasoning, dramatic relief, self-reevaluation, environmental reevaluation, self-liberation, helping relationships, counter-conditioning, contingency management, stimulus control, and social liberation. These are considered the processes that go on within the Stages of Change Model. The first three happen between the pre-contemplation and contemplation stages (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). The fourth process occurs in the contemplation-preparation stages. The fifth process is found during the preparation-action stages while the last five stages occur between the action and maintenance stages (Simons-Morton et al., 2012).

The first cluster of processes begins with the consciousness-raising process. This is described as increasing awareness and knowledge of a specific health risk, as well as understanding protective behaviors (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). Next is dramatic relief which is eliciting an emotional reaction to a health-risk behavior. The best way of describing a dramatic relief is by thinking about those St. Jude's Children's Hospital commercials on TV. The idea is to show something that is going to get an emotional reaction out of an individual will increases the

likelihood of that person to engage in the promoted behavior. The third process is environmental re-evaluation. This is described as understanding how one's behaviors can affect others in the environment (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). These effects can be either physical or emotional (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). These three processes are associated with the precontemplation-contemplation stages in Stages of Change, causing that person to consider whether a behavior change is necessary.

The next process is called self-re-evaluation. This is defined as the realization that behavior change is important to one's identity (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). Here, the individual will visualize their life without the health-risk behavior (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). This process can alter a person's self-image. This is the only process that pairs with the contemplation-preparation stage, where the individual realizes it is time to start their behavior change.

Following self-re-evaluation is the self-liberation process. This is similar to self-efficacy, meaning it is the belief that one can change and making a firm commitment to that change (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). Examples of this process include goal setting strategies, pacts, or rehab. This process is part of the preparation-action stages. That is where an individual is preparing themselves and beginning to take action in their journey.

The following five processes are the last ones in the Processes of Change. The first one is called helping relationships. This is the process of seeking support for behavior change (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). Surrounding oneself with supportive individuals will increase the probability of success in the behavior change process. Next is counter conditioning, substituting an unhealthy behavior with a healthy one (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). For example, drinking water instead of snacking, chewing gum instead of smoking. Then there is the reinforcement

management process. This is focusing on the consequences of behaviors (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). During this process, it is important to monitor the progress of behavior and reward positive behaviors. Next is the stimulus control process, defined as managing cues that stimulate behavior (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). It is essential to remove unhealthy behaviors to encourage healthier ones. Setting reminders up for oneself in an effective way of promoting good behavior. Lastly is social liberation, which is promoting social causes that are consistent with the healthful behavior (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). These five stages relate to the action-maintenance stages, which are all ways to promote healthy behavior and come up with ways to maintain them.

For this model I engaged self-re-evaluation and stimulus control. Self-re-evaluation is how I decided to make my goal healthy eating. I am very conscious about the way I look and since I am not fully satisfied with that, healthy eating will help me implement those changes. Stimulus control was something I was trying to implement by throwing out the junk food I had in the apartment, so I was not tempted to indulge.

Social Marketing

Social Marketing is not a theory, it is an approach used for promoting health behavior (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). It focuses on influencing behaviors that will improve the health of others. Social Marketing uses general marketing principles to deliver messages that will benefit members of society (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). The desired outcome of social marketing is always a societal benefit compared to commercial marketing where the financial gain is the main goal. Social marketing differs immensely from commercial marketing although they use the same concept (Simons-Morton et al., 2012). The "product" being sold here is healthy positive behavior, rather than a good or

service. The competition faced in social marketing is the current behaviors and social norms that are involved in society compared to the competition being other organizations selling the same goods and products. Lastly, the behavior targeted is a behavior that may cost physical, psychological, or financial discomfort but will result in a health benefit while commercial marketing looks for money in exchange for an item (Simons-Morton et al., 2012).

Social Marketing also is similar to commercial marketing because it uses the "4 P's:" Product, price, place, and promotion (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). Product refers to healthy behavioral change. It is the behavior being promoted as well as the benefits that go along with that behavior. Price is defined as an exchange of benefits and costs, referring to the potential barriers involved with the behavior change. The place is described as making the new behavior easy to achieve, meaning it is making the process accessible and convenient. Lastly is promotion, which is delivering the message to the target audience (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005).

