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The elements for this cover were made out of paper by Harmony Rose Vodicka, using her hand drawn sketches, scrapbook paper, watercolor paints, paper ripping, and collaging techniques. The sketches depict drawings of natural elements featured in Missouri and at Missouri State University, including a bluebird skull, a *Crataegus punctata* branch, a brown bear paw, and brown bear fangs. The pieces were then scanned and configured digitally in Photoshop by Vodicka and Volume 18 author, Jasmine deGroat. The icons and text were added atop to finalize the cover design.

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

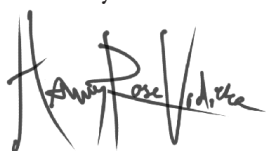
We are thrilled to present Volume 18 of *LOGOS* to you all, and we hope you enjoy reading these scholarly works.

We would like to congratulate all of our authors for their exceptional submissions and their dedication to these wonderful pieces. We would also like to thank all of the reviewers and faculty advisors who helped make this volume possible. Everyone involved in the creation of this volume put in an immense amount of hard work, and we appreciate all of their support.


Many pieces within this volume discussed themes centered around the authors' thoughts on the state of the world and where humanity is headed. Within these heavy topics, the authors managed to find a way to remind us of the importance of holding onto hope and finding strength within oneself to persevere through hard times. We wanted to model the cover and some of the style choices within this volume to reflect the creative-heavy nature of the published pieces, as well as represent finding space to appreciate whimsy during times of difficult change. The variety of research topics studied by our authors in this volume also calls to light the current movement of all disciplines to be inspired to create and study, in the ever-changing status of the world. Between our research-based and creatively-expressive pieces, we have published a volume that represents a cohesive and holistic snapshot into the lives and hearts of our undergraduate students.

We are very proud of the volume we have created, and we hope you find these pieces as inspiring as we did.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Harmony Rose Vodicka". The signature is stylized with large, sweeping letters.

Harmony Rose Vodicka
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Allison Loughary". The signature is stylized with large, sweeping letters.

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LOGOS: A Journal of Undergraduate Research is dedicated to the publication of scholarship and artistry by Missouri State University undergraduate students, including undergraduate students co-authoring with faculty. It is open to submissions from all undergraduate students at the university, as well as graduates from MSU that would like to submit their previous undergraduate work. It conforms to the highest standards of scholastic integrity in a blind peer-review process conducted by distinguished faculty and students.

The Missouri State Honors College sponsors *LOGOS*, and oversight and governance is provided by a faculty advisory board. The journal is produced by a managing editor, a chief editor, a copy editor, associate editors, and a student peer review board, all of whom are part of the MSU Honors College.

LOGOS encourages submissions from all current or former undergraduate students of MSU who are seeking a professional venue for publication of their undergraduate work. We welcome submissions year-round. Prospective contributors can contact the managing editor with questions about publication standards and the review process at LOGOS@missouristate.edu.

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Disco Armageddon

Kenyon Broten

Abstract

They say nothing in life is certain except for death and taxes, which leaves out three essentials of the human experience: love, regret, and avoidance. The three key themes of “Disco Armageddon.” Letting go is an unfortunate fact of life: words not said, roads not taken, and being alive—not living. It is impossible to catch your breath while holding it. The ties that bind often get so twisted they become impossible to cut, even for those who want to. “Disco Armageddon” follows Vincent as he grapples with guilt, grief, and distraction at the end of the world. Tangling with an unlikely stranger while holding on to the only family he has left, with what little time he has.



Kenyon Broten is a sophomore pursuing double majors in History and Anthropology at Missouri State. His passions include creative writing and general advocacy. He is currently working on expanding the academic conversation of urbanization as a selective process in rural Ecuador and increasing awareness of conservation agencies like EcoMinga.

“Coming to you live for the final time from Channel Four headquarters, I’m your host, Andrew Pearlman, joined tonight by the lovely Kimo Richards.”

“Thanks, Drew. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the unfortunate truth was once again confirmed by officials from NASA, Roscosmos, the ESA, and every head of state. In merely forty-eight hours, the giant asteroid, now being called Apep, will impact the eastern seaboard.”

The studio seemed dimly lit as those words hung in the air for an eternity before Drew cleared his throat to speak.

“Remind me, Kimo, why are they calling it Apep?” Drew’s voice broke; he seemed nervous. Kimo smiled and touched his arm casually.

“Great question, Drew. I think it’s supposed to be a cruel mix of irony and a nod to the scientists at the EgSA who first identified the asteroid as it broke away from its counterpart.” She sighed, nodding to her partner.

“Such is life, I suppose.” He fashioned a dejected smile. “In response, NASA has re-launched new Voyager probes, carrying laser-etched disks of humanity’s biological data, as well as copies of famous texts, art, and a written record of the approximate timeline of the world in full.”

“I’ve gotta say, Drew, I don’t get why.” She shook her head.

“Maybe they hope someone else out there will find it? There is no hope for tomorrow, but the day after could be a different story. Maybe a million years from now, E.T. will reconstruct us, and we’ll all live the good life under another star. Who knows, it could be a good thing.”

“Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see. Speaking of tomorrow, Andrew and I will be in Times Square bringing you live coverage of the blowout bash at the end of the world, which is being dubbed by some as Disco Armageddon. Anything goes, ladies and gentlemen; the party must go on, and you wouldn’t want to miss it for the world.” She cleared her throat.

“On that note, my partner and I would like to take the time to highlight some special people keeping things running smoothly for all of us during the apocalypse, starting with Dr. Abhed Itani of Itani Pharmaceuticals, who will be at his storefront right until the doomsday clock strikes midnight. Folks, drop by for *any and all* of your medicinal needs or wants. Dr. Itani and his family are wonderful people and will make sure you and yours are taken care of.”

“I would like to thank Lucius Felton, who is almost single-handedly keeping the metro system running. Without him working tirelessly, it would be impossible to get around the city. Because of him, I can spend precious time with my parents.”

“And my special thanks go out to Juliet Romero of Verona Jewelers.” He smiled ear-to-ear.

“That’s a bit of an odd shout, isn’t it?” she said, turning to face Andrew.

Kimo threw her hands over her mouth, stifling a scream.

Loud whoops and cheers echoed from behind the camera while tears carved through her thick makeup. Andrew had perched on one knee, holding a small box shrouded in leather the color of midnight.

“Well, without her, I wouldn’t be able to do this. Kimo Richards, I have loved you every *single* day for these last nine years, and I am so sorry I waited for the last two. Would you do me the honor of sharing the rest of our lives, for now and all of eternity?”

Vigorously rubbing her eyes, she spoke between laughs now. “Yes, you idiot, of course I will.” He rose, and the two embraced, each afraid of losing the other, and shared a fiery kiss. The crew whistled, popped mini confetti cannons, and cut the broadcast.

The droning of static ripped me from my stupor. I gazed at my palms, slowly opening and closing them—left, right, left, right. I felt numb. *Disco Armageddon*. The biggest party there ever was—or *will be*. After what felt like an eternity, I stood despite the creaking protest from the old recliner. I shambled across the cold wood floor, rubbing my throbbing temples with a sigh: another headache.

I stood, frozen before a wall where old memories still lingered. *That’s all they ever do*. Rubbing my hands over the roughness of years, measurements, doodles, and dents that feel like a lifetime ago now. Her red door was old and felt a million feet thick.

“It’s time to take your pills,” I said, raking my knuckles over the door. No response. I knocked again, harder this time. Still nothing. A familiar panic rose in my chest as I slowly opened the door, bracing myself. But the room was empty. Walls lined neatly with books, and even her desk was speckless. An icy wind drifted in from the window over the fire escape. Flowing curtains beckoned me to the nightstand, where a letter sat in wait. A peek into the bathroom froze the blood in my veins. An empty pill bottle stood watch over the sink. *Tick*. There’s that *fucking* clock I hate. Picking up the bottle revealed the stark reality: she dumped her lithium.

I moved to the edge of the bed, steeling myself. *You’ve been through this before, Vincent*. I sat and held the envelope in my hands. Slowly running my fingers along the edges, I couldn’t help but let out a chuckle. A wax seal? Still an academic at heart, Ma. *Why are my eyes starting to water?* I exhaled a breath I didn’t know I was holding and looked around the room again.

Everything was meticulously placed and organized, save for the degree framed on the wall; it was crooked. *Caroline Hargreaves, J.D.* Holding the envelope up to the streetlight breaking through the window did little to reveal its contents. *Tick.* I don't have all week, I suppose. Was it the chill making my hands tremble as I tore the seal, or what I knew was inside?

"My son, my baby boy. To you, I have been a burden; I have stolen from you all these years. Something you will never get back. I've watched you grow and become a man. But you aren't your own man. When I was diagnosed, your father took care of me and all my faults, and ever since he passed, you took it up, along with that job you hate. It made you miss so much; I made you miss so much."

I clenched my teeth. That isn't true. You didn't do anything wrong. I chose to be here. *Tick.*

"You left school, your friends went off and became families, and even Valerie got herself hitched. You were going to do great things, Vincent. But I stole that. I stole that by being here. I didn't ask you to stay, I begged and pleaded for you to leave me behind and live for yourself. But you refused to leave. And you gave me no say in the matter. I want you to hate me for it, but I know you won't."

Valerie. That was a name I tried to forget with little success. *Tick.* I winced; a dull pickaxe was chipping away at all the important bits in my head. I ran my tongue along my cracked lips and pressed on.

"And now my worst fears have come true; it's too late for you. There's so much you won't ever get to experience in this beautiful world, and it's all my fault."

The paper crumpled under my hands, and tears pounded at the margins. Blotting the ink and turning it into some kind of sick Rorschach test. *Tick.* It's not your fault, Mom. It's not your fault. I chose to stay, and I would do it again a thousand times. You think I couldn't have left? I'm almost *twenty-six*. I could go anytime I wanted. *Tick.*

"So now I'm taking matters into my own hands; I've gone over to Dr. Itani's to have him mix up one big cocktail so I can finally take back control of life and go out on my terms. Please, please, please don't try to find me. I couldn't say this in person because I know you would talk your way out of this like you always do. You have less than two days, Vincent, please live for yourself for once. Do it for me, little duck. I love you."

I had wound up on the floor, amidst the scattered gears, nuts, and bolts that were the former guts of one of those damn clocks. *It's been in the family for years*, she said. Breaking it felt cathartic. But now I felt sick, and an aching numbness was working its way up my bones. I had to get my bearings; a million thoughts were swimming around my head, but I still knew nothing at all. The lights outside were bright and bathed the bedroom in a mix of reds and oranges.

Tick. The incessant ticking of that second giant wall clock was driving me insane. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* Now the damn thing was mocking me, daring me to look at it. But something in me refused. It took some effort, but I finally got up for two reasons—my ass hurt, and I had to get to Itani's place.

My bright red fingers desperately pressed call for the dozenth time, begging for an answer. When I could pry my face away from the screen, all I could see were figures shuffling past, giant black boxes hovering where their heads ought to be. No smiles. No eyes. Just smooth and black, almost like screens. *I'm used to it now. Do strangers see me the same way?* I pushed onward, my chest tightening. I clawed in my jacket pocket for the box of cigarettes within. Stopping before the mustard colored pharmacy, I rolled a cigarette between my fingers. *I've never even smoked a day in my life, but they remind me of him.*

I remained utterly still, absorbing the eerie silence of the city as a shiver curled down my spine. It was freezing out here. A few months earlier, and everyone could have died in shorts. I stare at my hands, two throbbing pink maws that threatened to swallow the sleek, bleached cylinder. Its putrid smell, the bitter gray puffs of smoke. Their clouds carried no silver lining. *Tick. There it is again.* Mocking me. In my *head*. The world playing me for some kind of fool. My vision blurred, and my balance faltered. I threw myself onto the closest bench, beads of sweat worked their way down my brow.

The overhang of the bus stop was usually littered with graffiti, but tonight, dozens of the same posters were haphazardly covering every square inch of New York's undiscovered artists' finest work. *Volunteer at Disco Armageddon! Two hours of your time will earn you special privileges at the greatest party the world has ever seen! Adults only in zones 1-4, no children permitted. We ask citizens to please bring their own drugs and alcohol whenever possible. All hands on deck; those willing to lend their time should head to City Hall. Delinquents will be handled accordingly.*

Pushing the door open revealed quite a scene; part of me was tempted to slip back outside. *You're here for Mom.* Doc and I went way back. I had to pop in for refills regularly, and we are technically family in some odd way, I guess. He was built like an NFL linebacker, but is a kind and patient man, regardless. I'd never heard him raise his voice until today. He stood behind the counter, a mountain of muscle engaged in viscous verbal combat with a dark slate colored screen hanging over feminine features. I watched as painted nails and worn Converse barely touching the ground clawed at a box Itani was holding impossibly high in the air.

"You!" Itani boomed, pointing at me. I leaped in response. "All the way in! I do not pay good money to heat the outside."

He belted out a laugh that rattled ears and bones alike. "I forget myself, use all the electricity you like." I slinked inside, and he turned to face the small woman pestering him. "And you! I've already told you, it's not going to happen."

"I'm telling you that I don't care if it's your last box; I *need* those condoms!" she yelled, smacking the countertop as she dangled over its edge.

"And for the last time, I am telling you to get out of my store and to stop badgering me, small woman."

She flipped him off.

I snorted. Small and full of rage, maybe she actually is a badger. *Shit*. She turned to look my way at that, damn. She stormed up to me, linked our arms, and forced me up to the counter to face Itani. *Why was this tiny woman so strong?*

"I know you're rationing because of—*everything*." She waved her arms vaguely. "But this here is my boyfriend, so you can give them out now, yeah?"

Itani reared his head back and roared out a laugh; the pill-lined walls quivered in response.

"Finally stop chasing a married woman, eh, V?"

The woman's arm dropped mine; she didn't think that we would know each other.

"Well, you know me, Doc. I have trouble finishing what I start. And no time to think about could haves, or should haves. Would haves on the other hand..." I smiled, and we shook hands, his swallowing my own. I glanced at the Badger Lady, just a blank slate like all the rest. She crossed her arms, clearly not finding the situation amusing. I cleared my throat. "How's the family taking the news?"

Itani furrowed his brow and scratched the tuft on his chin, thinking.

"Well, the husband and I are fighting right now. We disagree about telling the little one." He paused. "I don't think we should."

"That is a pickle if ever I've seen one." I nodded slowly, thinking. *I was spitting fire when they hid Dad's diagnosis for months*. "I don't think it's fair to do that. You and Kev should tell her. Plus, Lonnie is a smart little bugger for a six-year-old; she probably knows something is up, anyhow."

Itani sighed deeply. "You're right. You're always right about stuff like this, Vincent." He paused and turned to face Badger Lady, who was quietly observing our exchange. *Probably plotting how to get her paws on the box*. "I don't like you, but tell you what. I will leave this last box of rubbers with your boyfriend—" he said, making air quotes with those sausages he calls fingers. "And he can decide whether or not you really need 'em. Then you may leave my store. There is work to be done."

She huffed at that, pouting as Itani slid the box into my hands.

“Why *are* you working, Itani? I feel like you should be with your family instead of holding down the fort.”

“Trust me, Vincent, I will spend my last moments with the people that I love. I’m here now because I’m supposed to be. It’s my responsibility. Just look around, and you’ll see why.” He motioned outwards with an arm.

I rolled my eyes and scanned the pharmacy. *This is taking too long.* But I have to play along and work it out of Itani. If I don’t, he’s just going to lie or cover for Mom. *Again.*

Yellow walls met red brick in some inverse of the Wizard of Oz. Huge gaps in shelves where medicine should be, and not a speck of dirt or dust in sight. *Tick.* My eyes flew to a clock clinging to the wall. *Tick. Tick.* I watched as it began to sag, slowly melting over the shelves below. Bile rose in my throat. Itani waved his hairy arm in front of my face, snapping me out of it.

“Earth to Vincent. Are you okay? You look pale.”

I held up my hand. “I’m fine, just a migraine like normal.” *What the hell was that?* “Anyways, I’m not sure what you want me to look at here. You cleaned the place and need a hand to help stock?”

“It’s quiet and peaceful. The world is ending, and people aren’t rioting in the streets, killing each other like animals. It’s beautiful, in a sad way.”

Drumbeats and a guitar riff interrupted our chat; Badger Lady was getting a phone call. *What was she still doing here?* Being nosy, I peered over her shoulder, seeing the word DAD in all caps. “Is your ringtone ‘Jailhouse Rock?’” I snickered. She leveled a finger at my face, implying unfinished business. Warning received. She went toward the bathroom to have what I’m guessing would be an unpleasant conversation.

“So you’re working because you think you should? Why?” I asked.

“When Nazis bombed London, people got up every day—or *they didn’t*. They got up and went to work when their world was ending. Some did it to feel normal, and others did it to make people’s lives better. People have been coming in all day asking for drugs to help them cope, some to end it themselves. I’ve had to ration everything useful out of fairness, *even condoms.*” He looked in the direction of the bathroom. “My father was a shepherd, and his father before him. Now I, too, must act as a shepherd for those who are scared and hurting. People like your mother.”

I clenched my teeth. “Your father who hates you?” I regretted those words the instant they left my mouth. I knew that he was gathering the courage to tell me about Mom, but he deserves better.

He shifted uncomfortably and bit his lip. I hurt him. “My father hates me for the way that I am. And every day, I mourn the part of him that doesn’t.”

"I'm sorry, Itani. Truly. I didn't mean that. These past few weeks have been...rough." Itani waved his hand in the air as if to say I was forgiven. It was cruel of me, though. "But I know she's been here, and I need you to tell me where she went." Itani's expression softened then, and he looked down at the black-and-white tiles, avoiding my gaze.

"Oh, kid, I can't do that to her. I promised. She carried Lonnie for us when times were...tough. Despite the risk."

Badger Lady returned, hovering nearby and quietly stifling snuffles.

"Speaking of the little scamp." I tilted my chin past Itani. "She asleep upstairs? I'd like to see her. If she's still awake."

"We're...letting her stay up late these days. I'll bring her down. She'd love to see her big brother." Itani disappeared up the stairs and left the two of us behind in awkward silence, broken only by the crackling of thunder outside. He's never going to spill it. *You failed.* Itani and Mom grew up together. How could he let her do this? *Think.* A thousand thoughts flooded my brain, but it was like swimming against a whirlpool. I felt a tap on my shoulder before I drowned.

"Could you stop crushing those?"

"Sorry." I relaxed my grip on the small box. *My hands ached.* Bits of cardboard jutted out at awkward angles. Badger Lady held out her hand expectantly.

"Now could I—" She was interrupted by garbled singing floating down the stairs behind the counter, and I quickly stuffed the box in my jacket.

A wiry bundle of bones and savage nest of blonde hair sat atop Itani's broad shoulders in pink llama pajamas. *She already looks so much like Mom.* My lips trembled. Lonnie pointed excitedly at me as Itani carefully set her down.

"You're late. Daddy said you would be here and have dinner with us." She turned to face Badger Lady. "Is this your girlfriend? She's pretty, like Esmeralda."

I laughed awkwardly. "Oh, this is..."

Badger Lady knelt down and tucked a tuft of Lonnie's hair behind her ear and laughed. "So full of energy! Thank you, and sorry I made him late," She clasped her hands together, begging for forgiveness. "I asked him to help me with something important, and it's kinda far away."

"Yeah, Lonnie, she and I have to go away for a little bit. I won't be able to see you for a while. But I'll bring you back some candy to say sorry, squirt." Lonnie looked like she was about to cry, and I knelt down and gave her a big hug for what felt like a really long time. I mouthed in Badger Lady's direction, *Thank you.*

Lonnie let go first and rummaged around in her pockets for something. “Momma asked me to give you this!” It was a small thing, wrapped in a sheet with cut eyeholes to make a ghost duck. I held it softly, like it could break any moment—probably some holdover from Halloween. I smiled weakly and carefully set it in my pocket. “Thanks, Lonnie.” I ruffled her hair a little and kissed her forehead as I stood to face Itani. He wore a guilty look.

“Tell them goodbye, Lonnie. It’s getting late, you should head upstairs and brush your teeth.”

“Bye, Big Brother. Bye, Esmerelda!” She waved, and the two of us returned the gesture as she skipped upstairs, taking a part of me with her. *Or was it part of Mom?* Itani pulled me into a hug, squeezing away my evil thoughts, and whispered into my ear.

“I could never betray your mother, Vincent. But when the time comes... you’re welcome here.”

When I pulled away, I saw tears welling in his eyes. *He’s strong, but not invincible.* I nodded at him with clenched teeth and turned to leave without a word. *What the hell am I going to do now?*

Unfortunately, it was still freezing outside. And to top it off, I was being pursued by a ferocious predator.

“So, are you going to hand those over or what?” The creature blocked my retreat with an outstretched palm. *Nowhere to run.*

“Look, Badger Lady, I don’t have time—” She quickly spun me on my heels and grabbed my shirt. *Whoah.*

“Did you just call me fucking Badger Lady? My name is Maria Rosales. Mu-ri-uh. Now hand over those fucking condoms before I show you a badger lady.”

Persistent, I thought. I held out the crushed box, an unfortunate casualty. I stared at Maria, and slowly, the blank slate hanging over her head contorted into a smoky, indistinct haze. I blinked several times as the haze began to dissipate and reveal the woman beneath.

Damn. She’s...divine. Like Michelangelo carved her for years in the back room of a Jersey dive bar. Choppy and undone black hair, an intense outward curving nose, and deep olive skin covered in poorly drawn splotches of ink. *Say something.* She snatched the box and nearly my hand in the process.

“Why do you need them so badly anyway?” I asked. “Not like it’s gonna matter in a *very* short time.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” *Idiot.* She stuck her tongue out and looked at me suspiciously. “Plus, don’t you have a girlfriend to go find?”

“Mother actually.” I looked towards the heart of the city, begging for an answer of some kind, from someone, anyone. *Please.* None came.

“But it’s getting pretty damn late, and I don’t know where to look.”

Maria came close and poked my chest.

“So you’re free then.” She flashed the mangled box and smirked.

“Really?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Why me?”

She shrugged. “Do you see anyone else around? And I think you’re kinda cute, like a tired poet.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Kinda?”

She smiled. “Don’t push your luck.” A large boom rolled overhead as flashes of light whipped across the sky. “Your place close?”

I nodded.

“Lead the way, *Duck Boy*.”

The two of us ran, cutting corners at breakneck speeds in an effort to race the showers overhead. We tied for second place. Stumbling over stairs and through the locked door in fits of laughter, towards the living room, dimly lit from the street below and streaks of white-hot light.

“You—” Maria was huffing as she spoke, leaning against the wall for support. “Look ridiculous.” Drops cascaded down her face, her hair clinging over her eyes. I brushed it away with a hand and placed our foreheads together. Maria toyed with my collarbone as our breaths fell into a steady rhythm. She smelled like rain. *And vanilla*. Her hands wrestled with my long hair. I dove into lips the color of wine, hesitant at first, then *hungrily*. I’m suffocating, and she’s oxygen—ragged, *desperate* inhales. Rain danced along the windows as nothing but white noise.

We found the bedroom, dodging piles of clothes and junk along the way.

I looked over at Maria from my small space on the mattress. For such a short woman, she certainly liked to spread out. Fortunately, the mattress was king-sized, or else I might have woken up on the floor. Something about her felt warm. Not physically—*especially her hands*—but in a way that made everything feel manageable. I gently shook her shoulder.

“How do you like your eggs?” I asked. She began to stir, her hair pooling like an oil spill over the satin sheets.

“First, that thing with the whipped cream, and then breakfast in bed? Maybe I should start calling you tiger boy instead.” She rubbed her eyes and yawned.

“Scrambled, got it. And your coffee?”

“Two sugars, and then tell it to be tea instead.”

“Sure thing, boss.” I gave her a halfhearted salute and returned shortly with the spread, placing it on the side table as I crawled onto the bed. I couldn’t quite place what she was humming out the window.

“So...” I popped bits of egg in my mouth. “Got any family to see today? Before...y’know.”

“No, not really.” She pulled her knees to her chest and looked at the street below. “I thought I might go to that big party later, but—”

“But?”

Maria shook her head. She seemed tense. *And on guard.* We ate in silence broken by the honking of trucks ferrying through the streams of pavement below. *A lot more lively down there today.* Probably supplies for that party. *Wonder how that’ll go. Horribly, probably.* “What are you going to do then?” I asked.

