



FRAMEWORKS

*A Journal of Undergraduate Research
in the Interdisciplinary Humanities*

*Issue 2, Fall 2021
The Unknown Edition*

Cover photo by Max Rayneard, Ph.D.

FRAMEWORKS PROGRAM DIRECTOR /JOURNAL EDITOR

Max Rayneard

EDITORIAL BOARD

Rikki Bettinger

Laura Bland

Robert Cremins

DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Martha Hayes

STUDENT ADVISER TO THE FRAMEWORKS PROGRAM

Ayania Hicks

FACULTY MENTORS

Richard Armstrong, Laura Bland, Tshepo Masango Chéry,
Robert Cremins, Jamie Ferguson, Alison Leland, David Rainbow,
Jesse Rainbow, Tamler Sommers, Caryn Tamber-Rosenau,
Marina Trninic, David Tucker, Helen Valier

WITH GRATITUDE TO

Dean William Monroe

Associate Dean Jonathan Williamson

The Honors College Office of Communications

Julia Brown, Brenda Cruz, Martha Hayes, Jillian Holden

The Office of Undergraduate Research and Major Awards

Ben Rayder, Rikki Bettinger, Brittini MacLeod

The Cougar Initiative to Engage (CITE)

Ann Dayton, Fan Wu

ADDITIONAL THANKS

Stacey Michael

Lorena Lopez

Christopher Herrin

FrameWorks is grateful to be funded in part by a grant from the

CITE, a program of the

Office of Provost Paula Myrick Short

FrameWorks: A Journal of Undergraduate Research in the Interdisciplinary Humanities is published by the Honors College of the University of Houston under the auspices of Creative Work with support from the Office of Undergraduate Research and Major Awards. The journal is published annually and contains articles written by undergraduate students (predominantly sophomores and juniors) who completed the FrameWorks Program, a year-long co-curricular course that facilitates undergraduate research in the interdisciplinary humanities through faculty mentorship and peer support.

Applications for the FrameWorks Program open in the spring semester. Rising sophomores and rising juniors are especially encouraged to apply. Applicants do not need to be students in the Honors College but must be registered at the University of Houston. If interested in the FrameWorks Program and in publishing research in the interdisciplinary humanities, additional information about eligibility, expectations, and the benefits of the program is available at thehonorscollege.com/frameworks. All queries regarding the journal or the program should be submitted to Dr. Max Rayneard at mjrayneard@uh.edu.

The views expressed by the authors, unless stated to the contrary, are not necessarily those of the editors, faculty mentors, the Honors College, or of the University of Houston.

FRAMEWORKS

*A Journal of Undergraduate Research
in the Interdisciplinary Humanities*

ISSUE 2, FALL 2021, The Unknown Edition

Table of Contents

- 7 Editor's Introduction
MAX RAYNEARD
- 9 Restaging COVID-19: Material Culture,
Ontological Security, and Liminality in a
Time of Pandemic
LEONARD WANG
- 24 Shadow Bodies: The Articulation of
Sudanese Identity
RANA MOHAMAD
- 37 Speaking, Embodying, Living: Oral History
and the 1963 Birmingham Children's Crusade
MORGAN THOMAS
- 55 Daughter of Breaking: Sexual Violence as
Political Economy in Judges 19
AUSTIN KELLY MITCHELL
- 73 It is All One Thing: Ecological Stewardship,
Nativism, and the Solwara 1 Deep Sea
Mining Project
ANNA MAYZENBERG
- 86 Conversation with Environments: Frameless
Aesthetics, Intersectionality, and the "America
the Beautiful" Initiative
ERIN SATTERWHITE
- 98 After Strategic Invisibility: The Faith Practice,
Monetization, and Exploitation of Vodou
LAUREN ROCHELLE
- 108 Unknown to Her: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta
Lacks* and Racial Disparities in Healthcare
RANI NUNE

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

When we decided on the theme “Unknown” in early 2020, we thought it would be a stimulating prompt for our second cohort of intrepid undergraduate FrameWorks Fellows. 2020 was a presidential election year, after all. With information bubbles and targeted social media campaigns tailoring facts to biases, the divisions between belief and knowledge blurred. At such times (or so the pundit class tells us), dogmatic conviction projects strength, and uncertainty suggests weakness. Early in 2020, “Unknown” seemed a provocative countermand to the excess of “knowledge” to which the presidential election – surely the biggest story of the year – would subject us.

Little did we know.

If 2020-2021 was defined by anything, it was our collective state of “unknowing.” As the pandemic raged, individuals, families, communities, nations, the globe were thrown into flux or, as Leonard Wang persuasively argues in this issue’s first article, a state of “liminality.” For many, the unquestioned underpinnings of daily lives – the safety of the very air they breathed – came to resemble shallow veneers, the mere semblance of order. And then George Floyd’s murder inflamed America. And then the election results were contested. And then the Capitol was stormed. And then Winter Storm Uri brought Texas to its infrastructural knees. At such times (or so many of us have come to appreciate of late), it takes strength to live without certainty, without the answer; to live in the unknown.

This, the second issue of *FrameWorks: A Journal of Undergraduate Research in the Interdisciplinary Humanities*, attests to that strength. The writers featured here are themselves exemplary: each of their quality pieces was written at a very challenging time. Their interpretation of the theme is diverse, but there is an urgency to their collective voice. They remind us that the disorientation of the last year was extraordinary for its ubiquity, but that for many people, uncertainty has long been the rule rather than the exception.

So, Rana Mohamad’s tender essay details the shadow body existence of migrant women. Austin Kelly Mitchell invokes the humanity of a woman who is left unvoiced by Judges 19, a text in which she is traded, brutalized, and disarticulated. Morgan Thomas directs our attention towards the ways the triumphs and violence of the civil rights era continue to reverberate in the bodies of those who lived them. Rani Nune draws on the devastating last days of Henrietta Lacks’s life to think through the historical power imbalance between imperious physicians and African American women. Lauren Rochelle critiques the corporate exploitation of intimate Vodou faith practices devel-

oped, in part, under conditions of enslavement. The articles of Anna Mayzenberg and Erin Satterwhite anticipate escalating climate crises, examine the limits of un-reflexive Western sustainability models, and gesture towards the radical potential of alternative perspectives.

It has been a privilege working with these fine people and their engaging, smart, revelatory pieces. Thank you to them, their mentors, and the support of faculty and staff who have made this second issue possible.

Max Rayneard, Editor

Restaging COVID-19: Material Culture, Ontological Security, and Liminality in a Time of Pandemic

By Leonard Wang

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic (*World Health Organization*, “Timeline of WHO’s Response to COVID-19”). Government orders for lockdown and quarantine measures quickly followed around the globe. Such responses were meant to limit what would become a devastating loss of human life. Inevitably, however, the measures triggered sociocultural consequences. Material and psychological forces combined to significantly change collective human behaviors, placing new stresses on existing social divisions.

In addition to wreaking havoc on the immune systems of its victims, disease outbreaks result in sociocultural changes (Greene and Vargha). Some of these changes are seemingly banal. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased social media usage due to the disruptions of in-person social lives (Koeze and Popper). Other changes are devastating, such as increased levels of anti-Asian discrimination (Wang et al. 3685). While we can now say that the introduction of effective vaccines has begun to mitigate the biological effects of COVID-19, no single panacea will resolve the pandemic’s sociocultural implications. Examining how the human experience of uncertainty manifests on a sociocultural level is an important first step in understanding how the virus has reshaped our collective life.

Medical historians have outlined broad typological structures for disease outbreaks that identify recurring phenomena while allowing for the unique characteristics of each historical event (Greene and Vargha). The framework theorized by Charles Rosenberg in “What is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective” is seminal. Rosenberg characterizes disease outbreaks as dramaturgical events. Similar to many dramatic productions, he argues,

they “mobiliz[e] communities to act out proprietary rituals that incorporate and reaffirm fundamental social values and modes of understanding” (Rosenberg 2). Disease outbreaks thereby offer scholars an opportunity to investigate human behavior and social structure. Like many dramaturgical events, epidemics progress in a particular order as they “[1] proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, [2] follow a plot line of increasing and revelatory tension, and [3] move to a crisis of individual and collective character” before drifting toward closure (2).

In this article, Rosenberg’s dramaturgical structure (through which he investigates the HIV/AIDS epidemic) will be a point of departure for an examination of some of the sociocultural phenomena to which the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise in the United States. COVID-19’s “plot line” will be interpreted in keeping with three stages (or “acts”) Rosenberg describes: “denial/resistance,” “managing randomness,” and “negotiating the public response.” With minor qualification, Rosenberg’s dramaturgical model is also useful in thinking about the tensions that characterized the American experience of COVID-19. Rosenberg’s model suggests a neat “plot line,” as though events, ideas, and practices flow neatly and sequentially. For the purposes of this discussion, the “stages” are also understood to reflect a simultaneous diversity of responses that overlap in ways indicative of sociocultural and political divisions of contemporary America.

This article applies Rosenberg’s framework to an analysis of material culture during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the changing significance of the otherwise mundane (toilet paper, grocery store aisles, face masks, among others). The pre-pandemic mundanity of such objects, it will be shown, was dependent on a state of “ontological security.” The fluidity and/or contestation of the meaning attributed to the objects will be explained as a response to the state of “liminality” into which the pandemic threw America.

In his examination of the AIDS epidemic, Rosenberg argued that disease outbreaks “constitute an extraordinarily useful sampling device,” producing objects “capable of illuminating fundamental patterns of social value and institutional practice” (2). Such objects become material evidence of highly complex and diverse individual responses during the pandemic, allowing for a more thorough understanding of social, cultural, and political dynamics during a particular historical period. Analyzing previously mundane objects reveals that disease outbreaks are more than just a function of pathogens. As medical historians Erica Charters and Richard McKay (drawing on Rosenberg’s work) write, “[t]hey are also a function of how society is structured, how political power is wielded in the name of public health, how quantitative data is collected, how diseases are categorized and modelled, and how histories of disease are narrated” (225). Understanding the sociocultural aspects of COVID-19, in other words, may help us better prepare for the next disease outbreak.

Before the Pandemic

Rosenberg argues that epidemics, like dramaturgical events, are of limited duration. During an epidemic, it is natural to look ahead to its end. However, for the purposes of this discussion, it is important to recognize some aspects of the sociocultural reality that precede the pandemic outbreak and that were disrupted by it. The sociocultural reality before the outbreak is the status quo that sustained the mundaneness of the material objects which the pandemic threw into new significance.

On a psychological level, the pre-pandemic sociocultural reality is marked by a pervasive sense of “ontological security.” First coined by Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing, ontological security describes how people differentiate themselves in such a way that their “identity and autonomy are never in question” (Laing 41). Laing’s psychoanalytical approach to ontological security was later sociologically applied by Anthony Giddens. Giddens’ interpretation of ontological security requires a person’s trust in social order (i.e., social narratives and routines) in order to “maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety” (Kirke 1; Rosedale 372).

Ontological security is a prerequisite for a sense of ordinariness. This extends to people’s relationship with material culture. Here, “Materialities of Care,” Christina Buse et al.’s sociological approach to material culture in health and social care settings, can be usefully extrapolated. Material culture more broadly can be observed in terms of spatiality, temporality, and embodied practice (Buse et al. 243). Considering material culture in terms of spatiality allows us to observe where and how objects and embodied practices interact in familiar and/or unfamiliar ways (246). Space is constantly being redefined by such interactions. In a state of ontological security, for example, many people maintained clear divisions between the work space and the home space, which were arranged, furnished, and interacted with accordingly.

Considering material culture through the lens of temporality allows for the identification and analysis of routinized activities incorporated into our everyday patterns and rituals (248). Buse et al. examine the way material objects were incorporated into and shared as part of everyday routines within a health care setting (248). To extrapolate this idea to material culture more broadly, we can apply it to the context of a grocery store. Before the pandemic, in a state of ontological security, people shared common materials and spaces: grocery carts, food aisles, and checkout counters. All of these material objects intersect with habitual patterns, the practiced shopping routines of patrons as they move about the communal space of the grocery store, nonchalantly breathing the same air. Before the pandemic, such spaces, habits, and interactions were so ordinary that nobody gave them a second look.

Liminality

It took the disruption of a global disease outbreak to make America look again. Cases of viral pneumonia first appeared in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (*World Health Organization*, “Timeline of WHO’s Response to COVID-19”). When it was classified by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses in February 2020, the virus was named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). SARS-CoV-2 causes the disease known as COVID-19 which was named by the WHO in the International Classification of Diseases in February 2020 (*World Health Organization*, “Naming the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and the Virus That Causes It”). On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global health pandemic.

As news of the deadly virus spread and the seriousness of the threat became clear, the COVID-19 pandemic became a stark reminder of mortality, painfully exposing Americans’ vulnerability. This fear was heightened for people accustomed to feeling protected against death from acute infectious disease because of the powerful prophylactic interventions developed by modern medicine (Rosenberg 2). It undermined trust in the social order necessary to “maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety” (to recall Giddens definition of ontological security). In other words, the pandemic pulled Americans out of their state of ontological security into a state of “liminality.”

Derived from the Latin word *limen* – meaning threshold – liminality first emerged as an analytical concept in the field of anthropology (Burrows Grad). Within this context, liminality refers to a “transitional period or phase of a rite of passage, during which the participant lacks social status or rank, remains anonymous, shows obedience and humility, and follows prescribed forms of conduct, dress, etc.” (“Liminality”). For our purposes, liminality is understood to mean “in-betweenness,” a state of profound instability, uncertainty, and disorientation that is an opportunity for reorientation to a new normal (Thomas).

In terms of broad social patterns, liminality accounts for the COVID-19 anxiety that prompted many Americans to adopt a “new normal,” as reflected in changes to the intersections of their spatiality, temporality, and embodied practices. The “home” became a space where public and private spheres intertwined as students began attending online school, and adults worked from home. By mid-March in 2020, New York City – home to the nation’s largest public school system with 1.1 million students – announced that it would switch to a virtual format (Taylor). If they had not already, other public school systems quickly followed suit. Changes to the American lexicon reflect the substantial shift in the concept of space; the term “Zoom University” was frequently used by college students to refer to the fact that, for most, college was now taking place in their childhood bedrooms” (Aratani). For the Americans

that were fortunate enough to keep their jobs¹, over 70% worked from home by October 2020, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (Parker et al.).

In terms of embodied practices, changes in grocery shopping behavior (from increased online sales to curbside pickups to social distancing in stores) further exemplify “traditional patterns of response to a perceived threat,” while also reflecting the social, cultural, political, and economic characteristics of a specific disease in a particular context (Rosenberg 2). Arguably, the idea of liminality is useful in providing a heightened understanding of how a “particular society constructs its characteristic response” to a disease outbreak (2).

However, it is also important to recognize that not all Americans experienced or reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic the same way. For many, a heightened awareness of their individual vulnerability led to a distrust of others as potential viral vectors, which damaged their sense of general belonging. Yet, others denied their own vulnerability and resented those who did not. The state of liminality demanded that Americans reorient themselves in relation to each other. Material culture was one site where this difficult negotiation took place, and mundane objects changed in significance as Americans used them to distinguish between their “in-group” and “out-group.” In the words of journalist Shankar Vedantam, “[a]t one level, a virus is a biological organism. It’s a creature of natural selection. It follows rules that have been studied for decades by epidemiologists. But at another level, a virus is a social organism. It detects fissures in societies and exposes fault lines between communities.”

Denial/Resistance

In the first stage of a society’s response, communities are slow to acknowledge the disease outbreak (Rosenberg 3). According to Rosenberg, for a society to admit that a disease outbreak presents an imminent danger, it risks social dissolution (4). Acknowledging the onset of a disease outbreak may cause the interruption of normal social routines and the disruption of economic activities, leading to an overwhelming sense of uncertainty.

As the tension has been described in this discussion, COVID-19 threatened the routinized comfort that is sustained by ontological security with a disorientating state of liminality. By the end of April 2020, the confirmed coronavirus deaths in the U.S. exceeded 100,000 – far higher than any other nation at the time (Taylor). As federal and state measures began to take effect, many Americans understood the state of liminality as an unpleasant, if neces-

¹ The Congressional Research Service reported that the unemployment rate reached 14.8% in April 2020 – the highest rate recorded since data collection started in 1948 (Congressional Research Service).

sary, transitional state while others held on tightly to their sense of ontological security, denying the severity of the threat. Even as the first wave gathered momentum, Peter Hotez wrote in “April and May of 2020, anti-COVID-19 and antivaccine activities melded and manifested as public protests in multiple U.S. states, with an emphasis on opposing testing, contact tracing, and government-mandated social distancing.”

At a broader level, the adoption and implementation of public health measures (and the resistance to both) reflect cultural attitudes. Collective memory – shaped in part by the deeply ingrained experiences of a specific community – forms cultural attitudes and shapes reactions to public health measures. For example, after the SARS epidemic ravaged Chinese society in 2003, citizens were quick to adopt the widespread use of masks during the COVID-19 outbreak (Jingnan). By contrast, Western societies, partly due to an absence of severe disease outbreaks in the last century, were much slower to accept wearing masks as a public health measure (Qiaoan 336). Arguably, resistance to mask-wearing by many Americans is also a reflection of cultural memory. *The New York Times*’ description of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic is familiar: “In 1918 and 1919, as bars, saloons, restaurants, theaters, and schools were closed, masks became a scapegoat, a symbol of government overreach, inspiring protests, petitions, and defiant bare-face gatherings. All the while, thousands of Americans were dying in a deadly pandemic” (Hauser).

In ways that will be examined in more detail under the rubric of Rosenberg’s third stage, face masks would become profoundly charged objects in the eyes of Americans. At base, however, those who refuse to wear masks did so in pointed defense of their ontological security, using material culture as their site of resistance. Wearing a mask, limiting gathering, observing social distancing, such actions would require them to acknowledge the severity of the threat and to abandon the comfort of routine for the disorientation of liminality. Given the actions of American generations prior, resistance may even have been a comforting ritual assertion of autonomy and identity.

Managing Randomness

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that certain mundane objects became flashpoints as Americans attempted to create a sense of order in the chaos of liminality. This led to a shift in the meaning and value attributed to those objects. The panic of buying toilet paper, an international phenomenon, is a key example, and speaks to what Rosenberg understands to be the second stage of a society’s response to disease outbreak, “managing randomness” (Rosenberg 4).

In his examination of the AIDS epidemic, Rosenberg argued that “accumulating deaths and sicknesses have brought ultimate, if unwilling, recognition” for disease outbreaks, leading to a shift from the denial/resistance stage to the managing randomness stage (4). Moving past the denial/resistance stage re-

quires members of society to collectively accept the existence of the disease outbreak and create communal frameworks to help manage the associated stress.

Disease outbreaks are chaotic moments in history that force humans to confront their own mortality, harshly reminding us of our vulnerability. Historically, when threatened with a disease outbreak, humans will gravitate towards an explanation that promises control and minimizes vulnerability – even if the explanation must sacrifice a degree of rationality. This is how particular, seemingly crazy narratives take hold and drive public responses to crises, or how formerly mundane objects come to hold disproportionate significance; they acquire metaphorical meanings, transforming them into tangible receptacles for human narratives (Carter). This was the case with toilet paper early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

As people retreated from public spaces and stayed within their private residences, there was an increase in purchase of private consumer toilet paper (Oremus). Because the toilet paper industry separates into a commercial market and a consumer market with distinct products, the increased use of private residential bathrooms during the pandemic caused disruptions in the supply chain (Oremus). The toilet paper shortage provides evidence for the overspecialized and fragile supply chains. Indeed, because corporations have sought to maximize efficiency at the cost of resiliency, global supply chains and distribution networks are extremely vulnerable to disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic (Martin; Walt et al. 12).

Decreasing toilet paper stocks in grocery stores suggested imminent chaos to many consumers. Hoarding toilet paper allowed them to feel as though they were holding that chaos at bay, as though they were managing the randomness. In a psychological sense, toilet paper gave people a sense of control in the face of a pandemic. Of course, the more panicked consumers bought toilet paper, the more supply chains and distribution networks were strained. More shortages fueled the sense of impending chaos, which drove demand further, to the point that toilet paper, an item that is explicitly made to be discarded, came to have exchange value in and of itself.

In March 2020, an Australian café advertised that it would accept rolls of toilet paper as currency. This suggests not only the shifting significance of a mundane item but also the changing human behavior in response to a disruption of routinized grocery store activity (Alford). The toilet paper frenzy was memorably satirized in a work of German street art (Fig. 1). Gollum holds a roll of toilet paper and, staring at it adoringly, says “Mein Schatz” [“My precious”]. Gollum’s madness and obsession over the ‘One Ring’ in *The Lord of the Rings* speaks to the desperation with which toilet paper was coveted.

Toilet paper, then, suggests the pandemic’s impact on material culture. The panic buying of toilet paper revealed not only the shift in how people ascribed meaning to mundane objects but also changed shopping behaviors and revealed the overspecialization of fragile supply chains that are vulnerable



Fig 1. Street art in Germany from: *The Telegraph Online*. “The World in Pictures.” March 22, 2020. www.telegraphindia.com/gallery/photos/the-world-in-pictures/cid/1756789#.

to disruptions. The patterned embodied behaviors by which toilet paper was distributed, bought, and stored shifted as consumers attempted to manage the randomness, to mitigate the disorientation of their state of liminality.

Negotiating the Public Response

The panicked buying of toilet paper seemed, to those who took part in the practice, a pragmatic response to a moment of crisis. While others might have found the practice irrational, the toilet paper did not come to be the political lightning rod that face masks became. If, as suggested earlier, the initial refusal to wear face masks represented a resistance to the state of liminality, a denialist defense of ontological security, masks soon became codified in more complicated ways. Indeed, the controversy surrounding mask wearing in the U.S. exemplifies the inherently political nature of public health, as the country struggled to negotiate its collective response to the pandemic. The negotiation quickly became mired in questions of morality, in the conflicts between individual freedom and social responsibility.

Rosenberg’s model anticipates this moral turn. He argues that in previous centuries, the explanatory framework for disease outbreaks was constructed in terms of the relationship of humans to God (5). Individual illness was often understood to be punishment for sin. Disease outbreaks were

thought to indicate the corruption of society more broadly. God punished humans through their bodies: the physiological mechanism bears the weight of the moral transgression. Since then, biomedical science has come to explain disease etiology in secular terms. Nevertheless, disease outbreaks are still characterized by the traces of the “eclectic mixture of moral assumption and mechanistic pathology” that has been fundamental to the “social management of epidemics in the West for the past three centuries.” Though God may not feature as prominently in our understanding of disease outbreaks, our explanatory frameworks still function to express and legitimate social and moral assumptions (5).

Rosenberg’s third stage involves the negotiation of a public response (7) in which society as a whole determines an appropriate explanatory framework. This framework, in turn, justifies the collective actions necessary to mitigate the disease outbreak’s effects. Rosenberg’s investigation of the HIV/AIDS crisis illustrates that collective acceptance of the epidemic’s reality was necessary for physicians and activists to come together to demand a cohesive public response (9). During a disease outbreak, there is tremendous political and moral pressure to take mitigating action. Indeed, in the face of an outbreak’s devastation, it is impossible to avoid culpability as even “failure to take action constitutes action” (7).

For public health measures to gain traction demands confidence and belief in their efficacy. Such belief, in turn, will facilitate a public sense of control over the disease outbreak. In the case of COVID-19, public health measures required changes to patterned pre-pandemic social behaviors. Members of the public were asked to socially distance, quarantine, and wear masks. While public health measures and rituals speak to the social values of specific societies at particular historical junctures, conflicts surrounding their implementation offer broader “insight into structures of authority and belief” (8). As calls for a society wide response grow louder, “collective responsibility is a framework for communal support [but also the basis] for accusations of irresponsible individualism” (Charters and McKay 225).

In a COVID-19 America, such tensions emerged between two camps: pro-maskers and anti-maskers. While pro-maskers stressed the importance of masks as a biopolitical intervention, anti-maskers denied their necessity and cast their resistance as principled, drawing support from public celebrities who took to social media to express their “constitutional right” not to wear masks (Harms 277; Marcus). Of course, as Joan Donovan points out, “Social media tends to drive the fringe to the mainstream” (NPR).

To make matters worse, government guidelines on masks were confusing during the early days of the pandemic. At first, public health officials discouraged people from wearing masks, citing shortages that could harm health care professionals (foreshadowing the issue of supply chain resilien-

cy).² In February 2020, the U.S. surgeon general at the time, Dr. Jerome Adams, wrote on *Twitter*: “Seriously people – STOP BUYING MASKS! They are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus, but if health care providers can’t get them to care for sick patients, it puts them and our communities at risk!” (Cramer and Knvul). The tweet came as panicked customers rushed to purchase masks online, leading to counterfeit N95 masks and price gouging. That same month, the *New York Times* quoted Dr. Robert Redfield, then director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as saying that “There is no role for these masks in the community. These masks need to be prioritized for health care professionals that as part of their job are taking care of individuals” (Cramer and Knvul).

However, just weeks later, in early April 2020, the CDC reversed its stance and urged all Americans to wear face masks outside their home (in addition to other public health measures like hand washing and social distancing). Similarly, in a White House press conference, Dr. Adams stated that cloth masks could help prevent asymptomatic people from transmitting COVID-19 to the public, a stark shift in opinion that he attributed to new data (Hansen). In September 2020, Dr. Redfield of the CDC added that masks were “the most important, powerful public health tool we have” for fighting the pandemic (Fazio). In the midst of these changing messages and guidelines from public health officials, President Trump added to the chaos by consistently undermining the advice of his own administration through both his rhetoric and example (Fazio).

With such mixed messages leaving the significance of masks up for grabs, they quickly became political symbols within American public discourse. 2020 was a presidential election year, which heightened this effect (Schneider). The incumbent President Trump, for example, claimed that wearing masks was a political statement against him, leading many anti-maskers to oppose local and state mask mandates (Sheth). When politicians, from city council members to the president, refuse to wear masks, their supporters are less likely to accept them as valid public health interventions. Instead, the political values associated with mask wearing are highlighted, forming a significant decision factor for mask-wearing behavior. Americans wore masks or refused to; beyond the epidemiological implications, the action itself (rather than any insignia) expressed their beliefs and identified their alliances.

Those who wore masks argued that they did out of moral necessity. They believed it was a civic responsibility, that the public good outweighed their

² The fact that there are different types of masks, including cloth masks, disposable masks, and masks that meet a standard (e.g., KN95 masks), only added to the confusion (CDC, “Types of Masks”).

personal discomfort, and that science had credibly determined mask-wearing lowered transmission rates. Those who refused to wear masks also argued that they did so out of moral necessity. They asserted their individual right not to wear masks and cast doubt on the gravity of the disease, the efficacy of masks in lowering transmission, and the credibility of science. These opposed positions aligned broadly, although not exclusively, with American bipartisanship.

Not just a reflection of a particular election cycle, the controversy around masks during the COVID-19 pandemic speaks to a standard social relationship question, how do we balance collective responsibility and individual freedoms? To what extent are we responsible for the common good, and when, if ever, should the common good hold priority over our individual autonomy? So, some anti-maskers viewed government mask mandates as a “violation of [their] freedom,” arguing that the government would be infringing on their political rights (Stewart). However, scientists kept arguing that in the context of a fulminating disease with a high infection rate, anti-masking would have devastating public health consequences.

Rosenberg’s framework, again, anticipates such oppositions. He argues that mandating behavioral changes is difficult because public health authorities face intrinsically complex decisions that must account for individual rights and the political process (10-11). Or, as American surgeon and public health researcher Atul Gawande writes, “Among the questions we now face is that of how our frayed democracy can cope with the [sociopolitical] conflict required to navigate the global pandemic.”

The politicization of masks was, perhaps, an avoidable tragedy. Meaning-making is a contextual and fluid process. The symbolic meanings of objects, the values they represent, are influenced by messages from government authorities, social values, sensational media, and a plethora of other factors. Their significance is neither historically nor culturally anchored (Qiaoan 337). This fact can be used or abused. The mixed messages of public health officials as scientific data evolved in the initial phases of the pandemic confused public sentiment regarding mask-wearing. Consensus might eventually have emerged had opportunistic politicians – and the social and moral assumptions they seek to legitimize – not stepped in to provide explanatory frameworks before public health guidelines could properly do so.

Conclusion

Inevitably, it is only a matter of time before we face another disease outbreak. Zoonotic diseases – illnesses that can be transmitted between animals and humans – represent an increasing risk to humans because of a number of factors: encroachment on wildlife habitats, climate change, global trade and travel, urbanization, and overpopulation (“Stopping the next One: What Could the next Pandemic Be?”). In preparing for the future, the reframing of the COVID-19 pandemic offers several lessons.

Using material culture, ontological security, and liminality to construct an understanding of the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforces (and perhaps further nuances) Rosenberg's framework to understand disease outbreaks. The recognition of the COVID-19 pandemic as a chaotic historical event at the intersection of biological and social forces highlights the complexity of disease outbreaks. At the heart of this complexity is the fact that public health is inherently political. Any public health response must anticipate and mitigate the political divisions that will test collective action for the common good.

America's divisions were fueled by COVID-19's jarring reminder of human mortality. The ensuing panic buying, an attempt to control the oncoming chaos, revealed the fragility of our ruthlessly efficient supply chains. At the same time, the politicization of masks, a fraught negotiation of the public response, showed the seemingly irreconcilable divisions at work: masks came to suggest cowardice, social responsibility, denial, resignation, political affiliation, and so on. Material culture, in other words, provided evidence of America's deep disorientation, as various communities took starkly divergent approaches to a common threat.

