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The Way Forward

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Call For Submissions

The *CEA Mid-Atlantic Review* (ISSN 1067-7429) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published annually by the College English Association Mid-Atlantic Group. We specialize in literary and cultural criticism, discussions of pedagogy, public humanities work, reviews of scholarly books, personal essays concerned with the teaching of English, and creative writing related to literature or teaching. The CEA Mid-Atlantic Review is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography and licensed through EBSCO.

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Writing Oneself into Being: Transnational Explorations of Radical Empathy and Community in Ika Hügel-Marshall's *Invisible Woman* and Faïza Guène's *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*

Tiffany Pennamon

Because Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) like schools, religious institutions, carceral systems, and even families play a significant role in identity-formation and upholding oppressive social systems, ethnic and culturally marginalized groups frequently face erasure, silencing, and physical and emotional violence when they do not have the ability to define themselves, their experiences, or their needs. For this reason, this article identifies Ika Hügel-Marshall's *Invisible Woman: Growing Up Black in Germany* (2008) and Faïza Guène's *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* (2004) as two case studies of Black and Brown women writers using their literature to construct an individual and collective cultural identity in the face of insidious social erasure and oppression in their native countries – Germany and France, respectively. I argue that, with their literary works, Hügel-Marshall and Guène write themselves into a Western society that tried to render them nonexistent and insignificant because of their identities. Drawing on Womanism and scholar Paul T. Corrigan's conceptualization of the *nepantlera* as theoretical frameworks, I further contend that Hügel-Marshall's and Guène's literary works are especially demonstrative of literature's ability to validate previously dismissed cultural identities while similarly birthing empathy for and understanding of Afro-German and French Muslim experiences, respectively.

This article explores Guène's and Hügel-Marshall's works by applying two major concepts, Womanism and nepantlera. First, in

order to explore the Womanist undercurrents in Guène's and Hügel-Marshall's writing, it is necessary to briefly define what a Womanist is. Alice Walker coined the term "Womanist" in her 1983 text *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Walker revealed that a Womanist can be a "Black feminist or feminist of color," or any person "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (Phillips 19). Using Walker's foundation as a guide, scholar Layli Maparyan examined tangential Womanist frameworks created by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems to theorize a more expansive definition of Womanism: "It is a way of understanding the world that is predicated on taking action which harmonizes the elements – people, spirits, [and] nature – that make up the world" (Maparyan 29). In essence, Maparyan's formulation of the Womanist idea explains it as a dynamic worldview and approach to social change that is a "gift to the world from women of color, particularly women of African descent" (32). Womanist theologians further underscore the spiritual power behind Womanism's ability to change minds and hearts, especially in the writings of women of color. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas suggests that the Womanist epistemology often found in these works is a testament to Black women's intrinsic understanding that their writing and knowledge production is a site of battle in a "death-dealing context" (3); in order for Black – and Brown – women to achieve self-determination and collective liberation from oppression by white men, white women, and Black men, they must continuously offer and stay grounded in a unique "moral, spiritual, and political" way of knowing that dismantles the "white and patriarchal powers that [compromise] Black women's integrity and self-determination" (Floyd-Thomas 3). Without the ability to write, Black and Brown women's silencing could mean social and literal death.

Although many Black and Brown women writers do not explicitly define themselves as a Womanist, some of their writing that is focused on their lived cultural experiences make them part of the Womanist tradition that seeks to bring about collective liberation and well-being – or "commonweal" – for all created beings (Phillips xxv). Commonweal can be achieved in part by harmonizing and coordinating, but also increasing dialogue between people. These skill sets are two foundational Womanist methodologies that attempt to figure out "how to make disparate elements work together" as well as "express and establish both connection and individuality" (Phillips xxvii). One

of the transformative outcomes of harmonizing and coordinating and engaging in dialogue is that it raises in humans what Maparyan calls a "differential consciousness" in her seminal text *The Womanist Reader*. A differential consciousness "permits movement among and between divergent logics (cultural, religious, ideological, etc.) and conceptual schemes (cosmologies, value systems, ethical codes, etc.)" (Phillips xxvii). In other words, an individual implementing Womanist methodology can hold space for and affirm another's perspective and differences while still living by their own value system, ideology, or way of knowing.

Second, in addition to their Womanist ethics, I recognize the ways in which Hügel-Marshall's and Guène's adherence to their lived truths and their unofficial offering of a cultural education in their works *Invisible Woman* and *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* make them *nepantlera* artists. In his article "Nepantlera as Midwife of Empathy," Womanist scholar Paul T. Corrigan reconfigures Gloria E. Anzaldúa's theory of *nepantlera* to demonstrate artists' ability to connect, heal, and sustain humans' relations with each other, the natural world, and the spiritual world. Anzaldúa originally defined nepantlera in the woman-of-color anthology *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*; the term refers to "those who facilitate passage between worlds" (i.e. moving from a capitalist, racist, patriarchal world to a liberated world) (137). Corrigan takes this understanding of the nepantlera and applies it to storytellers and other artists who play an integral role in our social change ecosystem through their production of radical, truth-telling work. He argues that literature significantly contributes to the work of building bridges between self and others because "nepantleras help us give birth to empathy" (Corrigan 137).

Moreover, nepantlera artists like Hügel-Marshall and Guène working through written mediums of storytelling have a unique ability to empower others to feel beyond their lived experiences because their work transcends a specific moment in time. Corrigan writes later in his essay:

> Where silence or repetition might become prohibitively awkward when speaking to a stranger, texts invite us to pause, to linger, and to return to certain points over and over again as long as we need – the sort of slow, recursive engagement transformation usually requires. While

> reading does not replace lived, embodied experiences and relationships with others, reading does help us develop the practice of empathy, which we may then bring with us out into the world.
> (Corrigan 139)

Corrigan's understanding of the transformative power of literature aligns with spiritual notions that any revolution must start from change within oneself before manifesting into the world. As such, readers can tap into their own inner revolutionary work of empathizing with the two women they do not know directly simply because of the ways Hügel-Marshall and Guène compellingly write about the exploration of their inner psyche and existence in the world. From there, their literature gives birth to empathy and affirmation for ethnic women, Afro-Germans, North Africans, or even people who feel they do not belong in their own homeland. Beyond this, the women's writing invites others who resonate with the work to build or join communities revolving around the women's shared experiences.

***Invisible Woman: Growing Up Black in Germany*: The Politics of Talking Back**

Ika Hügel-Marshall's autobiography *Invisible Woman: Growing Up Black in Germany* should be reimagined as a nepantlera Womanist text because of its enthralling narrative of the mixed-race woman's decades-long journey to embracing her Afro-German identity, which ultimately helped propel the nascent Afro-German movement in Germany, as well as her own attempts at solidarity with ostracized Black people across the globe (Janson 74-76). While the search and eventual reunion with her Black father in America is the central vignette of Hügel-Marshall's story, the text broadly exemplifies how the author only came to accept her Blackness in her 40s through writing, reading literature, and being in community with others who share similar cultural and racial experiences as her in other regions of the African diaspora; prior to this, Hügel-Marshall feared her Blackness because she did not understand it. Throughout *Invisible Woman*, readers step into the shoes of the protagonist as she faces traumatic experiences being separated from her white German mother and younger sister for

much of her early upbringing; being labeled "ugly" or "immoral" due to her skin color; and being excluded from the German nationality itself. The vulnerability infused in the author's writing invites others to empathize with a child-turned-adult who should be afforded the same level of care, love, and identity affirmation as other individuals.

Hügel-Marshall's experience is not unlike other Afro-Germans who must address what Trinh Minh-Ha calls the "difference that has no name, but too many names already" (Burkhard 125). In "'A New Spelling of My Name': Becoming a (Black, Feminist, Immigrant) Autoethnographer Through *Zami*," Tanja Burkhard shares that she and her mother – a Black Jamaican immigrant in Germany – similarly could not name the racial marginalization they faced because there was no accessible information or widespread dialogue about the discursive and sociohistorical context of Afro-German identity. Burkhard writes, "This work was not considered part of the mainstream canon of knowledge in Germany, and therefore excluded from general discussions about feminism and migration" (125). It is only exposure to Black diasporic writers and feminist organizers like Audre Lorde, May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz, among others, that Burkhard and Hügel-Marshall come to substantiate their Afro-German experience. This hints at the nepantlera abilities of the aforementioned writers and artists who challenge the Afro-German women to practice radical self-love and radical self-expression in order to facilitate passage into a new German society that fully recognizes its Black citizens.

Before meeting Lorde, who was a Caribbean-American Black woman poet-activist-lesbian, Hügel-Marshall shied away from deeper, complex conversations in white feminist spaces because she internalized the stereotypes associated with her Blackness. This sense of self-hatred is so detrimental that Hügel-Marshall even gaslit herself on behalf of the white women who do not take accountability for how they uphold white supremacist ideals in the spaces they occupy. The extent of Hügel-Marshall's wounded racial esteem is evident when she remarks, "Blacks are utterly strange to me, and I fear them … I am Black and I am ugly … I'm a bad seed, wayward, immoral, filthy, stupid. The last person I'd want to meet is someone like me" (85). When Hügel-Marshall meets Lorde for the second time during a 1990 conference in Frankfurt, she acknowledges that she has read much of – and been "greatly influenced" by – Lorde's published work (94).

Hügel-Marshall reveals Lorde's "texts gave me courage and made me feel understood. I'd rediscovered myself, not only in the way she expressed the pain that I and so many Blacks felt, but also in her message that we must stop seeing ourselves as helpless victims of a racist system" (94). Hügel-Marshall's narrative inclusion of her brief, but profound relationship with Lorde reveals how dialogue and community-building serve as integral strategies of Womanist resistance – ones that can be used by oppressed peoples to talk back and take up space in a world that intentionally makes marginalized people "invisible."

Because of Lorde's radical love for herself and other Black women across the diaspora, Hügel-Marshall's rediscovery of self and emerging love for her Afro-Germanity moves her into a mental and intellectual space where she is able to boldly challenge white Germans and assert that she has a right to be both German and Black. For instance, she harmonizes and coordinates her experience when she responds to a white university student who previously disputed her Blackness, proclaiming, "No one else has the right to define who I am. No one else can tell me if I have 'the right' to call myself a Black woman" (Hügel-Marshall 102). Beyond the individual relationship between Lorde and Hügel-Marshall, their encounter also introduces the Afro-German writer to a nearly all-Black environment – St. Croix, which "becomes [her] annual homecoming" (98-99) – as well as a sincere life partner and other friends – Dagmar Schultz and Lorde's partner Gloria Joseph. These communal relationships bring warmth and joy to Hügel-Marshall's previously desolate and isolated life. They give her the psychological and social "medicine" she needs to not only truly appreciate her reunion with her Black family in America, but also forgive her white mother for the ways she could not show up for her in her formative years. It takes Hügel-Marshall more than 40 years to feel happy looking in the mirror and to be proud to be herself (135), but it is better late than never. By offering the gift of *Invisible Woman* to the world, younger generations of Afro-Germans can cope with, navigate, or avoid altogether the same traumas Hügel-Marshall once faced before the existence of longstanding Afro-German movements and communities. In a similar fashion, non-Black Germans who read this book may see and hopefully understand the devastating consequences that occur when Whiteness attempts to erase and control Afro-German people's bodies and their experiences.

Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow: Constructions of North African Adolescence

Although Guène's 2004 novel *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* is a more fictionalized account of her lived experience as a French youth of North African descent, it dually offers Guène a medium to move from a fractured sense of identity into one of wholeness while also providing readers an opportunity to empathize with the experiences Guène and other second-generation French Muslims faced growing up in the banlieues of Paris. Comparable to Hügel-Marshall, Guène explicitly acknowledges writing as the art form that brings her healing, an escape from France's racist and anti-Muslim society, and a vehicle to achieve self-actualization and self-validation. Consequently, *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* should be viewed as a nepantlera text because of its capacity to put non-Muslims and French Muslims alike into the very specific experience of a young Moroccan woman who is witty, rebellious of Islamic ways of living, and seemingly more Westernized and wiser than her French society gives her credit for.

Like Corrigan's nepantlera artist, Guène's protagonist Doria says she will use writing and filmmaking to "lead the uprising in the Paradise Estate. … But it won't be a violent revolt … It will be an intelligent revolution, with no violence, where every person stands up to be heard … we will carry in us 'the sobs of the Infamous…the clamor of the Damned'" (Guène 179). The midwifery Guène enacts is an attempt to move her readers from her world where she and others like her experience extreme poverty, increased unemployment, anti-Muslim stereotypes, and social exclusion into a world where 1) banlieue youth can be proud of and accepted for their North African heritage *and* their French national identity, and 2) French Muslims receive increased social support and quality of life. Moreover, through *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, Guène reclaims her self-storytelling power, adding her to the list of other ethnic minorities who use storytelling and art to process their experiences as an "minorité visible" in their native France.

Reading *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* could be transformative for multiple audiences, but most significantly banlieue youth. This is because the text is ridden with Western pop culture references to entertainment like *The Price is Right*, *The Young and the Restless*, *Sunset Beach*, *Grease*, *Zorro*, *Star Wars*, *Les Misérables*, *Mademoiselle* and *Elle*

magazines, as well as cross-cultural slang such as “hop a ride on the metro” (Guene 21), “ghetto thug,” and “keepers of the peace” (Guene 155). This hip, youthful rhetoric bridges Western culture with Doria’s French Muslim experience as a youth wanting to express herself in ways that feel most authentic to her, particularly due to her Western socialization. Still, she must beware of how using this secular language and cultural references often creates a misunderstanding between older generations, as seen in the case of her relationship with her counselor Madame Burlaud: “[Mme Burlaud] comes from another time. I see it when I’m talking to her, I have to pay attention to everything I’m saying. Can’t say a single word in street slang or anything casual, even if it’s the best way of getting her to understand how I’m feeling…” (Guène 168). Including this insight in her narrative might allow Guène’s adolescent readers to see that, while using a creative language may divide generations, it is still vital to engage in language practices that affirm one’s sense of dualistic identity. Scholar Rebecca E. Léal’s writing aligns with this idea when she writes:

> The more contemporary *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* … more clearly seeks to subvert patriarchal, colonialist discourse to show its violence, to uncover the presence of the women it effaces, and to articulate plural, transgressive modes of emancipated subjectivity. As we have seen, the adolescent voice in particular is well-suited to dismantling the master narrative of Maghrebi-French communities as it allows for more freedom of expression without the constraints of adult political correctness. (Léal 147)

A youthful disruption of hegemonic writing practices is similarly evident in other texts by French people of North African descent like Azouz Begag’s *Shantytown Kid* and Nina Bouraoui’s *Tomboy*. Part of this broader subversive literary tradition, Guène’s text becomes a potential site of empathy, affirmation, and community-building among youth and others who engage with her work.