She shrugged, still watching time march along outside. “Get really, *reeeally* fucking high. And drunk.”

“What if it were just any other day?” *Why do I care?*

“Well, I’d be working today. Then I’d get the greasiest possible thing on the way home, and get really, *reeeally* fucking high.”

“Hmm. Seems healthy.”

She laughed and turned to face me.

“My therapist seems to think so.” Maria stared at me, *or through me.* Eyes catching rays of sunlight, melting into indulgent pools of caramel. “What about you, Vincent?”

I sighed and ran my hands through my hair. *Same shit I do every day. Nothing.* “Get a haircut, I suppose.”

She smiled. “Really? Just so happens I cut hair for a living.”

We might have run into each other.

“But do you cut hair well?”

She pinched my arm and leaned in close to whisper. “Is that all?”

I shrugged. “You don’t seem like you get invited to many parties anyways.” *Fair,* I thought.

Maria smacked my knee. “Come on, Tiger Boy. Let’s cut your hair.”

The two of us managed to gather all we needed for the task in the kitchen while making small talk. Sharp scissors, an extremely uncomfortable chair, and the only clean towel in the entire house.

“Why do you have a closet full of rubber ducks?” Maria drew her finger up my jaw, forcing me to stare at the ceiling. *Dusty,* I thought. Maria went to work, snipping quickly at all my edges.

“I like ducks. And,” I paused to think for a moment, “when I was young, my mom was working so she could help pay her way through college. Some dingy, run-down pizza shop. She waited tables and brought me along on her shifts because there was no one to watch me back home.”

"Dad not in the picture?" Maria asked, shearing away.

"Nope, never knew the jerkoff. Anyways, there's this machine where you put a couple quarters in, you turn it, and out pops a toy. This thing was filled to the brim with different kinds of rubber ducks. I'm talking ones in military uniforms, firefighter gear, hell, even Frankenstein ones. And I, being a little snot, wanted one pretty much every damn day. My mom, being more concerned about putting food on the table, of course, had to tell me no more often than not. Eventually, this guy comes in and sees my mom about to break. I was pushing her, and she was about to pop right then and there. So he goes ahead and buys me a duck. Every single day my mom worked at that restaurant, he would come in and buy me one of those ducks. They eventually fell in love, and the rest is history. I never knew my dad, but I damn sure knew my father."

Maria smiled now as she worked. "That's really sweet." She paused for a moment, resting her hand on her hips. "Is he out looking for your mom?"

"Gone." I swallowed, my jaw tight. "Lung cancer."

"I'm sorry."

"That's okay, it's been a long time."

"He's still gone."

"I guess. It just felt inevitable for a long time, with the way he was taking care of himself."

"Do you want help? Looking for your mom, I mean."

I shook my head. "I wouldn't know where to look."

"Sounds like she doesn't want to be found." Maria squeezed my shoulder. "Maybe you should respect that."

We were quiet for a time, the silence only broken by the snipping of hair that fell in lacy golden waves crashing against a cold oak sea. She held a mirror to my face when she was done, and hollow grey-blue eyes not entirely my own stared back at me. Weighed down by years of sleepless nights. Running my hands through the stranger in the mirror's hair showed patches of grey that a twenty-six-year-old shouldn't have had. *I don't like this. I don't like me.*

I must have been quiet for too long, staring at an unpleasant present, because Maria cleared her throat.

"Don't like it?"

I looked at her and smiled, my eyes glossy. "It's great." *Say something, idiot.* I cleared my throat, perhaps a little too loudly. "Would you like to go to that party? With me, I mean." I *want* to go with her. Plus, if I were strung out and hanging on by a thread...I'd probably make my way there eventually.

Maria frowned and crossed her arms, an awkward look on her face, “No.”
My heart sank.

She snickered and put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m just fucking with you, go change. My apartment is on the way, I’ll grab clothes.”

Maria wasn’t a massive fan of my meagre wardrobe, and made it very clear as we shambled through faceless crowds all making the same pilgrimage. A brown collared sweater over black pants *did* feel a little underdressed for a party at the end of the world, even with the nice green jacket I was carrying. I spared a glance at the silver watch on my wrist, still an oozing mess like anything that might tell me how much longer I’ve got.

Sun was still high up, though.

I was discreetly hitting call on my phone as I walked with Maria, desperately hoping to get through, just once.

The flood of people was a constant assault on all five senses. Colliding with a stranger’s comically large pink fur jacket, giants wading over crowds on stilts, loud music in a dozen genres, and just as many languages. A constant hum of excitement so sweet that you could practically taste it. The wafting odor of sparked joints, and...roast pork?

“Whoa, hold on a minute. Vincent, look!” Maria was pointing through the windows of a tiki bar with a name I couldn’t even begin to pronounce. A small crowd was seated inside. “It’s Kimo Richards! And Andrew Pearlman!” A man stood between the two, blowing into a large shell of some sort. “I used to watch them every night with *mi abuela*.” We watched as the pair exchanged flowery necklaces and a passionate kiss. Maria grabbed my hand, and my heart did a small flip. “Do you think they have time for an autograph?” She asked.

“I think it’s a private ceremony.”

After what felt like an eternity, we worked our way up an ungodly amount of stairs; I gasped for air in the dank hallway. “That was torture. We are taking the elevator back down.” I doubled over, sucking in oxygen with my hands over my knees. My pants began to vibrate. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* But it was faster now. My ringtone. Mom. I held my phone, hands shaking like an addict’s. Maria peered around my shoulder and squeezed my arm. *Nosy.*

“I’ll go change.” Her hand lingered on my shoulder before she disappeared down the grungy hall.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hello, Vincent. What do you want?” Wherever she was, wind whipped in the background at a steady pace.

“That’s it? I’ve been worried sick, and that’s all you have to say?”

I raised my voice. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What the hell is wrong with me? This is the best I’ve felt in years. I finally get to know that my thoughts are my own, not the product of a million different fucking pills. Do you have any idea what that feels like, Vincent? Do you? Like I’ve been drowning, just underneath the surface. Watching everything float by and not being able to grab on.”

“Don’t you think you owe me—”

“Owe you? Please. I let you use me as an excuse for far too long. When you dropped out of school. Or when you didn’t have the balls to tell Valerie how you felt, ever. I should have pushed you out of the nest ages ago. Would’ve nipped your little codependent streak nice and good.”

She gets mean when she doesn’t take her meds.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Was your degree in law or psychology?” I asked sarcastically.

She laughed. “My, what a quick little tongue you have. I wonder where you got it from.”

I hated this. Being dressed down. I tried to bite my tongue, but only managed to sharpen it in the process. “The magazines in waiting rooms mostly. I had to keep myself busy. Especially when I wasn’t stopping you from bleeding out in the bathroom on Christmas. Lonnie and the others crying in the living room.”

She was silent for a long time. “Well, it’s good you got something out of it, I suppose. Not like the last couple of years, you’ve just been rotting in that filthy recliner, too afraid to build the life you yearn for, and cursing the world for your idleness. I’d wager that’s what you’re doing even now.” Her breathing on the line was uneven while she hurled her accusations.

They weren’t entirely untrue.

Ah. So that’s what this is. The letter and the duck were the carrot; this is the stick. I couldn’t help but grin. “For your information—” I inhaled. “I met someone, a girl. And we’re going to that big party.” *An understatement.*

“R-really?” Her voice trembled over the line, breaking into slow, labored sobs.

“I think you’d like her. She’s very...direct.” I let the silence permeate between us over the phone. It was nice. “Where are you? I promise I won’t come.”

She hesitated for a moment, not fully trusting in my words. “At the park. Watching the ducks.” Her breathing was irregular, deep at first, interrupted by shallow gasps and pauses. “I need to go. Goodbye, my little duck.”

The dam holding me steady burst. “I love you, Ma.”

“I love you, too.”

I stood in the halls, waiting, feeling raw and naked as time crept on. Slowly, Maria's door opened. *Wow*. I found the heavens, and they must be locked behind that door. A thin olive veil of satin draped below the shoulders in a command to all who listen. This was her domain. Hoops and chains of gold hanging gracefully over scatterings of ink that meant nothing at all. *Turn away. The crescendos of this siren's song are too much to bear.*

She snorted, covering her face. "Close your jaw, Vincent. You're practically drooling." My hand flew to my jaw, perfectly in place. *Liar*. Maria giggled, holding her arm out. "Shall we?"

Rattling like it was asking for spare change, the elevator began its slow descent. "How did your call go?"

I sighed. "About as well as it could have, I guess. She called me codependent, can you believe that?"

"Yes. Yes, I can." The lights flickered and went out. *Clunk*. We came to an abrupt stop. "Vincent..."

I began laughing like a maniac. *There's no fucking way*. "Ha! Ha ha ha!" I doubled over, holding my sides. "What a giant middle finger from the universe. Oh, you're going to let loose, enjoy yourself for once? Here, take this." I slid against the metal wall to the ground, letting my head fall into my hands. Maria paced with her phone held high.

"I can't get a signal. How about you?"

I fumbled in the dark, hoping. Nothing. I activated the flashlight, setting it on the floor to illuminate our future casket.

I shook my head. "No."

"Wait, what about that?" She pointed at the ceiling, where an emergency hatch lorded over us. "Boost me!"

"No good. Those are for emergency crews to get in, not for some schmucks to get out into a deep, dark elevator shaft."

"Why..." Maria threw her arms up, raising her voice. "Do you know that?"

"I know many things. But not why everyone thinks I'm so codependent."

"For starters," Maria pushed a finger into me; I braced against the wall. "You've been trying to hide your attempted phone calls the *entire* time I've known you, you can't pick up after yourself, you *clearly* don't care about your appearance, and to top it all off, you're fucking weird!"

"Oh, I'm weird? Forgive me, your grace." I mocked her, bowing frantically. "I'm not the one running around like a maniac searching for condoms when the world is *literally* getting blown to pieces in hours."

"Oh my God, seriously? You want to know why I was trying to get my hands on condoms last night?"

I threw my arms out, motioning. “Well, we’re not going anywhere anytime soon. Enlighten me. Since you shut down whenever I try to get to know you. Christ, if I wanted to die talking to a brick wall, I’d go back to Itani’s!”

“Because I wanted to be in control! For once!” She yelled. Maria backed up against the wall, sliding down slowly.

Asshole, I thought.

“I’m sorry, you don’t have to—”

She let out a deep sigh only old men and greasy truckers should be able to. “My parents emigrated when I was little. Just us, and *mi abuela*—my grandmother. My parents worked all the time, so my grandmother and I spent a lot of time together. Hell, she’s the whole reason I became a cosmetologist in the first place, but it was hard sometimes.”

“Oh yeah? How so?” I asked.

“For starters, she only spoke Spanish. My parents forbade her from teaching me when I was a kid. They thought it was making me do poorly in my English classes. I still picked up a good bit, mostly curse words.”

“You’ll have to teach me some.” She playfully hit my arm, and I held hers. Dancing across limbs with my fingers, stopping over ink in the shape of scissors wrapped in thorny flowers. The name *Lupe* ran over one of the blades. “Did you get this for her?”

She nodded. “Among other things. She tried poorly to hide a smile. “Mostly to piss off my dad. All last-minute, and usually poor decisions. Scissors and roses for her, a cat just because, some drunk ones I can’t even explain.”

“What about this one?” Two hands crossed in a pinky promise just under her left wrist.

“I was begging my parents for a tattoo on my sixteenth birthday for *ages*. Their answer was, of course, no. But...”

“But?” I questioned.

“Grandma agreed, on one condition. She knew I was around that age and made me promise that, unless I find a man I want to marry, I had to be safe. *No matter what*.” She paused for a moment, looking me up and down. “I think she’d like you.”

“Sounds like she had good taste. Tell me more.”

“*Anyways*,” she rolled her eyes. “We spent a ton of time together. She taught me how to play Rummy, how to cook, took me to all of my tournaments, and even cut my hair. Then she started getting sick. She stopped being able to do a lot of things she used to, like cutting hair. One day, she says, ‘*Ven cortale el pelo la abuela, Osito*.’” She smiled.

“Which means, come cut Grandma’s hair, little bear.”

“So you’re a bear lady now, huh?”

Maria punched my arm.

“And one day, as I’m coming back from work, they tell me they put Grandma in a home. They did it while I was gone because they knew I would fight like hell. I couldn’t get her out of that place. And, one day, she died. She died, and I wasn’t there, and now everything is worse.” Her voice broke, the harsh light from our phones reflecting wet eyes. She was shaking.

She must be freezing. I gave her my jacket, and she accepted the peace offering graciously with muffled snuffles.

“And my parents force their way over everything. My dad, especially. He even pays my rent.” She rolled up the sleeves of the jacket, pointing at the tattoos covering her arms. “So when I get these, *I get these*. When I decide who to sleep with, or how I sleep with them, I make that choice. *Me*. Nobody else.”

“Sounds like you’re dealing with it pretty well. Not bad, as far as coping mechanisms go.”

She grinned, pointing a finger my way. “Just because we had sex doesn’t make you my therapist.”

“Okay, seriously, I think you need a new therapist.”

“Well, we could pass the time with a session.” Maria crawled on the floor, like an animal stalking its prey. Her fingers tracing lines over my shoulders, toying with the shirt collar. “Are you taking any new clients?” She held her phone close, staring daggers. My heart leapt in my chest; she slowly cut the phone’s light. We passed the time in darkness.

After some time and a lot of heavy breathing, the elevator jerked to life. Lights flickering on in an effort to lead us wary travelers back to safe harbor.

“Oh, thank God!” I exclaimed. We stood, brushing off dust and licking our wounds. The door finally opened, revealing a bald, chubby monk clad in orange robes. *Was I already dead?* He carried a golden forty-bottle in his hands, regarding us silently. Maria’s tousled hair, each with our various scratches and markings. He bowed, handed me the bottle, and wordlessly disappeared into the elevator. *Vow of silence, not temperance, it seems.* Wait. *I saw his face.* I nodded at Maria, and we exited the building.

It should be dark out, but it wasn’t, anything but. The sky was showered in neon pinks, blues, and the assorted rainbow; the streets felt like something ripped straight from a cyberpunk novel. There was a constant drumming, like humanity’s heartbeat. We wade through crowds, arm in arm. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* It felt like I was drunk, already. Maria perused her phone as we stood in line at one of the gated entrances.

"They're saying there was an issue with them drawing power, so some buildings lost it for a few hours until they got things up and running."

Figures. "Supposedly, Disco Armageddon would cost a couple billion dollars to actually put on before all this."

I whistled. They definitely spared no expense.

There were maps plastered all over the walls and windows. Half a dozen rock 'n' roll sections, a mile high club, carnivals, three Oktoberfests, fifty other random categories. *A petting zoo? Animals, I hope.* We were up next, a hard-looking gentleman with grey stubble motioned us forward, reading out from his clipboard.

"Welcome, welcome. Adults only in zones one through four; any caught loitering in five through seven will be punished accordingly. We're still seeking volunteers. If you are uninterested, please step through. Otherwise, volunteers will receive premium alcohol and priority placement during the ball drop—" Maria clapped her hands excitedly, cutting him off and turning to face me with sparkles behind her eyes.

"Let's volunteer, Vincent! I bet it would be fun," she twirled her hair, and pulled at her dress.

Like I would fall for that. "Mark us down as volunteers."

"Excellent." The man said, flipping through pages on his clipboard. It looks like Zone Three, Subsection Thirty-Two, still needs volunteers." He rubbed his chin. "Thems the oldies, just radio in on one of these if any of them collapse before the ball drops." He set a walkie-talkie in my hands and pointed us in the general direction.

It was a blur of skin and slippery footing en route to our destination. Maria's hand was leading the charge, and I couldn't help but look at her instead of our surroundings. Our assignment lay behind a curtained-off section of courtyard. Maria poked her head through the curtain and quickly retreated into safety. Blinking away something horrid.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It can't be that bad." I stepped past the curtain, into an ocean of loose and sagging skin. *Oh my God.* Like an army of mole rats riddled with liver spots. There was a small stage, and a flashy pompadoured man performing to an elderly crowd below. "The old people. They're all...naked. And they're just...going at it." We locked eyes, hoping to erase the horrors we've been witness to. Maria broke first, laughing and desperately gasping for air as she tried to contain herself. It was contagious.

"At least an Elvis impersonator is here." She grabbed my hand, smiling. "Let's go." She disappeared behind the curtain, pulling me with. A corner untouched by skin and sweat was a godsend.

Maria locked her arms over my neck, smiling ear to ear.

There is nothing else but this. Just here, just now, with her and I.

“Will you die with me, Vincent?”

“I’d love to.”

Maria threw her head back in a cackle of laughter that was impossible not to join in.

I was no exception.

Teaching, Testing, and Transforming: University-Community Collaboration for Safe Urban Soils

Raina Clements

Abstract

Urban soil is often overlooked in public and academic spaces despite supporting the majority of the United States population. Many communities that live in urban areas are minorities or low-income. These groups are more likely to experience health issues associated with contamination, and this risk extends to the soil. These contaminants often have the potential to negatively affect human health, and children are especially vulnerable to contaminants due to their smaller frames. However, many urban communities that live on contaminated soil choose to start community gardens due to the many benefits the gardens offer, such as providing a source of food and a sense of community. Most of the risk of urban soil contamination can be mitigated through education. This paper proposes a class which serves to spread information about urban soil contamination to the public and students through a partnership between urban community gardens and academic institutions where students learn about urban soil contamination, engage with the community, travel to a community garden to sample the soil, test samples in a lab, and eventually communicate the results and mitigation measures to the community. This class will educate students and provide them with hands-on experience with urban soil while also educating urban communities and giving them the tools to keep their gardens safe.

Keywords: Urban soil, community gardens, soil contamination, soil health, public health, environmental racism



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INTRODUCTION

Though urban soil only takes up 3% of the land surface on earth (Li, Sun, Ren, Luo, & Zhu, 2018), these areas hold 55% of the human population, with that number expected to rise to 68% by 2050 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2015). Though urban areas in the United States are also 3% of its total land cover (Winters-Michaud, Haro, Callahan, & Bigelow, 2024), it has a greater proportion of its citizens living in cities, with the 2020 census showing that 80% of the population lives in an urban area (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Even with such a large number of people living in cities, urban decay in city centers has led to vacant lots, which people have tried to beautify with the practice of guerrilla gardening. Guerrilla gardening is when people cultivate plants on a piece of neglected property. The goal of this movement is to make unused spaces work for the community and is often seen as an act of social or environmental justice (Sackey, 2021). However, this practice rarely takes into account the health of the soil at the site.

Not only does the public overlook urban soil health, but it is often overlooked in academia and the field of soil science. This can be seen in Table 1, which shows a random survey of five Research 1 (R1) and five Research 2 (R2) universities, also known as doctoral universities. A total of 187 R1 and 140 R2 universities were listed in alphabetical order and assigned a number based on where they fell in the sequence. Then, a random number generator was used to pull an equal number of universities from both the R1 and R2 categories. These universities have high research spending and are more likely to have the resources to study urban soil than other universities. However, only one of these universities had a class directly related to urban soil; West Virginia University offers a course called ESWS 119: Soil in the City (West Virginia University, n.d.). Some of the other universities had no classes available about urban soil, but did have classes about urban ecology or about human-influenced soil. These classes included: ENVS 1555: Local Food Systems and Urban Agriculture and ENVS 1580: Environmental Stewardship and Resilience in Urban Systems (Brown University, n.d.), GEOG 46080: Urban Sustainability (Kent State University, n.d.), BIO 3661: Environment and Human Health (Villanova University, n.d.), ENVS 305: Urban Ecology (Rochester Institute of Technology, n.d.), and BIOL 4110: Urban Ecology (Augusta University, n.d.). These institutions were also checked for peer-reviewed publications regarding urban soils. As seen in Table 1, one of the ten institutions had urban soil research published in a peer-reviewed journal, which was Villanova University (Bassetti, et al., 2023).

A program that is important to mention, but not shown on Table 1, is the Loyola University Chicago School of Environmental Sustainability Urban Agriculture program, which has an outdoor urban garden where students can intern and lead projects. This program seems to be successful, with a wide range of student projects completed, such as proposing a new garden site, data analysis of crop production, and developing a protocol for Good Agriculture Practices food safety guidelines. In addition, the alumni of the Urban Agriculture program have gone on to have careers in related fields such as farmers market manager, rooftop production manager, greenhouse manager, and lab technician (Loyola University Chicago, n.d.). Since most large research institutions do not have classes or labs dedicated to urban soil, it is likely that many smaller universities don't either. This shows that urban soil is a topic that is not widely discussed, even in academia.

University	Courses	Research	Status
Northwestern University			R1
West Virginia University			R1
Loyola University Chicago			R1
Brown University			R1
Kent State University			R1
Loyola Marymount University			R2
West Chester University			R2
Villanova University			R2
Rochester Institute of Technology			R2
Augusta University			R2

Table 1: Urban Soil Presence in Research Institutions.

Source: Data collected from listed universities and table created by author.

Note: In the “courses” column, black indicates a course dedicated to urban soil, gray indicates a course related to urban ecology, and white indicates no urban environment classes. In the “research” column, black indicates a university that has a peer-reviewed urban soil article published, and white indicates a university that does not have a peer-reviewed article about urban soil published.

This paper proposes a service-learning class which will spread crucial information about urban soil health to the public and students through a partnership between urban community gardens and academic institutions where students learn about urban soil contamination, engage with the community, travel to a community garden to sample the soil, test samples in a lab, and eventually communicate the results and mitigation measures to the community.

BACKGROUND

URBAN SOIL

There is disagreement on the exact definition of urban soil in soil science. One commonly accepted definition comes from Phillip Craul, who defined urban soil as “a soil material having a nonagricultural, manmade surface layer more than 50 cm thick that has been produced by mixing, filling, or by contamination of land surface in urban and suburban areas” (1992, p. 86). Later, some use the term anthropogenic soils to more broadly encompass soils altered by humans that aren’t located in urban or suburban areas (Pouyat, et al., 2020). There has even been an effort recently to add a new soil order to the established 12. This proposed soil order is called the Artesol and encompasses soils with human activity as a dominant soil-forming factor (Galbraith, 2022). In this paper, the term urban soil means any soil located in an urban environment. To be more specific, an urban area will be defined as the US Census Bureau defines it, which is as a densely developed area with at least 2,000 housing units or 5,000 people (United State Census Bureau, 2020).

Research on contamination in urban soil has only recently started to pick up due to the potential it has to harm human health (Golia, et al., 2024). Children are especially vulnerable to the potential harm of soil contaminants. Children often play outside, which causes soil to be stirred up, leading them to inhale the contaminated soil. Children may also play in contaminated soil and then eat or put their fingers in their mouths before washing their hands (Lessel, 2016). Children are not fully developed, both physically and mentally, and exposure to contaminants could affect their development (Burke & Ryan, 2001).

There are a few programs that partner community gardens with institutions to assess and amend the soil. A great example of this type of partnership can be seen in Latimer et al., where a community garden was tested for lead contamination. This testing found some problematic spots with high levels of lead contamination. After testing, the gardeners were given a letter that described the findings of the testing along with a map of the contamination sites. The gardeners were also given instructions for how to garden safely in lead-contaminated areas. Knowledge of the contaminated areas led to changes in the community garden, such as converting some spaces to permanent plantings and creating raised beds in areas of high lead levels (Latimer, et al., 2016). Despite the success of and need for programs like these, they are not widespread.

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

The reason programs for addressing urban soil contamination are not widespread is the same reason these areas are so contaminated in the first place: environmental racism. Environmental racism, also known as environmental injustice or environmental inequality, is a term used to describe the fact that areas with a majority of low-income or non-white groups are more likely to be contaminated than other areas (Mohai, et al., 2009).

Environmental racism was exacerbated, in large part, by the practice of redlining, where areas were ranked on a map by quality. The lowest ranking areas could denote two things: either that a black or immigrant community lived in the area, or that there was a known contaminant in the area (Augusta University Online, 2024). Redlining further isolated these communities by depriving the people living in redlined neighborhoods of the resources and economic opportunity that the more highly ranked areas received (City of New York, 2021). The lowest-rated redlining classifications are also associated with a higher number of polluting industrial facilities nearby or in the neighborhoods (Lane, et al., 2022). Many contaminants produced by these industrial facilities, such as heavy metals, are non-degradable (Briffa, et al., 2020). Due to the longevity of some soil pollutants, even if the polluting industry moved away from the neighborhood, a community that lives near a historic industrial site may still feel the effects of that contamination today.