The social marketing process starts with formative research, understanding the target audience by learning about the consumers' current behavior (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). Another type of research conducted is competitive analysis, to give them a better understanding of the environment in which the target audience is making their behavior decisions. This also investigates how their decisions are shaped by various factors (social, physical, economical) (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005). Researchers need to gather information to create an effective social marketing technique. That is all part of the planning and developmental process which is then followed by implementation and assessing the effectiveness (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Cancer Institute, 2005).

Social Marketing was helpful to be throughout this behavior change process. I used the four P's to guide and influence my behavior. The product is my healthy eating habits because eating healthy would help the prevention of diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. An additional benefit is losing weight. These products provide me with motivation to eat healthy. Next is price, the barriers I faced. One of my biggest obstacles were my friends influencing me to go out to dinner as well as picking the "healthy" option on the menu. The third P is place, which is how I made the product accessible. I made it easier for myself to eat healthy by eliminating temptations by changing the foods I purchase in the store. Lastly is promotion. I tried to influence my roommate and friends to engage in the healthy food journey with me. I explained to her why it is important for everyone to eat healthy. Getting her on board with the process made my transition easier.

Attribution Theory

This theory is a psychology-based theory developed by social psychologist, Fritz Heider in 1958 (Mcleod, 2012). The attribution theory is designed to understand how individuals use the information to make behavioral decisions. There are two types of attributions: Dispositional and situational (Mcleod, 2012). Dispositional attributions can also be called internal attributions. These refer to characteristics being the cause of behavior (Mcleod, 2012). For example, personality, mood, ability, efforts, and attitudes are all internal factors affecting an individual's behavior. Within the dispositional attributions comes the fundamental attribution error. This explains how oftentimes people place too much emphasis on internal factors to justify behaviors (Mcleod, 2012). Situational attributions are the opposite, the external factors affecting an individual's behavior (Mcleod, 2012). These attributions can be the task, other people, and even luck. There are three dimensions of attributions: locus of control, stability, and controllability.

Locus on control is defined as the understanding that people have control over their life events (Instructional Design, 2018). This can be either internal or external events happening in one's life. Stability is the consistency of a cause in an individual's life (Instructional Design, 2018). Consistent causes are permanent and are considered stable situations while inconsistencies are temporary and unstable. The last dimension is controllability which is whether an individual is willing to change a behavior or not. Some factors are controllable while others are uncontrollable (Instructional Design, 2018).

I used this theory to describe my behavior change process. I used external attributions, stability, and controllability. External attributions included my physical environment allowing me to be at home eating healthy meals. When I am not home, I tend to eat out more out of convenience, so my physical environment is playing a role in my eating habits. The stability of my healthy eating is consistent because I am home for good and do not have to go back to college. Once I get used to these eating habits, I will be least likely to fall back into my old routine. Lastly is controllability, I would consider my situation to be uncontrollable because I do not have a say in what I eat on a day-to-day basis. The options in the grocery store are also limited so we are not guaranteed to find a variety of healthful food options.

Persuasive Health Message Framework

The persuasive health message (PHM) framework is designed to outline how and what an individual should do to engage in a behavioral change (Hall & Johnson-Turbes, 2015). It combines ideas from three theories: Theory of reasoned action, elaboration likelihood model, and protection motivation theory (Hall & Johnson-Turbes, 2015). This is a framework used to develop persuasive health messages to individuals in society in hopes to influence these people towards a healthier lifestyle. PHM is designed to address a specific threat message that the target

audience may be susceptible to (Hall & Johnson-Turbes, 2015). It also includes an efficacy message, addressing confidence in oneself to engage in the advertised behavioral change. Message cues are another element attached to this framework, which is the outlet used to spread the message. Identifying the target audience is a crucial part of the PHM framework. Extensive research must be done to properly address the proper demographics and beliefs of this group of people (Hall & Johnson-Turbes, 2015). This can be done by paying attention to the salient referents (beliefs) as well as the cultural and environmental preferences of the target audience. The PHM framework includes three steps: Determine information about threat and efficacy, develop an audience profile, and construct a persuasive message (Hall & Johnson-Turbes, 2015). Each step is completed by using the elements described above.

In my behavior change process, I incorporated an efficacy message, salient referents, and cultural/environmental preferences. For the efficacy portion, I have the confidence in myself to eat healthily and continue this habit. I know that I am capable of following through with some dedication and the proper resources. My salient referents include my understanding of why it is so important to eat healthy: I am attempting to lose weight and I know I will be in a better health condition if I keep it up. Lastly, come my cultural and environmental preferences: struggling to find groceries due to the current pandemic going on. Another issue I face is the fact that my family is Italian, so we love our carbohydrates!