As I write this conclusion in June 2021, the pandemic is still ongoing. As of June 10, approximately 42% of the U.S. population has been fully vaccinated, and 52% has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine (*CDC, COVID Data Tracker*). The constantly changing state of the pandemic and the vaccine rollout have led to changes in public health guidelines. At the end of April 2021, the CDC announced that fully vaccinated people generally no longer needed to wear masks outdoors and later updated this guidance to include most indoor settings (Fazio). With public health officials encouraging fully vaccinated people not to wear a mask anymore and return to "normal," Americans have – once again – been thrown into a state of liminality. Old identifiers no longer hold. Is the unmasked person next to me at the deli counter fully vaccinated? Are they being responsible with their own health? And mine? When can I ditch the masks for good? When will the pandemic end? How will we know? These are all pressing questions that remain unanswered.

The COVID-19 pandemic catapulted human society into a time of uncertainty. What is certain, though, is that social behavior during a disease outbreak is simultaneously patterned and unique. These behaviors must be considered as part of any public health response, especially given that some have profound epidemiological implications. Better understanding material culture in a time of uncertainty is a first step to developing more intentional, effective approaches in the future.

WORKS CITED

- Alford, Henry. "What Would Freud Make of the Toilet-Paper Panic?" *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/03/30/what-would-freud-make-of-the-toilet-paper-panic>. Accessed 31 December 2020.
- Aratani, Lauren. "'Zoom University': Is College Worth the Cost without the in-Person Experience?" *The Guardian*, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/06/zoom-university-college-cost-students-in-person-experience>. Accessed 3 March 2021.
- Burrows Grad, Laurie. "Liminality: The Threshold Betwixt and Between." *Huffington Post*, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/liminality-the-threshold-_b_13845666. Accessed 6 September 2020.
- Buse, Christina, et al. "Conceptualising 'Materialities of Care': Making Visible Mundane Material Culture in Health and Social Care Contexts." *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 40, no. 2, Feb. 2018, pp. 243–55.
- Carter, Sarah. "How Face Masks Can Help Us Understand the World." *Oxford University Press Blog*, 2020, <https://blog.oup.com/2020/07/how-face-masks-can-help-us-understand-the-world/>. Accessed 28 September 2020.
- CDC. "COVID Data Tracker." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 28 Mar. 2020, covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccinations. Accessed 10 June 2021.
- CDC. "Types of Masks." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 11 Feb. 2020, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/types-of-masks.html. Accessed 10 June 2021.
- Charters, Erica, and Richard A. McKay. "The History of Science and Medicine in the Context of COVID-19." *Centaurus*, vol. 62, no. 2, May 2020, pp. 223–33.
- Congressional Research Service. *Unemployment Rates during the COVID-19 Pandemic: In Brief*. Congressional Research Service, 6 Nov. 2020.
- Cramer, Maria, and Knvul Sheikh. "Surgeon General Urges the Public to Stop Buying Face Masks" *The New York Times*, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/health/coronavirus-n95-face-masks.html. Accessed 9 June 2021.
- Fazio, Marie. "How Mask Guidelines Have Evolved." *The New York Times*, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/04/27/science/face-mask-guidelines-timeline.html. Accessed 9 June 2021.
- Gawande, Atul. "Inside the Worst-Hit County in the Worst-Hit State in the Worst-Hit Country." *The New Yorker*, Feb. 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/02/15/inside-the-worst-hit-county-in-the-worst-hit-state-in-the-worst-hit-country>. Accessed 21 April 2021.
- Greene, Jeremy, and Dora Vargha. "How Epidemics End." *Boston Review*, 2020, <http://bostonreview.net/science-nature/jeremy-greene-dora-vargha-how-epidemics-end>. Accessed 10 August 2020.

- Hansen, Claire. "CDC Advises All Americans to Wear Cloth Masks in Public." *US News & World Report* 2020, www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2020-04-03/cdc-advises-all-americans-to-wear-cloth-masks-in-public. Accessed 9 June 2021.
- Harms, Arne. "Fortifying Breath in This Moment of Spray: Face Masks beyond COVID-19." *Social Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 2, May 2020, pp. 277–78.
- Hauser, Christine. "The Mask Slackers of 1918." *The New York Times*, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/us/mask-protests-1918.html. Accessed 11 November 2020.
- Hotez, Peter J. "Anti-Science Extremism in America: Escalating and Globalizing." *Microbes and Infection*, vol. 22, no. 10, 2020, pp. 505–07.
- Jingnan, Huo. "Why There Are So Many Different Guidelines For Face Masks For The Public." *NPR*, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsand-soda/2020/04/10/829890635/why-there-so-many-different-guide-lines-for-face-masks-for-the-public>. Accessed 14 April 2021.
- Kirke, ander. "Anxiety and COVID-19: The Role of Ontological Security and Myth." *E-International Relations*, 2020, pp. 1–8.
- Koeze, Ella, and Nathaniel Popper. "The Virus Changed the Way We Internet." *The New York Times*, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html>. Accessed 28 January 2021.
- Laing, R. D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. 1960. "Liminality." *Dictionary.com*, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/liminality>. Accessed 6 September 2020.
- Marcus, Julia. "The Dudes Who Won't Wear Masks." *The Atlantic*, June 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/dudes-who-wont-wear-masks/613375/>. Accessed 10 October 2020.
- Martin, Roger. "The High Price of Efficiency." *Harvard Business Review*, 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/01/the-high-price-of-efficiency>. Accessed 3 December 2020.
- NPR. "The Growing Threat of Disinformation and How to 'Deprogram' People Who Believe It." *NPR*, 2 Mar. 2021, www.npr.org/transcripts/972589960. Accessed 22 May 2021.
- Oremus, Will. "What Everyone's Getting Wrong About the Toilet Paper Shortage." *Marker*, 2020, <https://marker.medium.com/what-everyones-getting-wrong-about-the-toilet-paper-shortage-c812e1358fe0>. Accessed 29 September 2020.
- Parker, Kim, et al. "How the Coronavirus Outbreak Has – and Hasn't – Changed the Way Americans Work." *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, 9 Dec. 2020, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/12/09/how-the-coronavirus-outbreak-has-and-hasnt-changed-the-way-americans-work/. Accessed 2 June 2021.
- Qiaoan, Runya. "The Myth of Masks: A Tale of Risk Selection in the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Social Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 2, May 2020, pp. 336–37.

- Rosenberg, Charles E. "What Is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective." *Daedalus*, vol. 118, no. 2, The MIT Press, Jan. 1989, pp. 1–17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20025233>.
- Rossdale, Chris. "Enclosing Critique: The Limits of Ontological Security." *International Political Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 4, Dec. 2015, pp. 369–86.
- Schneier, Elena. "The Face Mask 'Is Almost as Much of a Symbol as a MAGA Hat.'" *Politico*, 2020. www.politico.com/news/2020/09/30/face-masks-political-ads-coronavirus-424149. Accessed 27 February 2021.
- Sheth, Sonam. "Trump Says He Thinks Some Americans Are Wearing Masks to Show They Disapprove of Him and Not as a Preventive Measure during the Pandemic." *Business Insider*, June 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-americans-wearing-masks-show-disapproval-not-as-preventive-measure-2020-6>. Accessed 27 February 2021.
- Stewart, Emily. "Anti-Mask Protesters Explain Why They Refuse to Cover Their Faces during the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Vox*, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/8/7/21357400/anti-mask-protest-rallies-donald-trump-covid-19>. Accessed 13 January 2021.
- "Stopping the next One: What Could the next Pandemic Be?" *BBC.com*, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210111-what-could-the-next-pandemic-be>. Accessed 2 June 2021.
- Taylor, Derrick. "A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic." *The New York Times*, 2021, www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html. Accessed 26 May 2021.
- Thomas, Sarah. *Liminal Spaces / Sarah Sawin Thomas / TEDxLincoln*. TEDx Talks, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWIKLhJW_P8. Accessed 6 September 2020.
- Vedantam, Shankar. "An Unfinished Lesson." *Hidden Brain by NPR*, 2021, <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/an-unfinished-lesson/>. Accessed 8 May 2021.
- Walt, Stephen M., et al. "After the Coronavirus." *Foreign Policy*, no. 236 (Spring 2020), 2020, pp. 9–13, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic/>.
- Wang, Daniel, et al. "Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders in COVID-19: Emerging Disparities Amid Discrimination." *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, vol. 35, no. 12, Journal of General Internal Medicine, Dec. 2020, pp. 3685–88.
- World Health Organization. *Naming the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and the Virus That Causes It*. 2020, [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it). Accessed 12 December 2020.
- . *Timeline of WHO's Response to COVID-19*. 2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>. Accessed 13 August 2020.

Shadow Bodies: The Articulation of Sudanese Identity

By Rana Mohamad

... the function of poetry is to build imaginary homes for the migrant subject... it is always a homeless home, a paper boat, a tent, whose impermanent shelters encourage extensions of the self — peregrinations — both on foot and via the imagination, across the world from India to the Sudan, England to the United States, and beyond. We are thus born again in the poetic journey.”

- Richard Perez in his review of *Poetics of Dislocation*

In *Poetics of Dislocation*, Meena Alexander considers poetry as a medium by which the migrant reckons with the nebulous, ever-fluid push and pull that memories of home enact on their present selves. She explores the migrant writer’s poetry as a meditation on place, identity, and their relationship to the “home” from which he or she comes. Inspired by Alexander’s work, I look to my own mother’s poetry, written after her migration from Sudan to the American South in 1999 to interrogate the complexity of Sudanese migrant identity. In this essay, I translate my mother’s poems¹ as they were originally written in Arabic as private expression of self. As I interpret and respond to them, I delineate the areas of knowing and unknowing by which I, a first-generation Sudanese American woman, seek to define myself.

What I otherwise knew of Sudanese identity, mine or others’, is the product of a Western gaze that even as I internalized it, othered me. It identified me, as though by default, along a white-black binary, which was then

¹ Over the course of three months, my mother and I collected over forty of her poems, read, and reviewed them together. We then selected several of them to be analyzed and translated by me. The poems that appear in this paper do so with my mother’s permission

complicated by the outward expression of my faith, my *hijab*. Was I Black? African? Was I Arab? Something unknown and unknowable? The gaze disallowed the inextricability of these aspects of Sudanese identity, Sudan being a country that is both 'African' and 'Arab.' I began to read into my mother's work a seamlessly integrated Sudanese identity, unselfconscious of the categorical divisions I had internalized. This is what I seek to access through my mother's work. What does it mean to be Sudanese? Who is she, as she relates to the place of her birth? What is it to be a migrant woman who writes? Who am I, a daughter, a writer, of a migrant woman who writes? And finally, how does our writing inform our sense of belonging?

As part of my project, I conceive the migrant woman's experience as that of a shadow body. Following migration, the migrant woman finds herself transplanted from one "home" into another, where the "shock of elsewhere", as described by Édouard Glissant, engenders a perpetual kind of homelessness (Alexander 4). The act of migration, I argue, sweeps the migrant woman into hiatus, a state sustained by her memory and imagination. Shadow bodies then, refers to migrant women in waiting, unmoored by migration, reliant on memories of what was once home for self-definition. An amorphous state, the shadow body represents the site of rupture, the perpetual interruption of the self-in-the-present by recollections and dreams of a home physically left behind. Shadow bodies, like my mother's and my own, live between displacement and belonging. And so I ask, is it possible, necessary, desirable to escape the shadow body? Can a shadow body truly ever cease to exist, even if it returns to its first "home"?

In this essay, I trace the literal and figurative journeys by which my mother's and my separate shadow bodies came to be, how we relate to Sudan, each other, the act of writing. It is divided into three sections, "Boarding," "Arrival," and "Departure," which speak to the dislocations, locations, and reconciliations that inform my unfolding understanding of Sudanese identity.

Boarding

... the very notion of identity is born out of 'a crisis of belonging.'
— Meena Alexander, *Poetics of Dislocation*

American racialization offers those of African descent a circumscribed space, muffling if not ignoring altogether the diversity and complexity of Black identities. I learned my own Blackness initially by disowning it. At school my peers would ask if I was Black. "I'm Arab," I would respond, choosing to identify myself by the Arabic I spoke at home and at the mosque. I came to learn that identifying myself was not that simple. Muslim women, particularly the African Muslim women, were herded into a third space: not wholly Black nor Arab (as Muslim and Arab identities are so often conflated), defying categorical

logic, thus regarded as an undefinable “other.” This compartmentalization of identities, reductionist and shallow, was the basis of my early self-conception.

There were no established characteristics of “Sudanese-ness” in the larger fabric of American society. I understood myself as Sudanese only in glimpses, as though the parts that constituted my identity were individually passed over by headlights. Muslim. African. American. Black. African American. Daughter. As I first knew my Sudanese self, she was fragmented, irreconcilable, and depending on her audience, changeable.

II

In her *Poetics of Dislocation*, Meena Alexander proposes that the task of poetry is to “reconcile us to our world” (189). While I grappled with my Sudanese identity through the discourse available to me, my mother reasoned with her migration, displacement, and identity in the privacy of her poetry. In turning to her as conduit to Sudanese identity, I was struck by the ways she does not attempt to explain herself to a larger American society whose understanding of Sudan is minimal. The limiting discourse by which I attempted to unpack my own identity is unacknowledged in my mother’s writing.

My mother, deeply seated in her religious identity, does not reconcile it to a Western audience. She neither anticipates nor cares that it might be “unknown.” She does not write as a response to the compartmentalization of Sudanese identity, nor does she write in defense of the complexities American racialization mutes. As Trinh T. Minh-ha, a scholar of migration literature, might describe my mother, she writes “in uncertainty, in necessity . . . and does not ask whether she is given the permission to do so or not” (Minh-ha 8). A confidential place of self-sustenance and dialogue, my mother’s poetry faces elsewhere, thereby enacting the state of the shadow body. She angles herself away from the American world to which I struggle to reconcile myself and faces her grief, loneliness, and distance from an imagined Sudan. She lies in wait.

III

I discovered my mother’s poems scribbled in the margins of old school notebooks. My mother and I collected, recorded, and tentatively dated her work along a twenty-year timeline. “(Tears of) longing,” the first poem I intro-

دموع الشوق

تمر بي اللحظات صماء
كانها عتمه لا نور فيها ولا ضياء
تمر بي وكأنى انادى على انسان لا يستجيب ولا يهيمه قول ولا دعاء
فتتركنى لحظتى فى عالمى شئى من الاشياء

وتتخطفني الهواجس فاصير اشلاء في اشلاء
 فلا اجد نفسي في نفسي ثابتة ولا معنا عندى لموت او حياة
 ولكنى جعلت صبري لي حجابا غطاء
 وصبري بربي يزيد كل حين وحياتي في خدمته فناء
 وارفع الاكف لله تضرا وخوفا ورجاء
 ارجوه ربي ان يرفع عن كاهلي عظيم البلاء
 لا دنياي مليت بالمصائب والعناء
 ولا ارنى سعيدة يوما بزواج او بطفل او لقاء
 فقد اغلق باب الامل في وجهي
 وطالت بيننا المسافات وعظم الشقاء
 فابكي بحرقة دموعا حارة مشتاقة لاهلى ورب السماء

(Tears of) Longing
year unknown

the moments pass me by with deafening silence,
 as if they were bound by darkness and no light
 they pass through me and it is as if
 I am calling out upon ears that heed no response, call, or prayer
 (the moments) abandon me to my grief, a world of my own
 (and) my delusions steal me away as I shatter to pieces and pieces
 I do not find within me a steadfast self nor do I find meaning
 in death or life
 I have made of my patience a veil and cover
 (and) my patience in my Lord grows with each day
 I empty my life in His service
 I lift my hands to God in hurt, fear, and plea
 and beg of Him
 relieve my shoulders of boundless affliction
 (indeed) my world is full of misfortune and suffering
 and I cannot imagine finding pleasure in husband, child, or reunion
 (as) the door of hope has shut before me
 and the distance between us grew as did misery
 (and so) I fervidly cry, hot tears, longing
 for my family and the Lord of the skies

The translation is my own, an attempt to deliver my mother's words without altering their meaning. Yet I am aware of my limitations, and experience the difficulty of translating the original as a struggle to understand her, indicative of the ways I may or may not know my own mother.

“(Tears of) Longing,” is riddled with grief as my mother mourns the distance from Sudan and her family. It speaks to her deep loneliness. My mother’s language use suggests that she is bound up in longing for home; she retreats into her loneliness and, as if stung by it, wills herself towards God in complaint, in plea, in search for companionship. She simultaneously abandons hope and creates it.

My mother’s poem suggests her powerlessness to resist the onslaught of longing. She writes in the opening line: “The moments pass me by with deafening silence,” implying that even as she witnesses passing moments, she is acted upon by them. The word *تمر* in Arabic means “to pass through,” with a specific emphasis on the ease of the motion. The “ease” by which these deafening and suffocating moments pass through her suggests not only their repetition, but also her own inability to resist them. Even the “silence” of these moments imposes itself on her; it is “deafening.”

My mother brushes up against agency in the fourth line, too: “It is as if I am calling out upon ears that heed no response, call, or prayer.” Here, her need to be heard is met with heedless ears. Importantly, the ears are not incapable of hearing: “*لا يستجيب*” translates directly to “does not respond” and “*لا يهيمه*” to “pays no mind,” or “does not care.” Both terms imply that the ears she is calling upon are willfully dismissive, refusing to hear her voice and grief.

I hear in my mother’s voice that of the displaced, dispossessed migrant woman, abandoned to solitude, desperately seeking recognition in the spaces most immediate to her. Shattered, unable to find a steadfast self within, she hides her grief from the world behind the “veil and cover” of “patience.” Within herself, away from the world, she waits patiently for the Lord to relieve her suffering. My mother’s emphasis on patience speaks to the migrant’s waiting state as they yearn to find a remedy for their perpetual state of homelessness, a longing which comes to identify her.

Unraveling the loneliness woven into the poem, I discover tropes my mother often revisits. She understands *longing* as a product of distance. *Nativity* is a nod towards the home she left and the age at which she left it. It seems that a portion of her hurt is reserved for the *shattering of fantasies* she once held to, like the belief that momentary respites would close the gaping distance. Now she “cannot imagine finding pleasure in husband, child, or reunion.” She looks elsewhere for *love*, both the wound and the medicine, turning to *God* and *religiosity* for sustenance.

A second poem, “My Story” was written on a December evening in 2015. My mother described the poem to me as “an admonishment to anyone who would listen. Do not do as I have done. I wanted to tell someone that there are things in this world that are your right, that you should not have to long for as I have.”

حكايتي

ساحى حكايتي لجميع البشر
حكايتي التي انشق القلب فيها كما انشق القمر
فتجرت فيها من رحيق الايام الشهد الامر
ولبست فيها الرخيص من الحلل
وهاجت فى دواخلى الاسقام والعلل
واشتاقت روى لفارسي الاغر
فناديت عليه وناديت وناديت حتى اصابني الملل
ذهبت ابحت بين الانام عن بقايا رجل
رجل يحتويني فترتاح روى معه وتفرح بالقدر
قدر يجمعني به من غير موعد ولا سفر
فنبدا مشوارنا دون خوف او خطر
فيحلو اللقاء ويطيب السمر
وارتشف من كرمه رحيق العمر
فيهديني شعرا وغزلا ويراني فى عينيه اجمل من القمر
فبادله حبا وشعرا واحتويه حتى الثمالة غزل
فتفرح ايامنا بلقائنا ويولد الامل
فتشكر الرب الذي اهدانا السعادة
وتستمر ايامنا سعيدة حتى نهاية العمر

My Story

I will tell my story to all of mankind.
(the) story in which my heart split like the moon,
(in which) I swallowed from the nectar of my days a bitter honey
and wore charms of the cheapest kind.
Illness upon illness raved within me
and my soul yearned for my standing knight
(and so) I called, and I called until I began to bore.

I left to search the universe for the trace of a man,
a man to surround me so that my soul may rest and rejoice (its) fate,
a fate that will bring me to him without arrangement or distance travelled
so (that) we may begin our journey without fear nor caution,
towards a meeting that grows sweet and a night sweeter
and I drink from his generosity our life's nectar,
he gifts me poetry and yarn, (as) his eyes

see me more beautiful than the Moon.

I bargain my love and poetry and encircle him upon dizzy drunkenness
and Day rejoices in our coming together as hope (again) is born
and we thank the Lord who gave us our joy
and the lives whose happiness continues
till their end.

“My Story” begins with a direct reference to the first verse of Quran’s 54th chapter, entitled Al-Qamar, or “The Moon”:

أَقْرَبَتْ السَّاعَةُ وَأَنْشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ

This verse translates to “The Hour has drawn near and the moon was split in two” (54:1). The “Hour” refers to Yawm Al-Qiyama, the Day of Resurrection. The splitting of the moon, according to Quranic exegesis, alludes to the coming of Prophet Muhammad and is one of the telltale signs that Judgment Day is near. With this allusion, my mother opens her poem up to various interpretations. One reading suggests that the story she will tell is about the beginning of an end, be it the end of a dream, a small hope, a form of hurt, or even a self. A second reading, one consistent with “(Tears of) Longing,” is that my mother reserves her most painful confessions to God, and that she is seeking His companionship. This interpretation, it might be argued, is at odds with the audience she seeks to address in the first line, “mankind.” However, the Quranic language of the opening imbues her heart-break with a sacred resonance, as if it can only truly be understood and expressed through and by God.

Entering the poem with resounding heartbreak, my mother allows the rest of her text to unravel like a scroll, as though she is saying, “here are all the possible reasons for my heartbreak; here is the culmination of hurt.” We again hear echoes of the longing, naivety, God, and love tropes. The poem suggests a younger female voice, one whose idealizations are marked by the painful fact that they are unrealized.

The young woman yearns for her “standing knight” against the backdrop of the “illness upon illness” that “raved” within her. He suggests a fairytale savior whose purpose would be to remedy her misfortune and loneliness. And yet, as in “(Tears of) Longing,” her call goes unanswered, albeit that in this instance it is her own resignation that prompts her grief, rather than external denial. The poem’s voice reads to me like that of a girl watching a dream break and empty itself.

It is important to note, however, that although my mother begins this poem with grief, she does not return to it. Line eight initiates a departure, an escape into something imagined: “I left to search the universe for the trace of a man.” In this search, my mother imagines a love that encircles her, person-

ified in the form of a man, a fantasy she tentatively embellishes. The love between her and this idealized “man” is “fated,” pre-written, pre-destined. This reinforces the idea that through her poem, she seeks solace through God. She relies on God’s ordinance for this love to be complete.

Related to this imagined love is a vision of grounded femininity. In order to picture herself through the eyes of a lover, my mother must first conceive of a femininity capable of both receiving and maintaining personal freedom. She writes, “a man to surround me so that my soul may rest and rejoice (its) fate.” Here, I translated the word *يحتوى* to mean “to surround” in order to maintain the lyrical structure and flow of the poem. There are, however, multiple definitions of the term. *يحتوى* may mean to cover, to enclose, to encompass, to take in, to comprehend, or to hold. In attributing the term to a personified love, my mother attempts multiple interpretations. The term implies capacity, capability, and generosity. Rather than simply meaning “to surround,” *يحتوى* alludes to an open space of being, a space in which you are held, understood, encircled, and given the freedom to be. Moreover, she uses the term *ترتاح* or rest to describe the relief of being surrounded in such a way. This term implies both utter satisfaction and safety.

In this imagined love, my mother exists in a steadfast space in which she is safe, free, and actively held. Such stability and dependability, she seems to suggest, are necessary preconditions for the capacity to receive, and truly accept, happiness. Only then can she drink their life’s nectar from his generosity, accept his gifts of poetry and yarn, and see herself through his eyes as more beautiful than the moon.

IV

At the onset of my journey, I turned towards my mother’s poetry in hopes of finding threads, passing references, distinct from the Western discourses that “determined” my identity. I hoped to find pieces of what I could consider to be Sudan. Instead, I witnessed my mother’s attempts to reconcile and mitigate her own alienation following her migration. Poetry, so Alexander writes, is a medium by which the migrant writer erects an imaginary home, a “homeless home, a paper boat, a tent, whose impermanent shelters encourage extensions of the self” (Perez, vol. 36). My mother wields poetry to counsel herself, to incubate her memory of Sudan, and to write into the spaces of her knowing. She writes of her loss and longing and retreats into religious spirituality for a sense of permanence. And although Sudan itself remains an unknown to me, through her work I find myself angling away from my own present, looking out across time and space to a distant elsewhere. I am able to feel, momentarily, her shadow body.

• • •

Arrival

When you travel everything goes with you, even the things you do not know. they travel; they take up space; they remain the things you do not know; they become the things you will never know.

— Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*

I

In December of 2020, I traveled alongside my mother to Sudan to witness her return, to see the parts of her lying in wait to spur themselves back to life. I did not anticipate, wholly, the disruption of my own self-understanding.

I imagine that returning to a place left long ago, as my mother did, is like trying to remember a name, a song, an address by recreating the circumstances in which they were first known. It is to step into the source of your memories, dizzied by time and distance, and to find you'd actually been imagining a close likeness. The milk seller's name was actually his brother's; the lyrics of a song are different on the lips of the taxi driver; the address is a place near the newest green mosque. To return is to recognize that the shadow body lives between fragile memory and the robust imagination that fills in what is forgotten until what is known cannot be separated from that which is unknown.

And yet for my mother, Sudan, even twenty years after she had last seen it, was not simply a space of return but a form of renewal, a reminder of the cloth from which her voice was cut, a reminder that she exists, not just in her isolated migrant identity, but in the eyes of others. My mother, whom I for so long could only relate to through the fabric of a mother-daughter relationship, *burst into a multitude*. Daughter, sister, aunt, cousin, lover. She shattered into multiple selves, each more distant from me than the other.

This unanticipated reorienting set me on the periphery as my mother grew unfamiliar. Unable to relate to my mother as reference point or stabilizer, I found myself unmoored, disrupted. My mother and her writing were no longer the primary means by which I could explore my Sudanese identity. I was *in* Sudan, and yet I was overwhelmed, unable to make sense of the larger fabric of society I was meant to slip into. In attempt to steady and make sense of my surroundings, I wrote the following journal entry:

I am in Sudan. It doesn't feel real, not in the least bit. I have cousins, who are not real. A grandfather, who cannot be real. Even Mama, who is now the eldest of seven sisters, poised a certain way (I have been paying special attention to her nose and smile), is a figment of my imagination ... the streets [...] are absolutely unreal. It looks like I've stepped into somewhere else. I don't recognize any of the smells I am smelling. I don't recognize the sky, the earth, the people. Everyone is hardened, in a way that makes me raise my shoulders against myself.

II

As I grapple with the stark difference of experience to that of my mother upon our arrival in Sudan, I revisit the function of memory and imagination in recognizing, if not curating, a place of belonging. Prior to her return to Sudan, my mother's "self" was suspended in an imagined elsewhere. Her shadow body was born of a memory whose staple characteristic is its inability to be absolute, tangible, fully defined. In entering her hiatus of being in the wake of her migration, she wields imagination as a means of rectifying what cannot be known through memory. Moreover, she finds a form of belonging in this imagined space that is neither here nor there. Migration, an irreversible event, ruptures the migrant woman's "first" and "second" home and forces her to renegotiate a form of belonging that is an irresolvable in-between: this is the shadow body.

As I entered Sudan, my inability to reconcile my new surroundings, to relate to them, to see them as a function or extension of my own identity, forced me to abscond into hiatus. The image of an arrival to an all-encompassing, "truer" home turned out to be no more than a mirage. I found myself on a formless middle ground instead. I was neither here nor there, nor entirely alien to either. Thus, I continually imagined return, or, at least, a journey to another imagined space, one close enough to Sudan so that it wouldn't be too inaccurate, but far away enough to be comfortable. I imagined a self that would find that construction familiar enough to call home. All the while, I was angling myself towards an Elsewhere that held space for those internalized Western discourses and compartmentalized through which, in bite-sized pieces, I had understood myself as a Sudanese American.

III

But, being in Sudan forced me to face a host of truths, often contradictory, often too tangled up to be pulled out as a single translucent thread. I could not place my finger on what it meant to be Sudanese, but I could describe the rising smell of *jabana* (coffee) made by women in bright-colored *thobes*, seated in empty parking lots or at the bank of an open road. I could trace the smoke that curled towards me as Weam Shawgi, dangling a cigarette over an exposed knee, grinned and exhaled, saying, "*In'dik ma'ni?*" Do you mind? I could recreate the sounds of life that broke right at the cusp of dawn, the night's silence falling away to the sputtering engines of rakshas, cars and trucks as they press against one another on tight roads, their driver's hands never once leaving horns. I could paint an image of faces the color of the earth, hardened by sun, skin stamped by thought, laughter, tears that point to the geography of a life. I could give you eyes to see my mother among her sisters, boisterous, pleasant, and as lucidly complex as the henna that sprawls the length of her arms and legs. The poetry that acts as window to Sudan is

not just what is written. It is what has been lived, and what will remain in memory to shape what is imagined. Arriving in Sudan meant keeping watch, hoarding, and absorbing memories that, upon my return, I could only unpack and attempt to know at a distance.

Departure

When you embark on a journey, you have already arrived. The world you are going to is already in your head. You have already walked in it; eaten in it; you have already made friends; a lover is waiting.”

— Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*

The migrant’s first departure – mine from the United States and my mother’s from Sudan – signals the start of a perpetual homelessness. In my travels, I also *burst into a multitude*: niece, cousin, granddaughter, lover. Returning to America, a “home” I could not have claimed before having left it, these identities hang silent, waiting to be recalled or spurred to life by that remembered and imaged elsewhere that is similar but not identical to my mother’s.