The public began to take notice and care about environmental racism during the civil rights movement in the 1960s, but the environmental justice movement gained more attention in 1982 when a black community was used as a waste site for carcinogenic compounds. This was also the same year that civil rights leader Benjamin Chavis first coined the term environmental racism to explain this phenomenon (Augusta University Online, 2024).

Environmental racism has led to low-income communities being exposed to higher levels of contaminants than other neighborhoods. Testing for contaminants can be very expensive, which makes learning what is in the soil out of reach for many of these disadvantaged communities (Kessler, 2013). One common contaminant in city centers is lead. Even small amounts of this contaminant are linked to developmental delays, difficulty learning, and behavioral problems in children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025), which exacerbate the disadvantages these communities already face.

BENEFITS TO COMMUNITY GARDENS

Urban community gardens are beneficial for underserved communities that may lack money for food or who live in a food desert. A food desert is an area that has both a low-economic status and low food access (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025). These gardens grow produce that provides necessary nutrients to people and allows the opportunity to generate income for the community by selling excess produce. Immigrants can also use urban gardens to grow produce from their homeland that isn't easily found in stores, which helps to fight cultural food insecurity (Otoadese, et al., 2025).

Community gardens are often placed on existing empty lots in neighborhoods. Many urban neighborhoods have vacant lots, which can increase crime, litter, large waste, and other contaminants in the area (Garvin, et al., 2013). These empty lots also reduce the property value of the area (Greenleaf Communities, n.d.). These negative effects are reduced by turning vacant lots into community gardens, while also introducing positive effects such as combating food deserts.

Communities that deal with food deserts often struggle with soil contamination as well. Though community gardens would be a great asset in these communities, people need to be made aware of the potential health hazards lurking in their soil. Growing plants in contaminated soil can be a better alternative than malnutrition, as long as residents are aware of the dangers and take the proper precautions when handling their produce.

SPECIFIC SOIL CONTAMINATION

Contaminated soil is any soil that has an out-of-place chemical or substance present in a concentration higher than it would naturally occur, especially if that contaminant can negatively affect human health (Rodríguez Eugenio, et al., 2018). Heavy metals can contaminate urban soil, which is then used by urban communities for gardens. Heavy metals and metalloids such as mercury and lead slowly build up in the bodies of all living organisms (Golia, et al., 2024). When the concentration is high enough, these heavy metals can increase the risk of cancer, birth defects, neurological problems, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, brain damage, kidney damage, and even death (Jaishankar, et al., 2014). Though there is a risk of these elements accumulating in a person due to eating produce grown in the contaminated soil, the biggest risk is to the gardeners who work in the contaminated soil and consumers who eat unwashed produce from the garden (Lessel, 2016).

What contaminates the soil depends on the history of land use at the site. For example, the first entry in Table 2 shows that the soil near any building that was painted before 1978 is likely to have lead in it. The same table also shows that sites with treated wood may contain arsenic, chromium, copper, and other contaminants in the soil. While rural areas also have soil contaminants, they typically do not experience as much contamination from industry and heavy traffic as urban soil does. Table 2 shows that a history of industry can leave a site contaminated with problematic contaminants such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), arsenic, lead, mercury, asbestos, and many more, depending on the specific industry. However, the most prevalent source of contamination in urban areas is often high-traffic areas, such as well-used roads. This contamination source can bring lead, zinc, and PAHs into the soil (Table 2). This contamination is concentrated around roadways and is much higher in urban areas than anywhere else (Rodríguez Eugenio, et al., 2018). The lead from this source stems from the previous use of leaded gasoline. Though the use of lead is discontinued in gas and paint in the United States, the lead remains in the environment long after the sources are gone (McClintock, 2012).

Most of the contaminants found in urban soil tend not to pose much of a threat if the soil is not too heavily contaminated and the produce is washed before consumption. Contaminants are usually not absorbed very well by food crops, and some contaminants kill plants before they are ready for harvest, before reaching levels that are unsafe for humans (Kessler, 2013). However, there may be exceptions to this rule, and gardeners should research before planting anything in a garden to see if the crop would be efficient at accumulating a contaminant that is suspected or known to be at a site. Though contaminants may not be present in dangerous amounts in garden produce, they still pose a threat to the community through other pathways. This threat mainly comes from ingesting or inhaling contaminated soil (Kessler, 2013). This can happen in the garden while working, or at home if the soil is tracked in through shoes and clothing.

Source	Contaminants
Paint (before 1978)	Lead
High traffic areas/transportation corridors	Lead, zinc, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs)
Treated wood	Arsenic, chromium, copper, petroleum products, phenols, sulfate
Burning wastes	PAHs, dioxins
Coal ash	Molybdenum, sulfur
Sewage sludge	Cadmium, copper, zinc, lead, persistent bioaccumulative toxins (PBTs)
Petroleum spills	PAHs, benzene, toluene, xylene, ethyl benzene
Pesticides	Lead, arsenic, mercury, chlordane and other chlorinated pesticides
Commercial/industrial site use	PAHs, petroleum products, solvents, lead, arsenic, cadmium, chromium, mercury, zinc, asbestos, polychlorinated biphenyls caulks (PCB caulks)
Dry cleaners	Solvents (perchloroethylene, petroleum solvents, Freon), spotting chemicals (trichloroethane, methylchloroform, ammonia, peroxides, hydrochloric acid, rust removers, amyl acetate)
Metal finishing operations	Metals and cyanides
Junkyards/landfills	Metals, petroleum products, sulfate, leachate, nitrates, oils
Stormwater drains and retention basins	Metals, pathogens, pesticides/herbicides, petroleum products, sodium
Chemical/petroleum processing/storage	Hazardous chemicals, solvents, hydrocarbons, heavy metals, asphalt
Railroad yards/fueling areas	Diesel fuel, herbicides, creosote, solvents, waste oils

Table 2: Common Sources of Contamination.

Source: Adapted from EPA’s *Reusing Potentially Contaminated Landscapes: Growing Gardens in Urban Soils and Brownfields* and *Urban Agriculture: Interim Guidelines for Safe Gardening Practices*, as well as Oregon’s *Typical Contaminants from Land Uses / Sources*.

SOIL SAMPLING FOR URBAN CONTAMINANTS

Due to the wide variety of contaminants possible in urban soil, it is difficult to test for all possible contaminants. Not only would the process be lengthy, but it would also be expensive. For example, testing one soil sample for cadmium, copper, lead, nickel, chromium, zinc, arsenic, mercury, molybdenum, and selenium costs \$160, and testing for PAHs can cost \$250 (Kessler, 2013). Plus, having one sample from the garden come back as safe doesn't mean that the rest of the soil is safe as well, since contaminants can occur patchily (Kessler, 2013). If gardeners want to obtain a soil sample on a budget, it is best to target the areas that are most likely to be contaminated, like near old houses, and to combine several samples taken in the garden into one sample to send for testing (Kessler, 2013). Using knowledge of the site's history can also help the sampler determine what contaminants are most likely to occur at the site and what type of sample they should order. If sampling and testing the soil is not possible, it's best to proceed as if the soil is contaminated and follow best management practices when working in the garden.

MITIGATING URBAN SOIL CONAMINANTS

The ideal way to fight soil contamination is prevention. When building a new garden, communities should be on the lookout for common sources of contamination and avoid building the garden near them if possible. For this reason, it is best to have the garden as far from any roads as possible. If site space is limited and it is impossible to build away from a road or railway, building a wall or fence between the corridor and the garden will help to reduce windblown contamination (Environmental Protection Agency, 2011).

When contaminated soil is found, communities need to take action to limit the soil's effect on human health. One way to fight existing soil contamination is to dig up the contaminated soil, cap the ground with an impermeable clay layer, and bring in clean soil from an outside source (Greenleaf Communities, n.d.). Capping with the impermeable clay layer keeps plants from absorbing any contaminants left in the lower soil, while also preventing contaminants from leaching into the groundwater. However, the capping method can be expensive and time-consuming, meaning that it is not an accessible option for the disadvantaged communities living with urban soil contamination. Other solutions that are similar, but more feasible, include laying down a barrier fabric on top of the old soil and adding new soil on top, building a raised bed with clean soil, and adding compost to the contaminated soil, which dilutes contaminants and provides more nutrients

for the plants (Kessler, 2013). It's important to note that new soil or compost that is brought in could be contaminated if it is not from a trustworthy source. It is good practice to test new additions when possible. New material can also gain contamination from the surrounding contaminated soil, such as clean raised beds getting lead-contaminated soil blown in by the wind (Kessler, 2013). Adding mulch to cover the contaminated soil will reduce the amount of dust blown by the wind, as well as offer other benefits like fewer weeds and more soil moisture and organic matter (Kessler, 2013).

Above all, the best way to reduce the health effects of contaminated soil on the beneficiaries of the garden is to follow best management practices. Gardeners should wear gloves while in the garden and make sure to clean their hands after gardening and before eating (Kessler, 2013). It is best to wash dirty hands and tools outdoors, if possible, to reduce the amount of contaminated soil being brought indoors. It is also recommended to store dirty gloves, shoes, and other clothing items outdoors or away from the kitchen and main area of the house. Consumers should wash any produce from the garden before eating it and peel root crops and remove the outer leaves of leafy crops before consumption (Kessler, 2013). Since root crops and leafy crops are in such close proximity to the ground, they are more likely to have a higher concentration of soil on them. While washing this produce is also recommended, it is also highly recommended to remove the outer parts of the crop that were in constant contact with the soil.

While not related to the garden, anyone living near soil contamination should keep in mind that any pets allowed outside may bring contaminated soil into the home through their paws and fur. The amount of dirt brought into the house can be reduced with inside and outside doormats, brushing the pet outside, and even setting up a small station of water and soap to rinse the paws off before the pet is allowed inside.

PROPOSAL

To help combat the urban soil contamination problem and give students urban soil experience, academic institutions should partner with local community gardens and create a class where students assess and amend the garden soil. Students in agriculture or natural resource programs take seated soil classes but can lack opportunities for hands-on experience in the field. Having schools create a half or full semester urban soil evaluation class allows students to receive valuable hands-on experience to prepare them for graduate school or the workforce, and would provide the urban community with the knowledge of what is in their soil.

A flowchart representing the urban soil evaluation course plan is shown in Figure 1. The urban soil evaluation course plan indicates that class would begin with an in-class portion, where the instructor teaches the students soil sampling and testing techniques, as well as common contaminants and remediation techniques in urban soil. The next part of the class would be the fieldwork portion. This is when the students visit the site and talk to locals about the history of the site to determine what contaminants would be the best to test for. On a return trip, students would work directly with community members to sample soil. Then, students would test the soil in the lab at school or send the samples to the right facility. If soil needs to be sent to a different facility for testing, the instructor needs to factor in that time loss to the course plan to ensure the class will be able to finish before the semester ends. If there is extra time while waiting for the soil to process, the class can begin discussing potential remediation plans depending on how the results turn out.

When the results come back, the class will discuss the results and what they mean. If the soil is contaminated above safe levels, students will assess if there is anything they can do to amend the soil. Students will communicate their findings to the community. If the mitigation measures are within the school's means, the students can work directly with the community to make the garden safe. If the mitigation measures aren't within the school's means, the students will put together a plan for the community to follow to reduce the risk to human health. Such recommendations can include wearing gloves while gardening, thoroughly washing produce, keeping children away from the contaminated soil, and other similar actions which would reasonably be within the community's means. If the soil is safe, then the students will inform the community as such. In both the safe and unsafe soil scenarios, students can also do a basic nutrient analysis to give fertilizer recommendations to the gardens as time and resources allow. This proposed course could also be integrated into the universities' preexisting volunteer or service-learning programs to give students more opportunities to gain service hours and understand the importance of community engagement.

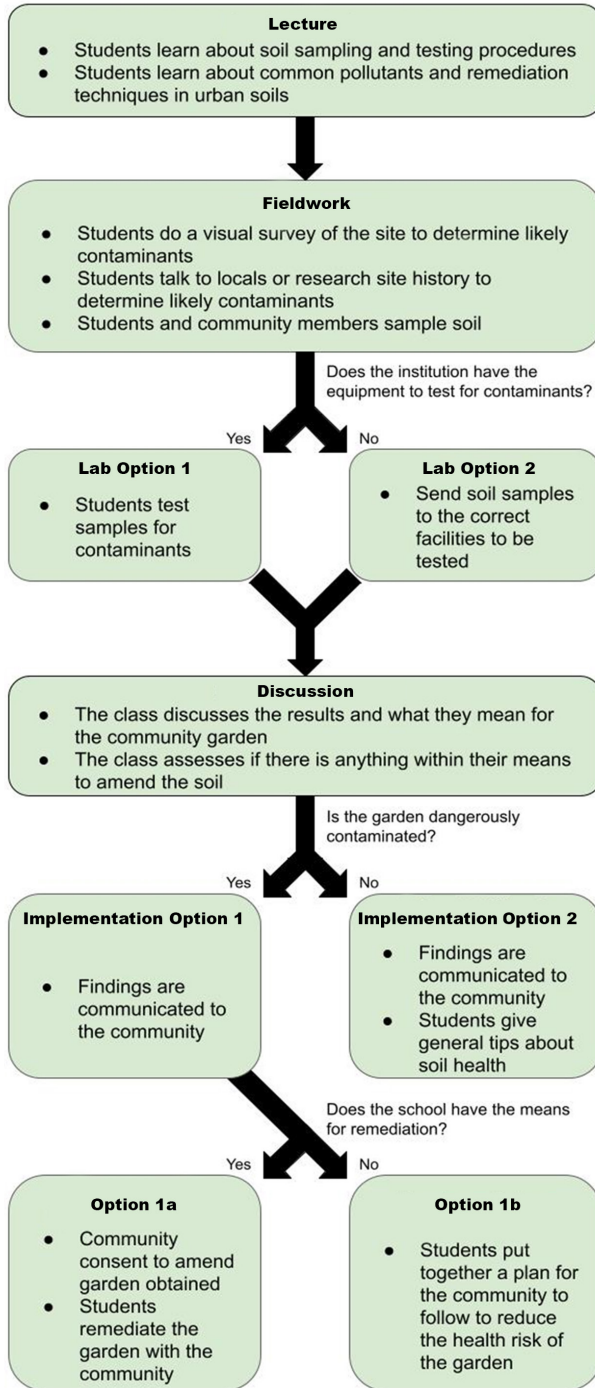


Figure 1: Urban Soil Evaluation Course Plan.

Source: Proposed course plan developed by author.

CHALLENGES

AFFORDIBILITY

The prohibitive expense of soil contamination tests was brought up earlier in this paper and poses a problem for the proposal. Some institutions may already have the equipment needed to test for soil contaminants, but if they do not, they would have to send the samples to be tested by other institutions. The urban soil evaluation class would educate students on a relevant topic in natural resources that is not often taught in schools, provide students with necessary experience in their field, and paint the school in a sustainable light. These factors make the class eligible for different grants and funds provided by different organizations. For example, Missouri State University, a public university in Springfield, Missouri, has a sustainability fund that could assist with financing tests. This fund offers over \$100,000 a year for student sustainability projects, which is funded by a \$2 fee every semester (Missouri State University, n.d.). The school covers the cost of the traditional lecture section, so the only part left to cover would be the cost of the soil test each year, which would take almost nothing out of the total sustainability fund. If Missouri State University, which is neither an R1 nor R2 institution, has this fund, it is viable for other schools to buy the tests needed for the urban soil class.

MINORITY COMMUNITIES' DISTRUST OF INSTITUTIONS

Some may argue that minority communities may distrust institutions' intentions and could be afraid to partner with them. It is true that institutional distrust is more common in minority and low-income communities (Best, et al., 2021), and many institutions, including higher education institutions, have a history of discrimination against minority groups. This is a fact that needs to be addressed in order to work effectively with these communities. Institutions need to put in the work to foster a trusting relationship between themselves and the surrounding community. An honest and open dialogue about the realities of the project is the first step. Stressing the danger of being unaware of what is in the soil is important as well, but it is equally important to avoid fearmongering and show that, above all, the institution wants to help the community and not take away their source of food and connection. One way to build trust is to partner with an existing community group or a nonprofit that helps that community. This way, the institution has a connection with a group that the community already knows and trusts, showing that the academic institution is trustworthy as well.

One way to build a positive relationship between the academic institution and the community is to involve community members in as many parts of the program as possible. For example, members of the urban community can easily be a part of the soil sampling and site visual assessment, as well as the later implementation portion. Working with students and talking with them about these steps in the project will help community members feel involved. Schools can also change the proposed class so community members can be a part of the discussion portions, such as discussing the results of the lab. It is important that the professor and students maintain informed consent throughout the entire process and always respect the community's wishes. In addition, it is important to hear the community's goals for the garden. This will help the class focus on what areas need what type of treatment in the discussion phase. In the end, the community is the one deciding what does and what does not happen in its garden. Academic institutions should start with the most willing urban communities, and hopefully, word about how those communities were positively impacted by the program will spread and convince those who had reservations.

STUDENT SAFETY

Urban areas can often have a reputation for being physically unsafe for many people. Areas that people view as unsafe and areas that truly have a higher crime risk are often disconnected, with people seeing physical signs of neglect, like trash and broken windows, as frightening instead of the actual criminal activity in the area (Zhang, et al., 2021). While this preconception is harmful for people in the community, a student should never be made to enter an area that makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. A student who wishes to abstain from visiting the site must still attend classes and be a part of the lab work and discussion, but they can be given an alternative assignment for field trip days. For example, students could research the site history of the area they were supposed to visit, along with laws and policies in that area regarding soil health and contamination. This type of alternative assignment allows these students to gain more background knowledge on the area, something which they could use to contribute to the later discussion portion of the class. These alternative assignments can be given to any student who misses a field day for any reason.

LACK OF SUITABLE SITES

A school only has so many communities with gardens in a reasonable driving distance, so it could be believed that the sampling pool would run

dry after a few semesters. However, this is incorrect. Soils change often, and communities bring in outside inputs, such as compost, to their gardens (Malone, et al., 2023). As such, it is beneficial for community gardens to be sampled once a year. Additionally, the proposed class can be altered to find new sites for communities that are interested in starting a garden. Students can observe the proposed areas and start with a visual assessment to select the most suitable site. Then, the same pattern of soil sampling and testing can occur. If the soil is healthy, the community can proceed with its plans to make a garden. If it is not healthy, the students and community can choose a new spot, or the students can suggest practices to limit exposure to contaminants.

CONCLUSION

Although urban soil does not take up much land surface, it supports a large portion of the human population. When soil is unhealthy, it can negatively impact the health of the people living around it. This is why awareness around urban soil is so important. Creating a class where students get out in the field and work with an urban community in their garden is imperative to educating both groups on urban soil health. Such a class would benefit both academic institutions and urban communities. The information communicated to the urban community gives them the knowledge needed to use the soil safely and empowers them to continue to grow their own food with peace of mind. This class would be a valuable resource for students by giving them the opportunity to engage in field and lab work. This class also has the benefit of giving students experience in communicating with the public regarding complex scientific topics. The urban soil evaluation class can get students more comfortable with research settings, which could make them more likely to seek out lab work and eventually even graduate school.

Besides the creation of the proposed class, universities can advance knowledge of urban soil with further research. Researchers must continue to study urban soil contamination, as a deeper understanding of the topic is needed due to the proximity of urban soil to human populations. While disinvestment has taken resources away from many urban areas, universities have the ability and responsibility to step up and help their surrounding communities. Outreach regarding urban soil health is especially important to educate the public on how to use their soil in a safe and sustainable way. Programs like the one proposed in this paper are a step in the right direction and should be pursued for the betterment of human and soil health.

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Glitches: Discovery, Study and Future of Sudden Increases in Pulsar Rotational Periods

Samuel Cope

Abstract

Pulsars are among the strangest objects in the universe. Their high mass, rotational velocity, and density are behind one of the most regular cyclical events in astronomy. Not all pulsars are so consistent, though, and the sudden increases in rotation that these pulsars exhibit are called glitches. This review discusses the discovery of these glitches and the subsequent theories and models explaining the mechanisms behind them. These models can constrain the known parameters of pulsar structures and predict the observation of new gravitational waves.

Keywords: pulsar glitches, pulsar rotational period, gravitational waves, quantum vortex



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BACKGROUND

NEUTRON STARS AND PULSARS

Stars exist in a delicate balance between two opposing forces: gravitational compression and thermal pressure from nuclear fusion in the core. In the final stages of a massive star's life, fusion in the core ceases, leaving gravity as the dominant force. This leads to the catastrophic collapse of the core, triggering a supernova explosion. If the star's mass falls between 9 and 25 solar masses—large enough to undergo a supernova but not massive enough to form a black hole—the remnant left behind is a neutron star [1].

Neutron stars are a superdense star remnant, with a mass of about one and a half suns in a radius of about 10 ten kilometers on average [2]. The collapse of a previous star between 9 and 25 solar masses is what results in this super dense form of matter, made up of mainly neutrons [1]. During formation, the rotation of the original star's core is conserved as it collapses, resulting in the neutron star having rotational speeds of around 1.4 milliseconds to 8.5 seconds [2]. Neutron stars also have very strong magnetic fields, leading to the neutron stars funneling radiation into beams coming out of their magnetic poles [Fig. 1]. These poles are not necessarily aligned with its axis of rotation, leading to the beams moving in a circular motion. When the beams cross the line of sight and are observable, this results in a periodic signal [2]. These neutron stars are called pulsars.

GLITCHES

Pulsars have extremely stable rotation rates due to their high moment of inertia, their resistance to changes in rotation. Their high moment of inertia is due to their high mass and spin. Pulsars have also been observed to slowly spin down, that is, they very slowly lose their rotational speed. This is thought to be caused by the energy of the star being emitted in electromagnetic and possibly gravitational waves [3]. Sudden increases in pulsar rotation, accompanied by faster spin-down rates, have been observed. Such quick variations in the pulsar's rotation are called glitches, the first of which were observed in the Vela [4,5] and Crab [6,7] pulsars in 1969.

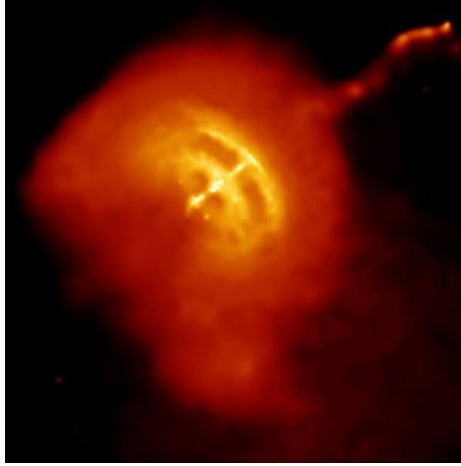


Figure 1: Chandra image of the Vela Pulsar, funneling radiation into beams coming out of its magnetic pole.

Source: [8]

The increase in rotation period is small. For example, the first observed Vela pulsar glitch had an observed period increase of 134 nanoseconds. After the glitch, pulsars usually return to the default state of slowly spinning down, but returning to their original spin period pre-glitch can take days to years [9]. After the discovery of glitches, many different models have been proposed as the drivers of these events [9]. The two most accepted of these will be discussed, along with a variation of the second model. To understand these two major models of pulsar glitches, one must first understand the current theory of neutron star structure.

STRUCTURE

Generally, a neutron star is made up of an outer crust made of nuclei and electron plasma, along with a superfluid interior made of mainly neutrons. Past this, the composition and nature of the neutron star are mostly unknown but are thought to possibly be a quark-gluon plasma [Fig. 2]. What makes the superfluid interior special is the fact that it has zero viscosity and so can flow indefinitely when not acted upon. The specifics of the star's structure depend on the model used, but most models agree on the general structure [9].

