

nota bene

2021



PHI THETA KAPPA
HONOR SOCIETY

FROM THE *NOTA BENE* EDITORIAL BOARD

Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society is proud to present the 27th edition of *Nota Bene*, the nation's only literary anthology featuring excellence in writing among community college students.

We are pleased to once again offer scholarships to outstanding *Nota Bene* authors. This year's Ewing Citation Scholarship has been awarded to Megan A. Pastore, a member from Tidewater Community College, Chesapeake Campus, in Virginia, for her short story "Brother Fox." The authors of four other standout entries have been recognized as 2021 Reynolds Scholars.

New this year is the naming of Phi Theta Kappa's first International Poet Laureate. This award goes to the author of the most outstanding poem, Federico De Palma of Orange Coast College, Costa Mesa Campus, in California, for his entry, "Immigrant's Song."

When we first published *Nota Bene* in 1994, we were overwhelmed with the response from members who flooded our mailboxes with submissions and from the audience who enthusiastically read the book. Today we continue to see a fervent response to the call for submissions, and selection for publication remains a great source of pride.

Nota Bene takes its name from the Latin expression for "note well." We hope you will take note and be inspired by the good work of these exceptional authors. We are grateful for the continued opportunity to showcase the talents of Phi Theta Kappa members and to affirm our commitment to the recognition and academic excellence of students seeking associate degrees and certificates.

Sincerely,

The *Nota Bene* Editorial Board

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Advisors Emeriti are a select group of retired or retiring advisors who, after providing extraordinary leadership and achieving success, are invited to continue their engagement and support of the Society based on their interests and expertise in Phi Theta Kappa's programs.

AWARDS

The Ewing Citation Scholarship Award of \$1,000 is given to the author of the *Nota Bene* manuscript considered to be the most outstanding of all entries. It is named in honor of the late Nell Ewing, long-time Phi Theta Kappa staff member who was a driving force behind *Nota Bene*, beginning with its conceptual design and establishment. She retired in 2012 after serving 26 years with Phi Theta Kappa.

The International Poet Laureate Award of \$1,000 is given to the author of the most outstanding poem. In addition to the scholarship award, the International Poet Laureate will be invited to present their poem during one of Phi Theta Kappa's international events.

The Reynolds Scholarship Awards of \$500 each are given to up to four authors whose manuscripts were deemed outstanding. These awards are endowed by the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and honor the memory of the late Donald W. Reynolds, founder of the Donrey Media Group.

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Brother Fox - a "PG-13" fable

MEGAN A. PASTORE
Tidewater Community College
Virginia

In the deep, lush wood, brother Fox stirs in his sleep. Grumbling, one eyelid tiredly lifts. He peers at the sunlight breaking the dawn of another autumn day and quickly snaps it shut. The cool morning air seeps beneath his fur as Fox curls a bit tighter; a slight hope of preserving another moment of warmth.

You see, brother Fox lives a lonely life-- but this wasn't always so. His wife died an untimely death, before having kits of their own. Logging accident, three and a half springs ago. Fox heard the machines rumbling down the path from their first abode. When he noticed his beautiful bride had wandered off in search of leaves for their morning tea, he froze. Panicked, he began to run toward the noise, scouring the woods for his sweet Petunia-pie. He found her, alright-- under a downed Sycamore, flat as the goddamned pancakes they'd had the morning before. And with the raspberry syrup, to boot! Heartbroken, he sulked away, pondering the love and life he just lost. "Why me," he cried out. Shortly thereafter, a bitterness that bites like warm cranberry consumed his heart and soured his soul. He'd set off to find a new home as he longed for isolation to live out his days. Wishful thinking-- at that.

Fox sighs, knowing there's no use in prolonging the inevitable. He stretches and moans as he wipes the sleep from his eyes. Grabbing his robe and slippers, he meanders to the kitchen. "At least the coffee's hot," he mumbles to himself. Fox can no longer bear the taste of tea. It reminds him of all he's lost; of his dear vixen and the cool mornings spent under their freshly downed quilt, while the very same ducks that simmered on the stovetop filled the air with a hint of their evening's meal. *A whole lifetime before them, gone.* He heads to his table and chair for one; black coffee in paw, and Fox in Socks under his arm. "Stupid fox. What fox wears socks," he scoffs as he straightens his spectacles.

Brother Robin calls just outside Fox's den. Disturbed, he stares beyond his hole at a world awaiting his charming presence. Closing his book, Fox reluctantly stands with a huff. His chair digs into the dirt floor, leaving track marks he will begrudgingly smooth over later. Wandering to the door, he stops and leans against the dusty frame. Fox wonders at all of the commotion, while casually lighting his cigarette.

"Robin, what are you so chipper about this morning? It's freezing-- I can see the frost on your berries from here," Fox gekkers.

Robin chirps back, "My sincerest apologies, Fox. Did I disrupt your morning read? What is it today...*War and Peace? Pride and Prejudice?*"

Cowering, Fox retorts, "Mind your business, birdbrain. You know nothing of the sophisticated tastes of a fox."

He begins to turn away from Robin, ready to recluse in his not-so-humbled home and pauses. Pivoting on his heel, Fox shouts, "You know, Robin-- you haven't much to sing about with your five measly chicks and your chirpy, plump wife. How do you get any peace with their constant pecking at your heels?"

"Ahh, you've got it all wrong, brother Fox," challenges Robin, "this is living. This IS peace and joy. You should try it sometime."

With the roll of his eyes, Fox returns to his dimly lit hollow. "He's got a lot of nerve. *You should try it sometime. Imbecile,*" he mutters to himself. Glancing around at the all-but-empty space, Fox decides he could use some air.

The "Foxxxy-Lady" calendar on his wall serves as a pleasant reminder that winter is quickly approaching. After a stalling moment to sneak a peek at Miss December, *what a tail on that one*, Fox bundles in preparation for the brisk day. As he heads down the same old beaten path that runs alongside the crick, Fox is blind to the beauty that surrounds him. Lost in thought, he nearly flattens sister Snake.

"What in the hell are you doing lying in the middle of the path, Snake? You'll be lucky to survive the cold of winter, yet you risk an early death being trampled by passersby such as myself!"

Saying nothing, she smiles at brother Fox.

"Oh great, another happy little sap. And what do you have to be so joyful about, Snake? I just told you I nearly killed you," Fox proclaims.

"Come rest with me, brother Fox. Warm yourself in the sun," Snake offers.

"Rest? Hah! I haven't the time for rest, Snake. I've more important things to do today."

Knowing better, Snake counters, "And what would that be, Fox?"

Stunned into silence, he doesn't answer. Unprepared for a game of twenty questions, Fox awkwardly slumps onto the path beside sister Snake.

As they sit quietly, Fox thinks to himself... *the sun really does feel nice. Welcoming and kind...* It reminds him of his days frolicking in the same sun with Petunia, only to then bask and be solaced by an afternoon nap intertwined in the meadow. Noticing a faint smile creep across sly Fox's face, Snake doesn't dare make a hiss of it.

"So, where are you off to in such a hurry today, Fox?"

His demeanor changes as reality pulls him away from what is now a distant memory that fades more and more with each passing spring. "You know... places. And things..." he struggles to come up with a viable answer.

"I see," says Snake.

Becoming defensive, Fox argues, "Well, I DON'T see. How can you possibly find joy just lying in the dirt, staring at nothing? You are alone. You've no husband or children, and your taste palate-- well, that certainly leaves much to be desired."



Fox pussyfoots around the fact that he just devoured her cousin last night for dinner-- bones and all. It was an excellent stew recipe he'd found in *The New York Times*. He fried up the skin to crumble into flakes to top his dish, and the bones added a subtle crunch-- surprising yet satisfying. His mouth waters at the memory. He guesses sister Snake has yet to hear the news, given she still sits with him.

"You know, brother Fox," Snake advises, "joy isn't only found in what you have or don't have. Joy may be found where you are-- right in this very moment." After a brief pause, she continues, "Take in the warm sun, breathe in the cool air. Fill your lungs with life! Look at the change in the leaves. For heaven's sake, open your eyes, Fox. Beauty is all around you, and in that beauty, you can find joy. You really should try it sometime."

Fox snuffs. *You really should try it sometime*. He feels a stirring inside. Deep down he knows Snake is onto something, just as brother Robin, but he pushes it deeper. Standing abruptly, he barks, "Hey, don't you have a cousin named Joy? You should check in on her, and while you're at it-- tell her I said hello!" Smirking quite proudly, he trots away.

Continuing onto his path, Fox averts his eyes to avoid the bold orange, red and yellow leaves that paint the surrounding Pennsylvanian woodlands. He plugs his ears, as to not hear the trickling of the crick beside him. Holding his breath, he nearly fades. He'd do anything to prevent this 'joy' Snake speaks of from poisoning his aching lungs. *Ahh, Joy*. The drool pools in his mouth once more. Exasperated by his own morbid thoughts, Fox shakes his head. Dizzying, he succumbs to the need for oxygen. In a deep, desperate heave, he takes in the cool, crisp autumn air; not unlike his first breath as a kit before suckling at his mother's tit. He feels... different. Sobbingly, he drops into a jellied heap upon the grass that blankets the water's edge.

Below, brother Otter having just cast his last line of the day, stares at his graying reflection, and smiles. With the slight twitch of his ear, he hears the familiar sound of harrowing cries in the distance, reminiscent of his days in the war. Gruffly, he declares, "We never leave a broken comrade behind," and charges up the bank in search of his fallen soldier. Otter is beside himself when he stumbles upon a forlorn and sorrowful Fox. For a moment, he is speechless.

This isn't the egomaniacal little shit stirrer they all know and hate to love. This isn't their brother Fox, at all.

Otter clears his throat, unsure of how his presence will be welcomed by such a vulnerable creature. Fox looks up, and embarrassed by his state, returns his face to his arms. Otter sits beside Fox, reassuring him with a masculine pat to the back. (*Nothing mushy to see here folks, just a couple of dudes having a very manly moment-- keep it moving.*) Before speaking, Otter looks around to be sure they are alone.

"Brother Fox, what on earth could cause you to suffer under such duress?"

Fox sobs a moment longer, then whimpers, "How--"

Otter waits.

Louder, Fox begins to wail, "How do I allow myself to find joy in this world, when the only love I've ever known is gone?"

Otter understands, all too well, the pain Fox endures. "Fox, my dear boy, I've been where you are."

Fox's face softens, his tears begin to slow, and for once in his godforsaken life-- he listens.

"When me and the missus were young, we moved here from the bayou, to start a new life. I was fresh out of war..." Otter lifts, and with his whittled walking stick, gently taps his peg leg constructed of bound twigs and bark, "we'd just come to learn we were about to raise a family. Here I'd thought she was just fat!"

Otter chuckles at the memory of her love for beignets, but Fox's heart sinks, and a pang of jealousy occurs for Otter even knowing a glimpse of the life Fox dreamt of. Otter continues, "A stubborn one, swollen with life and all, she was insistent on making her way to the crick herself to scrounge up some mudbugs for dinner. Little did I know, some strays-- a mess of coyotes from down in Wayne County, decided to pass through looking for new territory."

With widening eyes, Fox listens on.

"They happened upon my sweet Chérie and decided they'd have themselves a mid-afternoon snack. A tuft of fur was all that remained of my missus and our pups-to-be." He pats at his chest, "I keep it here in my pocket, next to my heart." Otter pulls out the fur and shows it to Fox. His stomach turns. He begins to think of Joy, regretting the things he said to Snake just hours before.

Reluctantly, Fox swallows the rising acid in his throat and finds it in himself to speak.

"But how Otter, after all of that, do you allow yourself to feel joy and love? How, after losing everything, can you look at anything and see beauty? Where do you find peace?"

Brushing the grass, Otter allows the fading green blades to slip between his paws.

"Right here."

As Otter lifts his face to the yellow sun, he feels the light without seeing it and allows it to warm his soul. He listens to the trickling of the crick and slowly opens his eyes, taking in the vibrant colors of life and death that surround him. Breathing deeply, he relishes the autumnal scent of decaying leaves-- knowing it makes way for new life come spring. Fox silently observes Otter, and new tears fill his swollen, bloodshot eyes. Carefully following suit, he mimics his dear friend.

Taking notice, Otter speaks softly once more, "Presence and gratitude, dear Fox. *Perhaps you should try it sometime.*"

And Fox does.

IMMIGRANT'S SONG

FEDERICO DE PALMA

*Orange Coast College
California*

Like the smell of our mother's skin,
our land stays with us.

Always.

We never, growing up, imagined
to leave,
to live
in a different land.

But we had to.

Sadly,
the pain of missing home
– and friends and flavors and family –
nothing is
compared to the pain
of the rods and the tongues
of those who never had
to leave,
who never learned
to live.

Of those who never understood
that we are not here to steal,
but to find the life that from us
was stolen
before we were even born.

Ever conscious of the offenses
– but always resilient –
we watered the unwelcoming land
with the sweat of our brow.
Until the day when our blood
bloomed under this new sun.

A son who calls this one his land;
who calls this one his home.

A son who taught us
that there is only one
people and one land.

A son who taught us
that we have always been home.



SHADOWS OF OUR VARIETY



MICHELLE LEGG

*Pearl River Community College, Forrest County Center
Mississippi*

I pulled out the brown, horse patterned suitcase from beneath my bed, looking across the room at my little brother pulling out his own Batman luggage. Laying it open on the bed, I stared inside for a moment. Carefully, I mentally plucked out the fear that I held within my fluttering rib cage and tucked it at the bottom of the bag. *It was time to be a big girl*, 11 year old me thought quietly. Time to change our situation.

Once I lay the fear inside to steel myself in the thought, I picked up the small pile of my favorite clothes. No matter that they were some of my only clothes. Folding them gently, I counted; the only two pairs of blue jeans that fit me the way I liked, three pairs of shorts that weren't too short for school, one black skirt and the red shirt that matched for special occasions, one tank top for the hot weather of the summer, one jacket that was a simple zip-up in black, and five t-shirts, one of which bore Pokemon graphics and the others sporting some kind of girly design that made me roll my eyes. At least they were better than the hand-me-downs that did not fit at all. On top of the folded layer, I lay flat the one shirt that I had managed to keep ahold of after my parent's divorce. The white fabric covered my clothes and tucked around the edges to keep them secure, a dark green, line-work graphic of Simba and Nala on the front and the Disney logo hidden in the artwork. It was massive on me, but I would grow into it someday.

After the necessary clothes came my toothbrush, my shampoo and body wash wrapped in a clean towel with pink flowers printed on it, and the small photo album that I kept beneath my pillow. The album was just as important as any hygiene product. It contained the pictures that I treasured of my parents, my brother, and I on the only vacation that I remembered. Disney World had seemed like a dream compared to the current situation. Once they were tucked into the luggage, I helped my baby brother pack the things he needed first, then his wants, before returning to my own bag. Many

books were the next thing that I placed inside, slipping one into the front pocket so that I could read it on the road while the sun was up. My only sketchbook followed close behind and the box of my favorite pencils and colors. I placed my diary in the front pocket as well, then filled the rest of my suitcase with wants. My stuffed animals, then a Barbie doll, my Godzilla that lit up and the entirety of my collection of plastic horses of varying sizes. Before closing up the bag, I slipped the strap of a carrying case around my neck, containing my Gameboy Advance SP, and tucked my original Gameboy Color and games in with my other belongings, being careful not to scratch the clear purple plastic of the game system while I zipped up the zipper. They were so precious to me; Christmas presents that had been just what I had asked for before everything had gone swirling down the drain.

The sound of that zipper had been so final, but maybe that was a sign that things were getting better. With one more sigh that seemed to weigh a full ton in my lungs, I took my brother's hand and led him downstairs toward freedom. The descent had been easy but crossing from the landing of the stairs and through the living room of the small townhouse seemed like walking through a mine field with a blindfold on. Our walking alone likely would not wake our step-father from the heavy, drug-induced nap he was enjoying on the sofa, though the possibility kept anxiety crawling over my skin like a nest of spiders. After all, irrational fear is a child's bread and butter when it comes to easily angered parents.

My nose had wrinkled as we walked past him, snoring away with his dentures half hanging from his gums and whistling when he breathed. I had hoped he would choke on them. I was so glad that he would no longer be a part of our lives, especially his explosive anger and the acrid, stinging scent of cooking cocaine and toxic sweat that his skin seemed to carry no matter how hard he scrubbed. Thankfully, cool night air washed the smell away from my nose as we stepped outside, my Grandmother closing the door quietly behind us.

"Come on kids," she had whispered gently, hustling us to the silver Jeep she had parked in the space directly in front of the building. Having backed into the spot, all she would have to do was throw the vehicle into drive, and we would be gone. I watched her put a box of items that she had collected from the house into the trunk space before helping my brother up into his seat and pushing our suitcases in under our feet before finding my own place. My mother sat in the front passenger seat, coming down from a recent high and face streaked with smeared mascara and dry tears. Her head lolled to face me, eyes red and puffy and a smile that did not reach them pulling sleepily at the corners of her lips. Her voice was all gravel and exhaustion as my Grandmother started the Jeep and pulled out of the space.

"Are you scared to move away? I'm sorry you have to leave your friends, but I just need some help..."

No, I shook my head, keeping my face placid and calm for her sake, and she commented on what a brave girl I was. Perhaps once I might have been afraid. I had been scared when we had moved in with that monster after my mother's divorce, scared to lose my father. Now, I was only glad she had asked for help getting clean, and we were finally leaving. Friends could write letters and send pictures, but happiness was fleeting and did not live in places where shadows of our variety thrived.

BRISEIS



JULIANNA JOVILLAR
*College of Southern Nevada
 Nevada*

They burned the town.
 They killed the men.
 They raped the women,
 And stole our children.

They sent me for sacrifice.
 My father plead for mercy,
 Begged for all to see,
 And they took me still.

In a camp of gore,
 A menagerie of monsters and barbarians,
 I stood at the center of their world
 And waited for death.

Then I was claimed,
 By the warrior, the man we all knew.
 The one with the Gods' blood and blessing.
 The monster.

+ + +

With eyes cold like the ocean,
 And sharp as a blade
 He critiqued me, my bloody and muddied body
 And in silence, took me away.

Swift-footed, they called him.
 The Greek's hero and savior.
 But all I saw was a beast;
 A beast of blood and war, and nothing more.
 In his tent, I was met with the smell of ash
 A dying fire, fading into the night.
 And I felt its embers in my bones
 Dimming as I became his.

With nothing and no one to call my own,
 I became his wife, as expected.
 Yet he paid me no attention
 Barely casting a glance as he destroyed my home.

+ + +

But then I met his companion.
 Patroclus, whose eyes were soft and yearning.
 He was gentle, good-hearted; kind.
 So different from the man who'd claimed me.

And he showed me kindness,
 Invited me in and warmed my soul.
 His efforts were genuine.
 His smile was caring

And I noticed his influence.
 How far his hand reached.
 Warriors and natives, all moved by his stature
 And respectful of his reserved being.

But the touch of kindness, his goodwill,
 Most affected my husband,
 The beast who took me.
 For he was a new creature around him.

+ + +

He made him soft.
 Kind and cautious, and wanting to be better.
 And he made me soft,
 Open to the world and it's possible goodness.

Slowly but insistently, we changed.
 He changed, my captor, my husband.
 Revealing his true nature beyond what I knew,
 Beyond the warrior.

And he came to know me and respect my opinions.
 For I would not be his servant or slave.
 I was no longer just a woman.
 I had a name.

We became a balance for each other.
 Swift-footed anger was cooled by tenderness
 Tenderness was affirmed by quiet kindness,
 And we were one.

+ + +

Years would pass, the war still raging
 Yet out of it, a community flourished.
 A camp of monsters no longer existed.
 It was a society of farmers and warriors, of families.

Patroclus was my closest companion.
 Even if my plights against my husband faded with time
 But one evening, rare in its serenity,
 It was just us two.

It the darkness of night, as we sat around the fire,
 He gazed at me with soft, unreadable eyes.
 I smiled lightly, for he meant no harm,
 Yet startled at his words.

"I'm sorry."

The blood of innocents burned in his eyes
 And he shut them, trying to forget his memories,
 His sins and regrets.
 His mistakes.

+ + +

He knew now, what it meant
 To truly take, to destroy.
 He had seen it in his men's smiles,
 In their children's triumphs and wives' joy.

He could hardly meet my gaze
 Eyes brimming with shame.
 But he spoke honestly, voice laced with pain
 And breaking with emotion.

"You deserved, *so much* more."

It was like light exploding.
 A warmth I didn't know was missing
 Enveloped my soul, stopping my throat
 Yet filling me with breath, fresh and clear.

A liberty in my chest broke free
 And the fire inside my bones, burned bright.
 My chains fell away, loud in my mind and heart
 And I felt free.

"I forgive you."

My voice was soft, but firm.
 And I felt it, so truthful and convicting
 The weight of my words
 And what they meant.

Achilles looked at me in bewilderment,
 The distress and surprise so plain on his face.

It made my heart clench in a way I didn't know it could.
I met him as he moved to me.

No words were said, only gazes met
And we understood each other.
No longer did I see the eyes of a beast
But of a man hardened and guilted by war.

They belonged to a man who'd seen the wrongs of his past
And had wilted at its permanence, at his inability to take it back.
They matched mine, gaze crooked but clear
And they could only see clearly when together.

+ + +

He took my hands and I felt comforted.
Affection bloomed in my chest, a connection.
We shared in our shame and regrets; our pain
And in each other,
We found peace.

A DOUBLE READING: THE MULTIPLICITY AND GENDERING OF GALADRIEL



CHELSIE POPE

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In Robert D. Parker's *How to Interpret Literature* he says, "At its most fundamental level, feminism is a simple concept. It is about taking women seriously and respectfully. It sets out to reverse a pattern and history of not taking women seriously, a pattern so deeply ingrained that it can seem natural, like mere truth" (Parker, 2019). The first time the word "feminism" was constructed was in the 1890s, and through feminism we can take a deeper look into the female characters within J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. There are many theorists and philosophers who have contributed to the literary study of feminism such as Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Laura Mulvey, and Simone de Beauvoir. For this paper we will focus on the concepts presented by Simone de Beauvoir as she discusses how "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (de Beauvoir, 2011). Women can take on many roles, but those roles are (or should be) defined by the woman herself. Viewing Galadriel in Tolkien's literary works with this lens brings a lot of scrutiny. In her article "Flawed and Formidable: Galadriel, Éowyn, and Tolkien's Inadvertent Feminism," Rachel Maddox, an author from Middle Georgia State University, states, "Galadriel seems almost too delicate to exist in Middle-earth, secluding herself in Lothlórien until Sauron is defeated" (Maddox, 2018). Tolkien has been criticized for his lack of female characters altogether. The few female characters that Tolkien does have within his trilogy are often called out for being absent or weak. However, the multiplicity of women allows for women to choose how to live as women, thus making Galadriel a strong female role model as she chooses her own path and how to make her own mark in Middle-earth.

While *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* was published in 1954 during first-wave feminism, critics have held it's female characters under scrutiny against second-wave and even third-wave feminism in the concept that women should be equal to men. Galadriel plays a uniquely different role within the literary works of Tolkien. Maddox describes, "Galadriel appears to fit Tolkien's sexist ideal of the perfect woman in that she represents physical purity" (Maddox, 2018). I offer an alternative way of viewing of Galadriel through de Beauvoir's concept of feminism. I argue that there

are many facets to feminism and to say that feminism is universal confines the idea of women as agents to a box. Instead of Galadriel being confined to this “sexist ideal,” she rather breaks the mold by stepping outside of the box. The beauty of the multiplicity of women is that it is liberating. Feminism may look different to different people. One woman may want to be a stay-at-home mother, while another may want to work full-time. Neither of these women are less than feminine simply because they choose a different path. Instead, they are the ideals of feminism as they are agents of their own destiny. They are doing what they want to do. Looking at Galadriel through the lens of feminism and lending a deconstructionist’s double reading will help shape the way one views women within Tolkien’s works by decentering the typical view of Galadriel.

Simone de Beauvoir was born in 1908. Her book *The Second Sex* was met with opposition because it was thought to be about sexual decency rather than a call to point out the flaws of the patriarchy. *The Second Sex* became a rallying call to challenge preconceived ideas about feminism. One of de Beauvoir’s main theories is that men act as the “subject” while women act as the “other” thus women are always compared to men and viewed as inferior. This is important when analyzing Galadriel as she is surrounded by subjects (men) throughout the entire trilogy. Her essence is always compared to the men around her.

Galadriel is depicted as passive because she stays within the borders of her land, Lothlórien. She does not venture out; she stays home which seems to take away her agency as a powerful female elf. In Rachel Maddox’s article she describes Galadriel,

“In keeping with her generally stereotypical depiction, Galadriel’s power and agency are constantly undermined by the men in her life, as she remains sheltered by her soldiers, isolated from the real world in Lothlórien. First, Galadriel is not included in the Council of Elrond. In the single most important gathering of leaders of Middle-earth, at which three Ring-bearers (Frodo, Gandalf, and Elrond) are present, and where they determine the fate of the Ring of Power—the most powerful tool in their world—the Lady of Lórien, the bearer of Narya, the mother-in-law of Elrond and grandmother of Arwen, is not only absent, but it appears as though she is neither invited nor expected.” (Maddox, 4)

Galadriel is seen in comparison to the male dominated characters surrounding her as they attend the Council of Elrond while Galadriel stays in her domesticated role in her home (Lothlórien). She is also pointed out as the Lady of Lórien and the mother-in-law of Elrond and grandmother of Arwen. Titles which point out her womanly duties within the home as Lady of Lórien and her responsibilities as mother-in-law and grandmother. Going back to de Beauvoir’s theory that women are the “other” and are inferior to men, this is clear as Galadriel is not invited to the single most important gathering in Middle-earth while a male dominated group take over the council.