Conclusion

Given James Baldwin’s observation that Black and Brown people, regardless of nationality, share a “painful relation” to the white

world (55), Ika Hügel-Marshall and Faïza Guène fulfill an irreplaceable role as nepantlera writers due to their works' empathy-raising, identity-affirming, and community-building capacities. The autobiographical and semi-autobiographical nature of their works facilitate passage into a better world that offers liberation, self-actualization, and commonweal for all – the end-goal of Womanism. This is because these self-reflective genres accomplish two things according to the late author and literary critic Toni Morrison: the autobiography and semi-autobiography correspondingly say about Hügel-Marshall and Guène that "this is my historical life – my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the [collective]," and that "we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of [oppression]" (Morrison 86). By writing, speaking up, and talking back to the oppressive systems and people in their lives, the women refuse to be silent about their pain caused by others' unacceptance of their right to exist. As Floyd-Thomas reminds us of the "death-dealing context" Black and Brown women writers, intellectuals, activists, and everyday figures maneuver, Hügel-Marshall's and Guène's texts save themselves and others from a figurative and potentially literal death at the hands of a society committed to discounting, or erasing altogether, their lives, heritage, knowledge, and more. The women's writing demonstrates their intuitive response to the late poet and activist Audre Lorde's avowal that "your silences will not protect you" (Lorde 41); their works similarly charge future generations to tell their story and speak their truths. In doing so, Hügel-Marshall's and Guène's pages become sites that catalyze radical empathy, healing from identity-based traumas, and restorative community-building efforts.

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A Beginner's Guide to Addiction and Rehab

Alexis Young

While writing a memoir about my family's experience with my brother's addiction and death in late 2020, I came across a major complication: I did not have the faintest idea about what occurred during his time in rehab. My memories and the consequent pages I wrote about his year and a half stay in an in-patient recovery facility included only my own sparse recollections of picking him up for Thanksgiving dinner and my mom's phone calls with his resident counselors. For our family, even though we kept in constant communication, my brother's recovery was out of sight, out of mind. At the recommendation of his doctors, he was shipped off to an affluent New England suburb to have his substance abuse issues handled by the experts. It was only upon reading the recovery notebooks I found in his room after his death that I began to form any understanding of what actually happened when he went away, and why we so desperately felt the need to send him away in the first place.

These notebooks completely changed my conception of addiction recovery programs and sparked an intense curiosity. They were primarily filled with simple, moralistic exercises to help work through his struggles with mental health and addiction. One page was dedicated to a list of reasons to get clean (I made the bottom of the list, just after his favorite TV show but before our dad). Another was a log that documented his instances of bad behavior. A third was a catalog of all the prescribed medications my brother was taking and had previously been prescribed. While I was not sure what I expected or wanted to find, the notebooks' emphasis on curing my brother's addiction by simply encouraging him to make good choices and take an intense roundup of medication left me feeling uneasy. I began reading memoirs by those who have also struggled with addiction, trying to learn

more about broader practices of addiction recovery throughout the United States. The memoir genre was not chosen randomly—this was just about the only representation of the inner workings of rehab that I could find. In TV shows, films, and novels, rehab was more likely to be used as a convenient way to make a character disappear, with no actual engagement within the facility itself. First-person accounts of addiction recovery institutions were the most bountiful source of rehab representation available to me.

Between the memoirs and research into the history of rehab culture in the United States, I began to understand why rehab appears to be the dominant treatment option for those with addiction, and why it is so underrepresented. No one in my family ever questioned the notion that my brother should be institutionalized despite having little visibility into the mechanisms of rehab. Even after he relapsed and died within a year of "graduating" from his rehab program, we still felt as if we had objectively done the right thing. In fact, I did not even know what, if any, other options for addiction treatment existed, or how the idea of rehab came to be. My reading informed me that the complicated history of addiction recovery is even older than I anticipated. As Kim Nielsen documents in *A Disability History of the United States*, mass institutionalization for those with disabilities began after the Civil War as "the solidification of the federal government . . . along with emerging technologies and urbanization aided the creation of institutions and the development of policies pertaining to people considered disabled" (98). The post-war federal government handled the influx of disabled soldiers in the already-growing cities of the Industrial Revolution by investing in housing and policies to aid its war heroes, which included the creation of asylums and other institutions for the disabled. Institutionalization of those with both physical and mental disabilities expanded once again after the disabling events of World War I and the polio epidemic until institutionalization became the cultural norm. Sending a disabled person elsewhere, either for the purposes of cure or simply to remove an unwanted family member, became normalized to the extent that "doctors routinely encouraged parents to institutionalize their children . . . and at their encouragement many parents never mentioned or acknowledged such children again" (Nielsen 142).

A key factor that increased a disabled person's likelihood of being institutionalized was the level of discomfort they caused to the

general, able-bodied populace. As industrialization caused frequent disabling accidents and urbanization meant that people were living in closer proximity, disability in public urban spaces became a social problem. Susan Schweik's *The Ugly Laws* notes that "most reformers focused on disability issues in the first two decades of the twentieth century . . . were 'social rehabilitationists' more than 'medical' ones . . . For social rehabilitationists, unsightliness was an attitude, both of the viewer and of the viewed" (232). Disability was conceptualized through this "unsightliness," creating a vague and easy-to-weaponize label against anyone who disrupted the social fabric of urban spaces. Addicts, street performers, those with physical or mental impairments, and beggars all fell under the umbrella of the "unsightly," a category that legally justified mandatory institutionalization. Disability became associated with the shame and secrecy of sending the unsightly out of sight, with institutions providing a convenient solution to help rid a family or city of its undesirable members.

Especially since the goal of institutionalization and rehabilitation was "to *change* the unsightly—not only to take people out of disabling situations but to take the disability out of people," if a person's disability was not curable, they were likely to never return to their home (Schweik 254). While the definition of disability is still debated and ever-evolving, medical and social lenses have both helped create a culture of cure. The cure-only approach of disability "fram[es] disability as a medical problem lodged in individual body-minds, which need to be treated or cured" (Clare 8). The problem of disability is located at the level of the individual, something to be eradicated personally and privately instead of accepted or accommodated more broadly by legal and social structures. If an individual cannot be cured, they are "named defective" and can be "targeted without question or hesitation for eradication, imprisonment, institutionalization" (Clare 23). For a person struggling with addiction, this typically means entering a rehabilitation institution until one is "cured," or sober. Even today, the Americans with Disabilities Act classifies an addict as disabled and therefore legally protected only if that person is not currently engaged in "illegal use of drugs" (ADA sec. 510). This is fundamentally opposed to the reality of addiction, especially to opioids like the fentanyl that killed my brother, as addiction is "a lifelong and typically relapse-filled disease… sustained remission can take as long as ten or more years. Meanwhile, about 4 percent of

the opioid-addicted die annually of overdose" (Macy 45). Addiction is only afforded legal status as a disability if the addicted person both commits to and succeeds within the contradictory culture of cure.

The attitude of institutionalization for the general disabled population thankfully did not hold. Reformers exposing the horrid conditions in many asylums and the increased demand for labor during World War II ended the phase of institutionalization as the obvious or only choice for managing disability, and parents of disabled children began seeking alternative options and lifestyles (Nielsen 144). However, a development in the history of addiction specifically occurred in the 1930s, one that continued to promote the culture of institutionalization for those struggling specifically with addiction. In 1935 in Akron, Ohio, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was founded by William Griffith Wilson ("Bill W") (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 14). AA provided a religious, total abstinence recovery framework that remains the predominant addiction recovery framework today. Total abstinence methods imitate the common cure-focused medical model of disability. As Eli Clare writes, those with disability are "tragedy and heroism… out-of-control, excessive, incapable… courage, metaphor, cautionary tale, downfall" (7). Total abstinence cure methods rely on *overcoming*—"dominating, subsuming, defeating" one's disability (in this case, addiction) (Clare 9). AA's foundational "Big Book," simply entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous*, details how its founder and the first one hundred participants of AA found sobriety through the acceptance of the twelve-step program rooted in the tenets of Christianity. My brother owned this book and attended AA meetings both during and after rehab, explaining that it was mandatory for him and all other patients. The explanatory chapter of the Big Book, "How It Works," begins as such:

> Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. These are such unfortunates … they are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 58)

The solutions prescribed by AA are based on religious morality and personal accountability, placing the blame for unsuccessful recovery on the addicted individual's personal dishonesty and failure to adhere to the program's strict rules. Even if one believes addiction is a disability, the stigma of addiction is "often attributed to actual or perceived use of illicit drugs, which invites further moral condemnation" (Bunn 59). The culture of cure demands that the addicted person invest in their own recovery, and perceives a relapse not only as against cure, but as illegal and morally condemnable. While medical models of addiction in theory, remove personal and moral blame for the addiction, "the biomedical model is characterized by a central paradox: that while it encourages compassion in treatment and policy, it simultaneously pathologizes and stigmatizes those labeled as having an addiction" (Bunn 60). Simply put, if the addict can't be cured, it is due to their own personality flaws, not the narrow, cure-only demands of the program.

In the 80 years since its genesis, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. has sold more than 40 million copies of its foundational text in 71 languages and implemented its programs in 180 countries (*Our Big Book* 3). It remains the most popular recovery framework in the world, and its influences have drastically influenced cultural understandings of addiction and recovery. While institutionalization was becoming a less common solution for most other disabilities, the cure- and AA-modeled idea of the addict as a deviant personality type with little self-control suggests institutionalization as the best way to treat addiction, even as other disabilities were no longer being treated in this way. After its founding in 1935, while some addiction recovery occurred in private recovery facilities, much of it was in prisons. Because acting on an addiction to an illegal substance necessarily results in illegal drug use and distribution, and "the illegality of those drugs. . . is regarded as reducing the excuse or justification for acting on the addiction," many who struggled with addiction were simply imprisoned (Wasserman 481). A pivotal 1962 court case, *Robinson v. California,* complicated the issues of addiction criminalization and recovery. While it did decriminalize addiction, the ruling mandated "a comprehensive plan of involuntary, institutional treatment be undertaken to cure the addict. The plan envisioned adequate post-institutional care to support the former addict until he had achieved a permanent reorientation to life without the drug" (Neibel 1). The

legal solution to uncured addiction was officially focalized around the institution, whether through rehab or incarceration.

Even as scientific understanding of addiction improved, negative perceptions of addiction still dominated the world of recovery. Advancements in brain imaging led to a 1997 study by Former American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) CEO Dr. Alan Leshner that revealed the neurobiological pathways of those with addiction were physically different from those without it, and that continued drug abuse changes the physical composition of the brain itself (Leshner 45). These discoveries did not change the way doctors and lawmakers thought about recovery solutions, however. In *The Urge: Our History of Addiction*, physician Carl Erik Fisher explores the questions this research produced: "Was it a physical disease, a character disorder, a spiritual sickness, or something else entirely? Common ground was hard to find, and the whole enterprise was threatened by infighting" (Fisher 235). Unfortunately, even further medicalizing addiction did not remove the immoral view of illicit drug use, and did not generate a better recovery plan or improve the model of addiction recovery that had been shaped by the AA model and previous court cases.

Today, private institutionalization is still understood as the "right" way to treat addiction. My brother's own silence about his time in rehab is reflective of the larger culture of shame surrounding addiction recovery that has been in place since the Civil War. Those who have spent time in rehab are reluctant to share their experiences to family and in the media largely due to sheer embarrassment. This culture of shame further condemns the addict in two critical ways: first, it keeps crucial information about addiction in the shadows, as many who could help others through sharing their own experiences do not feel empowered to do so; second, it promotes a negative self-image which can actually *cause* relapse. A better understanding of what recovery is actually like and exposing the flaws in both this process and our attitude towards it can help us to understand that addiction is not a shameful behavior that should be locked out of sight until it's "fixed," but a disability that requires understanding, compassion, and a multifaceted approach to treatment. With this historical background and understanding of the current cure culture in mind, the following sections aim to briefly dispel the most common harmful addiction and rehab myths while providing a better foundation of knowledge for

what occurs behind these shameful closed doors. While I do not claim to know of an immediate alternative to our current rehab culture, I believe demystifying addiction and highlighting the problems with our current ways of thinking is the first step in finding a way forward.

Overmedication

One of the most popular "quick fixes" for mental health and addiction recovery is to medicate the patient. The overwhelming plethora of pills available on the market for mental health and addiction treatment point to an ugly truth of excessive medication in institutions that Elizabeth Wurtzel documents in her memoir, *Prozac Nation*. In her years of experience growing up with mental health and substance abuse issues, she was prescribed a smattering of antidepressants and mood stabilizers including Mellaril, lithium, and Prozac. Reflecting on her history in and out of mental health facilities, she simply states, "Taking drugs breeds more drugs … I can't believe anyone in his right mind would deny that these are just too many damn pills" (Wurtzel xxxv). With every new institution or doctor, the first line of defense seemed to be a new medication, even when they made her exhausted, irritable, or completely miserable. Even as a child, doctors were ready to treat her mental health issues by experimenting with different pills, predisposing her brain to chemical dependency. Wertzel's experience is indicative of what some doctors worried about upon hearing about Dr. Leshner's brain imaging discoveries, "that it prioritizes the brain over all the psychological, social, and political issues that matter so much to addiction" (Fisher 60). Since Wertzel wrote her memoir in 1997, the total number of prescriptions filled in the United States has increased by 85%, even though the population has only increased by 21% (Carr). My brother, like Wertzel, started taking antidepressants and ADHD medication before he was 12. By the time he was 17, doctors took him off the medication, saying he was misdiagnosed and did not actually have ADHD at all, but was instead clinically anxious. He was on six or seven other prescriptions at the time of his death. The desperate need for cure often turns into a "quick fix," overmedication of those already struggling with chemical dependencies.