There is no version of home, not here nor there, that is complete and thus, what I know of my migration is the state of hiatus. My trip to Sudan created my shadow body, both displacing and realigning my knowing. What is known is that a country cannot fully be known, nor a people, nor an identity. What is known is that there are flickers of recognition by which we attribute and align ourselves in relation to one another.

On my return, I examine the flickering of a new kind of relation in which the journal entries I made in Sudan come to mirror the poems written by my mother. In the following meditation, I write to an unnamed “you.” This “you” – addressed in a moment in which all was unfamiliar – is meant to be God.

December 22

*I've been struggling to find you.
Earlier, I said a person remains the same
no matter where they are.
Now, it feels that you and I,
in this space,
are an exception.*

*Since my arrival
it is as if I have had to relearn you,
as if here your love extends in a different way,
a different tongue, a different conversation.
I understand that's not entirely the case.*

And yet.
I don't know what to do to reconnect.
To keep going like this is to I assume
my connection with you is strongest
and most explicitly pursued when I am
safely tucked away in the familiar.
Familiarity breeds contempt and resignation.

I don't want to live my life clinging to the known.
I don't want to keep feeling disoriented in new spaces.

It takes a moment to find your feet again, of course.
I am saying
that that
moment is full of the world's longing.

I'm saying,
insistently,
I want you with me.

The most striking similarity between my mother and my writing is a retreat into spirituality at a time when all other possible identifiers are lost. My disorientation mirrors her grief; our loneliness echoes down our throats. In our states of hiatus, we carve out a space of belonging that is free of time and place. The choice we make to write, to assign a voice to and document our displacement and belonging sustains not only the selves we discover in the process, but the shadow bodies that house them.

Although born of homelessness, the shadow body offers a nebulous home, reliant on memory and furnished by the imagination. Moreover, it takes the experience of passage, of migration, of hiatus, to recognize the work of a shadow body. It was only after I visited Sudan and returned that I was able to arrive at the door of my mother's grief, love, hope, and heartache. And it was only after my travels that I recognized I could begin to understand what it means to be Sudanese in America: Here are the spaces of my knowing. Here is what is unknown. And here, among them, is a kind of belonging.

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Meena. *Poetics of Dislocation*. University of Michigan Press, 2009.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Beverley, John. *Testimonio: on the Politics of Truth*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

- Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Penguin Random House, 2011.
- Édouard Glissant, "Errantry, Exile," *Poetics of Relation*. trans. Betsy Wing. The University of Michigan Press, 1997, p 11.
- Patel, Shailja. *Migritude*. Kaya Press, 2010.
- Perez, Richard. "Poetics of Dislocation (Review)." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, Oxford University Press, 7 Apr. 2011.
- Quynn, Kristina. "Elsewheres of Diaspora: Dionne Brand's 'In Another Place, Not Here.'" *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 48, no. 1, 2015, pp 121-46.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Penguin Books, 2019.
- Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. *Woman, Native, Other*. Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. *Elsewhere, within Here: Immigration, Refugeism and the Boundary Event*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Speaking, Embodying, Living: Oral History and the 1963 Birmingham Children's Crusade

By Morgan Thomas

Speaking at the National Colloquium on Oral History in 1967, historian Cornelius Ryan declared, "Interviewing is not reliable. I never found one man who landed on Omaha Beach who could tell me whether the water was hot or cold" (Hoffman and Hoffman 108). His remarks reflect a distrust of memory that is common among historians interested in determining the "objective facts" of a historical happening. Memory is unstable, they argue, under the pressures of aging, trauma, nostalgia, and forgetfulness (Ritchie 19–21, 26, 125).

Yet when Congress passed the Civil Rights History Project Act of 2009 (Public Law 111–12), it authorized oral historians to interview individuals on the periphery of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights Movement. Accordingly, accounts by lesser-known advocates for racial justice, including doctors, judges, and musicians, were incorporated into the Civil Rights History Project's (CRHP's) oral history repository ("About this Collection"). Also included were interviews with former youth activists such as Dr. Freeman Hrabowski III, who marched in the Birmingham Children's Crusade – a youth-led demonstration organized by civil rights leaders – as a twelve-year-old in 1963. The CRHP embraced such testimonies as texture and detail to normative histories (Scott 776) which tend to focus on iconic figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thurgood Marshall, leaving less conspicuous contributions to the nonviolent protests unrecognized (United States 2). The CRHP provided Dr. Hrabowski (and many others) an avenue to "speak his truth" into the archives, uncovering and preserving the underrepresented experiences of a younger African American activist. As historian Joan Scott asks, "What could be truer [...] than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through?" (777)

However, the idea that oral histories offer “true” accounts is not uncomplicated, as Scott herself notes. The idea of “uncovering and preserving underrepresented experiences” implies that memory (the cognitive capacity) is a mechanism that captures and preserves moments in time, that memories (recollections) are artifacts, and that interviews are extraction processes. To think of memories as “accurate evidence” of a kinesthetic, unmediated interaction between an individual and the world neglects the dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee as they negotiate the legitimacy and significance of experiences relative to a narrative in the process of emerging (Scott 776).

This article will examine Hrabowski’s interview not merely to recognize the contributions of Black youth activists in the 1960s, but to show how its participants’ dialogue, language, and physical movement evoke the intersections of personal experience and its broader historical significance. For this analysis, Penny Summerfield’s approach to interviewing as an autobiographical activity is apt, as she examines “how interviewees construct themselves through narratives that arise in dialogue with an interviewer” (Summerfield 1–2).

I characterize the encounter between interviewer, interviewee, and videographer as an event in which they play predetermined and responsive roles in order to situate Hrabowski’s personal testimony within broader narratives of racial oppression and anti-racist activism. Approaching the interview as an event allows us to treat the experiential not as evidence, unearthed and filed under that which is already known, but as the impetus behind the production of historical and subjective knowledge. As Hrabowski reflects on formative events, he does more than reconstruct what happened then; he also implicitly says, “This is how I came to be, and this is who I am now.”

Hrabowski’s oral history was published by the Library of Congress in 2011, forty-four years after the 1963 Children’s Crusade. The interviewer was Joseph Mosnier, a white man, and an associate director for the Southern Oral History Project at the University of North Carolina (“Joseph Mosnier”). John Bishop was the videographer. The interview covers the lead up to and events of the Crusade, engages the aftermath of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing, and reflects on Hrabowski’s achievements later in life.

The current president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, Hrabowski emerged from Birmingham’s segregated public school system before obtaining his Ph.D. in higher education and administration statistics (“Freeman A. Hrabowski III”). In his career, Hrabowski engineered such initiatives as the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, which continues to provide minority students with career opportunities in science, technology, engineering, and math (“About the Meyerhoff Scholars Program”; Hrabowski 2011, 01:10:00). During his interview, however, Hrabowski reminisces specifically about the spring of 1963. That year, he received his parents’ permission to join the Crusade after hearing Dr. King appeal to his congregation during a service at the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church: “When I heard this man say

that what he was proposing – and that is involving children in the march – could lead to children being able to go to the best schools in our city, now that got my attention,” he says (Hrabowski 2011, 00:30:15–00:30:32).¹ Chosen by movement leaders to lead a group of children for his attentiveness during nonviolence training sessions, Hrabowski assumed the role of a civil rights leader when he was not yet even a teenager (00:35:45).

Conceptualizing Hrabowski’s interview as an event rather than a recorded recitation of past events demands a methodology grounded in twenty-first century qualitative research. According to Torill Moen, a sociocultural scholar at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, researchers are increasingly interested in the ways human beings organize past experiences in the act of discussing them (56). The immediacy of the interview is distinct from the archival object that is derived from it – the recording and / or the transcript.

Narrative theorists, according to U.S. Senate Historian Donald Ritchie, “weigh the relationship between language and thought [...] view[ing] an interview as a multilayered document that is the result of an interviewer and interviewee ‘negotiating and creating a text’” (Ritchie 124). As the participants interact, they produce a retelling of the past thought to reflect one’s history, socialization, and information-storing traditions (Ritchie 124). However, such a “documentary” or “textual” focus tends to neglect the voice doing the “telling.” In actuality, recollections are rendered with manipulable pitch, volume, voice, tone, prolonged clauses, or periods of silence (McCabe X; Baum 26), all of which can carry “implicit meanings and social connotations” (Beard 534; Gee 20; Lamers et al. 312).

This is not to deny the importance of narrative in the articulation of experience through language. Indeed, Moen cites D. E. Polkinghorne as asserting that “People without narratives do not exist” (Moen 56).² We explain “how we came to be” by “rehearsing” our experiences and rationalizing them within a narrative framework (Gee 3). But beyond the interview itself, this “rehearsed version” of events would seem to be at odds with the idea of collecting historical information. As oral historian Martha Beard suggests, “Historical knowledge can never be obtained in a pure sense [...] instead, it can only ever be articulated through constructed discourses with various rhetorical and discursive effects” (533).

¹ As a stylistic choice, this article uses the Baylor University Institute for Oral History’s transcription format, unless otherwise noted. In contrast to the original transcript published by the Library of Congress, the Baylor University Institute for Oral History uses Chicago Manual of Style and avoids documenting crutch words like “um” or “uhm-hm,” which may distract from the message in its written form. See “Style Guide” (2008).

² Moen cites Polkinghorne, Donald E., and John Charlton Polkinghorne. *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. State University of New York Press, 1988.

Despite the loss of bygone, invisible, or unrecorded historical evidence, history's embodied manifestations – the language and movement of those that lived it – become worthy of analysis in and of themselves. Interviews reflect the subjectivities of the narrator and the influence – or constraints – of the interviewing context. They offer access to history as it is lived in the present. Hence, scholars like Summerfield focus on the autobiographical potential of the interview. How does the interviewee reevaluate “life as it was lived” (Summerfield 7)? How do they do so while engaged in discourse with a historian?

Historical Context of the Birmingham Children's Crusade³

The broader historical context of Hrabowski's subjective experience is a necessary preamble to this essay's analysis of his recollections in the event of the interview. Organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC] and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights [AC-MHR], the Birmingham Children's Crusade occurred as part of a campaign to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963. By marching from civil rights headquarters at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to City Hall, hundreds of Black students between the ages of six and twenty risked more than the violation of a state injunction prohibiting mass demonstrations (McWhorter 323, 348). They also risked academic expulsion and often, like sixteen-year-old Janice Kelsey, did so against their parents' wishes (Kelsey 2008).⁴

As one among 34,839 Black students in Birmingham Public Schools in 1963, Hrabowski grew up in a city infamous for racial violence and segregation (Bynum et al. 22). Segregation ordinances reified a social hierarchy that oppressed Blacks economically, politically, and socially (Morris 1–4; *The General Code* 1944). First, the tradition of relegating Black citizens to domestic or janitorial occupations in Jefferson County (Birmingham) led the income of Black males to be 48.8% less than whites by 1960 (Wilson 94). Secondly, although the Supreme Court denounced the precedent of “separate but equal” in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), limited federal oversight encouraged Birmingham officials to circumvent school desegregation (Morris 27–28).

³ Archival research for this article was largely limited to papers available in Houston – namely the Houston Chronicle and the Dallas Morning News.

⁴ Kelsey discussed this experience during an interview with the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in 2008: “She [Kelsey's mother] said, ‘I'm sending you to school. Don't you go nowhere and get in any trouble. I don't have any money to get you out.’ I said, ‘Yes, ma'am.’ That's what she needs to hear . . . I just wasn't going to stay, because the plan was to go to school and then walk out” (Kelsey 2008, 00:08:27-00:08:43). This excerpt is provided by the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute beneath Janice Kelsey's recorded interview.

Lastly, office-holders that staffed the tripartite local government, such as police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, refused to relinquish their support for segregation. Although federal Judge Hobart Grooms assented to integrate city parks in 1962, Connor retaliated by shutting them down with a “Damn the law [...] down here we make our own law” attitude (McWhorter 229, 159).

To combat these injustices, Black leaders of the SCLC and ACMHR launched a direct action campaign against segregation in 1963 that catapulted Birmingham into the international media. Whereas the SCLC comprised a national organization designed to coordinate protest movements in the South, the ACMHR coalesced in Birmingham following the local NAACP’s dissolution in 1956 (Morris 83, 68–69). By designing Project C (for ‘Confrontation’), these organizations sought to desegregate downtown facilities, secure fairer employment practices, appoint a biracial committee to oversee school desegregation, and reopen integrated parks and playgrounds (Morris 250–251; “Thousands May Be Arrested In Birmingham” 3). Rather than pursuing justice through legal means, Project C marshaled the philosophy of nonviolence to “thrust power into the hands of every individual desiring to strike out directly against oppression” (Morris 84). By organizing an economic boycott, leading mass marches on City Hall, and recruiting volunteers to fill city jails, Project C mobilized Black community members from all walks of life, including students under eighteen years old (Morris 260; McWhorter 290).

As the campaign confronted what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. decried as “the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States” (King 1), movement leaders strategized to increase the pressure of an economic boycott by publicizing their opponents’ use of violence against demonstrators (McWhorter 290; Morris 259). To attract media eyes, SCLC member James Bevel introduced a controversial proposal: putting children on the firing line in a nonviolent demonstration that would enter history as the Birmingham Children’s Crusade. Having “scraped the bottom of the barrel” of adults who were willing to go to jail, Bevel reasoned that children could take the place of adult activists concerned about losing their jobs (Cook and Racine 31). Likewise, recognizing that the movement would flounder without “the very bodies of blacks” that fueled direct action initiatives, Shuttlesworth reassured nervous committee members with the words, “We got to use what we got” (Morris 84; McWhorter 345).

On May 2, 1963, a day Bevel marked as “D-Day,” over one thousand students packed their toothbrushes, blankets, and schoolbooks, conscious that skipping school to demonstrate would lead to their possible arrests (Cook and Racine 32). The Monday before, pamphlets descended on Black high schools such as Ullman and Parker to inform students of the event (McWhorter 346). However, when the first group exited the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church waving signs and singing freedom songs, children as young as six years old

could be seen among the crowd (McWhorter 349; Cook and Racine 32). Although firefighters, who had been called to back up police officers, kept their hoses idle as they monitored the parade, Bull Connor authorized the arrests of six hundred youth that day (McWhorter 349–350). The arrests overwhelmed jails to such a capacity that officers had to open a second location at a sports stadium (Cook and Racine 32).

The next day, on May 3, 1963, Bull Connor “ordered out the fire hoses, the billy clubs, and the dogs” (Morris 267). The instruments that officers traditionally used to suppress demonstrations did not spare the second wave of youth emerging from the church. In an oral history conducted by the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Annetta Streeter Gary recalls encountering the fire hoses during the march as a child:

We had been taught, that if they put the water hose on you, to sit down and cover your face so that the pressure of the water would not hurt your eyes. We were taught to sit down and if we balled up into balls, then the water would not hurt as much. But that was not so. That water washed the two of us [one of Gary’s acquaintances in a club at the time, Jackie Rep], I can remember us balling up, hugging together and the water just washing us down the street (Gary 00:41:00–00:41:41)⁵.

A similar scene awaited reporters on Saturday, May 4, 1963: the day Hrabowski marched. As students hurled taunts at police officers, firemen retaliated with water hoses that allegedly “peeled [the female students’ dresses] off like bark” (McWhorter 359). Elsewhere, Hrabowski’s cohort concentrated on singing freedom songs that he recalls “gave you the strength to keep going” amid the commotion (Hrabowski 2011, 00:38:02). Yet before they seized the opportunity to kneel at City Hall in prayer, a red-faced Bull Connor emerged onto the stairs and spat in Hrabowski’s face (Hrabowski 2015, 41; Hrabowski 2011, 00:39:10). White police officers subsequently detained the youth with a photographer standing by to capture their arrests (Hrabowski 2015, Cover). Among the 2,300 Black people estimated by the Dallas Morning News to be arrested during the campaign, over 900 children, including Hrabowski, received jail sentences for marching between May 2 and May 4 (“Birmingham Race Pact” 1; Cook and Racine 32).

As medical historian Alondra Nelson notes, “Some of the most shocking photography and television of the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and

⁵ This excerpt is provided by the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute beneath Annetta Streeter Gary’s recorded interview.

1960s depicted activists being hosed down, shot, attacked by dogs, and otherwise abused” (33). Accordingly, the Crusade, publicized by photographers and news outlets, produced global shockwaves. In Mexico, for example, a pro-Catholic newspaper claimed that the events in Birmingham “make one feel ashamed to belong to the human race” (“Something Big in Birmingham” 1). At home, Congressman Emanuel Celler lamented that police brutality against children “tarnished” the nation’s image abroad (1).

To avoid a “dangerous and imminent explosion” caused by negative publicity, white negotiators rushed to create a biracial committee on May 10, 1963 (“Birmingham Race Pact” 1). The six-man committee moved quickly to integrate downtown facilities, improve employment opportunities for Black people, release prisoners, and establish connections with the business-oriented Senior Citizens Committee (1). The committee acquiesced to nearly all the objectives the campaign set out to accomplish. More significantly, the Crusade shook “the conscience of the nation” and came to epitomize the fight for justice that motivated the CRHP (Cook and Racine 31; United States 2). The Children’s Crusade’s success endowed each participant with a story to tell, some of which only emerged into the historical record nearly fifty years later.

An Emerging Childhood Biography

Twelve years old in 1963, Hrabowski faced the challenges of leading young demonstrators, confronting a red-faced “Bull,” and serving a five-day jail sentence. But that is neither the beginning nor the end of the story. Joseph Mosnier, a disembodied voice speaking from outside the frame in which Hrabowski’s recorded image appears, guides the conversation with questions designed to procure information about Hrabowski’s childhood more broadly. Together, they move the interview along a narrative trajectory that culminates with his activism.

The interview is conversational in tone while the participants implicitly abide by the designated roles of “interviewee” and “interviewer” (Ishizuka and Nakamura 34). Mosnier attempts to locate Hrabowski’s childhood within the broader historical context of the mid-twentieth century, while Hrabowski selects information he considers relevant to Mosnier’s objectives (Beard 531). Beard describes this interaction as “dynamic and reciprocal”: an activity where the historian and eyewitness interpret the significance of past events on “two simultaneous levels” (531). Hrabowski’s childhood biography is constructed on this dialogic foundation.

Mosnier initiates the oral history with an open-ended question. This courtesy intentionally avoids specificity to let interviewees provide information they consider most significant (Ritchie 81). However, while granting authorial leverage to Hrabowski, the question also signals Mosnier’s attempt to guide the discussion into a contextual framework: a means of setting the historical scene on which they can build an account of the Children’s Cru-

sade. Consequently, the terms family, community, and Birmingham elicit a description of Hrabowski's parents within a circle of institutions and beliefs shared by neighbors of similar backgrounds:

MOSNIER. Let me have you start, if you would, just with a description of family, community, in Birmingham, coming up as a child. You were born in August of 1950?

HRABOWSKI. Sure. I honestly believe I was as fortunate as a child could be – a child of color could be – born in the 1950s. I had parents who were educated, who were older, and who had been married ten years. So they were really looking for me (laughs). Fine, Christian people, very hard working. And we lived in a neighborhood, a middle-class neighborhood with similar families. The emphasis was on education, on our faith, on values, and on building strong community among the people in that area. That was my background in Birmingham. Church was at the center of everything (Hrabowski 2011, 00:00:44–00:01:40).

In the simplest sense, Hrabowski fleshes out the bones of Mosnier's curiosity by weaving together "aspects of the past that are unknown to the interviewer" (Summerfield 3). Whereas the photograph of his arrest isolates him in a world dominated by an unjust power structure, Hrabowski opens with a fortunate upbringing that contained a wealth of opportunities. While searching his memory, he pieces together a diverse spectrum of middle-class life in the suburb of Titusville: one of two Black middle-class neighborhoods in Birmingham where he grew up. Teachers, college graduates, physicians, and employees of wealthy whites comprised a community of hard-working individuals who nurtured their children personally and academically (Hrabowski 2011, 00:07:45–00:09:07).

In this tight-knit community, Hrabowski recalls enjoying a cosmopolitan upbringing in which piano lessons and small group discussions supplemented his formal education (00:06:55–00:07:32). To him, the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church represented a center of intellectual refinement where questions such as "What should a human being expect out of life?" encouraged attendees to reflect critically on their aspirations (00:28:12). Combined with his parents' involvement in the NAACP and ACMHR (00:18:05), Hrabowski also remembers his exposure to efforts that "uplifted" the race. Moreover, Hrabowski's initial portrayal of his childhood suggests a sheltered experience, in which the Black community thrived on members "that focus[ed] on education ... values, and on dreams, and the connection between hard work and reaching [those] dreams" (01:15:55–01:16:06).

However, Mosnier nudges Hrabowski out of his childhood shelter into a discussion of his racial identity and activism:

MOSNIER. In that kind of urban context, would you have had white acquaintances coming up?

HRABOWSKI. Oh, absolutely not. I had never met anyone white. I simply knew that white children were considered smarter than Black children. We were told that in so many ways, in subtle ways. The first time I realized just how distinct the two groups were, and distinctly hierarchical, was – I was peeling back the brown paper sack bag cover of a book I'd been given in the second grade. We had been told to leave it alone. And I peeled it back, and I saw the name of the white school. And I went up and asked the teacher, "Why did they give us the second-hand books?" Because that was such a message to us, you see (00:12:05–00:13:00).

As cognitive psychologists have observed, human beings "typically recall 'events' that are bounded in time and space" despite our senses receiving a "continuous stream of information" (Bibsy et al. 151). Therefore, whether or not Hrabowski was actually aware of racial inequalities before second grade, the peeling back of the paper sack cover represents a revelation of racial hierarchies in the interviewing context. His teacher's response subsequently reified (perhaps even created) the significance of the event he singles out: "You don't have time to be a victim . . . The book may be second-rate; you are first-rate. You are a child of God. Get the knowledge and keep moving" (00:13:10–00:13:20).

"Powerful, powerful message," Hrabowski reflects (00:13:20). Yet, it conveyed a sense of permanency about the world that he recognizes defined his early life. Adults consistently promoted phrases such as, "Don't expect fairness, but be twice as good, and perhaps you will be selected" (00:17:18–00:17:24). Furthermore, Hrabowski describes an indomitable caste system that his family hesitated to confront directly. Children's parks, movie balconies, restaurants, and water fountains represented bastions of segregation to which he and his peers lacked access (00:19:38–00:21:25). Hrabowski recalls that, given the violence, bombings, and threats of terrorism that segregationists used to maintain a racial caste system in Birmingham, his parents chose passive resistance by simply refusing to let him frequent these locations (00:20:53–00:21:00). Reflecting on these dynamics, Hrabowski distills them into the lesson they taught him as a child: "This is the way of the world" (00:31:59).

As Hrabowski explains it, participation in the Children's Crusade signified overcoming what felt like an immutable culture of inequality. Present at Dr. King's appeal to his congregation at the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, Hrabowski recalls his sense of amazement at the possibility of integration. "Before that King message – that message from Dr. King – the thought was,

'Since this is the way of the world, you've got to be really good to get a chance at all.' He was changing the model, the vision, and saying, 'It doesn't have to be this way'" (00:32:15–00:32:34).

Later in the interview, Hrabowski recounts that, after the march, federal Judge Elbert Tuttle overturned the students' academic suspension for demonstrating. (*The Dallas Morning News* marks the day as May 23, 1963) ("Judge Orders School Board" 15). Mosnier, perhaps sensing a potential connection to the impact on Hrabowski of Dr. King's message, reinvokes the notion of overcoming the impossible "Did it feel like a victory?" he ventures (Hrabowski 2011, 00:47:04).

"Oh, God." Hrabowski echoes, nodding. "Everybody cried. They cried. It was just to know that somebody white in power knew that we were not wrong and cared about children. Just knowing that there was decency among whites made a big difference" (00:47:06–00:47:26).

In May of 1963, the odds continued turning in their favor as city fathers consented to instituting reforms (00:48:42). Yet the interview ultimately calls attention to the role the children played, as Mosnier leads Hrabowski from his earliest conceptions of racism to an active revolt against it. When Hrabowski reflects on the five days he spent in jail following the Crusade, the impact of his participation becomes evident in the emotion that surfaces in his voice (00:43:50). Hrabowski tells Mosnier that Dr. King led the parents of arrested children in a vigil at the facility where he and others were held. Looking through the bars, he heard Dr. King say something he did not understand at the time: "What you do this day will have an impact on children yet unborn" (00:43:45–00:43:54). As the tangible rewards of marching manifested in the form of a biracial committee charged with redressing systems of oppression, the children came to understand that they had power in the face of racism.

When Words Fail, The Body Speaks

Although not active in the conversation, videographer John Bishop plays a critical role in capturing visually what words cannot convey alone. The movement of the camera reminds viewers of his invisible handiwork and brings Hrabowski's facial expressions, gestures, and mannerisms to life.

As oral historians Karen Ishizuka and Robert Nakamura point out, "People are not audio-only communicators. Some people talk with their hands or even with their entire bodies. Their shoulders rise with emotion or shrug in disgust. They clasp their hands in joy or smack their forehead for emphasis" (33). Body and voice might contradict each other, as when Hrabowski's face peels into a smile saying, "Quite frankly, all of a sudden I got really frightened [about marching]" (Hrabowski 2011, 00:35:05). At other times, Hrabowski punctuates his statements by moving his hand with each word, pinching his index finger and thumb (00:40:04). But what does it mean when silence permeates the tape, leaving the body to become the sole communicator?

Amid memories of second-rate textbooks and academic suspension for marching, the interview pulls away from the Children's Crusade and enters a topic that leaves the participants speechless: the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing. This digression is unplanned, but as Donald Ritchie suggests, oral histories, if done well, invite unexpected information (73).

After Hrabowski reflects on Judge Tuttle's reversal of the students' academic suspension, Mosnier attempts to draw out lingering, unconscious impressions of his arrest, employing a "free association" technique reminiscent of Freudian methodology. "Did you witness other things that remain as flash images . . . when you think back?" (Hrabowski 2011, 00:47:37–00:47:45), he asks, inviting Hrabowski to describe sentiments beneath his "conscious awareness" thought to be uncoded by language according to the psychoanalytical approach (hence Mosnier's evocation of visual memory) (Jones 9).

However, rather than recalling the Crusade, Hrabowski flashes back to his experience in the wake of the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on Sunday, September 15, 1963. Perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan's Birmingham's Eastview Klavern #13 Chapter, the attack killed four young Black girls: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley ("16th Street Baptist Church Bombing"). Suspect Robert Chambliss allegedly foreshadowed the bombing to his niece: "Just wait until Sunday morning and they'll beg us to let them segregate," he told her ("16th Street").

HRABOWSKI. Oh, my God! It was that fall in September! The flashes of the hand and the ring! . . . Things had begun to have signs of hope, of opening up in Birmingham. Remember all of the richness of my community! Richness in terms of love and spirituality and hard work and mutual support! . . . And we're in church that Sunday, in September, and all of a sudden, the pastor gets a note.

MOSNIER. At the pulpit?

HRABOWSKI. At the pulpit. He stops preaching and tells us that that other church – our sister church, where relatives of sons and daughters and fathers and mothers – had been bombed. 'Didn't know how bad it was (00:47:47–00:49:23).

In the interview, Hrabowski's shocked expression evinces traumas of which we only have archival records, as though he is living history in the present.

Indeed, what happens in the interview resonates profoundly with the reactions reported forty-four years prior. On September 17, 1963, the *Dallas Morning News* published an article in which Mrs. Maxine McNair (Ravitz 2013) (identified as Mrs. Chris McNair in the article) recalled the moment she learned of her daughter's death. "I began to scream, and I don't remember much after that," she said, her last words before, the reporter notes, her voice

trailed away (“Mother Recalls Morn of Murder” 4). A later article recounts the silence after “panic and terror filled Sixteenth Street Baptist Church when a tremendous blast ripped one end of the building” (“Panic Hit Church as Bomb Blew” 8). It details how “Everyone stopped for a minute at noon in Loveman’s, one of the largest downtown department stores. On the radio, an announcer said: ‘Now, we pause for a minute of silent prayer’” (“Church Bells” 4). Everyone, it seemed, was speechless.

When Hrabowski recalls the girls’ funeral, he too grows increasingly silent:

HRABOWSKI. And I’ll tell you what gave me hope in the midst of the darkness. It was the first time I had seen whites in my church. There were rabbis and priests and Baptist ministers from – (long pause). Hm. It was amazing. (quietly) And they – and they cried (Hrabowski 2011, 00:53:20–00:53:44).

What the audio cannot convey as a consequence of its medium is the physical expression of emotion captured on video. When Hrabowski’s words fail, his eyes water, his bottom lip curls, and he nods slowly in Mosnier’s direction. After a few seconds of silence, Mosnier offers to pause the recording, murmuring, “I need a second, too” (00:53:54). Bishop pauses the recording, and the scene fades to black.