In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* Galadriel is first described as, “grave and beautiful. They were clad wholly in white; and the hair of the lady was of deep gold ... but no sign of age was upon them” (Tolkien, 2012). Galadriel is first marked by her beauty and her looks. It is the first thing that is mentioned, which views her as the way a man would view her: one to be looked at and admired. She is quite literally described as a timeless beauty. In his article “Éowyn the Unintended: The Caged Feminine and Gendered Space in *The Lord of the Rings*,” William Henry Harrison says, “Galadriel never enters into direct battle with the enemy ... Galadriel merely provides strength and wisdom; the fighting is done by (male) others” (Harrison, 2013). This views Galadriel in the typical “male gaze” way women have been viewed, especially in the 1950s when this book was published. She appears to be there to lend only moral support as she does not battle Sauron herself. When Frodo offers Galadriel the One Ring, she replies, “In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! ... Stronger than the

foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair" (Tolkien, 2012). Maddox claims, "When Frodo attempts to give her the Ring, she refuses, not because she believes herself too lowly for such a gift, but because she is not above corruption as he assumes her to be" (Maddox, 2018). This is proving Galadriel's imperfections as a woman and a leader. She has the potential for corruption and therefore isn't different or set apart as higher than the men who have also been tempted by the One Ring.

However, women tend to be multifaceted. They may be represented by a center of idealism in what femininity looks like which is generally constructed by comparing female (other) to male (subject), but that does not make it the truth. Therefore, I suggest a double reading (in Derridean terms). "But deconstruction is not destruction. It can change the way we view things, but it does not destroy anything. It offers more, not less" (Parker, 2019). By showing a deconstructive double reading of Galadriel, we can see there is more than one way to view her, or more than one meaning to her femininity. One is not born a woman but becomes a woman. The multiplicity of women is meant to be liberating, allowing them to determine how to be woman. Because of this, Galadriel represents more than the typical ideals of woman compared to man or through the male gaze (domestic life, tending sick, smiling, looking pretty, etc.) Rather, they decenter that notion by representing their own truth of the kind of woman she wants to be rather than the constructed norms of feminism when compared to masculinity or the male gaze. Galadriel represents women as agents rather than women as victims.

When Galadriel is first being described as this beautiful elf, she is also compared to her husband, Celeborn. In the description both Celeborn and Galadriel are being described as beautiful, and furthermore it says, "the Lady no less tall than the Lord" (Tolkien, 2012). Not only has Tolkien broken the mold for masculinity by referring to both Galadriel and Celeborn as beautiful, but he also creates an image of equality among Galadriel and Celeborn as they stand the same height. De Beauvoir says, "most working women do not escape the traditional feminine world; neither society nor their husbands give them the help needed to become, in concrete terms, the equals of men" (de Beauvoir, 2011). Celeborn is often absent from Galadriel because he knows his power is less than hers. Galadriel is the sole proprietor of the "mirror of Galadriel" not Celeborn. Tolkien not only attempted to make Galadriel equal to Celeborn, but he often had Galadriel act on her own apart from Celeborn, thus giving Galadriel a chance to become an "equal of man" rather than constantly compared to Celeborn. She is able to obtain her own agency outside of her husband.

In reference to Galadriel not battling Sauron himself and only lending a hand indirectly, this makes more sense when you know Galadriel's history. Galadriel was not being passive in remaining in Lothlórien; she was saving the rest of Middle-earth! In Tolkien's *Unfinished Tales* it is revealed that Galadriel revolted against the Valar (Elvin) king (her uncle) Feanor as she desired to see Middle Earth for herself and wanted no part in the Kinslaying (the first elf-against-elf battle). She escaped Valinor and eventually ended up in Middle-earth; however, she could sense a dark presence rising, which was Sauron. It says, "He [Sauron] perceived at once that Galadriel would be his chief adversary and obstacle, and he endeavored therefore to placate her" (Tolkien & Tolkien, 2014). During the second age of Middle-earth, Galadriel fought to destroy Sauron, but when she failed, she took her ring of power and used it to protect her realm and people. Her ring of power, Nenyá, was created by Celebrimbor and was one of three rings of power that Sauron sought constantly. It says, "In her wisdom Galadriel saw that Lórien would be a stronghold and point of power to prevent the Shadow from crossing the Anduin in the war that must inevitably come before it was again defeated" (Tolkien & Tolkien, 2014). Galadriel stayed in Lothlórien to hold Sauron at bay, not because she was being passive by having her soldiers protect her, but by her protecting the rest of Middle-earth by keeping Sauron from crossing the Anduin river!

Maddox argues that the temptation of Galadriel to take the One Ring is a sign of her imperfections and potential for corruption. Again, this reveals the slippage within the

text as we take a deeper look into the multiple meanings of this passage. Galadriel had been banned from Valinor because she left against Feanor's wishes in pursuit of Morgoth and to rule Middle-earth. Frodo offered her the One Ring, a surefire way to achieve her dream to rule her own kingdom. She looked into the future and she saw the darkness that would befall Middle-earth should she take the ring of power. She sees that she would be a ruler, but not the ruler she wanted to be... a benevolent ruler. So, she made the hard choice and gave up her chance to rule her own kingdom. After she denies Frodo's offer, she says, "I pass the test. I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel" (Tolkien, 2012). Feanor had lifted the ban on Galadriel after she passed this test, but she remained Galadriel and remained in Middle-earth because that is what she wanted. This entire passage proves de Beauvoir's point that women are the best at deciding how to be woman. She further states, "The 'feminine world' is sometimes contrasted with the masculine universe, but it must be reiterated that women have never formed an autonomous and closed society; they are integrated into the group governed by males" (de Beauvoir, 2011). Feanor set the rules that Galadriel could not return to Valinor; he set the guidelines for her ban to be lifted. Galadriel disobeyed Feanor's orders to remain in Valinor in pursuit of Morgoth (a man) and she stayed in Middle-earth to defeat Sauron (a man). She is surrounded by men; she is integrated into this male-dominated world, yet she remains one of the most powerful and formidable characters within Tolkien's literary works.

Viewing Galadriel as more than fodder for the men around her, viewing her as a "woman as agent" rather than simply "woman as victim" of circumstance allows women to see the multiplicity of women. Women aren't defined by what society or men say they are defined by; they are defined by how they view themselves and act. They decide their own agency as women. As de Beauvoir states, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (de Beauvoir, 2011). Galadriel becomes woman through her conscious actions. Women as agents determine how to shape their own lives. This is empowering as the women in Tolkien's works are scarce, but they are powerful examples of the power that lies within each person regardless of their background. Galadriel determines how to leave her own mark in Middle-earth, and each person is capable of doing the exact same thing in our own world. One must simply be brave enough to stand their own ground and determine their own agency and multiplicity.

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THE SPECTRAL WALTZ

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The cemetery was haunted, but not by malevolent spirits. From far and wide spectators would come to watch the two lovers dance by moonlight. The spectral waltz took them to all corners of the cemetery, but they could never leave the confines of the dead. When the sun came up in the dawn, the few stragglers would strain their eyes in a vain attempt to catch a last glimpse of the lovers, for it was assumed that they never stopped dancing. It never mattered who watched the eternal dance, or what conditions the two were dancing in. The dancers danced on.

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The mayor was familiar with the spectral dancers. He had seen them himself on multiple occasions. He recalled a now-ancient memory of sitting atop his fathers shoulders while the sun set in the distance. Slowly, he began to make out the dancers as the moon rose and the night grew. Time passed languidly as he watched the two glowing dancers. They were oblivious to their surroundings, floating through headstones, disappearing through one side of a mausoleum and emerging from the other. Their focus was on the dance, but even that seemed secondary to their dedication to the other. Over the years the mayor would return to the cemetery to watch the lovers, and not once did he see their gaze wander from one another.

Like every great would-be-mayor, he held big plans for his city. A fledgling tourist destination for those wanting to see transcendental romance, Paloito held a small amount of real estate in the collective consciousness of the surrounding area. But the influence it held was minuscule in comparison to the surrounding cities that had experienced prosperous periods of growth in recent years. Paloito was swiftly falling into obscurity, merely a pitstop in the journey to brighter urban scenes. The mayor set his visage to one that screamed of determination and got to work. Paloito would grow.

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The mayor's grand project began with the largest public relations campaign Paloito would ever bear witness to. Paloito became swarmed with false agents. Pale imitations of the denizens that currently inhabited the quiet streets quickly swarmed into the public eye. Original residents of Paloito could hardly begin their daily routines without running

into the new hires of the mayor. The imitation citizens would do their own daily routines that didn't look suspicious upon first glance, until you realized that they hadn't been there the previous day. And no matter what, you couldn't get them to stop talking about the dancing ghosts in the cemetery.

Once a decently kept secret that occasionally attracted the more seasoned of travelers and folklore enthusiasts, the spectral dancers were quickly an object of attraction for a more common audience. Gone were the enthusiasts, those with the utmost respect for what the citizens of Paloito had always done for the spirits. Gone were the folklore purists that would follow the citizens' word as though their lives depended on whether the ghosts had optimal conditions for their ongoing dance. Now the nights were full of tourists that held large cameras that pierced the night when the shutter collapsed with force. Some held fireworks, and would light them upon the first sightings of the dancers, making them flicker out of sight beneath the brief flashes of light.

Paloito's population grew with the new attraction spawned from the dubious word-of-mouth tactics of the mayor. The rates of old citizens selling their homes to greedy young families grew just as quickly. The bright-eyed young men and women that wanted to prosper off the prestige of living in a cultural center thought it too ripe to pass up. They would buy the houses at any named price, old residents quickly realizing this fact. Their social status elevating as quickly as their debt, the young couples would see that their homes were redone in the style that was popular at that time, not wanting to be outdone by their neighbors.

The mayor was glad to see the old citizens gone, the traditions of yesteryear had begun to grow stale. The dead were due their respect, but their time had passed. The time for growth and innovation was sitting right in front of them, all they needed to do was reach for it. The future was Paloito's, for they had something the other cities didn't have. A rich history. Quickly, the mayor beset himself with the task of fabricating a tragic backstory for the spectral lovers.

The lovers' story had been turned generic by design. Instead of having many unknown origins that differed from family to family, the story was simplified. Individual details were cut, and only the barren core of every story was kept. The two lovers came out every night and danced until the sun came up in the morning. This way it was easier for the dubious word-of-mouther's to spread the story, anyone could remember a story of ghosts coming in the night. Few could remember the details that would add to the true story. Oblivious to this, the dancers danced on.

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To add to the dancers' spectacle, the mayor of Paloito decided to turn the cemetery into a circus. A great tent was erected around the cemetery, and headstones were moved to a different location with no regard for the bodies beneath lest they move the dancers from their sacred spot. The families that once resided within the town were long gone, benefitting from the pockets of the young couples that had bought their properties. But the ghosts of their relatives stayed, keeping those in the circus tent cold despite the heat, snapping ropes of trapeze artists, even lighting stages on fire before they were set to ignite. Those in the stands cared not, events like these only added to the spectacle.

The dancers would still find their way through the attractions, but with the neon lighting from the carnival, nobody would ever see them. Hologram technology had been created at the request of the mayor, who still sought to pay homage to what used to be a small town. The spectral dancers again danced like before, but now they had a blue tint from the technology.

Their movements were robotic and spasmodic, but they served their purpose. Audiences were once more enamored with the ghostly pair as they waltzed between attractions, but they had forgotten why they were there. Sometimes the legend would return when the zealous audiences would catch the sight of a second pair of ghostly dancers, appearing

superimposed over the “original” pair. They would shout and cheer at this, some in the audience would stand in disbelief, and the mayor would look out at the crowd and grin his devilish grin. Paloito had room to grow.

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Through the years the ghosts would lose their appeal. Paloito had become a place where one traveled to make it in the world. It was no longer a tourist trap, it was a sprawling city in the throes of technology and innovation. Sure, an amusement square was still set up around the dancers, but they were no longer the focal point. The citizens of Paloito were no longer interested in a pair of dancing lovers. The mayor cursed himself for this, blaming his plummeting poll numbers on the inefficacy of the dancers. They haunted his thoughts, seeming to watch his steps with bated breath, even though he knew they were confined to the circus tent. They would appear to him in his sleep, flitting in and out of his dreams. He would shake the two away, focusing instead on what the proper dreams were trying to tell him.

A bright and shiny upstart had taken Paloito by storm. He stood before the tall skyscrapers and felt at home, looking down at the citizens of Paloito with a smile that showed every pearly tooth. His grin was wolfish, the type of smile that took you by force, shook the money out of you; and the people loved him. The mayor lost the election in a landslide, the few votes in his name coming as a joke from younger voters. He turned into a specter himself, walking the streets at night, shuffling his feet in the city he had grown himself. The citizens he once ruled now closed their windows at his passing.

On one such night, he found himself before the tent. It had grown quiet within. The upstart had decommissioned all work around the dancers, citing them as “too ancient”. The ex-mayor walked among the machinery that no longer hummed with life. Brushed his hands along the booths that used to hold unenthusiastic adolescents during the Summer. He sat in the stands where the people would sit enraptured before the dancers, but he didn’t see them. He questioned if the dancers were ever real at all, and wondered if they had really been his ticket to becoming mayor. He stood and left in a huff, thoughts of reelection and sureties of his abilities pacing through his mind. If he had stayed a moment longer, he would have seen the dancers emerge from the other side of a hologram machine.

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They say if you sneak into the tent at night, once all the lights have shut off, and the workers have all left, you can still see them. The dancers, the enigma that has long since been forgotten in the advent of technology, and all the bells and whistles that have taken precedence over the one authentic attraction of the city. You can see the two continuing their spectral waltz. They no longer waltz through the mausoleums of their dead peers, or over the headstones that were once so common. They will instead waltz through shops plastered with their faces from life.

They will waltz through grim mockeries of the very real phenomena that permeate that once-hallowed ground.

They will continue to say this decades later. If you return once the tent has decayed, once the machinery has been scattered, and once nature has reclaimed all that it once owned. They say that you will be able to see them. The unwavering dance, the endless duel between two participants of equal skill. They will dance between trees, among the hollow places of animals yet living; around all the things that grow among the ruins. They will continue to dance, long after you perish and retreat to a grave of your own. Perhaps then you will be able to dance among them.

Or perhaps not, lest you ruin a tale as old as time, a tale as old as love itself.

IN MY DEATH, I WAS BORN



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In my death, I was born
The irony of the forlorn
The destruction of a soul
Is the building of a whole
Innocence is laid upon the pyre
Left to die, scorched by fire
The residue of despair haunts these woods
Blood pools where once purity stood
Around the petrified remains of naivete
The moon weeps, shaken from her place
The stars, in shame, hide their face
Behold! A birth, a breath
Blinking, shedding death;
Naked I emerge; Dirty, cold, so young yet my soul is so old
Grainy eyes permit the light
My unsteady legs begin to move, life in sight
Once hope deferred, begins to emerge
The irony of the forlorn,
In my death, I was born

LACKING LANGUAGE: THE FAILURE OF AUDITORY-ORAL PROGRAMS FOR DEAF CHILDREN



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Your child failed the hearing test.

It's a phrase most parents don't expect to hear, but many do. Across the world, approximately one in every 1,000 children is born with hearing loss in both ears—and of those, 95% will be born into families whose only form of communication is spoken language (Hall et al, 2019). The steps taken by those families over those first crucial years will have profound impact on the development of their deaf or hard-of-hearing child. These include the use of assistive technologies like hearing aids and cochlear implants, as well as communication and language options. The choices made at this early stage will have lifelong implications for the child and, for that reason, are fiercely debated.

Much of the debate rests on which communicative and language options yield the most benefit when applied as Early Intervention strategies. These options fall on a spectrum, from sign-focused to speech-focused. On the sign language end of this continuum is the Bilingual-Bicultural approach, or Bi-Bi approach, which combines the use of American Sign Language (ASL) and English. Opposite that rests the Auditory-Oral approach, which focuses exclusively on teaching deaf and hard-of-hearing children to hear and produce spoken language. Other approaches, such as Total Communication, reside in between, using a combination of approaches. (CDC, 2019).

Proponents of the Auditory-Oral approach suggest that through this method, deaf and hard-of-hearing children may grow to become "independent, speaking, participating, and contributing members of mainstream society" (Goldberg & Flexer, 2001). It allows them to be more "normal," more like their hearing peers, and to be fully included and integrated into mainstream hearing society. While some students may find success, early Auditory-Oral programs largely deprive deaf and hard-of-hearing children of language, which adversely impacts their development into healthy adults.

Historically, deaf education in the United States originated in sign language. In the early 1800s, Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc opened the first school for deaf children

in Connecticut. Clerc, an educator from Paris and deaf himself, taught Gallaudet the manual language that would come to be known as French Sign Language (LSF). On the journey back to America, Clerc and Gallaudet began the task of adapting LSF for English instruction. This adapted sign system, in combination with existing home signs used among the American deaf students, evolved into what we now know as American Sign Language (ASL). From that point on, sign language was the primary method of communication in classrooms for deaf children, and they flourished. By 1869, “over fifteen hundred pupils had graduated from the Hartford school,” many of them going on to become teachers of the deaf and further carrying on their language (Lane et al, 1996).

But at the same time, there was a growing movement of educators who favored the teaching of speech over sign, called the “oralist” movement. Oralists believed speech to be superior, and that the ability to communicate using spoken language was the measure of a successful adult. They held that “only instruction using the national spoken language [of a country] could fully ‘restore the Deaf to society’” (Lane et al, 1996). Their movement gained traction, earning the support of figures like Horace Mann and Alexander Graham Bell, until it came to a head in 1880. At the International Convention of the Universal Congress to Improve the Lot of the Blind and the Deaf, held in Milan, Italy, educators gathered from all over the world to determine the best education method for their pupils. Save the American delegates (whose company included the only deaf member of the congress), most of the 164 delegates in attendance voted to pass resolutions declaring that a pure oral approach to deaf education was the best method of instruction. And with that, the golden age of signed education came to a close.

Over the next hundred years, while oral methods maintained their elevated status, signed instruction carried on in small pockets of the Deaf community. It wasn’t until the 1960s that ASL again gained public favor, due largely to the pioneering research of Dr. William Stokoe. His work proved that sign language was a true and natural language by all scientific and linguistic definition and had the same potential for human communication as spoken language. But by then, the damage was done—oralism had taken root as an educational option for deaf children.

Today, it’s estimated that “only 1–2% of deaf children worldwide receive an education with a sign language as the language of instruction” (Hall et al., 2019). This means that the other 98% are educated primarily in spoken languages, occasionally with the supplementary use of signed languages. That much focus on speech can have disastrous consequences for deaf children, especially when it starts with early intervention measures.

Among those consequences are delayed— or in some cases, absent— literacy. Oral-focused programs are based in teaching children to reproduce sounds, slowly building up to the ability to form words and sentences. This can be a slow process, depending on the level of the child’s residual hearing and which, if any, assistive technologies they use. The results are a paltry vocabulary compared to hearing or deaf signing peers: “Deaf children who have been in oral kindergarten programs have learned, by age five, perhaps fifty words. At the same time, a child with normal hearing has a vocabulary of several thousand words; and a deaf child of deaf parents who has learned ASL as a first language has a vocabulary of several thousand signs” (Moore & Levitan, 2016). The oral program student has attained just a fraction of the language acquisition of their peers by the time they reach elementary school age. This vocabulary is the foundation upon which they must build the rest of their education, and these oral program students are left building on pebbles.

This has gross implications for their ability to develop literacy, which extends beyond the ability to decipher words on a page. Literacy may be described as having three levels: functional literacy, cultural literacy, and critical literacy. Functional literacy, usually achieved by the third or fourth grade, allows one to glean limited meaning from text, leaving

them able to follow basic directions but little else. Cultural literacy, founded on cultural knowledge, helps the reader contextualize the information into their existing schemas of the world and its rules. Those who have achieved critical literacy are able to understand, analyze, and utilize the social and political content of a text, as well as produce their own work that achieves analytical depth. According to Harlan Lane et al., “Widespread cultural and critical literacy is the primary goal of education in complex societies such as ours” (1996, p. 79). But without a vocabulary, the path to even functional literacy falters. Deaf children without substantial vocabulary, whether in a spoken or signed language, cannot develop the background knowledge which contributes to their ability to decontextualize concepts— they do not have the words to refer back to objects, experiences, and ideas outside of their present reality. “School should be an important source of background knowledge for [deaf children],” Lane says, “but all too often class time is devoted to the form of what is said rather than the content” (p. 284). In other words, so much time in the Auditory-Oral classroom is spent on the production of speech that communication, and ultimately language and literacy, is neglected.

This neglect of language in favor of speech results in what is called language deprivation. Defined, language deprivation is the “overall experience of lacking fully accessible language input” (Hall et al., 1996). As deaf and hard-of-hearing children of hearing parents do not readily have access to the language input that surrounds them in their daily familial exchanges (i.e., they cannot hear the spoken language used at home), if they are not provided with a visual communication method, then they have no language at all. This can deeply affect the children’s neurological development. According to the language scaffolding hypothesis, language is an integral factor in the development of higher-order neurocognitive operations, including executive function (the ability to plan and focus, among other skills), implicit learning, and working memory (Hall et al.). As evidenced by the figures on vocabulary acquisition by deaf students in oral programs, the focus on speech in these programs takes away from the development of language. Auditory-Oral programs don’t promote effective communication, but rather assimilation into the hearing majority.

All of this is not to say that deaf children learning to speak is without value. On the contrary, speech therapy and speech training are not under attack here. There are practical advantages to speech: communicating to a hearing person in an emergency, interacting with law enforcement, even ordering a drink at Starbucks can all be made easier through the use of speech. And while there is great value in the use of American Sign Language, and an incredibly rich and diverse culture in the Deaf community, it is unreasonable to expect that every hearing person with whom a deaf child will come into contact will know, understand, or even be familiar with sign language. Rather, the criticism here lies on Auditory-Oral programs which prioritize speech over language, whose aims are to help the deaf child integrate into and “fit in” with hearing society, rather than providing them with all of the communicative tools available to them. Whether or not a deaf person learns or chooses to speak should not determine their worth to society— they are valuable human beings, with or without speech.

Still, some graduates of oral programs find success. They achieve independence as adults without relying on interpreters or captioning devices. Goldberg and Flexer’s review of a study on graduates from Auditory-Verbal programs (similar in concept to Auditory-Oral programs) found that these graduates went on to lead successful and fulfilling lives, moving into impressive careers, and achieving integration into hearing society such that they identified more with a hearing identity than a deaf one (p. 413). Others, like Sara Fumanti of Pennsylvania, go on to mainstream schools and grow into ambitious young adults. Sara received cochlear implants by age 3, and eventually gave up the little ASL that she and her mother used to pursue auditory and oral methods. As a senior in high school, Sara was involved and well-adjusted, pursuing dance and her aspirations to become a chef. “Being a deaf child in a hearing world can cause many limitations,” she says, “...my mom did everything she could to help me overcome my inability to hear” (Mazur, 2016).

But not all deaf children of hearing parents are as lucky as Sara— only those with dedicated and involved parents like her mother are able to truly thrive, regardless of their chosen communication method. “Raising a deaf child requires great effort no matter what language choice the parents make,” asserts Donna Jo Napoli, PhD, et al. “Raising a deaf child with a sign language as well as spoken language requires learning a sign language. But raising a deaf child strictly orally requires daily training in vocalization and speech-reading throughout childhood, which certainly demands as much effort as learning to sign” (Napoli et al., 2015). It’s troubling to think that the effort on the part of the parents of deaf children may be wasted in an Auditory-Oral program which prioritizes speech over language, and assimilation over communication, leaving the deaf child isolated, uneducated, and deprived.

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THE HEIST



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You might've thought it was an ordinary Monday, but there was nothing ordinary about it. The First National Bank held its normal business as usual, but it was all about to change for the worst. *I'm so sorry.*

"You ready, kid?" Joey said.

"Never," I said with steel.

Joey laughed, "That's the spirit. Hey, Richie! Let's go."

Richie finally stumbled out of the van and onto the pavement. He looked like he was about to be sick.

"Okay," he said a little breathlessly. "I'm ready."

He wasn't. His legs were shaking, his forehead was perspiring, his eyes couldn't focus straight, and he couldn't hold his gun steady. I didn't understand why this mess of a boy was going with us. He could jeopardize everything.

"If today goes right, you two could finally be home free." Joey brushed off his shoulders and said, "*Andiamo, boys.*"

He cocked his gun and burst through the doors of the bank, and Richie and I followed him in.

Everyone in the bank turned to look at us and confusion and fear flashed on their faces as they began to realize what was about to unfurl. Each face I looked at was like a stab to the chest. I never wanted it to come to this. They said they had one job for me and then I would be fine, but I didn't know it was going to be this. I had no choice but to finish it.

"Alright," Joey shouted to everyone, "you know the drill."
No one moved a muscle. They just stood there in shock.

Joey turned to me. "Do it."

I swallowed hard and raised my gun to the ceiling and shot off one bullet. The sound shattered into my soul and sent all the people in the bank screaming to the ground for safety. I looked over at the line of teller stations and saw a young woman with a baby swaddled tight to her chest. When our eyes locked, I saw the terror and worry in them. I wondered if she could see the same in mine.

"Go," Joey told us.

Richie and I walked over to the tellers and placed the duffel bags we had been carrying on the counter.

"Fill 'em!" Joey yelled.

I looked at the man behind the counter in front of me. I gestured to the bag and said, "If you could, please," in a polite tone. The tellers began to place cash into the bags.

"Please," a man next to Richie in the next station over clamored. "Please, I was just trying to close my accounts because I got laid off from work! Please just let me go!"

"Please be quiet, sir," Richie said quietly.

"Anything!" the man continued loudly. "I'll do anything! Please!"

"Richie!" Joey yelled.

Richie jumped and looked at Joey. Joey nodded his head towards the babbling man, and Richie realized what Joey wanted him to do. "What?! No!"

Joey looked down at the kid and said in a low, rumbling voice, "Do it."

Richie began to freak out. "I never signed up for this!" he shouted. "I never wanted to shoot someone!" Richie threw his gun to the ground and started to run towards the door to escape but before he could even reach it, Joey raised his gun and a bullet found its way into the boy's back. The poor kid fell to the ground just inches from the exit, blood starting to pool slowly around him.