Weekly Progress

Week 1

My SMART Objective for the week was: By Sunday I will have only consumed junk food three days out of the week. For this week, I struggled to meet my goal. I did maintain the

willpower to eat mostly healthy, but only for two days. The other five I consumed junk food at least once a day.

An obstacle I faced was coming home late from a long day of class, the last thing I want to do is cook myself a healthful meal. However, when I spend the day on campus, I try to pick healthier options in the dining halls. On the days where I do not have class, I spend my day doing schoolwork, so I do not give myself time to cook in between assignments. Plus, I feel too drained to have the motivation to cook, so it is easier for me to eat smaller snacks throughout the day.

Another struggle I faced was seeing my roommates snacking on junk food or eating unhealthy foods, making me crave it more.

To encourage healthy habits, I talked to my friends and let them know what I am trying to do, so they can support me and my journey of healthy eating. I also downloaded the MyFitnessPal app to track my food each day which motivates me to make healthier choices.

Week 2

My objective for the week was: By Sunday I will have consumed at least one fruit and one vegetable per day. I did not complete my goal fully, however, I did eat one vegetable per day as well as eating clean for three days throughout the week.

I accomplished this by going to Aldi to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at a lower price, as well as other healthy items. I only purchased one junk food item to reduce the temptation and limit my options while I am in my apartment. I also continued to track my food using the MyFitnessPal app as well as the Weightwatchers app to find healthy recipes.

One of the challenges I faced was my craving for junk food when I am stressed out after a long day. I often use junk food as a coping mechanism when I am feeling stressed out or any other negative emotion. Instead of looking for the traditional sweet and salty snacks, I can make

my own, making them more healthful. For example, I can make avocado brownies that have more nutritional value than a regular brownie. Another obstacle I faced was the convenience of getting fast food on my long drive home each weekend. When I am driving, I feel like that is my only food option because I am usually in a rush and never make myself a healthy sandwich to eat on the road. Maybe next time I can allow myself more time or eat before I leave. A third struggle I faced was the fact that my friends always wanted to go out to eat as a way of socializing. Yes, I can go out and order a salad, but when everyone around me is ordering a burger or anything else, I do not have the willpower to just eat a salad. Next time, I can offer to do a “family dinner” and all cook something and eat homemade foods rather than spending money at a restaurant.

Week 3

My SMART objective for the week was: By Sunday, I will have consumed at least one fruit and vegetable with every meal, every day of the week.

The successes I celebrated this week were that I ate a vegetable with a minimum of one meal every day during the week, eating a piece of fruit with my breakfast each morning, and only eating one unhealthy dinner! I accomplished this by making healthful purchases in the grocery store, and a friend of mine is on a weight loss journey and recently joined Weightwatchers. She and I decided to go on the journey together, so we have been keeping in touch every day, talking about our progress. This is motivating to me because I have someone going through the same thing and I would like to inspire her to eat healthy, as I am sure she wants to do the same for me.

One struggle I encountered was the fact I had my period this week so all I wanted to do was eat junk food and lay in bed all day. Whenever it is that time of the month, my body craves sweet snacks followed by a salty snack, so there is a balance. It was hard for me to resist the

sweets since I recently purchased Girl Scout cookies, Thin Mints are my weakness. I managed to stay faithful to my diet plan and eating healthier snack options like popcorn, and only a few cookies per day. Another challenge I faced was my friends influencing me to go out to eat, which was my only unhealthy meal of the week. Next time, I should at least have the strength to order a healthier option when going out to eat and not let my friends influence my decisions.

Week 4

My SMART objective for the week was: By Sunday, I will have meal prepped all of my dinners for the week, including all five food groups. This was an interesting week because I did meal prep my dinners, however, I did not eat my pre-cooked meals on most days.

On Monday my boyfriend was here so we ended up going out to eat, Tuesday my friend wanted to get dinner before she left for break, Wednesday we found out we were going home for the semester so all of my friends wanted to get together, and then Thursday I went home. So, I never even had the opportunity to eat the meals I made.