One of the most devastating consequences of overmedication is the opioid crisis. In her 2018 investigation into the opioid crisis, *Dopesick*, Beth Macy chronicles the history of OxyContin, a synthetic,

prescribed opioid produced by Purdue Pharma. To summarize, the drug's manufacturers lied in its research about the drug's addictiveness and incentivized doctors through bribes and lies to prescribe OxyContin as a sort of miracle pain reliever. The drug became so popular that hundreds of thousands of Americans became addicted to opioids simply by taking legally prescribed medication, leading to an increase in heroin and fentanyl use, addiction, overdose, and death (Macy). A few years after the book's publication, Purdue admitted criminal wrongdoing and settled for roughly $6 billion in lawsuits (Mann). Purdue Pharma essentially capitalized on the need for cure by offering a quick solution to chronic pain, in turn generating a larger population of those with addiction.

This is not to say that medication is never helpful, even to treat addiction. In fact, in the case of severe opioid addiction, medication can be extremely beneficial. As Macy also explains, "Among public health officials, buprenorphine is considered the gold standard for opioid-use disorder because it reduces the risk of overdose death by half compared with behavioral therapy alone. It also helps addicts get their lives together before they very slowly taper off—if they do" (Macy 212). This quote makes a critical point: behavioral therapy *and* withdrawal management medication like buprenorphine (brand name Suboxone), along with many other rehabilitation techniques and decreased stigmatization, are nearly useless by themselves, but can be valuable tools to be used *together* when treating addiction. The devastating effects of overmedication are an easy way for AA and institutionalization advocates to denounce chemical methods of treatment in favor of their own. However, overmedication is a real concern and not the solution to AA's moralizing approach. The goal is to strike a balance between the many different types of therapeutic interventions without creating a too-narrow emphasis on a one-size-fits-all model of treatment and support.

Detox

Another information gap exists when considering the actual process of detoxing from drug or alcohol addiction. While rehab does often rely on changing an addict's behavior, these facilities are also medical institutions, and remove from the public eye the reality of how taxing addiction detox and recovery can be, especially from opi-

oids—it is not merely a battle of mental will. Two of the most enlightening experiences of detox come from Augusten Burroughs's memoir, *Dry*, and Macy's *Dopesick*. These two books provide harrowing portrayals of just how gruesome coming off any controlled substance, from alcohol to hard opioids, can be. Burroughs's arrival at rehab is not a pleasant one, as he finds an old, dilapidated building with "fluorescent lights. . . disinfectant . . . heavy wood-crate style [furniture]. . . industrial plaid fabric . . . not of good design, but indestructib[le]" (Burroughs 39-43). He is surprised to realize that recovery facilities are primarily medical institutions, equipped to handle the intense physicality of detox. His hopes for a glamorous spa vacation are replaced by intense encounters with pain and detox-related sickness. In her book, Macy similarly discusses how rough opioid detox specifically is – many become "dopesick" when they go too long without opioids and can even die of shock or dehydration when attempting to detox too quickly (77). Intense medical attention is needed to successfully complete a drug detox even before recovery work can begin, and it would be an incredible reduction of the reality of detox to think that that an addicted person can at any moment stop or "get over it."

Moralizing

As previously mentioned, the foundational AA book has sold millions of copies and been translated into 71 languages. AA is not the only text that aims to teach an addicted person how to *do better,* however. Burroughs received his copy of *Alcoholics Anonymous* along with a Bible and other self-help volumes upon his arrival at rehab (Burroughs 39). I found all three of these types of books in my brothers' old rehab items after his death in August 2020 as well. As Christian addiction artist Stephen Sawyer writes, "It is our lust to satisfy ourselves that slowly seduces us to destroy that same 'self' which we held in such high esteem. Only God will share in the fullness of your sufferings and never forsake you" (2015). The art and literature in the self-help, moralizing, or religious vein may be helpful for some, but can also be critically dangerous for others. Everyone's experience with addiction is unique, and it is often not helpful for an addicted person to blame a neurological, chemical disease on lust and selfishness, and posit religious belief as a cure-all.

These books often celebrate the journeys of "good people" who were able to overcome their struggles, revealing an intense narrativity

of addiction recovery culture. Books and storytelling are a cornerstone of how the behavioral therapy process of recovery functions and can be extremely damaging to an addicted person's self-esteem. In her cultural study on addiction, Robyn Warhol states that "just about everything–specifically beliefs and values, including and especially our understanding of identity and recovery–depends on (narrative) point of view" (97). Further, "Individual recovering alcoholics come to understand what they call their 'disease' by repeatedly reading, listening to, and ultimately telling–and repeatedly retelling–'drunkologues,' or first-person accounts of drinking behavior that is construed as 'alcoholic.'" (Warhol 98). Indeed, this is the precise experience of Burroughs and Leslie Jamison in their respective memoirs. After months of AA meetings in which empathetic sharing of drunken experience was encouraged, Burroughs began to completely rethink his self-image, finally proclaiming, "I'm not like other people. I'm like other alcoholics" (Burroughs 111). Jamison felt initially hopeful when sharing relatable "drunkologues" in her recovery group, but struggled once she achieved a few months of sobriety primarily because "recovery did not seem like a compelling story" (Jamison, 215). She would try and fail to journal, and lost determination simply because her story lacked the narrative gusto it once contained. I believe that the issue lies not in the embracing of one's own journey, but in the hyperfixation of others' stories, and the happy ending outcome that such narrative emphasis suggests. The experience of recovery is individual, not universal, and does not need to follow a tidy narrative arc to be meaningful.

Recovery as Accomplishment

Another foundational piece of AA is its reward system, especially its insistence on celebrating those who respond well to an abstinence-only approach. Complete sobriety is required in most rehab facilities and AA programs around the world, perhaps to a damaging effect. As Carl Fisher notes, "Programs insist on abstinence for all . . . This ideological approach to treatment is harmful because, as contemporary research shows, abstinence is not necessarily the best treatment goal for everyone with a drug or alcohol problem" (249). This insistence on abstinence or "cure" can even contradict the recovery work that the programs attempt to accomplish: "Too rigid a focus on

abstinence can cause an 'abstinence violation effect:' upon resuming substance abuse after a period of self-imposed abstinence, those who experience guilt, shame, and hopelessness are more likely to return to harmful use" (Fisher, 250). Not only is abstinence not feasible or advisable for some, but it can even be damaging for those who are able to achieve longer periods of sobriety. If a person is sent away and shamed when addicted, and lauded once they've achieved certain milestones of sobriety, any relapse, no matter how minor, can be felt as a monumental failure. A six-month sobriety reward chip is daunting and humiliating to look at upon returning to day one. Certificates of "graduation" or completion of rehab can also be falsely reassuring. Just because a person is released from an institution does not guarantee they are "cured" of their addiction and should not be conceptualized as such.

In her memoir, *The Recovering*, Leslie Jamison reveals that she especially struggled with the abstinence-only approach. She was already struggling with the 12-step program that Alcoholics Anonymous promotes when she discovered that its founder, Bill W., experimented with psychedelic drugs to achieve a "spiritual awakening" (Jamison,219). According to his testimony, the hallucinogens helped him stay sober from alcohol. Her disillusionment to the whole process was completed upon realizing that even the most prominent AA figure in history recognized that an abstinence-only approach was not the only way to live a healthy and fulfilling life. Celebrating complete abstinence as the singular measurement of addiction recovery is both ineffective and dangerous for those who struggle to meet these standards.

Addictive Feeling

The final addiction stigma I wish to bring attention to is the misunderstanding of what it feels like to have an addictive craving. This misunderstanding is part of what helps portray addiction as simply a result of bad behaviors and decisions. When addiction is conceived of as a choice, the deep chemical dependency and desperation that can come with recovery is overlooked. To understand the extremity of addiction's hold on an individual's willpower and reasoning, I use the example of recovering alcoholics drinking hand sanitizer, perfume, or other household chemicals to get drunk while institution-

alized. In theory, no one with control over their own decisions would consider consuming a toxic and bad-tasting substance. The first time I had ever heard of a person doing such a thing was when a counselor called my mother to tell her that my brother was being punished for getting drunk off Lemon Pledge. My mom was devastated, and even though she thought the situation was serious enough to warrant sending her child to rehab, the idea that he was so out of control that he was ingesting household cleaning products still seemed inconceivable.

Reading Burroughs's *Dry* showed me that, in fact, this was fairly common behavior for addicts in an institution. Upon Burroughs's arrival at his rehab facility, a nurse checked his belongings for cologne and mouthwash. She told him, "You'd be surprised by the things alcoholics will try and sneak in here to drink," which caused him to reflect that "[he] would never drink cologne and therefore is not an 'alcoholic' and is, in fact, in the wrong place. This is clearly the place for the die-hard, cologne-drinking alcoholics" (Burroughs 41). Even though Burroughs had been blacking out almost every night, he still recognized that drinking mouthwash or cologne was not something a mentally stable person would do. It was only when his normal supply of alcohol vanished that he finally understood that the addictive urges driving someone to do such a thing are not a matter of *deciding*. Many desperation behaviors can also be harmfully interpreted as a choice, like when an addicted person steals pills or runs away from home. There is an alarming harmfulness and fallacy in considering addiction as a shameful decision. Understanding how uncontrollable addictive feelings are can generate compassion for those who experience complete mental anguish while struggling with this disability.

Conclusion: Moving Forward and Away from Rehab

While I cannot solve the problem of addiction management in one essay, I can offer two changes that I believe would greatly improve the lives of those struggling with addiction: harm reduction and a focus on quality of life over cure. Harm reduction focuses not on eradicating the addiction from the individual, but for reducing the dangers involved with using illicit substances. Harm reduction involves providing access to sterile syringes and supervised injection sites to reduce overdose rates and the spread of communicable diseases. Harm reduction also includes training law enforcement and other

medical personnel to assist a person in overdose or detox, and widespread education and distribution to the general public of naloxone (brand name Narcan), a drug that counteracts opioid overdose. Harm reduction does not aim to eradicate the addiction, but provides a safer environment and lifestyle for those who cannot immediately achieve the elusive cure. Similarly, an emphasis on quality of life shifts the "goal" from cure to making a person with addiction as happy and comfortable as possible, regardless of their sobriety status. This is largely a social and legal change, and relies on large-scale attitude changes that in turn need to be reflected in policy and practice. For example, a person with addiction's quality of life would likely improve drastically if addiction was not a social taboo and they were afforded protection under the ADA without the exclusion of current use.

Unfortunately, even if the general populace and legal structures completely destigmatized addiction to embrace harm reduction and an emphasis on quality of life, my brother, and millions of others, are still gone forever. Nothing can undo the damage that a demand for cure, moralizing addiction, and compulsory institutionalization has already caused. In 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officially announced that fentanyl overdose is the leading cause of death for young adults in the United States (CDC). In some ways, it is comforting to know that my brother is not alone, and his story is part of a larger historical event that is still unfolding in real time. In other ways, it is incredibly frustrating to feel that the person I love most in the world has been reduced to a statistic. While I cannot change the past, this essay offers my small contribution to figuring out a way towards a future in which little brothers do not die because they are struggling with a disability and cannot meet the demands that cure-only cultures and institutions present.

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Framing the Border: Crisis Rhetoric at the U.S. – Mexico Border

Matthew P. Varvel

In 2019, U.S. news sources often published stories about the alleged crisis at the U.S.-Mexican border. Even the former President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, characterized it as "a growing humanitarian and security crisis" in a speech given on January 8, 2019 (66). While Trump labeled it both a humanitarian and security crisis, most of his rhetoric was geared toward the security element. For example, in the same speech he stated the "southern border is a pipeline for a vast quantity of illegal drugs, including meth, heroin, cocaine, and fentanyl" (66). He then used statistics to paint a picture of a threat to the nation and its people: "Every week, 300 of our citizens are killed by heroin alone, 90 percent of which floods across our southern border. More Americans will die from drugs this year than were killed in the entire Vietnam War" (66). This implicit comparison of the War on Drugs to the Vietnam War is clearly meant to invoke a national security threat. Trump then used additional statistics to invoke fear of a border that seemed to him to be out of control from a security perspective when he stated "In the last two years, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) officers made 266,000 arrests of aliens with criminal records, including those charged or convicted of 100,000 assaults, 30,000 sex crimes, and 4,000 violent killings. Over the years, thousands of Americans have been brutally killed by those who illegally entered our country, and thousands more lives will be lost if we don't act right now" (66). Later, he provided comparatively little information to support the claim of a humanitarian crisis, saying "Last month, 20,000 migrant children were illegally brought into the United States-a dramatic increase" (66). While this statistic may have evoked a sense of pathos for the children, he then went on to bolster his security rhetoric by saying "These children are used as human

pawns by vicious coyotes and ruthless gangs," a statement adding fear to his dominant security rhetoric (66). In essence, there can be little doubt that U.S. leadership was working to drive a narrative of there being a national security crisis at the U.S.- Mexico border. But did this narrative reflect reality?

For this project, I examine a handful of examples of rhetoric that was in the news media and determine how it framed the situation at the southern border as a crisis. While it would be well beyond the scope of this project to compile a collection of samples that would provide a high degree of reliability, I have made an effort to select samples from news sources that reflect a variety of political views. I have collected four examples that are somewhat representative in that they come from *Foxnews.com*, *Vox.com*, *Time.com*, and the *Nationalreview.com*. These articles were selected partly because they cover a spectrum of political perspectives with *Vox* being more liberal, *Time* being more centrist, *National Review* being more right of center, and *Fox* being more conservative; but, they were also selected for two other reasons: they each featured the word "crisis" in their title, and they were quite recent at the time this crisis was in the news, giving a more "current" take on the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border. Based on this study, it is clear the news media used tropes of illegality, statistics, and photos/video to frame the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border as a crisis, although the type of crisis varied across news sources with one type of crisis, humanitarian, being supported by scholarship and another, security, not being supported by scholarship.

For the purposes of this piece, "crisis" will correlate to this definition in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary:* "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs. . ." or "a situation that has reached a critical phase." The term also has generally quite negative connotations and is typically used in reference to situations that are quite serious and unpleasant. As will be seen, these usages aptly reflect the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2019.