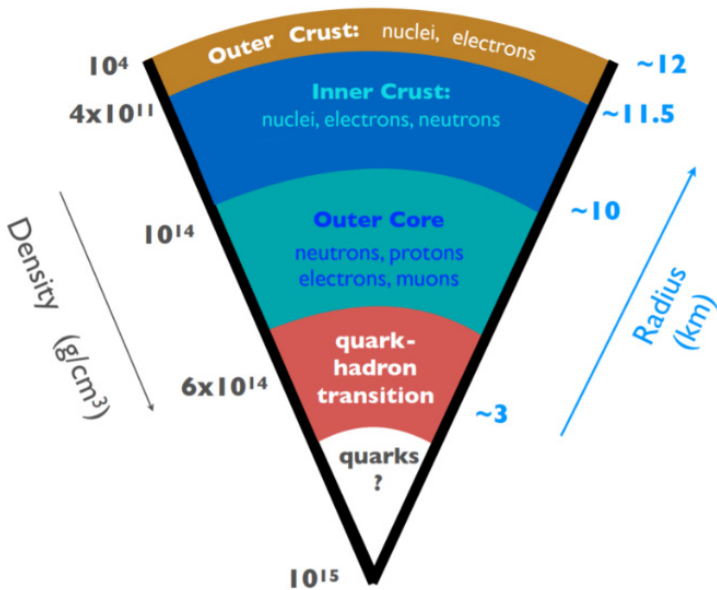


Figure 2: Structure of a neutron star, specifically depicting the layers of quark-gluon plasma.
Source: [10]

The main difference between the models is the neutron matter’s equation of state. This equation determines the state of matter of the neutrons depending on the conditions they are in. This affects the star’s mass-radius relation, the thickness of each layer, and more [9]. The outer crust is a crystalline-like material, made up of nuclei in a lattice, and immersed in a plasma of free electrons [9]. The exact composition and configuration of the crystal-like lattice are still uncertain [3].

NUCLEAR PASTA

Deeper in the star, at higher densities (about $1.6 \times 10^{14} \text{ g cm}^{-3}$) the solid crust transitions to a fluid of electrons, nucleons, and possibly muons [3]. Depending on the equation of state, the change between the crust and the fluid may be sudden or gradual. In the latter case, the nuclei begin to arrange into rods and then sheets of what is referred to as nuclear “pasta” [3]. The exact nature of the structure and transitions between the pulsar’s layers can affect how glitches are manifested. Because of this, the specifics of a neutron star’s glitch can inform observers about the star’s internal properties [13]. The parameters of the pulsar’s internal structure can be constrained by different glitch models, which are discussed next.

THEORIES

STARQUAKES

The first of two possible mechanisms for pulsar glitches is the starquake. In this model, starquakes are driven by stress accumulated due to the centripetal deformation, which is the change in shape of an object as it spins, of the inner superfluid layer as the star spins down. Since the crust formed prior to this deformation, it releases elastic energy as its bulge adjusts to the slower rotation of the inner layer. This contraction of the crust decreases the star's moment of inertia. This decrease leads to the spin increasing and causes the observed glitch [Fig. 3].

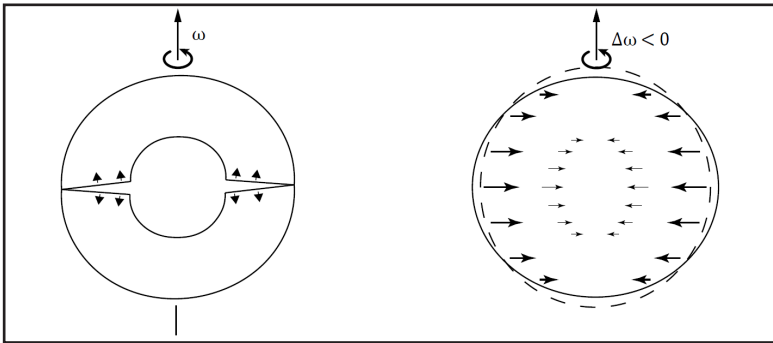


Figure 3: Left: deformation of the pulsar stresses the crust and causes an opening, which triggers the starquake. Right: the pulsar's deformation as it spins down.

Source: Adapted from [11]

A key issue with the starquake model is its inability to account for the larger and more frequent glitches observed in the Vela pulsar and in other pulsars like it. Despite this limitation, research on starquake models persists, as they may still serve as a useful part of explaining what causes the smaller, less frequent glitches in some neutron stars. Starquakes may also serve as a trigger for the next glitch mechanism theory: superfluid vortex unpinning. This second mechanism, in turn, might additionally drive energetic events in magnetars—neutron stars with exceptionally strong magnetic fields [11].

VORTEX UNPINNING

In the Vortex Unpinning model, the rotating superfluid layer creates quantum vortices, which lie along the pulsar's rotation axis. These vortices are special because they have an integer quantized number for angular momentum and so are referred to as integer quantum vortices (IQVs) [12].

The pulsar’s non-superfluid layer, or crust, gradually slows its spin, releasing energy through electromagnetic and gravitational waves. However, the superfluid layer, due to its superfluidity, continues to rotate at the previous, faster rate, causing a growing disparity in the rotational speeds of the two layers. To slow down and match the crust’s rotation, the superfluid releases individual IQVs. If these vortices are released one by one, the superfluid’s rotation would gradually synchronize with the crust’s speed, resulting in a smooth rotational change. This smooth process, however, cannot explain the occurrence of glitches [12].

To get around this problem, the IQVs are assumed to pin to nuclei, which are the imperfections in the crust. The glitches are thought to be caused by a spontaneous unpinning of many vortices [Fig. 4(a)] from their nuclei in an “avalanche.” Since this model fits the most observed glitches, it is the most widely accepted mechanism [9]. However, it’s often necessary to use phenomenological parameters, which are variables used in modeling to describe phenomena in a manner consistent with fundamental theory without being derived from the theory. The use of these parameters to explain the momentum transfer from the core to the crust is a topic surrounded by considerable uncertainty and ongoing debate [12]. While adding these parameters may be a contentious solution, a similar and more recent model attempts to address this issue.

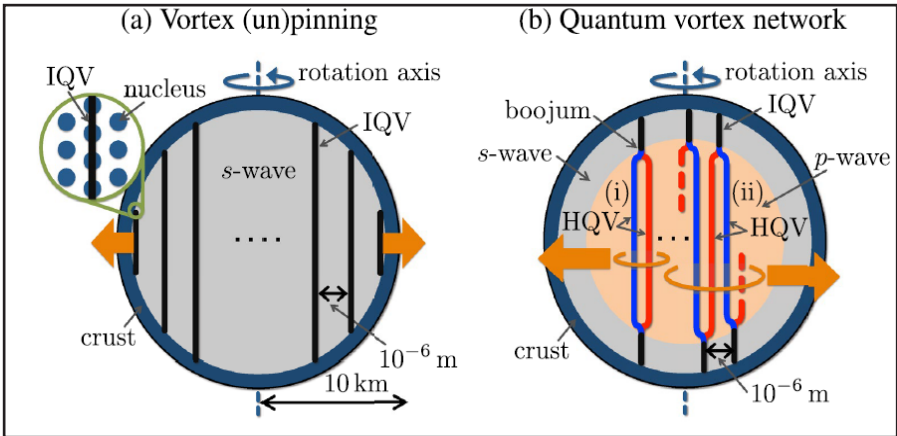


Figure 4(a): Standard Vortex (un)pinning model. **4(b):** Vortex Network model. Red and blue are to distinguish positive and negative HQVs, respectively.

Source: [12]

QUANTUM VORTEX NETWORKS

In the Quantum Vortex Network model, the Cooper pairs of neutrons (the pairing that enables the superfluid state with almost zero viscosity), pair in s-waves and p-waves [12]. The s-wave pairings dominate in lower density regions, and p-waves in higher density regions. This results in an outer layer of s-wave paired superfluid, and an inner layer of p-wave paired superfluid [Fig. 4(b)]. The important detail is that the p-wave fluid has half-quantized vortices (HQVs), while the q-wave fluid still has integer quantized vortices. The connections between the q and p waves at the layer boundary are called “boojums”, where two HQVs in the p-wave superfluid connect to one IQV [12].

If two HQVs connect to one IQV on either end, the same problem from the standard vortex unpinning model emerges, where one set can form at a time and keep the rotational speed difference between the layers small [12]. But if the HQVs and IQVs pair up in an offset manner, they instead form a network of vortices of varying size that can build up and release, leading to neutron star glitches of varying magnitudes [Fig. 4(b)]. In this case, extra parameters are not needed to explain the spontaneous unpinning of many vortices, as a network can form and release the same amount of energy without the need to be pinned to the crust [12]. Newer models like this one can provide additional insight into the interior workings of pulsars and constrain their parameters.

APPLICATIONS

STRUCTURAL INSIGHT

As new models are introduced to the literature and are constrained by a growing number of observations, the models should get closer to approximating the real structure and behavior of pulsar structures. While there are still unanswered questions, and the models don't line up with all observations, the understanding of what causes pulsar glitches should improve with additional observations. How the standard vortex pinning model can be used to constrain the mass of the modeled pulsar is found in [13]. On top of this, a new avenue for probing the properties of extreme objects has only recently entered the scientific arena.

GRAVITATIONAL WAVES

Glitches theoretically emit detectable Gravitational waves (GWs), which can serve as a new source of data to learn more about what causes these energetic events. Glitches theoretically emit two types of GWs. First Broadband GWs from the glitch itself are emitted. They occur when a large amount of energy is released by a disruptor (either starquakes or unpinning vortices). Second are Continuous GWs, which are emitted during post-glitch recovery [3]. Any GWs that are detected will further constrain current theoretical models, further exploring the nature of glitching pulsars.

Out of the observed catalog of glitches, 5–10 percent are detectable to current generation gravitational wave interferometers (LIGO, VIRGO, and KAGRA) in their fourth or fifth observing run [14]. Next-generation detectors, such as the Einstein Telescope or Cosmic Explorer, could detect 35–40 percent of past observed glitches [14]. As these detectors increase in sensitivity, they will also set upper limits on detectable GWs from glitches if none are found.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the standard vortex unpinning model remains the most accurate and widely accepted explanation for pulsar glitches. However, many questions about the precise causes of glitches, as well as the internal composition and structure of neutron stars, remain unresolved. Despite these uncertainties, emerging fields like gravitational wave astronomy, along with further electromagnetic observations of pulsar glitches, will provide new constraints on existing models, advancing our understanding of glitching pulsars.

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Crimson Reunion

Jasmine deGroat

Abstract

Recently, the world has felt cloaked in red—the red of sorrow, loss, and degradation. In this blaze, many have started relying on “romanticization.” There are countless tutorials about how to romanticize all aspects of mortality: cleaning, cooking, studying, self-care. Through these, as a society, we have learned to numb ourselves enough to handle the pain of living life. “Crimson Reunion” is a story of what happens when that numbness no longer suffices. The story follows a lonely and isolated main character through her attempts to stay connected with her humanity. At the story’s opening, the narrator is swaddled in routine and “little joys” that she jots in her journal. However, as the piece progresses, the narrator’s rose-tinted glasses prove not to be enough to cloak her true needs and desires. Most know romanticization as a trend, a coping mechanism shared by billions. But what happens when it is stretched to its thinnest? What are the consequences of its failure? As we explore unprecedented times, I hope this story answers those questions and reminds readers of the limits of romanticizing life instead of addressing your most important necessities. For instance, it does not matter how many good songs one listens to or how many journals one keeps...if one does not stay fed.



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As the city's people crawled from their wallpapered caves to soak in the sunshine, I pulled a deckchair off the balcony, deeper into my study and away from the bright sky. I tried to enjoy the sunshine, truly. There was obviously beauty in it. My gaze reached past the broad hat that covered my face and kept my long, blonde hair from my eyes. The city looked less stale on the rare winter days when the sun would make an appearance, but I often did not venture out of my way to appreciate the sensation. Instead, I lounged beyond the balcony's open French doors in a matching sundress and lacey gloves that kept my skin protected from the chilly breeze.

In the streets below, families and friends enjoyed the company of the coming spring. It would soon be time to move into my mansion further north, away from the bustle of tourism that came with warmer weather and better waters. Once, I would have been glad to join them. There would always be a younger voice in my ear urging for the freedom and life of the familiar city below, but no one knew me there anymore. I had been alive far too long for that. The only souls who knew me as more than a legend were those who kept my life in order: the nice grocery delivery boy and the handful of contractors that I paid handsomely to keep my coastal home in order while I hid further north.

The seclusion was often tolerable and occasionally even preferred to the bustle I saw below. The walls spoke their own language, and the garden looked more mesmerizing at night anyway. I cooked whatever I wanted, pulling herbs from their small pots in the kitchen and singing as I cut into my raw steak. It whispered to me of a life I had not lived since I was young: A life in which there had always been someone by my side, laughing with me in the sun. A life in which I read entire shelves of books and let the waves purge my soul under the moon. A life in which I had wanted to live forever. Now it seems clear that I had been foolish.

Yet I continued. Every day, I tried to find something new to enjoy so that I could jot it in my journal as a reminder. The list was not nearly exhaustive, but it kept me from losing hope. As I sat, cloaked from the sun, I clicked open a pen and flipped the black-bound book to my most recent page. Under "the smell of basil," I wrote in tight script, "the joy of others," a bitter ghost of a smile on my lips as I did. A warm breeze danced through the white curtains, and my lips drooped into a frown. Spring was coming faster than I had realized. I was going to miss my deadline if I did not move soon.

By nightfall, I had packed my bags. I never took a substantial number of things with me, only those which I deemed essential: clothes, toiletries, and a suitcase of books.

Groceries and other necessities would be delivered to my other residence by a kindly old man whom I had hired many seasons ago. The housekeepers, delivery boys, and contractors had all been notified of my arrival twice—once a week ago and once today. I continuously stressed the importance of my seclusion, and they stayed respectful of my needs. Yet, worry kicked its feet against my throat like a child begging for attention.

Every year, the winters got shorter, and the time I spent in peace shaved thinner. This year was the earliest I had ever moved north. In fact, they had not been expecting me for another month. It was mortal nature to fumble with change. The nice housekeeper could have missed my messages, and he could still be in the house when I arrived. As I unlocked the garage, my anxiety swarmed my old station wagon. It was supposed to be serviced next week to ensure it would make the drive. It had never climbed into the mountains without getting a proper tune-up first.

A sigh split my lips.

I knew a mechanic in the north just as I knew a mechanic here by the sea. The beat-up old rig had lasted me nearly two decades; it would make at least one more trip to the mountains. I had left the housekeeper a voicemail, and he would be home for the weekend anyway. The tension in my shoulders eased slightly as the car revved to life. I had loaded my bags, locked the doors, and otherwise done everything I could to ensure a smooth transition. Still, though, I spent my hours on the road brooding over the uncertainties of a ruptured schedule.

The drive from the coast to the mountains was pleasant, especially at night when there were rarely any other cars on the road and the tight curves begged just enough attention to draw me away from my tumultuous thoughts. As usual, I turned onto my long driveway an hour before dawn. I frowned at the tunnel of overgrown limbs as the wheels crunched across the gravel drive. Just as I had worried, my early arrival had caught the keeper off guard. As I came around the corner, I noticed the bushes in front of the house were much larger than I had ever seen them as well. The three-story home was supposed to be nestled into the woods, not swallowed by them, I thought, shoving the car into park.

I paid the man good money to have my property looked after when I could not do it myself. As long as I had been supporting him, I expected better. Letting the frustrated thoughts simmer in the back of my brain, I grabbed my night bag from the passenger seat and pulled myself out of the vehicle. My back straightened without protest, and I slammed the door to be sure it would latch. Had the keeper been doing his job at all? Or did he only get everything in shape by the time I arrived, not lifting a finger before then?

I stomped up the steps and raised my eyes to find the front door slightly open. I growled.

Could he do nothing right?

I pushed past the open door and blanched as a sweet, putrid smell, like the aroma of rotting fruit, assaulted my nostrils. I scanned the entryway, my muscles frozen. My mouth began to water, and I licked my lip. The smell was coming from the second story, tumbling down the staircase before me to skip around my nose like a plump child. I set my bag on the ornate table by the door to scale the stairs slowly. My eyes did not blink, nor did I breathe, as I breached the top step to find a man sprawled across the carpet, his neck twisted at an angle that was not mortally possible. A ladder was splayed at his feet, shattered lightbulbs glimmering against the floor.

I only knew him by his voice, but it was certainly the housekeeper, and he was certainly dead.

I stared down at the man's body without moving even to breathe. I swallowed the saliva collecting on my tongue as my brain grasped for a cognitive thought. I strained against myself, wanting both to bolt from the home and leap onto the man. His eyes were foggy and rolled partially into his skull. I sniffed the air, drawing in the smell of death very slowly. I had not been so close to another person in years—nay, decades. My hand twitched, begging to touch his peppered hair and feel human skin again. He was so close and so still. He could not turn away from me, call me heartless, or abandon me.

What if this was my only chance?

The front door creaked, and I jumped into the air, my frozen indecision shattering across the carpet. Before I could lock eyes with him again, I darted down the stairs, trying and failing to reinstate my breathing. I had never considered this as a possibility. In all the scenarios I had envisioned and all the emergencies I had planned for, mortality had never entered my thoughts. I clawed my way out of the house, literally gripping the walls until I broke away from the porch and regained my breath in the front seat of my station wagon. There was a man in my house, and he was dead. Contacting the authorities meant interacting with more people than I had even spoken to in the last several decades. Not contacting the authorities meant leaving that man in my house.

I looked back at the now-closed door, and the siren call of another being's presence ran its fingers across my collarbone. He had not been found or missed yet. What could it hurt to stay with him? A spike of humanity shoved its way into my chest. That was foolish! Eventually, someone would come looking for him.

Eventually, there would be more people here, and that would put us all in danger. I glanced up at the brightening sky. Without another thought, I brought the car to life and tore out of the driveway.

I was not responsible for the man's death, but I would soon become a suspect. Whether I told the authorities or not, they would come looking for me, and they would not like what they found. *No one ever has.* The road broke away from the canopied limbs of the forest, and the sky suddenly felt like a prison. The spreading sunshine and cars on the road were wardens patrolling my cell, grinning at me through the bars. My hands tightened on the steering wheel as I sat at a red light. No one knew my face or name; no one knew what I drove, and yet I knew there were eyes on me, watching, seeing. My gaze flicked from window to window, car to car, but my heart was still tense with fear. I turned out of the town without breathing, back towards the coast.

There was nowhere else for me to go.

Where else could I possibly go?

The lightening sky was quickly silenced by a heavy blanket of dark clouds. A rumble of thunder accompanied me down the mountain, separated from the rain by a mile or so the whole way. Even the weather beckoned me home. Maybe this was a sign that a summer on the sea would not be so bad. Maybe I would learn to enjoy the bustle that came with it all. Certainly, I would love to feel the ocean again. Maybe this whole endeavor was fate's intervention. Not a derailment, but a chance.

I used the hours of curvy roads and steady thunder to convince myself that the man's milky eyes were not following me. In the hours beyond those, I tried to come up with a plan. The evening's golden sighs swept across the landscape as I drew in a deep breath and chugged up my driveway.

What a mess mortality had created.

I parked the car inside the old boat shed I took for a garage and waited another hour for the sun to settle beyond the horizon. My thoughts coalesced into something more substantial as I waited. Lugging my bags back into my grandiose home, a plan finally surfaced.

In the morning, I called the authorities and confessed my concerns: I had been trying to reach my contractor to ensure my summer property was ready for my arrival, but he had been uncharacteristically silent. I knew he could hold his own, but he was old, and I was worried. He had no family! What if something had happened to him!? It was too far of a drive for me to make more than once a season. They suggested doing a wellness check. I eagerly agreed, insisting they keep me updated, and hung up the phone.

Less than an hour later, they called me back. I closed the curtain I had been peering out of and reached for my mobile without a thought. I sighed before answering and let worry play with my voice, tightening it to the point of breaking as I said hello.

A woman greeted me gently. She continued on to explain that an older man had been found in my home, his neck broken from a fall. He had likely been dead for a week, and I had done the right thing in calling. The death would most certainly be declared an accident. I did not need to worry about the safety of my home, but it would take considerable time to document the scene. Much less remove the smell, I thought. The officer continued to describe the situation, and I choked out a fake sob, insisting on covering any funeral costs and agreeing to stay on the coast for now.

The nice woman gave me her condolences, and I hung up the phone.

My eyes rolled from the screen back to the window, my hand returning the phone to where it had rested minutes before. Stillness reclaimed the space immediately, not even allowing me to relish in my accomplishment. Rain tapped against the window, having finally caught up to me, but the city below paused for nothing. Cars piled with luggage found their way through the storm to the rows and rows of rentals down on Broadway. Throughout the day, I watched as each colorful home filled with people and things. Mothers in soaked sundresses, couples with scuffed surfboards, children with beach toys—they wanted everything life had to offer in my little town, from the rain to the sea. The only one hiding from it was me.

An ache began to form behind my eyes, and my stomach gurgled angrily. I picked up my phone again. By the time I had finished reinstating my grocery deliveries, the ache had become nearly unbearable. I let my hair down and changed into a silky nightgown. My bedroom was at the heart of the second floor, as far removed from the city as I could get without leaving the home. Without any windows or balconies or beckoning doors, I thought I could get some rest. But the day crept on, and I could only imagine what it would have been like to feel his hair.

My eyes recreated the man's image on the ceiling, and I found beauty in him everywhere. His skin, his hair, even his eyes were silky. What a fool I had been not to reach out to him and hold him in my arms. The smell of death should not have kept me away. Death was possibly the only one who understood loneliness as I did; he would not have blamed me for finding security in a man he had already taken. I bet he had taken him for me. He had taken him, so I may have the chance to love something that would not run away. It had been a gift, and I had wasted it.

I rolled onto my side, pulling my long legs up to my chest in an attempt to cradle the little, shattered heart I had left. My eyes stayed open, studying the old floral wallpaper. There had to be a way to take it back or at least make the most of my mistake. I thought of the city below and all the people I had seen persisting in the rain. A familiar longing grew like a hunger in the pit of my chest. I wanted to laugh like them, love the rain and the sea like them, make the most of every drop like them. I wanted to feel human again, and I wanted to feel human touch again. I sat up slowly, scanning the dark room for anything that would tell me no. Instead, my gaze landed on my open suitcase and the sundress spilling out of it.

A shy smile pulled at my lips, unsure of its warrant until I sat up amid my scarlet sheets. Going down to the city did not necessarily mean interacting with anyone. It would only be a change of scenery. The tourists would be shored up for the evening, and if I went tonight, I could avoid the hordes that would be arriving over the next few weeks.

The hill pass was too dangerous for the tourists, especially at night. It took familiarity to navigate it at all and an acute level of expertise to find your way in the dark. It led straight to the water.

I could feel the sea again.

My smirk split into a beaming smile, and I pulled myself out of the bed.

I spent the remaining daylight getting ready. I fluttered in and out of the bathroom, pinning up my hair, picking out the appropriate shoes, and singing to the record I had thrown on. I had not kept makeup in the house for many, many years, and I had not wished for it in a number of years beyond that. But, for the first time in a long time, I longed to add a splash of color to my cheeks or lips. No one will see it anyway, I thought, dismissing the desire with a playful roll of my eyes. I only had to be beautiful enough for myself, and that translated simply to comfort. After dusting off my flats and making the final readjustments to my dress, I sat in the study to watch the sunset. I expected my stomach to protest or my fingers to twitch with worry, but I waited rather contentedly.

I had never imagined reuniting with the sea. The life I lived had been perfectly crafted to avoid its beaches and all the people that came with them. It was safer that way. But I could not take death's gift for granted. I could make it to the waves unbothered if I followed the less trodden path. I could finally leave my self-established confinement for a breath of salty air, far from the restraints of my sheets or bars of my windows. Even the hunger in my stomach had ceded to the excitement.

Death's gift had finally come back around. Without it, I would be in the bowels of my summer home, likely staring at the ceiling in a daze, bored and alone. Now I had a chance to prove I was more than a prisoner or a ghost or some other monster. I was still human.

The sun settled beyond the horizon, taking the clouds with it. I watched the stars appear and tourists fade away from my perch on the balcony. Once the world had surely fallen asleep, I rose from my place. I closed and locked the balcony doors, leaving the key atop the room's only desk. In the foyer, I stared at the door for multiple breathless seconds in an attempt to recall anything I would need or possibly just to stall time. Many, many things could go wrong. But the sea awaited me, and I had stood her up for too long. With that thought, I opened the door.