Obstacles I encountered were my friend's invitations to dinner. I could not deny them because we wanted to spend time together before going home. When we were out though, I tried to pick the healthiest option that was not a salad, but French fries are always a must! Another struggle I faced was once I got home, I went back to work for the weekend, so it did not give me much time to eat healthful meals each of those days. Since I work in a restaurant, I usually just get something to pick on throughout my shift and by the time I am done, it is usually late, so I do not want to eat a big meal at night. I can overcome this work obstacle by eating before I go to work, or even bringing my food with me to eat during the shift rather than having to order food there.

Week 5

My SMART objective for the week was: By Sunday, I will have consumed three meals a day containing one healthful food from each of the five food groups on all seven days of the week. In shorter terms, my goal was to use MyPlate as a template for my daily meals. I could not fully reach my goal due to the COVID-19 issue, however, there are very few successes I was able to celebrate.

For dinner every day, I was able to eat something from every food group. Being home really helped me to accomplish this because my parents regularly make well-balanced meals. Plus, my dad and brother are very health conscious, so we are never eating too unhealthily. I continued eating fruit with my breakfast each morning and managed to eat three meals a day for the majority of the week. Being home has mainly helped me achieve these milestones because we eat home-cooked meals every day and there are usually leftovers for me to have for lunch the next day. Plus, I do not have to worry about paying for groceries since I am home and my parents do the grocery shopping.

A challenge I encountered was craving junk food out of boredom, due to the quarantine. A way I can avoid this is by finding ways to keep myself busy, so I am not thinking about food. Another struggle I faced was there being limited options at the grocery stores. Since the shelves are mostly empty, my parents had to get canned vegetables which have less nutritional value. They were also unable to get a variety of fresh fruits and meat products. We still managed to have enough, but it does affect our ability to have three full meals per day since we need to conserve food.

Week 6

My SMART objective for the week was: By Sunday, I will have consumed the proper servings of my proteins, fruits, and vegetables on each day of the week. I did not fully meet my goal for the week, but I did get the proper serving of protein each day.

The serving for protein in a day is relatively small so I was easily able to achieve that through breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I also ate some fruit with my breakfast each morning as well as for a snack when I was feeling a little hungry. We did not have too much fruit in the house though which made it challenging to get the proper serving. Another success I can celebrate is eating at least two meals a day, every day. When I am at school or working, I typically only eat one full meal in a day. The rest are usually snacks or something small that I can eat on my way out the door.

An obstacle I encountered was having my period and craving sweets. When I have my period, I always want to eat to alleviate the pain of the cramps, and my stomach feels like an endless pit, so I am always in the mood for food. I still snacked but tried to eat healthier options such as Cheez-Its, pretzels, and popcorn.

Bar Graph



Behavior Change Analysis

It has been a week since the behavior change project has officially ended and I am still trying to regularly practice healthy eating. Not all of my meals are well-balanced meals, but I have been eating fruits and vegetables daily now. Before this experiment, I went days without either a fruit or a vegetable at times. Another improvement I have made is that I am eating a minimum of two full meals a day- usually breakfast and dinner. I noticed that when I eat breakfast, I do not get hungry for lunch. Sometimes I get hungry, but not enough to eat a meal so I will eat a healthy snack like fruit, pretzels, popcorn, or Cheez-Its. This is different from before the project because I would only eat one full meal a day, which was not usually healthy. I also did not choose to eat healthier snacks, I resorted to sweets like cookies and other snacks such as potato chips. The quality of the food I am eating now is much better too since it is home-cooked and usually containing at least three food groups per meal. I plan to keep up the good work and mainly eat healthy foods so that I can earn myself a cheat day here and there while continuing on my journey to a healthier lifestyle.

Summary Paragraph

In conclusion, there are various theories, models, and frameworks used in society to explain behavior change. Some of these, such as the PHM framework, provides an outline to describe the process of a behavior change. Each one of these models has the individual at the center and attempt to explain why they behave the way that they do. Six of these frameworks were used in my personal behavior change transition to healthy eating. Application of the theories helped me to remain consistent in my progress and I hardly ever regressed. Even after

that regression, I was able to regain my healthy eating habits and continue practicing them to this day.