Rhetoric and the Border

A review of literature concerning the 2019 border situation and its rhetoric will help to make it clear that the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border was, in fact, not a security crisis but a humanitarian crisis. Karma R. Chavez posits that in the U.S. after September

11, 2001, border rhetorics are essentially rooted in the War on Terror (48). She claims "The issue of framing is especially dire in relation to the U.S.-Mexico border, which has, in the eyes of many politicians, pundits, and citizens alike become the greatest source of *insecurity* in the national imaginary" (49). She proceeds to say that "militarization of regions of the U.S.-Mexico border seems natural and warranted in order to protect citizens from these supposed threats" of entangled terrorism threats, "drug smuggling," and "the invasion of 'illegal aliens'" (49). However, as Chavez notes, militarization of the border has little if anything to do with the events of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror but has instead "been in the U.S. government's plan at least since the Reagan administration" (49). According to Chavez, militarization of the border was mostly about the War on Drugs in the 1980s and 1990s and shifted to being more about the War on Terror after 9/11 (54-55). While this militarization has been implemented purportedly for America's security, Chavez notes the primary victims of whatever war "Washington claims we are waging" are undocumented immigrants and border residents (61). As will be seen later, news media security crisis rhetoric at the border seemed to be rooted in the War on Drugs, not terrorism.

In *The Border Crossed Us*, Josue David Cisneros states that "borders are important because they help us define who is a citizen and who is not, who belongs and who is 'alien,' indeed, what citizenship is and what it is not" (5). He continues by saying "The border is physical and ideological; it constitutes identity as well as exclusion" (5). Borders, in essence, draw a figurative and/or literal line between "us" and "them." Meanwhile, Cisneros also claims that "illegality [is] a performative *affect* emanating from the bodies of suspected immigrants" ("Looking 'Illegal'" 134). He continues in his discussion of Arizona's Senate Bill 1070, signed into law in 2010, to say the bill, and ostensibly the views driving it, mark "nonwhite immigrant 'others' who perform or embody difference [as] 'foreign' or 'illegal'" (135). He goes on to posit that the rhetoric surrounding SB 1070 "points to the anxiety surrounding purported threats of (racialized) immigrants to US (racial) identity and the sanctity of US citizenship" (135). His conclusions simply tie anxiety about illegal immigration at the southern border to racism. Immigrants, according to Cisneros, are inextricably perceived to be tied to "crime, disease, and danger" (140). There is also conflation of the Mexican and Latino body such that all Latino

people are assumed to be Mexican *and* illegal "until evidence proves otherwise" (140). Indeed, the border situation in 2019 seemed to be one that was often characterized by public officials and segments of the media as a "Mexican invasion," but facts will show most of the immigrants involved were actually Central American. Furthermore, these immigrants were othered and associated with crime by political figures like President Trump and segments of the news media in much the way Cisneros suggests.

A substantial part of this fear and dislike of racialized immigrants crossing the southern border, according to Regina Branton, et al, is a direct result of the fear of terrorism stoked by 9/11 (664). As they note, for months following the attacks there were reports of apprehensions at the southern border "of individuals from 'special interest' countries," and "some politicians went so far as to explicitly link migrants to terrorists" (665). Branton, et al, remind us that "an American citizen of Puerto Rican origin" named Jose Padilla "was arrested in 2002 and convicted of aiding terrorists in 2007" (665). His images were "pervasive" in the media, "and served as an explicit coupling between Hispanics and the terror threat" (665). Branton, et al, note that in the years following 9/11, media coverage of border apprehensions not only increased but became quite negative (666). They even point to a National Association of Hispanic Journalists report that said "in the year following 9/11, sixty-six percent of network coverage of Latinos involved crime, terrorism, and illegal immigration" (666). They also quote a Media Matters Action Network report stating "cable news overflows not just with vitriol, but also with a series of myths that feed viewers' resentment and fears, seemingly geared toward creating anti-immigrant hysteria" (qtd. in Branton, et al, 666). From the data they observed, Branton, et al, conclude "9/11 stimulated an identity-based conflict over some of the more contested (and nativist) elements of American national identity. This symbolic conflict activated or perhaps magnified Anglo hostilities towards a variety of marginalized social groups-including Latinos- resulting in heightened opposition to immigration" (667). Essentially, Branton, et al, have found 9/11 was the stimulus for much racialized animus toward immigrants, and Latino people in particular (677).

Countering the seemingly predominant narrative of a Mexican invasion of the U.S., Lynn Stephen notes 84,000 children were taken into custody at the border in 2014 and the first half of 2015 (fiscal

years), and very few were granted asylum. Stephen states most were actually from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador rather than Mexico (18). Stephen concurs with Cisneros, Branton, et al, that these people tend to be "labeled as dangerous, criminal, undeserving, and less valuable as U.S. citizens" (7). To emphasize the irrational level of fear and loathing directed at undocumented immigrants, Androff and Tavisolli indicate undocumented immigrants made up only 4% of the U.S. population and 5.4% of the workforce in 2008 (165). They, too, concur with Chavez, Cisneros, Branton, et al, and Stephen that "the criminalization of undocumented immigration has contributed to a climate of discrimination that negatively affects immigrant communities," sometimes characterizing them as a national security threat (166). Androff and Tavissoli reject the security crisis rhetoric regarding the border, instead claiming there was a humanitarian crisis (172). Musalo and Lee declare that Central American immigrants were largely not deterred by the Obama era's "harsh policies" regarding border security, positing "The crisis we face is . . . humanitarian in nature and regional in scope-and the migrant 'surge' is undoubtedly a refugee flow" (139). They assert the U.S., by ignoring realities in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, "has failed to lessen the refugee crisis in its own region" (139).

Edward Alden notes that having effective security apparatuses in effect on the border was "producing diminishing returns" (481). In his view, this was because of three primary reasons. One is the fact we were seeing "significantly more asylum seekers from Central America," a group that is difficult to deter because they are fleeing terribly oppressive conditions and often violence in their homelands, and there was also the fact that the U.S. has legal responsibilities when dealing with asylum seekers who cannot just be rounded up and deported. Alden underscores the gravity of the asylum situation with statistics, saying there were "just 22,000" asylum seekers at the border in 2011, but the number increased sharply to 140,000 in 2015 (487). Also, the majority of undocumented immigrants are people who actually overstay their visas (488), which better security at the border does nothing to address (481-82). Alden cites 2014 research saying these overstayed visa situations make up "two-thirds of those added to the undocumented population," showing the problem is quite significant and has little or nothing to do with border security (488). Finally, he states an increasing amount of Mexican migrants

crossing the border repeatedly are parents of children left behind in the U.S., and this fact makes such individuals more difficult to deter than traditional migrant labor, for instance (481-82).

Now that scholarship has established the existence of a legitimate humanitarian crisis and ideas based in fear and racism driving the perception of a nonexistent security crisis in 2019, I will now examine four articles from the news media to see how they used rhetoric to frame the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border as a crisis, whether humanitarian or security-related.

Artifacts

A *Fox News* article by Talia Kaplan dated April 25, 2019, "Florida Sheriff on Border Crisis after Major Drug Bust: 'It Makes Me Absolutely Crazy,'" cites expert testimony by a sheriff in Florida who was dealing firsthand with criminal elements of the border situation. Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd warned of the drug smuggling element and its repercussions in the U.S.A. "after his department seized 50 pounds of methamphetamine with a street value of 1.4 million dollars" (Kaplan). Some of the rhetoric helps to characterize the situation as a security crisis as the sheriff says the situation is making him "absolutely crazy," emphasizing his desperation (Kaplan). He then reveals the purported ringleader of the criminal group is "an illegal alien," tying this to the statement that this information leaves one "want[ing] to just pull your eyeballs out," a statement clearly meant to drive home just how emotionally stressful his experience of the border situation is (qtd. in Kaplan). To further express his apparent desperation, the sheriff states "the person that was setting up the drugs in Mexico was a person that we deported from this country, and two others of the multi-kilo dealers just arrived from Mexico two months ago. It's like we need some help here" (qtd. in Kaplan).

Evidently, forty-seven people were charged in the investigation, nine of whom were "allegedly in the country illegally," a tidbit of information further serving to intensify the situation with reference to border security concerns (Kaplan). However, it is not clear whether these people were traditional illegal immigrants or people who overstayed visas. The article continues connecting this drug bust to a perceived security crisis in Florida with regard to the amount of deaths attributed to methamphetamine. Kaplan notes "According to

the Florida Medical Examiners Commission, in 2017, 464 people died in the state as a direct result of meth, an increase of 42 percent from 2016; and an additional 394 people had meth in their system when they died, an increase of 38 percent from 2016" (Kaplan). These statistics are used rhetorically, emphasizing notable increases in meth-related deaths, underscoring the characterization of the border situation as a security crisis. Kaplan then quotes the sheriff urging the audience to "extrapolate that over the entire country" to emphasize the border meth problem is not just a Florida problem but a national concern (Kaplan). Kaplan then states Sheriff Judd claims "illegal aliens are to blame for bringing in thousands of pounds of meth across the border into the United States" (Kaplan), a claim only further underscoring the premise that with regard to the drug trade, there was a security crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border that was not being dealt with sufficiently, ostensibly because there were not enough resources to do so, and this claim from someone whom the target audience would perceive as an expert would only further amplify the assertion of a security crisis at the border. This article has a visual element too as it is accompanied by video of the sheriff being interviewed on the *Fox News* channel. This video features a banner at the beginning that reads "Crisis at the Border" on top of "Fox News Alert." These visuals obviously serve to characterize the situation on the U.S. southern border as a security crisis the channel's viewership must be alerted to, underscoring a sense of alarm/emergency.

Turning from street crime to legal issues concerning immigration, we now examine an article from Nomaan Merchant writing for *Time,* dated April 19, 2019, "Family Detention Centers Unused as President Trump Warns of a Crisis at the Border." Typically, the Border Patrol picks up immigrants and turns them over to ICE, but Merchant quotes ICE as saying it was "overwhelmed," not even able to transport immigrants to holding facilities, leaving the Border Patrol to often directly release immigrants to nonprofits or simply leave them "at bus stations" (Merchant). The use of "overwhelmed" serves to support the perception of the situation as a crisis. Merchant presents alternate views, providing quotes from "immigrant advocates" who believed the government was not truly unable to transport immigrants to facilities but was instead claiming to be unable to handle the numbers in order to further the perception of crisis for political reasons (Merchant). For instance, Peter Schey, the executive director of the

Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law, states “We believe that this is part of trying to justify a narrative” (Merchant). Regardless of whom one believes, there is still a feeling of crisis despite Merchant’s efforts to retain a reporter’s “objectivity.” For example, Andrea Meza of RAICES (Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services), a “legal services group,” went to the Karnes detention facility, the Karnes County Residential Center in Karnes County, TX, daily to discuss asylum cases with detainees, and she claimed changes at the facility made it more difficult to meet with detainees to discuss their cases (Merchant).

Even if her claims are true and ICE was purposely making it more difficult for asylum seekers to get effective representation, that in itself would further contribute to a humanitarian crisis at the border in that it would result in a backlog of asylum seekers in detention facilities. This article appears underneath a photo of immigrant children being held at the Karnes facility who are pictured entering the cafeteria. Strangely, the photo was taken from an odd angle, with the camera evidently close to the floor
and angled upward, so the children look quite tall and imposing, much moreso than they would if the picture had been taken from a more normal height; presuming the photographer to be an average adult, the children would then appear small and less threatening. The choice of photograph is an interesting one as it seems to portray the children as threatening rather than innocuous, a choice serving to work against characterizing the situation as a humanitarian crisis, one in which the target audience should sympathize with the children.

Proceeding to our next artifact portraying a humanitarian crisis, Dara Lind’s April 11, 2019 article for *Vox.com,* “9 Questions about the Border Crisis You Were Embarrassed to Ask,” also uses language and references to legal issues as well as visuals characterizing the situation as a humanitarian crisis. She states there has been “a huge spike in unauthorized migration, especially of families,” and “the government’s capacity to handle an influx of large groups of children and families was already under serious strain at the end of last year. It’s now obviously overmatched-in what politicians of both parties are recognizing as a humanitarian crisis” (Lind). Lind does not shy away from characterizing the situation as a full-blown crisis, although unlike the *Fox News* article, which emphasizes the criminal and security elements of the situation, she concentrates on the humanitarian ele-

ment. She goes on to say that, unlike the claims of some of the quoted sources in Merchant's article for *Time*, the crisis was not a "manufactured" one, "or a politically engineered one," saying "it would be easier to solve" if it were fabricated (Lind). Lind then postulates not only was there indeed a crisis, it was a "regional crisis" in which close to 1% of the population of both Honduras and Guatemala could have attempted to enter the U.S. through Mexico (Lind). Lind's article takes the form of a question-and-answer session. She provides a rhetorically powerful bar graph [see Fig. 1] illustrating Border Patrol apprehensions from October of 2011 through February of 2019 that clearly shows a sharp increase of just over 10,000 in April of 2017 to over 90,000 in February of 2019. Lind points out these numbers are still lower than they were in the early 2000s but says there are now "record numbers of families coming to the US without papers" (Lind). Lind says the evidence was "substantial" there were more families and children crossing into the U.S. than ever before, a piece of information that would serve to bolster humanitarian crisis rhetoric (Lind). Lind also notes a large part of what was causing a humanitarian crisis was the U.S. system is set up to catch and return people who cross the border illegally while many of people crossing the border in 2019 were claiming asylum and could therefore not legally be returned to their country immediately. Essentially, there was an overwhelming backlog of people who could not be deported:

> Asylum seekers . . . can't be deported until they've been screened by an asylum officer to see if they have a 'credible fear' of persecution. Unaccompanied children from non-Mexican countries have to be transferred to the care of the Department of Health and Human Services within 72 hours and are guaranteed immigration court hearings. Families, under a 2015 court ruling, can't be detained indefinitely; generally, the government has to release them after about 20 days. In all three cases, the 'detain, then deport' system doesn't work. The system is overloaded with people it wasn't designed to handle. (Lind)

Lind's claims serve to characterize the situation as a humanitarian crisis, which lines up with the aforementioned scholarship.