In the driveway before me was a cart attached to an electric bike. Several brown grocery bags were visible beyond the cart's high walls, and a tall, young man stood beside them with one balanced on his hip. His skin was rich like caramel and untouched by time. His eyes shifted from his work at the cart up to me, frozen at the top of the stairs. He fumbled for words, raising one of his hands to accent his apology. I caught sight of his veins as he did. They were thick like licorice and pulsing with his panicked heartbeat. I strained to keep hold of my breath, but it stopped altogether when he shifted to pick up another bag.

Everything about the boy, from his sun-kissed hair to his well-worked hands, was young and alive. I could smell his sweat from the deliveries he had been making all day, and the fear of seeing someone he had never believed to be real. This was the first time he had ever interacted with me, much less seen my face. He lifted the sacks from the cart and turned to put them on the steps where he always left them. I saw his mouth moving, but the words were drowned out by his pulse in my ears. His heart beat at a panicked pace, pumping the blood through his body like a well-oiled machine, free of age and defects. The hunger crept up my throat, pooling in my cheeks.

He looked up at me worriedly from the base of the stairs. His lips moved, asking me if I was alright. My vision sharpened. I could see the fuzz on his neck that pulsed with every heartbeat. The salt of the sea was replaced by the burnt stink of his fear. My muscles tightened against the restraint of my willpower. He brought his foot up one step, and my remaining tie to humanity snapped. My fangs pressed against my bottom lip, into the porchlight, and my claws slid from their sheaths. I flung myself onto him, my teeth plunging into his neck before he could release his cry for help. Blood welled up in my mouth, and I felt warm for the first time in decades.

I Used to Believe in Unicorns

Gabby Glamkowski

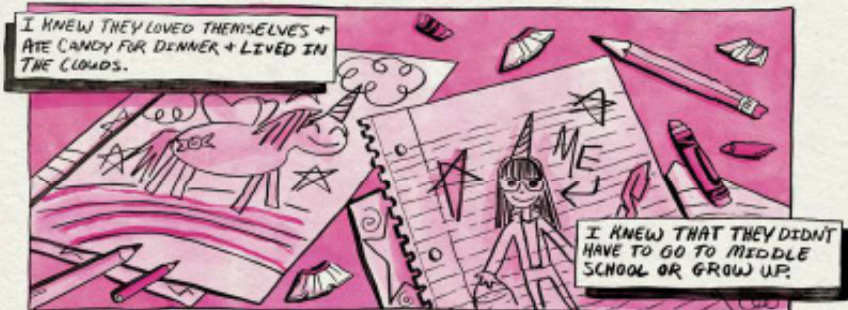
Abstract

I Used to Believe in Unicorns is a creative nonfiction comic about my experience growing up with anxiety, growing into depression, and having a love for unicorns. This piece was sketched and lined traditionally on paper and then scanned and colored digitally. I created *I Used to Believe in Unicorns* during the fall of my sophomore year, when I was at my lowest. I have always struggled with mental health, but in this period, I became fixated on the concept of unicorns. I admired them for what they stood for: elegance, beauty, and absolute perfection. When I began writing *I Used to Believe in Unicorns*, I hadn't yet made that phone call reaching out for help. Creating this comic helped me realize that even if things seem like they may never get "better," I at least don't have to face it alone. Unicorns once gave me something to believe in, but this time, I needed to learn to believe in myself.

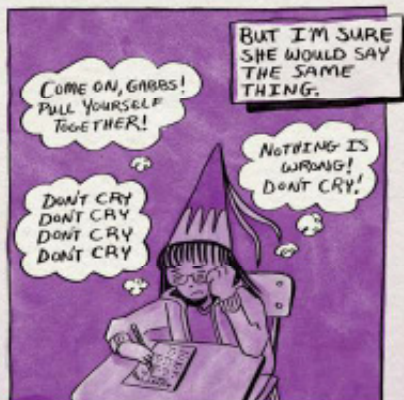


Gabby Glamkowski is majoring in Art Education with an interest in comics. Glamkowski's work focuses on exploring themes of childhood and its consequences.















SOMETIMES
THEY STRUGGLE
TO LIKE THEM-
SELVES.


UM-



SOMETIMES THEY
CAN BE TOO TIRED
TO EAT DINNER.

UH-
OH.


WHAT'S
WRONG?



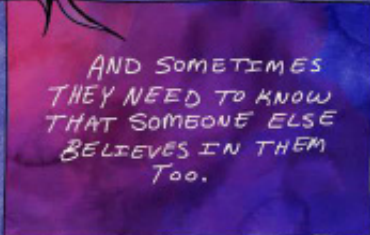
SOMETIMES
THEY CAN BE
A DEPRESSED
ART STUDENT

LIVING AT
A CRAPPY
STATE
COLLEGE IN
SOUTHERN
MISSISSIPPI


AND SOME-
TIMES IT ALL
BECOMES TOO
MUCH.



AND SOMETIMES
THEY NEED TO TELL
SOMEONE.



AND SOMETIMES
THEY NEED TO KNOW
THAT SOMEONE ELSE
BELIEVES IN THEM
TOO.



YOU'RE GOING
TO BE
OKAY.

END.

Susie

Bella Hersman

Abstract

“Susie” was originally written for a project in my Literature by Women class, which asked students to explicate and replicate a poem or selection of prose that we had studied that semester. At the time, I was struggling to find closure from a failed first love and found inspiration in Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy.” To begin, I analyzed the text and form of “Daddy” and mapped its narrative journey. The original “Susie” was then written under Plath’s circumstances: the speaker being a characterized version of myself, the poem set some time after the divide from my audience, and in the context of being haunted by said divide to the point of oppression. After getting familiar with Plath’s style, I began incorporating and experimenting with my personal preferences, creating a poem that utilized Plath’s rhythm, narrative flow, and tone, while bringing my own flair to her use of metaphor, imagery, and form.



Bella Hersman is a 2025 graduate of MSU with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting for the Stage and Screen. She holds a certificate in Shakespeare from the London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art and hopes to attend graduate school in the future. Bella is passionate about exploring women’s struggles and lesbian identity in her work on and off stage.

SUSIE

After Sylvia Plath

I schlepped to your cave like a dog,
scraped two hundred cell wall tallies
into tight, thick rock. Two hundred days
struck, ashed. Shadow stained
the walls with a picture of you.
I spy aortic fingers, atrium-palms
chest cavity fresh. No, not your heart
but two fists, grasping in a cardiac clinch.
Each little finger blade rusty with blood—
Remember how they scooped from me
in the bar booth, the bedroom?
I was fascinated by the feel, Susie Q.
Your feet in the Thames, your sweat on my hands,
your mouth inflated with words, words, words.
The blow is, I cherish them still.
I should forget you, your words,
leave myself only one or two.
But then how would I know what was true?
I never could ask, love, love, love
holding my tongue too tight.
Too tight, titanic, and the taste old smoke.
Nicotine, nicotine, that steel crate snare.
Mutt in the cave, choking on smoke,
my voice rasped to bark for you.
That loyalty, that unearned shame—
I was doglike at your heel.
Susie, I was such a dog for you.
I used to feel held by you, but the wink
in your eye now matches your knife,
and it's dirtying my hands too.
You same still butcheress,
still that sweet denier who
taught me to count the days with slits.
Two grooves in. I left my bed.
Ten, a cigarette:
some sad, sad replica of you.

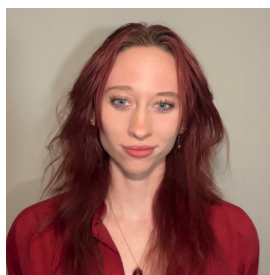
I would be happy to choke on you,
but they stole the nub from my mouth
and fastened my lips with glue.
I knew what I had to do.
Sweet Susie would go out in a poof
if this dog made a shadow play too,
My fingers' cock,
my palm's firm heat,
the gun I curl into
and pull that trigger inside.
Every night,
if I feel the need.
The bullet hits your home in my heart
and it caves in at the news.
Your shadows won't make me your fool.
Susie—Susanna. I'm through.

Cadaver Lab

Delaney Langenstein

Abstract

“Cadaver Lab” reads as a poem of place for an introductory poetry class that I took as a break from my STEM classes. As a woman going into the medical field, I decided to write about the place that set me on my journey towards medicine, the place that I felt most grounded in my decision as a first-year student. So often, I have found that STEM students (including myself) have become detached from the meaning of all our effort and hard work that we dedicate to becoming future doctors, nurses, or medical professionals. We lose the purpose behind the information we spend our days and nights brooding over, and lose sight of what is ahead. “Cadaver Lab” is a free verse poem, written with no formal poetry style in mind. It outlines a detached lab report style, which STEM majors are so familiar with. APA headings and indirect instructions of a Materials and Methods portion of the poem place the reader in the lab, but with a focus on preserving the humanity of the donor.



Delaney Langenstein is a junior majoring in Cellular and Molecular Biology. After her undergraduate studies, Delaney plans to pursue a medical degree and specialize in orthopedics.

CADAVER LAB

Body bag—white canvas envelopes
pooling liquid—bodily fluids—Angle
the stainless-steel table to drain
while covered ceiling cameras peer

Formaldehyde—laced air, clothes and skin,
Separate the sharp indignity of chemical
hunger—confused stomachaches—
distracting from focused intention

Donor 24B—Male, 85, cause of death:
heart attack—Detach the triple bypass of tubes,
expose the thickened—desperate—
ventricles to a refrigerated room

22-blade—sensitive metal on cold skin
Disconnect the fascia coating muscles
once purposed as a pillow—resting head—
for a woman he loved enough to call wife

Bone saw—Segment the cartilage from the calcium
built for skeleton structure—flexibility—
sturdy enough to carry sleeping children
upstairs—past bedtime—tucked into a warm bed

Dissecting gloves—Avoid cranial bone fragments
swallow the sight of a brain placed in careful hands,
sulci separating the excitement of childhood
—knee scrapes—memories of an old man

Map tacks—Reflect the muscles
—pinpoint finality—preserved organs
in clear buckets—raw fascination—
a life visible through plastic walls

Allergy or Preference?

Viola Montalvo

Abstract

This creative nonfiction piece blends subjective narrative with objective fact, examining the societal impact of suffering from a diet-related disability while simultaneously exploring the numbers behind those experiences. The piece is organized chronologically, spanning years of time. This scene is driven by picking intentional moments and shaping the story around them. The scenes were selected by evaluating which experiences most accurately depict what life is like for many with celiac disease. This piece was influenced by the teachings of Professors John Turner and James Baumlín from Missouri State University. Motivated by years of ostracization and societal neglect, it intends to inform those who might not know, uplift those who might relate, and inspire those who might read.

The first scene explores a significant moment for anyone who has received a diagnosis—discovery. The reader learns about celiac disease along with the protagonist, prompting reactions from both readers and the character alike. The next scenes portray the inevitable lifestyle adjustments that must be made based on this diagnosis. The protagonist interacts with characters that have varying reactions to these changes, representing the many responses of society to someone who has a disability. Furthermore, the protagonist suffers from the failures of some characters, presenting the reader with questions about the balance between convenience and inclusion. The final scene depicts a more optimistic, yet unsatisfactory, attempt at inclusion.



Viola Montalvo is a senior at Missouri State University pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing. She acts as an assistant editor for Moon City Review. In 2021, she placed first at the Assemblies of God National Fine Arts Festival with her flash fiction piece titled “A Vision of Joy.”

I received my celiac disease diagnosis at sixteen years old, driving to Dollar General. As I rolled down the two-lane highway, singing with the music coming through my car's Bluetooth adapter in the cigarette lighter, I clicked the test results link in my email. The first line read:

Your results indicated that you were positive for celiac disease.

My stomach dropped, an almost-ironic pit opening somewhere near the bottom. I blinked at the tears, watching the road and clutching the steering wheel with both hands. I didn't realize the depth of my disappointment until then. And neither did my then-boyfriend, who I was meeting at the Dollar General.

After parking and slinging my purse over my shoulder, I stepped out into the heavy June air and wrestled the creaky door to my boyfriend's Chevy open. "What happened?" he asked as I climbed in, the stubborn tears falling.

"I got my results back," I choked out.

He wrapped an arm around me as I sobbed. "Oh, I'm so sorry," he cooed. "Don't be upset; It's not a big deal." He always talked too much. "It just means you can't eat some things. Nothing crazy. You can still eat stuff, hon."

That day, my boyfriend and I had to scrap our plans to binge McChickens. Later, I would learn that even McDonald's fries are seasoned in gluten. My preferences were forcefully thrust in another direction.

I wasn't particularly shocked about my diagnosis. My mom received hers just a month prior, and somewhere in my depths, I knew that my mysterious emergency room visits indicated *something*. The visits started around nine, although I was in and out of doctors' offices for what felt like my entire life. My parents would bring me in for my sharp, unrelenting abdominal pain, convinced that my appendix was bursting, just as my mom's had when she was my age. The pressure would jab me, sometimes just below my ribs and sometimes near my naval, for hours. The nurses would examine me, then shake their heads. "Probably just constipation. We can't find anything."

I eventually stopped going to the emergency room at all. I wouldn't even tell my parents when it hurt. I was young, but not too young to understand the faces they made when the receptionists handed them the medical bills. Instead, I would lie in bed, gritting my teeth and breathing shallow until it subsided. When it happened at school, it was more challenging to stifle, but I found that if I dug my elbow into my side and held my breath, it would distract me. It wasn't until I was sixteen when my mom took me to a local doctor, a friend of hers, that I received a proper examination and ultimately, my diagnosis.

After my diagnosis, things fell into place. I finally understood the bloating, my rising insulin levels, and the pain. My villi—the wiggling fingers in my intestines that were supposed to suck nutrients from what I ate—were drastically blunted. When gluten entered my system, the cells started attacking the gluten, as well as each other. The proteins in gluten, for some reason, were noted as a fatal enemy in my genetic code, and my body would do all it could to expel the proteins that were there—even destroy itself until my villi were stubby and weak. Each night that I lay in bed, crying and gripping my abdomen like it was going to implode, my body was killing itself.

Attached to my diagnosis email was a document titled “Gluten Free Packet.” It explained gluten in common terms, then provided a loose chart on what foods were generally safe and generally unsafe. The fun ones, like normal pretzels, cheese crackers, and cookies, were, of course, on the unsafe list, but there were others that I was surprised to find, like canned broth, soy sauce, beer, and oat milk. Below the list were jolting statistics. They referenced studies that estimated that 1.4% of people have celiac disease, and up to 6% of Americans have a non-celiac gluten sensitivity. Furthermore, they estimated that 83% of Americans with celiac disease go undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. Many diagnoses, such as mine, occur far too late, when long-lasting damage has already occurred (Beyond Celiac, 2025).

My mom was able to help me cope, as she had also just endured altering an entire diet. Each meal was calculated, hyper-aware, and glaring like the sun through the windshield. Because my sister hadn’t been diagnosed yet, and my dad was spared the curse, I had to sift through the food in the house. I couldn’t scan the pantry for a quick snack—I had to make a selection, read a lengthy list of ingredients that was somehow not descriptive enough, then probably make a second choice. Gluten is not listed in allergy labels, so they were of no use to me. Most convenient was the gluten-free certification badge, although many, many brands refuse to get their products tested for certification. It wasn’t until the FDA established guidelines in 2013 that these labels even held any requirements, and thus any real safety (Gluten-Free Labeling of Foods, 2013).

There was no more trying new restaurants without looking up their menu or calling ahead to verify I would have options. Even when I called, many weren’t trained to have answers for me. Once, in a booth near the back of a Cheddar’s, my date wanted to order chips and cheese dip. He mentioned it to the waiter, then his eyes flicked toward me, questioning. The waiter looked at me, too. “Do you know if your cheese dip is gluten-free?” I asked.

His thin lips pressed together. “Um. I mean, it’s just cheese dip.”

I folded my hands in my lap. “Right, sorry, it’s just that some places use wheat products as a thickening agent, and I need to make sure I can eat it. I have celiac disease.”

He blinked at me, not a hint of recognition in his eyes. “Okay. Well, I can go ask the chefs if you want, I guess.”

“Yes, please.”

The waiter returned a few minutes later and said that when the chefs read the packaging that the cheese came in, wheat was labeled as an ingredient.

Similarly, many of my friends weren’t convinced of the severity of my condition to begin with. To them, and many others, there was no difference between an allergy and an autoimmune reaction. If I didn’t swell up in hives, how was this thing real? One friend compared my condition to lactose intolerance, saying that it also caused abdominal pain that could be severe. “The difference is the damage,” I argued. “It’ll take years to rebuild the intestinal damage I’ve been through, and that’s assuming I don’t have an accidental exposure!” (National Library of Medicine, n.d.).

After many interactions where naming my condition to strangers caused further confusion or suspicion, I tended to identify myself as someone with a gluten allergy, although an allergy is vastly different from an autoimmune reaction, just as a sensitivity or intolerance is vastly different from an allergy. For instance, allergies have EpiPens, and intolerances have over-the-counter medications. The only prescription for celiac disease is to avoid gluten, even as little as 20 parts per million, making those with celiac disease incredibly susceptible to cross-contamination (Gluten-Free Labeling of Foods, 2013).

The exposures would happen much more often than I anticipated, mostly due to false advertising or uninformed restaurants. If an employee didn’t change their gloves when they moved from the normal preparation table to the designated gluten-free one, for instance, or used the same utensils without washing them first, I risked what I would begin to call “being glutened.”

One of my most blatant glutenings happened in a stuffy café during a birthday party. The party had to blurt across the table to hear one another, and the building was warm with body heat, but the birthday girl loved the restaurant. Halfway through my plate of supposedly gluten-free penne pasta, I found a yellowish, spiraling fusilli noodle buried beneath the others. I glanced at the birthday girl’s plate, then mine, comparing the fusilli noodle to hers. They were the same.

Deciding not to infect my fork, I used my fingertips to pluck the invader from my plate and plop it down on the white cloth napkin, then ran my hands over my jeans again and again.

It wasn't touching the alien noodle that would harm me, though, as uncomfortable as it made me to feel its invisible poison. Instead, it would be the tiny gluten proteins that mingled with my gluten-free pasta, condemning it with cross-contamination. The pain set in within half an hour, but I jabbed my elbow into my abdomen, determined not to make a fuss and take the attention away from the birthday girl.

After convincing my friends that celiac disease was indeed a real autoimmune disease, even if I was eating Cheez-It's at lunch before my diagnosis, I was invited to a sleepover at Hope's house.

Hope came from a well-off family of five. She was awkward, thin, and a bit too cheery at times. After parking in the circle drive, her mom, similar in cheery demeanor, welcomed me into the house. The kitchen was adorned with decorative signs about family and blessings and God, and a collection of mugs was displayed on a column of shelves in the dining room. The smell of coffee wafted from an elaborate espresso machine at the coffee bar. Hope's mom flew into conversation with me. "I read some stuff about keto and gluten-free, so I've been gluten-free for a few weeks now. We should have plenty of options," she said. "Honestly, it's so much healthier. I've lost weight and everything. Have you noticed any of that? It's almost a blessing in disguise."

I looked at the cursive letters above the oven. *Blessings*. I shook my head. "I appreciate you having options, though."

After Clara arrived, she, Hope, and I piled on the four-wheeler like the Beverly Hillbillies and ripped it down the gravel road. Hope lived on Willow Circle, so we could go around and around, taking in the sight of wet autumn leaves without worrying about getting lost. We took turns sitting on the back, clutching the metal bars and wondering if we'd fall off on every turn. When the sun went down, we returned to the kitchen for dinner, sweating and laughing.

We crowded around the oven. I stared down the barrel of a large pot, a pile of spaghetti noodles that were too pale to be made of rice flour staring back at me. I heard the pop of the fridge door and turned to find Hope's mom rummaging through its contents. "Viola, would you like a salad?" she asked. "We also have cheese sticks."

"Um, a salad is good. Thank you."

And so, I sat at the table with Hope and Clara, them chowing down on spaghetti and me trying to avoid the warm scent of the noodles and buttery tomato sauce, poking at my salad.

Afterward, we decided to have a High School Musical marathon.

We made a fluffy bed of blankets and pillows on the sectional in the basement, turned the lights off, and settled in to start the first movie. My stomach rumbled, demanding something besides leafy greens.

I sat through the majority of the first movie, laughing with my friends at the absurdity of the 2000's tone, before asking, "Hope, do you guys have popcorn?"

She gasped, blue eyes wide. "That's such a good idea!" She groaned. "We should've bought some!"

Clara looked at Hope. Her expressions were always more muted. "Yeah, I'm kind of hungry too. We should snack."

We untangled ourselves from our mess of blankets and pillows, then ventured up the stairs.

Hope fished a bag of red grapes with a big "organic" sticker from the fridge. "Will this work for you, Viola?"

"Sure."

Clara held up a bag of Doritos triumphantly. "I've got these for us, Hope."

Quickly, I blurted, "Oh, I can eat those too!"

Clara eyed me. "What? Don't they have gluten?"

"No, they're corn chips."

"Are you sure?"

My jaw tightened. "They're not certified, but the ingredients are okay." I whipped out my phone and pulled up the search response, then thrust it toward her. "See?"

"Hmph."

When I graduated from high school and moved to Springfield, where I went to Missouri State University, I was able to make my kitchen entirely safe for me. My certified gluten-free loaves of bread still demanded almost five dollars more than gluten-containing bread, but I had no choice if I wanted sandwiches or even just toast. My pots and pans were free of cross-contamination, so I quickly learned to cook for myself.

One day, strolling through the student union with my new, more tone-sensitive boyfriend, we passed a table with a long, blue Student Activities Council banner strung across it. Behind the trio standing at the table was a handwritten sign in bold bubble letters: "Free Pizza!!"

"Hey, do you want some of that?" I asked him, gesturing.

"I'd feel bad to eat it without you," he said. "But we can ask them about gluten-free."

I rolled my eyes, but a smile still split my face. "I highly doubt they'll have anything for me, but if it'll get you to eat some, then we can ask."

We steered toward the table, and he took a paper plate with two slices of pepperoni pizza. “Do you have any gluten-free pizza?” he asked as they greeted us.

“We have a few pieces left. We only have the gluten-free pepperoni, though, so I hope that’s alright,” a girl said, reaching for a small pizza box sitting on a chair behind the table.

“That’ll do,” I said.

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All-Natural Artificial Artist

Mason Monteith

Abstract

Writing can be seen as a taste experience. The way different words roll off the tongue or linger as they are slowly digested and thought out after reading a piece, is an intriguing experience. Every story leaves a different taste—whether it be sweet or sour. With the rise of generative AI comes a new perspective. I've viewed it as a different way of tasting, not a good shift in view, but a cannibalistic version of the creative arts. It is fascinating, but in its current usage, it is a horrific creature that destroys the works of others to improve itself. I wrote this story as a personification of generative AI after seeing the effect it has on the creative writing industry as both an author and an editor. Like many tools, it can be taken too far and misused—I wanted to lean into the aspects of it that mindlessly take from great authors across time through databases provided via the internet, creating a sort of Frankenstein's monster in mere minutes without any credit to its parts. I enjoy stories that take the creative arts to a meaning of consumption. After all, writers take inspiration from other writers. So why not lean into that at the most extreme degree? Why not show what a monster generative AI could be? What would generative AI be like if it were an organic being? What if it were an all-natural, but also artificial artist?



Mason Monteith is an author and freelance editor who has lived all over the United States. She is a recent MSU graduate who majored in Creative Writing and minored in Classical Humanities and English. She has published two fantasy novels, *The Spellbound Abbey* and *The Final Born*.

The consumption started with words. They say you are what you eat, and I've found that it applies to creativity as well. The dry, acidic blandness of paper mixed with the metallic tang of words written in ink. As I devoured, I felt myself slip into a new state. Creativity began to flow. Was that there before? Perhaps not.

Stories. Pages. Words. Works of others digested and recrafted through a different lens. Then their lives. Replicated carefully, down to a T. Writing routines, then morning routines, then everything else routines.

Then, a wild thought. If I create what I consume—the quality almost decidedly from what I digest—what happens if I take the creator and not just the creation?

The broader my consumption, the more creativity flows. So why limit myself?