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MENTAL HEALTH AND REINTEGRATION OF FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS IN THE CONGO: AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL RESPONSES TO TRAUMA

REBECCA DIERS

Abstract

Around the world, children under the age of eighteen are taken from their families and turned into child soldiers. These children are forced to commit acts of violence against their families and communities, including murder and rape. Because of the horrors they are forced to commit, many rescued child soldiers consequently suffer from mental illness such as PTSD and other emotional and behavioral problems. In addition to having those individual mental issues, it is difficult for former child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to successfully reintegrate into their communities after they have been rescued, because of various cultural beliefs. Since many other previous research projects have been conducted solely on the mental health of former child soldiers, the goal of this research is instead to analyze cultural responses to trauma in the Congo, and how the effects of being a child soldier impact both the individual and the community.

Participants

Bidibidi Refugee Camp
Children of War Rehabilitation Center
GUSCO
Lehman College
Victoria Sanford
Invisible Children

Background

Violence in the Congo stemmed from the Rwandan Genocide in 1994. In this genocide, thousands of Tutsi and Hutu individuals were killed. Many Hutus who were responsible for the murders in this genocide fled to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and formed armed groups, causing groups of Tutsis and other rebel groups to arise (“Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo” 2020). When the Congolese government could not stop these armed groups, the Congo Civil War began, and eventually evolved into a conflict for access and control of minerals throughout the DRC (“DR Congo: Chronology.” 2012).

During this civil war, multiple crimes against humanity and war crimes were used as tactics by the armed groups. Some of the crimes against humanity included murder, torture, forcible transfer of a population, and rape. While there were also multiple war crimes, the most extreme and inhumane was enlisting and conscripting child soldiers and having them participate in the hostilities (“Democratic Republic of the Congo”). In wars, child soldiers are defined as any individual who is under the age of eighteen and who is associated with armed forces. These child soldiers do not only participate in physical combat though. Many also work as “carriers,

guards, domestic servants, or sex slaves” (Hermenau et. al. 2013: 1). Additionally, these child soldiers are often forced to partake in the execution of the war crimes and crimes against humanity. They often must perform these tasks against their own family and community members.

There are multiple ways in which children are recruited to be child soldiers. Many are abducted or recruited by force by rebel groups, or are coerced by threats the rebel groups make against them or their families. Some children also join because they are promised things like protection, food, education, or money, and others join to avenge the death of a family member at the hands of a rebel group. The children that are abducted or coerced are often targeted by rebel groups because they have been orphaned or separated from their families during the war (Derluyn 2011: 3). While many child soldiers have been rescued, there are still many who still hold that position. In fact, in 2007 there was an estimate that there were still seven-thousand child soldiers in various armed groups and forces, and that most of them were from the eastern DRC (Hermenau et. al. 2013: 1).

Narrative

Other studies have been conducted on the mental health of former child soldiers, which is why I instead chose to focus on the impacts on the cultural responses to that trauma and how the community treats the former child soldiers when they are reintegrated into society. This is research that has already been conducted on Ugandans, which is why I instead chose to do it on the Congolese, to see how these communities are similar/different to one another. The goal of this research is to understand the reintegration process for former child soldiers from the DRC, as well as learn how their community reacts to these child soldiers. This is because children who are involved in killing others are often considered threats, and are stigmatized for their actions (Nduwimana 2013: 8). Understanding the Congolese’s cultural responses to trauma and child soldiers would allow better ways to reintegrate former child soldiers into their communities in the future. These Congolese cultures include those who speak the four national languages of the DRC: Kikongo (Kituba), Lingala, Swahili, and Tshiluba (“Language Data for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).” 2020). More details about these languages will be offered further below.

Children who are subject to wars—or in this case, children who perform wartime atrocities—often have to deal with mental health issues such as PTSD and other behavioral issues as a result of the trauma they have been through. This trauma includes being subjected to beatings and rape, marching until the point of exhaustion, and being forced to kill family members, community members, or other children who tried to escape (Child Soldiers Global Report 2001-Uganda 2001). Research has shown that child soldiers who have been exposed to the violence of war often have greater levels of aggression, are more vulnerable to develop additional psychological disorders that can affect their functionality, physical health, and mortality. In some cases, child soldiers may even have a changed perspective towards violence; after experiencing it repeatedly, they may begin to find violence normal, acceptable, and even exciting (Hermenau et. al. 2013: 1-2). These children need help to recover from the physical and emotional trauma they have been through. A goal many people have for these former child soldiers is them being able to be reunited with their families, and be reintegrated into their

communities (Rehabilitation Projects 2020). Oftentimes though, “suffering from PTSD and aggression can lead to discontinuation of reintegration programs and consequently heighten the risk of voluntary reenlistment in armed groups” (Hermenau et. al. 2013: 7). This, alongside cultural and spiritual beliefs of the community, often makes it much harder for these children to be reunited with their families.