Even though Lind focuses on the humanitarian elements of crisis, there are also references to human smuggling, a criminal enterprise; this inclusion has a rhetorical effect of naturally criminalizing what was happening with these migrants. Lind says the significant increase in people attempting to cross the border "isn't fully understood," but "It appears to stem from a shift in smuggling tactics and capacity. (While human smuggling is illegal, it's used by asylum seekers who feel they have no other choice as well as people migrating for economic reasons)" (Lind). This information rhetorically ties the immigrants, at least those participating in smuggling, to the criminal rhetoric of the *Fox News* article discussed earlier. People are characterized in one way or another as criminals, making them less sympathetic to the mostly American audience of these articles. Lind also notes that Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents urged reporters to get pictures of a holding facility under a bridge in El Paso, TX that was shut down in March of 2019, saying it exemplified "what they were forced to do because they had no other choice" (Lind). Lind states this anecdote as truth, and it would also work to characterize the situation as a humanitarian crisis from the viewpoint of those who were tasked daily with trying to address the situation on the ground.

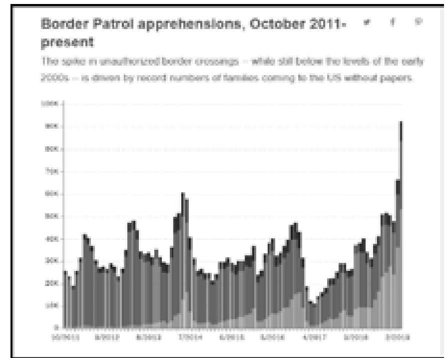

Figure 1. **Graph of border patrol apprehensions from Oct. 2011 to Feb. 2019. Source: Vox.com**

Despite the human smuggling references that tie these immigrants to criminality, the visuals of this article create sympathy for the immigrants. This article appears below a large, screen-wide photo [see Fig. 1] of a group of what appears to be five girls, most of whom are obviously juveniles, who are climbing over a railing, perhaps in the process of an illegal border crossing. None of the females are looking in the direction of the camera except for a little girl who is being held by an older female. The little girl is barefoot and has a blanket, evoking significant pathos. The caption identifies them as a "Guatemalan woman and her three daughters at the border fence after crossing into El Paso, TX from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico."

As two of the girls are in the act of climbing, or climbing down from, the barrier, the photo illustrates a certain level of desperation

Figure 2. **Five people climb a railing at the US - Mexico Border.**

Photo by David Peinado/Getty Images

on the part of the immigrants. The effect of this photo on the audience would likely depend heavily on the audience's views of immigration. Farther down, another photo shows a group of Hondurans, children and adults, sleeping on concrete, waiting "to board a bus that will take them out of Honduras." The photo is taken from an angle looking down on these people who are sleeping on what appears to be a sidewalk, and the photo evokes significant pathos as the discomfort of the migrants, some of whom are shoeless children, has to be inarguable. There are a handful of additional photos as one scrolls down the page, including a shot of several immigrants waiting at the border fence with enforcement officials; a woman and two children waiting in a holding facility that appears to be little more than a tent city in Tijuana, Mexico, another shot evoking significant pathos; a picture of five Mexican soldiers stringing barbed wire across the border fence in Juarez, Mexico; and finally a shot of a Honduran man holding his little girl, waiting for a bus to Guatemala, another picture evoking pathos. The visuals as a group work to create sympathy for the immigrants, which is not surprising as the article takes the stance there was a humanitarian crisis at the border.

Our final artifact, Jonah Goldberg's article for the *National Review*, "Both Sides Are Wrong about the Border Crisis," from April 3, 2019, also delves into some legal issues regarding the border situation and portrays the crisis as humanitarian. Goldberg begins with some quotes about the border from President Donald Trump, conceding some criminals do indeed exploit the border, but then begins to make

his case Trump's vision of what was happening did not line up neatly with reality. Goldberg cites statistics from the Center for Migration Studies (CMS), saying "in 2016 and 2017, sixty-two percent of the newly undocumented had overstayed their visas, and thirty-eight percent had crossed the border illegally. CMS reports 'visa overstays have significantly exceeded illegal border crossings' for seven consecutive years," a legal issue not brought up in the other news articles but that is supported by Alden's aforementioned scholarship (Goldberg). Goldberg also notes that unlike much of Trump's rhetoric stated, most of the border crossers were not Mexican "but Central American" (Goldberg). Goldberg then says "They aren't single Mexican men looking for work but rather families, often with a dismayingly large number of children in tow. They're bringing kids to take advantage of asylum laws. And because they are requesting asylum, they aren't trying to sneak in; they're seeking out border officials to file paperwork" (Goldberg). The factual element of what Goldberg says lines up with ideas reported in other articles cited in this paper, but his rhetoric is also tinged with negativity toward the asylum seekers as is evident in his comments about the number of children in the families and his assertion adults are "bringing kids to take advantage of asylum laws," purporting to know the motivations of the immigrants (Goldberg). He then asserts U.S. officials claimed, "the border system is at a 'breaking point' because of an 'unprecedented' wave of migrants, most of whom are families or unaccompanied children" (Goldberg). Then he mentions an alarming statistic when he quotes Keven McAleenan, the commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, who "anticipates the final number to be some 40,000 children to be taken into custody by the CBP in March" (Goldberg).

The number is seemingly huge and rhetorically significant since it strikes the reader as being enormous and especially poignant as it refers to children. Goldberg, like Lind in her *Vox* article, also mentions traffickers and their role in fueling the crisis, adding the element of illegality and tying it to the immigrants who do business with the human traffickers out of desperation. However, Goldberg, in fairness, attempts to limit the negative rhetorical effect of the connection on the migrants as he refers to them as "the poor Central Americans they [smugglers] prey upon" (Goldberg). This article too, being on a website, has a visual element like the others, which is unsurprising as photos are common inclusions in print journalism and can be

quite arresting in their effects on readers. The lone photo [see Fig. 3] under which the article appears is of a "Customs and Border Protection officer near an enclosure holding Central American migrants who illegally crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in El Paso, TX, March 27, 2019," making the photo quite recent at the time. The officer is foregrounded in the photo, holding up a hand near the mouth and appears to be shouting. A subtle bit of pathos is evident as the officer's badge is crossed with a black band, a well-recognized way of honoring someone who is deceased. There is much barbed wire in view, and the immigrants are behind a chain-link fence behind the officer, a fence topped with more barbed wire. The holding facility appears to be under an El Paso bridge, and the migrants appear to have little to nothing to do but stand in the dirt under the bridge. More than a few of these migrants appear to be children, and the photo as a whole creates pathos for the migrants as well as the officer, who again appears to be marking the death of a colleague.

Figure 3. Image of a Customs & Border Patrol officer and detained migrants published in *The National Review.* Photo by Jose Luis Gonzalez/ Reuters.

Conclusions

As expected, these four articles vary somewhat in their views of the situation at the border. All four use rhetorical devices like tropes of illegality, statistics, and visuals to paint their rhetorical pictures of the crisis, with all but the *Fox News* article agreeing the situation was a humanitarian crisis rather than a security crisis, putting the premise of the *Fox News* article at odds with available scholarship. Not to minimize the drug smuggling problem across the U.S. southern border, but in the larger context the *Fox News* article functions rhetorically like anecdotal evidence to support a political agenda regardless of serious scholarship done about the situation. The *Fox News* article also exemplifies the fear tactics and "othering" of immigrants referred to by, for example, Cisneros, and is clearly rooted in the War on Drugs as claimed by Chavez. In light of available scholarly work about the 2019 border situation, there is no doubt about the existence of a humanitarian crisis, and this fact was

apparently not lost on the news media, or at least the sampling examined here. Most of the articles engage facts and statistics about the larger picture of a regional humanitarian crisis and use visual rhetoric to underscore their conclusions with pathos-evoking photos, creating sympathy for the immigrants. Even the typically conservative *National Review* reaches a conclusion at odds with Trump's view of a security crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, leaving only *Fox News*, in this sampling, to push that narrative. In closing, it seems despite cries from portions of the public about media bias and inaccurate reporting, the only source in this study found to be inaccurate when compared to available scholarship was the *Fox News* story, which, while quite possibly factually correct, is anecdotal and was used by the network rhetorically to further the mistaken view there was a security crisis, not a humanitarian crisis, at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2019.

The articles selected for this project and the 2019 situation at the U.S.–Mexico border itself are examples of the sheer power of language and visuals, particularly photographs, to convey information and to shape thoughts and feelings about subjects. Rhetoric ultimately has many definitions, but as the art of effective communication it has a tremendous daily effect on our lives, constantly working to help shape our knowledge of and our positions on innumerable topics, and as such it warrants scrutiny in the various permutations it takes in our daily lives. Essentially, we must not just be passive receptors of rhetoric but active thinkers and evaluators, always working to critically evaluate the messages we receive, putting in the work to collect messages from various sources, scrutinizing them rhetorically and factually, to more responsibly construct our own perception of reality. This approach is particularly important in a society in which multiple 24-hour news outlets seem to often go beyond presentation of facts into opinion, often blurring the line between the two, creating an environment in which it is more difficult to feel assured that we have been accurately informed about whatever may interest us.

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Hella Stellar: *Insecure* as a Beacon of Hope for Black Entertainment

Tiana Williams

One of the most common themes of mainstream entertainment in recent years has been Black trauma. Whether it be focused on the racial disparities Black Americans experience on a day-to-day basis or images of violence perpetuated on Black people broadcasted on the television screen, there is an unsettling hyper-fixation on Black trauma. In order to break that mold, creative executive show runners such as Issa Rae have been producing enlightening content for Black entertainment that humanizes the Black community. Rae's two-time NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Comedy Series-award winning HBO series *Insecure* (2016-2021) became the pinnacle of relatable content for young Black Americans to identify with on a more substantial level than simply racial identity. Rae has aided in removing the stigma of what white America thinks the Black experience looks like in the entertainment industry for Black women. Issa Rae's work follows the overarching principle of positive representation for Black women; moreover, *Insecure* displays the importance of placing Black people in executive roles in order to accurately portray Black women.

Throughout history, stereotypes that display Black women in a negative light have laid a foundation for non-Black society's perception of Black women. Black women have often faced a doubled amount of discrimination and disrespect due to their race and gender. Racial stereotypes about Black women in America began in the antebellum era, when white supremacists were enslaving around three million Black Americans (*African Americans in the Antebellum United States*). "Racial and discriminatory representations of Black womanhood which had roots in the antebellum era [include] the 'inept domestic servant/mammy, the domination matriarch, the sex object (the Jezebel), and the tragic mulatto'" (Mgdami). These depictions

in artwork and early television permanently warped the perception of Black women, "Conversely, Black women were conceived and pictured as primitives, lustful, seductive, physically strong, dominating, unwomanly and dirty" (Mgdami). Most of the artwork from the antebellum era depict Black people as pitch black with bright red or white lips happily eating watermelon, serving their enslavers, or doing something to explain their darker complexion. Images of Black women during this era hypersexualize their physical features such as their buttocks or breasts; Black women were not exempt from the ridicule and immense racism from these minstrel images.

Figure 1. Illustration by Helen Bannerman in *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899). The image depicts caricatures of a Black woman dressing a child in a red garment.

Misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey in 2010 for a combination of misogyny and racism specifically for Black women, soaked a stain into Black women's lives forever. Mammy, Jezebel, and Tragic Mulatto stereotypes assigned to Black women are linked to white supremacy and racism. These stereotypes fulfill the racist and sexist ideology of enslavers and white supremacists, "[The mammy's] conceptualization as an ideal slave and mother, her domesticity, her virtue, and her defeminized image were in tune with the Victoria ideals of womanhood and thus fashioned her idealized image" (Mgdami). "Mammy" characterizations of Black women included forcing masculinity onto the Black woman and removing Black women from the proximity of femininity in order to protect white women's feelings during this era. Cartoonists during this era often drew Black women as being larger in size, more muscular, and disheveled in comparison to their depictions of "soft" and "feminine" white women.

Comparatively, the "Jezebel" image also plagued the minds of the world for centuries after its idealized conception. In contrast to the Mammy character, this character displayed Black women in a hypersexualized manner, "the Jezebel was a middle-aged or young woman governed by her libido and 'matters of the flesh'" (Mgdami). The image of the Jezebel caricature of Black women created the heartbreaking narrative of a Black woman being in total control of any and all sexual endeavors, including the inevitable sexual assault

her enslavers. This caricature in particular seemed to absolve white supremacists from any and all sexual abuse inflicted on Black women, "…it accentuated the immortality of Black women and made them responsible for their own rape and sexual coercion" (Mgdami). White women during this era perpetuated this Jezebel image more than their male counterparts:

> It was widely believed, by White women especially, that Black women during slavery drew on their sexual relationships with their White masters to gain freedom for themselves and for their offspring… many White women believed that Black females tried to infatuate White men and were therefor inviting sexual attack. (Mgdami)

White women during this era genuinely believed that Black women were trying to use their bodies in order to obtain freedom or special treatment from their white male enslavers. Black women were not viewed as human or vulnerable in the eyes of white enslavers.

The "Mulatto" was considered to be the most egregious sin to white supremacists. Ironically, these babies were often the result of sexual violence from white enslavers. In America, having a single drop of "Negro" in their blood immediately made "mulattos" invaluable. Even in the white supremacist's hatred for "mulattos," proximity to whiteness held more value than pure blooded African Americans, "Being "whitish" and regarded thus as more beautiful than full-blooded Black women, many mulattas were also during slavery sold for the exclusive purpose of prostitution and concubinage" (Mgdami). The relationships between enslavers and Black women began the withstanding complexity adjoined to being both Black and a woman. While being despised for everything they were and were not, Black women were simultaneously robbed of their sexual virtues, dehumanized, and desired by enslavers. By publishing stereotypical images in both art and entertainment throughout this era, white people were able to control mainstream narratives about Black women. These caricatures became the foundation for what has been expected of Black women in entertainment globally.