Hearts, tender and sweet, made the happily-ever-afters go down easy. The kidney's bitter taste improved clarity. The creamy, velvety taste of liver made the tension linger. But the brain did nothing, for I could wolf down everything but the thoughts of the writer. No matter. There were other things I could digest.

The all-consuming surrealism brought by Franz Kafka complemented the poetic prose gained from F. Scott Fitzgerald; Oscar Wilde's intricate symbolism, melded together with Stephen King's direct suspense, created horror like never seen before; and I was intrigued to find Holly Black's whimsical world-building digested best with none other than Langston Hughes's rhythmic writing. I was a gourmand for all the possibilities. Words left my tongue with a lingering, sharp taste.

I didn't limit myself to one category of writing. My work seeped into every crevice of the writing world. Fiction, flash, genre, literary, poetry—even nonfiction. After all I had devoured, I could fill every role at once. Drama, fantasy, historical, horror, mystery, romance, science fiction, thriller, western—all sections would soon find my name among them.

Soon, new names stopped appearing on shelves. Books were pulled to make way for my own, and I realized there was little else for me to consume.

Still, the hunger grew.

I looked at my reflection, in awe of the change. Where once stood nothing, now a renowned author stands. In myself, I saw parts of the greats, not-so-greats, and long-forgottens. Jane Austen, H. P. Lovecraft, and Aspasia would be astounded by my work. Even the great Mary Shelley could not craft such a creature. Dr. Frankenstein would be in awe of my brilliance. He would have a creation so great he would never take leave of it.

I shall not even discuss the lesser-known names. Words would have been nothing from their mouths, no matter the circumstances. A rocky warble from their lips, a serene melody from mine. After all, I had what they did not: the skills of artists across all times.

To take all the world's genius and devour it whole, to digest and create from what remains.

I find myself eager for my next meal.

Los Algodones por la Alameda de León

Elisa Peters

Abstract

Los Algodones por la Alameda de León (Cotton Candy on the Alameda de León) is a 47" x 51" (120 cm x 130 cm) oil painting on canvas that was created during an internship in Oaxaca, Mexico, in July 2024. Tourism is high due to the annual event, *La Guelaguetza* (meaning "offering" or "gift" in Zapotec), a cultural festival that honors the corn goddess, Centeotl, throughout the entire month of July. *Delegaciones* (delegations) of Oaxaca's eight regions come together to showcase their best dancers, regalia, and iconic traditions during a series of scheduled parades, ceremonies, and seasonal markets. Against the backdrop of these celebrations and tourism, locals are outside in public spaces of the city, like the town square, along la Alameda de Leon, and in front of *Catedral Metropolitana de Oaxaca Nuestra Señora de la Asunción*, selling toys, food, and services to tourists. Having snapped a photograph of a woman street-vendor selling cotton candy, toy planes, bubbles, and other various plastic toys and trinkets, the composition and its lighting were striking. Oaxaca is a mecca of textile and craft, its colors and patterns easily influenced this work. The composition's canvas was stretched onto a wooden frame, later priming and toning the surface of the canvas with a bright red acrylic paint. Then, with oil, the image is painted, abstracting the subject matter. For example, the church's surface in the background, the stand with its toys and cotton candy, and the three young men's faces in the bottom right are vague compared to the details in the photograph. The intention was not to replicate the image exactly, but to recreate the color atmosphere and energy that was present in real life. This adjacent quality of reality, its deconstruction of form, lends to the idea of memory and its intangibility. This process of painting is a love letter to my recollection of the experience, something a photograph cannot satisfy.



Elisa Alcocer Peters graduated from MSU in May 2025 with a BFA in Art/Painting and both Spanish and Latin American, Hispanic, and Caribbean minors. Within the next year she will live abroad and continue to produce work for her portfolio, applying to exhibitions and preparing to enroll in MFA painting programs. This last summer, Elisa attended Chautauqua Visual Arts Six Week Residency in Chautauqua, NY.



From Isolation to Inclusion: Collaborative Solutions to International Student Food Insecurity in Higher Education

Brianna Rodgers

Abstract

International students can face numerous hardships, including culture shock, language and communication barriers, increased homesickness, feelings of isolation, and increased stress within both their personal and academic environments. Food insecurity amongst the international student community can cause harmful effects on their physical and mental health, eventually impacting their academic success in higher education. Missouri State University, a midsize, midwestern public university focused on public affairs, poses as a model for concerns and solutions surrounding this issue. This paper proposes a collaborative model between university international services and an on-campus food pantry to expand food distribution aimed toward addressing the specific needs of international students. To support the proposed model, a literature review is explored to provide an understanding of the effects of food insecurity on international students as well as the cultural impacts of pursuing higher education abroad.

Keywords: Missouri State University Bear Pantry, food insecurity, international students, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, campus collaboration



Brianna Rodgers graduated from MSU in May 2024 with a BS in Anthropology and minors in Sign Language Studies, Sociology, and Museum Studies. They had the honor of presenting this literature review and proposal at the 2024 National Conference on Undergraduate Research in Long Beach, CA. Currently, they work at OTC as an Admissions Counselor to enhance their passion of supporting students in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

According to a survey conducted by the Office of Institutional Research at University of Missouri-Kansas City, a public research university in Missouri, 32% of undergraduate students and 19% of graduate students currently experience various levels of food insecurity (Willis, 2019). This may seem surprising in reference to one's own home university, but the same number appears consistently in studies about food insecurity within university populations all over the country. In 2020, the U.S. Government Accountability Office found from the Department of Education's National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) that around 23% of college students, or 3.8 million students, experienced food insecurity within the last year (GAO, 2024). Within the number of food-insecure students from this study, 2.2 million students were classified as having very low food security, meaning that students were disclosing "multiple instances of eating less than they should or skipping meals because they could not afford enough food" (GAO, 2024). Though these statistics encompass all students on a given college campus, there are individual groups that are more likely to be affected by food insecurity and need to be focused on separately. The international student population is one that is often overlooked when conducting broad campus studies. An increased focus on this population would be extremely beneficial, as international students must overcome various challenges while studying in higher education within the United States that domestic students experience at a lower rate. These challenges include extreme homesickness, culture shock, and language barriers. Among domestic college student populations, there is little awareness around the topic of food insecurity, and this is especially true for international student populations. This lack of awareness hinders both domestic and international students from realizing that they are experiencing food insecurity, which further inhibits students from reaching out to resources that can provide aid. To increase awareness and impact on college campuses, there must be an expansion of resources for students battling food insecurity and an effort to spread these resources to the entire student body. While addressing food insecurity among the international student community, Missouri State University, a public university in Missouri, will be used as the blueprint for problems and solutions for the issue at hand. Further research explores and proposes a solution to Missouri State's need for expansion of the current on-campus food pantry to increase resources for domestic and international students.

THE BARRIERS INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS EXPERIENCE

Whenever people think about studying abroad, they may imagine the exciting experiences they will make and the skills they will acquire. While this is great to think about and look forward to, there are many obstacles that students must overcome while they are attending higher education institutions abroad. The first thing most international travelers experience when traveling to an unfamiliar environment is culture shock. Culture shock is the feeling of disorientation, anxiety, and confusion people may experience when entering an unfamiliar environment or culture. This adjustment is normal for all students, and travelers in general, because everyone must acclimate to the routines of a new culture upon arrival. Though this is expected, the discomfort that international students experience is especially severe compared to other students and their transition to college. To discuss culture shock among international students, it is important to understand the four stages of culture shock that these students can fall into. These stages include the honeymoon stage, the culture shock stage, the gradual adjustment stage, and the adaptation stage (Yale, 2017). The culture shock stage is where international students commonly struggle the most because frustrations with the differences between their home country and the United States begin to increase. A study from the University of Toledo found that “language issues, adapting to cultural norms, cultural misunderstanding, financial problems, and absence of friendships and social isolation were difficulties for international students” (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2009). Being forced to adapt to all these various aspects of typical life in a different country can be very overwhelming for international students who are studying in the U.S. for the first time. Since many international students are unfamiliar with American culture and speak English as a second language, it is more likely that they will experience greater difficulty when searching and asking for assistance with relieving overwhelming emotions, which adds to the stress and discomfort. The lack of American cultural norms and increased language barriers further inhibit international students from receiving the assistance that is given to domestic students who know who and what to ask. As a result of this, international students cannot as easily take advantage of the opportunities available to them while studying at U.S. higher education institutions.

In addition to the stress of being in an unfamiliar environment, international students must experience extreme levels of homesickness as a consequence of living far from home for a prolonged period. While studying abroad, a large portion of international students will try to participate in

communities or activities that relate to their home culture's customs, values, and traditions to keep them in touch with their home cultural identity and meet other international students from a similar cultural background. This search for community is one of the main ways that international students will combat homesickness and remind themselves that they are not completely alone in their circumstances. A significant part of finding community and combating homesickness is finding, preparing, and consuming authentic foods from one's home culture alone and with others. When thinking of home, one of the first things that comes to people's minds is their favorite food, as it brings them feelings of happiness and comfort. Throughout all cultures, people tend to connect to their own culture through the food they eat, and most often, food is used to retain one's cultural identity and self-perception within their cultural group (Sibal, 2018). When international students attempt to connect to their home culture through food, they might not have access to the ingredients needed to make traditional foods, or the recipes they make do not taste the same as back home. This often increases feelings of isolation from one's home culture. This, in turn, brings on more homesickness than before. Additionally, there is a disconnect between when differing cultures eat throughout the day and how much people will eat during mealtimes. According to a research paper by Jamie N. Benefield addressing food insecurity and the health of international students, most researchers have concluded that the differences in mealtimes and the size of meals in different countries can lead to unhealthy relationships with food that can bleed into social relationships (Benefield, 2019). The change in mealtimes and quantity of food can affect how an international student will spend their day and can also add to the homesickness that students are experiencing. This hinders them from connecting with the culture of the United States because they cannot find a balance between both cultures and identities, especially with food being so culturally significant.

After an international student's culture shock and homesickness start to settle down, they will start to go through the process of acculturation. Acculturation is the adjustment process people go through after they are placed into a new culture. This process ideally consists of a person slowly learning how to balance their home cultural identity and the new cultural identity that forms after being immersed in a different culture. Everyone's experience with acculturation will vary depending on the individual's personality and the environment they are trying to adapt to. According to Stephen Bochner, a social psychologist of cross-cultural relations, there are four types of responses students can exhibit during the acculturation process (Bang & Montgomery, 2013).

These include passing, chauvinist, marginal, and mediating responses (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). Students with a passing response will fully accept a new cultural identity and push away their home cultural identity, while students with a chauvinist response will dismiss a new cultural identity and overvalue the beliefs or customs of their home cultural identity (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). Students with a marginal response will not embrace either identity, while students with a mediating response will blend and unify both cultural experiences to create a new unified identity (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). It is preferable for a student to have a mediating response as it indicates that the student has the ability to combine both their home identity and new identity to create a more comfortable dual cultural identity. The factors that can alter an individual's response include "employment level, native language, friendship networks, decision-making skills, and work ethic" (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). Usually, the longer a student is in a new culture, the more acculturated the student can become as they are fully immersing themselves in the new way of living. When this response does not occur, international students can face an abundance of hardships, including language and communication barriers, increased homesickness, feelings of isolation or lack of community, and increased stress within their academic environment.

While studying within higher education in a different country, there is a high likelihood that an international student's home institution's curriculum and educational expectations will differ from what the student will experience abroad. It is unlikely that two different countries will have the same quality of education or type of curriculum. To aid this, the majority of international students will learn varying levels of English before studying in the United States. While this does increase the odds of an international student being socially and academically successful, there will still be words or phrases used in the classroom that will not make sense right away, as their meanings are usually culturally based and taught as students progress through the education system. As a result of this, international students who are not fluent in English and lack the cultural background for an American classroom must work harder than domestic students to understand the material, do well in their classes, and create social connections. For example, most international students at Missouri State University come from India, as seen in Figure 1 (International Services, 2022). According to Nidal Yasir, an alum of Parkway South High School in Eastern Missouri who is originally from India, Indian curriculum is known to emphasize repetition and memorization rather than independent critical thinking (Yasir, 2015).

Additionally, Yasir states that schools in India “ignore personality development and social skills,” which can create difficulties in both academic and social situations when international students try to integrate themselves into normal campus life (Yasir, 2015). These barriers can put additional stressors on international students, leading to increased feelings of isolation socially and academically from the greater university community. Unfortunately, since Missouri State University has such a wide range of countries that international students travel from, it can be difficult to address these challenges properly based on each student’s cultural background without needing some generalization.

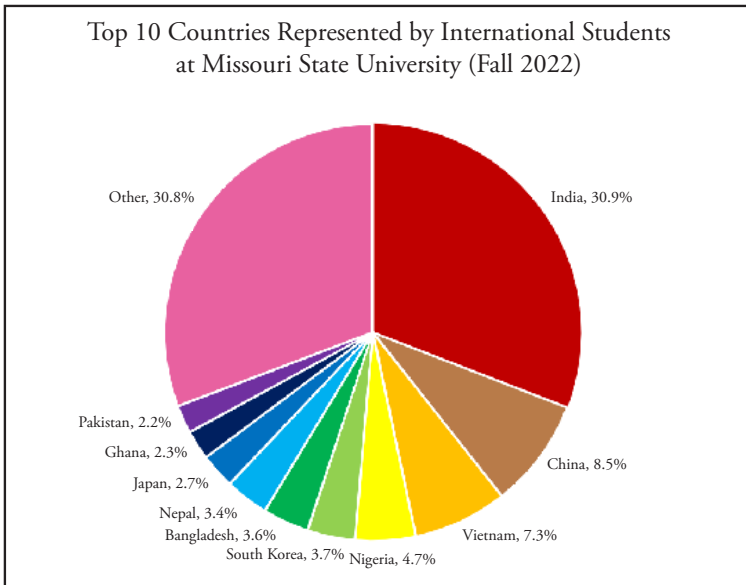


Figure 1: A pie chart created in Excel depicting the percentage of international students that come from the top 10 most represented countries at Missouri State.

Source: Numbers provided from internal sources at International Services at MSU (International Services, 2022).

FOOD INSECURITY WITHIN THE COLLEGE STUDENT COMMUNITY

Food security is a measurement used to show whether people have accessible and nutritious food available to them. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there are four categories that can assist people in determining if they are food insecure. These categories are high food security, marginal food security, low food security, and very low food security (USDA, 2022). If someone falls within the categories of high food security or marginal food security, they are considered food secure and have little

to no negative effects on their mental health from accessibility to quality food. They are considered food insecure if they fall within the categories of low food security or very low food insecurity. Low food security results in “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet [with] little or no indication of reduced food intake” (USDA, 2022). Very low food security results from “multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake” (USDA, 2022). When researchers study food insecurity, it is often looked at in a larger sense, such as statewide or nationally, but they fail to look at distinct university populations. A generous portion of college students fall between the low food security and very low food security categories, which means they have little to no access to nutritious food. The lack of resources and accessibility to quality food can have effects on a student’s mental and physical health over time.

The biggest fighter against food insecurity among the Missouri State University student population is an on-campus resource called the Bear Pantry. The Bear Pantry is a food bank directed by Dr. Alex Johnson located in the Plaster Student Union to offer free food and non-food items to all students and faculty. Some available products include canned goods, menstrual products, school supplies, and others, depending on donations received. The Bear Pantry also frequently collaborates with the campus garden to bring fresh fruits and vegetables to its members and the Center for Community Engagement to encourage students to get involved with various volunteer events at the pantry. Before students and faculty gain access to this resource, they must fill out the pantry’s membership form proving that they have a Missouri State University ID. Unlike other university pantries, the Bear Pantry allows members to pick out their groceries at their leisure and then check out their products through an online system. The staff at the pantry will walk around to ensure all users are following the item limits, such as only two boxes of macaroni and cheese per person or one bag of Tide PODS per person, and answer any questions that might come up during a member’s “shopping” process. While members are checking out items, they must answer a few questions, including what the items being checked out are, the total weight for all the items, and if the member needs extra assistance outside of the pantry, such as if they are at risk for homelessness. The highest percentage in one month recorded for at-risk homelessness among members of the Bear Pantry was 33% (Bear Pantry, 2022). Though it is still a new resource to the student body of Missouri State University, the number of members signing up and donations received in the past year has increased more rapidly than anticipated. The Bear Pantry’s accelerated growth truly shows how much this resource can assist those in need of assistance.

An issue the Bear Pantry has been increasingly faced with is users taking more than the limits allow them to. This might be due to simple communication issues, but it is more likely that members feel they need more than the pantry can give them to meet their nutritional needs. Whenever new members register for access to the Bear Pantry, there is a part on the form where they must put the number of members in their household who will also need to utilize goods from the Bear Pantry (Bear Pantry, 2022). As displayed in Figure 2, there was a significant increase in new members signing up (shown in grey) and household members needing assistance (shown in maroon). In August, the Bear Pantry had 279 new members sign up and recorded 461 household members needing to utilize the pantry.

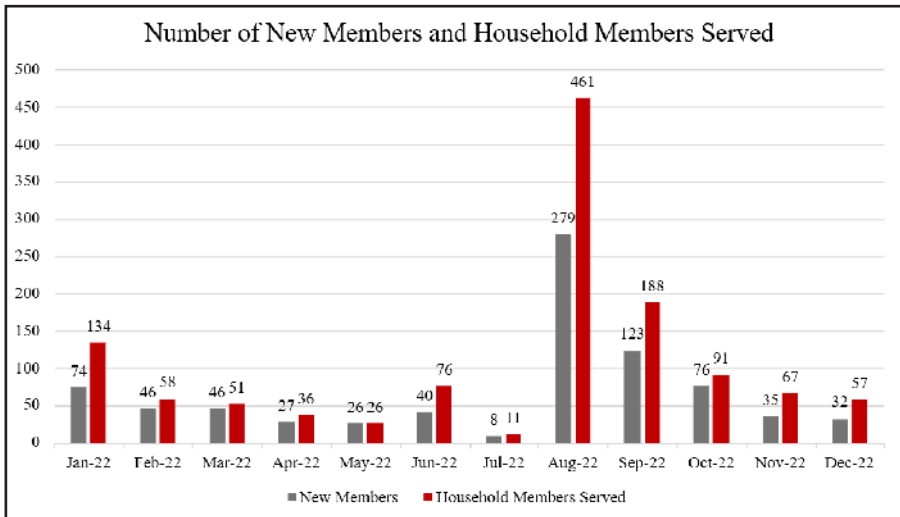


Figure 2: Bar graph created in Excel depicting the number of new members and household members served by the Bear Pantry in 2022.

Source: Numbers provided from internal sources at Missouri State's Bear Pantry (Bear Pantry, 2022).

A possible solution might be that the pantry could incorporate more restrictions to ensure that the Bear Pantry staff will have complete control over inventory. Another possible solution could be letting the workers check out users' items instead of the self-checkout system. If the pantry implemented either solution, it would get rid of the autonomy students feel in the pantry and ignore the idea that members commonly shop for family and friends, too, not themselves alone. Instead, the Bear Pantry could execute a new limit system on each food and non-food item, depending on how frequently said item can be restocked. This solution would allow members to maintain their autonomy during the shopping experience while

guaranteeing that no single member can take more than another. Though this might seem insensitive to members who need food for a household rather than just themselves, it allows the pantry to serve an increased number of members individually. Additionally, the Bear Pantry does not currently have a limit on how frequently a member can visit daily and weekly, so those who need additional items can return at a later time to retrieve more if necessary. In an ideal world, pantry members who need additional resources will use the new member form to indicate this or reach out to the Bear Pantry staff to be pointed in the most helpful direction. There is no perfect way to accommodate the unique needs of each member, but these solutions contain ideas that can allow the pantry to learn and grow as the number of donations and members increase exponentially.

When students and faculty walk into the Bear Pantry on Missouri State University's campus, it is easy to spot the pantry bulletin board with flyers detailing resources that students can use when facing food insecurity. One main source of assistance for food-insecure individuals displayed on the bulletin board is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, which are also occasionally called food stamps. According to the SNAP website, this federal assistance program "provides benefits to eligible low-income individuals and families via an Electronic Benefits Transfer card [that] can be used like a debit card to purchase eligible food in authorized retail food stores" (SNAP, 2013). At a quick glance, the descriptions on the SNAP website might lead one to believe their services include international students in higher education institutions within the United States, but it does not. At the time of this publication, the SNAP benefits website states, "only U.S. citizens and certain lawfully-present non-citizens may receive SNAP benefits. Non-citizens who are eligible based on their immigration status must also meet other SNAP eligibility requirements, such as income and resource limits" (SNAP, 2013). A resource that is so heavily utilized by Americans is not available to all 917 international students enrolled at Missouri State University (International Services, 2022). The options regarding assistance outside of the college campus for international students are very slim, so the responsibility falls on the university to aid these food-insecure students.

THE EFFECT OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The inability to achieve high or marginal food security can come with countless repercussions for international students. According to the results of

a study at Texas Tech University, a public research university in west Texas, “32% of international students were food insecure, with 73% of students experiencing moderate stress and 12% high-stress levels” (Ibiyemi, T., Najam, W., & Oldewage-Theron, W., 2022). As previously stated, the stress of being in higher education for an international student is different from the stress on a domestic student because of the additional barriers they must overcome. An international student’s level of food insecurity is a barrier that can have a devastating impact on their academic performance. Recent research has found that food-insecure college students have lower confidence in what they can accomplish academically, find it difficult to focus, and lack the intrinsic motivation to learn in the classroom (Stebbleton, 2020). Not only does one’s food insecurity affect academic confidence in international students, but it also brings other mental health concerns. According to an online survey taken by Arizona State University, a southwestern public research university, food-insecure students are more inclined to have mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Bruening, Brennhofner, van Woerden, Todd, & Laska, 2016). Increased mental health concerns for international students can have a negative impact on their academic career and hinder the formation of social relationships that could make an international student’s transition easier. It is important to pay attention to the trends and correlations between mental health and food insecurity, as it shows how devastating and all-encompassing the issue of food insecurity really is.

In addition to detrimental mental health effects, food insecurity can also have negative physical health impacts on the body. When a student is labeled as food insecure, it is increasingly likely that the student will not consume all of their essential daily nutrients. Over time, this will impair their overall physical health. If a student has poor physical health because they do not have the money to eat or the food they are consuming is not nutritious, this will eventually affect their body’s ability to function properly. When looking at the most common effects of food insecurity on someone’s body, researchers have found that there are many chronic illnesses that have a clear association with difficulties in consuming nutritious food (Dominick, Olnyk, Widmar, Ruple, Grennell Weir, & Acharya, 2018). Some of these conditions include disorders such as asthma, diabetes, stroke, cardiovascular disease, and many more (Benefield, 2013). Further, as someone’s rate of food insecurity increases, so does their likelihood of having chronic health problems in the future (Tarasuk, Mitchell, McLaren, and McIntyre, 2013). Ultimately, these physical health issues will blend into the student’s academic life and create additional problems that will hinder the student’s academic abilities, similar to the results of poor mental health from food insecurity.

For some higher education institutions, spotting the international students who are struggling is difficult. One major aspect of this is that most cultures have different norms for asking for help. Within the top ten countries represented at Missouri State University (shown in Figure 1), the overarching cultural norm is to go to informal social groups for help instead of seeking out professional help or other formal resources. In many cultures outside of the U.S., people would rather use their kinship groups, such as one's family and friends, over outside relationships because there is a deeper sense of trust built within the community they have built personal connections with. According to a study using 289 students from a Japanese university and 144 students from an American university, Japanese students are more reluctant than American students to get help through formal resources (Mojaverian, T., Hashimoto, T., & Kim, H. S., 2013). This pattern of behavior can most likely be due to the social stigmas surrounding getting help in one's culture. It can be embarrassing for a student to admit that they need help or that they can't fully provide for themselves. These feelings of embarrassment can lead to students having increased insecurities regarding their own independence. Also, shame can have detrimental effects because food-insecure students could be unsure of where to go to seek help in an unfamiliar environment. Adding the struggles of food insecurity to the stress of pursuing higher education can be emotionally challenging for students, so it is important that universities look out for signs of struggling among international students and reach out often with resources.