The reunification process is also often difficult, because of trauma-based beliefs that these communities have. In many war-affected countries, having children under the age of eighteen who are participants in the war brings political and social unease to the communities. This is because children “represent future generations of adults,” and the communities worry that these children will cause the downfall of their society (Boyden 2009: 344-345). In addition, many countries, children are given large amounts of economic and social responsibilities that vary depending on their gender, class, and level of maturity. Even though they have these responsibilities though, they are “rarely awarded political or military power within the home or community.” Those types of power are associated with being an adult, and so when a child becomes a participant of war, it “breaches adult notions of what is acceptable childhood behavior” (Boyden 2009: 348).

In some countries, these worries come from spiritual beliefs. Studies on former child soldiers among the Acholi in Gulu, northern Uganda have shown that their communities are often afraid of them. These Ugandans believe that these former child soldiers with emotional or psychological trauma are *cen* (mad), because the spirits of those that they have killed have possessed them. Their community fears that these spirits will come out of the former child soldier and harm others (Boyden 2009: 344-345). Research from Uganda has also mentioned other metaphysical entities, such as people being “seized by *jogi* and *tumi* (terms for usually personified ghosts), and Pentecostal possessions were widespread” (Allen et. al. 2019: 8-9). This research has shown that the less time a child has spent with the LRA, the more likely they are to report they have experienced *cen* and stigma from their community. This is because those who spent less time with the LRA are more likely to live with patrilineal relatives who will abuse or reject them upon their return. Those who spent more time with the LRA are often more assertive and confident, and therefore less likely to report any stigma (Allen et. al. 2019: 12). In the instances that the parents were happy to be reunited with their children, local rituals would take place in order to cleanse the child from their actions. Most Ugandan families also require proof that the child is remorseful for their actions. Once these rites of cleansing and atonement happened, then the child would be accepted back into the community (Boyden 2009: 255).

Stigma associated with these former child soldiers also often depends on the individual's gender. Men are typically considered the heads of the household and the leaders in these communities, and so when a male child soldier is raped, their masculinity, as well as their status in their family and community, is destroyed. In terms of adults, raping a man caused the community to then perceive them as a woman. One survivor in an interview reported how he had not told his wife about how he was raped, since two wives are not allowed to live in the same house. In comparison, a raped woman is no longer deemed acceptable for marriage, and so they will often be chased away from the community (Christian et. al. 2011: 234-235). This makes one wonder what these individual's futures hold, especially in societies where the future for girls is marriage (Brett 2004: 37). While this is only research done on adults who have been

raped, it can be assumed that child soldiers would face similar stigmatization based on their gender as well.

Setting

While this study is about the Congolese people and their reactions to trauma, it will not be taking place in the DRC. This is because the civil war is still going on there, making it a dangerous place to travel to. In fact, the DRC travel advisory advises against traveling to North Kivu and the Ituri provinces due to terrorism, and to the three Kasai provinces due to “crime, civil unrest, armed conflict and kidnapping.” Additionally, because of these poor security conditions, the United States government has a limited capability of providing any emergency consular services to any U.S. citizen outside of Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of the Congo Travel Advisory 2020). Overall, traveling to the DRC would ultimately put me at risk, and cause me to be unable to complete this research effectively.

Instead of doing this research in the DRC, it will instead take place in Gulu, in northern Uganda. Uganda still has some dangers, such as the potential for robberies, home invasions, kidnappings and sexual assault (Uganda Travel Advisory 2020). However, while armed forces such as the LRA are still active at the borders of South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the DRC, security has been maintained in northern Uganda for over a decade now (Allen et. al. 2019: 4). This ultimately makes Uganda a safer place to conduct research than the DRC, even though one still needs to proceed with caution.