Naturally, these stereotypes leaked into television and film throughout the decades due to white people being the sole ones in charge of mainstream entertainment for more than half a century in Hollywood. One example of Black women being confined to one box for entertainment because of stereotypes is Hattie McDaniel. McDaniel

was one of the first Black women on the big screen for the movie *Gone with the Wind* (1939). She went on to win an Oscar for Best Actress in a Supporting Role for her performance as "Mammy" in the film. Over the years, *Gone with the Wind* has received an immense amount of criticism for its racist imagery and themes. For Hattie McDaniel to win an award as prestigious as an Oscar for her performance acting as a racist caricature of a Black woman speaks volumes to the level of respect designated for Black women in entertainment. Black women only seem to be praised and highly regarded in Hollywood while portraying racist caricatures of themselves.

Before *Insecure*, there were dramas, such as *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder,* that were created by a Black woman. Prior to these shows, however, representation of Black women in dramatic television was sparse. *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder,* created by Shonda Rhimes, center Black women characters at the height of their careers, yet who are extremely messy in their personal lives. Kerry Washington became the first Black woman to lead a television series in thirty-seven years (Warren 8). Black women as characters on television were reserved for one-dimensional, inconsequential characters, usually someone's (typically lighter in complexion) sidekick or best friend. Kerry Washington's Olivia Pope has been dissected since *Scandal* first aired in 2012. Many have culminated her character as being a combination of negative racial stereotypes for Black women like the sapphire, jezebel, and mammy stereotypes. Due to Olivia Pope's controversial and problematic relationship with the President of the United States during the series, many critics have reduced Olivia Pope to a glorified mistress, exactly like the jezebel. In a thesis written by Michaela Warren, she describes the racial dynamics in *Scandal*, "Race is nowhere, yet everywhere in *Scandal*… to a white audience, Olivia Pope can almost become race-less" (Warren 37). One of the times race is particularly mentioned in *Scandal* is when Oliva is directly identifying the power dynamic between she and the President. Despite the mountains *Scandal* moved on television, the series still stuck Black women in an all too familiar box; A Black woman being a mistress to a white man in power and being at that same white man's every beck and call has been done countless times on television. *Scandal* left viewers hungry for something more dynamic.

How to Get Away with Murder proved to be that something dynamic towards the latter half of the series. *How to Get Away with*

Murder aired in 2014, two years after *Scandal*. On the surface, these two shows seem similar in archetype. Viola Davis played Annalise Keating, the main character of the series and an extremely successful Black lawyer and professor in Pennsylvania. She is extremely independent yet possesses personal desires and struggles that are relatable to the audience. Keating suffers from alcoholism and deals with mental health trauma privately. Later in the series, the audience even learns that Keating is a bisexual Black woman. While these dynamic storylines are explored more later on in the show, the start of the show unfortunately paints Keating in the same historical stereotype as Olivia Pope from *Scandal*. She is the essence of a jezebel character. Keating cheats on her husband with a married man, has sex with people for her personal gain, and her alcoholism is nothing but fuel for the fire.

For these two shows, aside from lacing in modern versions of century old stereotypes, Black trauma is still laced into their storylines. Annalise experienced a childhood riddled with trauma, a miscarriage she suffered after a convoluted car accident, and witnessed numerous murders. Olivia Pope played mistress to the most prolific man in the world and is a substantial people pleaser. While these are dramas and therefore exaggerations of the human experience, both characters have deeply traumatizing experiences, some even specific to Black culture, that fuel their character development. Warren notes this flaw in her thesis, "However, the narrative of Black experiences always tends to be marked with some indication of struggle or tragedy a character has faced" (Warren 41). The importance of these two shows, however, lay in the market they opened for *Insecure*. Both shows gifted Rae an audience that was built around the desire to see Black characters explored in a different light, "However, these characters and the shows, also proved something to the white male dominated industry of television, that Black women can lead a show and bring in ratings" (Warren 43). Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating were still successful, powerful, and skilled Black women. They possessed the agency to be messy and human, devout to their personal journey. The impact of *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* had more to do with their iconic status rather than the stereotypes of Black women the characters inadvertently reinforced.

To illustrate the influence of the aforementioned stereotypes of Black women in media, it is important to take a look at one of the

most influential women in modern times. Michelle Obama became subjected to ridicule and negativity through the media as she supported her husband in his pursuit of becoming the President of the United States. Her status as a Black woman in America held the potential to ruin Barack Obama's America. The media portrayed Michelle Obama as beastly and unfeminine due to her Blackness and athleticism, similar to the Mammy stereotype. Michelle Obama experienced firsthand the duality and complexity that coincides with being both Black and a woman. By focusing on her racial *and* gender identity, media outlets deemed Michelle Obama unworthy of being the First Lady. In a newsletter penned by Taquesha Brannon, she notes, "… her favorability is related to a change in earlier media representations that emphasized her Black, racial identity to later media representation that highlighted her femininity, gender identity" (Brannon 23). Michelle Obama was demonized in the media for being a Black woman yet praised for removing herself from her race later in the election. As a Black woman, it is particularly difficult to separate race and gender; this is an experience exclusive to Black woman.

Figure 2. Political cartoon by Ben Garrison published on his Twitter account.

Placing her Blackness at the forefront in the media left the future First Lady exposed to being demonized and masculinized, remnants of the detrimental stereotypes Black women have been trying to escape for centuries. Whenever Michelle Obama said something unfavorable or did something outside the norm for a First Lady, it was negatively analyzed under a microscope in the media. Any type of negative press was associated with her Blackness. To contrast, in order to seem more appealing to the masses, Michelle Obama centered her media image around her fashion and being a mother. These are things that are directly associated with womanhood and femininity. Without incorporating her Blackness to news stories, the media suddenly valued her more, "…Mrs. Obama was rewarded with ascending favorability ratings and positive press when she was portrayed as an ideal mother, a fashion icon, and a favorable first lady" (Brannon 25-26). Based on the stereotypes enforced for centuries and what has been learned about the Black

woman's experience in antebellum America, the key issue during Mrs. Obama's personal campaign was her being a *Black* woman. Womanhood and femininity are reserved for whiteness in society. Black women lack the ability to separate their dual identity as both Black and woman; Michelle Obama was praised by the media for being able to separate the two. Michelle Obama shook the table for white America because she was everything it has been taught Black women are not allowed to be: Black, educated, feminine, and in power.

Stereotypes in entertainment have also emphasized the importance of what is being consumed in media by the public. In more recent years, another problematic image of Black people has come to the forefront in entertainment. Black trauma films, television shows, and videos have been making appearances. In an article featured in *The Urban Culture* (TUC) about Black trauma in movies and television shows, author Deja Heard defines the term, "Black trauma (also known as racial trauma) refers to the mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination, racism, and hate crimes." She goes on to categorize what would be considered a part of the "genre" as "Black trauma," "These black trauma films and [TV] shows could be something that's centered around things like slavery, police brutality, racism, and the list goes on" (Heard). Specific films such as *Two Distant Strangers* (2020) and *Them* (2021) are also mentioned in the article for their particularly graphic content. It is called into question the need for such triggering images and their validity in their setting, "…Some of the content that comes out of these artistic statements is more triggering than impactful" (Heard). In retrospect, groundbreaking shows such *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* did not need the traumatic events for the main characters in the show in order for the show to be successful. The true goal of these traumatic, graphic depictions of Black people on TV and in film is questionable. They serve no purpose other than fulfilling shock value and entertainment.

Similar to the entertainment industry, Black trauma is displayed on social media on what seems like a daily basis. Activist movement hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName are littered with violent and uncut footage of Black people becoming victims of police brutality and white supremacists. What initially began as a plea with government officials to do something about racist policing and police brutality has now become a one-stop-shop hashtag

for graphic images of dead/dying Black people. For anyone viewing, these images become engrained into the back of people's eyelids. However, for the Black community, a community that is already living the reality they view on social media, these images can be doubly troubling. When coupled with Black trauma becoming popularized in entertainment, the issue becomes Black people reliving traumatic experiences online through social media at an alarming rate. Reliving the trauma through entertainment is simply superfluous trauma.

On the contrary, executive show runner Issa Rae has generated shows, both online and for TV, that break the mold of typical Black trauma entertainment. Rae began her stint in entertainment with the YouTube series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011-2013). At the center of this YouTube miniseries was a mid-twenties Black woman, J, trying to navigate her personal and professional life with obstacles such as micro-aggressions at work from her superiors and trying to find her voice to express what she wants out of her life. The YouTube series was beloved by many Black millennials as it described the exact day-to-day activities they were experiencing.

Figure 3. **Logo of Issa Rae's web series,** *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl and Friends* **[2011-2013].**

Figure 4. **Promotional image for season four of Issa Rae's HBO series** *Insecure* **[2020].**

When Rae announced that she would be premiering a show titled *Insecure* on the primetime network HBO, people were excited to see what she would bring to the table with a more professional team and higher budget. The timing for the show was also perfect; *Insecure* premiered in 2016, starring Rae as Issa Dee and predominantly Black cast. The representation from two dark-skinned Black women being the main characters of this lively television series was as equally exciting as the rest of the show. *Insecure* lived through the endings of both *Scandal* in 2018 and *How to Get Away with Murder* in 2020 as well as handful of other television shows featuring a Black woman as the

lead. The ending of these shows granted Rae an even wider viewership, her audience becoming residue from shows that lacked what Rae provided. Rae adopted components from her predecessors including *Girlfriends* (2000-2008) and *Being Mary Jane* (2014-2019) and made them her own. People were thrilled to laugh alongside Rae at hilariously awkward situations and shift in their seats in the uncomfortable scenarios.

In an article published by the *Atlantic*, Hannah Giorgis describes Issa Dee as someone who is fumbling through her twenties and thirties as a hot mess, “She has stumbled through infidelity, the protracted demise of a long-term relationship, several more unfortunate romantic entanglements, and a series of unglamorous jobs” (Giorgis). *Insecure* has been a popular series amongst all types of viewing demographics, but especially the Black community. Consumers found Issa Dee’s honesty and vulnerability in her struggles admirable. Most of all, it was deemed relatable on a deeper level than simply being awkward experiences *everyone* has faced at some point in their life. Although there are dramatic aspects to *Insecure*’s baseline for episodic content, the drama is never based around race. The audience follows Issa Dee vicariously throughout various vital stages of her adulthood alongside her best friends, “The series has been devoted to showing how these everyday trials are experienced by Black characters, even if those characters are sometimes trying to navigate predominately white corners of the professional world” (Giorgis). The primary focus of *Insecure* was not on a Black woman trying to navigate racism in her professional environment and how that affected her on a day-to-day basis; the focal point of *Insecure*, and what made it so successfully relatable, was its realness. *Insecure* was about a woman experiencing her life who just so happened to be Black; this was a change of pace from the character types like Annalise Keating and Olivia Pope, who were older, wealthier and settled Black women. Issa Dee experiences a series of personal and professional complications, touching on topics that include sexual exploration, friendships, relationship issues, and financial struggles from not staying at a job that was not compatible with her personal growth.

Rae explores micro-aggressions in the workplace and minor interactions with white people as a subtle way to remind the audience that Issa Dee and her friends do experience racism in America. In the very first episode of *Insecure* titled “Insecure as F**k,” during a

classroom visit for her job, Issa Dee is asked by a student, “Why you talk like a white girl?” (1:05). Using proper grammar or speaking in a certain tone of voice is often associated with whiteness. This statement from the student is placed for comedic effect because of her question having nothing to do with Issa Dee’s presentation, however, it acknowledges the sense of not belonging in one particular space as an educated Black woman. Within the first two minutes of *Insecure*’s first episode, Rae fully acknowledged that her main character is a Black woman, yet she also made her relatable on a millennial level by depicting Issa Dee as a Black woman approaching her thirties with a job she is unhappy with and a relationship in which she does not feel fulfilled.

The audience follows Issa Dee into her (white) boss’s office with narration from Issa Dee. She talks about her boss’s goals for the organization titled We Got Y’all as wanting to help “kids from the hood” without actually hiring anyone who looked like said “kids from the hood.” The boss’s office is adorned with posters of Martin Luther King Jr., Barack Obama, Beyoncé, Pan-Africanism ideology, and African statues and memorabilia. Issa Dee’s boss is also talking to Issa wearing a dashiki, which is traditional African casual wear. These images portray the type of person Issa Dee’s white boss is: someone who aligns themselves with Black and African culture blindly without realizing how offensive they truly are. In under three minutes of Rae’s first episode, there is a clear distinction between how Issa Dee is viewed within her life as a Black woman and her relationship to race. While these illustrations precede the tone for all future addresses of racism throughout the remainder of the series, racism is never the focal point of *Insecure*. Rae acknowledges racism as a subtext compared to the overarching goal of the show.

Issa Dee resolved a new hunger for positive Black representation on the television screen; this is important because *Insecure* did not have to feature Issa Dee withstanding Black trauma in order to reach the turning point in her character development. Issa Dee withstood life’s already crippling pains like friendship fallouts, horrendous breakups, and career changes. Issa is a graduate of Stanford University, which is brought up a couple of times throughout the show, however, the viewer never gets the sense that it’s being mentioned because Issa Dee was a Black woman at a prestigious university. In an *NPR* article, Rae describes *Insecure* as “basic” (Deggans, Rae). The

article begins by recognizing *Insecure* as revolutionary for television because of the fact that it focused on "basic" Black Americans living their lives. While shows such as *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* were highly successful, they still lacked a level of relatability for a millennial audience. Rae honored a more realistic perspective by concentrating on placing millennials not having it all together. This provided a humanizing experience for Black woman with less, making them feel represented. Eric Deggans recounts the initial interview with Issa Rae impending *Insecure*'s debut, "Five years ago, I sat in a Los Angeles hotel meeting room with *Insecure*'s creator/star Issa Rae, talking about how her new series was going to feel like a TV revolution because it focused on 'basic'—her words—Black people, especially Black women, trying to make their way in life" (Deggans). The article goes on to mention a direct quote from Issa Rae stating how sad it was that Black people being regular on television was to be considered revolutionary. By the final season of the show, every single character has evolved into different people. The authenticity of the show is linked to exploring everyday issues such as romantic relationships and self-discovery. To reiterate, the focus of this show is not on the Black characters going through life in a caricature manner, "… race only matters when it needs to, yet Black culture underlines every aspect" (Deggans). *Insecure* is universal in its relatable experience, rather than a Black experience. While aspects of the show are drenched in southern Californian Black culture, it is not exclusive to *only* Black culture. Rae successfully depicted complex Black characters who dealt with humanizing issues on-screen, "Still, *Insecure*, remains the touchstone of her success; the mothership series where her focus on normalizing the lives of Black people has resonated worldwide" (Deggans). Rae pushed her audience to accept her characters for good and bad, forcing them to humanize every character, no matter their physical appearance.