"Freeze!" someone called out. I looked over and saw a security guard with her gun held up ready to fire. "Put the guns down!"

Joey turned his gun towards the guard. The woman fired off a shot at him, but it only grazed the arm of his suit jacket. Another gun went off with a loud blast. The security guard looked down at her stomach and saw blood begin to seep through her uniform. I lowered my gun, my arms hurting from the jolt. *What did I just do?*

Joey walked over to the counters and waited for the tellers to finish filling the duffel bags and looked at me with a sick proud look on his face. "Nice shot, kid," he said. When the tellers finished their job, he grabbed the sacks and handed one to me. "Let's go."

"I said freeze!"

We looked over to see the security guard leaning up against a column with her gun held up at us. Her skin was pale, and sweat beaded her forehead. She had a

makeshift tourniquet tied around her abdomen made from her uniform but you could see the blood seeping through her white tank top undershirt like watercolor on wet paper. She was unsteady but there was a fire in her eyes. She would not give up without a fight.

But neither would I. I had come too far for it to end like this.

A baby began to cry, and I looked down to see the mother with her baby covered in a ball on the floor trying to calm her child. I knelt down, placed my gun on the ground, and asked the mother, "What's its name?"

The mother looked up frantically and shielded her crying baby from me. "Her name's Charleston," she said softly. "I'm Maddison. Maddison Daigle."

Joey yelled from behind, "Shut that baby up!"

I ignored him. "That's a lovely name. My name's Xavier," I told the woman. "Could I see her?"

Maddison's eyes widened, and she closed her arms around the infant even tighter and the baby cried even louder.

"Hey, hey, hey," I tried to calm her. "It's okay. I just want to calm her, Maddison, and believe me, you would rather have me calm her than the man behind me."

Tears began to well in Maddison's eyes, and my soul shattered even further. Reluctantly, she slowly handed me the small baby, and I cradled her in my arms. Charleston kept screaming but once I started singing a little lullaby, she calmed down to a whimper. I looked up at Maddison, tears streaming down her face, and my heart lurched. "I'm sorry," I told her. "I'm so, so sorry."

With the baby in one arm, I grabbed my gun from the floor and jumped up to stand beside Joey. A horrendous scream ripped through the mother and echoed throughout the building.

"We are going to walk out of here!" I yelled at the security guard. I felt the surprised look from Joey, but he quickly readjusted to the situation. The fire in the security guard's eyes burned even brighter but she lowered her arms anyway.

"Take the money and go, Joey," I told him keeping my eyes fixed on the guard.

Without another thought, Joey grabbed the two duffle bags, picked up Richie's gun from the floor, and walked towards the exit while I slowly made my own way backward. Charleston began to fuss. I kept my eyes forward as I stepped over Richie's dead body. Joey held the door open for me to leave, but I stopped in the doorway. I looked out over the people who cowered on the ground with pain in my heart. I wasn't supposed to end up like this, I thought.

Joey yelled from behind me, "Come on, kid!" Sirens began to sound in the distance.

I looked at the mother who stared back with heated hatred. "I'm sorry," I told her. I turned around and walked out of the building. I could hear Maddison's screams as the door slowly closed behind me.

Joey and I climbed into the van that sat outside, and we began our getaway. The realization of what just happened sunk in my chest, and the baby in my arms weighed me down like an elephant stepping on my heart.

“Good job, kid,” Joey said from behind the wheel. “That was some quick thinking. The boss is going to be real proud of your work today. I think it’s enough for you and your father to pay off your debts and finally be free.”

I looked in the passenger-side mirror, tears clouding my vision, and saw the flashing lights in the distance behind us while the baby cooed in my arms.

I can never be free anymore.

+++

A piece of her was missing. *She* was missing. Maddison had no idea what to do. After giving an extensive police report, she was told there was nothing she could do but wait. So she sat at home on the couch curled up in a ball with Charleston’s teddy bear. She had no appetite. She would have no sleep. Her eyes were puffy from the continuous crying, and her throat was sore from her screaming. She was beyond bereaved. Beyond consolation.

Maddison could not believe how her world was taken from like that—how that boy could take her Charleston. Her little Charlie. And yet, Maddison felt a sliver of pity for the boy. She could see the pain and fear in his eyes. She hated herself for it.

The shrill of the doorbell went off and jangled her nerves. *Not another casserole*, Maddison thought as she got up from the couch. Ever since she got back home from the police station, a dozen people came by her home to offer their condolences and a casserole. But when she looked at her watch, she realized it was past midnight, and no sane person would offer a casserole after eleven o’clock.

Maddison approached the front door and peered through the peephole. She saw nothing. *Stupid kids*, she thought to herself. But as she turned to finally go to bed, she heard a faint cry outside her door. She knew that sound. Maddison rushed to open the door and looked down to see a baby swaddled in a basket.

“Charlie!” she yelled.

Maddison bent down to pick up the child and cradled her in her arms. Maddison’s heart began to warm, and the hole that was there began to heal.

She looked out to her surroundings but saw nothing. No one.

Maddison hugged her child tight to her chest, never wanting to ever let go again. She looked down at the basket Charleston came in and found a note that lay at the bottom. She picked it up and read:

Dear Maddison Daigle,

You will never know how sorry I am for the distress and grief I have caused you and everyone at that bank today. I never meant to cause this amount of trouble. I was only trying to help my family, and this was the only way, believe it or not. They got caught up in a bad crowd, and I suffer those consequences. I am not asking for forgiveness. I am not trying to justify my actions. I am so, so sorry. Please take care.

– Zay

Maddison looked out once more to the dark beyond her home.

“Thank you!” she called. “Thank you, Xavier.”

Maddison turned with her beloved child in her arms and shut the door behind her.



HOPE KEEPS ME ALIVE

ROLAINDJY DESIR

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The ink of my quills has soiled thousands of papers,
My monotonous verses, cries of my heart in distress,
Echo in the pavilions of the supreme courts.
Poverty is spreading like wildfires.

Our green hills where once dwell animals of all kinds,
The vast plains watered by fresh rivers,
The cold valleys from which our voices echoed our joy
Disappear faster than smoke.

Haiti, land where my umbilical cords are rooted.
My first cries echoed in the corridors of the Citadelle Laferriere¹.
I am not afraid of death; I was born near a cemetery.
Haiti, alma mater, robust but friendly land

The silhouettes of your palms shadow me
when the splendor of the sun engulfed my forehead
I stayed outside late listening to the drear chorus
of the moon that always wears a cloak woven by the stars

Haiti, my eyes sob when I see your pain.
My heart trembles - I think of you from the starry land²
The dawn takes on more of its sublime colors.
The vapors no longer cover the mountains; the horizon is hazy.

Haiti, a bloody land sheltering in the shadow of danger
Innocent bloods roam the gullies of grim neighborhoods
Where the velvety bistre rubber residue rests
Haiti, agricultural land but food is diamond.

Haiti, land of resistance, where no one can resist the charms of the beaches.
Enchanting landscapes, fertile plains
The stars dance to the rhythms of carnival melodies.
Haiti, rich land but slaughtered by poverty.

Haiti, one day you will rise from your ashes.
You will fly even higher, strengthened by your scars.
The sun will rise again from the horizon,
Happy to fondle your sore heart.

¹ Mountaintop fortress located on the North of Haiti nominated as a UNESCO world heritage site in 1982.

² Referring to the United States.

WITCHCRAFT, REVENGE, AND TRANSFORMATION: MALE VS. FEMALE DIRECTION IN HORROR FILM



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Within recent decades, character tropes and themes in modern horror cinema have gone through drastic social change. One such notable transformation is the changing function and portrayal of female characters in horror films, which have broadened in both scope and sympathy. Yet, the treatment of such female horror protagonists continues to greatly contrast between male and female directors. Male directors more readily portray women unsympathetically by placing them in strict boundaries of stereotype and gaze. Female directors encourage more dynamic women in horror films through the satirizations and new interpretations of common horror themes, such as witchcraft, sexual assault, and transformation.

Witchcraft has served as an encompassing horror theme for female sexuality and agency. Despite the sexual and ethical liberation witches explore through their crafts, witchcraft horror films continuously depict witches' downfalls caused by their over-ambitious natures and hungers for power. Rather than illustrating narratives of female empowerment, many witchcraft horror films' characterizations center on the very traditional and patriarchal structures their witches wish to transcend from.

Andrew Fleming's teen horror film *The Craft* (Fleming, 1996) both upholds and subverts stereotypes of the "teen witch." The film is radical in the witchcraft horror film genre for its teenage protagonists' refusal to be victimized but in its focus of literal and figurative empowerment, *The Craft* blames the girls for their own abuse. *The Craft* follows the story of four outcast teen girls who gain magical powers, by calling upon a powerful deity known as "Manon." Each of the four girls utilizes her powers in fulfilling personal desires for love or revenge. The first half of the film reflects on teenage sisterhood and examines how the four young women overcome universal problems of adolescence through entertaining, mystical means.

The latter half of the film, though, takes a sharp turn when one of the girls, Nancy, becomes overly-powerful and uses her magic to seduce Sarah's boyfriend. This romantic feud climaxes in a battle of sorcery between the two women, and Nancy is beaten.

Contrary to the first half of the film, the second act pits the girls against one another in petty rivalry and each of their greeds for power result in dire consequences. Such is especially true for Nancy, whose “anger, sexuality, and hunger for power leads to her undoing” (Chandler, 2016). Nancy’s transformation from hero to villain occurs quickly and unsympathetically. As a witchcraft horror film targeted towards a teenage audience, its overarching message is a warning for young women against extending their ambitions beyond socially-conforming standards. Such contrasts starkly to Anna Biller’s *The Love Witch* (Biller, 2016), where magic brings enlightenment rather than personal misery.

The Love Witch, with its shimmering visuals and whimsical dialogue, satirizes witchcraft horror film through its ironic portrayal of its male characters and the main character’s incessant pursuit of romantic love. *The Love Witch* explores a witch, Elaine’s, search for a husband that fits her ideal of an American husband. Despite her powers and ambitions, she fails to realize until the end of the film that her desire to conform is futile. The futility of her determination is caused in part not only due to her unique position as a powerful sorceress but as a woman who desires agency and empowerment in her relationships. Her uniqueness contrasts both the mid-century mise-en-scene and the misogynistic perceptions of the men she misguidedly desires. The men’s fear of Elaine’s position both as a woman and a witch reflects the high priestess of Elaine’s coven’s notion that the “history of witchcraft is interwoven with the fear of female sexuality” (Barbara, *The Love Witch*). *The Love Witch* serves as a stark contrast to Fleming’s *The Craft* mainly through its ending. At the end of the film, rather than facing continued abuse and bereavement by her lover, Elaine kills him. Through the murder of her unsympathetic lover, Elaine experiences a moment of emotional and spiritual enlightenment, finally feeling freed from her seemingly inescapable desire for romantic love. Where *The Craft* pits two women against one another over the welfare and affections of a male love interest, *The Love Witch* eliminates the male love interest entirely.

The Craft and *The Love Witch* both tell stories of young women who find magical power through the worship of male deities, only to use such powers to gain the affections of men. Arguably, such similarities in the protagonists’ intentions and means of achieving their goals paint stereotypical pictures of female ambition. The witches in both films could have potentially utilized their powers to fulfill desires that extend beyond romantic love and male affection. The women instead are reduced to literal “femme fatales.” Despite the similarities in the witches of both films’ arcs, though, the resolutions of the protagonists’ romantic pursuits result in entirely antithetical messages. Where *The Craft*’s Sarah is punished for her desires and is forever traumatized by her lover’s death, *The Love Witch*’s Elaine is liberated by her husband’s murder. Fleming’s reductive tale of female empowerment touts a message that female desire and power will face consequences. In a welcome contrast, Biller’s transformation of “female experience and trauma through fairytale” relays an empathetic perspective on how power can not only enlighten women but ultimately save them (Morgan, 2017).

Similar to witchcraft horror films’ examination of women’s re-affirmation of the self and empowerment, the “rape revenge” horror genre explores misogyny, only through more vicious means. Sexual assault and abuse has continually functioned in horror cinema as a catalyst for female revenge narratives. “Rape revenge” films directed by men have typically depicted the assaults of its female protagonists as sources of voyeuristic horror. Prolonged shots of assaults and the humanization or motive exploration of the women’s attackers further the films’ objectification of its protagonists. While such films allow its female protagonists justice over their attacks through the violent murders of their abusers, the women remain static and unsympathetic figures of female trauma.

Steven R. Monroe’s *I Spit on Your Grave* (Monroe, 2010) glorifies sexual violence and the protagonist’s violent assault serves as a means of shock and terror rather than sympathy. Monroe’s attempt to modernize Meir Zarchi’s 1978 version fails in its inability to readdress the original’s central problem: the objectification and perceived “monstrosity”

of its protagonist. In fact, Monroe's version is arguably more unsympathetic. Like the original film, *I Spit on Your Grave* follows the story of author Jennifer Hills, who is violently gang-raped during her isolated sabbatical in a woodland cabin. The remainder of the film then depicts her brutal revenge against each of her four attackers. The rape of Hills is prolonged and fetishized, contributing to its "torture porn aesthetic" (Mee, 2013). Not only is the rape itself intense and excessively graphic, but Hills's character has no experiences or arcs that extend beyond her rape.

The audience does not see Hills's "slow recovery and her pre-emptive prayer to God for forgiveness as we do in Zarchi's film" (Mee, 2013). Rather, "the focus is on the rapists, their group dynamic collapsing and paranoia growing" as Hills "begins to stalk them" (Mee, 2013). In Monroe's revision, Hills is reduced to predator and prey. She is overwhelmed with pain and fear during her attack, and she is driven by her bloodthirst for revenge. Instead of functioning as an examination of sexual violence, *I Spit on Your Grave* only achieves in objectifying its female protagonist. As a result, the adaptation is more outdated than its decades-old predecessor, and lacks thematically and empathetically in comparison to rape-revenge films from female writers and directors. The difference is especially dramatic when compared to Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge* (2017), which grants its female protagonist a wide berth of emotions, conflicts, and experiences.

Fargeat's action-horror film *Revenge* remains subversive in its depiction of the main character, Jen's, sexual assault. *Revenge* tells the story of Jen, who, on an initially tame desert vacation with her married boyfriend, is assaulted by the men on the trip. In their efforts to hide their crime, the three men attempt to murder her. After, Jen attempts to heal from the merciless violence inflicted against her and hunts down her perpetrators. While strikingly similar in its general plot to *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Revenge* contrasts in the depiction of Jen's rape and how it explores her inner emotions and conflicts following her assault. Fargeat intentionally sought for Jen's assault to not be voyeuristic and focused on the abuser. Rather, the scene itself is kept sympathetic towards Jen's reactions mainly after her attack.

During the rape scene, only Jen's expressions and gestures are shown and the reactions of her unnamed attacker are given no screen time. The men in *Revenge* are perpetually secondary and Jen remains the sole sympathetic figure in Fargeat's narrative. After her rape and attempted murder, the film shows Jen healing physically and emotionally. Despite the unrelenting brutality inflicted against her, she tends to her wounds and evaluates her situation. The men are not shown in the entire duration of her development. The structure of Jen's arc is therefore a "construction of the female gaze" (Michael, 2017). The narrative value of the men in *Revenge* lies solely in their capacity for violence and their remorseless ability to carry it out. Fargeat's interpretation of rape-revenge horror is subversive in the humanity it grants Jen and its lack thereof for her attackers. The directorial and narrative focus *Revenge* dedicates to Jen raises questions "about how the female might imagine justice (revenge) differently from the male" and how feminist themes can not only be better incorporated into the horror genre but redefined entirely in subgenres that disservice its female protagonists (Michael, 2017).

The depiction of female transformation and psychosis in horror cinema has remained relatively stagnant between both male and female directors, the difference between male and female interpretations weighing on what function female characters serve within the narrative. Where female directors often draw humor and sympathy for their female characters, male-directed horror narratives view the women's psychotic natures as their films' very sources of fear or eroticism.

The psychological horror-drama *Black Swan* sexualizes its female protagonist's descent into psychosis, despite the film's continuous infantilization of her character (Aronofsky, 2010). Along with this questionable and perverse sexualization, the other women of the narrative display hyper-obsessive and psychopathic tendencies that lend to

unsympathetic characterizations. The narrative value of the other women lie solely in their manipulation and capacity of abuse over the female protagonist. Aronofsky's *Black Swan* follows ballerina Nina, whose professional dancing occupies her every waking moment. Nina's obsession with ballet is further amplified by her overbearing mother, who infantilizes Nina and keeps her unaware of her own agency and sexuality.

Nina's slow descent into madness begins when the director assigns Nina the titular role of the Swan Queen. His sexual harassment and emotional battery towards Nina escalate over the course of the film, clashing with her mother's discouragement of her maturity. While all female dancers in his ballet troupe experience his verbal barragemment as "puppets of a tyrannical male diety," Nina experiences the brunt of it (Edelstein, 2010). Not only does the artistic director get away with the abuse of his position, but he utilizes it to cause further jealousy and toxicity between the women of the troupe. *Black Swan* pits its women against one another without respite or remorse. Whether we see Nina experience violent jealousy over "The Black Swan" Odile's praises from the director or the venomous insults uttered by Nina's aging predecessor, the women of the film are static. The women of Aronofsky's *Black Swan* are only fueled by their hatred for one another. Nina's sexual and emotional liberation is not liberation at all, rather it is misogynistic performance trapped within the confines of her director's sexual fantasies.

Similar to *Black Swan*'s female protagonist's descent into psychosis is Karyn Kusama's horror-comedy *Jennifer's Body* (Kusama, 2009), which depicts the main character Jennifer's transformation from complacent teenager to flesh-consuming predator. But, *Jennifer's Body* differs from *Black Swan* in that Kusama presents the protagonist's transformation as not only desirable for the character, but entertaining and humorous. *Jennifer's Body* follows the popular student Jennifer Check. One night, when Jennifer and her nerdy best friend Needy go to a concert, Jennifer is kidnapped and used as a sacrificial virgin in a satanic ritual. But, the ritual goes awry and she transforms into a carnivorous succubus. Where *Black Swan* considers the developing sexuality of its protagonist as serious and erotic, Jennifer Check's transformation is satirical. It is a parody of societal perceptions of promiscuous young women. Jennifer seduces, kills, and consumes men. Her friend quickly catches on and when Jennifer is confronted, she responds with wit and an indulgent lack of concern over morality: "Needy: You're killing people? Jennifer: No. I'm killing boys" (Kusama, 2009). Kusama's film never looks down on Jennifer for her actions and transformation, rather, the film is sympathetic to her change. *Jennifer's Body* is consistently self aware, utilizing the horror trope of linking "female sexuality with the demonic" and turning it on its head (Laycock, 2009).

Both *Black Swan* and *Jennifer's Body* conclude with the deaths of their transformed heroines. Nina's and Jennifer's escalating arcs do not result in final, enlightened metamorphoses as is seen with Elaine in *The Love Witch*. Rather, the endings for its heroines are more akin to Nancy's in *The Craft*. The deaths of the heroines illustrates a similar message: female hunger and consumption should be punished. Such endings occur in both *Black Swan* and in *Jennifer's Body*, despite either director's gender. While both heroines die in their films, their perceptions of death sharply contrast. In *Black Swan*, Nina slowly bleeds to death from self-impalement. As she slowly dies on the stage, she pronounces "It was perfect. I was perfect" with her art director leaning over her and touting praises (Aronofsky, 2010). In *Jennifer's Body*, Jennifer is gutted with a pole. Unbothered, Jennifer pulls out the pole from her belly and asks Needy "You got a tampon?" (Kusama, 2009). Nina's death is performative and pleasing, and until her death she considers herself through the lenses of male gaze and artistic performance. Jennifer, though, is covered in muck and blood and uses gallows humor. Aronofsky's *Black Swan* measures its women through their capacity for sex and artistry, where Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* satirizes male perception and sexualization of female horror protagonists.

Feminism in horror films has been relatively one-note and counterintuitive to positive representation of women. Feminist depictions of women do not hinge on their positions

as protagonists, antagonists, or side characters, rather on the respect and sympathy they are granted from their narratives. Whether female characters are sexually violated and dehumanized like in Monroe's *I Spit on Your Grave* or fetishized as artistic objects subject solely to the scrutiny of male gaze in Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, male directors have historically mishandled gender-based horror narratives. With the incorporation of more female directors and empathetic perspectives, horror cinema has begun to expand beyond common tropes into new, unexplored realms of empathy, artistry, and awareness.

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PELO MALO



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“Mami, por que yo no soy rubia con pelo lacio?”

I was no older than six when I asked my mother this question: *Why am I not blonde with straight hair?*

At the time, I sat naked in the bathtub of our old apartment. It was Sunday, the day in which my mom would set aside hours on end in order to complete the weekly ordeal of washing my hair. My head would be yanked from side to side, and I’d often feel hot tears streaming down my face as I tried my best to hold still. I’d squeeze my eyes shut, silently cursing the knots and tangles that often come with having curly hair, and pray that when I opened my eyes, they’d be gone.

My mother, the woman I admire most, was working hard at altering my natural appearance.

For a long time, I blamed her for having made me feel so ashamed of the color of my skin and the texture of my hair. But as I’ve grown, I’ve come to realize it had always been inevitable.

The Dominican Republic has a long-standing history of anti-blackness. I never saw my mom’s curls until this past year, when the salons closed due to the pandemic, and her naturally kinky hair began to grow in at the roots.

I was 14 when I started high school, and soon realized I was one of two black girls in the entire school. My mother told me to fix my hair.

I found myself waking up every day an hour earlier than the rest of my peers in order to straighten the big, bouncy curls that sprang from my scalp. They say Dominicans do the best hair, but what they really mean is that they’re the best at blow drying, setting, and flattening out any trace of *pelo malo* you might have once had. The chemicals break down every last kink in my hair, and when I wash it a week later, I find myself with limp strands that fall flat against my head.

Until one day, I got sick of it.

I got sick of having to wake up early, sick of having to smell those putrid relaxers, and sick of hiding who I really was.

That's when I found myself late one night staring at my own reflection in the bathroom mirror. I grabbed the nearest pair of safety scissors, and began to chop off every last limp end, with all the boxed-in fury of a mad man.

For a while, I rocked a mini 'fro. I began to listen to Beyonce, all the while learning to love my *"baby hair and afro, my negro nose and Jackson 5 nostrils."* I started to educate myself on the history of my people, and have since then even held the honor of co-hosting a discussion panel on the topic of racism to over 500 students.

I'm nineteen years old as I lay in the Sun, soaking up every last bit of its rays with unabashedness. I walk with my head held high, my huge hair often making its presence known before I have. My mother tells me to fix my hair, but all I can reply is that I cannot fix what is not broken.



OUR LAST WALK

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A very excited 10-year-old girl laces up her hot pink L.A. Gear sneakers. She double checks her Jem book bag making sure everything essential is packed. That would include Barbie dolls, paper, markers, fake lipstick, and of course a toothbrush. Mom instructed me to never use anyone else's toothbrush. Especially not Dad's. That's where I was going today. Dad lives with Grandma and Grandpa. After waiting for what felt like an eternity, Grandpa arrived. He pulled up in his dark blue Oldsmobile, and we were off. Grandpa and I chatted about school. I watched out the window as we drove. The fall in New Jersey was all around us. The leaves on the trees were the prettiest reds and oranges, and with the window open, the autumn air flowed all throughout the car. After a short drive, we pulled up to the brick duplex. Excitedly, Grandma rushed out in her apron to greet us, with Dad not far behind.

I hadn't seen Dad in a while, as I only visited every other weekend. He had the same curly black hair, scruffy beard, and he wore his typical dark blue jeans and band t-shirt. It felt so good to hug him again. After our warm greeting, we headed inside to eat. Upon entering the house, the air permeated with the smell of herbs and spices. We were all in for a treat, because Grandma was making her special sauce. The four of us sat down to eat and enjoy all of Grandma's hard work. During the meal Dad and I made funny faces at each other. After we overindulged on pasta, dessert was served. Grandma made her little Italian cookies with sprinkles on them. I remember eating so many I felt close to bursting. When dessert came to a close, Dad suggested that just he and I take a walk.

He quickly grabbed a football, and we were out the door. Dad said he needed to show me how to throw properly while he had the time. He instructed that my throwing hand needed to be lined up with my fingers in between the laces, and my thumb under the ball. After a few unsuccessful tries, I did it! I, a frilly, hot-pink-sneaker-wearing, Jem-book-bag-toting girl, could throw a perfect spiral. As we walked, tossing the ball back and forth, he got serious. Dad voiced several times that he was so proud of me, and that I was so much like Momma. He said I was beautiful, strong, and funny. Even as a ten-year-old, I knew this was an important conversation and this walk--extremely significant.

As we continued, Dad told me he had made some bad choices in his life, and that he was sick. I asked if he had a cold. He replied that no, it wasn't a cold. He had a virus that could only be passed to another through blood or fluids. He said he was telling me because I had a right to know. He stressed that I was an intelligent girl, and that I needed to know for my own safety. Dad said to never touch his toothbrush or razor, and that we couldn't shave together anymore. We did that every morning when I came for the weekend. Dad with his shave foam and real razor, and me with my little pink fake one. He would lather up both of our faces with his smelly shave foam, and we'd shave side by side in Grandma's seashell-decorated bathroom. Dad never really had rules. He was a big, olive-skinned, mop-headed clown, and he wasn't the type to worry for no reason. So, when he told me all the ways in which I needed to be careful, and why, I completely understood.