Silence and emotion confound historians, social scientists, psychoanalysts, and qualitative researchers alike (Stanley 1996; Jones 1998; Errante 2000; Lamers et al. 2013; Holmes 2017). From a mechanism for reducing one’s vulnerability during conversations about emotional subjects to an indication of collecting one’s thoughts, silence assumes numerous meanings in oral history literature (Errante 22–23; Lamers et al. 311). So, too, do emotions have infinite manifestations in the interviewing space. Overwhelmed by the sight of “tears, a faltering voice, a shaking hand, [and] a body racked with sobs,” Australian oral historian Katherine Holmes simply asks, “Do we know what they [emotions] mean? How do we read them?” (57)

Beneath their uncertain meanings, these expressions (or lack thereof) provide hints about their historical, emotional, and social roots. As Antoinette Errante, an oral historian of post-colonial transitions, observes, some “memories” and “voices” are impossible to capture during interviews: “either the historian or the narrator is not part of the context of remembering in which a particular story is told” (17). Errante specifies this point by referencing her research in the 1990s on the cultural impact of Portuguese colonization and multiple educational reforms on Mozambique. Realizing her one-on-one interviews failed to capture the “collective” voice of traumatized communities, she discovered that Mozambicans preferred meeting in groups where they could recall shared experiences (25). Interviews conducted in intimate set-

tings stifled memories that communities privately circulated among themselves. Their emergence required changing the number and type of people present and relationships bound by shared experiences and trust (25). Thus, in Hrabowski's interview, the people involved in the process of remembering, combined with the cultural silence surrounding the murder of four young girls, may be thought to give shape to this particular stream of emotional and historical information.

In 1998, psychologist David Jones examined the adverse impact of discussing difficult topics on the interviewer themselves. "It was very tiring and upsetting to do those distressing interviews," he reflected. "It seemed immoral, to [be] going [into] people's lives, upsetting them and taking away bits of their stories, perhaps leaving them with confused and exposed feelings" (Jones 54). At the same time, Jones believed that pushing distressed interviewees to continue articulating their trauma risked harming the interviewees psychologically (52). The emotional toll, in other words, is mutual. Apart from the personal strain that Mosnier expressed from listening to Hrabowski's testimony ("I need a second, too"), the perception that Hrabowski was becoming emotional convinced him to intervene. Bishop pauses the recording to acknowledge the distress, tailoring the footage so its viewer, too, is confronted with the silence. That very silence then becomes part of Hrabowski's childhood biography.

This silence, or the inability to continue speaking, frequently overcomes former Crusade participants who reflect on the act of terror. During a panel hosted by the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in 2013, former Crusade participant Ricky Powell was asked how he coped with "death in the manner that it occurred" as a fourteen-year-old boy. "Cautiously," Powell responded into the microphone (Cooper et al. 00:41:40). When he paused, a hollow silence permeated the rehabilitated nave of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where the audience and panelists resided. Janice Kelsey, who was sixteen years old when she participated in the march, recalled a similar reaction by her family in writing. "There was not a lot of talk in our house about why this happened and who was responsible," she reminisced. "There was just a sad quietness" (Kelsey 2013). Moreover, when Hrabowski implores Mosnier to remember the "richness in [his] community," his use of "community" evokes a collective experience where the bombing robbed his neighbors of their ability to express their reactions through words. To him, neither the Children's Crusade nor the bombing affected him alone: for better or worse, they shook the foundations of the Black community in Birmingham as a whole.

No matter the interpretation, both tears and silence introduce the long history of Southern white terrorism into Hrabowski's account of the Crusade. "What you need to know," he explains, "Is that the people who were the naysayers were saying, 'That church was bombed; those girls were in those coffins, because we went to jail. We upset things, and that's what happens'"

(Hrabowski 2011, 00:52:35–00:52:47). He smiles grimly, yet the stinging echo of those accusations is deafening. The Crusade and the bombing are associated in his consciousness, held together by a sense of remorse: victory over segregation intermingles with the persistence of terrorism by individuals who undervalue Black lives. He begins to cry, and as he does, the distance between 1963 and 2011 unravels, exposing the rawness of an inexplicable tragedy that both children and their community endured.

Conclusion

The term autobiography, as Summerfield uses it, implies the independent narration of one's life by the individual that lived it. But while Hrabowski does occupy a central role in his interview as an eyewitness to the Civil Rights Movement, the dialogue and silence of his interlocutors help to shape a narrative that contrasts terror against Birmingham's Black community with triumph over specific and cultural forms of racism. As the trauma and optimism of these events resonate through the voices and bodies of those that lived them (Hrabowski), the interview's participants collaborate to "usher" their subjective significance into existence. The interview illustrates this when Hrabowski realizes, throughout the conversation, how his exposure to the possibility of racial equality as a child informed his endeavors to reduce educational disparities as a university president. "All of [my work] comes as a result . . . of the hope I got from those experiences as a child," he says. "I've never said it this way before" (Hrabowski 2011, 01:13:45–01:13:58).

Fifty-eight years after 1963, Hrabowski continues to "live out" the lessons he learned from the Crusade at the forefront of higher education. He speaks to this briefly in the interview's conclusion, when the participants return to the screen after the silence. He also wrote about it in his 2015 book, *Holding Fast to Dreams* : "I walked in the Children's Crusade from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to the steps of Birmingham City Hall to demonstrate my wish for a better education than the one offered by segregated Birmingham" (Hrabowski 2015, 9). When the Meyerhoff Scholars Program produced a Black female doctor part of a team that developed a vaccine for the coronavirus (*CBS News*),⁶ her success, along with that of hundreds of other graduates (Hrabowski 2011, 01:12:49), is part of the legacy of the youth who risked their lives in the 1960s.

Hrabowski's interview, and other oral histories told by the former youth activists who underwent them, are not accounts of something "bygone," "misremembered," "rediscovered," or "excavated" by an interviewer. As this

⁶ The doctor is Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett, who is a senior research fellow and immunopathologist (*NBC Bay Area*).

essay has argued, such interviews show how history is continually reflected upon, embodied, and given meaning by those who bore witness to it. In the process of attributing significance to memorable aspects of his youth – such as his childhood community and activism – Hrabowski’s oral history tells the past and continuing story of the children of the Civil Rights Movement, those who endured hardship at the hands of hatred and who continue to step forward to combat injustice.

WORKS CITED

- “16th Street Baptist Church Bombing (1963)” *National Parks Service*, www.nps.gov/articles/16thstreetbaptist.htm.
- “About the Meyerhoff Scholars Program.” *University of Maryland-Baltimore County*, <https://meyerhoff.umbc.edu/>.
- “About this Collection” *The Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/about-this-collection/>.
- Baum, Willa K. “Transcribing Procedures.” *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1991, pp. 26-34.
- Beard, Martha Rose. “Re-thinking oral history - a study of narrative performance.” *Rethinking History*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2017, pp. 529-548.
- Bibsy, James A., et al. “The Role of Spatial Boundaries in Shaping Long-Term Event Representations.” *Cognition*, vol. 154, Sept. 2016, pp. 151–164.
- “Birmingham Race Pact Breaks Back of Crisis: Agreement Caps 5-Week Conflict.” *Dallas Morning News*, 11 May 1963, p. 1.
- Bynum, Effie, et al. *Desegregation in Birmingham, Alabama: A Case Study*. Teachers College, Columbia University, 1974.
- “Church Bells Toll in Birmingham.” *Dallas Morning News*, 17 September 1963, p. 4.
- Cook, Erin, and Leanna Racine. “The Children’s Crusade and the Role of Youth in the African American Freedom Struggle.” *OAH Magazine of History*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2005, pp. 31-36.
- Cooper, Priscilla, et al., panelists. *First Person Accounts from 1963 Birmingham Campaign*, April 25, 2013, 16th Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama, C-SPAN.
- Errante, Antoinette. “But Sometimes You’re Not Part of the Story: Oral Histories and Ways of Remembering and Retelling.” *Educational Researcher*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2000, pp. 16-27.
- “Freeman A. Hrabowski, III.” Office of the President. *University of Maryland-Baltimore County*, <https://president.umbc.edu/>.
- Gary, Annetta Streeter. Interview by Horace Huntley. “Annetta Streeter Gary.” *Birmingham Civil Rights Institute*, <http://bcariohp.org/items/show/71>.

- Gee, James Paul. "Memory and Myth: A Perspective on Narrative." *Developing Narrative Structure*, edited by Allyssa McCabe and Carole Peterson, Hillside, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, 1991, pp. 1-25.
- Handler, M.S. "Malcolm X Terms Dr. King's Tactics Futile." *The New York Times*, May 11, 1963, p. 9.
- Hrabowski, Freeman. Interview by Joseph Mosnier. "Freeman A. Hrabowski oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Baltimore, Maryland, 2011 August 14." *Library of Congress*, 2011, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669131/>.
- Hrabowski, Freeman A. III. *Holding Fast to Dreams: Empowering Youth from the Civil Rights Crusade to STEM Achievement*. Boston, Massachusetts, Beacon Press, 2015.
- Hoffman, Alice M., and Howard S. Hoffman. "Reliability and Validity in Oral History: The Case for Memory." *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience*, edited by Glenace Ecklund Edwall and Jaclyn Jeffry, University Press of America, 1994, pp. 107-135.
- Holme, Katie. "Does It Matter If She Cried? Recording Emotion and the Australian Generations Oral History project." *The Oral History Review*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2017, pp. 56-76.
- Ishizuka, Karen L., and Robert A. Nakamura. "'See What I'm Saying?': Adding the Visual to Oral History." *Oral History and Communities of Color*, edited by Teresa Barnett and Chon A. Noriega. Los Angeles, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2013, pp. 29-49.
- Jones, David W. "Distressing Histories and Unhappy Interviewing." *Oral History*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1998, pp. 49-56.
- "Joseph Mosnier." *C-SPAN*, www.c-span.org/person/?josephmosnier.
- Jr., Martin Luther King. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Aug. 1963, https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf.
- "Judge Orders Schools Board to Reinstate Negro Students." *Dallas Morning News*, 23 May 1963, p. 15.
- Kelsey, Janice. Interview by Laura Anderson and Wayne Coleman. "Janice Kelsey." *Birmingham Civil Rights Institute*, 31 March 2008, <http://bcri-ohp.org/items/show/28>.
- Kelsey, Janice Wesley. "'Am I partly responsible for the death of those girls?'" *Kids in Birmingham 1963*, Sept. 2013, <https://kidsinbirmingham1963.org/category/janice-wesley-kelsey/>.
- Kuettner, Al. "Birmingham Racial Wall Shows First Major Crack." *Houston Chronicle*, 6 May 1963, p. 15.
- Lamers, Sanne M.A., et al. "Emotional Expression in Oral History Narratives: Comparing Results of Automated Verbal and Nonverbal Analyses." *Oral History Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 310-314.

- McCabe, Allyssa. "Preface: Structure as a Way of Understanding." *Developing Narrative Structure*, edited by Allyssa McCabe and Carole Peterson, Hillside, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, 1991, pp. ix-xvii.
- McWhorter, Diane. *Carry Me Home*. Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2001.
- "Meet the Black Female Scientist on the Forefront of COVID-19 Vaccine Development." *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 9 Jan. 2021, www.cbsnews.com/video/meet-the-black-female-scientist-on-the-forefront-of-covid-19-vaccine-development/.
- Moen, Torill. "Reflections on the Narrative Research Approach." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 4, no. 5, 2006.
- Morris Aldon D. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York, NY, The Free Press, 1984.
- "Mother Recalls Morn of Murder." *Dallas Morning News*, 17 September 1963, p. 4.
- Nelson, Alondra. *Body and Soul*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- "Panic Hit Church as Bomb Blew." *Dallas Morning News*, 16 September 1963, p. 8.
- Ravitz, blast 50 years on." *CNN*, 17 September 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/14/us/birmingham-church-bombing-anniversary-victims-siblings/index.html>.
- Ritchi, Donald A. *Doing Oral History*. Third Edition. New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2002, 2015.
- "Scientist Kizzmekia Corbett Leads COVID-19 Vaccine Trials With Dedication, Humor." *NBC Bay Area*, 12 Apr. 2020, www.nbcbayarea.com/news/coronavirus/scientist-kizzmekia-corbett-leads-covid-19-vaccine-trials-with-dedication-humor/2271701/.
- Stanley, Jo. "Including the Feelings: Personal Political Testimony and Self-Disclosure." *Oral History*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1996, pp. 60-67.
- Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1991, pp. 773-797.
- "Something Big in Birmingham: Truce Hints Heard, Troopers Take Over." *Houston Chronicle*, 8 May 1963, p. 1.
- Summerfield, Penny. "Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice." *Miranda*, vol. 12, 2016, pp. 1-12.
- "Style Guide: A Quick Reference for Editing Oral History Transcripts." *Baylor University Institute for Oral History*, 2018, <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php?id=14142>.
- "Thousands May Be Arrested in Birmingham, Says Dr. King." *Dallas Morning News*, 4 May 1963, p. 3.
- The General Code of the City of Birmingham, Alabama*. Charlottesville, VA, The Mitchie Company, 1994.
- United States, Congress. *The Civil Rights History Project Act of 2009*. H.R. 586 (IH). <https://congress.gov/111/plaws/publ19/PLAW-111publ19.pdf>.

Wilson Bobby M. "Birmingham Segregation: Is it a Project of Black-White Socioeconomic Differences?" *Southern Geographer*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1989, pp. 92-105.

Daughter of Breaking: Sexual Violence as Political Economy in Judges 19

By Austin Kelly Mitchell

I first read the biblical book of Judges in the spring semester of third grade. That year, I'd set my sights on reading through the Hebrew Bible before summer vacation. My evangelical school's chapel meetings and Bible lessons had already taught me to revel in our scriptures' beauty and absolute truth, and so, with the encouragement of my teachers, I was determined to flip through each of the silver-lined, one-ply pages of the *NIV Old Testament*.¹ My copy was bound in black leather with my name embossed on the front in cursive, which I took as a personal invitation into the holy text of my parents and grandparents.

I remember sitting at my desk at the front of the classroom when chapter 19 of Judges introduced me to sexual violence. In the first episode of its finale, the author of Judges conjures up an anonymous woman for a gruesome purpose. As the story goes, a certain "Levite's concubine" disobeys her husband and lord, a man from the tribe of Levi and town of Ephraim, and runs back to her father's house in Judah. The Levite goes to fetch her and is heartily greeted by his father-in-law. After days of eating and drinking with the concubine's father, he leaves for home with the young woman back in his possession. While overnighting at Gibeah in Benjamin, a group of men threaten the Levite with rape. He hands the concubine over to them instead. She is raped and brutalized by the mob. The Levite takes her motionless body home with him, cuts her into pieces, and distributes her parts to all the tribes of

¹ *New International Version of the Bible*, a preferred translation in my natal evangelical Christian tradition. Old Testament, a traditional Christian term for the Hebrew Bible.

Israel. “How has this evil been?” the Israelites ask at the beginning of the next chapter (20.3), before accepting the Levite’s account as the scandalous pretext for a war of vengeance against the tribe of Benjamin: a self-destructive war on Israel’s part, but one endorsed by YHWH.²

At school, we had learned about conquest, crucifixion, and enslavement, but rape was not in the curriculum. I remember leaving my glossy ribbon bookmark at the end of the story, walking to Mrs. Merrill’s desk, and asking, “What does r-a-p-e mean?” Her response, of course, was a combination of euphemism and feigned ignorance. Back then, I got the impression that she didn’t know either. And so, Merriam-Webster had to be my teacher.

Dictionary definitions offer no consolation nor resolution for narrative horror on this scale. Neither does academic scholarship. When I eventually dove into the body of research on Judges 19-21, its overwhelming violence nearly dissuaded me from looking any further, lest my hands get too bloody in the search for meaning. I am not alone in this experience. Biblical scholar Renita Weems writes that Judges 19–21 could compel someone to “stop reading the Bible altogether” (125). The passage is known in feminist biblical scholarship as one of many “texts of terror” which confront characters and readers with visceral stories of bodily trauma, sexual abuse, and patriarchal violence (Trible 28).

Such stories are not confined to scripture. Thirteen years after my first encounter with the Levite’s concubine, I have become acquainted with sexual trauma. I see and hear sexual trauma by the roadside, on the news, and in the stories of my chosen family. My people are, on the whole, transgender and nonbinary. Nearly half of all trans people in the United States have experienced sexual assault, which more heavily impacts trans people who are Black or indigenous, who are sex workers, and who experience houselessness (NSVRC). This trauma is compounded by state-by-state legislative efforts to limit or outright ban transgender and reproductive health care, policies avidly pursued by evangelical lobbyists and faith leaders. Biblical texts, in other words, don’t just offer (contested) moral teaching to those who hold them sacred. They affect the structural, material, and embodied circumstances of vulnerable people regardless of their faith.

What, then, do I do with my sexually violent Bible – hide in its glittery silver linings? I am no more inclined to do so than to look past the traumas to which too many of my community members are subject. My intention is to read Judges 19 from the standpoint of its nameless, voiceless concubine, who

² YHWH, or the tetragrammaton, is the Hebrew acronym for a divine name, often translated in English as “the Lord,” and pronounced by some as “Jehovah” or “Yahweh.” Another divine name, El or Elohim, is typically translated as “God.”

refuses to submit to patriarchal violence and dies for it. My approach is, in part, a reflection of what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls a “hermeneutic³ of remembrance” (19). She proposes this interpretive methodology as an alternative to “abandoning the memory of our [biblical] foresters’ suffering and hopes” (19). A hermeneutic of remembrance is profoundly subversive in that it reserves the right to challenge the perspectives of biblical authors themselves. It thus “moves against the androcentric⁴ text toward the lived history of the woman it buries” (19).

A reader of Judges may join the Israelite chorus as they gather to demand an explanation for the dismembered body parts left on their doorsteps. They address the Levite, who sent the bloody parcels, and demand an account: “Speak! How has this evil been?”⁵ (20.3). Within the story itself, answers vary based on the perspectives of the speakers. The Levite tells his version on a national stage – he fortunately remains alive to testify. By changing details to exonerate himself of his concubine’s death, he successfully channels Israel’s rage against the men of Gibeah, to whom he hand-delivered his concubine to be “known.”⁶ The unknown biblical narrator has his version, too; he indicts wicked men like the Levite for upsetting a moral order and inciting national conflict. Nowhere in Judges 19 does the narrator give the Levite’s concubine a chance to answer – or a name, a mother, a word of dialogue, or a burial.

How can I, a reader of Judges, respond to the question posed by the Israelite chorus? Instead of averting my gaze from the concubine’s experience, I will read between the lines of Judges 19 for glimpses of her, for echoes of her voice. In doing so, I aim to reframe a text which, embedded in my spiritual tradition, evinces the economies of power that underpin sexual and state violence. To begin to do so, I must meet the Levite’s concubine where she is. So, I call her by name. She is *Beth-sheber*. I use this name in affirmation of Mieke Bal and Cheryl Exum’s previous work on Judges 19. Beth-sheber is named for the home (Hebrew *beth*) to which she longed to return as well as for being the daughter (*bath*) of breaking (*sheber*), “as in the breaking of pottery into pieces” or “as in the phrase, ‘breaking of a dream’” (Exum 176-177).

³ Interpretive framework. Hermeneutics is the field of biblical studies where readers make meaning of a text.

⁴ Revolving around men.

⁵ This and all following biblical quotations, unless marked otherwise, come from the *Literal Standard Version (LSV)*, which I prefer for its disorienting and present-tense narration. Other English translations tend to smooth out the Masoretic Text’s Hebrew for the sake of literary readability. As its name suggests, the *LSV* is more or less direct. It conveys the chaos and disjointedness of the narrative at hand. It, along with every other translation, contains the contested translation “concubine,” which I reduce to the original Hebrew word, *piylegesh*.

⁶ Biblical euphemism for sexual penetration, or “carnal knowledge,” by a man, often with undertones of force.

This essay attempts to illuminate the biblical narrator's omissions by reframing Judges 19 from the perspective of women who, like Beth-sheber, were taken as concubines (*piylegeshim*). Literary-historical criticism contextualizes Beth-sheber's story, whether mythical or biographical, in the patriarchal economy of Iron Age Israel.⁷ The first two verses of Judges 19 offer a fragmented glimpse into the beginning of the end of her life: she is "taken" as a *piylegesh*, then in the next biblical phrase, leaves her husband to return to her father's house in Judah. And yet she is not treated as a protagonist, and indeed has no dialogue in her own story. Regardless of Beth-sheber's historical personhood, young women in her setting served as commodities promising domestic and agricultural labor, fertility, sexual availability, and virgin purity. This "evil" is rooted in the political economy of Israel, operating behind the scenes and branching through individual men's sexually violent behavior. Judges is less interested in confronting systems and patterns of sexual violence than in justifying centralized, monarchical state power. And so, Judges 19 begins with statecraft on its mind.

No King

Judges 19.1a And it comes to pass in those days, when there is no king in Israel, that there is a man ...

The first task in critically reframing Judges 19 is to account for its monarchist political perspective. The later chapters of Judges are sprinkled with repetitive reminders that "in those days there was no king" (17.6, 18.1, 19.1, 21.25). Israel was not yet united under a centralized state, Judges notes, so people were left to their own wicked devices. They lacked the strong arm of a theocratic national ruler to enforce moral norms. The "no king" refrain suggests that wickedness emerged from individual moral dysfunction: "each does that which is right in his own eyes" (17.6, 21.25). Beth-sheber's rape is described as "that which is good in [the mob's] eyes" (19.24). The biblical narrator places blame on a certain few "heartless individuals" for their decisions, but fails to apply the same standard of accountability to their broader society's practice of trading virgin daughters (Yee 157).

Such an individualizing analysis of violence relies on personal morality to explain acts of violence, too often at the expense of a critical engagement

⁷ Whether Beth-sheber's story is myth or biography is unrelated to Israel's question in the text. I am ambivalent toward this distinction and do not have a dog in the fight between postmodern and fundamentalist readings. Whether fictional characters or a historical community, the Israelite chorus articulates the question already in my heart.

with underlying social and economic patterns. In the words of prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore, this kind of approach relies on “individualizing [social] disorder into singular instances of criminality” (176). In it, individual attacks are met with additional force, not healing or resolution. In the case of Judges, it bolsters state and societal reactions from “a punishment mindset and a war footing,” where the bad men are stamped out and their victim left in pieces (Kaba).

By contrast, historical materialist analyses understand personal morality to reflect the underlying social environment of a person. Marx describes this primary tenet of historical materialism when he writes, “Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand” (193). In the context of this biblical analysis, materialism asks, “What social and economic relationships gave rise to this situation?” In other words, “*What made this evil happen?*” A materialist analysis of Judges 19 must contend with an economy in which men form political and economic relations using virgin daughters as object commodities. If, in such a society, a patriarch did not seek a wife for his son or a price for his daughter, it would be an exceptional act of resistance, and an economic sacrifice with social consequences. A historical materialist reading thus subverts the perspective of Judges’ narrator when he chalks the story’s brutality up to individual “sons of worthlessness” (19.22).

When the united tribes of Israel ask “How has this evil been?” it is not to question the sexual violence that pervades in their social and economic structures, but a reaction to a particularly egregious instance in which cruelty was made manifest and undeniable. The Levite’s response is notable for the way it externalizes “the evil.” He offers a chopped-up version of the story in which he deflects all personal responsibility for her death and casts himself as a distraught husband (*ish*, 19.3) and lord (*adon*, 19.26) looking for justice. He points the finger at Gibeah and concludes with “behold, you are all sons of Israel; give for yourselves a word and counsel here” (20.7).

The eleven present tribes of Israel, too, deflect responsibility. They accept the Levite’s pointed accusation as evidence that a select few are guilty and turn their collective rage upon the entire tribe of Benjamin, who neglected to attend the assembly or to surrender their Gibeathite kinsmen. A hastily scrambled intertribal army annihilates every last Benjaminite civilian, slaughters their livestock, and sends “all the cities which are found into the fire” (20.48).

The chaos and massacres underscore the anarchy of pre-monarchic Israel. Koala Jones-Warsaw argues that the “entire story functions within the Deuteronomistic History to justify the establishment of kingship” (29). Certainly, the narrator’s repetition of “no king” indicates that the concluding chapters of Judges convey a message about the Israelite politics of monarchy. Gale Yee argues that chapters 20 and 21 frame Israel’s military response as a “symbolic resolution of real social contradictions,” where a divinely anointed

king symbolizes the restoration of order (144). In her reading, the author of Judges has Gibeah and Benjamin criminally threaten (the contradiction) the moral order, which is ultimately restored by Israel's punitive action (the resolution). And so, when the text's narrative structure associates violence and anarchy with the olden days, it would encourage the Israelite populace to look favorably, by contrast, on their contemporary monarchs and courtly elites.

But instead of the resolution Judges seems to proffer, the moral and criminal contradictions escalate up until its twenty-first and final chapter. Eventually, Israel seeks to pacify Benjamin's six hundred surviving soldiers by gifting them six hundred virgins. They pillage four hundred of these young women from the destroyed town of Jabesh-Gilead as punishment for opting out of the war effort. The other two hundred are "seized" as they dance in a festival of YHWH, in the northern town of Shiloh (21.12, 23). War meets sexual violence meets sacrilege. And Israel does not stay united. Every man goes home with his human and nonhuman spoils, "each to his tribe" (21.24). Clearly, the reason for Israel's furious and collective moral indignation – the mistreatment of Beth-sheber – has been forgotten in the exhilaration of ethnocide. The final verse of Judges reiterates the absence of a king in those days and that people did what was right in their eyes. Without the guiding hand and disciplinary presence of a monarch, the reader is asked to infer, the Israelites would return to their anarchic individual ways.

Yee argues that Judges was written (author is unknown) within the context of King Josiah's political and religious reforms, which centralized state and cultic authority in Jerusalem. Josiah (c. 640-610 BCE) is credited with eliminating the worship of all Israel's gods beside YHWH, and restoring its monarchic righteousness after a series of wayward kings (2 Kings 23–25).⁸ Scholars dispute the textual dating of Judges, but, if correct, Yee's interpretation offers a convincing explanation of Judges' narrator's investment in moral idealism and the necessity of the monarchy. If Judges 19–21 was in fact composed at royal court during a period of the *de facto* state's consolidation, it makes sense that centralized and punitive state power would be represented as the ultimate resolution for moral and criminal contradictions.

We now turn to the text itself for a close reading of its first three verses. An examination of the economic position of virgin girls in Israelite society will situate Beth-sheber in her time and place and shed light on her story.

⁸ Other Israelite deities named in the Bible include El (pl. Elohim), Ba'al, and Asherah.

Taken

Judges 19.1b ... there is a man, a Levite, a sojourner in the sides of the hill-country of Ephraim, and he takes a wife for himself, a *piylegesh*, out of Beth-Lehem-Judah ...

Beth-sheber's story takes on a new coherence when read in conversation with the lives of her historical contemporaries, i.e., "taken" women. After setting the scene, Judges 19.1b provides a casual example of the coercive sexual politics of ancient Israel: the Levite "takes" Beth-sheber as his *piylegesh*. The text does not portray her as an active participant in the marriage process. She is passively "taken" in marriage in the same way the Levite later "takes" hold of her to push her outside (19.25), "takes" her unresponsive body home on a donkey (19.28), and "takes" his knife to dismember her body (19.29). The verb for "taken" (*l-q-h*) is a common transitive verb in the Hebrew Bible, used for people and objects alike. The book of Genesis, for instance, includes no fewer than 41 instances of women being "taken," typically in marriage, rape, or concubinage.

While "concubine" is the predominant rendering of the word "*piylegesh*," womanist scholars insist on a more nuanced translation, which opens the door for a historical examination of Beth-sheber's circumstance. Wil Gafney points out that concubinage did not technically exist in ancient Israel, where an *issah* (woman / wife) would be a "primary woman" in a man's household and a *piylegesh* would be a "woman of secondary status" (2017, 34).

In order to understand Beth-sheber's position as a subordinate, lower-class wife, one must look no further than the "familial mode of production" in prestate Israel (Yee 144). Friedrich Engels defines "mode of production" as "the social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live" (25). The epoch of Judges 19 is the Iron Age (c. 1200–1020 BCE), when the Near East saw the generation of early agricultural surpluses, thanks to new technologies ranging from hand tools to enslavement (Lerner 54). In this context, Ancient Israel's mode of production gave rise to a political economy organized by kinship. Clan or tribal patriarchs – definitely not *piylegeshim* – maintained livestock, farmland, and households.

Patriarchs in this context knew each other and entered into transactions because they were related by blood or marriage. They used kinship to form and mutually define social and military relationships (Rubin 170). Men passed wealth to each other through patrilineage and through the trade in virgin daughters. Prospective grooms would negotiate a bride-price with fathers in their familial, geographic, and social networks. These patriarchs were "under an obligation to dispose of their family members in marriage ... to maximize family fortunes and keep up or improve family status" (Lerner 107–113).

Thus, the gift-transaction of marriage would have established an economic relationship between Beth-sheber's father and her new husband, the Levite.

So, after reaching a satisfactory agreement with her father, the Levite would have been able to "take" Beth-sheber in marriage (19.1). If the Levite's family lacked the resources to purchase their son a wife, they could have raised funds by selling other children into slavery, or giving up a virgin daughter into a "degraded marriage" (Lerner 112). The Levite's hypothetical sister, like Beth-sheber, could be taken to perform household and sexual labor, with no ability to consent or refuse. This form of marriage, to quote Lerner, "amounted to domestic enslavement" (112).

While Beth-sheber's acquisition is unvoiced at the beginning of her story, the edicts of ancient Israelite society meant certain women were the property of men. In keeping with contemporary developments in nearby Mesopotamian enslavement, biblical law began to define norms for the relations between slaves and masters, right alongside those between women and men (Lerner 48). The Torah⁹ admonishes men not to covet "anything that belongs to your neighbor," including wives, handmaids, and menservants (Exod. 20.17, Deut. 5.21). Men could legally serve their women writs of divorce but not the other way around (Deut. 24). Most enslaved Hebrew people were to be "sent away free" every seventh year, not so for virgin daughters (Deut. 15.12–17). And if two enslaved people had children, only the man would be set free; the woman and her children would remain in bondage (Exod. 21.4). A man could sell his daughter into slavery at will, under which condition she would be permanently enslaved (Exod. 21.7–11).