More importantly, Rae does not subject the characters in *Insecure* to the same racist caricatures of Black women that have been in entertainment for centuries. In fact, she defies all stereotypes by casting people diverse in body type, personality archetype, career path, and skin tone. Issa Dee and her three best friends are never villainized, hypersexualized, or tokenized due to their race. They are all women in their late-twenties to early-thirties that face complexing

issues. Essentially, these women are humanized for all they experience and feel within the show.

To exemplify the character dynamics within *Insecure*, it is important to highlight a couple of episodes. In the first episode of season two titled "Hella Great," the audience follows Issa Dee and her best friend, Molly, throughout a typical day in their adult lives. Molly is Issa Dee's outspoken, vivacious, career-driven, morally grey best friend; the two have spent a majority of their lives together, including college. The episode begins with a montage of Issa Dee on a series of unfortunate dates; she's still in love with her longtime now ex-boyfriend, Lawrence, after she cheated on him. The episode cuts to Molly in therapy with a Black therapist; she is only discussing her work life. The audience joins Issa and Molly on a hike where the two besties are venting to each other about their most recent issues. This is only the first instance within the episode where both characters are allowing each other to be vulnerable with each other.

From Issa Dee and Molly's hike, the viewers are suddenly watching an antebellum era-based soap opera with one of Lawrence's friends, whom Lawrence is staying with until he can find a place of his own. *Insecure* often does this sly acknowledgment of race within the show without making it starkly obvious to the audience. Issa Dee is also watching the same soap opera in the apartment she used to share with Lawrence. She is shown hopelessly swiping through dating apps unsatisfactorily, which illustrates Issa still longing for Lawrence. Visually, the apartment Issa Dee used to share with Lawrence has references to Black and African culture such as an African print tapestry and a Frank Ocean throw pillow. Issa Dee prepares for bed by tying her short, natural hair into a head scarf, a ritual performed by Black women across the world in order to protect their hairstyles. These are intricate details specific to Black culture. The scarf is also a symbol of Issa Dee's vulnerable state. Rae making the decision to show Issa Dee in her scarf is vulnerable within itself, yet it adds on to her inner turmoil with Lawrence. Similar scenes were showcased in *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Girfriends*, however, it was never discussed in *Insecure* as a separation of racial experiences or used as a teaching moment. Rae did not depict Issa Dee in her headscarf as something malicious or to display a Black woman in a negative light as "Mammy" caricatures typically did; on the contrary, the decision was made to

allow the audience to view Issa Dee in a soft, feminine, and emotional light that is specific to Black femininity.

After a long day having typical issues at work, Issa Dee returns to the apartment she used to share with Lawrence to find a jury duty notice for him; something that would cement Lawrence's need to return to the apartment. Issa Dee decides to host a "plus one party" so Lawrence would assume she was okay without him. In true Issa Dee fashion, the audience is taken on yet another montage journey of her practicing what she wants to say to Lawrence once he arrives and switching in and out of outfits ranging on distinct levels of scandal. These are images most women are able to relate to, not just Black women. Issa Dee begins to grow upset at Lawrence's absence. Molly notices her friend's mood and follows her out on the balcony to give Issa a chance to vent. Molly does what any best friend would do and holds Issa accountable for throwing the fake party. Lawrence eventually swings by as Issa is cleaning up the party. By then, Issa is defenseless considering she was no longer expecting him to show up. There is tension in the air due to the breakup, but also something underlying the surface. The two of them end up spontaneously having sex, which ends up confusing the situation even more; this is typical of any toxic relationship.

The important thing to remember about this episode is that it would still make sense without the minor racial elements. There are moments in the episode where race is mentioned because it is not a topic Black Americans can tuck away and bring back out at their discretion; it is an element in their everyday lives. This is exactly why it makes sense that Issa Dee would be exasperated with her white co-worker for making micro-aggressions towards the Hispanic students they are trying to help for their job. It makes sense that Molly is relieved that she has a Black therapist, regardless of if she is sharing genuinely or not. It makes sense Molly would be frustrated that one of her white colleagues is making more money than her. These are all true aspects of the Black professional experience that are not often depicted in entertainment. The overall plot of the episode, though, revolved around Issa's mental state following a breakup caused by her wrongdoing and Molly attempting to climb the ladder at her job. Without those racial elements, the episode would still make total sense. Molly and Issa's life events are placed at the foreground while their "Blackness" is placed in the background in tiny details like art-

work and side conversations. For Black people, the Black experience is inescapable, however, it is not the *only* aspect of life.

Over the course of two episodes in season four, the audience accompanies Issa and Molly through a major argument that tests their friendship. In this particular situation, neither character was correct in the way they handled the confrontation. Both Issa Dee and Molly lacked the proper communication all season to deal with the actual root of the issue. The two go on to mend that rough patch in their friendship and move on from that lesson. The value in this as a viewer is that there is no obvious "bad guy" per se. Neither Molly nor Issa are villainized outside of their human actions as a result of their skin tone or race. Both women are written to be humanized in the moment they needed their best friend and felt angry that they were not there for each other. Upon airing, these particular episodes were very polarizing online because people could understand where either character was coming from. Once again, Rae pushed the audience to relate to the characters because they were human, not simply because they were Black.

Figure 5. **L to R: Amanda Seales, Yvonne Orji, Issa Rae, and Natasha Rothwell on the set of *Insecure* in season 3.**

The other half of the best friend quartet is Tiffany and Kelli. Neither one of these women were subjected to being reduced to racist caricatures of Black women either. Tiffany is not tokenized for being light skin, although, the quartet make fun of Tiffany from time to time because of it; she values the important things in life like her husband and friends. She also graduated from Stanford University alongside her besties as a proud member of the first Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. Kelli is the voluptuous, openly sensual, glue of the

group. Kelli is never sexualized without her consent or just because she is a Black woman in *Insecure*. While she and Tiffany spend most of their time together the same way Molly and Issa Dee do, Kelli is the true factor in keeping the group both in the mix and sane. Kelli is the true embodiment of a free spirit and frequently guides the group into many of her poorly thought-out shenanigans.

All four of these women are submerged in femininity in their own ways and explore their sexuality openly. They hold each other accountable (sometimes to their own disillusionment) and embody what it means to form a sisterhood. When analyzing these characters versus the images of Black women that have been perpetuated in entertainment for centuries in combination with what has been seen of Black women in the past on television, none of these Black women align with these racist caricatures. Kelli is not hypersexual or hypersexualized because she is a Black woman; she is open in her sexuality because she is a woman in her early thirties. Molly is not portrayed as being hard-headed or difficult to work with because she is a Black woman; she is defined as this character because of her backstory and familial life. Tiffany is not valued in the friend group for being a light skin Black woman; she is valued in the friend group for what she contributes to the conversations and the care she provides her friends. These characters defy the stereotypes aforementioned by Rae's contribution to providing these characters with the safe space to be vulnerable. Rae perceives these characters through a humanizing lens. She does not unnecessarily traumatize the audience or the characters by including aspects of Black trauma that *may* be a reality for Black Americans. Issa Rae simply allows them to exist in their human truth.

The key factor in these humanizing representations of *Insecure* revolve around who is in the executive offices making decisions for the show. There is predominantly Black and people of color ensemble both on-screen and off-screen for *Insecure*. Most, if not all, of the executive producers for the show are the characters within the show, which makes it easier for the people up top to vouch for what they find to be absolutely necessary for their characters. In a *New York Times* interview conducted by Salamisha Tillet, the cast and creatives behind *Insecure* give insight to what it was like filming and being in charge of the show. Tillet asks Rae about a previous description Rae provided for *Insecure* about how it "wasn't exclusively about the struggle of being Black but rather 'just regular Black people living

life'" (Tillet). Rae responds, "The goal was to elevate Black people and make us look as beautiful in our regularness as humanly as possible. I think we achieved that" (qtd. In Tillet). Both Rae and Prentice Penny, another show runner for *Insecure*, detail that Black Americans simply return to their daily lives after facing micro-aggressions in the workplace or out in the world. Tillet continued by noting, "Even though your own show was on HBO, it often felt as if it were written for a Black audience" (Tillet). HBO is considered a non-Black streaming platform, meaning Rae and Penny had to answer and collaborate with white executives in order to make certain aspects of the show work to the white executive's liking. Rae describes her frustration with being locked into a certain formula for Black entertainment, "With 'We Got Y'all,' we just felt tired of telling those stories. There is this pressure for Black writers to talk about the Black experience within a white context… we were briefly encouraged to tell the point of view of the Frieda character [Issa's white colleague…] Why would we do that?" (qtd. In Tillet). There was no room for growth with Rae and Issa Dee being confined to spaces that were not meant to include their experiences as Black women. The Black creatives behind *Insecure* choosing to place the Black characters in Black spaces allowed the authenticity of their character's lives to be more realistic. These creatives also came from a place within the industry where their voices were labeled as "other;" this provided them perception on what *really* matters when it comes to representation for Black millennials on-screen. They were allowed to set another standard with *Insecure*, Issa Dee, Molly, and all other characters involved.

Insecure makes the Black experience completely immersive in the way the characters' dress, interact with each other, and the miniscule details only those within Black culture will be able to recognize. Rae curated a show that highlighted the beauty and simplicity of what it means to be Black in America without incorporating exhaustive depictions of Black trauma, unlike her television precursors. She allowed the characters to be themselves, to be human in an industry that views Black people as subhuman. There is a long, convoluted history to what Black representation looks like and means in entertainment. *Insecure* is Black representation and presentation done right.

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BACKSIDES

AMITA BASU

In the headquarters of Calcutta Electricity Supply Corporation, we sit over lunch. The powder-blue walls smell damp; the fans hanging on ten-foot-long rods from the high ceiling whirr lackadaisically, barely moving the swamp-thick air; our lunch is white rice, fish curry, and sweets; and the only way to stay awake this midsummer afternoon is to jabber.

We've pushed around our paperwork, slow as snails, but there's nothing to push post-lunch. Still we must stick around till 5pm. You decry the regulations: "Already in this heat, my eyelids are embracing like lovers, refusing to part."

Utpal and Animesh, who lunch with us, merely nod.

But next day at the meeting, Boss cold-shoulders you. You and I confer, and conclude that either Utpal or Animesh is a snitch.

Animesh is always haunting Boss's cabin, telling Boss how he toils, picking up everyone's slack. Boss asks him home to tea. For the occasion, Animesh buys new shoes and shirt, and thereafter comes to work extra-smart. In the midmorning post-tea slump, you and I butter up Boss's new favorite, undoing the damage of our loose tongues. We begin lunching out of office.

We take Utpal along. Utpal has no friends, speaks a muddy English, wears kurtas shabby-elbowed and eyeglasses thick as telescopes,

and works like a masochistic donkey but never brays about it. Stupid fellow!

Over our threesome lunches, joking around waiting for the food, we realize it's safest to stick with one butt for every joke: Utpal. Utpal smiles sheepishly.

####

My wife is learning *kasuti* stitching. She explains how she must count the threads of the warp and the weft. What might those be, I wonder, yawning at the *Anandabazar's* Sports section.

It takes her a day to fill one square inch with embroidery. I bend kindly over my poor bored housewife. "And what's so special about *kasuti*?"

She turns the cloth over and looks up at me. I blink blankly. "Don't you see? The backside is as neat as the frontside."

"So what? Nobody sees the backside."

"My mother taught me," she says, "That a beautiful thing should be beautiful on every side. God sees the backside."

My wife's mother was also a housewife. And God has retired – he was succeeded by Boss, and Boss only has eyes in the front of his head. I smile into my moustache.

###

Over the vanilla cake celebrating Animesh's promotion, you and I whisper about his paunch, ballooning under his fine shirts. All week, we haunt Animesh's big new Division Manager desk.

Utpal grinds away in his corner, hidden behind and bent over his pile of papers. Feeling generous, we stroll over. "Friend," I advise, "Don't work yourself to death."

"We three will grow gray at these desks," you reason. "Might as well make ourselves comfortable, eh?"

Utpal thanks us for our advice, poor half-wit, deaf to irony, then ducks his head back to work.

The sexless old bachelor doesn't even avail of his ten days' leave a year, and doesn't seem to know that on Saturdays you need only stay till noon.

###

We're going to visit a schoolmate in hospital. "Just 41," you say, tsk-tsking with relish, "And a heart attack!"

“Makes you think,” I agree. But I don’t want to think. Panicking, I cast about for pleasanter subjects.

Our taxi’s rushing down the new highway over a neighborhood we roamed during college days. I remember these houses’ fronts: repainted every year in post muted colours, balconies rainbowed with flowerpots, rice-powder *alpona* in driveways daunting passersby. Now we’re passing these houses’ backsides.

You snort. “Look at them!”

Damp has blackened the houses’ back walls and is cracking them. Bathroom pipes and loose wires grotesquely necklace them. Air-conditioner exhausts, smog-browned, sag from blind windows. These back walls are never repainted. They never were painted to begin with. The cement wasn’t even smoothed: it’s still grainy.

“Poor souls,” I reflect. Fifty years ago, these houses put their faces towards the front, viz, the main roads we used to haunt. How could they know that later there’d be another front, the highway at their back?

###

Utpal’s missing.

Utpal hasn’t been late or absent in thirty years. We finish today’s paper-pushing, then tour the office. Often he’s helping someone with their work, viz, doing it for them.

He’s not here. The world devours fellows like him: good-going-on-simpleminded, *bhalomanush*. We debate ringing the police. Then you spot him sitting in the Regional Manager’s glass-walled corner office.

“Good old Utpal!” you laugh. “Gone bonkers at last.”

“Stealing something from Boss,” I speculate, “Old dot-pens, probably. Loony miser!”