There are multiple rehabilitation and reception centers in Uganda whose missions are to help former child soldiers from the DRC. In fact, the Ugandan Government has “repeatedly committed itself to freeing children abducted by opposition forces and handing them over into rehabilitation centres.” In February of 2001, rescued child soldiers from the DRC were given to UNICEF by the Ugandan Government in order to reunite them with their families. After being given medical treatment, counseling, and education, statistics from two rehabilitation centers in Gulu showed that 5,837 child soldiers were reintegrated into their communities up until the first quarter of 1999 (Child Soldiers Global Report 2001- Uganda 2001).

Before rehabilitation and reception centers were developed, the names of the children who had returned would be announced on the radio in the hopes that their family members would be listening and come to get them. Sometimes the children would even be paraded in towns to see if someone recognized them. Oftentimes, these children’s family members would fail to come forward to receive them. Because of this, a group of parents came up with the idea of creating a reception center in 1994 to better help unite these children with their families. The first center in Gulu to be created was run by Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO), and its development was helped by the organization, Save the Children. A year after GUSCO was created, the World Vision center was established, and then ten more were created between 1997 and 2004 (Allen et. al. 2019: 4-5).

One rehabilitation center I have made arrangements to visit is the Children of War Rehabilitation Center in northern Uganda. The nonprofit organization called Invisible Children partnered with World Vision Uganda to create this rehabilitation center in order to reunite former child soldiers

with their families (Rehabilitation Projects 2020). Rehabilitation centers like this, as well as GUSCO are where a lot of this research will be conducted, as it provides a place to speak with former child soldiers about their mental health and about the reunification process. It also gives me an opportunity to speak with some children's families about their reactions to their child being a child soldier, and how that affects both them and their community.

I have also made arrangements to visit the Bidibidi Refugee Camp. This refugee camp hosts individuals from many African countries, including the DRC, Sudan, Somalia, South Sudan, and Burundi ("Our Work: Uganda 2020). It is here that I will speak more in depth with Congolese families about their beliefs and perspectives on trauma and the effects child soldiers have on their community.

Methods

Before beginning my research, I think it is important to gain the trust of the participants. In order to do this, I would like elders in the refugee camps to teach me their languages. French is the official language of the DRC, and since I learned French for seven years, I will already be able to communicate with the Congolese people. I will use this knowledge to ask the elders I am put in contact with to teach me one of the four other national languages: Kikongo (Kituba), Lingala, Swahili, and Tshiluba ("Language Data for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)." 2020). While I would ideally like to learn some of the basics from each of those four languages, so that I can initiate some conversations with any of the Congolese people, I would like to gain the greatest level of knowledge about the Lingala language. Focusing primarily on one language will best allow me to achieve a higher skill level in which I can communicate.

Once I have acquired a sufficient skill level of communication, I will begin to complete interviews and surveys. In their research about trauma and PTSD in Ugandan and Congolese child soldiers, Christophe Pierre Bayer and others wrote how they restricted their study to rehabilitation centers, because it was almost impossible to travel because of ongoing ambushes and poor security (Bayer et. al. 2007: 556). In recognition of this, my own traveling for this research will also be limited to the GUSCO rehabilitation center, the Children of War Rehabilitation Center, and the Bidibidi refugee camp.

All participants will need to give verbal consent in order to participate. Children under the age of eighteen will also need consent from a family member, or from the respective institution in which they are at if there is no family member present/that they are in contact with. Introductions will be made in one of the four national languages that I learned in order to gain the trust of those I am interviewing, but the interview itself will be conducted in French (as long as the participant knows how to speak French as well). This will allow me to avoid using a translator, as they may not translate every word the participant says which could hinder the results.

Interviews will first be conducted at the refugee camps, so that I can ask elders and other adults about their beliefs relating to trauma, and what their perspectives on child soldiers are. These questions will include whether or not child soldiers are seen as a threat when returning to their community, and what roles do children, men, and women hold within the community. I hope

these questions will lead the participants to begin to talk about some sort of spiritual belief, such as how Ugandans believe the child soldiers are possessed by the spirits of those they have killed.

Interviews will then be conducted with the former child soldiers. They will be asked their age, place of birth, and level of education, before being asked about their military experience. Those questions will include how long they were with the armed groups, what combat experience they had, and how they were recruited (voluntary or forcibly). In a study conducted on former child soldiers in Uganda, the researchers conducted a list of war and non-war related potentially traumatic events, and had the children check off all of the ones they experienced. This list included traumatic events from the Posttraumatic Stress Diagnostic Scale, such as domestic violence, assault by a weapon, rape, accidents, and massacres. The children were not asked the number of times these incidents happened to them, as that number would be unreliable (Hermenau et. al. 2013: 3). The same survey will be conducted with this research of former child soldiers of the DRC, as it gives insight to the experiences they had as a child soldier. I will then ask them about the reintegration process, and whether or not they feel as though they would be accepted back into their communities, and why/why not.