It is unclear under what circumstances the Levite acquired Beth-sheber, so a literary reading cannot unequivocally declare her to have been held in bondage. Although Beth-sheber is not mentioned as having been enslaved previously, she could have been given in marriage or bondage before the Levite acquired her in Bethlehem. The Torah passages above clearly attest to the ubiquity of such a scenario. Depending on her family's economic class, a virgin daughter would experience marriage under utterly different circumstances. Marriages by contract often occurred between families with relative wealth and resulted in primary marriages, defined by a limited degree of legal rights for the primary wife. Any wife, regardless of status, legally owed her husband fidelity and sexual availability, but only the primary wife was entitled support from her husband and could control property, including other women (Gafney "Speak!"). If unable to conceive, primary wives could transform their

⁹ Literary unit also known as the Pentateuch or the Law of Moses. Consists of the first five texts in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Followed by Joshua and Judges, then Samuel, where the first Israelite kings appear

enslaved women into *piylegeshim*, secondary or lower-class wives, for their husbands to use sexually (Lerner 91–92). If there were no enslaved women in the household to choose from, a lower-class woman could simply be bought from her family of origin and used as a *piylegesh* for sexual gratification or procreation. Yee refers to this as the *piylegesh's* “double subordination” to the primary wife, who was already inherently subordinate to her husband (152).

Whereas the biblical slavery statutes could very well apply to Beth-sheber, the author of Judges does not offer any clarification. He doesn't specify her family's socioeconomic situation, nor the presence of any mother or siblings. Similarly, the Levite gets no genealogy, and no primary wife is mentioned as Beth-sheber's superior. It is unclear how he even met Beth-sheber's father, given that they lived in different tribal territories. Absent any real clarity about Beth-sheber besides her *piylegesh* title, suggests the subordinate status of a cheap bridal commodity. And yet she asserts her freedom.

Whoredom

Judges 19.2 . . . and his *piylegesh* commits whoredom against him, and she goes from him to the house of her father, to Beth-Lehem-Judah, and is there four months of days.

This second verse speaks to Beth-sheber's single recorded act of autonomy: opting out of sexual obedience. The author seems to imply that her action (she “goes from him”) is related to a prior transgression, described by a verb phrase translated “commits whoredom against him.” The narrator offers no clear explanation for her departure, except for “whoredom,” a nonspecific accusation of sexual impropriety. While a materialist understanding of Judges 19.1 may add context, the text itself is puzzling and provides none of the particular circumstances or events that would compel a woman like Beth-sheber to “go from” her husband with zero legal or social authority to do so.

Beth-sheber's return to her father's house implies that she felt her prospects there were better than they were under the Levite's roof. And yet it is important to recognize that she looks to “escape” to the site of her initial commodification. Lyrae van Clief-Stefanon spins Beth-sheber's missing perspective into poetry in “The Daughter and the Concubine from the Nineteenth Chapter of Judges Consider and Speak Their Minds.” Here, Beth-sheber reflects on her experience as an expendable family asset on the day her father first hands her over:

And I was a gift once
And I was Daddy's to give
And Daddy was joy and sorrow
And Daddy was Oh

my baby gal done got big
And Daddy was Lord
she done grown and gone. (22)

Note the enjambment in the final two lines: Van Clief-Stefanon juxtaposes the father's interjection ("Lord / she done grown and gone") with his *de jure* status as Beth-sheber's paternal master ("And Daddy was Lord"). His economic position as a patriarch entailed supreme authority over his daughter's body and the ability to exchange her for dowry or for a legally assessed penalty. For instance, if a virgin daughter were sexually assaulted, biblical law called for her father to be paid fifty shekels (Deut. 22.28-29) and for her immediate marriage to her attacker. Judges gives no reason to discount or affirm this possibility for Beth-sheber but does affirm that her new husband has assumed her father's former role as master, or lord (19.29).

Gafney and Lerner each point out that Israelite laws (and their Assyrian, Babylonian, and Hittite counterparts) about enslaved women were deemed "necessary because these practices exist[ed] in the community" (Gafney, *Womanist Midrash* 120). The variety of scenarios addressed in the Torah speak to the multiple and overlapping determinants of the freedom or subjugation a woman might experience. It is useful to remember, for example, that primary wives and enslaved women occupied two ends of a spectrum, with *piylegeshim* like Beth-sheber occupying an "intermediate position" (Lerner 112).

Here, Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality can account for differing experiences of power between women based on such factors as class, fertility, marital status, nation, and sexual availability in the eyes of patriarchal law. Crenshaw posits intersectionality as a challenge to feminist and antiracist theory and politics which have tended to oversimplify power relationships into binaries of black-white, man-woman, and criminal-victim (140). Specifically, "intersectional experience" describes the overlapping variables at play in the lived experiences of Black women, which are rendered two-dimensional when accounted for solely in terms of Blackness or womanhood. Generally, the concept of intersectionality encourages an investigative look at the interplay between identity categories, social forces, political systems, and so on, to provide a more holistic picture than binary identity politics are capable of producing.

Wil Gafney, Koala Jones-Warsaw, and Mitzi J. Smith take up Crenshaw's challenge as they consider the political and economic dimensions of Beth-sheber's story through lenses of womanism, the Black feminist¹⁰ mode

¹⁰ It is important to note that the terms Black feminism and womanism mean different things to different people. Both were first formally articulated to indicate the distance between dominant white feminism and the experiences, analyses, and organized movements of Black women in the United States.

of analysis coined by Alice Walker. Gafney characterizes womanism as an integration of “the radical egalitarianism of feminism, the emancipatory ethic and reverence for black physical and cultural aesthetics of the black liberation movement, and the transformational trajectories of both movements” (*Womanist Midrash* 6). By centering on Black women’s experiences and analyses, womanist biblical interpretations hold “didactic value for other readers” and engender a “commit[ment] to the wholeness and flourishing of the entire community” (7). That is to say, the implications of womanist insight ought not be dismissed by non-Black or non-woman readers and can move to uncover harmful power dynamics obscured by binary analyses.

Take, for example, Smith’s reading of Judges 19. In “Reading the Story of the Levite’s Concubine Through the Lens of Modern-day Sex Trafficking,” she points out that Black women and children are disproportionately more likely to experience the types of violence to which Beth-sheber is subjected (18). She argues that the Levite uses distance to isolate his victim, just like contemporary traffickers. Smith refers to Beth-sheber’s transition from daughter to *piylegesh* as the first of five spatial journeys in Judges 19, reminiscent of contemporary predators taking their victims “permanently or temporarily from her normal geographical surroundings” (17). Her journey to the Levite’s household in Ephraim, unnarrated yet necessary for the plot to begin, constitutes “implicit transportation of human property across geographical boundaries” – in other words, human trafficking (17).

With or without a bridal contract, Beth-sheber would have been taken from Judah to Ephraim, across tribal borders, as part of a status transformation from virgin daughter to secondary wife, “exchang[ing] one master for another” (Smith 17). Although today “we regard it as unthinkable that an otherwise upstanding citizen might be a slaveholder” (27), the economic underpinnings of Israelite kinship relationships code Beth-sheber as property to be taken. The mode of production itself produces violence. According to custom and law, her consent is not required for the Levite to shuttle her across the landscape of Israel to a new life as his wife of secondary status. Her initial journey and transformation flies under the radar of the text, perhaps because of how commonplace a trip like this would have been for Israelite girls and women.

Less common, perhaps, was Beth-sheber’s choice to leave and travel again, crossing back through the territories of Ephraim and Benjamin into Judah. This second journey is Beth-sheber’s sole assertion of agency in a text that generally confines her to a silent object. She takes her body, the Levite’s legal property, and in doing so, transforms her status from *piylegesh* to run away. Indeed, the text holds off on referring to her again as a *piylegesh* until the Levite recaptures her and heads toward Ephraim. For the next scene, she is merely called “the young woman,” visiting home without permission (19.3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9).

Gafney rightly identifies the language of “slut-shaming” (“Speak!”) in the accusation found in Judges 19:2 that states Beth-sheber “commits whoredom” (Hebrew *z-n-h*).¹¹ Arguably, the accusation is made to characterize her departure, rather than to explain it (as though she was attempting to avoid just consequences for sexual impropriety). Other prominent translations of *z-n-h* in this verse read, “is unfaithful to him” (ESV), “plays the whore against him” (KJV), “plays the harlot against him” (JPS), and “prostitutes herself against him” (NRSV). The Hebrew verb does not have a clear English counterpart but occurs in instances where feminine sexual subversion meets idolatry. Sometimes the Torah uses *z-n-h* to describe Israel’s repeated collective “whoring” after gods other than YHWH (Exod. 34.15; Lev. 17.7; Num. 15.39; Deut. 31.16); at others it is used in connection to intermarriage with non-Israelite women (Exod. 34.16; Num. 25.1). Perhaps, then, the narrator does not accuse Beth-sheber of literal adultery or sex work *while* at the Levite’s house, *after* which “she goes from him.” Earlier in Judges, the narrator says Israel commits whoredom against YHWH by breaking their covenant with Him (Judges 2.17, 8.27). Hence, the narrator may be imputing whoredom onto Beth-sheber’s departure from her lord. In this reading, she commits whoredom against the Levite *because* she goes from him.

Whether she is accused of literal adultery or of breaking the marriage contract, Jones-Warsaw suggests that the narrator’s diction reflects the perspective of the Levite (20). His accusation of whoredom could carry the penalty of death for Beth-sheber because, according to the law, infidelity was punishable by execution (Lev. 20.10). Even if the Levite’s charge of literal adultery was false, she must have known the flight would imply guilt. If the charge was levelled *post hoc*, something clearly compelled Beth-sheber to break the marriage contract by running from him. Thus Jones-Warsaw incisively reads Beth-sheber’s self-emancipation as an “act of survival” (Jones-Warsaw 21).

To Bring Her Back

Judges 19.3a And her husband rises and goes after her, to speak to her heart, to bring her back. ... 19.28 and he says to her, “Rise, and we go”; but there is no answering, and he takes her on the donkey, and the man rises and goes to his place, 19.29 and comes into his house, and takes the knife, and lays hold on his concubine, and cuts her in pieces to her bones.

¹¹I use the three-consonant stem *z-n-h* here, because it appears in scripture in different grammatical forms.

In the context of her political economy, Beth-sheber's personal horror story takes on new meaning. So far, this analysis has only dealt with the first two verses of Judges 19, as the narrative setup to a text of terror. Read through a materialist lens, that brief prologue illuminates the rest of the chapter. Holding onto that frame of reference, the critical reader bears witness to the Levite's pursuit of Beth-sheber, and the grisly scene of her subsequent death. No longer can Judges 19 be read simply as an illustration of cruelty enacted by a deviant few.

The Levite's decision to follow Beth-sheber is puzzling (19.3). If he believed his *pilegesh* committed whoredom, like the narrator says, she could no longer be his wife of any rank. Adultery – defined as any sexual contact between a man and another man's daughter, wife, or enslaved woman – was punishable by death (Lev. 20.10). The Levite also would have been bound by the strict rules governing marriage as a member of his priestly tribe/class. Levites were prohibited from "taking" a "woman of harlotry," a divorcee, a widow, or any woman otherwise "defiled" (Lev. 21.1-15). His decision to pursue her, and indeed her father's decision to shelter her for four months, would at the very least imply scandal, given their place and time.

Considering how scandalous this situation would seem to the men involved, and how high-stakes it would be for Beth-sheber's survival, her father's joy upon recognizing the Levite seems, at face value, inexplicable. He "keeps hold" on his son-in-law, and "presses" him to stay longer and longer (19.4, 7). The chummy atmosphere becomes more confusing when later, during the episode at Gibeah, the Levite reveals that the whole time he has been prepared to feast, with bread, and wine, and straw for his human and donkey entourage – "no lack of anything" (19.19). The Levite did not *need* the food, drink, and rest proffered by his father-in-law. Why, then, the dramatic show of camaraderie?

Viewed through a materialist lens, the father's demonstration of extreme, and somewhat coercive, hospitality is rendered more coherent. Phyllis Tribble calls the feast an "exercise in male bonding" that takes place even as Beth-sheber, their reason for meeting, "fades from the scene" (82). It is true that Beth-sheber does not speak a word, but "male bonding" hardly accounts for the absurdity at Bethlehem. Jones-Warsaw describes Beth-sheber's Judae-an father as "forceful and manipulative, but polite" (19.21). He insists for three days that the Levite stick around and "support [his] heart" with food and drink (19.4, 5, 8). The Levite may be legally entitled to reclaim Beth-sheber, but under her father's roof, he can be stalled. Eventually, however, the Levite asserts his right and takes Beth-sheber from her father's house.

Later that night, the Levite and his party find themselves stranded in Gibeah, in "a broad place of the city," somewhere with open air and nowhere to stay (19.14-15). When an old man serendipitously shows up to offer lodging, the Levite reiterates that he is headed to his home, that no one has yet

extended hospitality, and that he is from the hill country of Ephraim (19.18). After all, the old man is from the hill country as well (19.16) and is proximal to the Levite because of shared geography and familiar lineage. Articulating their mutual “stranger status” (Niditch 367), the Levite ingratiates himself to his new host. He makes a point to tell the Ephraimite that he has enough straw for his donkeys, enough provisions for himself and his manservant, and for the Ephraimite’s servants and the “handmaid” too (19.19). Here Beth-sheber is referred to by a new title, one which does not specify any marital relationship to the Levite. The old man responds, “Peace to you; only, all your lack is on me, but do not lodge in the broad place” (19.20). His hospitality is touching, and apparently responsive to a perceived degree of familiarity between the two men.

At this point in her reading, Smith intervenes, remarking that the text “reeks of the images and language of familiarity” (15). She points out that modern sex traffickers leverage personal relationships with and proximity to their victims, even as familiarity and proximity bring men together in fraternity with one another. The Levite and the old man realize that they’re from the same region. They are thus linked by the bonds of fraternity, which Smith identifies as a condition allowing for “male enjoyment and self-gratification to the exclusion of female well-being” (22). It is natural that after arriving home, they take their sandals off, wash their feet, and imbibe together, “making their heart glad” (19.21–22). There is no mention of Beth-sheber or anyone else taking up space in the house, although the text assures us that the donkeys get fed (19.21). Any subordinate humans fade into the background, including the Levite’s “young man.” Beth-sheber, we are left to assume, is welcomed as a material extension of the Levite, her lodging contingent upon him. Enjoyment, here as in Bethlehem, is the prerogative and privilege of the patriarchs who identify with each other against the inhospitable and alien setting of Gibeah.

All of a sudden, a mob of unknown quantity, who are identified as “sons of worthlessness,” disrupt the men’s dinner (19.22). From the very introduction, the narrator has made his verdict. They surround the Ephraimite’s house and “beat on the door,” demanding to rape his guest (19.22). Jones-Warsaw observes that although he is the “master of the house” (19.23) the Ephraimite’s power is limited. He is described as an alien, an elder, and a manual laborer, suggesting a lack of economic and social resources (Jones-Warsaw 23). Shrewdly, then, he employs a threefold strategy of persuasion. First, he appeals to a fraternal sense of propriety: “No, my brothers, please” (19.23). The “sons of worthlessness” (19.22, repeated by Israel in 20.13) are now part of his brotherly moral network, whereas a few hours ago he had warned the Levite not to linger all night in their public square (19.20).

Having invoked brotherhood, the Ephraimite adds a second tactic, attempting to activate their sense of guest-host reciprocity. They shouldn’t “do

evil ... do not do this folly," he says, explaining, "that this man has come into my house" (19.23). The Ephraimite expects that the four walls of his home will protect a guest who would be otherwise exposed to assault, should he have slept on the street. He insinuates that the web of brotherly relationships in Gibeah could be enough to dissuade the mob from attacking a fellow Israelite man. Rape of a man, especially a supplicant bound by fraternity and guest-host norms, would act as a "doubly potent symbol of acultural, non-civilized behavior from the Israelite point of view" (Niditch 369). Whereas sexual assault against women was built into the economy of the day, male rape threatened to destabilize the concept of fraternal relationships between patriarchs, and by extension the Israelite national community.

It is therefore an option utterly unacceptable to the Ephraimite. And so, even as he relies on male solidarity for protection, the Ephraimite makes a third, shocking play – a concession consistent with economic norms. The offer, if accepted, would serve as damage control, minimizing the crime of male rape (Jones-Warsaw 24). This is where the womanist principle of "the inherent value of each member of a community in the text" nuances the "dichotomy of wicked men/innocent women" perpetuated by individualistic readings (Gafney 2017, 8; Jones-Warsaw 27). Men in this setting exercise power over the lives of women, and yet that power is shaped by their economic, geographic, and kinship relations with other men. For example, the Levite is threatened with rape as a guest in the land of Benjamin and is defended as such by his protective host (19.22–23). The host, himself is an Ephraimite sojourning away from his tribal inheritance, working in the fields until dark (19.14–16). He is unable to simply reject the mob's demands on the body of the Levite because he wields no power over them in their geographic place. But since Beth-sheber and his own virgin daughter are present and under his authority, the Ephraimite is able to use them as a counter-offer. Womanist and materialist analysis can hold space for the interplay of complex dynamics, without denying one to acknowledge the other.

As we have seen, a *piylegesh* and virgin daughter are both inherently sexually available, to the extent that their male next-of-kin permit. In the ancient Near East, a man in debt could pledge as collateral his wife, children, "concubines," and *their* children, along with any other people he held in bondage (Lerner 90). Grasping for something of value, the Ephraimite offers his own daughter, along with Beth-sheber, to the mob. "Behold ... please let me bring them out and you humble them" (19.24). Nobody has demanded access to or even mentioned the young women at this point. He makes the deadly suggestion of his own accord, leveraging the bodies of the two women at his disposal.

The crowd does not reply to the Ephraimite's proposition, and says nothing else for the duration of the narrative. The narrator adds dramatic weight to their silence, declaring that they "have not been willing to listen" (19.25). For the first time in this encounter, the Levite is spurred to action.

The otherwise explicit text casts a smokescreen over his identity for this one act of betrayal. Referred to obscurely as “the man,” he takes hold of Beth-sheber, “his *piylegesh*,” and brings her outside to the men, who “know her and roll themselves on her all the night until the morning” (19.25). This whole night happens quickly from a textual perspective, in the span of one long sentence: the unwillingness to listen, the delivery of Beth-sheber, her rape, and her stagger back toward the house. She “falls at the opening of the man’s house where her lord is, until the light” (19.26).

When, in the morning, the Levite gets up, he finds Beth-sheber laying unresponsive at the house’s threshold. He loads her onto a donkey and takes her across tribal borders again to complete his journey (19.27–28). After arriving home, the Levite takes his knife, “butchers her to her bones,” and sends the twelve pieces throughout the countryside (19.29–30). Israel gathers and demands an explanation, joined later by a certain third grader in twenty-first century Texas.

Speak!

Reading Judges 19 through a hermeneutic of remembrance requires the use of what Kelly Brown Douglas calls a “moral memory.” Moral memories, she writes, “acknowledge the ways in which our systems, structures, and ways of being” – e.g., an economic system of human trafficking – “are a continuation of the myths, the narratives, the ideologies of the past” (Douglas 221). A moral memory takes into account the desperate situation a historical woman resembling Beth-sheber would have found herself in and looks for her in the present.

If as Douglas writes, “To have a moral memory is to recognize the past we carry within us,” the American reader of Judges has much to recall (122). It does not suffice to recite the names of those people lost to systems that enslave, kill, or subjugate. Nor does it suffice for a people to cry out to their rulers, “Stop the violence!” And so, prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba writes that “stop the violence” should sound more like “stopping the poverty, stopping the foreclosures, stopping police harassment, stopping the mass incarceration of black and brown bodies” (U.S. Prison Culture). The reader of Judges may add to Kaba’s list, stopping the abductions, stopping the pillaging, *stopping the rape, and stopping the societal use of women as sexual currency.*

A state’s response to harm is guided by the motives of its ruling classes, whether they be tribal patriarchs or congressional millionaires. Prisons and armies do not form in order for victims to heal. If justice-minded communities are to cut off violence at its root, materialist analyses are crucial in order to identify and “abolish the conditions under which prison [and war and sexual assault] became the solution” (Gilmore 176). Israel’s military response to Beth-sheber’s trauma and death never once deviates from its violent economic system or from the religious texts underpinning it. In fact, the horrors

she endures and the terror visited on thousands thereafter is appropriated to a political moral that seeks to justify centralized, punitive state power. Judges has no interest in critiquing the social hierarchies by which Israel's most vulnerable are brutalized. It aims to expand and enforce them.

In "Speak! What Judges 19 Has to Say About Domestic Violence," Gafney insists that it is "far past time" to "seriously engage ... the survivors and abusers in our midst – in our scriptures, congregations, and communities" (2015). Whereas punitive states address alleged violence by creating violence of their own (arrest, confiscation, deportation, execution, incarceration), the critical reader of Judges 19 may see things more clearly. A materialist analysis goes beyond merely crying out "Stop the violence!" to take a more compassionate and informed approach to violence of all kinds as an issue of collective well-being and public health. And in particular, it opens up new perspectives on the life, suffering, and resistance of Beth-sheber.

WORKS CITED

- Bal, Mieke. *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*. University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, 1989, pp. 139–67.
- Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. Orbis Books, 2015.
- Dunbar, Ericka. "For Such a Time as This? #UsToo: Representations of Sexual Trafficking, Collective Trauma, and Horror in the Book of Esther." *The Bible and Critical Theory*, 15, no. 2, 2019, pp. 29–48.
- Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Translated by Pat Brewer, Resistance Books, 2004.
- Exum, J. Cheryl. *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 1993.
- Gafney, Wil. "Speak! What Judges 19 Has to Say About Domestic Violence." *Sojourners*, 5 Oct. 2015.
- . *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Woman of the Torah and Throne*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. "Globalisation and US Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism." *Race & Class*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1998, pp. 174–88.
- Jones-Warsaw, Koala. "Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19–21." *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 22, Fall 1994, pp. 18–35.
- Kaba, Mariame. "Can We Please Bury 'Stop the Violence' as a Slogan? It's Meaningless." *U.S. Prison Culture*, 5 Oct. 2013.

- Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus, Penguin Books, 1973.
- National Sexual Violence Research Center (NSVRC). "Sexual Violence & Transgender/Non-Binary Communities." 2019.
- Niditch, Susan. "The 'Sodomite' Theme in Judges 19–20: Family, Community, and Social Disintegration." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3, July 1982, pp. 365–78.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter, Monthly Review Press, 1975, pp. 157–210.
- Schüsser Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Beacon Press, 1995.
- Smith, Mitzi. "Reading the Story of the Levite's Concubine Through the Lens of Modern-Day Sex Trafficking." *Ashland Theological Journal*, 2009.
- Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Fortress Press, 1984.
- Van Clief-Stefanon, Lyrae. "The Daughter and the Concubine from the Nineteenth Chapter of Judges Consider and Speak Their Minds." *Black Swan*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Weems, Renita J. *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*. Fortress Press, 1995.
- Yee, Gale. "Ideological Criticism: Judges 17-21 and the Dismembered Body." *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, edited by Gale Yee, Fortress Press, 2008, pp. 146–70.

It is All One Thing: Ecological Stewardship, Nativism, and the Solwara 1 Deep Sea Mining Project

By Anna Mayzenberg

The deep sea – any part of the ocean below 200 meters in depth – is largely unknown to humankind. For the creatures that live there, pressures are extreme, light is sparse if present at all, and food is rare. Until the 1960s and 70s, scientists believed the deep sea supported only a small population that survived on “marine snow,” a mixture of dying animals, fecal matter, and dust that floats down from the shallower waters. In 1977, everything changed. A hydrothermal vent was found 2,500 meters below the surface near the Galápagos Islands (Lubofsky). Hydrothermal vents, like hot springs, expel hot mineral-rich water that supports life despite inhospitable conditions. Biologists investigated further, discovering hundreds of previously unknown species.

While this unprecedented research was thrilling and uncovered new resources, it also increased human interest in exploiting the deep sea as enabled by technological advancement. This prompted key questions about the value of the deep sea with profound implications for its conservation. Should the value of the deep sea be understood in terms of its extractible resources and their commercial utility? Or does the deep sea have value in and of itself? Who decides? This article engages these questions as they pertain to deep-sea mining. To do so, it examines two approaches to deep sea sustainability and the cultures in which they are grounded.

Deep-sea mining, a nascent industry, seeks to supplement resources available through land mining by retrieving minerals from undersea hydrothermal vents and polymetallic nodules that are millions of years old. Between 2007 and 2019, the deep seabed off Papua New Guinea’s [PNG’s] New Ireland and Duke of York Islands nearly became the first testing ground for deep-sea mining processes. The populations of these islands are largely in-

digenous, with hundreds of different ethnic groups, clans, and languages. Tok Pisin is the most widely-spoken official language. The majority of Papua New Guineans identify with various Christian denominations, but many also hold to indigenous beliefs and practices (CIA).

In 2011, after several years of negotiation and lobbying, a Canada-based corporation, Nautilus Minerals Inc. [Nautilus], was granted an environmental permit and mining lease from the PNG government. They were thus positioned to initiate Solwara 1, the first large-scale deep-sea mining project. Nautilus boasted that their methods would have a lower environmental impact than land mining. Their Environmental Impact Statement [EIS] Main Report (published in 2009) claimed that their deep-sea mining approach would hold “no risk to daily subsistence and traditional local activities” for indigenous populations (144). The mining would happen at such depths, Nautilus claimed, that it would have no impact on local people who relied only on environments nearer the surface.

However, Nautilus failed to understand the sentiments of local indigenous populations. The company did not manage to assuage their environmental concerns. Many locals felt that Nautilus did not respect their cultural understanding of the sea, according to which there was no clear distinction between the deep sea and the surface waters. Some felt that Nautilus did not comprehend the stakes: “They think that it will not affect people like other mining but it does! [...] when they mine this seabed, they mine our culture!” (Childs 120). In 2019, plagued by government delays and financial issues caused in part by community resistance, Nautilus filed for bankruptcy and suspended the Solwara 1 project.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its suspension, Solwara 1 offers a telling case study in which the cultural presumptions of a Western corporation come into conflict with the belief systems of the indigenous people from whom it seeks consent. What emerges is a failure to communicate between stakeholders. Nautilus’ profit-driven sustainability model understood the value of the deep sea in terms of its resources, while indigenous sustainability models insisted on the inherent value of the deep sea.

The theoretical frame for this article’s discussion of the tensions that contributed to the failure of Solwara 1 is provided by environmental philosophers Freya Matthews, Clare Palmer, and Carolyn Merchant, who interrogate Western perceptions of the environment and how they interfere with conservation. The analysis is also informed by work on the cultural implications of mining in PNG by cultural anthropologist Martha Macintyre and political ecologist John Childs.

The Case Study

At first, PNG's government was enthusiastic for deep-sea mining to begin in its waters, expecting an economic windfall for the nation. Excited by the prospect of mining that was intended to be less invasive and highly profitable, the PNG government pushed the project forward, investing over \$100 million dollars for a 15% equity stake in Nautilus (Filer et. al). While the PNG government looked forward to the revenues to come, concerned local communities had a different opinion.

Many believed Nautilus underestimated the potential environmental impact of its deep-sea mining plan and failed to properly consider its cultural impact. In 2009, coastal communities formed the Alliance of Solwara Warriors to oppose the project. As early as 2012, the year after PNG granted Nautilus a 20-year mining license, 24,000 Papua New Guineans signed a petition opposing Solwara 1. In 2017, coastal communities launched legal action against the PNG government, claiming that Nautilus had not provided enough information and that local communities had not given informed consent to proposed deep-sea mining (Natalie 2020). They cited several instances of negligence, including an unanswered letter from the Deep Sea Mining Campaign (an organization opposed to the project), requesting more detailed documents on EIS. The letter, written in 2012, requested the full oceanographic data set from the EIS, as well as studies of the metals that would be released and their effects on the food chain (Rosenbaum and Magun). Five years later, they had yet to receive a response. In addition to specific environmental criticism of Nautilus, community members spoke out on cultural grounds. According to a Deep Sea Mining Campaign source, one protestor asserted that it was "foreign to Melanesian culture to become so excited about giant machinery" because their "traditions protect community and nature" (Natalie 2017).

Nautilus defended its prior conduct, with the project's then CEO, Michael Johnston, characterizing the protestors as "a handful of professional activists" that were to be expected, because "you always get one or two people who jump up and down" (Davidson and Doherty). Nautilus claimed that it had been as transparent as possible. For a 12-month period (2007-2008) prior to the release of the EIS, it had conducted presentations at nearly a dozen Mining Warden's Hearings in seven PNG provincial capitals. Nautilus argued that it had used "formal (e.g., presentations, meetings, surveys and workshops) and informal (e.g., visits to villages in New Ireland and East New Britain provinces, leaflet and brochure distribution, face-to-face and telephone conversations, emails, or facsimiles)" methods to discuss Solwara 1 with local communities and its shareholders. (*Nautilus Minerals Niugini Limited Executive Summary* 39). On the basis of these efforts, EIS asserted that "support for the Project was generally strong," although it conceded several times that environmental concerns were expressed at most meetings (*Nautilus Minerals Niugini Limited* 40-41). For the sake of transparency, Nautilus provided a version of EIS that

was translated into Tok Pisin. In addition, it continued to hold consultation meetings so that, by 2016, the company approximated that 20,000 people in 46 PNG locations had been involved in “community engagement” (Filer and Gabriel 5).