Our steps took us to the tiny convenience store a few blocks up the street. I got a pack of gum, and of course we got Slim Jims. Dad and I love those. Sometimes, we'd eat so many of them that I'd get a belly ache. After making our purchases we set off back to Grandma's. For the walk back dad suggested we give our throwing arms some rest. He said he'd hold the football under one arm and my hand in the other. Hand-in-hand we walked, while taking in the scenery of the middle class houses and the trees with their myriad of colors that only fall leaves possess. We even played the what's that cloud look like game. I spied a cloud that resembled the shape of a bird. Dad argued it looked more like an angel. It was the best walk. I remember a few times Dad squeezing my hand, and then he'd just look down at me and smile. Each time I'd squeeze his hand right back.

We finally made it back to Grandma and Grandpa's. Over the next two days, he and I spent more time together than we had on any other of my visits. We hung out in Grandpa's tv room on his plastic-covered couches and watched our favorite movie, *Spaceballs*. Dad would steal a piece of my popcorn when he thought I wasn't looking. We also continued my drum lessons in the garage. We were on to practicing Led Zeppelin. Dad said I was improving so much that I'd be better than him in no time. We didn't shave together that weekend, but we did so much more.

On Sunday it was time for me to go back home. Dad hugged me extra tight before I hopped in the car with Grandpa for my ride back to Mom's. I was pretty quiet on the ride home. Grandpa didn't seem to mind, as he listened to his Italian music and sang along. It felt like with every mile we traveled away from Grandma's in the blue Oldsmobile, I was changing. It was as if my mind and heart were steeling itself for what was to come. It seemed like on the ride there I was one girl, and on the journey back in the same seat, I was morphing into another. I arrived at my door feeling a bit perplexed by it all.

As soon as Mom locked eyes with me, she knew it, too. I got her usual bright smile upon entering our two-bedroom condo. I hurriedly dropped my Jem backpack and ran into her arms. As she rubbed my back she said, "He told you, didn't he?" I replied, "Yeah Momma, he did." She just continued in her caressing. Then said, "Baby, I'm not going to lie to you, Daddy may not be around too much longer. So you have to spend as much time with him as you can. That'll make you and him happy. When you don't know how many minutes you have left with someone, baby, you have to make each minute count."

So, that's just what I did. I saw Dad every chance I got. Although it was the last walk we took, we did get the chance to make a few more memories. I did my best to make each moment with him count, no matter what we were doing. For him and for me. He'd be tickled to know that I play the what's that cloud look like game with his grandchildren, and that they know all about him.



BROKEN ARROW

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I remember him in a cloudy vision in my slumber / Warm lips on my forehead.
"I love you," he said / providing a blanket of love that warmed and sustained me.
Reassuring words stuck in my brain / for minutes, hours, decades
The flight to Albuquerque was to last two hours / stretching instead into decades.
He left on a cold Tuesday morning / He returned Friday... cold
"No screams were heard" / Penetrating arrowheads of black ink on mimeograph paper
Damn the medical doctor / How could one be so callous to write that?

I remember him beyond what is displayed / in the portrait in my home
A random letter from the Land of Enchantment / brought me back
To the moment I heard / "Your Father will not be coming home."
Damn the letter's author / For tapping my pain and sorrow.

I remember him as he was, when he left / Strong and brave like any Air Force pilot
His spirit still resides with me / and in the foothills around the Duke City.
Does he walk those hills with his companions / and see the city lights at night?
Or does his spirit sit atop crude granite chairs / and watch balloons in the autumn?
Damn the barbed-wire fences / keeping me from visiting his final resting place.

I remember him as others once saw him / through framed stories from my family
Reading through letters of grief / from community members
And teary-eyed remembrances / from brothers-in-arms.
Even with these vivid memories / I cannot prevent
His memory from fading / as the decades go by.
I must recant my previous statement / to prevent him from disappearing:
Bless the author / and his desire to know my Dad

"Broken Arrow" is based on the 11 April 1950 crash of a B-29 Superfortress in the Manzano Foothills. Thirteen Roswell-based crewmembers were killed three minutes after takeoff from Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico.

THE ARTIFACT



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Queenie was the one who found the deer skull. It was at the bottom of the ravine, already mostly picked clean. The heat of summer had accelerated the rotten feast. Queenie and Little were not supposed to even be there. From as far back as they could remember, the older kids would tell stories about strange things happening down in the ravine that the grownups wouldn't talk about or couldn't explain. Queenie's mother and Little's mother both told them not to play down there, but they liked to go on adventures and made sure to look all around them when they went down. One time Little had seen a man with a dog sitting on a log eating a sandwich. He looked harmless, but Little ran silently back the way she came, never even stepping on a single twig.

When Queenie saw the skull she'd been fixing her ponytail just the way her sisters did, a technique that she had been perfecting all summer. Little's hair was short and usually full of snarls, but she just pushed it back behind her ears and didn't give it another thought. Queenie flipped her hair over her head and gathered it at her crown in one motion. She smoothed the hair and pulled it through the elastic over and over so that it was tight against her scalp. As she straightened up her eyes landed on the deer skull right there in front of her, half submerged in an oily puddle, and she let out a quiet squeal of surprise.

Iridescent slime swirled around the skull as Queenie lifted it from the stagnant water. Queenie and Little stared wide-eyed into its empty eye sockets as flies zigzagged around their heads. The bone was yellowed, its crevasses packed with mud and dirt. The brains and fleshy bits were long gone along with the jaw and a portion of the skull at the base. Most of the upper teeth were still loosely held in place. Queenie glanced at Little, a grin starting at the corner of her mouth, and shook the skull vigorously. Dirt and bits of plant matter showered the ground below as water droplets were flung in all directions. Queenie shook the skull and the teeth rattled like a crackling fire. Queenie and Little started to giggle. Looking at each other with wild glee, their laughter grew to squeals and cackles until Queenie was chasing Little around in the mud shaking the skull at her, the teeth rattling and rattling.

Finally, out of breath, they stood in the middle of the tall grass gazing at the skull with wonder and breathing heavily.

"This is a Sacred Artifact," Queenie said definitively.

"What's that mean?" Said Little.

"It's like something special, like they'd put in a museum."

"Let's put it in the treehouse!" Little said, her eyes gleaming, waiting for Queenie's approval.

"Yeah!" Queenie said and turned on her pink sparkly sneakers and squelched through the mud up the side of the ravine, Little close behind her.

The treehouse was in Little's backyard, but it belonged to both of them. It was high up in the branches on the north side of a thick old oak tree. Moss had grown through many of the boards and almost covered the roof, but the floor was solid. It had two windows, one faced the old farmhouse that Little called home and the other looked down on the ravine.

Queenie and Little scrambled up the ladder, Queenie balancing the skull on her hip and climbing with one hand as the teeth gently chattered. The girls pulled themselves up through the doorway and went about brushing out the fallen leaves and bits of debris that had settled in the treehouse since their last visit. Queenie propped up the skull in the northeast corner, farthest from the doorway. They sat in the middle of the floor and studied the skull. Its vacant eye sockets seemed to mock them while its upper jaw curled into a sneer where the teeth met what was once the connection spot for the lower jawbone. The snout curved down past the teeth, an undulating slope of bone that culminated in a jagged edged hole where the soft tissue of the nose had been.

Queenie was idly chewing on her cuticles, spreading glitter chapstick from her lips to her nails, and Little twirled a piece of hair that had fallen from behind her ears around and around her finger.

"I bet it has powers," Little said after a long moment.

"I bet it got dropped by a witch riding past on her broom!" Queenie said and they both giggled. The skull stared back. They all sat in a soft silence until the light began to turn from gold to grey and Queenie and Little ran to their houses for dinner.

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Later that night, Little lay in bed listening to the faint sounds of her parents watching TV downstairs. The yellow light from the streetlight outside mixed with the blue light of a late summer dusk, and there was a sweet smell of dew in the air. Little was held in the stillness of the moment. Half covered under soft sheets, she sighed and closed her eyes. Her head was heavy on her pillow, and her thoughts drifted like fish that were too quick to catch.

Her breathing became rhythmic and slow, then quickened as her mind came back into focus. Something wasn't right. Her head was too heavy, it felt odd, as if it was not her head at all. Little brought her hands up to her face and groggily ran them over her cheeks. These were not her cheeks. She felt a sliver of panic start at the base of her spine. It was like that time her older cousin had convinced her to jump off the high diving board at the pool and those couple extra seconds she spent hurtling through the air felt like they would never end. She was so glad to hit the water, even though it slapped her skin, because a part of her really believed that she would just keep falling.

She felt this same rising terror now as a tingle shimmied up her spine, but this time there was no relief of a cannonball splash into a pool. She ran her hands over her face, and her hands felt smooth, dry bone where her skin should be. She could see through her eyes, but all she felt were empty holes. Her hands moved down her face, but her face was too long, and her hands just kept moving over unfeeling bone until they came to the jagged point of what was now the bottom of her head, way past where her chin once was.

Her heart pounding, she dragged her heavy head upright until she was sitting wide-eyed in her bed in the semi-darkness. She sat on her hands, gently rocking, as she exhaled and burst into silent tears. She could not feel the tears on her cheeks, she couldn't feel her hands on her skin, and it was taking all of her strength to hold her head upright. She sobbed and rocked and wished as hard as she could that she could just fall asleep and have everything return to normal.

Moments stretched into each other, and her tears gradually became sniffles. She touched her face and quickly drew her hands back. She willed her limbs to move, slowly placed her feet on the old wooden floorboards of her bedroom. It was fully night now, but she could still make out shapes in the dark, and the streetlight outside cast a long rectangle of muddy ochre light through the window.

She saw her dark silhouette as she approached the mirror and dug her nails into her palms to muffle a scream. Her whole head was shaped like the deer skull in the treehouse. She squeezed her eyes shut and slowly opened them, but her skull head remained the same. She shut her eyes and thought of her parents and how mad they would be that she went down the ravine and how this was all her fault for not listening. She willed herself not to cry again and opened her eyes to face her dark, grotesque silhouette. She had to fix this.

Little took one shaky step after another towards the mirror. As she stepped into the murky patch of light from the window, her full form came into view against the darkness of her room, and she let out a tiny moan of despair. Her head was not her head. She had no face, no eyes, no mouth, just the deer skull perched on top of her shoulders. Her hair stuck up at odd angles and fell loosely around the off-white bone of the skull. Her eye sockets were so dark that they looked as if they were full of the thick blackness of deep space. She could see clearly but was afraid to investigate closer to see if she still had eyes. She could feel her tongue on the inside of her mouth and her lips, but when she tried to speak the sounds just echoed out through the hollow bone, and she heard the faint sound of rattling teeth.

"Oh no oh no oh no no no..." She whispered, rattling the teeth, "please no."

Overcome with determination, she pulled at the skull and felt shooting pain through her whole head and down her neck. She quickly released it in frustration and agony, her hands dropping to her sides in defeat as her skull head sat heavy above her slumped shoulders. Pacing as quietly as she could, she walked over to the window, then back to her bed, then back to the window. She finally crawled back into bed and sat cross-legged, resting her huge skull head against the wall. Her mind cycled through panic and possible solutions and then back to panic. She thought of Queenie and hoped that she was ok. She hoped that they could still be friends now that Little had a skull for a head. She closed her eyes and fell asleep imagining how sad the rest of her life would be.

Little awoke in a tightly curled ball in the corner of her bed, pressed against the wall and her bed frame. Sunlight was streaming through her window and for a moment she forgot all about her horrible night and her head that was not her head. Then it all came crashing back to her, and she grabbed her face in both hands. Her face was her face! She ran her hands through her hair, over the back of her head, and back along her jawline. Her familiar shapes brought her such relief that she almost started to cry again.

She took a deep breath and jumped out of bed to the mirror, thoroughly inspecting her reflection. It was the same old Little, hair askew and cheeks lightly freckled.

At breakfast Little said nothing of the night's occurrences. Afterwards, she ran over to Queenie's back door, shouting her name through the screen. Queenie came running, sliding on her pink sparkly sneakers as she pushed through the screen door to join Little. Queenie was talking a mile a minute about sneaking out of her room the night before to watch some movie that her sisters were watching downstairs. There was too much kissing in the movie and that was gross and boring, but the outfits were great and someone even got murdered and there was tons of blood. Little was half listening to her as Queenie led them towards the treehouse. They reached the ladder, and Queenie had a hand and foot on the rungs when Little stopped her.

"Wait, Queenie, did you have, like, any weird dreams last night?"

"What, you mean like from the movie? No."

"No, I mean just anything. Like anything weird?" Little lightly kicked at the ground with her shoe, looked down, and then looked back up at Queenie.

"No, I slept fine. Why? Did you have any dreams?"

"Um, no, I guess not, not really."

Queenie narrowed her eyes at her friend and waited for Little to say more. Little just kicked at the dirt, and Queenie shrugged and turned back to the ladder.

"Hey Queenie?"

"What, Little? What's up with you?"

"Um, maybe we should get rid of that skull. It could have, like, rabies or something. I don't know."

"Little! I know what's wrong with you! You're just scared!" Queenie stretched out the word scared for as long as she could, ending it in a mischievous giggle and punching Little gently on the shoulder.

"I am not! I just think it's gross and weird."

"That's not even how you get rabies, Little. If you want to be a baby, then be a baby."

Queenie turned and started climbing the ladder. Little sighed, kicked the dirt one more time, and then followed slowly behind. She watched Queenie's sneakers disappear over the edge of the treehouse floor and a moment later she peeked up over the floorboards. The skull was still exactly where they had left it the day before. Its huge hollow eye sockets were lifeless in the daylight and its teeth silent and still. Little only hesitated for a moment, not wanting Queenie to think she was scared, and pulled herself up into the treehouse. Queenie picked up the skull and casually rolled it from one hand to another like she was playing with a ball.

"See, Little? It's totally fine. It's not even that dirty."

Little forced a laugh and let Queenie toss her the skull. She would have rather touched anything else in that moment, but she caught the skull by its forehead and spun it around in her palms.

“Yeah, I know, I just wanted to see if you were scared.” Little held the skull up in front of her face, leaned forward, and roared at Queenie until they were both giggling.

“Ohh so scary!” Queenie squealed in mock terror, shrieking as Little started to tickle her while still pretending to wear the skull as a mask. They rolled around the treehouse until Queenie had the idea to go swim in the river and see if they could find any good skipping stones. Little tossed the skull aside and followed Queenie down the ladder. As she stepped down the rungs, she glanced back into the treehouse. The skull lay vacantly on its side, and she felt that familiar sliver of terror at the base of her spine. She hurried down the ladder to join Queenie and didn’t look back.

A CACOPHONY OF CONSUMERISM



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Abstract

In his 1964 song "The Sounds of Silence," Paul Simon illustrates the connection between a growing culture of consumerism in a society and the deterioration of interpersonal relationships. He presents to his listeners the idea that consumerism is detrimental to both individuals and society as a whole because it undermines the development of communication skills which are the foundation of healthy societies. The author analyzed the song's lyrics to understand its full meaning and conducted research by reading journal publications and articles written by psychologists and sociologists in order to determine if Simon's predictions were true. Writings were found which stress the importance of interpersonal relationships to the overall wellbeing of individuals and writings that show how some psychologists believe there is a link between loneliness and consumeristic impulses. Furthermore, it was found that some sociologists believe that healthy, functioning societies are created and maintained through meaningful interactions between individuals. The author concludes that Paul Simon's predictions are accurate and that there is a definite connection between consumerism, isolation, and the overall wellbeing of a society.

A Cacophony of Consumerism

In his song "The Sounds of Silence," Paul Simon (1964) paints a prophetic picture of the long-term effects of consumerism on a society. He presents to the listener the idea that a consumeristic culture by nature creates estrangement between individuals and can eventually lead to the deterioration of the society which espouses that culture through the erosion of meaningful interpersonal communication. According to the symbolic interaction theory of sociology, "individuals construct the nature of their social world through social interactions" (Curry et al., 2019, p. 13). Therefore, if individuals embrace values which are detrimental to social interaction and interpersonal communication, the effects will inevitably cascade to the broader society. Simon illustrates this concept through complex imagery which takes the listener through all the stages of loneliness,

isolation, alienation, and the attempt to fulfill one's deepest needs through the mindless cycle of consumerism.

Simon (1964) uses the first two verses of his song to establish the effect which a consumeristic society has on the individual. By addressing darkness as an "old friend" in the opening line and proceeding to describe to literally no one a dream which he has had, Simon essentially gives his conclusion in his first words. He is illustrating a state of isolation in which he feels he is unable to engage in meaningful interactions with those around him. Venter (2019) states that, "Human beings are in essence social beings. They need to be connected to others to experience a meaningful existence," and that is precisely what Simon seems to be lacking. He uses lines like "In restless dreams I walked alone" and imagery like "I turned my collar to the cold and damp" to convey this loneliness and the bleak emotions associated with it. Also significant is the fact that every verse of the song is punctuated with the word "silence." Silence in this song implies a lack of meaning because as the next verse reveals, there are people interacting, just not in any meaningful way.

Simon (1964) sings that the silence is "touched" by the "flash of a neon light," a bright sign which reveals that he is not in fact physically alone as he at first supposed but is surrounded by a great multitude of "ten thousand people, maybe more." These people, however, are not behaving as satisfied members of a healthy society would. He describes them as,

People talking without speaking, People hearing without listening,
People writing songs that voices never shared, And no one dared
Disturb the sounds of silence.

This is perhaps the most impactful line of the entire song as it demonstrates exactly what a society's interactions should be by illustrating what they should not be. As one researcher put it, "Quality interpersonal communication involves people listening to each other with concern and empathy. Communicators should be able to express their emotions in a way that conversations are meaningful for both the sender of the message and the receiver" (Venter, 2019).

In the very next verse, Simon (1964) attempts to make the people aware of this. He sings, "'Fools', said I, 'You do not know./ Silence like a cancer grows,'" endeavoring to shake them with arguments and imploring them to listen and act. The people in the song are unmoved, however, and the final verse reveals the source from which this impenetrable silence stems. It goes, "And the people bowed and prayed/ To the neon god they made." The "neon god" is the bright sign introduced in the second verse, and it represents modern commercialism and by extension the figurative religion of consumerism. The fact that the people are united in worshipping it shows that the advertisement and all it implies has become integrated into the society's shared culture and values, and terming it metaphorically as a god demonstrates the pervasiveness of this value, even displacing traditional religions.

The final lines which state, "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls/ And tenement halls/ And whispered in the sounds of silence" (Simon, 1964) speak of the extent to which this materialistic and consumeristic viewpoint has infiltrated the minds of the people in the song. The "words of the prophets" are the advertisements and posters which were one of the primary mediums for proclaiming the religion of accumulation in Simon's day and which have since been superseded by growingly intrusive methods. As one author wrote, "while advertisements used to appear exclusively in magazines and newspapers, today they are everywhere: on bathroom stall doors, airplane tray tables and even laser-etched on the shells of eggs" (Novotney, 2008).

Consumerism, or the “set of values that encourages people to acquire numerous and ever-changing goods and services in large quantities and to quickly replace them with something new” (Curry et al., 2019, p. 57, quoted from Lury, 2011), is what Paul Simon (1964) is arguing has destroyed the society in his dream by alienating people from one another, and from a sociological perspective, he may not be far off. According to Ninivaggi (2019), these two phenomena, emotional isolation and widespread consumerism, may be more closely linked than one might think. He defines loneliness as “a feeling of being isolated, unconnected, insecure, estranged, alienated, and empty” and asserts that this state of being results in a “natural defense of clinging and grasping.” He states that this response manifests through “an endless series of repetitive, temporary arrangements of adhering to another or, for example, holding on to possessions such as money, property, video games, toys, or power and control over others, or grasping a no-longer-adaptive ideology” and further elaborates by saying, “Loneliness results in the feverish pursuit of clinging to persons and of gaining material objects.” This very closely mirrors Curry et al.’s (2019) definition of consumerism and paints the picture of a double-edged sword. The implication is that loneliness not only drives consumeristic habits but is also in turn exacerbated by the consumer impulse.

According to the symbolic interaction theory of sociology, personal interaction is key to forming and maintaining a lasting society (Curry et al., 2019, p. 13). When a culture begins internalizing a toxic value like consumerism, a gulf can form between individuals and meaningful interpersonal interactions in daily life. The end result is the deterioration and loss of cohesion in that society through the erosion of meaningful communication. From this perspective, consumerism is not only bad for the individual but for society as a whole. By encouraging a state of mind which lends itself to feelings of loneliness and isolation which in turn drive the individual to consume even more, consumerism creates a vicious cycle which if left unchecked may deteriorate the emotional and symbolic bonds of a society from the inside out.

Although written long before the advent of smart phones or even the internet, the haunting lyrics to “The Sounds of Silence” are impressively insightful. In his song, Paul Simon (1964) attempts to warn the citizens of economically prosperous nations of the price they may pay if they neglect to keep their focus on the true foundations of a healthy society: deep personal relationships and effective communication. He does so by painting a bleak picture of the dystopian world of triviality and meaninglessness into which a society embracing the values of consumerism will eventually plunge. Listeners can learn from his song the importance of keeping one’s head above the toxic waters of consumerism by occasionally tuning out those empty words echoed “in the sounds of silence.”

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SIEGE OF THE EMPIRE

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All they had exchanged were letters
But it meant everything
Every pain and trial
For just the chance.

Her sister, her stubborn
Wild and reckless, bright
And daring sister
Was leading the rebellion.

A resistance against the Emperor
And his reign of fear and inequality.
They were forming all around the land
Readying for battle

For war.

Once she knew what the rebellion stood for
And who was behind it,
The Empress quickly became
Their most important informant.

And in return, they opened her eyes.

She'd come to know the people through them.
All the people.
Not just the ones she met while with the guard
Or the upper-class aristocrats so involved in themselves

Not even those running the shops she traversed.

She met the unseen;
The vagrants and vagabonds searching for a home
The slaves yearning for freedom
And the slave masters content with their evil.

She met the refugees yearning for safety
The sick and lame in need of care
Children without homes
And the elderly working day and night.

She'd learned of the plights
That plagued the kingdom
And had come to understand
How and why

The Emperor

She knew of his cruelty and carelessness
But did not quite estimate its reach
The impact it had on the people
And the pain it had brought the empire.

But she knew now
And would not stand for its continuity.

Two years
Of correspondence
Of planning and plotting
Of preparing for every scenario,

Had led to this
The final day.

The "Day of Reckoning"
Her sister called it in her last letter.
Dramatic and eccentric despite the circumstance,
It was an accurate title.

The main battle would be at the Southern border.
It would be large and loud
With most of her men lined to fight
And all eyes would be there.

The Empress would not let her men fall though.

She had several rebellion spies
Stationed with every battalion
Ready to lead them out of battle
And out of harm's way

Many of the men were her friends.
They were comrades and kindred spirits
And even if they fought for the Emperor
They deserved a chance of freedom.

With her battalions already weakened
Tweaked strategically by rebel spies
And ready to be led out of danger
It served as the perfect distraction.

While the war raged
The main rebel convoy
Would make its way towards the palace.
To the Emperor.

She would take Eve
And leave with Aragon
Who had been a spy in her court
Since their first meeting.

While they were fleeing
The Northern Rebellion
Led by her sister
Would storm the palace.

She would meet the Southern Battalion
Surrender to the Rebellion
And they would eventually return
To rid the Empire of its ruler.

Which was why she stood
Tense and anxious
Before the throne room doors
Stalling the meeting of her husband.

She would usually just leave,
Her husband did not truly care for her or their child,
But the last time she had left
Not telling him of her plans

He had hurt her.

She was unable to walk for two days
Not without limping
And had been threatened
If done again.

If not for his loyalists
The ones who told him
Whenever she left the palace or planned an outing
She would have left without notice.

Asking for permission to leave
Was a formality
But an obstacle all the same
And it had to be done.

With a deep breath
The Empress pushed the doors open
Quietly walking in
And closing them behind her.

The Emperor sat at his throne, the room deathly still.
 The only sound, were the ragged, fearful breaths
 The Empress calmed quickly.
 There was something cold in the air.

He regarded her silently
 Eyes scanning over her,
 And she did not miss
 The dangerous gleam in his eyes.

He had been harsh in the past few weeks
 Quick to anger, quick to conclusions.
 Every word and offense by court officials
 Never ceased to infuriate him.

The Empress had been the one to take the heat
 Something for him to channel his anger into
 Every ear-splitting scream, harsh word
 Every rough grasp and sudden hit

Was her burden to bear.

Her body was sore and bruised
 Blue and purple blossoming
 Where most could not see
 But she had taken it with practiced silence.

It made her present fear more realistic.

She glided over to where he sat
 And took her place beside him.
 In her throne
 She sat as casually as she could.

He still looked at her
 Irritation and anger dancing in his eyes.
 "What do you want?" he spat callously
 Pouring her a goblet of wine.

The Empress took it with gentle fingers
 Grounding herself by gripping it.

"I would like to go out."

His eyebrow quirked up
 And with practiced elegance
 The Empress reined in her worry.
 He said nothing, waiting for an explanation.

"As you know, Eve is 3 years old now."
 She ignored the scowl
 The disapproval that appeared on his face.
 "I would like to acquaint her with the horses."

"The horses?" His voice was acidic.

She nodded softly.
 "You know how much I treasure riding."

He did know and his expression shifted
More inquisitive than accusing.

"I would like Eve to become comfortable with them."

"She's too young to ride." he stated plainly.
An actual response and sliver of interest
Caught the Empress off guard
But she was quick to continue.

"I know."
She sat closer, turning her body
And facing the Emperor entirely
She looked into his eyes as she spoke.

"I thought it would be good for them to bond before she begins riding."

The Emperor looked at his wife.
Expression devoid of life,
He blankly regarded her
Then looked up, as if thinking.

"That's a wonderful idea."

"Really?" she blurted
Unable to stop the shock,
The confusion, from coming forth.
He didn't reply, grasping her chin and quickly turning to her.

Frostbite.

His lips were just as numb and frigid
As they were their wedding day
Needles piercing her skin
And making it crawl.

When he pulled back
Desire and control lingering
She gasped for air.
His hand still gripped her chin.

The abruptness and suddenness
Of the kiss, alerted her
Set her instincts off
And she quickly looked at him.

His smile... it was too confident
Too satiated and content
It raised the hair on her body
And flooded her heart with fear.