We saunter in. Animesh stands across the desk, notebook in hand, bowing as Utpal dictates from the swivel-chair. Is Animesh in on this little skit? Not a good skit: Utpal’s English accent is still thick as ghee, his elbows still seedy as a rickshaw-driver’s morals.

Utpal finishes. Animesh bows, turns, and walks sheepishly past us. Our blood turns to water. We start crawling away.

Utpal smiles, just as he always smiles. “Yes?”

“No, we were just wondering” – you begin.

“That is to say, we didn’t know” – I supply.

“Congratulations, old man.”

“Boss, we mean, Mr. Utpal, sir.”

“None of that,” smiles Utpal, from the black leather throne, behind the plaque glinting on the bureau. “I didn’t want to tell you I’d interviewed – that too for this position. Leapfrogging! It’s unheard of.” Modestly he smoothes his chest where his necktie should be. “But we’ll be as before.” We swallow as we think of ‘before,’ but that memory’s too big to swallow: it sticks in our throat, a live-legged frog. “If you ever face any problems, or have any ideas how to make things better, just walk in.”

Our jaws drop. We scrutinize his face. Is he really this naïve? Trust the government to promote jackasses over the heads of sensible people. We stumble back to our nook.

You’re first to find your voice. “We got lucky, eh?” you mutter, wiping your brow. “For a moment there, I thought we’d be penalized for having shown the wrong person our backsides.”

END

Tulip Poplars

Daun Fields

When I am teaching, I'm usually a tulip poplar.

Before class, I remind myself to allow roots to descend from the base of my spine. I imagine what the topography deep under my feet looks and feels like. First it is thick sand packed onto rolling limestone, then cool flowing water. There. I learned to ground my body and mind in preparation to approach facilitating a group from Grace Chapman when she was a willow tree and from Natalie Long when she was a hawthorne. I remember all the trees.

Maybe I'm a rose bush for today's class, maybe an orange tree tomorrow. It depends on how far I need to reach to facilitate connections, or how much context I should offer–sometimes in a showy way–before everyone in the learning group feels ready to discuss. I lecture because I love sharing historical context when it supports explorations of the text. When I lecture the way I learned from Dr. Maisha Wester when she was a holly in bloom, fully prepared with an outline and allowing emotions to come through, I can see and hear that students feel more informed and inspired when it's time to discuss the text that is situated in a time and place. I am continuing to practice allowing my passionate and spiritual self to shine through when necessary while sharing lecture materials and wisdoms—modeling Dr. Debra Walker King
while she is currently a sycamore with an outstretched branch promising to catch us if our vulnerability knocks us down in front of everyone during her Alice Walker seminar.

I learned to practice using unobtrusive, encouraging phrases such as, "say more about that," and "interesting! let's find that in the text" to guide students into deeper class discussions, as well as to ask them to share a daily question or curiosity based on the reading as an effective way to encourage them to *do* the reading. Patrick Kendig modeled this for me when he was a potted ficus who hoped to

be planted permanently at Harvard. An egalitarian classroom is important, and I have observed that effective professors offer as much equal time as they are able to each student, and gently encourage shy students' voices through ways of participation that are not limited to vocal in-class discussion. These include drawing on the board, taking a poll on their phone, or annotating a text with images or words on a digital annotation platform such as COVE.

The true effectiveness of compassionate encouragement was shared with me by Dr. Laura Gonzales, a (seemingly always in bloom!) magnolia tree. Always encouraging students with suggestions to further develop their work, she instills confidence by creating a feeling of low-stakes exploration and experimentation during the dreaming and writing process. This, in my experience, results in a student body that releases into the creation process with ease. Flexibility is a companion to this compassionate encouragement, and I learned to be flexible with assignment deadlines in order to offer students the opportunity to show their best work *and* prioritize their mental health from palo verde tree Dr. Victor Del Hierro. I also learned this from my first-year writing students, who, when they were ponytail palms, still in pots in a line in the greenhouse, afraid of catching a sickness, turned in excellently composed "late" assignments.

I learned to convey to students the deep pleasures that can come with writing, reading, and research in order to show an alternative to the sometimes demoralizing, stressed-out burnt-out narratives of academic education. By selecting texts such as *Pleasure Activism* by adrienne maree brown or *On Longing* by poet and scholar Susan Stewart, I offer students space to discuss their experiences or curiosities regarding the roles of effort and enjoyment, and "feeling good" during the writing process. Discussion questions here might sound like, "How does your body feel when you are stressed and trying to compose an essay?" "How might one love reading/creating a piece of written text?" or "How do you get into 'the zone' to write?" I learned to share pleasures of writing and reading in order to encourage students to bring awareness to their own bodies and emotional needs from Dr. Judith C. Brown, a peach tree whose inosculated partner had died suddenly a few years before I took her class.

When I'm teaching, I'm usually a tulip poplar: the state tree of Indiana. But I know I am just one in a dense forest that's always grow-

ing and changing. I have inherited a passion for teaching and empowering students' voices and creative processes from the professors who have offered the same to me.

The Poetry Institute Library

Catherine Hoyser

Sometimes when I dream
I tumble down round
a rabbit hole and pop up
in the poetry library. Walnut
shelves with thin volumes, tall
folios, Oxford classic-sized,
fit for pocket books. At the
end of the room is a counter behind
which sits a poet librarian.
Who it is changes, but we end up kissing
and then we push each other away,
say friendship is better than sex.

Sometimes it is Stanley Kunitz in his
lovely white-haired puckishness
with a vase of lilies on the counter.
He burped once mid-kiss, and we
giggled, chortled, then laughed huge guffaws.
Stanley asked me how many poems I'd written lately—
I lied—thousands, well, hundreds, okay, one.

Sometimes it's Billy Collins in his compactness,
twinkling eyes, with Emily Dickinson
shaking her finger at us.
Marianne Moore went with me once.
Elizabeth Bishop was there, but didn't kiss;
she offered to take me fishing.

We always end up declaring friendship is better.
We'd rather talk poetry than love.

Coleridge never stopped talking; Wordsworth
asked me for my journal. He wanted
more memories to mine. Dorothy's
had run dry. Keats refused to draw
near, contagion, my dear.

Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett
Browning sat sipping tea, complaining
about the old boys' network. They enjoined me to
be wary, but Liz hoped that I would find a man
as good as Bobby. Marianne Moore
cropped up again and suggested I visit
her favorite shop to buy a hat, pitied
that I had given away my flea market cape.
Sylvia Plath intoned a greeting worthy of a sybil.
We commiserated about our Germanic fathers,
argued about Cambridge's gleaming spires
versus Oxford's.

Once a blind man sat at the desk muttering
about wine and seas; he kept calling me
Cassandra, but I protested
why not call me Helen instead,
since I failed to see the future?
Before we could kiss and talk
about friendship, he nodded off. I
woke to see the "rosy-fingered dawn."

BOOK REVIEW

Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 4, edited by Dana Lynn Driscoll, Megan Heise, Mary K. Stewart, and Matthew Vetter. Parlor Press 2022, ISBN 978-1-64317-271-2 (PDF), v + 337 pp.

Reviewed by **Lily Howard-Hill,** *University of South Carolina*

Driscoll et al's edited collection *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 4* builds on the conversations started in previous volumes, "adding to . . . topics such as linguistic diversity, digital privacy, feedback, online source evaluation, grading criteria, social media, racial literacy, public writing, primary data analysis, digital collaboration, writing workflows, genre theory, knowledge transfer, archival research, and accessibility" (ii).

Each entry in the collection is followed by teacher resources for implementing the practices set out previously; in this sense, *Writing Spaces Volume 4* could easily feature as a textbook in any writing program. While no clear organizational structure immediately presents itself, the collection soon makes clear the prominent thread through every essay: undergraduate student writers are important and have valuable contributions to make that are often at odds with the ideologies and goals of higher education. The interconnectivity of writing and identity leads Alvarez et al to argue that "when it comes to writing, ideas about what is 'appropriate' are often at the heart of judgements about whether writing, and by extension the author, is 'good'" (4). Alvarez et al offer several strategies that are "oriented by translingualism" (6) to help students, to whom many of the entries in this collection are addressed, understand how to "continue languaging and stance-taking away from the deficit perspective in the various writing tasks [they] might encounter as a student and as a writer in the world" (12).

On reaching broader audiences, Grayson and Sánchez-Martín explore the use of writing assignments as making language more equitable in the classroom. Their chapters challenge us to get uncomfortable with contemporary practices, because, as Grayson puts it, "a little discomfort can be productive and lead to transformative learning" (176). These chapters suggest that practicing racial literacy guides writers towards antiracist writing practices. This, in turn, increases our understanding of what writing does in a society where embedded prejudices often limit our ability to grow as learners. If challenging "normative and exclusionary views of language and writing" (269) is an understood objective of contemporary writing pedagogy, Sánchez-Martín asks, why is language diversity still a marginal topic? This chapter presents non-traditional genres of text, such as recipes, as examples of translingual writing practices in action, in contrast to the monolingual classroom that both Grayson and Sánchez-Martín oppose. Similarly, Ashley J. Holmes "challenges students to use public writing to embrace their role as an 'academic citizen'" (199), one whom she argues can perhaps move more easily towards addressing social injustices.

Like the previous authors, Holmes suggests that "recognizing a multiplicity of publics means acknowledging and valuing the way our differences can challenge us to later and expand our views of the world" (206). But this recognition may not come easily: Seeley's (and others') chapter on 'reading the room' explains that learning how to navigate hidden power structures within a discourse community follows from "recognizing the social context that surrounds communication" (291) and developing strategies to be successful in new situations.

Similarly, Raquel Corona and her coauthors advocate for more opportunities for collaboration and co-authorship in writing classrooms. Student writers do not generally have positive experiences with "teamwork, group work, collaboration, cooperative learning, coauthoring, or cowriting" (51), and therefore do not fully recognize the potential of writing that is fundamentally "shaped by additional voices" (52). Using their personal experiences as both teachers and writers, Corona et al help students navigate the intricate classroom politics that come with working with others, suggesting that the potential for collaborative writing is greater now with the technologies available. The authors emphasize that "Twenty-first century learners . . . have access to amazing technologies, access to other writers around

the world," claiming that the strategies set forth in this chapter equip students with the multiple literacies needed to succeed in a global workforce (57).

Kara Taczak argues that to be effective in future writing situations, such as the multiple literacies that form a workplace, students must understand "how to effectively and successfully transfer knowledge and practices from past and current writing experiences forward" (301). Reforming some of the common misconceptions about writing, Taczak rethinks these misconceptions as "revised truths" about writing, arguing that "misconceptions can hinder your ability as a writer to effectively respond to a writing situation" (305). While the misconceptions and revised truths that she explores are not particularly groundbreaking - writing as a process, for example - Taczak's focus on the role of transfer opens up the conversation to new futures and futurities. Taking up the thread of writing accessibility, Rachel Donegan's chapter would not be out of place in a course on professional technical communication; Donegan focuses on the rhetorical aspects of visual text design, situating her work in ongoing conversations about disability inclusion and access and emphasizing how "access features not only have direct benefits for a disabled audience, but are beneficial rhetorical bonuses for all writers" (110).

Many of the chapters in this collection focus on writing in, or for, the world that we live in. Never neglecting the more "traditional" writing practices that could easily get lost in a collection which places such an emphasis on writing's social turn, additional chapters focus on how to analyze data (Denny and Clark), utilizing feedback in writing (Grauman), writing in genres (Jacobson et al), and understanding grading practices (Levine). Whether it's exploring texts circulated via social media and in digital spaces (Amicucci; Cummings et al; Kim; Carillo and Horning), the role of writers in non-traditional spaces outside of the classroom (Gaillet and Rose; Hemstrom and Anders), or writing for the workplace (Van Ittersum and Lockridge), *Writing Spaces: Volume 4* de-centers our classroom practices to highlight the role of students' identities in their writing. Simultaneously a collection for students and teachers, the editors have ensured that the broad themes held within are relevant to all writers in the contemporary world.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Amita Basu is a creative writer whose fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in more than forty magazines and anthologies including *The Penn Review*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *Gasher*, and *Bandit Fiction*. She lives in Bangalore, India; has a PhD in cognitive science; teaches undergraduate psychology; likes *Captain Planet*; and blogs at http://amitabasu.com/.

Daun Fields is a Ph.D. student and English instructor at the University of Florida where she finds herself, a Midwesterner, surrounded by endlessly thrilling varieties of orange trees. She currently studies human narratives of intersections between nature and spirituality, and *odic force*, the Victorian-era theory of an all-permeating and hypnotic energy emanating from the moon. In addition to research and teaching, she enjoys swimming in the local waters and walking her dog each day hoping/hoping not to see an alligator in the street.

Liliana Fuentes is an avid photographer of all things nature. She enjoys exploring her surroundings and venturing off the beaten path for that perfect shot. She resides in Silver Spring, Maryland and has called it home for the last three years. Hailing from Miami, Florida, Liliana relishes the ability to experience the multi-faceted nature of the different seasons.

Lily Howard-Hill is a graduate student at the University of South Carolina, where her current research focuses on the labor concerns of graduate assistants who work in writing programs across the United States. She regularly presents at regional and national conferences, and currently serves as the President of the University of South Carolina student chapter of the Rhetoric Society of America. When not teaching freshman writing courses, her interests include exploring the intersections of pop culture and rhetoric, trans-Atlantic discourses

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Matthew P. Varvel is a Ph.D. student and Assistant Instructor at the University of Texas at El Paso. He holds an M.A. in English from Angelo State University and has been teaching for seventeen years - eleven at the high school level where he taught Advanced Placement, Dual Credit, and On-Level courses and six years at the college level. His interests include Composition theory and pedagogy, particularly Labor-Based Contract Grading, and constitutive rhetoric, rhetorics of power, and rhetorics of place.

Alexis Young is a graduate student at Georgetown University pursuing an MA in English with a Certificate in Disability Studies. She graduated from the University of Virginia with a B.A. in English and History in 2019. She works in higher education consulting for Deloitte and recently published a memoir, *The Worst Thing* (2021), on her brother's addiction and death within the context of the opioid epidemic in the United States. Her research interests primarily include addiction and mental health in American literature. She is an avid runner and enjoys cheering for the Chicago Cubs.