Despite these efforts at community engagement, “Nautilus still lacked a single ‘local community’ from which it could claim to have obtained a social license” (5). Local protestors dampened PNG’s government enthusiasm for the project, and it gradually lost government and corporate investor funds necessary for its execution (Long).

Given the history of PNG’s exploitation by international mining concerns, local communities’ instincts to prevent deep-sea mining were not unfounded. Martha Macintyre researched the sociocultural impact of land mining in PNG over a period of approximately 30 years. Writing about informed consent in the context of mining, she details the ways local people often change their minds after having previously agreed to mining because “the benefits fail to meet their expectations, or the effects of environmental degradation become apparent” (56). Locals want to withdraw consent because they feel lied to, “accus[ing] the mining company or government of trickery.”

A particularly devastating example that justified local skepticism was the Ok Tedi Mine, which operated for about 20 years from the 1980s onward. Despite some concerns, the mine was not significantly resisted by locals: “Local Yonggom communities had initially been cautious about foreign mining interests. However, the local communities expected to benefit from the proposed development [...] The people’s expectations were especially high since a few jobs had previously been created during the exploration and construction phases” (Jell-Bahlsen and Jell 324). What fears local communities had (they heard about the possibility of pollution), they largely kept to themselves. As a community member from Dome Village said, “We were worried about our gardens and the river, but we had no idea how to fight against the mine, because we are not educated people.”

The Ok Tedi Mine was an environmental and sociocultural disaster. Forests and hunting grounds were negatively affected, which resulted in habitat loss and extinction of wildlife and plants. Large bodies of water were polluted which, in turn, polluted land used for gardening and farming (325). The loss of land, which was “the source of their subsistence” amounted to a loss of home. The result was the psychological trauma of feeling that the indigenous community’s identity and culture was being destroyed. Ok Tedi was not a standalone case; there are many others, including the infamous Porgera Gold Mine in Enga Province, “notorious for its corporate violence and human rights abuses” (326).

It is unsurprising, then, that local communities looked on Solwara 1 with skepticism. They understood that they would take on a greater share of the risks since their communities stood to be directly affected, and they

mistrusted Nautilus' assessment that those risks were minimal. Despite the potential economic benefits to the region, the communities worried that they and their natural resources would be exploited by government officials and an international corporation.

Two Models of Environmental Distancing

While Nautilus went to great lengths to gain the local community's informed consent for Solwara 1, it did not fully understand what it was asking for. To do so would require them to better grasp the relationship between the coastal indigenous people and the deep sea. The disagreement between the parties was amplified by the fundamentally different models of sustainability they were applying. Nautilus' view reflects what environmental ethicist Clare Palmer calls an "ecological stewardship model," while the indigenous coastal community's perspective accords with Freya Mathew's idea of a "nativism model."

The ecological stewardship model holds that it is humankind's responsibility to take care of nature. The concept of stewardship promotes sustainability and investment in nature, but, at the same time, is dangerously anthropocentric. For Palmer, ecological stewardship implies "that the natural world is a human resource, that humans are really in control of nature, [and] that nature is dependent on humanity for its management" (78). According to Palmer's analysis, the stewardship model has theological underpinnings. In Genesis 1:28, for example, it is written that "God blessed [mankind] and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" Here, God bestows the earth and the sustenance it provides upon humankind with the direction that they are to have dominion over it. The notion is affirmed in the next chapter: "the Lord God [...] planted a garden in the east, in Eden ... [and] made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground" (Gen. 2:8-9), after which He "took [...] man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Gen. 2:15). The Book of Genesis thus reiterates the idea of stewardship (even if the word itself is not explicitly used): nature and its resources are God-given, as is the duty to care of them.

If the origins of the stewardship model were theological, it was galvanized by secular thinking. In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, ecofeminist philosopher Carolyn Merchant points out that "Roman writers such as Ovid, Seneca, Pliny, and the Stoic philosophers" conceived of nature as a "living organism" and a "nurturing mother" (3). And while "the idea of dominion over the earth existed in Greek philosophy and Christian religion," it did not begin to "spread beyond the religious sphere and assume [...] ascendancy in the social and political spheres" until "the economy became modernized and the Scientific Revolution proceeded," with new technologies and a focus on rationality. Merchant argues that environmental health has declined as logic, order, and mechanism have become ascendent.

Secular stewardship models characterize nature as wild and unpredictable, to be controlled, restrained, and exploited through the ingenuity and to the benefit of humankind.

The nativism¹ model, by contrast, perceives humanity to be part of nature, and nature to be integral to humanity. Humanity is “in a very obvious [...] sense [...] entirely part of, and dependent on, the natural world” (Palmer 78). Environmental philosopher Freya Mathews writes that to be native to nature “is to by-pass, to a degree, the mind-matter dualism of the Western tradition. For one cannot regard the identity of human beings as set apart from the [natural] world on account of some kind of mentalistic attribute which the rest of reality categorically lacks” (3). In other words, nativism models of sustainability situate human beings as extensions of the earth, rather than imposing an abstract, imagined boundary between humankind and nature. This integral interconnectedness of humans and the natural world extends to all aspects of nature, as well. Nativism models of sustainability understands damage to any part of nature as damage to the whole. Accordingly, environmentalism is not seen as a “societal chore,” as Mathews implies stewardship sees it (12). When individuals consider themselves to be a part of nature, they instinctively take care of it, as they would themselves.

While both stewardship and nativism models support sustainability, nativism is less anthropocentric. Rather than claiming dominion over nature, it understands human and environmental concerns as indistinguishable. This concept is a clear stumbling block in Nautilus’ understanding of local concerns regarding Solwara 1. The language of the EIS is steeped in the categorical logic of the stewardship model of sustainability. So, as the EIS emphasizes the importance of minimizing damage to hydrothermal vents and surrounding environments, its phrasing forces a distinction between the surface waters and the deep sea. Indeed, the EIS interprets the concerns of locals in a way that implicitly distances them from the deep sea rather than considers them native to it:

Within PNG, the local coastal people have expressed most concern for the quality of the marine environments and the protection of the reefs and fisheries upon which they depend, as well as on the well-being of the larger animals that are present such as whales, sharks and turtles. The maintenance of health of the marine environment is not

¹ This article’s use of “native” should not be confused with the colonial use of the term, with its racialized and racist implications. Nor should “nativism” be understood to imply the essentialist logic of racialized nationalisms. Nativism here implies a sustainability model that conceives of humans as “native to nature.” That is to say that humans, despite their best attempts to deny it, originate from and remain inextricably part of the natural world.

a matter for negotiation, and the project must demonstrate that shallow water animals are not exposed to the mineralised materials of the seafloor to which they have not adapted, so that *there is no risk to daily subsistence and traditional local activities*, such as shark calling (Nautilus Minerals Niugini Limited Executive Summary 23).²

Working in the stewardship model, Nautilus showed some commitment to conserving the environment they hoped to mine. As Palmer argues, stewardship models link “the natural world [...] to money and resources” (Palmer 72). Nautilus’ investment in the natural world and its preservation focuses on maintaining resources for future use and profit. In doing so, they impose the same logic on local populations, framing their concerns as limited to the effects deep-sea mining will have on the surface waters that feed them and to which they are culturally tied. Nautilus, in other words, places locals in a stewardship model that conserves the environment because it benefits human beings to do so, rather than for the sake of the environment as a whole.

Nautilus does not grasp the profound sense of connection indigenous people who resisted Solwara 1 feel to the deep sea and the rest of the natural world. The focus on surface waters fails to address the ways the deep sea is also a part of indigenous cultural identity. Indeed, EIS’ engagement with the cultural significance of the deep sea is superficial. The “Cultural Heritage” discussion of the EIS Main Report (comprising a small section of a single page), primarily discusses World War II artifacts that were already mostly “removed, disturbed, or destroyed” when nearby Port Rabaul was built (118). Cultural significance is here almost exclusively ascribed to man-made artifacts, while the cultural significance of nature itself is only cursorily engaged. In an entire chapter on the socioeconomic implications of their project, Nautilus fails to mention any kind of cultural impact outside of the potential disruption of local shark-calling activities.³ By its logic, indigenous people would be culturally unaffected largely “because the Solwara I mining area [was] located offshore” (172, 125).

Indigenous protestors themselves struggled to express their profound connection to the deep seabed throughout their resistance to the Solwara 1 project. The cultural differences and the challenges of communicating a nativism model to a corporation operating under a stewardship model proved

² My italics.

³ Shark-calling is a traditional way of snaring sharks practiced by the Malanggan people of New Ireland. The ritual has specific guidelines, from the chant spoken while building the canoe to the coconuts rattled to attract the shark. It is seen as a coming-of-age practice for young men as they enter into adult Malanggan society (Messner 52-59).

difficult to overcome. As part of a study of PNG deep-sea mining, environmental researcher John Childs interviewed the Tolai people using innovative methods that encouraged them to effectively communicate their concerns. Childs writes:

Sitting at a kibung at the beginning of a 2-year research project, over 200 people representative of the Duke of York Islands weighed up how they perceived the risks of deep-sea mining. ‘The thing is,’ began a clan leader, ‘Nautilus doesn’t understand how we visualise the sea,’ Another fisherman continued that ‘I don’t understand why they call [this project] Solwara 1. We don’t divide the sea up into different numbers. It is all one thing’. After much debate, the discussion of community members, which lasted over four hours, centered on the question of how to demonstrate a worldview which stands in opposition to the claims of ‘sustainable’ deep-sea mining. (120)

While Nautilus painstakingly made the case for the sustainability of their approach, indigenous protestors disagreed with something as fundamental as Nautilus’ understanding of the sea. The Tolai people and Nautilus were having different conversations.

This communication barrier is even more apparent in a female elder’s observation that scientists often “come here and tell us that this mining will be sustainable [...] tell(ing) us how the ocean works, that it has volcanoes and things like this. But we already know this! Our beliefs go back many years before these scientists came here” (124). Explaining the deep sea to Tolai people in the language of science has no bearing on their understanding of its value (123). Tolai cultural beliefs include spirits such as “Tamaidok [...] frequently described as a ‘volcano god’ who ‘defends the seabed’ and is a ‘protector of the seabed’s treasures.’” Damage to these spirits is at the root of Tolai concerns about deep-sea mining. They espouse a concept, “Graun,” which speaks to the interconnectedness between spirits, individuals, and nature. Damage to one element is damage to all of the others. Thus, when Nautilus representatives come to local villages to discuss mining, not only do the locals speak a different language (literally and conceptually), but their perception of themselves relative to the deep sea is profoundly different.

As environmental humanist Stacy Alaimo argues in “Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialisms, Posthumanism, and Unknown Futures,” emotional and spiritual interconnectedness with nature is only infrequently considered in science-driven sustainability models. Rarely do they make space for the religious or cultural implications of environments, holding instead to the universal truths and technological advancement promised by mathematical and scientific endeavor. These epistemological approaches are seen as un-

biased, neutral, and transcendent. It is important, however, to recognize that they are expressions of a particular cultural position. Not doing so, Alaimo argues, “obscures power differentials, political differences, and cultural values, for it relies on an epistemology that divides subject from object [and] knower from known” (560).

Such power differentials are evident in the way science-based sustainability models disregard the insights of indigenous stakeholders. Locals, with vast generational knowledge of their environment, could revolutionize sustainability approaches, but mostly lack the scientific training to prove and/or communicate the value of their belief systems and practices to Western partners (560). In assuming that objectivity and precision are the only priorities, sustainability science shuts out the people who have much to contribute with a vested stake in doing so.

As much as Nautilus claimed to “listen” to local communities, they still privileged the findings of their own EIS that the risk of environmental damage was low. The objectivity and technicality of these assessments – based on “average sedimentation rates” or “Phase I ... GHG emissions” (*Nautilus Minerals Niugini Limited* 83, 189) – overrode the language of the community members, which was grounded in religious or cultural associations. Childs’ study reveals the local opposition to the “hard facts” by which Nautilus justified the sustainability of Solwara 1.

Many of Childs’ participants created artistic representations of their connection to the sea through sculpture and drawings. One piece of art [see fig. 1] repurposed the three layers into which Nautilus had divided the ocean in its community engagement presentations.

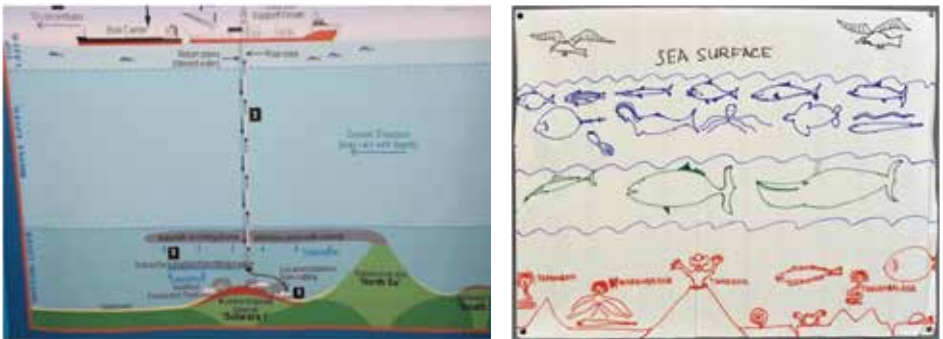


Fig 1. Nautilus’ educational representation of the deep sea and Tolai artist’s response (Childs 123)

According to Nautilus, the top layer, closest to the surface, is the epipelagic zone. The middle layer – at a depth of between 200 and 1,000 meters – is the twilight zone. Everything below that, Nautilus perceives as the deep sea. In the Tolai artist’s repurposing, the top two layers were populated with various

unlabeled sea animals. In the third layer, at the deepest depths, various labeled gods intermingled with the sea creatures. Some of the gods were drawn as sea creatures with human faces that reflect the indistinguishability of humans and the deep sea. While Nautilus' presentations to the Tolai had tried to convey to them that these depths were largely unpopulated, the artist rejected that assertion, filling the space (122-123).

In Childs' opinion, this kind of art appeared to be the Tolai community's best way to "forcefully assert the perceived threats posed by deep-sea mining" (Childs 124). They chose it not only to communicate to one another, but out of the conviction that outsiders like Nautilus needed to "see [their] culture and how it is being threatened" (Childs 124). In other words, in their attempt to create a relatable piece of work to convince a North American, Western company that their beliefs mattered, the Tolai turned to artistic expression in opposition to restrictive and technical scientific jargon. Not only were they unwilling to distance themselves from the deep sea, but they were doing everything they could to bring the rest of the world into their way of understanding.

This is not to say that the Tolai and other indigenous peoples did not attempt to understand Nautilus' scientific discourse or that they made no effort to communicate with Nautilus in its own language. Richard Steiner, an environmental consultant, was hired to review Nautilus' EIS independently to better understand the specifics of sustainability in deep-sea mining (Long). Steiner acted as a middleman in this complex situation. Of course, the communities and protestors who hired him had their own cultural reasons to oppose deep-sea mining, but they hoped consultation with trained scientists would garner them greater respect from Nautilus. Nor was Steiner their only attempt to communicate through Nautilus' more technical language. Organizations like the Deep Sea Mining Campaign published critiques of the EIS and the Solwara 1 project with such titles as "Accountability Zero: A Critique of the Nautilus Minerals Environmental and Social Benchmarking Analysis of the Solwara 1 Project" and "Why the Rush? Seabed Mining in the Pacific Ocean." These documents addressed not only EIS' neglect of Solwara 1's cultural impact but also the substantial environmental impacts that Nautilus failed to consider.

In the end, the communication barrier could not be overcome, as the sides struggled to understand each other's closeness to or distance from the deep sea.

Implications

Nautilus' inability to fully comprehend the perspective of the indigenous PNG communities on the deep sea, despite all of its attempts to communicate with them, is representative of a larger issue. The corporation's tendency to value natural objects on the basis of their commercial or scientific

importance is rooted in the Western ecological stewardship model, which imposes psychological distance between humans and nature. High profit projections and the prestige of leading the first deep-sea mining venture meant that Nautilus pushed forward despite local communities' clear issues and concerns. Nautilus understood itself to have done the research, shared the information with the public and worked to minimize its known impact on the lives of PNG's indigenous people. However, they failed to acknowledge a crucial blind spot: a Western corporation mining in the waters of a Pacific Island nation does not necessarily know best, regardless of its prodigious scientific research. In PNG, Nautilus sought the voices of indigenous people but disregarded them when they became inconvenient to the project. This is an ethical failure. Proceeding without the informed consent of indigenous communities should not be an option, regardless of how strongly a corporation believes in the feasibility of its project.

The deep sea presents a challenge for conservationists seeking to protect it against profit-driven industries. They must articulate the value of a sparsely populated space that has historically been described in the language of science as a wasteland. Reconceiving the deep sea according to nativism perspectives that place the human world in close conversation with the seabed might allow conservation groups to articulate the inherent value of the seabed to skeptical audiences. Such a shift in perspective could even reveal new and surprising ways in which the seabed can benefit humankind, a discovery that ecological stewards would value.

Humanity is new to the deepest regions of the planet. As we learn more about the significance of the deep sea and develop strategies for its conservation, it is vital that nativists and stewards respect and learn from one another's beliefs. If they fail to do so, both will be left unhappy in the long term, when the environmental damage is already done.

WORKS CITED

- Alaimo, Stacy. "Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialisms, Posthumanism, and Unknown Futures." *PMLA*, vol. 127, no. 3, 2012, pp. 558–564., www.jstor.org/stable/41616846. Accessed 14 Oct. 2020.
- The Bible: New International Version*. International Bible Society, 1984.
- Childs, John. "Performing 'Blue Degrowth': Critiquing Seabed Mining in Papua New Guinea through Creative Practice." *Sustainability Science*, vol. 15, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 117–29.
- CIA. "Papua New Guinea." *The CIA World Factbook*, Skyhorse Publishing, 2021.
- Davidson, Helen, and Ben Doherty. "Troubled Papua New Guinea Deep-Sea Mine Faces Environmental Challenge." *The Guardian*, 11 Dec. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/12/troubled-papua-new-guinea-deep-sea-mine-faces-environmental-challenge>.

- Filer, Colin, et al. "How PNG Lost US\$120 Million and the Future of Deep-Sea Mining" *DevPolicy Blog*, <https://devpolicy.org/how-png-lost-us120-million-and-the-future-of-deep-sea-mining-20200428/>. Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
- Filer, Colin, and Jennifer Gabriel. "How Could Nautilus Minerals Get a Social Licence to Operate the World's First Deep Sea Mine?" *Marine Policy*, vol. 95, Sept. 2018, pp. 394–400.
- Jell-Bahlsen, Sabine, and Georg Jell. "The Trans-National Gold Curse of Papua New Guinea." *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 36, no. 3/4, Springer, 2012, pp. 317–41. JSTOR.
- Long, Marcy Trent, et al. "Podcast: The Damaging Failure of Seabed Mining in Papua New Guinea." *Chinadialogue Ocean*, 15 Nov. 2019, <https://chinadialogueocean.net/11653-solwara-1-nautilus-seabed-mining-podcast/>.
- Lubofsky, Evan. "The Discovery of Hydrothermal Vents." <https://www.whoi.edu/>, 11 June 2018, <https://www.whoi.edu/oceanus/feature/the-discovery-of-hydrothermal-vents/>.
- Macintyre, Martha. "Informed Consent and Mining Projects: A View from Papua New Guinea." *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 1, *Pacific Affairs*, Spring 2007, pp. 49–65.
- Mathews, Freya. "Becoming Native: An Ethos of Countermodernity II." *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1999, pp. 243–71.
- Merchant, Caroline. *The Death of Nature*, Wildwood House, 1980.
- Messner, Gerald Florian. "The Shark-Calling Ceremony in Paruai, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea." *The World of Music*, vol. 32, no. 1, [Florian Noetzel GmbH Verlag, VWB - Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Bärenreiter], 1990, pp. 49–83.
- Natalie. *Nautilus Machines Will Wreak Havoc | Deep Sea Mining: Out Of Our Depth*. 29 Sept. 2017, <http://www.deepseaminingoutofourdepth.org/nautilus-giant-seabed-mining-machines-will-wreak-havoc/>. Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
- Natalie. *PNG Communities Will Have Their Day in Court! | Deep Sea Mining: Out Of Our Depth*. 17 September 2020, <http://www.deepseamining-outofourdepth.org/png-communities-will-have-their-day-in-court/>. Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
- Nautilus Minerals Niugini Limited*. "Environmental Impact Statement: Solwara 1 Project. Volume A: Main Report." Coffey Natural Systems Pty Ltd, 2008.
- Nautilus Minerals Niugini Limited*. "Environmental Impact Statement: Solwara 1 Project. Executive Summary" Coffey Natural Systems Pty Ltd, 2008.

Palmer, Clare. "Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics." *The Earth Beneath*, SPCK, 1992.

Rosenbaum, Helen, and Wences Magun. "The Deep Sea Mining Campaign Writes to the PNG Government." *Deep Sea Mining: Out of Our Depth*, 18 Oct. 2013, www.deepseaminingoutofourdepth.org/letter-to-png-pm/.

Conversation with Environments: Frameless Aesthetics, Intersectionality, and the “America the Beautiful” Initiative

By Erin Satterwhite

Land artist pioneer Agnes Denes writes that an aesthetic engagement with nature highlights “what we already know against all that we have yet to learn” (Denes 929). For Denes, along with many environmental aesthetics philosophers, a “true” aesthetic experience means an embrace of the nonhuman world as a source of knowledge and beauty at odds with pervasive practices. All too often in the contemporary United States, aesthetic engagements with nature are limited by historical colonialist narratives, according to which the natural world is to be conquered, tamed, and exploited.

However, as environmental aesthetics philosopher Ronald Hepburn writes, “We are in nature and a part *of* nature; we do not stand over [and] against it as [we do] over [and] against a painting on a wall” (290). The idea that humans transcend nature and are at odds with it, that nature is humanity’s non-human “other,” is a fundamental misunderstanding with real-world implications beyond mere aesthetic appreciation. Rethinking aesthetic approaches to nature allows for aesthetic encounters in which neither humans nor nature are limited by the structural and hierarchical frames that separate them. Hepburn’s “frameless” aesthetic allows for multiple, varied, intersectional approaches to policymaking in a time of environmental crisis.¹

¹In this essay, I adopt philosopher Carolyn Merchant’s definition of the term “nonhuman community,” as used in her book *Reinventing Eden*. For Merchant, “nonhuman communities” encompass all living species on Earth that do not belong to the species of *homo sapiens*. A nonhuman community could be a particular estuary ecosystem in North America or the taiga forest in northern Russia. In this essay, I seek to distance my language from traditional “othering” of nonhuman communities by grouping them all into “the natural world” while effectively isolating *homo sapiens* outside of that categorization.

Othering and the Environment

Reinforced by the narratives that justified expansionism and exceptionalism, American environmental policymaking has tended to “other” the natural world, including certain human communities deemed not to have “transcended” their “natural” state.² “Othering,” as it is used here, is meant to suggest the process of defining individuals, groups, or entities, as being socially subordinate, excluded from the mainstream social norms (Merchant 620). The act of othering has long been a tool to reinforce social structures (the “norms”) that serve the powerful by relegating anyone else to the outskirts of culture. The environmental effects of such practices are not limited to the United States and are evident across the globe.

Scientific data shows that “75-80% of the effects of climate change will be felt by the global South / two-thirds of the world, and those effects are most harsh because material poverty means weaker infrastructures of support for housing, clean water, food security, health care, and disaster preparedness / response” (Gaard 23). In the United States, landfills, pollution, and toxic waste are routinely imposed on majority-minority neighborhoods or on American Indian reservations: typically, wherever property values are low, areas disproportionately home to Black and indigenous people of color. The environmental degradation of such areas lowers property values further, resulting in less business and infrastructure investment. The people in such neighborhoods often suffer terrible disparities in air quality, health care, amenities, employment, and access to healthy nutrition. They become stuck in cycles of environmental racism.

Those privileged by American Colonialist Narratives are less likely to be *subject to* their environments – manmade or natural. The narrative elevates those it privileges above the (rest of the) natural world. Through this act of othering, human communities in power are also stuck in a cycle: they declare their civilization’s dominion over the (rest of the) natural world, enact their domination, and in so doing, justify declaring their civilization’s dominion over the (rest of the) natural world. As environmental historian William Cronon writes, “to the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles” (25). Clearly, such a hubristic dichotomy would be a liability for anyone seeking to address escalating environmental crises through policy implementation.

²For more on American expansionism and exceptionalism, see Carolyn Merchant’s *Reinventing Eden: the Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (2004), or “the father of environmental justice” Robert Bullard’s *Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement* (1993).

And yet, as Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus have argued in their article “The Death of Environmentalism,” America’s environmental policy has mostly failed in part because politicians do not “question their most basic assumptions about the problem and the solution” (122). Proposed solutions too often privilege those already in positions of economic advantage. For example, the government incentivizes SUV-makers to decrease emissions and increase the miles per gallon output of their products but is disinterested building a robust public transportation infrastructure that might also provide mobility for less privileged communities. As Shellenberger and Nordhaus point out, “in the face of perhaps the greatest calamity in modern history, environmental leaders are ... selling technical solutions like fluorescent light bulbs [and] hybrid cars” (127). Such policies seem more interested in driving the development of consumer products for the economically advantaged, than they are in creating solutions actually needed by “othered” human and non-human communities. Environmental policymakers, disconnected from the (rest of the) natural world, stuck inside frames that privilege technical, humanmade approaches over the natural, lack the intersectional perspectives to provide anything but narrow solutions.

Environmental Aesthetics and the “Frameless”

It is not that those privileged by the colonialist narrative are unable to “appreciate” nature, but that they do so from afar, as though nature need have no impact on human lives beyond the aesthetic. As Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo write, this reduces their understanding of environmental issues to a “frame of pristine wilderness while blinding them to issues in environments where people live” (541). DeLuca and Demo’s “frame” not only separates the privileged human from the (rest of the) natural world but also cannot see that any human is subject to it. This has the effect of denying the connection between environmental degradation and the conditions disadvantaged humans must endure. The singular perspective of the privileged displaces the diverse and intersectional approaches “other” human and nonhuman perspectives could bring to the discussion. In other words, the frame must be reimagined.

Ronald Hepburn’s concept of “framelessness” seeks to dismantle the pervasive human / nature dichotomy. His 1966 essay, “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty” is one of the most influential pieces of writing about aesthetics to come out as the environmentalism movement was gaining steam in the latter half of the 20th century. Hepburn argues that artists, in their representations of natural beauty, typically impose formal limitations that undermine rather than heighten a viewer’s aesthetic appreciation of the natural world. For him, part of nature’s beauty is that it cannot be contained by formal limitations, that it is, in other words, “frameless.” He argues that a “truer” aesthetic encounter “take[s] pleasure in sheer plurality, in the

stars of the night sky, in a birdsong without beginning, middle or end” (“Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature” 199).

A realist landscape painting might offer us a beautiful, idyllic meadow scene, yet by its very nature, it freezes what it represents in time and surrounds it with a frame. It is confined within the boundaries that the artist has placed on it. However, the landscape itself (as opposed to the landscape painting) is constantly changing. A moment after the painting was completed, thunderclouds may have arrived on the horizon, perhaps prompting the artist to pack her watercolors and easel, dramatically altering her visual, sensory experience. And yet the painting does not convey what nature is doing or will do. It captures and frames only what once was, and that through the trained eye and techniques of a human artist. Natural beauty, Hepburn suggests, defies the frame (the physical frame in this context, but also, in the abstract sense of established ideas regarding representations of nature within aesthetic philosophy): it lies in the natural world’s dynamic, changeable, unexpected, unknowable qualities.

We see the frame as both a physical boundary and ideological limitation in Thomas Cole’s *The Oxbow* (*The Connecticut River Near Northampton*) (1836) (Fig. 1). A founding member of the acclaimed Hudson River School of painting in 19th century New England, Cole specialized in pictorial represen-



Fig 1. Looking at Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)*, 1836, oil on canvas, 130.8 x 193 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

tations of wilderness as purity and sublime (Ziser and Sze 398). The Oxbow depicts the moment a thunderstorm begins to roll through a valley in a realistic, yet dramatic style, as Cole attempts to illustrate the sheer majesty of the natural world.

Clearly, Cole intended to convey the changeability of the natural scene. However, the moment of change is stalled, frozen on a canvas and separated from the rest of the world by its gilded frame. Hung in a brightly lit, temperature-controlled gallery in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the painting serves as a kind of “window” to nature set against a featureless wall. “Nature” is thus offset against an “unnatural” urban setting. Observer of the painting may recognize the brilliance of Cole’s colors and revel in the image’s composition, but they encounter a domesticated, plastic representation of a natural world from which they are isolated. The frame freezes nature in abstraction.

German contemporary environmental artist Nils Udo is less conventional in his use of the frame in *Pine* (2000) (Fig. 2).