He knew.

Without warning,
He hit her
Striking her across face
And nearly jolting her off her throne.

"Do you take me for a fool?"
 His voice was like poison
 And the Empress gasped in surprise
 As wine spilled over the ground.

"The Empress' army is what they call it. A work of rebellion."

He struck her across the face again
 And she barely caught herself
 An arm holding her up on the ground.
 She didn't bother to wipe the blood from her mouth.

"A revolution." she snapped back.
 It was no use pretending
 She saw the look in his eyes
 Nothing would stop him.

But nothing would stop her either.

"You are too late." she smiled and moved to stand.
 He glared at her with raging fury
 And she found joy in it,
 "They are already coming. You can't stop them."

"Wrong!"

The Empress' eyes drifted to the sword
 Resting against the Emperor's side
 But found herself moving away
 As he reached for her.

"You will suffer for your treason!"
 He was red and nearly shaking
 As he preyed on the Empress,
 "You and that brat!"

Any fear or worry
 Any sense of patience and indifference
 Left the Empress
 And she stood straighter.

Years of silence,
 Of endured abuse and pain
 Of loneliness and hopelessness
 Burned in her chest,

And the snide and hurtful words
 The fear for her daughter,
 And daily weariness
 Boiled to the surface.

The Emperor's head turned as a voice beyond the doors called out.
 "Your majesty! Convergence at the front gate!"
 It was a distraction
 And the Empress took full advantage.

She slammed her body into his
And rolled away, running to the doors
Just beyond, laid her knapsack
Her supplies for escape

And her sword.

She stumbled but was steadfast.
The unsheathing of a blade echoed from behind
And she turned back, sword in hand
Letting her pent up rage overtake her body.

She blocked his swinging arm
Sparks glinting at the contact
And pushed upward
Knocking him away and gaining her footing.

She was upon him like lightning
Slashing and thrusting her blade forward
But he parried with equal skill
And anger.

As she thrust her sword angrily
The Empress was very aware of the time.
The rebels were already upon the palace
And she needed to keep her husband occupied.

She had warned Aragon
To take her daughter
And meet the rebellion group waiting
If she did not return within the half-hour.

She hoped he had listened.

Swinging upwards
The Empress caught her husband across the cheek
Drawing a red line
And making him stumble.

He let out a ferocious roar
And charged her
Making her kneel
As she blocked his strike.

Rage reflected in his eyes
As she cried out, pushing him away
And the throne room doors flew open,
Soldiers running in.

The Emperor noticed them.
"Get her!" he screeched,
Blocking a swipe to the head.
The soldiers did nothing at first

Watching as the Empress
Continued her attack.

But an angry cry from their Emperor
Broke their trance.

Half of the soldiers moved
Swords drawn on the Empress,
But their advance was stopped
As the other half moved against them.

A battle broke out
Soldier fighting soldier,
The Emperor's men defending
Against the Empress' loyal comrades.

Neither royal noticed though
Too focused on each other.

They moved with unyielding aggression
Slashing and swiping at each other
And using every strength
And skill to best the other.

Bloody and bruised
Their blades rang out loudly
As they crashed against the other
Unmovable in their assault.

But they were both running out of energy
Succumbing to their injuries.
A jab to her side made the Empress stumble
And they both stepped into each other.

She was at a disadvantage
And both saw it,
One excitedly and the other in alarm
But neither relented.

As the Emperor gripped her neck
The Empress reared her sword back
And as air left her lungs
She pushed forward.

A sickening squish
Followed by a loud crunch
The rulers fell to the ground
Leaning on each other for support.

The Empress grimaced
As she twisted the sword further
And the Emperor's hand around her neck
Shakily tightened.

She gasped
Making her movements count
As the sword embedded in the Emperor's chest
Moved farther in.

Their sudden silence drew attention
 Clashing blades replaced
 With harrowed breathing
 And scathing looks

The husband and wife said nothing
 But made eye contact
 And the Empress took in the sight
 Of the Emperor.

The rage in his eyes was palpable
 But the slack of his grip
 The paling of his skin
 And sweat on his brow, said more.

Without warning, they were pulled apart
 Both falling backwards
 One against the cold tile
 And the other in waiting arms.

The soldiers helped her stand
 Her hand moving to the wound at her side
 And they smiled at her
 Congratulating her.

She nodded solemnly
 And although her husband
 Still lived, barely,
 Glaring at her with unrelenting hate

She walked away.

The soldiers saluted her
 Drawing their swords
 As she walked past them
 And beyond the throne room doors.

Their battle had silenced the ruckus
 Of servants and soldiers running around
 Looking for a leader
 To direct them amidst the chaos

"Is the Emperor dead?" A maid shouted
 Hope laced on her tongue
 She, nor the servants she stood with
 Noticed the Empress walking towards them.

"The rebels are finally here!" another servant shouted.
 He began running, but was stopped by a maid
 "But what of the Empress?
 She did not escape."

"She's right here."

The Empress's voice was cool
 Yet slightly amused
 And the group jumped in surprise
 But smiled.

"Your majesty." the man greeted,
Smiling and bowing as she approached.
"The rebels," he began,
"The people are waiting."

They led forward excitedly
Forgetting their formality for a second
And the Empress followed
Anticipation and anxiety tingling her skin.

They did it.

The Emperor
Her husband
Had been defeated, dethroned
And now...

Now she was free.

Despite her wounds
And weary state
When she saw a flutter
The movement of ebony tresses,

Of a small body
Dressed in blue and white
Clinging to the comforting hold
Of a loyal, rebel spy

She ran.

"Eve!"
The Empress did not need to push past anyone
As they moved with ease
Smiling as the mother and daughter were reunited.
"Mama!"

The duo clung to each other
And the Empress did not fight
Nor stop,
The tears that came to her eyes.

She was safe.

The Empress hoisted Eve into her arms
And cast Aragon a grateful glance.
He nodded happily, then cleared his throat.
"The rebels are waiting."

She took a deep breath
Nodding to the rebels,
Those who'd come to confirm her victory,
And walked through the open doors.

She was met with subdued cheers
The rebellion battalions

Lined at the palace front
Hundreds, upon thousands waiting.

And at the lead
With a staff in one hand
Eyes brighter than the sun,
Stood her sister.

She was taller now
Perhaps taller than she herself,
But her obsidian locks, much like Eve's
Were just as wild as the last she saw her.

Upon seeing the Empress and making eye contact
Her sister smiled wide,
Excitement so blatant and raw,
And raised her staff.

"Long live the Empress!"

The cheers that followed were loud
And joyful
But most importantly
They were filled with hope.

The Empress found herself grinning.
A feeling she hadn't felt
In so long, warmed her heart
Overriding her worry and exhaustion,

Even if there was still much to do.

She would have to put together
A council, made up of the people,
And not aristocrats,
To help guide leadership.

She would have to integrate the rebellion
Understand their efforts
Their ways of helping the people
And involve herself.

There would be loyalists
And a difficult transition
And it would not be easy.
Good things never were.

But for now...
The Empress smiled at her soldiers
At her sister, giddy with excitement
And pulled close, her daughter.

As the sound of horns and whistling
Of people singing their happiness
Filled the air,
Her sister began running to her.

The Empress breathed in deeply
Letting that long forgotten feeling
Of happiness and joy
Of relief and liberty, take over

And found herself
Inexplicably and freely,
With the touch of life in her heart,
Laughing under a golden sky.

TIL DEATH BRING US TOGETHER



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It was a sunny morning when Lonna's husband returned to see her. The sun rose as if it was his companion, the two rising in unison. He parted the dirt that covered his coffin, gasping as air filled his ribs. He greeted the sun with a wave, along with the workers that were still on the grounds. A few ran screaming, but the more seasoned employees had seen crazier things. He strode through town, waving hello to every passerby that was out in the morning. When it first happened, the town was horrified, calling the police and watching as their bullets missed his skeletal frame.

He quickly defused the situation, the town quickly recalling that you could broker deals with the powers above to come back to Earth if you chose. They sighed in relief at their old neighbor and opened their curtains once more. He continued down the streets of his town, passing the dog pound he had worked at in life. He bent down to wave at the dogs that were frantically barking at him. Upon gracing his own reflection he understood why.

"I should've specified that I wanted to come back as a normal-looking human." He hadn't realized he reincarnated as a skeleton. He stood from the window and kept walking to his old home, apprehension rising where his throat used to be. What if Lonna didn't recognize him? The skeletal form didn't do much for his appearance; the cops sure didn't know who he was before he explained the situation. What if Lonna had forgotten about the bargains with the powers above that were so common?

The questions occupied him until he had completed his journey. He stood on his porch, a skeletal fist raised to the door, trembling. If he still had sweat glands he assumed that he would've been sweating all over. Before he could finish the action, the door swung open and Lonna pulled him in, an angry look on her face.

"You idiot! Standing naked on my porch! Just because you're dead doesn't mean I'll stand for indecency. Put some clothes on, you klutz!" If he still had lips, he assured himself he would have been smiling. If he still had tear ducts, he knew he would have been crying. Returning to his old bedroom, he found a set of clothing already on the bed. Apparently, Lonna had been waiting.

"Honey! Were you waiting for me?" She responded from far off. He heard her response through the walls.

"As a matter of fact, I was! You took three days to get back to me? Three fucking days you kept me waiting! Next time you die you'd better never come back mister, I swear to the powers above! So help me I will reach into that grave and dig you out myself next time..." Her words trailed off, and Adrian could tell she wasn't really angry. He dressed in the slacks that needed to be cinched with a belt to the very last loop and a shirt that hung from his bony shoulders. Gazing at himself in the mirror, he examined his calcified frame.

"Hmm, maybe going naked is the right option here, I look like a circus tent." A voice from behind answered him.

"I think you look dashing. You always needed to shed a few pounds, and sure, you may have gone off the deep end with it, but I'm quite forgiving." She smiled up at him and smoothed out his shirt, ignoring the odd bumps of his bones.

"You look cute, in that way that skeletons in the display windows of Halloween stores do."

"Ah yes, thank you. *That* was the look I was going for." Adrian examined himself in the mirror once more. "Halloween store display figure, huh? Well that means there's some semblance of me that's scary, right? I could stand outside on Halloween night and scare kids!" Lonna rolled her eyes and pushed him out of the room.

"Whatever, skeleton boy. Let's drink some tea."

In life, they would always look out the window at the bird feeders they had put up, eyeing the little guests as they came to and from wherever it was birds originated. In death, they did the same. Routines never differed despite the life and death barrier. In fact, the few days Lonna's husband complied with the "death" thing had been a nightmare. It was him coming in the middle of the day--Lonna pulling him in and pretending to be angry at the delay--that a smile finally returned to her face. The two could finally go back to normal.

Adrian brought the cup to his skull, pouring the liquid through where his mouth used to be. Lonna silently waited for him to notice the large stain growing all over his clothes, but he never did. He was too entranced by the birds. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he set his cup down on the table and sat back, placing his hands where his belly used to be. The new sensation of wet clothing surprised him, and he jumped, a slight rattle emanating when he hit the chair once more.

"Jesus Christ Lonna! You need to remind me that I'm a skeleton!"

"You looked so cute pretending to drink your tea."

"I just wonder when I'm finally gonna be able to realize that this is what I look like."

"How long has it been, a day? I imagine it'll take some getting used to."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you? Having a laugh at my existential crisis? Is that it? I can see the smile playing at your lips, I know where your mind is at!"

"That's exactly it."

"Oh fine. Have your fun, I'll be in our bedroom changing again."

He got up from the table in a fake huff, so similar to his fleshy self, and departed for their bedroom.

Pulling herself from the new reality that seemed so much like a daydream, she began to question her surroundings. Surely this wasn't real, surely she would awaken from this dream she was in. She had buried her husband just three days ago, but there he was--albeit in a quite different state--changing in the other room. She turned to face the door, not knowing whether it would ever open again, not knowing whether the person she thought was in there was real or not.

Just then, her husband reemerged, in a new pair of slacks and a new button-up. The two locked gazes, one pair of sockets, and one pair of eyes. But Adrian knew that look, he knew it all too well. The look Lonna got whenever they'd enter a room with too many people. The look when someone said something hurtful to another person within earshot. The look she gave him when he came home too late from work. The look she gave him when he came through the door just minutes ago. The look she was giving him now.

"You want to know the deal I had to make to come back to you. That's it, isn't it?"
"That's exactly it."

"You want to know whether there's some adverse side effect, something along the lines of my permanent death at a later date, right?"

"That's exactly it."

"Because you know that to make a deal with the powers above, you have to give up something dear to you. Something so personal that you would never want to make a deal in the first place.

"You're three for three, Adrian. And you're scaring me. What deal did you have to make? Please tell me we'll be together again."

"We'll be together every day. Every morning I can return to you."

"But what happens at night? What happens when *I* die?"

"At night I have to return to the underworld. I have to lie in my coffin until the sun rises in the East."

"What happens when *I* die?"

"I have to be in my coffin at nine o'clock, on the dot. I can be early, of course, but why would I want to miss out on extra time with you?"

"Please don't dance around the question. What happens when I die?" Adrian sighed and sat down.

"I'd rather not talk about you dying right now. Can't we just sit here and enjoy the moment?" She began to hit him on the humerus repeatedly, not caring that her hands felt as though they were hitting metal. Not caring that tears were falling down her cheeks when they never had when the two were both alive.

"No! Tell me what you had to sacrifice! Tell me what it is that made you come back to me. Did you sacrifice us? All of this? Can we not meet again in the afterlife? When I die, will we be apart forever? You're so selfish! We could have had eternity together!"

"What do you mean? We'll be together in the afterlife, what the hell are you talking about? I just don't want to talk about you dying. The deal I made had nothing to do with the afterlife."

"So what could you have possibly sacrificed?"

"I sacrificed my time with you."

"What? What does that mean?"

"They looked into my history in life, my memories, motivations, and desires. All they ever saw was you. One of them even teared up a bit. Very powerful stuff. They said that the only thing I had to sacrifice was my time with you. So every night I have to return to my coffin."

"Really?"

"Really, really. They knew that the only way I would be able to sacrifice enough to leave the underworld would be if they took you away in some capacity. I guess the whole skeleton thing could have been amended, but that'd probably mean an extra hour or so away from you. Not worth it, if you ask me." Adrian plopped onto the couch, oblivious to the rattling of his bones.

"Is something wrong? You're standing there as if I told you bad news. This is *good news*. Obviously it's not good that I can't see you all the time, but this is a good compromise."

"No, no. Nothing's wrong. Quite the opposite. I just had this feeling while you were in the other room that you would've had to give us up being together in the afterlife."

"Oh, never. That would be classified as a 'punishment' rather than a 'sacrifice'. They let me in on the whole process, astounding stuff. Would you like to watch some television? You could probably wrap me in blankets so that I have some softness." He brought a hand to her cheek, wiping away the streaks. Lonna hugged her husband, not caring that his frame didn't give beneath her touch.

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"The sun's going down, Lonna. I need to go to the cemetery."

"Can I come with you?" Adrian looked at her for a while before answering.

"Are you sure you want to? It'll be like you're burying me all over again." She considered this very true statement before answering.

"I'll walk you to the edge of the cemetery?"

"A compromise, I like it." Adrian held out a hand and stood, letting the blankets that were carefully wrapped around him fall to the floor. Lonna grabbed his hand and gingerly stood, hanging onto the amalgamation of bones that needed to return to their resting place. They silently made their way to the cemetery, the only noises accompanying them were soft clacks from Adrian's feet. Standing at the gate, Adrian cautiously strode forward, testing Lonna to see if she would continue her path. But she stood fast where she was, and he was glad. For her own protection, it was probably best that she didn't see this part.

"Okay, I'd like you to turn around and walk home now."

"But I want to make sure you get into your coffin safely!"

"You shouldn't. It'd hurt you too much, and you know it. Please, just walk to our house. Don't look back. Please."

"But how will I know you'll be back tomorrow?" Adrian stopped for a moment and used the words the powers above had told him to use in this very situation.

"You won't know. That's the thing. But love is all about trust, and it's important, it's of the utmost importance, in fact, that you don't turn around to watch me bury myself again. Okay? It would ruin you. So just trust me. Trust me like you always have." Lonna wrung her hands and nodded. She understood, despite it all.

"I love you."

"I love you, too." Lonna took a deep breath, turned around, and walked back to her house. She never looked back. Adrian didn't wait to make sure Lonna didn't turn around, he knew she was good for her word. They both knew. Adrian went to the hole he had dug that morning and thanked the powers above that the cemetery workers hadn't filled in his not-so-final resting place. He climbed into his coffin, shut the lid, and waited for the morning sun to peek through the cracks.

TO BELIEVE IS HALF THE BATTLE



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Around this time last year, I began to acknowledge my passion to write and how enjoyable a life that would be for me. If only I could turn my curiosity into passion, my passion into vocation. Could I ever believe in myself enough to do this? I began to ask God and the universe to send me the signs and clues on where to begin. As always, the rule of 'Ask and you shall receive' applied itself divinely and memorably.

I had written a few short pieces about my life, memories that I tried to search out of the voids of my mind. I thought that they were good but did not feel I had read enough written works to make a valid comparison. I decided before I wrote, I must read. This thought bored me, I wanted to write not read. Why didn't I just have the confidence to do that? Then it happened. My mind formed a link, search for writers that used the words I would use in the way I might use them. Search for Virgo writers.

The story really began when a friend took me out for a birthday dinner. Sitting across from each other in a booth, my hunger turning to growls in my belly as I contemplated the menu. I looked up to find my friend staring impatiently at me, his fingers excitedly tapping a package that sat upon the table. "I can't wait, just open it now." He said, so, I set my hunger aside and opened my present. It was a brand new beautiful signed copy of Paulo Coelho's book, *The Alchemist*. A brand-new leather-bound hard copy. The leather, one of my favorite colors of deep burgundy red with shiny embossed gold design and title. The tips of the pages, shiny gold, forming a river around the cover that looked like a gold bar. A gold satin ribbon neatly tucked at the halfway point of its pages. Lost in time, I stared at the book's glory. His voice brought me out of the mystic haze of divine will. For I knew instantly, this book was to be part of the answer to my prayer. "Open it! Look at the signature!" I shifted my soul back into the 'now' of the moment and opened the cover. "CRACK!" I had never heard a sound so loud in my life. As if Thor himself sent a lightning bolt crashing into the restaurant! I had never been the first to break a book's binding. The experience was surreal, as if I had just given life to the book itself, thrust it into existence, at that very moment it had breath. I know it's strange, but my eyes began to tear up with emotion at that sound, which hopefully my friend took as gratitude for the perfect gift.

Really, the sentiment was much deeper. Deep as the ripple upon the burnt sienna satin that lined the inner cover and the first page, that, when turned revealed the penned signature of Paulo Coelho himself. Now, you must understand that at that moment, the author's name meant nothing to me, having never read the book, but I knew deeply that it would. My friend then explained his reasoning for buying it, the author was a Virgo, like me. Out of curiosity he then looked up Paulo's exact birthday, and we both found ourselves dumbstruck with awe, it was August 24th, my exact birthday! The rest of dinner was a blur. I ate, but my hunger was not satisfied as it had become new. An insatiable desire to discover what first word awaited me on page one.

It was the perfect evening to cuddle up and begin to read. Tucked into my bed, my six pillows encasing me in comfort. My silver-grey satin comforter provided a cool chill to the hot August heat outside. It was still too hot for scented candles but a few drops of magnolia scented oil drifted through the air of my room. The light, casting a gentle ambiance for the experience. I was ready.

I began to read, instantly his words seemed as though they came from my own mouth, my own mind. His thoughts and fears, the same as mine. The way he wrote of landscapes and the simplicity of conversations and thoughts, exactly how I would write them. I thought, I could be him, I could have written this word for word. I could write this. I don't need to wait until time is missed and opportunity passed. I don't need to get better or be perfect! I could tell my stories in my words and a reader just like me could find inspiration in them.

Paulo Coelho writes of a young shepherd named Santiago and his search to find purpose and treasure. His journey sends him on a mystical adventure to the pyramids of Egypt. Along the way he meets many very interesting characters who help him to look deeper into the veil of life's mysteries. By looking deeper, he learns to recognize signs and symbolism that deepen his understanding of his experience through life's journey. It is a beautiful and prophetic tale that is wonderfully written.

The story was of things that I have had an understanding for my whole life. His words captured me and placed me in comfort and confidence. I would find within its pages permission to be me. As Santiago learned a deeper meaning of himself and his journey through life, so did I. Each page revealed a lesson and adventure that I could apply to my life and my purpose. In breaking the binding of this book, a connection was made that also broke a binding within me. I found the symbolism to be perfect.

I have since looked up other Virgo writers, and there are so many. So many that share sociologic values and a search for purpose. So many with a comforting compatibility to my own personality. So many that have found successful vocations in writing. I hope to be next.

This experience has given me courage to write in my own voice and also a stronger passion to read the voices of others. Reading has become a pleasure rather than a chore. In the book, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes: "I wished I had known more, and I wished I had known it sooner." He writes, "I have spent much of my studies searching for the right question by which I might fully understand the breach between the world and me." I too felt that breach between the world and myself. I have wasted much time trying to define how I felt different and why I struggled with acceptance. This experience really helped me to look inward, to those haunting places. To dig out the memories from my youth that had left damaging imprints. To simplify them, and transform them, into vision that I can draw from and give words too. Now I am beginning to see that there is no "world and me," that I am part of the world, like any other. As Coates realized, I too, realized "**That writing**" ... is simply "**the art of thinking.**" Moments like the one I had, reading that line in his book, are so amazing! When I paused and re-read the sentence with a deep inhale. I let that breath change me, as I exhaled, I became new, a new understanding spread through my body. To

transform my fear and doubt through six simple words. One more deep breath, as I read them again. I do not want to ever forget them. I **think** so much that sometimes it feels dangerous. I am an **artist** in my heart. When I **write**, it is hard to stop.

Vocation is a response to a call from beyond oneself. To use my God given gifts to leave an imprint of passion upon the world. To understand that life is about more than me, that humanity will always be bigger. That if I am able to respond to my happiness and my passion, letting go of all other thoughts. That vocation will be automatic and life will take care of me. Just like life took care of Santiago. In every moment of my journey, I have the opportunity to create a story to share. I feel extreme gratitude for that. My story will end well.

DO YOU LOVE ME?



PEYTON SIMPSON
Labette Community College
Kansas

Do You love me?
I whisper into the pillow
That has never judged.
Tear-stained, sweat-stained, heart-stained.
It has never faltered
Under the altar
Of my sorrow.

Do You love me?
A phrase I put on repeat
Wondering where You are.
I've been told Sunday after Sunday
That You're always there
Watching from above,
But if you were up there,
How could you watch as your "son"
Is beaten and bruised?
Like you never knew.
Like a father watching from the window,
Seeing their child fall to the ground,
Making the sounds of pain,
And yet never rushing out to be by their side.

Do You love me?
Sticks and stones have always broken my bones—my spirit.
And the scars on my heart are tearing this young man apart
Who is crying out for safety from the One above.

Do You love me?
When rancid death and decay
Brought my grandmother to her grave

And took away the precious folds of my grandfather's brain.
When my dear friend is ravaged and engraved
By the same cancer her mother had endured.

They say You know the number of hairs
on our heads and now she has none.
Is that some sort of joke to You?

Do You love me?
Where were you
When my father clenched his fist
Never missed a single hit
Giving me bruises and splits
On my arms and upper lip.
He staggered out of the room
Leaving me broken and confused.
Leaving me to wonder
Where were you
When that person who shall never be mentioned
Looked at me with sick satisfaction as they
Paid me too much attention.
Touching me, gripping me, defiling me.
Staggering out of the room
Leaving me broken and misused. Leaving me to wonder

Do You love me?
The dusty book on the shelf doesn't seem to give me answers.
This book of "truth" and our "manual for life"
Has led to nothing but headaches and unbearable strife!

Do You love me?
I am done with the silence and the emptiness.
I need to know if all they have said is true.
I have been drudging day after wretched day,
Trying to find some semblance of peace,
But all I have found is this torrential pain
Given to me by the world You created!
How fair is that?

Do You love me?

I love you.
From the depths and heights of My very being,
As far as the East is from the West.
I have said you will have trouble in this world.
And it is not from Me, but from the sin that Man chose,
And that breaks My heart.
But that is why My hands are scarred.
You can lay your troubles down on Me
Because you cannot find peace yourself,
For I give it to you freely when you seek and ask.

I love you.
If you would only open up My Word
And actually read
You would see

that it is nothing but true,
For I am truth.
It is nothing but the way,
For I am the way.
It is nothing but life,
For I am life.
If you would only open up My Word
And actually read
You would see
That it isn't a manual but actually a love story.
The true story of My Father's heart longing for you.

I love you.
I was with you.
Those bruises and scars are carried on My heart with you.
You need to know that every hit he threw
He threw at Me too,
And every cry they drew from you
Was drawn from Me too.
For what's done to the least is happening to me,
And at the very least
I am with you.
Through all your pain and devastation,

You can rest in the rejuvenation
That comes from being a new creation.
You can rest in the fact that I am
Holding you, loving you, lavishing you
With with My good grace,
So you can lift your head
And just look at My face
And know

I love you.
I know it's hard to trust the Father's plans,
But can you trust that He knows more than you?
I, too, have lost before,
Been angry at people before,
Cried to My Father sweating blood before,
I have been in your shoes and more.

I love you.
Stop focusing on the scratches that itch your mind,
But turn and fix your eyes to the scars
In My hands.
In My feet.
In My side.
Your sticks and your stones have pierced My very bones
So you wouldn't have to do this alone,
But instead, you can cast your cares
On the One who cares for you

I love you.
Like a father watching from the window,
I see you stumble,
I see you fall,
But I know that you can stand up tall.