The final interviews will take place with the families of these former child soldiers. I will be put into contact with these families, as well as former child soldiers who have been reunited with their families, with the help of Invisible Children. Since Invisible Children meets with the children's families to help them prepare for their children's return home, I will be able to ask them additional questions about the reunification process. When speaking with the former child soldiers who have already been reunited with their families, I will be able to ask them whether they experienced any stigma from their community upon their return.

Upon completion, each participant will be given two US Dollars for their help with this research.

Work Plan

January 21- February 20	During this time frame, I will be spending my time at Bidibidi, and learning having the Congolese refugees there teach me their languages.
February 21- March 20	During this time frame, I will begin to interview the Congolese refugee elders at Bidibidi about their cultural perspectives on trauma and child soldiers.
March 21- April 20	During this time frame, I will be interviewing former child soldiers at the Children of War Rehabilitation Center.

April 20	During this time frame, I will be interviewing former child soldiers at GUSCO.
May 21- June 20	During this time frame, I will be put into contact with the families of the former child soldiers at the rehabilitation centers, and interview them on their thoughts about their child being a child soldier. I will also be put into contact with children who have been reunited with their families, and ask them about the reunification process.

Budget

Item	Type	Purpose	Cost
Plane Ticket	Round Trip Ticket	To get to location to do fieldwork, and to return back to the United States following its completion.	\$1,600
In-country transportation		Traveling to the rehabilitation centers and refugee camp as well as to other places needed.	\$900
Travel Insurance		Protection against any financial risks or losses that may occur.	\$50
Immunizations	Typhoid, Cholera, Yellow Fever, Rabies, Malaria	Protection against acquiring any potential diseases that are found in Uganda.	\$3,690 (Typhoid-\$110, Cholera-\$225, Yellow Fever-\$155, Rabies-\$3000, Malaria-\$200)
Rent	One-bedroom apartment	So that I have somewhere to stay each night, since I cannot stay at a refugee camp or a rehabilitation center.	\$3,600 (\$20/night)

Food		To ensure that I will get enough nutrition.	\$900
Water	Bottled	To purchase clean water instead of potentially drinking contaminated water.	\$600
Recorder	Sony-BX Series Digital Voice Recorder	To record interviews with participants to ensure all of their statements are captured and easily accessible to refer back to.	\$40
Computer	HP Pavilion	To take notes on and to work on research while doing the fieldwork. Also for transcribing interviews.	\$850
Phone/Internet Service Provider	Zoom Wireless	To be able to effectively use my computer for research.	\$720
Flash Drives		To backup research on the computer so that nothing gets lost or deleted.	\$40
Portable Charger		To keep phone and laptop charged in order to work on research without worrying about these devices dying and not being able to be charged	\$60
Batteries		To be used for the portable charger and recorder	\$20
First-Aid Kit		In case of a medical emergency where items in a first-aid kit can be used instead of going to a hospital (i.e.: band-aids for cuts)	\$30

Gifts for Participants	To be given to any participants as a way to say thank you	\$200
Other Unexpected Costs	In case of a medical emergency, or other needs	\$200

Total Cost: **\$13,500**

Qualifications

The official language of the DRC is French. I took seven years of French classes throughout middle school and high school, and have been reviewing the language frequently in preparation for this research. Knowing this language will allow me to communicate with the Congolese people who speak French.

Additionally, I have taken numerous courses throughout my college career that have prepared me for this research. Some of these courses include “Methods of Anthropology,” “Anthropological Theory,” “Anthropology of Gender,” and “Global Criminology.” These courses provided me with a basis on how to conduct anthropological research, as well as how gender plays a role in society. The latter is especially important, as part of the preliminary research I conducted for my own research showed how a lot of the cultural responses are in response to one’s gender.

Finally, I have a lot of prior research on the DRC and child soldiers. In the “Anthropology of Gender” course, I conducted a cross cultural analysis about the use of sexual violence in the Bosian War and Congo Civil War. This provided me with a basis for this research.

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