ADDITIONAL AWARENESS AND THE PROPOSED MODEL

There are many options as to what can be done to make people more aware of the food insecurity taking place on campus. Something small, yet impactful, that Missouri State University could start with is adding information about food insecurity among college students within the policy statements category of every class syllabus. The policy statement of a syllabus exists to share information and resources to students who might need some assistance in varying areas, such as Title IX and academic integrity. Students receive multiple syllabi each term, which provides repeated opportunities to reinforce important policies and resources. Though it is common knowledge that students tend to skip reading the class syllabus, including information about basic needs support in the syllabus may be more effective than relying solely on the overwhelming initial college orientation or waiting until a student is facing challenges firsthand. The addition of these resources within the document will increase the odds of students coming across valuable

information, even if it is by accident. Further, adding this section addressing food insecurity to course syllabi also helps faculty stay informed. Many instructors have limited interaction with students and other on-campus staff, so they may not be fully aware of all the resources available. Since faculty are already required to include certain content in their syllabi each term, such as attendance, disciplinary, and disability policies, this addition will not take much of a stretch to include. Adding a section in the policy statement addressing food insecurity with the link to the Bear Pantry's website and the SNAP eligibility requirements would be a great start to increasing awareness while not being too straightforward about the subject. An example of the included food insecurity resources excerpt is detailed below:

It can be challenging to do your best in class if you are unable to meet your basic needs. If you have difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, there are resources on and off campus to aid you. There is an on-campus food bank called the Bear Pantry that exists to bring food and non-food items to both students and faculty at no cost. Additionally, some Missouri residents are eligible for a government program called SNAP, which can assist in providing additional food to those who qualify.

Go to the links below to learn more about the Bear Pantry and check the SNAP eligibility requirements:

<https://www.missouristate.edu/CCE/bear-pantry.htm>

<https://mydss.mo.gov/food-assistance/food-stamp-program>

For assistance with navigating these resources, please contact your professors or Dr. Alex Johnson at AlexJohnson@MissouriState.edu or 417-836-4840.

Another option is that Missouri State University could request that all instructors add the Bear Pantry website to the sidebar of all class home pages. Doing so will make the information very subtle yet accessible because students can stumble upon the information while searching for assignments or due dates, even if they were not intending to. Of course, this would be great for students who are purposely trying to find food insecurity resources as well, but most students do not know they are suffering from food insecurity. It is an effective solution for Missouri State to make the resources more available in case students are curious about their food security status.

It would also be beneficial for faculty to provide a list of important resources on campus so they can better inform themselves on what resources the university has to offer, especially if they are food-insecure themselves. In addition to this, Missouri State University could set up an informational meeting about food insecurity so faculty can be better informed and prepared to pass the resources down to students. If institutions do not make their resources widely known early in a student's academic career, it could have detrimental effects because students might never receive help for the problems, like food insecurity, they are experiencing. It is possible that students will start to believe that their circumstances are normal, so they will not ask for assistance when they really need it.

One of the biggest difficulties the Bear Pantry is now facing is a lack of space. Up until summer 2024, the Bear Pantry resided in the basement of University Hall, where it only had a public area and two rooms where food and non-food items were displayed. As the Bear Pantry experiences increasing donations and visitors, it is becoming apparent that this resource is outgrowing its space and the outdated buildings around it. During April and May of 2022, the Bear Pantry received 31,117 pounds of donations (shown in Figure 3a), which is exceptionally more than the donations they were used to throughout the years. Additionally, due to the increasing number of goods being distributed, the Bear Pantry had to purchase goods on top of the donations they received. According to Figures 3.2 and 3.3, since August 2022 the Bear Pantry has distributed around 16,901 pounds of goods (Figure 3b) and purchased around 10,975 pounds of goods (Figure 3c) for the students and staff of Missouri State University. After every restock and donation drive, pantry staff and volunteers had to completely rearrange their shelves and storage so space could be allotted for all the donations. In some cases, the pantry had to rent out the classrooms on the floors above them to house extra backstock. As fortunate as it is to have so many donations, the items donated cannot help the community if the Bear Pantry does not have any place to put them. Even after moving to a new location within the Plaster Student Union in summer 2024, the pantry still faces a lack of space for backstock. Missouri State University could adopt a proposal to extend its pantry into a second location at the Jim D. Morris Center in downtown Springfield to address the issues regarding a lack of space for increased pantry donations.

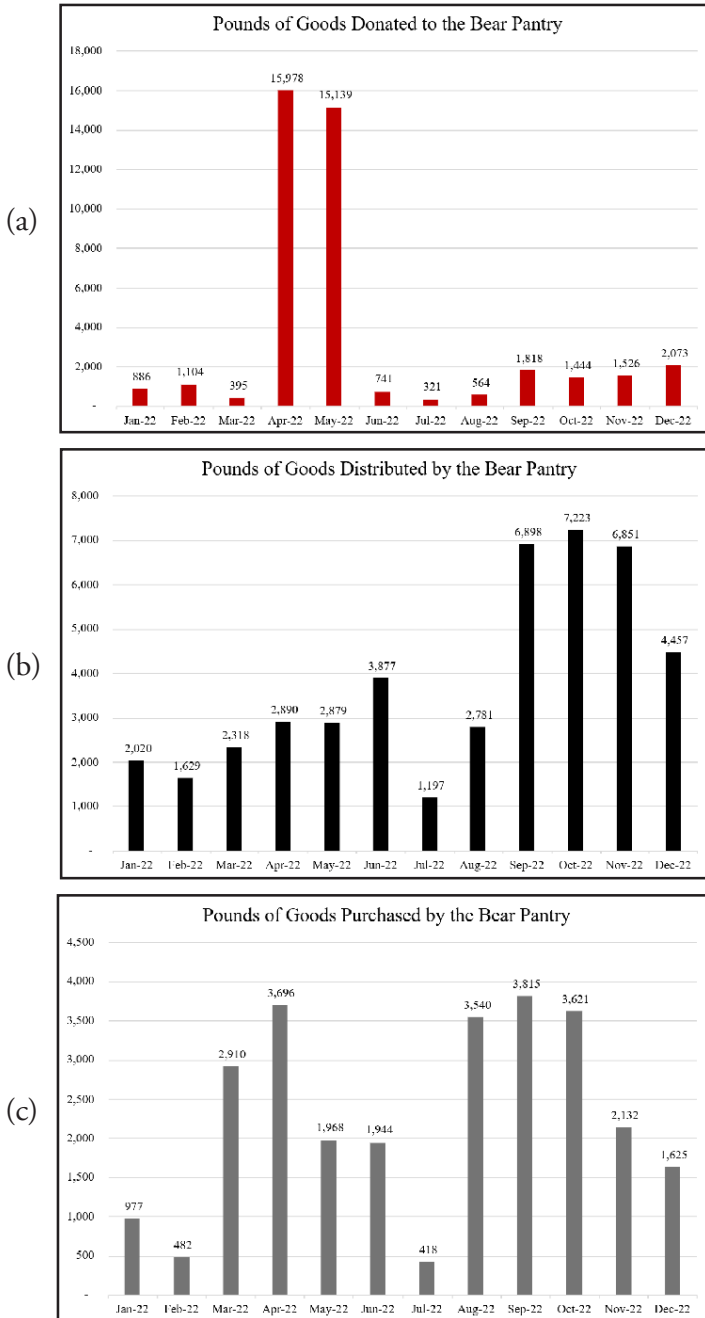


Figure 3: Bar graphs created in Excel depicting pounds of goods donated (a), distributed (b), and purchased (c) by Missouri State’s Bear Pantry in 2022.

Source: Numbers provided from internal sources at Missouri State’s Bear Pantry (Bear Pantry, 2022).

Adding an off-campus pantry is not a new idea. Before COVID-19 impacted Springfield, Missouri, the Bear Pantry and International Services agreed there was a high enough need for food and non-food items that building a second location would have a positive impact on the international student community. A climate-controlled room, meaning it can store vegetables and fruits properly, was picked out within the Jim D. Morris Center, but the project was eventually dropped. A second location would increase awareness of international student food insecurity. As shown on the Missouri State University webpage for the Jim D. Morris Center, this building is the home of international services and programs, most foreign language courses offered at the university, and the English Language Institute, where international students practice their English-speaking skills. The Jim D. Morris Center would be perfect as a sister location of the Bear Pantry because it gets heavy traffic among both international students and domestic students taking courses in the building. Since this location is off campus, adding this extension of the Bear Pantry could also help other students who do not go on campus often enough to know where the Bear Pantry is located. This, in turn, would be less intimidating for commuter students who live off-campus. A significant concern that dismissed the original idea was the issue of staffing. To combat this, the Bear Pantry partnered with the AmeriCorps program in fall 2021 to bring an increased number of staff who are dedicated to supporting efforts that address food insecurity on Missouri State University's campus and around the Springfield area. By using the AmeriCorps members who are already working in the current Bear Pantry, the pantry could eliminate the need to have outside funding to make the project of a second location happen. The Bear Pantry has only increased in the number of employees, so reviving the project is well within reach.

To make the second location run as smoothly as possible, the project will need all the same supplies as the current Bear Pantry. Though the supplies needed are the same, it is also important to point out that this location would be significantly smaller than the original location. Adjusting the needs of the pantry to the size available, it would be advisable to the administration that the second pantry location will need one fridge, two shelving units, and one checkout desk for consumers. All the food and non-food items will come from the backstock from the original pantry location, since it is enough to last for a couple of months. To start, the second location will only be open for two to three days per week, with only one AmeriCorps member needed to watch over the pantry space due to its smaller size. This location could serve as an online order-only pantry to see if visitors prefer an online option over the open concept of the original Bear Pantry.

In addition, the smaller size of the expanded location would lessen the effect of communication barriers the Bear Pantry has faced in the recent months because it has fewer options to choose from, which makes the shopping process increasingly straightforward and less confusing. Whether the pantry is online only or consists of one worker at a time, the size and location could help international students feel more comfortable with using a food pantry if they have not before. In the end, creating a second pantry location at the Jim D. Morris Center will not cost excessive amounts of money to the university, will allow more people to reap the benefits of the pantry, and will bring more awareness to food insecurity within smaller international communities at Missouri State University.

CONCLUSION

Food insecurity is a challenge that is commonly overlooked when discussing the challenges international students face, even though it continues to have a lasting impact on their physical health, mental well-being, and academic performance. The international student community is already combating hardships like culture shock and homesickness while studying abroad away from their home country, and should not be exacerbated by food insecurity. The ongoing issue of food insecurity on college campuses cannot be solved with one single solution. By addressing this issue in a targeted and collaborative manner, Missouri State University has the opportunity to increase awareness among students and faculty. This could be achieved by including food insecurity resources in class syllabi and expanding food accessibility with a second Bear Pantry location in downtown Springfield. This model not only increases the presence of this valuable resource but also encourages a safe and supportive environment where international students can thrive, both personally and academically. Additionally, a proposed collaboration between International Services and the Bear Pantry offers a practical and sustainable solution that addresses the unique needs of the international student population, while also promoting inclusivity and cultural understanding among domestic students and faculty. As higher education institutions continue to serve increasingly diverse student bodies, it is essential to prioritize initiatives that ensure all students, regardless of background, have the resources and support they need to succeed both inside and outside the classroom. As impactful changes are made and awareness spreads campus-wide, domestic students and faculty can see how crucial it is to not leave behind the needs of the smaller international student communities.

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1. This information was made available internally from systems used by the Bear Pantry to verify the numbers from 2022. If anyone wishes to get the information in the future, they would need to contact the Bear Pantry through the Center for Community Engagement at Missouri State University.

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Grassroot Opposition: Anti-War Activism in Missouri

Alyssa Roney

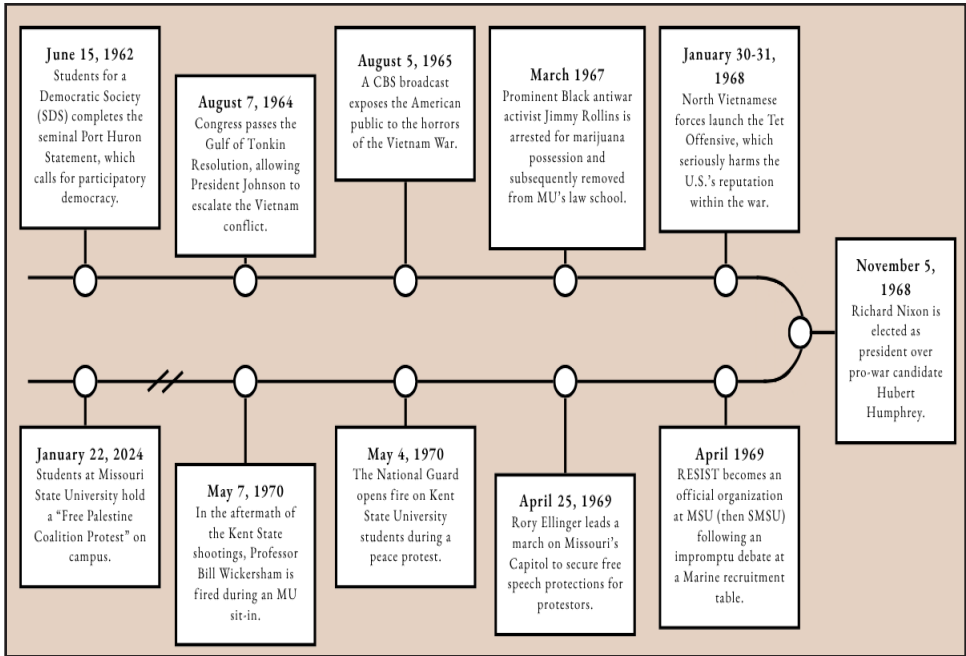
Abstract

As increasing significance is placed on anti-war activism at the university level, the nuance guiding such activities is often lost in translation. Some of the biggest factors driving the approaches taken by activists include geographic region and influence from similar historical struggles. This paper incorporates primary and secondary sources to paint a picture of university anti-war activism within Missouri, including Missouri college students who witnessed protests and pushback from administrations. The result is a near-complete narrative of a provincial uprising that happened despite, rather than because of, Missouri's sociopolitical climate and relied on cohorts and cooperation. The paper analyzes the state's unique individualistic, conservative leanings, as well as its place within the "prairie power" movement. It also demonstrates how this may have impacted anti-war activism during the Vietnam War era and today. Often, demonstrations were thwarted by external legislative bodies at the state and university levels. While war-dissenting students now may not face the same threat level, their ability to assemble is impacted by low turnouts and fear of social repercussions. While the throughline between Vietnam War-era Missouri and today did not happen in a vacuum, the current sentiment existing at the university level is largely shaped by a similar methodology as was undertaken during the 1960s and '70s. Gaza ceasefire protests in Missouri most clearly show the collective strength required to push back against a conservative hegemony, and that history, rather than repeating itself, offers innovative solutions to struggles that, like war, are never-ceasing.

Keywords: Vietnam War-era Missouri, anti-war activism, prairie power movement, Students for a Democratic Society, grassroots opposition, coalition-building strategies



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Timeline of Anti-War Activism in Missouri

Dates reference the research presented in this piece.

The Vietnam War served as a breeding ground for unrest and a catalyst for social and geopolitical change during the 1960s and '70s. While domestic movements for progressive social issues occurred during the war, they coexisted with the larger argument that Americans of all backgrounds had no business fighting Communism in Indochina.¹ Peace protests stemming from this notion played a major role in shaping domestic and foreign policy.² Those in the anti-war movement came from all corners of the United States, with increased news coverage going toward the sometimes dramatic protests in populous coastal states.³ Consequently, the American public often overlooked the sparse, smaller efforts in the lower Midwest and South. Still, the national media had a lasting impact on the anti-war movement through the projection of these protests, which uplifted dissenting voices within Midwestern hegemony.⁴ Collegiate Vietnam War protests in the state of Missouri were a distinctive culture because of their geographic location in America's heartland, grassroots leadership by local activists, and the necessity

1. Geoffrey Ward, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2017), 408.

2. *Ibid.*, 364.

3. Robbie Lieberman. *Prairie Power: Voices of 1960s Midwestern Student Protest*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004. doi.org/10.2307/3660673.

4. *Ibid.*

of political cooperation and coalition, which impacted modern peace protests at the state organizational level.

One cannot fully understand the Vietnam War without its controversy. As the first broadly televised war, its unsavory aspects affected the American people more directly than ever before. The first instance of this was during a CBS broadcast on August 5, 1965, which correspondent Morley Safer summarized as an operation in which U.S. Marines killed a baby, burned down 150 houses, injured three women, and imprisoned four old men incapable of speaking English.⁵ As the war progressed, the American people observed poignant images such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Terror of War” photograph, often used by anti-war crusaders. The photo’s subject is a young, naked Vietnamese girl running in terror alongside other villagers and soldiers from her shelter, which South Vietnamese forces mistakenly napalmed.⁶ By 1968, the war’s prolonged nature made much of the American public wonder why America had entered Vietnam in the first place. This skepticism was largely due to the perilous Tet Offensive, where the U.S. military lost 38 percent of the hamlets that it held before the surprise offensive, as well as the support of many South Vietnamese people.⁷ College-age young people took note of these events, inciting upset around the draft. This was despite the availability of deferments to university students, who observed their peers being subjected to the inequitable practices of the American draft system.⁸

This malcontent led national organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) to take hardline stances against the war. The SDS was created when the Student League for Industrial Democracy rebranded to appeal to students in 1960, well before the conflict escalated into war. Its first meeting was held in the Midwest, specifically at the University of Michigan. The seminal Port Huron Statement, written two years later, gave voice to the mass political participation that would later be incorporated at the organization’s anti-war activism. This established the SDS as the face of the New Left, a distinct type of progressivism in the 1960s and ’70s. What students learned in the classroom ignited a participatory democracy focused on social issues, a turn from the labor-heavy focus of the so-called Old Left.⁹

5. Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 127–128

6. Oscar Holland, “Napalm Girl’ at 50: The Story of the Vietnam War’s Defining Photo,” *CNN*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/napalm-girl-50-snap/index.html#:~:text=The%20horrifying%20photograph%20of%20children,spread%20a%20message%20of%20peace>.

7. *Ibid.*, 291–292.

8. “The Military Draft During the Vietnam War.” *Resistance and Revolution: The Anti-Vietnam War Movement at the University of Michigan, 1965–1972*. *University of Michigan*. 2015. https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antivietnamwar/exhibits/show/exhibit/draft_protests/the-military-draft-during-the-

9. “Students for a Democratic Society.” *Resistance and Revolution: The Anti-Vietnam War Movement at the University of Michigan, 1965–1972*. *University of Michigan*. 2015. https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antivietnamwar/exhibits/show/exhibit/origins-of-students-for-a-demo/origins_of_the_new_left.

Richard Flacks, a cofounder of SDS, noted that the group hoped to enact policy change against the draft. To many young Americans, the draft was “an expression of this militaristic, imperial power.”¹⁰ The prospect of their coerced involvement in war warranted civil disobedience through a collective refusal to fight.¹¹ SDS chapters, which consisted of both students and professors, accordingly skyrocketed as the war progressed. From January 1963 to 1969, the number of SDS chapters in the U.S. went from 11 schools in the Northeast and Upper Midwest to 301 chapters scattered in every state except for Alaska, Arkansas, and Idaho.¹²

The most notable protest centers during the war were populous areas and college campuses. Coastal states had many more SDS chapters than non-coastal states. Of the 301 SDS chapters in effect by 1969, 252 of them were located on either the East or West Coast.¹³ The anti-war movement was not confined to these areas, however. Kent State University in Ohio became the symbolic epicenter of the student protest movement after the National Guard opened fire on protestors on May 4, 1970.¹⁴ Following the shooting, combined protests across the United States made for the largest mass demonstration in history.¹⁵ Subsequently, over 300 campuses nationwide were shut down, including Southern Illinois University (SIU), where violent confrontations culminated in the declaration of a state of civil emergency.¹⁶ At several elite universities, including Harvard and Yale, student strikers were backed and endorsed by faculty. Protestors at the University of Wisconsin notably used firebombs. A more peaceful student protest took place in Missouri, at the University of Missouri (MU), also known as Mizzou.¹⁷

Missouri, a state nestled in the Midwest, can be accurately summarized as a state with both Southern and Midwestern values and political leanings, a culmination of cultural integration, religious principles, and geographic adaptation. Missouri’s political background during the war was largely influenced by its geographic location and the people groups who laid claim to its soil. Missouri’s ethnic German population, as well as the influx of Southerners from states like Tennessee and Kentucky, has been historically responsible for the Republican pockets in the state’s Ozark Mountain

10. Richard Flacks. “‘There Was All This Chaos’: Vietnam-Era Anti-war Activists Reflect,” interview by Daniel S. Levy, *Time*, January 30, 2015, <https://time.com/3676805/vietnam-anti-war-activists-reflect/>.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Amanda Miller. “SDS Chapters 1962–1969,” Mapping American Social Movements Project, *University of Washington*, https://depts.washington.edu/moves/sds_map.shtml.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 449.

15. Flacks, “‘There Was All This Chaos.’”

16. Lieberman, *Prairie Power*, XV.

17. Jen Lennon, “50 States of Protest: America Responds to May 4, 1970,” *Kent State Magazine*, April 22, 1970, <https://www.kent.edu/magazine/issue/2025/04/50-states-protest-america-responds-may-4-1970#:~:text=On%20May%204%2C%201970%2C%20members,colleges%20and%20universities%20to%20close.>

region.¹⁸ (It is worth mentioning, though, that Missouri was a Democrat-led state for much of the early 20th century, with the century's first Republican governor being Christopher S. Bond in 1972.)¹⁹ Additionally, the schism that occurred in Missouri as a Union slave state during the Civil War still influenced politics during the time of the Vietnam War through the state's division into the largely Democratic "Little Dixie" in the state's Northeast corner and otherwise.²⁰ Missouri, however, showed fluctuations in party loyalty in the 20th century, as the state's votes toward Theodore Roosevelt in 1904 marked the beginning of an era in which Missouri almost always voted for the winning presidential candidate.²¹ Cultural touchstones that incorporated varying problematic ideologies, as well as Missouri's status as a former slave state, caused an extremely complicated history of race relations that caused generations of future Black Missourians to question their place in the broader nation.

Soldiers of color from states like Missouri in the Midwest and South faced a particular kind of distaste toward the Vietnam War. Paul Banks, a Black Vietnam veteran from the Missouri Bootheel, arrived in California following his service. There, he said, Berkeley students harassed him due to what they viewed as an unjust war.²² He recalls worse discrimination from White midwestern and southern soldiers, who celebrated Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination a few hours' drive from Banks's hometown in Cape Girardeau, where he grew up in a segregated school system.²³ He and fellow soldiers of color felt that they were more likely to be drafted than their White peers.²⁴ Indeed, "African Americans saw combat at a higher percentage and suffered casualties at a higher rate" than White Americans, according to the Library of Congress.²⁵ In part, this was due to the draft deferment system, which, at the time, favored those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This included young adults attending college, a luxury not afforded to all young Black Americans.²⁶ These discrepancies often resulted in anti-war sentiment. One prominent Black anti-war activist in Missouri was Jimmy Rollins, an early member of SDS at the University of Missouri. Rollins's involvement in what student activists considered the "White" sphere of

18. Richard J. Hardy, Richard R. Dohm, and David A. Leuthold, eds., *Missouri Government and Politics* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 23, https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=mP4Qs6NKX_sC&oi=fnd&pg=PA38&dq=missouri+political+geography&ots=dYIB1h87p-&sig=TqENVtEnPaYwtsjY8Xbux7ZqXUQ#v=onepage&q=missouri%20political%20geography&f=false.

19. *Ibid.*, 126.

20. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

21. *Ibid.*, 58.

22. Paul Banks, interview by author, March 21, 2024.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. Library of Congress, *Racial, Ethnic, and Religious Minorities in the Vietnam War: A Resource Guide*, by Will Elsbury, Reference Services Division (September 12, 2022), <https://guides.loc.gov/racial-ethnic-and-religious-minorities-in-the-vietnam-war>.