Because, like a father,
Sometimes you have to teach by letting go,
Saying no,
Standing idly by,
But still near by your side.
Day after wonderful day

I watch you grow.
And I want you to know

I love you.
Since the time the world began,
I held you in the palm of My hand.
The same hands that drew galaxies to span
Across the universe.
The same hands that were stretched apart,
Nailed on the bark of a tree
Where I hung precariously,
Suffocating on the brink of death.
All so the world,
So you
Could see
And be redeemed
By the greatest love story
Of all time.

I love you.

WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT



T. LANE WILLIAMS
Des Moines Area Community College
Iowa

In grade school, Valentine's Day was easy: our teacher expected all students to take part in the holiday. You were expected to give everyone in your class something special. They were expected to share the same in return. Whether they liked you or not.

Whether they liked it or not.

The week before the commercialized candy/card combo swap, the teacher handed each child in class a 9"x15" manila envelope to decorate. We shrieked with glee, because we knew it was time for crayons and construction paper and string and ribbon and felt and glitter and Elmer's White Glue! We morphed into struggling little Picassos, turning what could be a red-breasted robin's nest cast-offs into agonized attempts of frilly friendship shrines in red and pink. Even though the results were more Guernica than Garçon à la Pipe, our teachers always applauded the effort.

The night before the big day, Mom and I bundled up to join millions of other families making grocery store treks on the coldest evening of the year (or so it seemed) during the most brutal blizzard (or so it seemed) for the most expensive cardstock and plastic-flavored candy (or so it seemed) needed to fill our classmates' manila masterpieces. Tweety Bird or Taz? Kermit or Strawberry Shortcake? Hearts or Heroes? No dilemma was greater at that moment than deciding what label we'd wear for the rest of the school year. Cool kid, nerdy kid, poor kid, rich kid: which cartoon creation would stave off the insults? And, abandon hope all ye whose mother decided, "this year, we're going to make homemade cards." Ask not for whom the tinsel bell tolls, it tolls for macramé.

As I look back, was it that terrible? No, of course not. Although, it did raise my anxiety level at a premature age. I'm sure I am not the only one who fretted about

the possibility of not receiving anything from Mary Sue, Juan, Minh, or worse, the entire class. But, luckily, that never happened. In the end, we all enjoyed making the envelope. We all enjoyed the candy. We all enjoyed our friendships.

Well, at least for that one day.

And yet, I will say those experiences were better than they are for children today. The shoeboxes are on parade across America, clogging into classrooms after parents posing as their lovely little ones have dolled up the boxes with Fivrr graphic designs printed the night before. Moms bringing Little Debbie cakes see themselves outdone by parents serving custom supermarket donuts. But despair not, for those parents are humbled after Timmy's dad arrives with personalized confections prepared by his neighbor's small batch artisanal bakery on the rise. Just wait until next year for a Whole. 'Nother. Level. No one can keep up with the sugar-coated Joneses seated on the alphabet rug.

We seem to forget, through all of this, that Valentine's Day is about caring for each other. It's about loving thy neighbor as thyself; it's about putting someone else first. It's about wearing a mask on your face, it's about two meters between bodies; not to save yourself, but to save others. It's about unmasking your heart and embracing each other's soul. It's about somebody you love, like, or don't even care about, and giving them something personal for one moment, in one day, to say "Hey, you're special to me."

Whether you like it or not.

BAD AT SOMETHING NEW



JESSICA LUNA JONES
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I remember it was a surprisingly warm Saturday for a typical Wisconsin fall day, which means I was in a good mood. The sunlight was crossing our balcony glass door, bringing warmth and happiness to our living room. Twenty-four years of living in constant eighty-degree weather had made my body, and apparently mind, extremely sensitive to the cold. And for northeastern Brazilians, cold means any temperature lower than seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit.

My husband and I were sitting comfortably on the couch, drinking some freshly brewed coffee, and trying to choose an outdoor activity for the day. As usual, I asked him to come up with some good options for me to choose from.

"I am not from here; you are! You know more places than I do!" I would tell him for any we-need-to-choose-a-place situation.

A beam of light gently accentuated the amber color on his right eye. I caught myself paying devoted attention to his face, and it was clearly telling me that he was struggling with my demand. But when he started revealing some of the options, I understood the reason for the struggle. Jamie's list was initially focused on activities he knew I would like. Some coffeehouses and cafes, Olbrich Botanical Garden, and Henry Vilas Zoo. But I already had an idea of what was coming at the end of his list.

"Would you like to go to the driving range with me?" he finally asked me, with a half-joking tone in his voice.

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Every year Jamie chooses at least one sport-related activity to focus on, and during that fall season, he got what I call "golf-fever." The symptoms included excessive thoughts about golf, weekly visits to the nearest driving range, and compulsive swing practice in the living room. He had invited me to the golf course before, but my answer was always a wrinkled nose followed by a no. However, before even thinking about it, I answered yes. As I said, I was in a good mood.

At an early age, I embraced my aversion to playing sports as part of my identity. I always repeated to myself that it was not for me. Nevertheless, I would sit on the uncomfortable concrete bench at my school gymnasium and happily watch my skilled friends playing soccer or basketball. For a long time, I assumed it was because I was shy, that I didn't want anyone watching me doing anything, especially if I was not good at it.

During my childhood, my family was proud of me most of the time. I was a cute, delicate, and calm girl, with amazing grades at school but extremely introverted. And for a family of outgoing Brazilians, that was a big issue. I lost count of the times I had to hold back my tears at my family parties because I didn't want to sing or dance in front of them. Today, I know my problem wasn't being shy; it was fear of being imperfect. I feared trying something new and failing.

While we were getting ready to leave the apartment, my mind tried to come up with excuses not to go anymore; I even started to feel cold and tired. Amazed by the power of my mind over my body, I tried to subvert the situation by telling myself, *you don't need to be good at it, Jessica. Just. Enjoy. The. Moment.* And so, we left the apartment.

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On our way to the driving range, Jamie briefly shared his perspective about playing golf. Usually, I am the one doing the talking, but this time I just listened. He emphasized that golf was frustrating, and I shouldn't expect to be good at it in the first few attempts. I imagine that my tantrums after some failed culinary adventures had warned him about my reactions to frustration. In the blink of an eye, the landscape changed from houses and commercial buildings to autumn-colored trees. I couldn't help but notice that I was having the same feeling I had when I boarded the plane to Madison. The fear of jumping into the unknown was pressuring my stomach.

When I was eight years old, my father, a professional guitar player, tried to teach me how to play the guitar. Although he was lovely and understanding, I ended up crying and threatening to break his guitar. It only took me two days to get to that point. Then, at twelve, I had my first English class in middle school. All my classmates were enrolled at private language schools since they were seven years old. Fast enough, English made my list of "Things I have no talent for." I genuinely believed that learning was about innate talent, not about practice.

A gateless entrance with a wooden sign welcomed our arrival at the Door Creek Golf Course. The way led directly to a half-empty parking lot, yet Jamie kept driving straight towards a smaller parking lot close to a bright-green field.

The driving range was completely different from what I imagined. Surprisingly, there was no group of retired men sitting on a fancy white structure whose only job would be to laugh at my inexperience. I know this seems far-fetched, but golf is not a popular sport in my hometown. The only golf course is restricted to members only, and those members are retired, wealthy men.

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Growing up in a family of four people sharing a two-bedroom, six-hundred square foot apartment, I never expected to even touch a golf ball in my life.

Instead, it took me a second to notice that the simple open structure right in front of our parked car was not part of the parking lot but, in fact, the practice field. We walked towards a strange machine with some green plastic buckets by its side. Jamie explained that we were at the most affordable golf course in the area and inserted six dollars in the machine to fill one of the buckets.

While Jamie was looking for the best spot and setting everything up, I enjoyed the sun on my skin and the refreshing wind coming from the open field. Then, he handed me his left glove and one of his clubs. The club felt heavy and cold to my weak, bare hands. At first, he tried to teach me how to position my body and move my arms by simply showing me how he does it.

"I don't think I can move my body that way, babe!" I said louder than I planned. "Try it. I will watch and correct anything," he replied smiling.

And so, I finally tried to hit a ball. Not unexpectedly, it was a complete disaster. I made a giant hole in the grass and immediately felt some tears in my eyes. As a result of my constant effort to adapt to my new life in the US, I had become extremely sensitive. I started to think about how tired I was of being out of my comfort zone, but Jamie's voice brought my mind back to the moment.

"It's okay. This is normal. I told you it's frustrating, right? Next time, keep your head down," he said.

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My next few attempts were slightly better. To be honest, I didn't think they seemed better, but I definitely felt more comfortable. While Jamie's golf balls were flying and disappearing on the horizon, mine were accumulating in front of me. Eventually, though, I was able to perform two or three decent hits.

When our bucket was almost empty, an old man and a kid approached the range. Based on the man's outfit, he was either a professional or had a worse "golf-fever" case than my husband. They chose the spot to my right to start their practice. Surprisingly, I didn't feel anxious or uncomfortable with their presence. According to my imagination, he was precisely the man who would laugh at my mistakes, yet he didn't even look at me.

We had spent a little over one hour at the driving range when we decided to head back home. My arms were sore, and my left index finger was hurt, probably because of the uncomfortable size adjuster on my engagement ring. Looking at my left hand, I asked Jamie:

"Hmm... Next time, can you remind me to leave my rings at home?"

"Next time?" A mix of surprise and excitement filled his face.

"Yes, I decided that golf is the perfect sport to help me deal with frustration," I informed him. "I don't need to be perfect, but I can get better one day at a time."

On that day, I finally acknowledged that my personal growth started when I allowed myself to be bad at something new.

SPACE ODDITY



SABRINA LOPEZ

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The sheets in my wing must have been negative thread count. Each of my clammy digits nestled perfectly in the crevasses between where the loom reset itself like they belonged there, running up and down the tracks in the fabric as I lay flat on my back, mentally tracing the parallel tracks in the ceiling panels overhead. I wondered what time it was. The steady rise and fall of footsteps in the hallway outside my door along with the muffled pulse of the time clock when a nurse clocked in for the day were my closest indication. In the infancy of my stay, these hours before breakfast were spent winding the rubber ball in my stomach ever tighter in anticipation of Rita, with her ceaseless barks and hollers all up and down the corridor that it was time to get up, and how we'd all better shower, because we didn't want her to notice if we didn't, and how we'd better not leave anything behind in our rooms, because those doors were staying locked until supper, and they weren't opening up for no one.

It wasn't until I'd learned the importance of rising before the Sun, so as not to be woken by Rita's barks and hollers from directly above my dreaming head when I'd slept too good, that I had acclimated. Coincidentally, it was only in those wee hours before the madness that anything remotely meditative took place for me in my stay at the hospital. I'd gaze out my window at the Moon (or the half-hearted glow of the Moon that managed to make it through the thick frosting on the glass window beside my bed) and lose myself in imagining someday making a snow angel in one of its craters. I'd fit perfectly, like the hole had been punched just for me, and the weightless, donut-like powder I assumed the thing was covered would swell up around me like a fog machine at a Halloween party. And I'd laugh and laugh at myself, and how silly I probably looked, and how the surface beneath me wasn't made of cheese. Then the Sun would start to rise and the sheets would start to itch from the position I'd been in for a while, and I'd smile and think that maybe that would be worth sticking around for. But then I was in the mess hall, the ground cold beneath my non-slip socks and coated in globs of wax left behind from a likely ancient linoleum floor buffer, the room a-titter because Tuesday was Pancake Bacon Breakfast.

The Pancake Bacon Breakfast would always find itself gone from my plate, and myself in the Psychologist's Office, inexplicably. Closet was more like it, I often thought, the slim splinter of a space seemed punched into the hallway wall like an afterthought. Sat in a flimsy upholstered stool, I had only ever met with the top of a balding head and hands always writing in a flurry.

They would break my train of thought just as I began wondering how the orderlies managed to squeeze in the dense wooden desk between us. It was always the same.

"How are you today?"

Always good.

"Feeling ready to go home?"

Never quite.

"How are the meds?"

Slowly killing me probably. Have you heard what those things do to your kidneys?

"Good. Glad to hear it. You can head to the nurse's station."

I might have mumbled a thanks sometimes, but I can't recall, because all too suddenly the nurse was handing me a paper cup that would wilt the second it hit my lips, all the while shoving a thermometer in my ear. She was planning to renew her wedding vows, she told the other nurse behind the counter who was tasked with eyeing me menacingly to ensure I wasn't packing anything underneath my tongue. The Medicine Nurse said the couple's therapy hadn't worked, and at this point she wasn't sure what else to try. Big Brother Nurse would hum pensively in response, eyes never leaving mine, even as I knocked back my tap water chaser, he was clearly only half listening. My temperature would beep back normal. So, I'd toss my pruned medicine turned water cup into the trash and move to ask the Medicine Nurse what font the invitations might be in, or if she had tried a couple's retreat instead, just to be a part of something, only to find I was halfway through Group then.

That day, the residents of our wing were sat at a large circular table. Half our energy spent avoiding each other's glances, the other half coloring our feelings. Anyone who had been in for longer than a week knew all the markers in the big bucket were either Manatee Gray or dried out, so I just decided to draw the Moon as I remembered it, since it was gray anyway.

I was sure to make each crater methodically mis-sized, just like I remembered them being on the real one, but always at least me-sized. The ink would bleed through the printer paper they gave us to draw on and onto the permanently sticky wooden table beneath, making swirls on the back of my artwork as I moved it around, making little galaxies. Glancing around the table at the artwork being made by my neighbors, the room seemed divided into two camps: those dedicating their time to strong-arming the last of the ink left in the colored markers, and those who had moved onto using stickers. There was someone, though, at the side of the table opposite to me, that kept looking in my general direction, almost beyond me, every few seconds before diving back into their work, like a swimmer coming up from a breaststroke.

I should mention for clarity (and to protect my credibility as a narrator), that the swimmer wasn't there, in my daily memories, every time. Just this one time. It's the closest thing to a face I can remember from my stay, and even when I think really hard about it, all I see is the galaxies I made by accident on the table in the middle where a nose or a mouth should be.

Anyway, I guess I was put off for a minute, staring back lamely--I could see a face at the time, staring right at me. It wasn't like the half-hearted glow of faces I'd seen in my periphery since checking in. It was a real human face. For a second I was nervous it would try to talk to me, break the trance that I'd put myself into. And then I wasn't, because the RA was on her phone two neighbors away from me. There in case anyone tried to pull anything, like over socializing. The orderlies had been on edge since Narcan Sam had spit on another patient two days ago. So I went back to working on adding craters to my Moon. I couldn't focus though, because just then it dawned on me, and distracted me, as I doodled little ridges, that there were always other planets there, somewhere by the Moon, even if we couldn't see them. After all, I hadn't seen the Moon in a while, but there I was drawing it because at one point I could see it. That's what I was thinking when I decided it was only fair and realistic to add a little Manatee Grey speck to the background of my masterpiece, a few lightyears away, hardly perceptible to the human eye, just so the Moon wasn't alone.

Finally, I'd eaten again for the last time and my pajamas were different. The day was over. The crunch of starch beneath my legs let me know it was time for bed, but the quiet hiss from under my door's heavy metal and the inelegant cascade of steps away from it let me know that someone had just slid something underneath.

At that, I tensed completely. It, too, was an anomaly. Surprise, a feeling I had all but forgotten. Honestly, I was deathly hesitant to look, to shatter a day-- a series of days, that had otherwise been so remarkably unremarkable. The structure was the real medicine, I thought, finally staring across the floor at the sealed envelope that was in the middle of it.

Knowing doubtlessly that upon waking the next day I would find Rita and reheated breakfast, without threat of conversation, was the cure. Knowing that the door to my room would lock until dinner, and I would sit and speak unheard to the head of a Doctor whose name I might never have been told was the bitterest pill. That I would know whether I liked it or not how the Medicine Nurse's second wedding went without ever having to be told and would sit through Group, maybe get lectured about the benefits of meditation, half the room already in a trance, always still as a statue, counting every ridge in the ceiling until it was over, was a side effect.

All this, I thought, I'd take just to get the medicine I really came for. To lay just as I had been moments before spontaneity was slid under my door, contemplative and bathing in that lovely half-hearted glow from the window. Safe from the threat of reality, the ambiguity of choice, the weight of autonomy; free to think without consequence. It was only then, in the blanket of the night's light, that I dared allow myself to dip my mind's toe into the possibility that those consequences of living out there beyond the glass may have been worth one glimpse out at it's unfrosted majesty, or that it might be worth it to try, to not miss my chance to reserve a ticket to my crater.

But it was exactly those kinds of reckless thoughts, I reminded myself, that I had only had the luxury of having because I was still safely inside the Hospital. Where I could forget what it was like before in the night because I would start the next day knowing exactly what it held for me. I was safe where I was free to dream without guilt or the threat of action or failure.

The back and forth in my mind had apparently made me restless, because I sprang suddenly out of bed and padded over to the window, where I huffed a big wet spot of condensation right in the epicenter of the glow. Hurriedly, as not to lose it, I leaned over and snatched my Moon drawing off of the nightstand where it was left before dinner and pushed it so tightly against the wetness that it stuck there on the window. My breath hitched at the product. The thinness of the paper allowed it to be backlit

by the moonlight-- it's clumsy imitation, the accidental ink spiral galaxies and that imperceptible speck of a planet shone through, rising up a shining solar system right there in my room. I looked on numbly for a while, tears welling up in my eyes. It was beautiful and real in its own right. I didn't have to pretend it was. I just had to pretend it was a replacement for the alternative.

It was in this same spirit of pretending that I pushed the envelope sharply back under the door and out into the hallway, strode across my half vacant double suite into my corner bed by the window, pulled my stiff tarp up around me, flipped over, and gazed into my little star system until it met my dreams.

The next morning, on Biscuits and Gravy Wednesday, I pretended to ignore the heat of the accidental inky galaxies swirling where a nose should be that met me across the room, for the sake of my structure. For the sake of my sanity, I pretended not to see the crude drawing of an astronaut adrift in a galaxy of stickers that Rita was pinning up on the bulletin board in the Mess Hall, an envelope clenched between her teeth.

AS HAMMERS

RYAN KING

*Bristol Community College
Massachusetts*

as hammers
with small letters
strike against
ribbon with
precision

fingers hit hard
against keys
not felt for
twenty-seven years
with the
symphonic
pitter click
whir-oosh
click

he traps himself with
such
electric ferocity
almost palpable
in a chair
using the type guide
to zero in

then no longer
the musty smell of a too-used
chair

in a room filled
with too-abused
books

air
the bite of wind
at the nose and
cold at the lung

it smelled like a
New England fall

it looked even more
so like one
as his eyes focused
it in

he was walking forward
type guide no longer
what it was but now
something oddly similar
but more oddly familiar
to him

he saw the forest
down the iron sights
of his gun at dusk



once more he saw
the dark silhouette
of himself
at least what once
was
he

two paces ahead
or behind

depending on who's asked

there is a sullen
natural silence

so

the man in front
hesitates
his next step

a break in the
heavy footfalls in sync
with the strikes pushing
their ink onto empty
paper

he sticks in the rifle's
barrel
around his mid back
with a heavy
grunt
then sigh

they moved forward in
step
a woven path determined
by solid fingers and the
strength
of a solitary machine

the wind picks up

a torrent of air almost
knowing to unify their
motions it strikes them
both
down to a right knee
and a left hand

a blank unilluminated
face turns back
as he looks up

no longer in control
of the sun or the sky

the shadow was free

so it ran

the man lunged forward
and got a hold of one
foot
in time to falter its
motion

they were both on their
feet
now he no longer
attached
to it and no longer it
was
a part of him

they stood as two wholes
of the same mind

it tried to run again

he won't let it

not after finally
capturing it
not after finally
trapping it
not after finally
understanding
its false intent

a steady hand came up
against
strong guests fighting to
exist
in harsh necessity

the iron sights held his
grace
the type guide held his
eye
desire is too strong a
word
for it, but he did need
for it

with a burdened finality
only a hammer strike
can sound
he pressed down and he
was free.

THE AMERICAN WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT: A JOURNEY OF COMMUNICATION AND RESILIENCE



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"There never will be complete equality until women themselves help to make laws and elect lawmakers."

– Susan B. Anthony (High Commissioner of U.N. Human Rights, n.d.).

The American women's suffrage movement was influential in the advancement of equality in the United States. Although there still exist instances where inequality is still actively practiced, giving women the right to vote was a catalyst in the advancement of women's equality. After decades of hard work and battles against a society that forbade women from voting, the path to the nineteenth amendment was successful. However, the suffrage movement had to find ways to communicate and advocate for their rights. Communication was key to the success of the women's suffrage movement, because without it they would not have been able to rally support, spread awareness, and campaign to those in charge to change the law.

The Birth of a Movement

The beginnings of American women's equality movements, specifically women's suffrage, can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century (Bryn Mawr College, n.d.). The Seneca Falls Convention was organized by pioneers of the movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott (Bryn Mawr College, n.d.). It was at this convention where Stanton presented the Declaration of Sentiments which served to outline all of the grievances that American society had imposed upon women and as the basis for the women's movement in the United States (Bryn Mawr College, n.d.). It is important to note that the Declaration of Sentiments followed the wording of the Declaration of Independence, which perhaps suggested to those who read it that women were finally declaring their *independence* from the limitations of gender inequality. Among the grievances listed were the fact that men did not allow women to "exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise ... taken from her all right in property ... all colleges being closed against her" (National Park Service, n.d.). In addition, the Seneca Falls Convention brought about the beginnings of some of the most avid and dedicated suffragists. These women included Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, among several others. This convention would prove to spark the beginnings of one of the most influential movements in American history.

Rallying Support

In order for the American women's suffrage movement to succeed, suffragists and leaders of the organization needed support. In a time when women were expected to be submissive and to stay in the home, rallying support for something as radical as voting was a difficult task. There were several issues along the road to the nineteenth amendment and women's suffrage. The organizations behind the movement had to find ways to communicate their message to women, men, and of course, the government.

One of the most interesting yet ironic occurrences from the women's suffrage movement was the lack of support from women. Leaders of the movement were disappointed that large proportions of women did not care for the right to vote or were outright against it (Miller, 2015). The reasons as to why some women and men were against the right to vote spoke greatly about the importance of communication. Some women believed that they should not be given the right to vote because they did not have the time nor the mental capacity to keep up with politics (Lange, 2015). Other women were simply of high social status and they felt that the system was fine as it was (Weeks, 2015). These beliefs from women may have resulted from years of constant oppression and a sense of inferiority. Rather than fight the system, some women were compelled to believe that everything was fine the way it was either because it benefited them, or a man told them to believe so. This was not only a great disappointment to women who were in favor of the right to vote, but it was also a sign that more work needed to be done. The movement would have to find better ways to communicate its message and make it clear that women were entitled to vote. The importance of communication was exemplified during times like these. For example, the organization that once began as the *National Woman Suffrage Association* eventually broke up and split into several organizations due to internal conflicts (Miller, 2015). Although these internal conflicts resulted in other organizations, there were still groups of women actively trying to rally against women's suffrage.

When suffragists organized events and rallies to gain support, anti-suffragist events were also held (Miller, 2015). Suffragists had to come together to collectively unite against those who did not support the suffrage movement. One of the major ways that this was accomplished was through the support of men. The ideas and opinions of men carried more weight during this era and having men support the movement was of utmost importance. Some men strongly felt that women should be given the right to vote and, in some cases, women's suffrage was passed at the state level due to overwhelming male support (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). In fact, several western states such as California, Nevada, and Idaho had already passed full women's suffrage, long before the nineteenth amendment was even drafted (National Constitution Center, 2006). Early enfranchisement of women was also seen internationally. In Britain, most women were enfranchised in 1918 (British Library Learning, 2018). Women in New Zealand had the right as early as 1893 (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2021). These international accomplishments were extraordinary, but for all American women to become enfranchised, they would have to forge their own path to victory.

Within the first decade of the 1900s, *The Men's League for Woman Suffrage of the State of New York* was created to help women attain the right to vote in New York (Men's League, 1910). Organizations and groups such as these were essential to convincing the public to support women's suffrage. This, however, did not mean that all men supported the idea of giving women suffrage. Women and men who opposed suffrage were a tremendous hurdle to overcome as they posed significant threats to the movement.

Spreading Awareness

Despite the setbacks of not having overwhelming support from women and men, the suffragists had to continue with their mission. There came a time where the suffragists had to spread awareness about the cause behind their movement to each and every American. However, the Americans that needed the most awareness spread to them were those in power such as members of Congress. In 1865, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone sent letters around to friends and community members. The letters asked their recipients to consider writing to their representatives in Congress and telling them to amend the constitution (Stanton et al, 1865). One letter stated, "let the Women of the Nation now unitedly protest ... which is at the foundation of all Government, the right of representation" (Stanton et al, 1865). These letters were stepping stones in the awareness campaigns.

The pioneers of the movement did not solely depend on friends and other women to write to Congress. In fact, they sent multiple letters to Congress which asked for the possibility of amending the constitution. In one letter written in 1871, the women described the injustice of not being represented in Congress just as their male counterparts were (Anthony et al, 1871). It must also be considered that the suffragists did not only rely on letters to make a difference. Several outside influences spread the message and came from unexpected sources. At the time, the two most popular magazines geared towards women, *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, surprisingly stayed away from the subject of women's suffrage due to fears of losing female readers (Burkhalter, 1996.) This was another disappointment considering the prospect of how many women would have been able to read the messages had they been published in those magazines (*Ladies' Home Journal*, 1918). It was instead other magazines such as *Literary Digest* and *New Republic* that actively and openly discussed what was going on in the United States pertaining to the suffrage movement (Burkhalter, 1996.) These open discussions were essential in getting the word out about the significant issues women were facing.

These letters and magazine publications represented the need to spread awareness to all of those who had the power to make a change to the fundamental role of women in American politics and government. However, the awareness campaigns were not only limited to Congress. In the early 1900s when the movement's pioneers such as Anthony and Stanton died, new leaders were ushered into the playing field. Alice Paul rose to prominence as a leader and organizer of the women's suffrage movement (Library of Congress, n.d.). One of the major accomplishments under the leadership of Paul was the widespread use of banners (Harris & Ewing, 1917). These banners often had messages that spoke of equality and the need for the right to vote. However, the banners were also used to speak out against those in power such as President Woodrow Wilson (Library of Congress, n.d.). The banners allowed the women to express creative dissidence against the government.