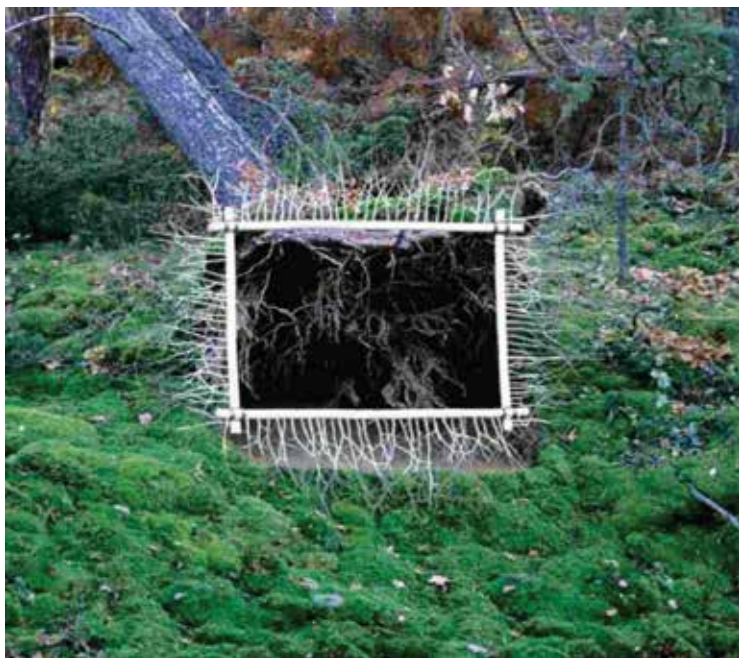


Fig 2. Udo, Nils. *Pine*. 2000, hazel stakes debarked and pigment print. France.

Udo’s pigment print, made of local, natural materials, renders the roots of an uprooted tree, in a way reminiscent of an X-ray. The print is surrounded by a frame that consists of stripped hazel twigs that further emulate the exposed roots. Even though Udo’s *Pine* employs natural, raw materials, the artist still feels the need to employ a frame as a way to set his artwork apart from its

setting. Admittedly, that setting is “natural.” However, the frame precludes his static representation of a root system from the changeable natural environment that surrounds it. Udo clearly seeks to blur the frames that separate the artistic representation of nature from nature itself; however, the effect is an inversion: the artwork is a frozen, abstract, “unnatural” interloper into a “natural” scene.

Cole and Udo, separated by centuries and from different art movements (Romanticism³ and Land Art, respectively), together suggest the ubiquity of frames as physical and ideological boundaries by which artists separate their (humanmade) artwork from the natural world. In each instance, they pull the observer’s eye to something they, as artists, find beautiful in nature (a rolling storm, a network of roots) by capturing, preserving, and distinguishing it from nature. As much as these art works evoke wonder, calm, awe, etc., they do not do so through an immersive experience of nature. Rather, their frames affirm the pervasively-held idea of the dichotomy between humans and nature.

Agnes Denes’ *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982) (Fig. 3) models a frameless and immersive approach to artistic engagement of the natural world.



Fig 3. Denes, Agnes. *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*. 1982, Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill, Manhattan. Commissioned by Public Art Fund.

³Some scholars might consider the Hudson River School, founded by Cole, an art movement in its own right. However, it is a largely accepted fact that it falls within the broader category of American Romanticism, which focuses largely on dynamic, glorious landscapes such as Cole’s in Fig 1.

Denes, one of America's first female environmental artists, planted two acres of wheat atop a landfill that resulted from the construction of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers. The wheatfield was planted in close proximity to Wall Street on a plot of land that was worth \$4.5 million at the time (Denes "Works: *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*"). At the center of New York's polluted, bustling New York financial district, Denes conceived of the piece as a commentary on ecological degradation, mismanagement, and world hunger (Denes 928). To plant her wheatfield in this quintessentially urban space was to treat New York City not as unnatural, but as a natural environment in its own right.

Wheatfield was frameless because it did not artistically represent the natural world so much as artistically enact it. The wheatfield changed from the sowing of the seeds to the harvesting of 1,000 pounds of golden grains. In addition, Denes did not remove herself from the piece. She sowed and harvested the wheatfield, or stood triumphantly in her healthy, billowing field with skyscrapers looming in the background. Her four-month-long experiment with *Wheatfield* models an aesthetic engagement with nature when we immerse ourselves in it.

Framelessness and Intersectionality

To experience the (rest of the) natural world as frameless is to conceive of the integral character of human relationships with each other (in all our diversity) and with the non-human. Here, frameless aesthetic experiences model an *intersectional* understanding with important implications for environmental policymaking.

"Intersectionality," a term attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw, was originally intended to nuance academic approaches to the distinct forms of violence to which African American women were subject. Crenshaw critiqued single-axis models of identity (for example, Black *or* female *or* unemployed *or* queer, etc.) because they failed to accommodate various entangled determinants of African American female identities (Black and a woman and a mother and an activist, etc.). Accordingly, the systems that oppressed African American women could no longer be understood singularly (racism *or* sexism *or* classism *or* homophobia). Rather, intersectionality allowed scholars to show the multiple, targeted, interrelated systems of oppression to which African American women were subject.

Since then, intersectionality has been applied to interrogate variously constellated identities and systems of oppression. It is helpful to picture intersectionality as a spiderweb: Each connection between strands represents the intersection of social categories like race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class; each interwoven spiral represents a different, wholly unique identity based on their social categorization (King 66). Intersectionality allows us to conceive of the ways all these categories and identities determine an individual's lived experience.

For the purposes of this argument, the concept of intersectionality can be used to think about the multiple determinants of human relationships and how they determine interactions with the (rest of the) natural world. Intersectionality, in other words, can “illuminate the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, disability, sexuality, caste, religion, age and the effects which these can have on the discrimination, oppression, and identity of people” (King 64) relative to the (rest of the) natural world.

Because of its flexibility, the idea of intersectionality can accommodate the heterogeneity of individuals and communities, human and non-human, and the dynamics between them that constitute the unframed natural world. In this way, a concept from environmental aesthetics, frameless encounters with the (rest of the) natural world, paves the way for an integrated approach that rejects the dichotomies (human/nature, self/other) that have plagued America’s social structures and environmental policymaking. To live in frameless relation to the (rest of the) natural world, in other words, is not to privilege particular perspectives, but to embrace their variety and their intersections.

Case study: The Rollout of “America the Beautiful”

Early on in the Biden-Harris administration, the Department of the Interior announced an initiative that promises to conserve thirty percent of U.S.’ public, private, and Tribal Nations’ lands and waters by the year 2030. It proposes a decade-long plan to combat the climate crisis through an arguably *frameless* approach. Its central tenet is the pursuit of “a collaborative and inclusive approach to conservation,” that puts (in many cases for the first time) the power to enact change in the hands of local “farmers, ranchers, forest owners, fishers, hunters, rural communities, and Tribal Nations” (“Report: America the Beautiful” 14).

As the name of the initiative suggests, it is explicit in grounding its intersectional approach in an aesthetic appreciation of nature. The great beauty of America’s natural environs is frequently foregrounded in the initiative’s proposal. It seeks to ensure that all Americans have equal access to immersive experiences of natural spaces, which it cites as being essential to individual and communal physical and aesthetic wellbeing (6). While aesthetically-relevant language is not a new phenomenon in environmental initiatives (countless conservation campaigns have emphasized the cuteness of endangered species or the majesty of landscapes), the Biden-Harris administration’s report is revolutionary in the ways it recognizes the necessity of multiple integrated points of view.

As part of the rollout of the initiative, the government released a video appropriately titled, “America the Beautiful,” featuring Ray Charles’ rendition of that song as a soundtrack. The video draws direct inspiration from

conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady's *Art Is...*, her photographic series taken at the 1983 African American Day Parade in Harlem. O'Grady and fifteen others participated in the parade on a float with *Art Is...* written on it. The performance's participants, including O'Grady herself, jumped on and off the float at various moments, holding an ornate gilded frame in front of different people watching the parade, even cops. O'Grady notes that the performance "made portraits of the people and landscapes of Harlem" (Hunt 21).⁴

As can be seen in stills from "America the Beautiful" (Fig. 4), the iconic golden frame is featured in a variety of landscapes and settings (both traditionally "natural" and humanmade).



Fig. 4. Stills taken from "America the Beautiful" via *YouTube*, uploaded by Joe Biden, 7 Nov. 2020, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJc_SRsbGS0&t=39s

Construction workers, multi-generational families, farmers, musicians, and many others engage with the frame in unique ways. Many use the frame around themselves as a way to create a self-portrait within their environment. Others frame a particular aspect of their setting.

Initially, it might seem that this piece complicates the concept of framelessness in environmental aesthetics. However, after posing for a moment to be captured within the frame (or to capture a particular vignette in the

⁴See O'Grady's website for a full gallery of *Art Is...* here: <https://lorraineogrady.com/art/art-is/>

landscape, in the case of the man in the bottom right of Fig. 4), each participant moves on. They pause, capture what they find aesthetically beautiful or important in that given moment, then bring the frame with them as they continue with their lives. The frame, it can be inferred, follows them everywhere they go, perhaps inert until they find another use for it. A more compelling interpretation, then, is that the frame serves as a symbol of their aesthetic sensibilities and of their inherent need to sensually immerse themselves into their environments, which of course includes other people. Carrying their aesthetic sensibilities with them, they can pause at any moment to focus on a particular aspect of their experience, not in order to capture it or to deny the rest of their immediate environment, but to appreciate the particularity of limitless, fleeting nature. As Ronald Hepburn notes, the beautiful reality of the environment is that it is constantly changing, presenting new opportunities to learn from it and our aesthetic engagement within it.

More than selling the American public on immersive aesthetics via *YouTube* videos, the initiative's frameless, intersectional approach is integrated into the language of its report. It recognizes, for example, the need to fight climate change "with the natural solutions that our forests, agricultural lands, and the ocean provide." The report thus honors the role the (rest of the) natural world must play in its recovery, as opposed to the technical, humanmade approaches of privileged, self-interested policymakers.

The report further distinguishes itself from approaches that othered human communities based on their perceived inability to "transcend" their natural state. It lauds the Tribal Natives as the wisest, most successful, respectful stewards of the country's environments.⁵ The report recognizes the historical injustices by which indigenous peoples were removed from their traditional lands. It seeks to rewrite federal legislation that excluded indigenous communities from large-scale environmental efforts, thereby denying them funding. Also prevalent in the report's language is its commitment to increasing access to immersive experiences of nature for those who suffer the effects of environmental racism, poverty, and exclusion from the outdoors in general. "America the Beautiful" seeks to reengage such communities with their environments by funding programs that give *them* agency.

The "America the Beautiful" report makes many compelling pledges. It is very encouraging that the proposed policy seeks to redress environmental racism based in a false human/nature dichotomy. It makes sense to do so by

⁵For more information, see the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report from 2019: "The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services," 2019, https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/2020-02/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policy_makers_en.pdf.

harnessing the rich wisdoms of both the human on non-human communities that have been discriminated against. The language of the policy proposal contained within the report shows what is possible when operating within a “frameless” mindset. That said, the report is, at most, a policy proposal. It needs fleshing out. The frameless, intersectional ethos it expounds has the potential to serve as a strong backbone for local and community-led efforts, and insofar as it cedes power to these communities, its success over the coming decade will depend on what is achieved by the many local groups it hopes to empower.

America’s future depends on the wisdom of those it has historically excluded. It is high time we recognized our mutual interdependence on each other and the (rest of the) natural world.

WORKS CITED

- “America the Beautiful”. *Youtube*, uploaded by Joe Biden, 7 November 2020, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJc_SRsbGS0&t=39s
- “Biden-Harris Administration Outlines ‘America the Beautiful’ Initiative.” *U.S. Department of the Interior*, 6 May 2021, www.doi.gov/pressreleases/biden-harris-administration-outlines-america-beautiful-initiative.
- Bullard, Robert. “Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement.” *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grass-roots*. South End Press, 1993.
- Cronon, William. 1995. The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature. *The New York Times Magazine*, August 13.
- DeLuca, Kevin, and Anne Demo. “Imagining Nature and Erasing Class and Race: Carleton Watkins, John Muir, and the Construction of Wilderness.” *Environmental History*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2001, pp. 541–560.
- Denes, Agnes. “The Dream.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1990, pp. 919–939.
- . “Works: *Wheatfield - A Confrontation*.” Agnes Denes Studio, www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works7.html.
- “Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad.” *The White House*, The United States Government, 27 Jan. 2021, www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/.
- Gaard, Greta. “Ecofeminism and Climate Change.” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 49, March-April 2015, pp. 20-33. <https://www.sciencedirect-com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/science/article/pii/S0277539515000321?via%3Dihub#bb0065>
- Hepburn, Ronald W. “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty.” *British Analytical Philosophy*, B. Williams and A. Montefiore (ed.), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

- . "Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature." *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Volume 3, Issue 3, July 1963, Pages 195–209.
- Hunt, manda. "Art Is...: Interview with Lorraine O'Grady," *Studio: The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine*, pp 21-24, Summer/Fall 2015.
- A.E. Kings. "Intersectionality and the Changing Face of Ecofeminism." *Ethics and the Environment*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2017, pp. 63–87.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*. Routledge, 2004.
- "Othering", *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Third Edition (1999), p. 620.
- "Report: Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful 2021." *U.S. Department of the Interior*, www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/report-conserving-and-restoring-america-the-beautiful-2021.
- Shellenberger, Michael, and Ted Nordhaus. "The Death of Environmentalism Global Warming Politics in a Post-environmental World." *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, p. 121
- Swanson, Lori J. "A Feminist Ethic That Binds Us to Mother Earth." *Ethics and the Environment*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2015, pp. 83–103.

After Strategic Invisibility: The Faith Practice, Monetization, and Exploitation of Vodou

By Lauren Rochelle

Take a trip down Westheimer Road, right into the very heart of Montrose¹, and you will find Voodoo Doughnuts. One of nine locations across the nation, the very first Voodoo Doughnuts was established in Portland, Oregon, by entrepreneurs Kenneth Pogson and Tres Shannon. Their website details “The Voodoo Doughnuts Story.” Its founders rented a “hole-in-the-wall” storefront to sell a mix of classic and “unconventional” pastry selections. They hosted “various ‘sideshow activities’ including legal weddings, concerts in the loft space atop Voodoo’s duct tape-muraled bathroom and weekly Swahili lessons.” This language serves to associate their venture with the unorthodox and the exotic, the ethos by which the donut shop justifies its name. Their merchandise features a caricature of a Voodoo practitioner with a feather-covered staff and a bone necklace (but also, to avoid controversy, it is a racially ambiguous caricature). Their menu includes pastries called the Voodoo bubble and the Voodoo doll. The founders of Voodoo Doughnuts, two white men, incorporate ill-informed associations with a living faith practice into their brand to entice and titillate buyers.

The exploitation and commodification of Vodou goes beyond the single example of a quirky donut chain. In 2009, Disney released *The Princess and the Frog*, their first film featuring a Black Disney Princess. Two years prior to the release of the film, Disney presented a collection of early concepts and songs at a shareholders meeting. Black media outlets responded with heavy criticisms over racist stereotypes (“Controversy Over *The Princess and the Frog*”).

¹Montrose is a Houston neighborhood known for its eclectic nature; it is seen as a hub for hipster culture, modern art, food, and nightlife.

In response, Disney re-wrote portions of the plot and character backstories and brought in Oprah Winfrey as a technical consultant. The antagonist of the film, Dr. Facilier, is described as a Vodou witchdoctor who uses dark loa (Vodou deities) to do his bidding (*Disney Wiki*). His character is constantly surrounded by skulls; they are on his hat, his business cards, above his workshop, etc. He turns the prince into a frog through a Vodou ritual sequence which features snakes, dancing Vodou dolls, and shrunken heads (*Friends on the Other Side*). Although the protagonists search for, and eventually find, a gentler, kinder Vodou practitioner to undo Dr. Facilier's spell, this does not sufficiently counteract the film's association of Vodou with darkness and evil. There are elements of death and trickery within Vodou's heterogeneous and complex history and practices, but Disney leans into tired stereotypes to titillate and thrill its largely white audience. Despite facing immense societal pressure to get the depiction of African Americans in this movie right, the iconography of Vodou, an African based faith practice, was still exploited.

Why, in an America that prides itself on religious tolerance, is Vodou the plaything of Donut shops and Disney movies? Are these examples of exploitation licensed by racist disdain for Black faith practices? The short answer is yes. However, the whole story is more complicated. Arguably, Vodou practitioners played a role in the commodification of the faith. This is not to suggest that its exploitation should be morally licensed. In this article, I will argue that it is important, if tricky, to maintain a distinction between the monetization of Vodou by its practitioners and its exploitation by outsiders. This distinction is complicated by the near impossibility of pinning down what, exactly, constitutes "authentic" Vodou practices because of the faith's underground history, lack of orthodoxy, and syncretic adaptability. By broadly tracing the history of Vodou's evolution from Dahomey to New Orleans, I will ask if it is possible to determine the propriety of its commodification, and if so, whose responsibility it is.

The term "Voodoo," as spelled most commonly in Mainstream America, is fraught with negative connotations. The colloquial phrase "Voodoo economics" is described in the Oxford English Dictionary as, "depreciative (originally and chiefly U.S.) an economic policy perceived as being unrealistic and ill-advised" ("Voodoo, n."). Richard L. Park, a white physics professor, coined the term "Voodoo science." He described it as a combination of, "pathological science, junk science, pseudoscience, and fraudulent science" (Park 14). In both instances, Voodoo is a derisive term. These associations are based in colonial-era racist assumptions. As Ina Fandrich writes,

the world was divided into Black and White, implying that Whites had distinct European histories and cultures worth studying, whereas the past of African nations was blurred into one amorphous,

‘primitive’ set of superstitions and jungle ‘fetish rites’ that had no historical evolution, all lumped into the dubious and usually derogatory term Voodoo. (“Yoruba Influences” 787–788).

The term Voodoo became so detached from the faith practice itself, that in 2012, twenty-five scholars and practitioners of Haitian Vodou signed a letter petitioning the Library of Congress to change its primary subject heading from “Voodooism” to “Vodou” (Ramsey 14). Vodou (the term and the faith practice) and Voodoo (the word and its associations) have distinct (if related) histories.

The etymological and cultural roots of Vodou can be traced to The Kingdom of Dahomey (what is now known as Southern Benin) and the Fon people. To the Fon, the word “*Vodu*” means spirit or deity, and their faith practice is called “*Vodún*,” the predecessor to Haitian and American Vodou. In “Vodún, Spiritual Insecurity, and Religious Importation in Benin,” Douglas J. Falen, outlines the basic tenets of the faith practices.

The main elements comprising Vodún are: a recognition of the influence of ancestors and spirits of nature in people’s success and misfortune, possession ceremonies honoring the deities, a sophisticated divination system predicting one’s fate and the will of the spirits, and the use of animal sacrifice and the offering of food and drink to thank the deities or to persuade them to take favorable action on one’s behalf. (455)

Crucially, the faith practice was not bound by a single orthodoxy. It was a “diverse assemblage of beliefs and practices” with no written rules or membership rites (Falen 455–456). The heterogeneity of Vodou’s origins speaks to a cosmology and faith practice that is flexible and reactive, and therefore able to accommodate a variety of influences.

The transatlantic slave trade affected the Fon and a myriad of other peoples in the region, fueling the diaspora of Vodún and its practitioners throughout the New World, earning Benin the moniker “exporter of Vodún” (Falen 460). Many Fon people were transported to Saint-Domingue (modern day Haiti), where they were forcefully stripped of cultural and personal identifiers: social structures, family ties, names, clothes. Many were forced to adopt French Catholicism. In fact, according to the slave codes of Saint-Domingue during French colonization, “slaves had to be baptized within the eight days after their arrival” (Laguerre 38). The syncretic origins of Vodún allowed many to sustain and cultivate traces of their home religions by adapting them to the New World.

Haitian Vodou was born out of the combination of Vodún and Catholicism. Catholic iconography took the place of African deities in worship

rituals, and the elements of blood, death, and sacrifice which can be found in Catholicism helped blend the two practices together. The ritual and ceremonial nature of Vodún was maintained in Vodou despite the incorporation of Catholic iconography and ideas. Such accommodations were permitted in the absence of written rules, with faith practices transmitted and evolving generationally through embodied performance. As Nathaniel Samuel Murrell writes, “Vodou[’s] core of beliefs ... are kept alive in their dance of life. ... In their religious dance, devotees serve the *lwa* (“divine spirits”) through rites and rituals for healing, spiritual guidance, and survival” (59).

These practices served as the basis for community for enslaved people in Haiti away from the eyes of their overlords. Enslaved peoples would often be punished if they were caught practicing any religion outside of the sanctioned form of Christianity. This necessitated what, for the purposes of this discussion, will be referred to as “strategic invisibility,” a space in which to claim and cultivate a cultural heritage of their own. It is through strategic invisibility that Vodou provided communal solace from the horrors of enslavement. It also allowed for the creation of an underground political and social structure, as showcased in the role Vodou played in the Haitian Revolution. One of the revolution’s early leaders was a known Vodou priest, Dutty Boukman, who held the largest ritual and political meeting at Bois Caïman, the historical site where the rebellion was planned. Boukman gave the signal that began the revolt in northern Saint-Domingue (Hurbon 27–28).

The Haitian Revolution, a bloody and successful slave uprising, lasted several years, sending Haitians and practitioners of Vodou fleeing to places like New Orleans (Foreman) where they would influence the faith practices of enslaved people in America. Because Dahomeyans were in the minority among the West African peoples who were initially brought to Louisiana, Vodún did not play as foundational a role. Enslaved people nevertheless carved out spaces of worship, drawing especially on Yorùbá, Kongo, and Bambara influences. When Haitian refugees arrived in America, their Vodou practices “merged” with ritual practice of Louisianan enslaved people (Fandrich “Yorùbá Influences,” 786). This is why, for example, American Vodou focuses on the spirits of the dead: these were the elements present in Congolese faith practices (785–786).

In addition to the influence of West African faith traditions, American Vodou was shaped by differing conditions of racial oppression. According to Fandrich, Vodou could not flourish in New Orleans as it did in Haiti; the island had a higher Black to White ratio and a looser social system which allowed it to thrive (785). Given Louisiana’s white majority, strategic invisibility proved a challenge, forcing slaves to abandon some of the spiritual complexity of their practices. So, while Haitian Vodou has an elaborate system of *lwa* or *loa* grouped into different religious rights, Louisianan Vodou has a relative lack of deities.

Voodoo, which in this article connotes Vodou's racist caricature, arises out of white outsiders' attempts to describe rituals and ceremonies they did not understand, thereby reflecting their own limited perspectives rather than the faith practices themselves. In fact, some of the associations that racist outsiders imposed on Vodou reflect anti-Catholic discourse, although it has also been argued that racist associations fueled anti-Catholic sentiment. As Lauren Working writes in, "Violating the Body of the Law: Cannibalism in Jacobean Political Discourse," cannibalism was at first associated with Native American tribal practices that denoted savagery and transgression distinct from the "civilized" West. As the Reformation gained steam, however, Protestant authorities labeled Catholics as cannibals who fed on the flesh of God (157–175).

White colonial writing about Voodoo clearly displays an overlap of anti-Catholic and racist associations. Hence, both Catholic and Voodoo practices were cast as occultic: spirit worship, death cults, blood drinking. One of the most famous accounts came from Spencer St. John, a British consul member from Brunei. In his 1884 book, *Hayti: or, The Black Republic*, he describes his view of Haitian Vodou practitioners, stating that there only two kinds; "those who delight in the blood and flesh of white cocks and spotless white goats at their ceremonies, and those who are not only devoted to these, but on great occasions call for the flesh and blood of the 'goat without horns,' or human victims," (John 185). Here, he represents Vodou as a cannibalistic and demonic practice, one that claims the lives of human victims.

Any elements of culture operating outside the boundaries of western social structures, particularly those stemming from Africa, were seen as distinctively primitive. It makes sense that an emissary from a British Protestant nation might have these stereotypes surrounding both the fundamental Black and Catholic nature of Haitian Vodou. Also, St John's visit to Haiti came after the Haitian Revolution. This massive slave revolt scared western colonial powers, and so St. John's account reflects this fear as he seeks to discredit Haitians and their religious, societal, and political practices.

Another racist perspective of Vodou comes from American journalist Lafcadio Hearn. In his report of a Vodou ritual in the Louisiana bayous of Lake Pontchartrain, he writes, "The light from a nearby pine knot torches ... lent 'a grotesqueness to their figures as curious as it was entertaining ... their shadows stretched out over the rushes and the reeds of the swamp, and their faces ... in effect looked wild enough to satisfy any lover of the wild and the mysterious'" (Gordon 767). While not steeped in anti-Catholic sentiment, Hearn's account is mired in racist stereotypes, most notably evident in the "exoticism" he describes. Hearn "others" the Vodou practitioners, implicitly claiming moral purity for "civilized" white people, by hypersexualizing and exoticizing their black bodies. He is scandalized but also entertained. Here, we see how exotification provides the basis for commodification and exploitation.

Vodou practitioners had good reason, then, to operate under a shroud of strategic invisibility. The shroud was a historical necessity which was maintained even after emancipation. What was a necessity, became a tradition. The ritual performances and spiritual practices were largely maintained out of the prying eyes of outsiders and oppressors.

This, however, was not always the case. Some Vodou practitioners did, in fact, “go public” with their faith tradition. They did so in an effort to monetize the tantalizing and scandalous associations western viewers imposed on Vodou. This monetization is enabled by the syncretic and flexible nature of Vodou, which adapted some of its rituals to appeal to the outsider’s gaze. Crucially, it must be understood that this monetized public Vodou is not an inauthentic, corrupted, or lesser form of the faith practice. Such a claim would depend on a “pure,” “original,” “ideal,” form of Vodou that, as the history above should suggest, never existed. Public Vodou is an almost inevitable product of the faith tradition’s syncretic flexibility. Simply put, Vodou incorporated capitalism.

In her 1982 article, “Authentic Voodoo is Syncretic,” Michelle Anderson details distinct “ritual” and “theatrical” forms of Haitian Vodou which she encountered in various locations, two of which, Mariani and Nansoucri will be discussed here. At Mariani, she observed a Vodou ceremony that took place before an audience of paying tourists. Anderson describes the performance, undertaken by a single woman, as:

tightly choreographed, allowing for the unexpected to occur (predictably) within a selective dramatic presentation of those aspects of voodoo which are palatable to the foreign audience. Simultaneously, it confirms the popular expectation of ‘scary voodoo’ with bloody spectacle and fire-handling, while enforcing a distance from the audience that disallows real transformation (inadvertent possession) (93).

The ritual at Nansoucri, by contrast, was community-based with Anderson and her small team the only outsiders. She details a ceremony filled with singing, dancing, and drumming, as well as philosophical debates with the elders about the state of Haiti. She writes that “[a]ll ages are present, and children are actively ‘practicing’ or imitating possession,” (98). Policemen were present. They greeted participants and took part in the discussions.

There is a clear distinction between the monetized “theatrical” Vodou of Mariani and the community-based rituals at Nansoucri. The practice at Mariani was highly dramatized and aims to entertain outsiders for capital gain. The practice at Nansoucri was centered around the community itself. It is important to recognize that, in both instances, the benefits of Vodou accrue to the faith practitioners themselves. This is a crucial recognition in determining the propriety of Vodou’s monetization.

At face value, then, I seem to be arguing that Vodou's monetization is appropriate only for insiders to the faith tradition. However, this is, in itself a complicated claim. Who determines the "authenticity" of a practitioner's faith? Is it possible to know who "truly believes" and who "acts the part"? The difference between Vodou and Voodoo hinges on this distinction, as can arguably be seen in the changing faces of America's most famous representative of the faith tradition, Marie Laveaux.

Marie Laveaux was born on September 10, 1801 in New Orleans, Louisiana to Charles Laveaux and Marguerite D'Arcantel, both free persons of color (Fandrich, *Mysterious Voodoo Queen* 152). Laveaux's parents were avid members of the Catholic church. Marie was baptized six days after her birth and maintained a close relationship with Catholicism throughout her life. There are numerous accounts of her near-daily attendance of mass, as well as her relationship with friar Père Antoine of St. Louis Cathedral (153).

How Laveaux became a practitioner of Vodou is unknown. Nevertheless, her version of the faith practice seemed to disregard strategic invisibility as she rose in prominence to become one of the most well-known Vodou priestesses in New Orleans. She would go on to monetize this reputation, accruing wealth from a diverse clientele, including white people. According to Carolyn Morrow Long, press coverage of Laveaux tended to "stress the interracial makeup of Marie Laveaux's congregation and clientele, saying that attendance at her meetings was often 'more white than colored' and that she made her fortune by serving the 'rich white folks'" (92).

Although she capitalized on white clientele, Laveaux's relationship with white people was ambivalent. Ina Fandrich writes that "[r]unaway slaves frequently credited their successful escapes to Laveaux's powerful charms. The white male press often contested the efficacy of Laveaux's spiritual work, accusing her of being nothing but a blasphemous fraud, yet nobody ever questioned her enormous popularity among all segments of society" (*Mysterious Voodoo Queen* 294). So, while Laveaux clearly catered to white audiences, she also practiced with the well-being and freedoms of her own community in mind. Her fame and notoriety allowed her to do the kind of charitable work for which she was admired:

[S]he always gave money to the poor, nursed the sick and terminally ill at Charity Hospital, and comforted prisoners on death row. The obituaries from 1881 praise her as the savior of countless victims of the recurrent yellow fever and cholera epidemics whom she healed as a nurse. From 1850 on she is said to have made daily trips to the Parish Prison providing food and spiritual support for the incarcerated. (165-166)

This is one image of Marie Laveaux: The Vodou queen, a dedicated Catholic with wavering loyalty to her white clientele and a deep investment in charity work.

However, there are more faces (literally) to Marie Laveaux. The first Marie Laveaux [Marie I] gave birth to her eldest daughter, Marie Eloise Euchariste Glapion [Marie II], in 1827 (158). As she grew up, Fandrich writes,

[t]his daughter must have resembled her mother in a striking manner and followed her footsteps on the [Vodou] path. Building on her mother's reputation, she also called herself 'Marie Laveaux.' We know that, at some point, Marie Laveaux I retired from her leadership role and her daughter took over her position as the 'reigning Queen of the Voodooos.' (159).