The awareness campaigns had their setbacks just as the campaign to gain support did. However, these campaigns would be essential to achieving the final step of changing the law. The suffragists realized that they were close to achieving their goal and continuing the legacy of all the women who came before them. However, in order to attain the desired nineteenth amendment, suffragists would have to start lobbying the most powerful man in the government, Woodrow Wilson.

Campaigning to Those in Power

Although President Wilson did not have the legislative power to change the constitution, he did have the *influence* to do so. Suffragists knew that they needed the support of the president if they wanted to get the right to vote. This was not going to be an easy task as communication skills of great degrees were needed to be able to reach the president. It was through protests, banners, and demonstrations that the suffragists were able to communicate their message to the president and Congress.

Early on, President Wilson took a stance in which he believed that the decision on women's suffrage was best left to the discretion of state legislatures (Library of Congress, n.d.). These beliefs set off several campaigns and protests against Wilson and Congress. Despite early protests, Wilson seemed unreceptive to supporting an amendment that granted women the right to vote (Library of Congress, n.d.). It was clear that protests not at the nation's capital were not as effective on Wilson as suffragists might have liked them to be. The suffragists made a bold decision to take the protests straight to the White House (Harris & Ewing, 1917). The protests, which lasted for months, proved to be the most effective at changing Wilson's mind (Library of Congress, n.d.). This was due to the fact that the banners that the women carried around were embarrassing to Wilson as they would mock quotes from his own speeches and compare him to the Germans (Library of Congress, n.d.). The suffragists knew that those kinds of political comparisons were highly effective persuasion tactics.

There was, however, another event that launched the women's suffrage movement into success. When the United States was ushered into World War I, suffragists stopped demonstrating and protesting (Hughes, 2017). The suffragists did not stop because they were hopeless or felt as if they were never going to make a difference, but rather they stopped their protests because they felt it would be best to help the country. Women were the main contributors to the war effort in the United States and they did everything they could to help (Cobbs, 2017). Although this may have initially seemed to prove that their movement had lost all power, it turned out to prove the opposite.

The suffragists' unification with the rest of the country during the war showed that they cared for what was going on in the country. Towards the end of the war, Wilson now had the mindset to completely support an amendment for the right to vote (United States Senate, n.d.). In a speech to Congress in 1918, Wilson urged the legislative body to consider all that women had done for the country throughout the war and to pay it back by passing a suffrage amendment (Wilson). He stated:

The women of America are too noble and too intelligent and too devoted to be slackers whether you give or withhold this thing that is mere justice ... the tasks of the women lie at the very heart of the war ... show our women that you trust them as much as you in fact and of necessity depend upon them. (Wilson, 1918).

The sudden support from the most influential man in government did prove to be effective as only a year later, the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution was passed in both houses of Congress (Pruitt, 2021). The most difficult challenge of getting Congress to agree on the amendment was overcome, and it came with a new sense of hope and pride for the future of women in the nation.

Although the suffragists were one step closer to the finish line, they still had to keep fighting throughout the state ratification process of the amendment. Several states voted to ratify in 1919 and a few ratified in early 1920 (Pruitt, 2021). However, by August of 1920, the decision which determined the fate of the amendment came down to Tennessee and North Carolina (Pruitt, 2021). After North Carolina struck the amendment down, the final decision came down to the Tennessee state legislature. Suffragists knew that they had to focus their campaign efforts on Tennessee legislators and ensure that the amendment passed. On August 18, 1920, the Tennessee government ratified the amendment after one legislator broke a tie on the vote (Pruitt, 2021). In ratifying the amendment, Tennessee became the last state needed for the amendment to be officially added to the Constitution of the United States and thus allow the suffragists to finally declare success.

The Impacts of Success

The road to the nineteenth amendment was not an easy journey. Countless women had to be brave and stand up for what they believed in. Despite the setbacks and the instances

where it felt as if there was not a future for the movement, they were resilient, and they kept fighting. A century-long journey of communication and resilience came to an end in 1920. Although the passage of women's suffrage was not an end to the journey of women's equality, it was a major milestone.

Today, one hundred years after the ratification of the nineteenth amendment, women hold 27% of seats in the United States Congress, 30% of state executive offices, and 31% of state legislatures (Center for American Women and Politics, 2021). The current Congress has the most female representation in American history (Blazina & Desilver, 2021). In a record-breaking 2020 election year, the United States witnessed over eighty million people vote for the third ever female nominee for vice president on a major party's ticket (New York Times, 2020). On January 20, 2021, Kamala D. Harris made history as the first African American, Asian American, and female vice president. This accomplishment represents a new generation of female leaders who will be able to overcome the limitations of gender inequality in the nation. As Vice President Harris stated, "But while I may be the first woman in this office, I won't be the last" (2020). Despite the continued need to work on systemic inequality, progress has been made. The movement that started with a small group of women in the nineteenth century has reached a level that exemplifies the power and impact of voices communicating in unison to finally be heard.

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I BID ADIEU

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As I sing to the stars,
I bid you adieu.
Resting in the field that will shine golden
by the sun's light.
The moon gleams in over the mountains.
Stray clouds frolic with the gentle wind.
Time gallants by and the planets dance.
Appearing in the distance of Poseidon's might,
Halley's comet has bowed a subtle goodnight.
Clashing amongst the atmosphere,
a sprinkle of cosmic dust
here and there
The clock turns 9 to bid you away.
A whisper of a kiss,
to fill sweet dreams.
As I sing to the stars,
I bid you adieu.

THE EFFECTS OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE BEACHES ON COQUINA POPULATIONS



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Abstract

Donax variabilis, highly diverse coquina clams, are small bivalves that inhabit the intertidal and shallow subtidal zones of beaches along the Gulf of Mexico. This species of coquina clams is extremely important in the study of the ecosystem of the beaches and are in direct relation to the biodiversity present there. This experiment analyzed the number of coquinas being tested on two different types of beaches, private and public. Experimental procedures involved collecting samples from the beach sites, recording the totals, and returning the coquina to the shore. Observational results displayed higher average proportions of coquina at the public beaches. These findings suggest that the hypothesis is not supported due to the average mean of the private beaches being less than the average mean present at the public beaches, making the public beaches more favorable for coquina.

Key words: Population level, Madeira Beach, Florida, Pinellas County

Introduction

Donax variabilis, highly diverse coquina clams, are known for coming in a wide variety of shell colors and patterns (Adamkewicz 1991). These clams are small bivalves that inhabit the intertidal and shallow subtidal zones of beaches along the Gulf of Mexico (Snyder et al., 2014). Not only are they pretty to look at, they are also important to their environment. These clams are a critical food source for organisms such as fish, crabs, and shorebirds. They have a major impact on the overall survival of the animals up the food chain (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 2019). The coquina in this experiment will be used as a proxy for evaluating how human interaction, beach management, and protection practices on the open public and private beaches are impacting the species that inhabit the beach. It is hypothesized that private beaches will have more coquinas than public beaches.

Along with being significant in the food chains, coquinas are also considered to be an indicator species for their beach habitat. Despite their lifespan averaging only one year, they are extremely sensitive to changes in environmental parameters and can signify when something is affecting their habitat (Mikkelsen 1985). Coquinas can be an indication of a healthy, natural beach because they are constantly filtering nutrients from the water and sand. However, when environmental parameters change for the worst, like record high salinity and temperatures, an increased mortality rate like those seen in Nayar, India can be a direct link between the habitat and the coquinas (Cobb et al., 2011).

Coquina clams can be used by managers of beach regulation that come in to observe major environmental conditions after serious environmental changes to the beach have occurred, such as erosion due to a tropical storm damage (Courtenay et al., 1974). These clams can help them determine how much nourishment the sand has lost as well as the type and amount of sand that is needed to restore the beach. This is especially significant considering nearly one third to one half of all beaches in Florida are "critically eroded" or eroded to such a degree that development, wildlife habitat and other factors are either lost or threatened (Kayatta 2012). The coquinas are a critical factor to most plans of beach restoration, which is often executed by pumping sand into the area to combat erosion and maintain tourism. An analysis of beach restoration projects reveals that beaches in Florida and many other coastal areas are lacking proper management (Ariza et al., 2014).

The beaches in Florida are divided into private and public. While both are managed, private, in comparison to public, tend to have more resources. Funding from organizations helps to preserve the natural environment of these beaches. The funding is easier to acquire because most visitors are more inclined to pay the raised fees if they know that the funds will be allocated to resource protection and beach management (Manoj et al., 2003). Although replenishing sand is beneficial to the beach, it is a risky process for the coquina population. Oftentimes cheap, temporary nourishment projects bury the sand-dwelling creatures alive and tend to harden the beach. This process negatively impacts the coquinas' chance at life and decreases their potential of upkeeping a long-term residence in their newly nourished environment. When sand is pumped onto the beaches during the restoration process, it can potentially cause the clams that are already there to burrow in the "shore edge" for safety from predators only to become buried by more sand than they are able to dig themselves out of, killing them in the process.

With most beach restoration projects; sand pumping is done so fast that wildlife relying on the specific natural sand compositions do not have the time they need to get accustomed and adapted to the change. This can result in large consequences that in the end can do more harm than good. Instead, accretion, which is the gradual addition of soil to the shore, should be used in place of the sand pumping (Kranz 2009). This process allows the wildlife to acclimate themselves to the changes over a longer period of time, enabling them to have a smoother transition as their beaches are slowly restored. The differences in measurements taken between public and private beaches is studied in this experiment. This categorical element is considered as the independent variable.

Methods

Study species

The coquinas are beneficial for scientific observations because they are considered to be an indicator species, which means they provide essential foreshadowing of changes that could affect their environment. This study will be specifically relating the number of coquina, the biodiversity of the area, as well as the health and management of the beach. The dependence on the number of coquinas is related to the regulation of the beach and the independent variable, which protects the nutrients present in sand and water.

Experimental design

To determine if coquina populations differ between open public beaches and regulated private beaches, we collected samples from each environment type with 5 replicas of each. The sampling areas for the public beaches included: Madeira, Indian Rocks, Redington, Longboat Key, and Cortez Beach. The private beach sampling areas included: Caladesi Island, Honeymoon Island, Fred Howard, Fort de Soto, and Sandpearl Resort in Clearwater (Figure 3). At each sampling location, 30.5 cm from the shoreline was then measured from where the tide was hitting the shore at the time and a 1 m x 1 m quadrat was placed onto the sand and a sample was taken from what was included in the boundaries. A shovel was then used to scoop 10 cm into the surface of the sand and the sample was placed in one container that is about 946 milliliters, until full.

Slowly the sand mixture was then filtered by adding the sand from the quart to the sifter. The second quart container was then poured into the water over the sand until only the coquinas remained. The separation process was continued until all of the quart contents of sand were empty. The coquinas were then taken from the sifter, put into a small container, totaled, recorded, and then returned to the shore (Figure 2). To determine if populations of coquina differ between open public and regulated public beaches, data was compared using a t-test.

Results

It was predicted that the private, more protected beaches, will have greater numbers of coquina clams since they are better managed and are protected more from mass tourism. Contrary to this idea, our results were opposite of our expectations. Our results revealed that the effect of private and public beaches is independent of the number of coquina residing on each sampled beach. There is no effect of beach status on density of coquina clams ($t=1.05, df=4, p=0.34$). Although the average number of coquina found at public beaches was nearly 2.4 times more than that found at private beaches (Figure 1), there was a high variability within treatments resulting in no overall effect. One sample location in particular, Madeira beach, had 62, the highest quantity of coquina of all sampling sites (Figure 4).

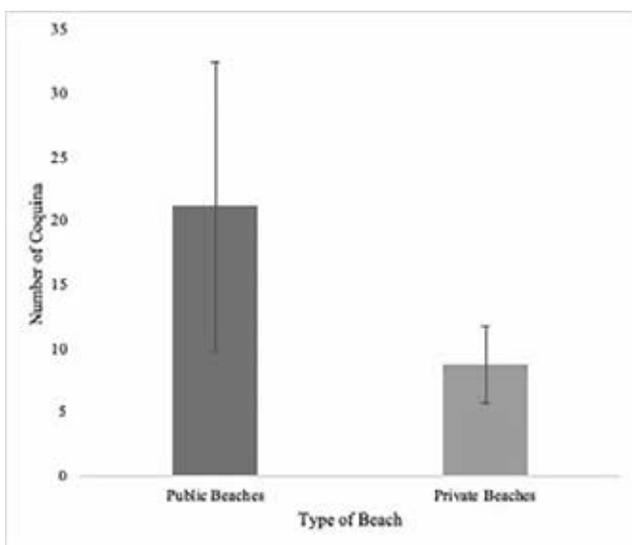


Figure 1

Figure 1. The blue bar indicates the average number of coquina clams found at the public beaches; it is then being related to the orange bar which represents the average number of coquina clams found at the private beaches.

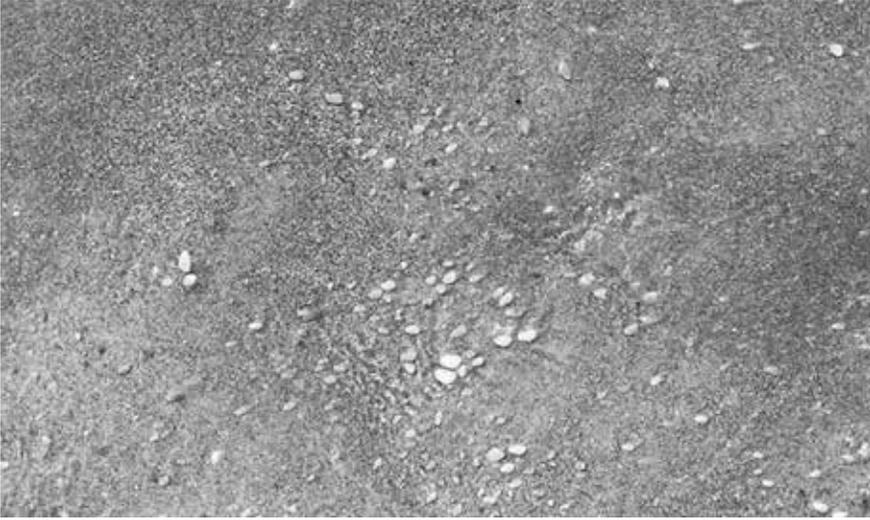


Figure 2

Figure 2. Collection site from shoreline containing the coquina prior to being disturbed at Madeira beach.

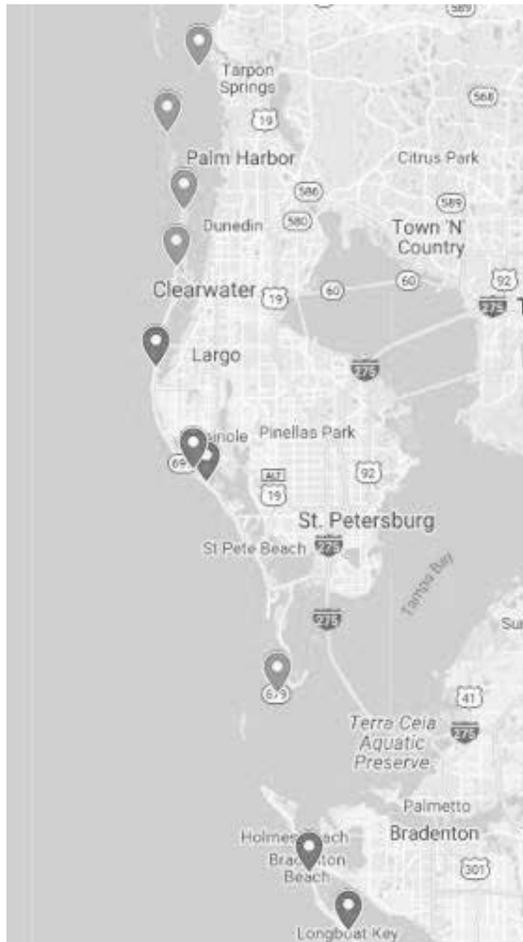


Figure 3

Figure 3. Pictured are the 10 sampling sites along the west coast. Public beaches are indicated with blue markers, while private beaches are indicated with orange markers.

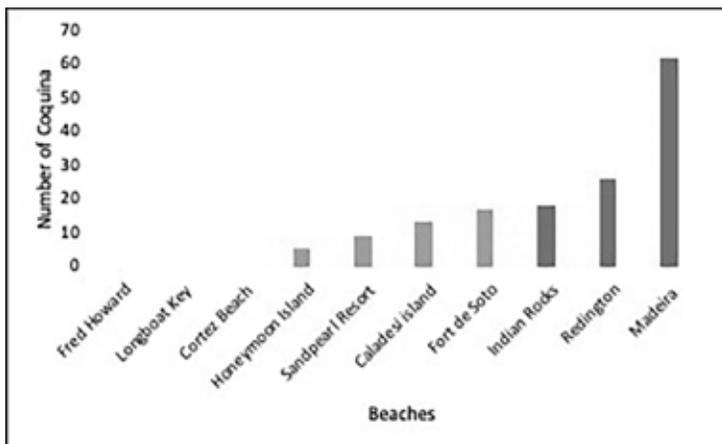


Figure 4

Figure 4. Each bar represents one of the public and private beach sampling sites with their corresponding number of coquina.

Discussion

This study was to better understand the affect humans pose on the ecosystem and communities of beaches in Florida. With beaches in Florida being overpopulated and seemingly always packed, it comes at a cost to the organisms and abiotic factors living in the area. The coquina clams are considered an indicator species, meaning they are one of the most quickly affected by a change in their habitat and are a gauge of the habitat's ability to sustain life (Luna 2014). The change in the clam population and the cause behind it gives scientists insight into what is happening at the beaches and gives them foreshadowing of large-scale events to come. The numbers of coquinas spread throughout the west coast of Florida can be used as a proxy and show how human regulation and preservation of beaches is actually affecting the species' that live there. A factor that can influence the number of coquina and other beach residing animals are compatibility issues. During restoration projects when new sand is brought onto the beach to fight erosion it needs to be the same or greatly similar to what was already there. If the native sand was replenished with material that was not the same, it could potentially result in negative environmental repercussions. One negative repercussion that can come from using an incompatible sand source is that the species living on the shores of the beach, such as coquina, sand crabs, and beach hoppers (*amipods*), will not be able to adapt to the new sand type and potentially die. This information relates to the results, showing great variability of coquina clams averages between public and private beaches. It recognizes that the two types of beaches seem to receive similar management.

The main takeaway from this experiment is how much the beaches are being affected at the ecosystem and community levels, which can be used by the regulators and beach preservationists to decide how much needs to be done to help the areas. It also shows that while one would think private beaches are supposed to be better regulated with the same sand type, this is not always the case. In contrast to the proposed hypothesis, the data was very unpredictable.

Based on the data, a factor that may influence coquina numbers are seasonal changes. As seen in other studies, seasonal changes based on preferred location, can influence the recruitment period, reproductive cycle, and growth rate of coquina (Cobb et al., 2011). The results shown in our study could be influenced by the factors presented in Cobb's research, which could act as a naturally occurring bias. Results of population density may vary depending on the season the study was done. For example, data done in the summer, will show different results than one done in the spring. In order to see overall preferences of

coquina, more accurate data should be collected during the different seasons, over the span of the year to see the averages between the public and private throughout the duration of the year.

The highest number of coquina was present in the public beach sample located at Madeira. This data shows an example of a preferred habitat of the coquina due to their large quantity's resident at the beach. In contrast some of the beach samples had zero coquina clams. These samples represent some factor lacking, causing coquina to not prefer those particular sites. Together, between preferred location and seasonal changes can have an impact on the number of coquina found at various beaches at different times of the year. The results recognize that the hypothesis was rejected since the average mean of the private beaches was not larger than the average mean present at the public beaches.

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VIRGIL AND HOMER CENTO

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Soon as the sun came up in flames above the earth
in such good time the fire-god rises up
Bearing commands for you through the racing winds
Terrorizing the great cities, clinging as fast
Headfirst till he hit the earth, barely alive

If I cannot sway the heavens, I'll wake the powers of hell!
Holding nothing back. In a moment they had reached
A perfect spot for the lures and subterfuge of battle
The burning eyes, the stark, transfixing horror —
You will see if your warm embraces serve you then

Up on a mountain summit, battling in all their fury
And all inside, alarmed by the danger, swarming round
Both harnessed up in the grim gear of war
The one dread oath decreed for the gods on high
That calls the pallid spirits up from the underworld

There, there in the clouds and high clear sky you dangled
By the greatest grimmest oath that binds the happy gods!
We're mortals, harried by mortal enemies
That was the cry that fired each soldier's heart
This is the one the Fates demand. So I believe

There is a valley full of twists and turns
That unseals our eyes in death. Equipped with this,
And the dark cascading waters of the Styx — I swear
Woven through it...there is the heat of Love
Whirring across the dark, never closing her lids

The strongest, swiftest blast on earth, men say —
Their rage to a piercing buzz and black reek
You shades of the dead below for the gods above
She was up in flames at once, engulfed in quenchless fire
Breathing room in war is all too brief



THE EFFECT OF MASS-SPECIFIC BMR ON BODY SIZE

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Introduction

All biological activities depend on energy. These biological systems, however, are shaped by universal constraints (Healy 2013). Two of the most crucial of the constraints are body size and metabolic rate. A major factor affecting metabolism is body size (Glazier 2008). Understanding why rates of metabolism vary is of fundamental importance to the understanding of how different organisms create the energy they use to live. Organisms depend on metabolism, chemical reactions within cells that create energy to survive. The metabolism provides the ability to do processes that are vital to living. This includes eliminating nitrogenous wastes and converting food into energy that is used run cellular processes, such as synthesizing food, into organic material that is crucial to the body like lipids and nucleic acids. Upon these reactions taking place, organisms grow and reproduce. It is observed that expenditure of energy per gram of tissue is dependent of body mass, as tissue in smaller animals expends more energy before expiring than tissue in their larger animal counterparts (Speakman 2005). Organisms that are smaller in body mass, have been seen to have a pattern in that their metabolism is higher during its lifetime than other larger animals, contrary to other findings.

The mass-specific metabolic rates of birds, mammals, and amphibia will be used as a proxy for evaluating the impact of metabolic rate on organisms' body size. It is hypothesized that the amphibia will have the highest metabolic rate due to the smallest average body size of the samples. It is also hypothesized that basal metabolic rate and mass specific BMR will have a direct effect on the body masses of birds, mammals, and amphibians. The biggest difference between the classes being observed is the mammals and birds are homeotherms, meaning their bodies maintain a consistent temperature by its metabolic activity as temperature varies. The amphibians however are heterotherms, organisms who regulate body temperature differently when inactive, fluctuating with the environment.

Methods

To determine if the differing mass-specific metabolic rates has an influence on an organisms' body size, data was extracted via Quardvark. The sampling classes in which data was extracted from were Mammalia, Aves, and Amphibia. Of these classes, the

data of birds, mammals, and amphibians such as frogs and salamanders were observed. For each class, the average mass (g), basal metabolic rate (W) and mass specific BMR (W/g) were recorded.

Results

Figures 1 and 2 show that mammals have a positive relationship regarding body mass with both basal and mass-specific metabolic rate. Figures 3 and 4 show that like mammals, birds also have a positive relationship with data sets being closer to trendlines. When comparing birds and mammals, figures 5 and 6 show that mammals' metabolism is much greater than that of the birds. The only sample in which birds were greater than mammals was in figure 7, the comparison of average mass-specific metabolic rate. Using this compiled data, figure 8 shows the comparison the average mass-specific metabolic rate between amphibia, mammals, and birds. Overall, birds have the highest rate, double what the mammal was and more than ten times that of the amphibia.

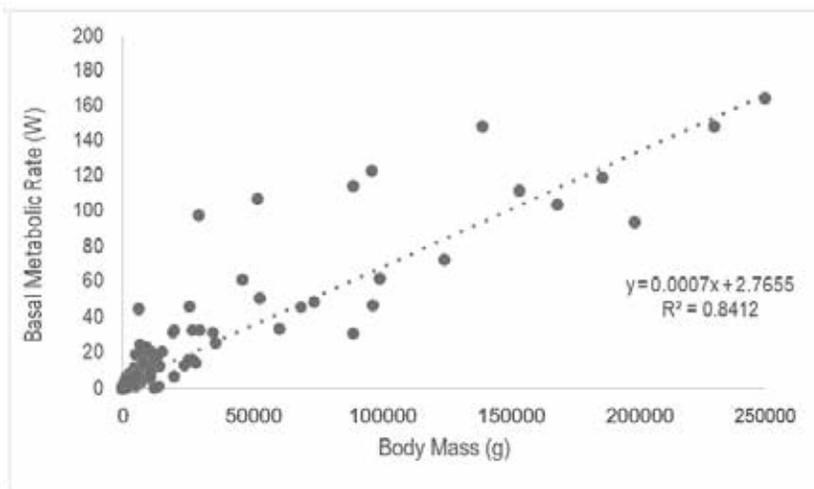


Figure 1

Figure 1. Basal metabolic rate versus body mass in Mammalia. Data were extracted from Quardvark (citation).

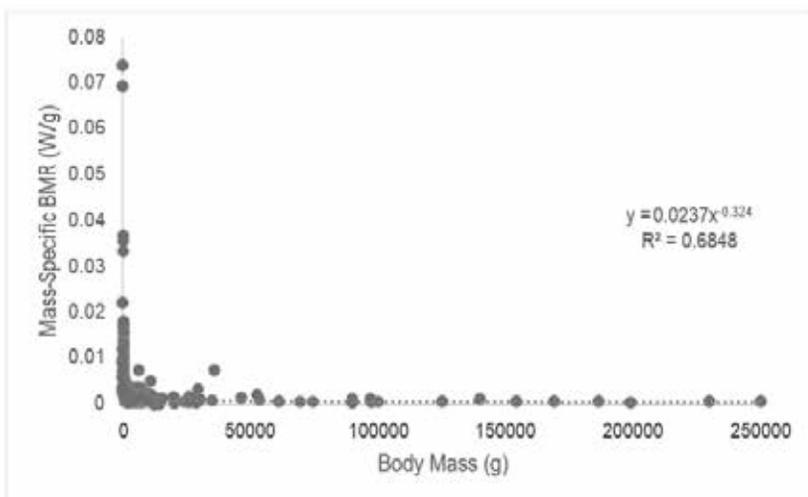


Figure 2

Figure 2. Mass-specific basal metabolic rate versus body mass in Mammalia.

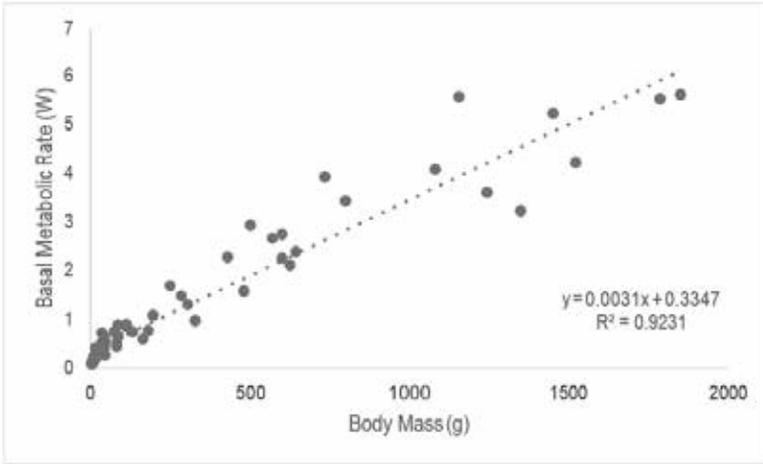


Figure 3

Figure 3. Basal metabolic rate versus body mass in birds.

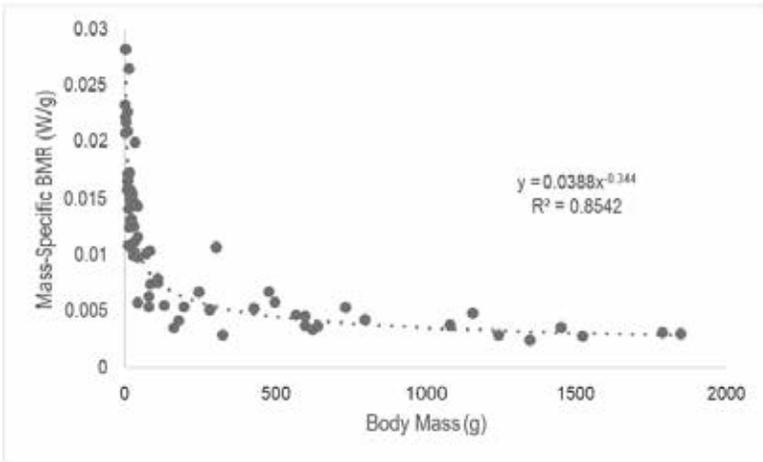


Figure 4

Figure 4. Mass-specific basal metabolic rate versus body mass in birds.

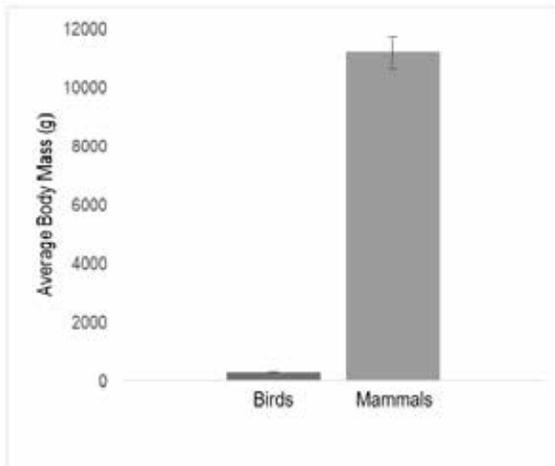


Figure 5

Figure 5. Average body masses of birds and mammals. Birds are significantly smaller than mammals ($t = -5.18$; $df = 295$; $p = 2.05E-7$).

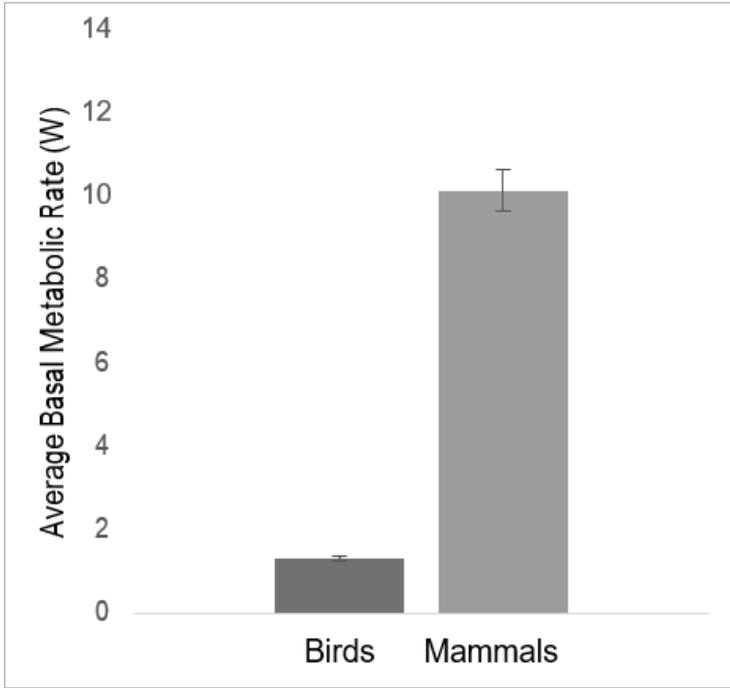


Figure 6

Figure 6. Average basal metabolic rate of birds and mammals. The average BMR of birds is significantly slower than mammals ($t=-5.82$, $df=304$, $p=7.51E-9$).

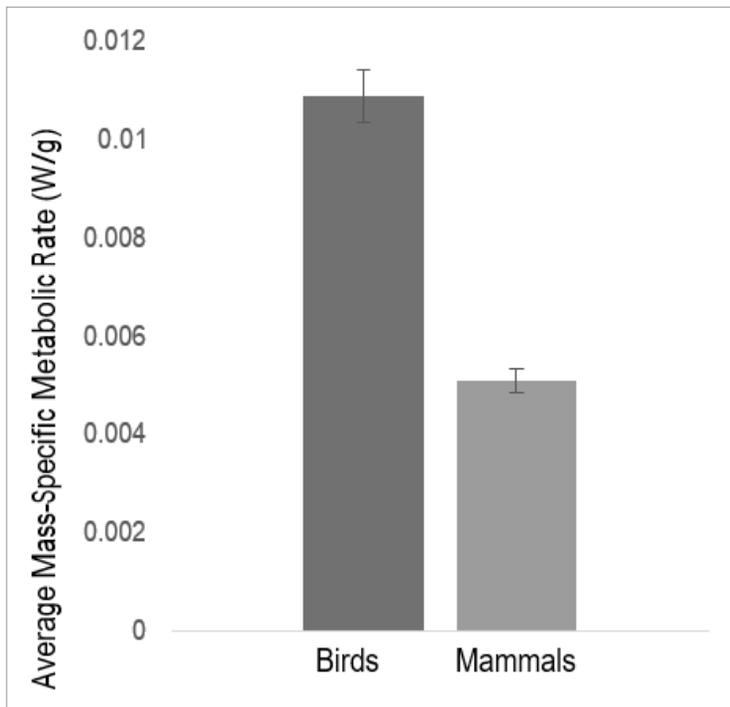


Figure 7

Figure 7. Average mass-specific metabolic rate of birds and mammals. The average mass-specific metabolic rate of birds is significantly higher than mammals ($t=5.99$, $df=101$, $p=1.62E-8$).

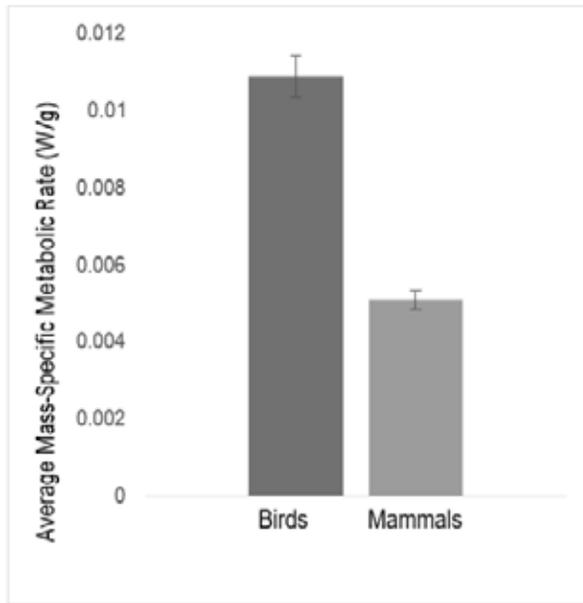


Figure 8

Figure 8. Average mass-specific metabolic rate of amphibia, mammals, and birds. The average mass-specific BMR of Mammals are significantly higher than Amphibia ($t=-11.39$; $df=308$; $p=1.26E-25$). The average mass specific BMR of Amphibia is significantly lower than that of birds ($t=-12.59$; $df=65$; $p=2.12E-19$).

Discussion

This study investigated the most crucial constraints of organisms (Glazier 2008), the differences between the mass-specific metabolic rates of birds, mammals, and amphibia to determine the correlation between metabolic rate and body size. While figures 1 and 2 show that mammals have larger average body mass and basal metabolic rate than birds, figure 8 shows us that birds have the larger average mass-specific metabolic rate. This data was then compared to that of amphibia, as seen in figure 7. Amphibia despite having the lowest average body mass, did not have the fastest metabolic of the classes in the sample.

After the statistical analysis of the data extracted from Quardvark and the comparison of the basal metabolic rate, mass-specific BMR, body mass, and their averages, it can be concluded that posed hypothesis that amphibia having the highest metabolic rate due to the smallest average body size is not supported. The other posed hypothesis that basal metabolic rate and mass specific BMR having a direct effect on body mass is supported. The influence of metabolic rate in organisms, specifically mammals, birds, and amphibia, does not directly correlate with body size.

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THE CRISIS AMERICA'S YOUTH FACES AS A RESULT OF COVID-19: THE WIDENING OF THE EDUCATION GAP



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The youth of the United States is facing a crisis due to the closing of schools as a direct result of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. The pre-existing education gap has only been broadened as students have been moved to remote learning. Factors such as social and economic status, race and ethnicity, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have only heightened the impact the pandemic has had on education. The welfare of America's youth has also been put at risk with factors such as increased unemployment, school closures, and increased stress levels due to the current global health crisis.

"Stay at home" orders in the spring of 2020 saw school-building closures across 48 of the 50 states. About 55.1 million students were affected by these closures (Children's Defense Fund, 2020). Suddenly, teachers found themselves scrambling to translate in-person lessons to virtual presentations. Districts struggled as they tried to ensure children would have technological devices with which to engage in the virtual classroom learning experience. Classrooms, as we know them to be, instantly became a thing of the past as students and their families transformed kitchen tables, bedrooms and living rooms into virtual classrooms.

These new home classrooms drew attention to social and economic inequalities as never before. Virtual learning highlighted the social and economic differences in the student population as students exposed their home environments to their teachers and classmates through webcams. While the exposure of these inequalities could be damaging to a student, it is what is unseen that is far more damaging. Many districts have been able to provide some type of distance learning, but there are still many students that have gone and continue to go without. According to America's Promise Alliance, "Recent analysis shows that 16.9 million children do not have high-speed internet at home and 7.3 million do not have a desktop, laptop, or tablet" (Children's Defense Fund, 2020). Lack of devices, no internet connection, learning disabilities, and parents whose work schedules do not allow for them to facilitate distance learning have

become standing hurdles leaving many students without access to education. The loss of learning due to the pandemic has been dubbed “The Covid Slide,” and we have barely begun to see its effects on this generation of youth.

Learning gaps had been established prior to the global pandemic. These gaps can be attributed to disabilities, low income, and racial inequalities. Breaks in schooling, such as summer recess, have already been proven to increase these gaps, particularly in the subjects of mathematics and literature. According to the research article “Projecting the Potential Impact of COVID-19 School Closures on Academic Achievement,” “...returning students are expected to start fall 2020 with approximately 63 to 68% of the learning gains in reading and 37 to 50% of the learning gains in mathematics relative to a typical school year” (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Continued school closures as well as lack of access to virtual schooling can only continue to negatively impact these initial projections.

Aside from the known breaks in schooling due to the current pandemic, there is a question of the quality of distance learning that has been provided. The majority of teachers and grade school students had little to no experience with virtual schooling prior to COVID-19. Without warning teachers were forced to convert in-person lesson plans into online lessons. Students were required to sit for long periods of time on devices that in the past parents typically tried to limit access to. For younger students in particular, there was the question of whether or not there was someone available to capably facilitate online instruction. Families who relied on schools for child care abruptly found themselves with no means of daytime care for their children. These factors along with students who had little or no access to online schooling all play an important role in the quality of education that has been received during the global health crisis.

For many students, school is a safe haven and may be the only stable element in their lives. The abrupt closure of schools has consequently left these children without the supports they had been receiving within, leaving them more vulnerable to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as: low family income, domestic violence, neighborhood violence, residence with someone mentally ill, suicidal or depressed; residence with someone with alcohol or drug problems, and unfair treatment or judgement due to race/ethnicity (Children’s Defense Fund, 2020). The consequences of ACEs can be: depression and anxiety, control issues, substance abuse, risky behavior, neural development delays, low stress management, and an increased rate of heart disease, cancer and other illnesses (Children’s Defense Fund, 2020). The combination of increased unemployment due to the global pandemic and the closure of schools is causing the percentage of children exposed to ACEs to steadily rise. The children being exposed to these negative experiences have now lost what may have been their only emotional and health support during this crisis, due to the closure of schools.

Educators play an important role in child welfare. With school closures it has become difficult for teachers to see warning signs of neglect and abuse. Typically reports to child protective services come from people outside of a child’s home. According to the *Washington Post*, “...no group reports more than educators, who were responsible for 21 percent of the 4.3 million referrals made in 2018, according to federal data” (Schmidt, 2020). With unemployment rates at an all-time high, school closures, “stay at home” orders, and the anxiety associated with the possibility of contracting COVID-19, stress levels within homes have substantially increased. Typically a child abuse victim’s abuser is a family member. Due to the pandemic, family members are the only people most children have any contact with. A *Washington Post* article titled, “With kids stuck at home, ER doctors see more severe cases of child abuse” states, “In 2018, nearly 80 percent of perpetrators were parents of the victim. That year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated 1,770 children died of abuse and neglect” (Schmidt, 2020). The lockdown has only seen these numbers increase, while the number of reports of abuse have dramatically decreased.

Not only are child abuse-related incidents on the rise, so is the incidence of childhood hunger. According to the Children's Defense Fund, "Last year, 22 million children received free-or reduced-price school lunches..." (Children's Defense Fund, 2020). COVID-19 has caused a disruption in these programs, leaving the children that were benefiting from them at risk. School closures, increased unemployment, and loss of income have only added to this issue. A proper diet is essential to healthy child development and a child's ability to learn. According to a 2020 report by the Children's Defense Fund, 17 percent of U.S. children lived in food-insecure households in 2017 (Children's Defense Fund, 2020). For many of these children, school lunch and breakfast programs made up the majority of their daily food intake. While some programs have been put in place to supplement the loss of school meals, many expire in 2021 and more action is needed to address this issue.

COVID-19 has seen homelessness and unstable housing conditions to be on the rise. This has had a direct effect on children's ability to access education during distance learning. The economic recession we are in has made it difficult for low-income families to provide the type of environment conducive to learning. According to a 2019 report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "...in 2017, severe rent burden was the most common problem, with 7.52 million households paying more than half of their income on rent"(Dept. of Housing & Urban Development, 2020). These numbers can only be anticipated to increase exponentially as unemployment rates skyrocket due to the pandemic. The concern for loss of education will fall to the wayside as these families scramble to maintain shelter and nourishment.

Schools provide the only health care many students receive, not only for physical health, but mental health as well. Most of the students reliant on these services have lost access to them entirely due to distance learning. The Children's Defense Fund says, "Of those children who do receive mental health services, 70-80 percent receive them at school" (Children's Defense Fund, 2020). During a time where public stress factors have substantially increased due to the looming health crisis, mental health services are essential, yet they have been stripped away from students because of school closures.

Students with disabilities have lost educational resources essential to their education and well being with the closing of schools. As many of these students require curriculum modifications and accommodations to facilitate learning, virtual learning may not be an option even with available access. Not to mention other services they may not be receiving such as speech, occupational, and physical therapies. Regression, typically of some concern pre-pandemic, has become a major issue within this demographic of children. In an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Shawn Ullman, senior director of national initiatives at The Arc, a nonprofit disability advocacy group said, "All students may have lost some learning last spring. There's a general belief that students with disabilities lost more learning" (Maher, 2020). For these students, the instructional time lost due to the pandemic may take them a substantially longer amount of time to make up over a student with typical needs. These students are some of the most at risk for losing education essential to developing independence and being able to take care of their daily needs.

The lack of social interaction because of school closings can have a negative impact on a student's desire to learn. Students are not receiving the same positive reinforcements through remote learning, which can lead to a lack of motivation. Students are no longer receiving motivating physical rewards. Accolades for academic achievements have less impact when given through a computer versus in person. Teachers are finding it more difficult to keep children engaged through remote instruction, as it is far easier for a child to tune out a computer screen than a physical person.

Another cause for concern due to school closures is high school dropout rates. The demographic of students most at risk to dropout of school are the very students

that have had difficulties receiving education during distance learning. Dr. Russell W. Rumberger, a national leading dropout prevention scholar, weighed in on the topic in an interview with the Regional Educational Laboratory Program saying, "I worry that under these and remote learning conditions the number of kids who don't finish high school might increase. Students vulnerable to dropping out may "check out" since—in at least some districts—grades are being frozen or failing grades are being eliminated, and there are limited opportunities for social interaction with peers and teachers" (Berliner, 2020). These are legitimate concerns as the statistics of students dropping out of school after missed days are normally staggering. According to McKinsey & Company in an article titled "COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime," "In normal circumstances, students who miss more than 10 days of school are 36 percent more likely to drop out" (Dorn et al., 2020). Knowing this statistic and then considering how long vulnerable students have been without school due to COVID-19 and the financial crisis some of these families are facing, it seems certain dropout rates are going to be at an all time high.

Clearly COVID-19 has created loss of learning, even in affluent communities. While this is a current, pressing issue, there is an even greater issue for concern. That concern is what ramifications the loss of learning on this generation of youth will have in the future. An increase in dropout rates could impact future crime rates. In a 2011 article Elizabeth Waibel of the *Jackson Free Press* wrote, "At state prisons in the U.S., 68 percent of inmates do not have a high-school diploma" (Waibel, 2011). There appears to be a direct correlation of crime and high school dropout rates. If the dropout rates increase, it is very possible crime may increase as well.

Future employment rates may also be impacted by the "COVID Slide." Today's youth might be lacking employable skills due to the loss of learning from the global pandemic. The economic recession due to COVID might also come into play as students may be less likely to seek higher learning because of financial constraints. These factors can also have an impact on future crime rates as well as poverty levels which can in turn create a long-lasting, negative impact on the education gap in the future.

As a society, we need to recognize the crisis the youth of today is facing due to school closures because of COVID-19. It is imperative that we begin to strategize how to effectively help students recover from the loss of learning they have suffered over the past year. We need to be cognizant of the possible future ramifications the loss of learning could hold for our society in the future. By recognizing what could be, we can possibly change the course, exponentially impacting systemic inequities within our educational system and overcoming disparities for underrepresented and underserved student populations.

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NOT A DRILL



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Pre Covid 19, when ill, I still tried to go to school. The brainwashing about persevering under any circumstance and my destructive perfectionist tendencies made staying home for self-care a non-option for most of my childhood. My schools didn't help. If I wasn't dying, they saw no reason to miss class. In my early years of public school, I showed up to class with all manner of plagues and did everything to keep from spreading anything to anyone else. I kept Germx on hand, smothering and huffing it religiously until I lost more brain cells than my classmates sniffing Sharpie markers in the bathroom. I wiped my desk down with Clorox before dismissal as if destroying evidence of a murder, and I only sparingly threatened to lick people. One would think I would have had to amend this habit when I entered the culinary program in my sophomore year of high school. However, the instructor assured us that, while she considered the sick unfit to breathe the same air touching the food, students could still do book work. So, when I ran a mild fever of 99.9 degrees, I figured it an excellent idea to go to school. I turned out to be spectacularly wrong.

My culinary class hung around with backpacks shouldered, ready for our weekly trip to replenish ingredients with the neighboring county's culinary groups. I sat hunched on the always dirty lab floor, regretting my refusal of the expired in 2001 sleepy-time cold medicine my mom offered that morning. My stomach did its best imitation of a garbage-disposal. I opted not to eat breakfast due to my negative track record with motion sickness and my desire to avoid giving my body anything that would turn it into a fountain of regret. Only an unhealthy amount of caffeine and spite fought to make me a functional human, and by the time we recited the pledge, a headache and chills set in. We received confirmation that the bus arrived, but a voice came over the intercom before we reached the door.

"Teachers and students, this is an evacuation drill, I repeat this is an evacuation drill, please move to your-"

Before the announcement finished, my teacher snatched the emergency bag with the neon vest and headcount, and we sped to the football field evacuation site. A wave

of synchronized groans escaped the second we left the shade of the building. The unfiltered summer sun glared down on us as we moved across the parking lot, dodging student cars and teenagers running around as if trying to survive Pompeii's pyroclastic flow. A handful of our culinary class and I lost the teacher in the crowd, and we searched the huddle of bodies for her neon vest. Luckily, one of the neighboring school's culinary teachers, who left the bus to check on us, found us, and we followed her to our evacuation spot. Funneling a blockage of over a hundred people through the gate to the football field created chaos, and everyone bumped and squished into each other, tearing grunts and rude words from classmates.

When the firefighters and the bomb squad arrived, I knew something felt wrong, though it took every neuron in my tired brain to discern what. A rush of teachers moved in the opposite direction of the herd, towards the building with armed guards to perform classroom sweeps. Even the assistant principals looked panicked as the walkie talkies on their belts went insane, screeching with static.

"We checked all of G Hall. Nothing unusual in H-"

I stopped, and one look around confirmed my fears.

Not a drill

People around me picked up the truth as well, and the air buzzed with the realization. As standard in emergencies, the students did not remain calm and rational but instead lost their collective minds.

"We gonna die!" one person yelled.

"We are not! Shut up!" came another.

"I'm leaving! They can't keep us here! What if we all make a run for it at once?" one said, looking around for supporters.

Most tapped at their phones, posting the story to social media, or called their parents. Teachers, just as stunned as us, did little to calm the situation. Somewhere in my feverish haze, I tried to assess the threat but could do no more but blink at the people running around me. I then felt the pain in my shoulders- a familiar digging pain. My brain spiked.

I brought a full backpack to an active bomb threat.

I swore I felt people staring at me suspiciously. I started hyperventilating from the paranoia of accidentally breaking the rules. Fears of suspension filled my mind.

To make matters worse, the looming threat of death and general fever loopiness made me irrational, and I felt an anxiety attack coming on. I wasn't sure if I would pass out or throw up the coffee and stomach bile, licking acid up my esophagus. The air sat on my head as heavily as a two a.m. existential crisis. The crowd screamed louder than an audience at a football game, and my head felt as if it would burst under the noise. Space vibrated as the sound of the entire student body's collective breathing crashed against my skull under the yelling, and I slumped onto the concrete, laid out like a salted slug.

People guessed us potentially trapped for hours, and it kept getting hotter and hotter. At first, the sun relieved me of my feverish chill, but soon my skin burned strawberry red, and my lip's flesh cracked and split. Classmates used the corpses of folded homework in a pathetic effort to fan one another. The collective sweat of so many roasting bodies accosted my nosed even through the gummy mucus barrier. We looked skyward, waiting for cloud cover, and collectively grumbled and groaned when the shade abandoned us.

I closed my eyes and tried to ride out the experience, but after forty-seven minutes, the faculty decided to move us down into the bleachers, absent of cover. For a second, the crowd looked like a coup. A cry of outrage resounded, and one student even threw a purse. As though trying to move cattle off a railroad, teachers and officers worked to persuade the group.

At this point, I felt so out of it that I wordlessly accepted the sudden relocation as a classmate pulled my body along with the rest of the sweaty mass. I weakly gagged on the haze of biological sour but tried my best to put it out of my mind and focus on where I used to feel my legs. Even with my classmate's help, I hobbled directly into one of the metal poles supporting the stadium on my way to the bleachers. The moment we sat, the metal seats branded our thighs through our khakis, and I struggled to keep myself upright but ultimately gave up, crumbling against the seats and frying like a piece of expired bacon on a skillet. The dots in my vision blended with the silhouettes of vultures that perpetually circled the stadium. I do not know what I saw in this state, but I'm sure it told me the meaning of life and proceeded to bash my face with a desk until I forgot.

"You good?" My classmate asked.

I responded with something akin to a dying cat in labor. Each sound distorted under my inflamed throat, and my saliva sat like a paste against my tongue, making every breath taste stale.

By the end of the second period, I somehow ended up at the nurses' station with a rapidly rising temperature of 103.4 degrees. The next thing I knew, my mom dragged my half-conscious body to her mini-van. I slept for 15 hours, only getting up to sip water and throw up.

As a result of this incident, before going to school with so much as a headache, my first question is always, "Can you survive an emergency in this condition?" and if that answer is "no," I lay back down.



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