Marie II's reign was very different to that of her mother. She was not, for example, as devout a Catholic as her mother. In addition, she was more likely to exploit black bodies than she was to help or support them. Allegedly, Marie II used her mother's "Maison Blanche" (great white house) on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain as a site for large [Vodou] ceremonies and as a brothel. Fandrich quotes Robert Tallant: "There, for a fee, she would arrange appointments for white men with mulatto or quadroon girls. This was really carried to its epitome of notoriety by Marie II, but certainly Marie I started it" (163–164).

Regardless of Marie I's culpability, Marie II seems to have fully embraced a capitalist ethos at the expense of community-mindedness: "The stories that portray Marie essentially as a charitable figure probably refer to the elder widow Paris [Marie I], while, most likely, the stories that stress Marie's primary interest in sex and money point to the younger Eucharis Glapion" (186). Arguably, then, Marie II marks a shift from Vodou to Voodoo, from community faith practice to the exploitation of "sexualized," "sinful" black bodies. Although we have no way of ascertaining the depth of Marie II's faith or her belief in the rituals she facilitated, it is reasonable to infer that Marie II was simply "acting out the part" of a Voodoo priestess, an insider by association rather than out of actual loyalty.

Here, we find ourselves at the heart of the dilemma. While it is necessary to maintain the distinction between monetization and exploitation, it is impossible to determine if those who profit from Vodou do so from a place of "authentic" faith. This is further complicated because the flexible and syncretic nature of the faith practice resists orthodoxy: each practitioner's relationship to Vodou is unique, unbound by rules, membership rites, or oversight. There is no definitive answer, then, to the question with which I began this article: is it possible to determine the propriety of Vodou's commodification? In its more intimate manifestations, the line between monetized and exploited Vodou cannot be determined by outsiders and may be up to the conscience and self-awareness of the practitioners. As an outsider myself, I do not claim this authority.

It is easier, however, to recognize the difference between intimate, localized, monetization of a faith practice and the corporate exploitation of the racist, derisive stereotypes that have become associated with it. We may, at most and qualifiedly, infer the poor faith by which Marie II capitalized in Marie I's complicated legacy. There is little doubt, however, that it is highly inappropriate for profit-driven global corporations to misrepresent a faith tradition. We may wonder whether or not a performer of theatrical Vodou rites *actually* believes, but it is glaringly exploitative to reduce a faith tradition to a set of ill-informed quirky, exotic associations to enhance donut sales.

The distinction between intimate Vodou practices and corporate exploitation of Voodoo is important. In the end, Voodoo stereotypes reveal more about the biases and fears of their perpetrators than they do about the religion they claim to describe. Vodou practices, by contrast, deserve respect and to have space held for them whether they are monetized or not.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Michelle. "Authentic Voodoo Is Synthetic." *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1982, pp. 89–110.
- "Controversy Over 'The Princess and the Frog.'" *Essence*, <https://www.essence.com/news/critics-dispute-princess-and-the-frog/>. Accessed 27 Apr. 2021.
- Desmangles, Leslie G. "Replacing the Term 'Voodoo' with 'Vodou': A Proposal." *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2012, pp. 26–33.
- Dubois, Laurent. "Vodou and History." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2001, pp. 92–100.
- Falen, |Douglas J. "Vodún, Spiritual Insecurity, and Religious Importation in Benin." *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2016, pp. 453–483.
- Fandrich, Ina Johanna. *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: a Study of Powerful Female Leadership In Nineteenth-century New Orleans*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- . "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2007, pp. 775–791.
- Foreman, Nicholas. "The History of the United States' First Refugee Crisis." *Smithsonian Magazine*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-united-states-first-refugee-crisis-180957717/>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2021.
- Gordon, Michelle Y. "'Midnight Scenes and Orgies': Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy." *American Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 4, 2012, pp. 767–786.
- Hurbon, Laënnec. "Haitian Vodou, Church, State and Anthropology." *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1999, pp. 27–37.

- Laguerre, Michael. "The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1973, pp. 36–50.
- Long, Carolyn Morrow. "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo: Sin, Fraud, Entertainment, and Religion." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2002, pp. 86–101.
- Murrell, Nathaniel Samuel. *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*. Temple University Press, 2010.
- Park, Robert L. *Voodoo Science: The Road from Foolishness to Fraud*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.
- Ramsey, Kate. "From 'Voodooism' to 'Vodou': Changing a US Library of Congress Subject Heading." *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2012, pp. 14–25.
- "Reformation." *HISTORY*, <https://www.history.com/topics/reformation>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2021.
- "The Voodoo Doughnut Story | Learn about Voodoo Doughnut." *Voodoo Doughnut*, <https://www.voodoodoughnut.com/the-voodoo-doughnut-story/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2021.
- "Voodoo, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/229580>. Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
- Working, Lauren. "Violating the Body of the Law: Cannibalism in Jacobean Political Discourse," *XVII-XVIII*, 71, 2014, pp. 157-175.

Unknown to Her: The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks and Racial Disparities in Healthcare

By Rani Nune

Rebecca Skloot's book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, tells the story of an African American woman's experience in the healthcare system of the 1950s and details some of its scientific, ethical, and racial significance. Born in Roanoke, Virginia in 1920, Henrietta Lacks was diagnosed with cervical cancer at thirty-one years old. She died that same year, only ever having lived under segregationist laws. Lacks would never know of her impact on science and medicine. During treatment and unknown to her, samples of her cervical cancer cells were harvested. Subsequently, they were cultured to become the world's first "immortal human cells." Easily reproduced in laboratories, these "HeLa cells," as they were known, became staples in cancer research and played an important role in treatment breakthroughs.

While Lacks' legacy continues in the form of the immortal HeLa cell line, her life offers important lessons on informed consent and racial equality. Lacks' family had no idea about her legacy until 1973 when researchers, seeking to solve a contamination problem in the HeLa cell line, attempted to obtain DNA samples from Lacks' immediate family without the informed consent of her husband and children. More than twenty years after her death, Lacks' cells had helped give rise to a multi-billion-dollar cancer research industry, for which her descendants received no financial compensation.

It is this very ethical dilemma Skloot analyzes in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. The heart of her work lies in the exploration of the birth and rise of research ethics and informed consent, the history of medical experimentation on African Americans, and the bioethical principles that guide medical practice relative particularly to race. Skloot's work received a positive critical reception, sparking conversations regarding historical and contemporary structural racism in medicine. However, Skloot's broader systemic

focus leaves crucial determinants of healthcare disparities to which African American people are subject underexplored. Even if they have access to advanced facilities (as Lacks qualifiedly did) African American patients often *still* receive inferior healthcare. This suggests that healthcare disparities are also an outcome of the conduct of health personnel. However, as medical historian John Hoberman argues, the “systematic detection, prevention, and sanctioning” of racially-charged behavior of doctors has “never made it onto the agenda” of American healthcare (506). Health personnel are held individually blameless by the generalized terms by which disproportionate African American suffering is evoked, be it specious historical claims about physiological differences, or broad-based explorations of systemic racism. What is left out of such analyses are the role of internalized, implicit, or explicit biases of healthcare personnel, as well as the complicated interplay of medical authority and patient vulnerability in racially-charged contexts. So, while analyses and redress of institutional, structural, and systemic racisms are undoubtedly important, inequalities are also perpetuated on an interpersonal level, in the intimate negotiations between doctors and patients.

This essay will recount Lacks’ story and will extrapolate some of the details Skloot provides regarding intimate encounters between Lacks and her doctors into a discussion of the attitudes and racial biases they betray. It is, of course, important to recognize that these encounters reflect systemic and structural inequalities, and part of the methodology of the paper will be to speak to the context and pervasive practices of the time. Many of the behaviors displayed by Lacks’ doctors were “acceptable” racial stereotypes based in specious science, medical paternalism, benevolent deception, linguistic segregation, and more. The pervasive nature of these practices does not mitigate their personal culpability for the poor quality of care she was afforded. In fact, it is telling that Lacks’ doctors seem to deploy strategies to avoid accountability and liability. It is this unwillingness to take personal responsibility for the standard of care for all patients regardless of their race, that stands between American healthcare and the realization of its purported equitable, anti-racist ideals. Henrietta Lacks’ story, as will be shown, has much to teach us about the intimate effects of continuing healthcare disparities.

Born amidst the Jim Crow era, Lacks was raised in a society that openly denied her as an individual deserving of equal treatment based on the color of her skin. In her lifetime, both schools and hospitals were segregated, with the consequence that African Americans were denied easy access to quality education and healthcare. In Lacks’ story, education and healthcare access are interlinked. Segregation meant that many African American neighborhoods lacked nearby schools that accepted African American students. Those that did were often too small for comfort and lacked the sufficient funding for robust education programs (“Beginnings of Black Education”). Without any African American schools in close proximity and feeling obliged to work

the field that fed and clothed her family, Lacks stopped attending school by the sixth grade (Skloot 20) which prevented her from gaining basic health literacy.

In addition, neighborhoods predominantly occupied by African American residents often lacked nearby hospitals or clinics, at least ones that admitted Black patients. Lacks' access to healthcare was significantly limited. When it became clear she required higher levels of treatment than were available at her local clinic, Johns Hopkins was the "only major hospital for miles that treated African American patients" (15). While Johns Hopkins has a notable reputation as a top hospital, it is important to recognize that Lacks did not go there by choice. Johns Hopkins was located twenty miles from Lacks' home, and closer hospitals did not accept African American patients.

However, it was not just lack of access to high-quality care nor low levels of health literacy that led Lacks to delay seeking medical care despite having communicated her discomfort with her two most trusted cousins "for more than a year" (14). She approached healthcare institutions with circumspection. Lacks, the pregnant mother of four children, kept her symptoms confidential even from her husband as she was afraid "a doctor would take her womb and make her stop having children" (14). Lacks' fears were not born out of paranoia or excessive caution. The medical field had a history of unethical and specious treatment directed at African American people. The history of forced sterilization of Black women is rooted in the era of slavery. Gynecologists experimented on enslaved women often with no anesthesia (despite its prominent use in the treatment of white women). After abolition, sterilization abuse grew exponentially, fueled by a white fear of a growing African American population as well as the discriminatory belief that African American women were unfit mothers. Forced sterilization peaked in the 1950s and 1960s (Black Genocide). Lacks lived in an era of pervasive eugenic sterilization, making the idea of a doctor's visit a fearful event, one to be avoided until symptoms became unbearable.

Eugenic sterilization was a particularly egregious example of pervasive medical practices based on race. The racial background of African Americans was often blamed for health disparities and mortality rates under the assumption of physiological predisposition to certain conditions. This is the premise on which "race-based medicine" is built. According to medical anthropologist Jessica Cerdeña et al., it is a system in which race is believed to serve as an important determinant in diagnosis and treatment, inevitably "leading to inequitable care" (1125).

Lacks' story is riddled with examples of race-based medical assumptions. Following the birth of her fifth child, Lacks' symptoms grew worse, leaving her no choice but to see a physician at her local clinic. After a cursory examination, Lacks' doctor assumed that her lump was a "sore from syphilis" (Skloot, 15). This inaccurate diagnosis was likely the result of negligence

and bias: cervical cancer almost never mimics cervical syphilitic lesions, with less than twenty cases ever reported (Zhu 1). Lacks' doctor probably felt "scientifically" justified in his presumptive diagnosis by the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which commenced less than two decades prior his encounter with Lacks. The methodologically suspect and ethically incompetent study fueled generalizations among doctors that African American people were distinctly predisposed to venereal diseases. In reality, the study was premised on false assertions of African American promiscuity (Brandt 23). Lacks' doctor's immediate presumption exemplifies race-based medicine. He used harmful generalizations regarding Lacks' race as supporting evidence to make a false diagnosis, to deleterious effects. The test for syphilis, which delayed her treatment further, came back negative. It was only then that Lacks was sent to the specialized services of the Johns Hopkins gynecology clinic.

Lacks' story to this point makes clear that, even before her arrival at Johns Hopkins, her understanding of medical intervention was steeped in fear. It is no wonder that once she commenced outpatient treatment there she displayed heightened vigilance, a stress that must have taxed her body and further delayed her treatment. Each time she received a positive test for an illness or was advised to return to the hospital for treatment or more testing, she "declined," "cancelled the appointment," or left "no response" (Skloot 16). It is difficult not to read into these seeming expressions of fear an attempt to maintain a sense of agency and bodily autonomy. This interpretation is especially compelling when it becomes clear that she was afforded little power over her own treatment at Johns Hopkins where the environment was steeped in "medical paternalism."

Medical paternalism grew out of the pervasive eighteenth-century belief that doctors were "all knowing healers." This belief was reflected by Lacks' husband, Day, when he says, "They is the doctor . . . you got to go by what they say. I don't know as much as they do" (Skloot 165). Accordingly, physicians appeared as benevolent parents making decisions on behalf of the patient. The patient, in turn, is treated like an uneducated child who lacks autonomy and the capacity to make their own decisions. In limited circumstances, medical paternalism can benefit the patient. If, for example, a patient without a proxy suffers a condition that compromises their decision-making capacity, or in cases of emergency, the doctor must assume primary authority.

In the 1950s, however, paternalism ran rampant among physicians, often regardless of their patients' decision-making capacity. Indeed, "incompetency" was often imputed onto patients: the assumption, for example, that African American people were uneducated and incapable of understanding complex medical ideas meant physicians felt justified in mandating treatments patients might otherwise decline. Medical paternalism posed as an expression of moral goodness and beneficence. However, it often disregarded the patient's values and, worse, their fundamental right to bodily autonomy, in ef-

fect, “rob[bing] them of their own humanity” (Goodyear-Smith, 452). Medical paternalism was especially pervasive in the treatment of women, even more so for African American women. It was so deeply ingrained in standard medical care practices, that it shaped the physical spaces of hospitals and clinics.

When she arrived at Johns Hopkins, Lacks, like all African American patients, was segregated in the “colored wards” (Skloot 15). She was led from the waiting room to a colored-only exam room, described by Skloot as “one in a long row of rooms divided by clear glass walls,” that allowed nurses to see from one room to the next (15). Lacks was told to undress and change into a hospital gown, all while exposed through the glass partitions. Clearly, this arrangement served the convenience of health staff, rather than Lacks’ privacy, comfort, or sense of control. Recent studies have shown that comfort and privacy mitigate patient stress. So, for example, patients separated from neighboring beds by curtain walls felt “less secure” and “less able to control social encounters” than patients in single-bed patient rooms with solid walls (Huisman, 50). But Lacks was not even afforded the luxury of a curtain. Within moments of having entered the hospital, in other words, Lacks would have been keenly aware of the institution’s disregard for her, subjecting her to the indignity of segregation and exposure. It would have been very clear to her that power resided with the “care” provider, rather than the patient.

The paternalism with which Lacks was treated can be inferred from her doctors’ chart notations. A few weeks into radium treatments of her cervical cancer, for example, Lacks communicated “several times” that she believed her cancer was worsening, spreading throughout her body, or “moving through her” (Skloot 64). This is clinically significant information dutifully conveyed to a physician by a scared and dying woman. Her chart, however, contains a doctor’s notation which claimed that Lacks “state[d] that she feels fairly well” and had communicated “some vague lower abdominal discomfort” (63).

The language used in these notations is clearly at odds with the sentiment Lacks was expressing. The terms “some” and “vague” especially minimize Lacks’ symptoms, suggesting the physician’s mistrust of the Lacks’ claims. This mistrust suggests the paternalistic authority with which the physician approached her. In addition, it suggests his adherence to specious race-based medicine, according to which African American patients were thought less likely to feel pain as a result of “less sensitive nervous systems” (Hoffman, 4297). These suppositions did not derive from credible scientific research regarding anatomical differences in the nervous systems of African Americans and Caucasians. They reflect ideas that were used to justify the extreme barbarity with which enslaved people were treated. Cruelty was necessary as Black people were “insensible to pain when subjected to punishment” (Hoffman 4297). Regardless of his reasoning, Lacks’ physician disregarded Lacks’ complaint as a pressing symptom deserving of medical attention. Instead, she was left to endure avoidable pain.

The charts also offer evidence that Lacks' physicians were aware of her worsening condition but purposefully neglected to disclose it to her. Again and again, physicians minimize Lacks' suffering. Her discomfort worsened, and Lacks complained of increasing pain and yet her doctor notes, "no evidence of recurrence" (Skloot, 64). Two weeks later, Lacks was experiencing pain so great that she could barely walk. Only then did one of her doctors note that she "looks chronically ill . . . obviously in pain" (64).

The suddenness of this dire annotation suggests an attempt by her doctors to shield Lacks from her own condition. Her decline would not have been sudden. It is highly unlikely that Lacks' tumors, which had by then developed on her pelvic wall, hip bones, and lymph nodes, went unnoticed by a number of physicians over the course of three months, especially as she persistently drew attention to her symptoms. More likely is the doctors were undertaking what they understood to be a "benevolent deception" (63). Under the paternalist impression that they knew what was best for her, they felt it unnecessary to deliver information that could "confuse or upset" Lacks (63). "Frightening" terminology such as "cancer," they might have justified to themselves, could elicit an anxiety reaction which might exacerbate her physical condition (63).

Benevolent deception is further evidenced by the failure to communicate the side effects of radiation treatments on Lacks' reproductive organs in advance of treatment. Lacks had wanted another child and was overcome with grief when she learned that the treatment had left her infertile: it was the realization of the sterilization fears that had kept her from seeking treatment when her symptoms first arose. Had she known about fertility loss as a side effect of radiation, Lacks said, "She would not have gone through with the treatment" (48). Indeed, the pretext of the radiation treatment was not properly communicated to Lacks. Doctors knew Lacks' cancer was terminal but only told her it was "inoperable" (64). Her impending death was hidden from her. The radiation treatments were not an effort to cure Lacks, as she believed, but a measure to "at least relieve her pain" (65). And so, Lacks endured radiation treatments, planning her life and hoping to be able to have another baby, while, unknown to her (and her family), "She was dying" (65). The withholding of key information from Lacks under the guise of a benevolent deception ultimately had the effect of shutting Lacks out of treatment decisions she should, by right, have been able to make herself.

Benevolent deception, while undoubtedly infringing on Lacks' dignity, is less egregious than another practice by which information may have been withheld or strategically utilized to misinform her: linguistic discrimination (Hoberman, 517). African American patients were often considered uneducated and unable to understand complex terminology. Hence, the language in which African American patients were addressed was often vague, inaccurate, or misleading. Lacks' doctors may have wanted to shield her from her prognosis, or they may have assumed she was incapable of grasping her own

circumstances. Either justification, however, is premised on the elevated authority of the doctor and the (emotional or intellectual) weakness of a Black, female patient.

In the end, however, the physicians' violation of Lacks' body – the harvesting of cells without her knowledge – is the clearest evidence of the disdain with which they saw her. Here, too, her chart is telling. A few days before her death, her doctors describe her as “complaining bitterly,” (Skloot 65). This is not an account of a dying woman that suggests an empathetic, caring gaze. More chillingly, she is described as a “miserable specimen” (66), stripping her of her full humanity, reducing her to an object of science, worth no more than a sample of cells scraped from a cervix.

It is important to recognize, however, that such language does not only dehumanize Henrietta Lacks. It is also an assertion of the physician's power over her. This power enacts itself in terms of the physician's qualification, his race, and his gender, all of which reflect privileges ascribed to him by history. It is from this position of privilege that the physician assumes the right to judge Lacks based on the internalized stereotypes history has ascribed to Black women. She is “promiscuous,” “emotionally weak,” “dishonest,” “uneducated.”

However, historically speaking, physicians would have been unlikely to examine themselves in order to diagnose elitist, racist, sexist biases that manifest in the poor treatment of African American women. John Hoberman argues in “Medical Racism and the Rhetoric of Exculpation: How Do Physicians Think About Race?” that even in the post-Civil Rights Era medical literature has tended to obscure, sanitize, or downplay the “sting, pungency, and menace . . . of race relations as they are acted out in medical settings” (521). He argues that honest self-reflection is at odds with the medical community's historical tendency to deny the influence of “larger social forces” within the confines of medical practice. Medical settings, the doctor's office, the examination room, the physician's own mind, are considered to be “private spheres.” This privacy in effect immunizes the physician from social or even collegial accountability:

The sanctity of the private sphere within which the physician's thoughts and feelings shape their decisions derives from a traditional sense of autonomy. It is, therefore, not surprising that . . . doctors resist inquiries into the sources of their judgments. Nor is it surprising that physicians are reluctant to expose their incompetent (or bigoted) colleagues. The physician who acknowledges that racially motivated judgments can affect medical practice may challenge the doctor's absolute right to privacy by advocating some kind of therapeutic intervention (521).

Doctors, in other words, colluded to prevent questions from the public about the political or moral beliefs that influence their professional judgment (521) with the result that they were able to continue to exert “unethical forms of power” over patients like Henrietta Lacks. It is clear from the flagrancy of her poor treatment – inaccurate and vague chart notes, her disinformation, the violation of her right to consent – that her doctors, secure in their sphere of privacy, felt they could act with impunity. The hypocrisy is glaring: they believed that their own autonomy was sacred and denied Lacks hers.

Inarguably, there has been progress in the medical community’s understanding of the problems that arise from doctor-patient power-imbalances. In current best practice, it is understood that doctor-patient relationships are most productive when both operate from a collaborative mindset and exhibit mutually participatory behavior. Such a relationship is dependent on a balanced power dynamic. The patient should feel empowered to tell their story without fear of judgment so that no clinically important details are excluded. This allows them to frame their problems within their own experience and culture, while also raising the likelihood of an accurate diagnosis (Goodyear-Smith 453). Patients are understood to respond better when they maintain a sense of autonomy, allowing them to actively participate in decisions regarding the identification and treatment of their problem (453). To facilitate such participation, doctors must “respond to patients’ cues,” ask pertinent and engaging questions as the patient imparts their story, demonstrate their accurate understanding of the patient’s descriptions, and acknowledge the humanity of patients (452). This synergistic partnership is key in upholding the highest standard of care for the patient and is understood to play an important role in achieving positive health outcomes. Had Lacks felt empowered this way, had she not been so resistant to medical care because she understood it as a threat to her autonomy, she might not have developed the “litany of untreated conditions” (Skloot 16) that ultimately escalated into terminal cancer.

Even as the medical community’s understanding of such best practices has advanced, it is clear that those best practices are disproportionately denied Black patients. The sad truth is that there continue to be parallels between Lacks’ experiences during the Jim Crow era and that of many contemporary African Americans. Research shows that even if African American people gain access to health services, they are “significantly less likely” to receive high-quality, appropriate levels of treatment than the white population (Mayberry 115). It is therefore important that we recognize the medical settings – the doctor’s office, the examination room, the physician’s own mind – are not immune to the history and continued social impact of racism. The Jim Crow era may have passed, but it continues to impact the perceptions African American people hold of the medical

field as well as the practices of healthcare professionals. Many issues that ailed the healthcare system in the 1950s continue to afflict it in the twenty-first century.

Race-based medicine, for example, may be actively discouraged and understood to be specious, but some of its core biases, such as African Americans' reduced sensitivity to pain, still remain today. A study found that in New York City, pharmacies in minority neighborhoods do not stock sufficient medication to treat patients with severe pain appropriately (Morrison 1026). Another study found that African American patients in the emergency rooms are 66% less likely to receive pain medications compared to similarly injured white patients (Todd 1).

The medical paternalism that shaped hospital spaces and doctor-patient relationships in the 1950s may be widely condemned today, but its decades-long practice in medicine continues to fuel fear among many African American communities that medical care seeks to strip them of their autonomy. Even with the contemporary emphasis on informed consent and the outlawing “benevolent deception” practices, many African American people display deep-rooted skepticism that medical services have their best interests at heart. As a result, African American people are more likely to hesitate, even if they have access to preventative or curative treatment than white people. So, for example, studies have shown that African American communities are more skeptical of COVID-19 vaccinations than white populations who are vaccinated at rates “two to three times higher” (Recht para. 2).

Linguistic segregation, too, persists. In a study described in the article “Physician Racial Bias and Word Use during Racially Discordant Medical Interactions” Hagiwara et. al. observed that non-Black physicians undertook “less relationship building” which resulted in a decrease in patient questions and “physician information giving” (401). Non-Black physicians tended to monopolize conversations with African American patients, with increased “utterances, faster speech, and longer talk time” (402). By centering themselves in conversations, physicians are “more likely” to leave African American patients feeling subordinate (405). Unsurprisingly, such patients are more likely to “ignore the doctor’s advice and put off care” (Blanchard 728).

As Lacks’ story teaches us, such hesitancy can lead to a litany of untreated conditions and terminal illnesses. She died over 70 years ago. Skloot’s account of her final days and her legacy asks important questions about the healthcare systems and institutions that exploit and dehumanize Black bodies. However, it is important to recognize that Lacks suffered not just because of Jim Crow era racist systems, but at the hands of physicians. While it is undeniable that the physicians were themselves influenced by the racist systems and institutions, they also had individual moral agency.

Their unexamined personally-held biases also caused Lacks' terrible suffering. Contemporary health professionals, however, have the benefit of hindsight, as well as subsequent advances in medicine, ethics, and oversight. Few would argue that the healthcare industry should not redress the systemic legacy of Jim Crow. It is as important that they be willing to examine the ways their personal biases perpetuate power differentials, to ask how their interactions reflect outdated practices (medical paternalism, race-based medicine, linguistic segregation) that condescend African American patients and elevate physicians. Such individual work is vital to the provision of equitable healthcare. This, too, could be a part of Henrietta Lacks' legacy.

WORKS CITED

- Blanchard, Janice, and Nicole Lurie. "R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Patient Reports of Disrespect in the Health Care Setting and its Impact on Care." *The Journal of Family Practice* vol. 53, no. 9, 2004, pp. 721-30.
- Brandt, Allan M. "Racism and research: The case of the Tuskegee Syphilis study." *The Hastings Center Report* 8 (6), 1978, pp. 21-29.
- Cerdeña, J. P., Plaisime, M. V., & Tsai, "From Race-based to Race-conscious Medicine: How Anti-racist Uprisings Call us to Act." *The Lancet*, 396, 2020, pp. 1125-1128. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(20)32076-6
- Goodyear-Smith, Felicity, and Stephen Buetow. "Power Issues in the Doctor-Patient Relationship." *Health Care Analysis*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2001, pp. 449-462.
- Hagiwara, Nao et al. "Physician Racial Bias and Word Use During Racially Discordant Medical Interactions." *Health communication*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2017, pp. 401-408.
- Hoberman, John. "Medical Racism and the Rhetoric of Exculpation: How Do Physicians Think about Race?" *New Literary History*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2007, pp. 505-525.
- Hoffman, Kelly M et al. "Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs about Biological Differences between Blacks and Whites." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 113, no.16, 2016, pp. 4296-301.
- Huisman, E. R. C. M. "A User-oriented Focus to Create Healthcare Facilities; Decision Making on Strategic Values." *Technische Universiteit Eindhoven*, 2019, pp. 50.
- Mayberry, R M et al. "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Access to Medical Care." *Medical Care Research and Review: MCRR*, vol. 57, Suppl 1, 2000, pp. 108-45.

- Morrison, R. S., et al. "We Don't Carry That' – Failure of Pharmacies in Predominantly Nonwhite Neighborhoods to Stock Opioid Analgesics." *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 342, no. 14, 2000, pp. 1023-6.
- Recht, Hannah, and Lauren Weber. "Black Americans are Getting Vaccinated at Lower Rates than White Americans." *Kaiser Family Foundation*, 2021. <https://khn.org/news/article/black-americans-are-getting-vaccinated-at-lower-rates-than-white-americans/>
- Todd, H et al. "Ethnicity and Analgesic Practice." *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2000, pp. 11-6.
- Zhu, Xiaoqing et al. "Cervical Syphilitic Lesions Mimicking Cervical Cancer: A Rare Case Report." *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, vol. 31, 2015, Pages 1-3.
- "Beginnings of Black Education." *Virginia Museum of History & Culture*, 29 Nov. 2020, www.virginiahistory.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/beginnings-black.
- "Black Genocide." *PBS, Public Broadcasting Service*, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-black-genocide/.

CONTRIBUTORS

Anna Mayzenberg majors in Management Information systems with minors in English and Phronesis. Beyond college, she hopes to continue writing and exploring. Faculty Mentor: Dr. Laura Bland.

Austin Kelly Mitchell (they / them) majors in Religious Studies and plans to attend seminary and apply liberation theology in the field as a chaplain. Faculty Mentor: Dr. Caryn Tamber Rosenau.

Rana Mohamad majors in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. A Sudanese immigrant, she is particularly interested in the ways in which Black Arabs are depicted and situated in the context of the largely ethnolinguistic Arab identity. Faculty Mentor: Dr. Tshepo Masango Chéry.

Rani Nune is a Biology major with a double minor in Chemistry and Medicine & Society. She looks forward to a career as a physician-scientist. Faculty Mentor: Dr. Laura Bland

Lauren Rochelle majors in History, with a minor in Ethnic Studies. She plans on attending graduate school when her time at the University of Houston is over. Faculty Mentor: Dr. Max Rayneard.

Erin Satterwhite studies Art History and French and is passionate about education as it relates to the climate crisis. Faculty Mentor: Dr. David Rainbow

Morgan Thomas majors in History with a minor in Education. After graduating, she hopes to gain teaching experience before attending graduate school. Faculty Mentor: Prof. Alison Leland.

Leonard Wang majors in Biomedical Sciences. He aspires to be a physician and a writer. Faculty Mentor: Dr. Helen Valier.