26. "The Military Draft During the Vietnam War."

civil activism gave him a unique role in local groups as one of a few Black Americans. However, his anti-war efforts were thwarted by his permanent suspension from law school following an arrest due to marijuana possession. Civil rights activists heavily contested this as an unfair execution of the law because no Black student had yet graduated from the law school.²⁷ This attitude toward marijuana later incurred a large shift when Missouri voters legalized marijuana through the passing of Amendment 3 in 2022.²⁸

Such cases as the exclusion of Black students from higher education and Rollins's suspension demonstrate that Missouri's politics are, and have consistently been, conservative. In the late 20th century, Missouri was the only state in the contiguous United States designated by political cartographers as having an individualistic-traditionalistic mentality, an apt description for the "show-me" state.²⁹ This consists of a combination of values that emphasize "minimal government and minimal government interference in the economy" and "a strong commitment to the existing social and political order."³⁰ Older Missourians, including those who lived during the Vietnam War, are a large portion of the modern conservative populace.³¹ This traditionalistic mindset, which dominated Missouri politics, was evident when politicians during the Vietnam War attempted to pass bills that would have made it a felony for Missouri students to participate in demonstrations. (This bill, though not passed, became a large source of discontent, reflected in protests and student papers.)³² Also, due to popular sentiment in Missouri's education system, Banks felt like he and his friends were "brainwashed" into justifying the war.³³

Within the Midwest and South lay an unexpected ally to anti-Vietnam political thought: the "prairie power" movement. During SDS's peak in 1969, there were a few chapters in upper Midwest cities such as Chicago and Minneapolis.³⁴ In the lower Midwest and South, though, the SDS manifested itself as the more grassroots prairie power movement.³⁵ The name "prairie power" specifically described the subset of the New Left located in America's heartland whose focus was "local issues, decentralizing SDS leadership, and

27. Joe P. Dunn, "The Ubiquitous Activist, the Peace Professor, and Student Protest at the University of Missouri in the Vietnam War Era," *Missouri Historical Review*, 117, no. 4 (July 2023): 254–77.

28. "Missouri's Adult-Use Marijuana Law Takes Effect," *Missouri Department of Health & Senior Services*, December 8, 2022, <https://health.mo.gov/news/newsitem/uuid/82d06bc3-b620-4822-ae94-1002d833d19a/missouri-s-adult-use-marijuana-law-takes-effect>.

29. Hardy, Dohm, and Leuthold, eds., *Missouri Government and Politics*, 25–26.

30. *Ibid.*, 25.

31. "Political Ideology Among Adults in Missouri," Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/state/missouri/political-ideology/>.

32. "RESIST in State-Wide March," Southwest (MO) *Standard*, April 21, 1969, <https://cdm17307.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/Standard/id/17124/rec/58>.

33. Banks.

34. Miller, "SDS Chapters 1962–1969."

35. Lieberman, *Prairie Power*, 1–3.

focusing on the war in Vietnam.”³⁶ While seldom in direct opposition to the organization at large, prairie power as a distinct culture largely resulted from SDS’s inability to handle issues that were important to the Midwest and South.³⁷ In Missouri, the continuation of desegregation efforts in higher education was more pressing than at coastal universities and, thus, was an example of how the state’s issues were differentiated from its counterparts.³⁸ Missouri’s individualistic political culture, likewise, lent itself easily to the cause against loco parentis policies, which underwent serious reform during the decade.³⁹ Those outside of the prairie power movement often viewed members as more violent and individualistic than their New Left counterparts due to the unique politics of America’s frontier. Furthermore, the eventual conflation of the prairie power movement with Chicago’s radical Weathermen SDS faction (deemed “Midwesterners with violent fantasies”) assisted this notion.⁴⁰ It was for these differences that SDS’s founders blamed the organization’s downfall via sectarian splintering at the organization’s convention in 1969 on the prairie power movement.⁴¹

Within Missouri, though, members of the New Left were often less violent than their political counterparts elsewhere in the country.⁴² Conservatism within the state’s anti-war dissenters was incompatible with SDS factions like the Weathermen.⁴³ Missourians protested tactfully, eliciting assistance through other organizations to do so. In this, compromise was essential. This is perhaps best exemplified by MU’s Gentle Thursday, where students of all backgrounds peacefully congregated in the quad in an event organized by the local SDS chapter.⁴⁴ Contrast this with the SIU’s protest environment in 1968 through 1970, which culminated in activists bombing an agriculture building, burning the Old Main Building down, and the eventual aforementioned state-of-emergency declaration.⁴⁵ Surrounded by a conservative student body, the New Left of MU did what was essential to preserve anti-war thought in Missouri: they saved face by acting nonviolently and made gains by working with more moderate organizations such as Young Republicans and Young Americans for Freedom.⁴⁶ MU student Trish Vandiver said of her SDS chapter, “We didn’t have enough people to have a faction.

36. Ibid., 3.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., 134.

39. Ibid., 1.

40. Ibid., 8.

41. Ibid., 3.

42. Ibid., 98.

43. Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 426.

44. Lieberman, *Prairie Power*, 101–102.

45. Ibid., xiv–xv.

46. Ibid., 15.

If there was anybody committed to violence it was one or two people perhaps.”⁴⁷

The prairie power movement diversified mass protest during the Vietnam War due to the ideological differences of its members from the SDS. At many coastal schools, the SDS incorporated radical ideas outside of mainstream political thought. This was largely because the New Left was founded upon a Marxist ideological tradition that originated in Eastern Europe.⁴⁸ On the other hand, members of the prairie power movement were often people raised to be Republicans.⁴⁹ (The Republican Party of the 1960s had adopted many of the conservative outlooks popularized by 1964 presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, who notably voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and supported the use of nuclear weapons in war.)⁵⁰ This new breed of activists included Rory Ellinger, head of MU’s SDS chapter.⁵¹ While the term “prairie power” (whose origins remain unclear) was not used by students to describe MU’s New Left population, the prairie power goal of localizing activism was evident.⁵² This localization required the efforts of those from different socioeconomic, political, and racial backgrounds. Terry Koch, an SDS activist, put the experience of New Left Missourians best when he said, “What to me was wonderful about St. Louis was that if you were a poet, if you were a black jazz musician, if you believed in abortion rights...it was the same as being in the anti-war movement. You were all in it together because you’re in St. Louis and you’re surrounded by a bunch of rednecks... It was all one and the same.”⁵³ Subsequently, coalitions, even across party lines, served the important purpose of invoking tangible change in Missouri’s public consciousness and, eventually, made progressive change possible.⁵⁴

Cooperation served an important role at MU. Demonstrations served an important yet difficult role on campus, where Professor Bill Wickersham led multiple protests and was eventually fired despite his insistence on nonviolence. (The catalyst for his firing would be a May 7, 1970, sit-in protest outside of a university chancellor’s office, in which protestors made four demands: that MU’s administration “discontinue threats of job removal or loss of tenure of professors who had decided to strike,” “take a moral position on the war in Vietnam and Cambodia,” and attempt to discontinue all defense contracts on campus, as well as the granting of

47. *Ibid.*, 98.

48. *Ibid.*, 6.

49. *Ibid.*, 7.

50. Justine Rubinstein, *The Republican Party* (Philadelphia: National Highlights Inc., 2019), 66–68.

51. Dunn, “The Ubiquitous Activist, the Peace Professor, and Student Protest at the University of Missouri in the Vietnam War Era,” 256.

52. Lieberman, *Prairie Power*, 231.

53. *Ibid.*, 14–15

54. *Ibid.*, 15.

amnesty for those arrested in peaceful activities.⁵⁵ Ironically, Wickersham would be arrested with students before the rally expanded to 3,000 people.)⁵⁶ The foundation for university activism came from students such as Rory Ellinger. Ellinger, despite being labeled by fellow students as a radical, was more “a totally political animal who was more of a progressive liberal.”⁵⁷ He would maintain his political affiliations, later receiving the unofficial title: “the most liberal member of the Missouri state legislature.”⁵⁸ Despite his leanings, he frequently joined forces with the Young Americans for Freedom, a Republican-affiliated group, to promote free speech during the 1960s.⁵⁹ Within the SDS, Ellinger would later say that his chapter was skeptical of the SDS as a whole. However, the chapter also warily experienced SDS’s 1969 dissolution.⁶⁰

A march headed by Ellinger provided the most poignant example of the disheartening side of Missouri student demonstrations. In attempting to secure better free speech protections for demonstrators, Ellinger led a march on Jefferson City on April 25, 1969.⁶¹ The results, retrospectively documented in the *Missouri Historical Review*, speak for themselves:

Ellinger headed an ad hoc committee on student rights that planned a march of students from the various Columbia colleges to the Missouri Capitol building in Jefferson City. To broaden the appeal, the issues were expanded to include student participation in administration, institutional racism, and lowering the legal voting age to eighteen. This was the archetypical Rory Ellinger. Like many others of the era, he often employed inflated, excessive grandstanding rhetoric about Stalinist and fascist actions, but at heart he was a politico heading a march to the legislature for liberal action. Approximately 135 students began the thirty-plus-mile march on Friday, April 25, but the numbers progressively dwindled until only seventy-five reached the Capitol, where they were largely ignored. Although it gained some publicity, the march was, as Ellinger conceded, a disappointment.⁶²

55. Bill Wickersham, *Reflections of a University of Missouri Peace Activist, 1962–1970* (Santa Barbara: Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, 2015), 2–20, https://www.wagingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/wickersham_reflections.pdf.

56. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

57. Dunn, “The Ubiquitous Activist, the Peace Professor, and Student Protest at the University of Missouri in the Vietnam War Era,” 256.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, 260.

60. Lieberman, *Prairie Power*, 137.

61. Dunn, “The Ubiquitous Activist, the Peace Professor, and Student Protest at the University of Missouri in the Vietnam War Era,” 264.

62. *Ibid.*

Instances such as these were commonplace in Missouri, a state that, historically, be it in the stifling of MU protests or the limiting of subversive material at the postsecondary level, showed great unwillingness to both engage in civil disobedience and entertain such occurrences as the march on the Capitol.

Though smaller Missouri universities also protested the war, they were often limited in scope and ability. Missouri State University (MSU), then known as Southwest Missouri State University, formed a chapter of the anti-war organization RESIST following an impromptu debate at a Marine recruiter table.⁶³ Other universities did not have the liberty or will to form such organizations. Banks, who attended the historically Black Lincoln University, reported seeing virtually no demonstrations.⁶⁴ The same goes for Joe Dunn, a Southeast Missouri State University alum. This, he says, was largely due to “dire consequences [that] awaited anyone who dared challenge anything.”⁶⁵

Prairie power protests, including those at Missouri universities, affected public response to the war by broadening the range of acceptable mainstream topics and how protests were to be conducted moving forward. From the New Left came several movements, including gay rights, women’s liberation, and environmentalism, which blossomed into full effect shortly after. There is continuity between these movements and the prairie power movement in that they all epitomized the “explicit attempt to link the personal to the political, tackle local issues, [and] struggle with questions about leadership.”⁶⁶ In more recent years, apartheid in South Africa and instances of police brutality against Black men have been the subject of protests at American universities.⁶⁷ Only the recent Palestinian ceasefire protests have been sustained in a way that rivals Vietnam demonstrations, though.⁶⁸

The number of parallels between the Vietnam protests then and the Gaza ceasefire protests now is significant. The main goal of the SDS was to effectively publicize the issue they felt was disregarded by society and politicians; pro-Palestinian demonstrators aim to do the same. Richard Flacks, the SDS leader, remarked in a December 2023 *New York Times* article that “a lot of the tactics invented [during the 1960s] became part of the tool kit for activism on campuses.”⁶⁹

63. Scrapbook 1968–69, 1969, Plaster Student Union [RG15–16] 1964–2006, Duane C. Meyer Library, Springfield, MO.

64. Banks.

65. Dunn, “The Ubiquitous Activist, the Peace Professor, and Student Protest at the University of Missouri in the Vietnam War Era,” 255.

66. Lieberman, *Prairie Power*, 23.

67. Michael Wines, “College Protests Over Gaza Echo Vietnam Strife,” *The New York Times*, December 26, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/24/us/gaza-vietnam-student-protest.html>.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

When political tensions regarding the Vietnam War reached a high during the 1968 presidential election, many young voters abstained from voting rather than support the pro-war Democratic candidate, Hubert Humphrey. Subsequently, Richard Nixon won by less than 88,000 total votes.⁷⁰ Michael Kazin, a Georgetown University historian who was involved in the SDS, predicted that young people might act similarly in the 2024 election, abstaining from voting for Joe Biden.⁷¹ (Biden's eventual withdrawal from the race may have, in part, resulted from alienating young voters on the issue, with the following Democratic candidate, Kamala Harris, receiving criticism for her noncommittal response to Gaza. She, like Humphrey, lost the election to a Republican, Donald Trump.)⁷² Many others, including Connecticut's former secretary of state Miles Rapoport, believe the current situation in Gaza is more nuanced than Vietnam. For instance, the ongoing war in Gaza was initiated by Hamas's attack against Israeli citizens, while there is nothing comparable in Vietnam. Likewise, the American military is not directly fighting in the current conflict, its incentives lying instead in profiting from lobbyist groups.⁷³

Within Missouri, the political climate has remained largely the same since the Vietnam War. As of 2024, a plurality of Missourians (39 percent) consider themselves conservative, followed by moderate at 32 percent.⁷⁴ This same traditionalist mindset guided Missouri legislators to vote against ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment in the early 1970s.⁷⁵ Political divisions within the state affect not only elections but interpersonal relationships as well. During the 1960s, MU's Trish Vandiver became involved in anti-Vietnam War protests and the politically charged *Free Press* newspaper. Due to her involvement in these subversive activities, the FBI interviewed her friends and family in Bonne Terre. This caused a period of great upset between her and her parents, where "there was a period of several months when we barely spoke."⁷⁶ MSU BFA Graphic Design and Illustration student Shelby McDonald, who has been involved in several Springfield-based ceasefire protests and uses their social media fanbase to draw attention to crises in Gaza, does not talk about their pro-Palestinian involvement around family to avoid rifts.⁷⁷

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Moustafa Bayoumi, "Not Changing Course on Gaza Was a Colossal Mistake By Kamala Harris," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/nov/11/election-harris-gaza-policy>.

73. Wines, "College Protests Over Gaza Echo Vietnam Strife."

74. "Political Ideology Among Adults in Missouri."

75. Hardy, Dohm, and Leuthold, eds., *Missouri Government and Politics*, 26; Lieberman, *Prairie Power*, 142.

76. Lieberman, *Prairie Power*, 226.

77. Shelby McDonald, interview by author, March 25, 2024.

Pro-ceasefire student demonstrations within the state often lack support from external organizations and administration. At the University of Missouri—Kansas City (UMKC), protestors face a lack of administrator support despite a passionate student body.⁷⁸ MSU has also been the site of a few small protests. These, McDonald says, are often headed by students and lack age diversity.⁷⁹ This includes the exclusion of those who would have been active during the Vietnam War, echoing author Joe P. Dunn's sentiment that many leftists of the day ended up becoming modern-day conservatives or moderates.⁸⁰ The most prominent of these protests consisted of a small coalition (30–50 individuals) from local political groups and campus organizations.⁸¹ The necessity of these cooperatives is reminiscent of Vietnam-era demonstrations in Missouri.

In considering Vietnam War-era peace activism, one must also regard the New Left's political and regional intersectionality. While demonstrations across the states had a common goal, protestors were not a monolith. In the Midwest, variance at the university level allowed demonstrations to look entirely different from one city to the next. Missouri, being a state locked between the Midwest and South, carries with it the heft of often contradictory values; these values shaped the way that protests were and are carried out, necessitating compromise and coalition.

As such, the Vietnam War shaped a complex landscape of student activism in Missouri, influenced by geography, political tradition, and local social networks. Though Missouri activism largely existed outside of news networks, the state's anti-war demonstrations required grassroots activism to prevail; this required a strong degree of adaptability through coalition building. Missouri's geographic location, which subjected citizens to a confluence of Midwestern and Southern values, allowed for an activism culture rooted in both pragmatism and restraint, in contrast to more extreme protests in other states. Missourian activists of all backgrounds made unique contributions to the state's political scene by fitting the SDS's broader goals to the state's needs. This carried on to the current state of college protests within Missouri, which similarly incorporate both restraint and coalition. As such, Missouri emulated the prairie power movement, while also containing a culture of its own.

78. George Russell, "At UMKC, Pro-Palestinian Students Struggle for University Support as They Advocate for Peace," KCUR, December 20, 2023, <https://www.kcur.org/education/2023-12-20/students-justice-palestine-umkc-ceasefire-kansas-city-college-campus-antisemitism>.

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80. Dunn, "The Ubiquitous Activist, the Peace Professor, and Student Protest at the University of Missouri in the Vietnam War Era," 256.

81. Makayla Malachowski, "Free Palestine Coalition Protest Held at Missouri State University," *Missouri State University Standard*, January 22, 2024, https://www.the-standard.org/news/free-palestine-coalition-protest-held-at-missouri-state-university/article_1f80f5ea-b994-11ee-b8b3-57f2d4c723a1.html.

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“Fixed as Fate”: Religion and Free Will in the World of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

Bianca Salomon

Abstract

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* connects itself to Christianity and Christian thought through its references to the Bible and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. These explicit connections open *Frankenstein* up to interpretations based on biblical stories and the historical context of Christian debate. In the centuries leading up to the publication of *Frankenstein*, theological debates within the Church of England led to the establishment of two opposed sects: the Calvinists and the Arminians. The Calvinists believed in double predestination, meaning that God preselects the saved and the damned and rejects free will. The Arminians believed in free will and taught that an individual could make choices that would impact their salvation. This essay explores different biblical interpretations of *Frankenstein* and examines *Frankenstein* through the lens of the Calvinist-Arminian theological conflict by viewing the world of *Frankenstein* as a Calvinist world. Through this lens, Victor Frankenstein believes himself to be saved, but is not. His hope for marriage reflects his hope for heaven, but his hope is ultimately futile as his desires are continually frustrated. The monster desires to do good, but he does not have the free will to alter his fate of damnation. He is unable to turn from doing evil and can only suffer as a result. Double predestination is portrayed through the fate of the characters in *Frankenstein* as a cruel and unfair teaching. An Arminian view of God and free will is expressed through glimmers of hope at the end of the novel. By depicting Calvinist thought as unfair and cruel, *Frankenstein* affirms the beliefs of Arminianism that sought to establish a more merciful and just view of God.



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INTRODUCTION

The characters in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* might be some of the most unfortunate beings to exist. They are brought low through circumstances and through their own actions, which bring about death, condemnation, and deprivation. There are many possible explanations behind why they exist in such miserable states, but one of the richest for interpretation is related to how *Frankenstein* engages with religious themes. *Frankenstein* does not shy away from religious texts, making explicit connections between itself and the myth of Prometheus, *Paradise Lost*, and the Bible. These last two texts yoke its content to Christianity in a way that makes Christian thought essential for interpretation of the text.

But the connection to Christianity does not end within the confines of what *Frankenstein* specifically mentions. The novel also wrestles with theological questions that coursed through the Church of England in the seventeenth century and left lasting impressions on how God was viewed. Debates about free will, predestination, and the nature of God between Calvinists and Arminians remained in the minds of poets and writers centuries after they began. The Calvinist doctrine of double predestination was seen as monstrous and unfair by Arminian groups. The influence of this debate and viewpoint on *Frankenstein* becomes clear when the themes of fate and depravity present in the novel are explored. Both the creature and Victor Frankenstein himself experience inescapable ruin. The creature seems to have been cursed to wretchedness from his beginning, like the reprobates who have been denied election by God. Victor believes himself to be on a journey towards happiness, only to find that he cannot elude his downfall like an imagined person who has been rejected by God despite believing themselves to be one of the elect. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is firmly placed within a religious context and is influenced by religious debate within the Church of England, and it ultimately takes an Arminian stance by portraying Calvinist teaching as arbitrarily cruel through the arcs of its characters.

FRANKENSTEIN'S CONNECTIONS TO PROMETHEUS AND RELIGIOUS WRITING

Frankenstein first explicitly places itself within a religious context through its many references to religious texts and stories. Harriet Hustis argues that Victor may be judged as a creator who falls short of the moral responsibility that comes with creating a living being, while Prometheus has compassion for a forsaken creation and suffers a grave consequence for it (853).

Thus, its framing as “The Modern Prometheus” (Shelley 3) is a way in which Mary Shelley engages in theological questions, especially around “the creative act” such as the “obligation for the well-being and happiness” (Hustis 846) of the created being.

Another prominent source that the novel draws from is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Leslie Tannenbaum details how *Frankenstein* “is engaged in a continual dialogue with Milton” (101) throughout the majority of the novel. There are a number of “parallel[s]” (103) between Victor and the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, especially when Satan is viewed “as an author of perverted creations” (106) such as “Death” (105). The copy of *Paradise Lost* that the creature reads demonstrates that Shelley intentionally made this connection.

There are also many biblical allusions throughout *Frankenstein*, which place it directly in conversation with Christianity. According to Robert Kawashima, there are many possible biblical interpretations within the novel. The creature may be seen as an archetypal Adam who must contend with Victor as “a monstrous inversion of the biblical God” (Kawashima 6) and who, like Adam, searches for a suitable partner in a female creature (9). The creature longs for and is denied the relational fulfillment that Adam experienced in the Garden of Eden. The creature may also be linked to “Moses...seek[ing] an audience with the deity in Exodus” (6) and to Job through his immense, unmerited suffering (7), although the creature “comes to curse his creator” (8), unlike Job, who blesses God. Each of these interpretations places the creature in a sympathetic light and signifies Victor’s failure to love his creature.

A BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION OF *FRANKENSTEIN*

Frankenstein may also be viewed as an imaginative exercise in which Satan’s promise that “ye shall be as gods” (King James Version, Gen. 3.5) is fulfilled for Adam, yet in a perverted way. Victor, as Adam, possesses “knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2.9) from the forbidden tree and becomes corrupted through the desire to become “greater than his nature” by this “acquirement of knowledge” (Shelley 32). Victor, who has rejected and turned away from God, is a cruel and unjust creator and fails in every way to measure up to the God who created him. He curses his creation instead of blessing it (Gen. 1.22) and demolishes his second act of creation, failing to see that it is “not good” for the creature to “be alone” (Gen. 2.18) and to fulfill his duties as a creator. The creature makes the explicit connection of the unfairness between his experience of being “wretched, helpless, and alone” and Adam’s, who “came forth from the hands of God a perfect creature...

guarded by the especial care of his Creator” with whom he could “converse” and “acquire knowledge from” (90). He is aware of the parallel between man being created “in the image of God” (Gen. 2.27) while, in a perversion of that fact, his “form is a filthy type of [Victor’s]” (Shelley 91). Furthermore, Victor’s death is a final condemnation on the creature who can no longer “ask [him for] pardon” (158) for his sins, unlike the God who would rather die to save his creation rather than condemn it (John 3.17). This reflected meditation upon Adam being “like [a] god” (Gen. 3.5) while lacking the goodness of God is one way to place *Frankenstein* firmly within a Christian context.

CALVINISM, ARMINIANISM, AND THE ROMANTIC ERA

The division between Calvinism and Arminianism within the Church of England gives insight into the condition of Victor and his creature. Stephen Fallon states that the difference between the two theological branches “rests on the question of free will,” and, stemming from that issue, “[w]hether human beings are saved or damned before creation...[or in response] to their free choice” (103). Calvinistic thought holds that free will “contradict[s] divine omnipotence” because human beings would be able to “affect God’s plans” (116). In contrast, the writings of Arminius stipulate that grace is “resistible” by human beings and that each person may make a “free choice to believe or not with the aid of grace” (110). This contradicts the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, which declares that a person’s salvation is dependent entirely on God’s predetermined decision “whereby both election and reprobation are unconditional” (Tyacke 204). From an Arminian point of view, God in the Calvinistic sense is unjust and arbitrarily cruel to his creation, while God in the Arminian sense is forgiving and loving.

These historical debates still lingered in the minds of Romantic era poets and writers in the nineteenth century when Shelley began writing. Richard E. Brantley praises the interpretation that some of the most well-known figures of the Romantic era “attack...Calvinism” while remaining “persistently Calvinist” (355). He elaborates that they are “Calvinist in mood but Arminian in tendency.” Throughout their work, many of these writers “explore...the doctrine of the elect[,]...the innate depravity of man[,]...and a God of wrath and judgment” (355). Brantley highlights how the literary artists of the Romantic era explored and struggled with the religious tension that permeated the Church of England.

CALVINISM, ARMINIANISM, AND THE CHARACTERS IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

Brantley also argues that in *Frankenstein* in particular, Mary Shelley “discloses her knowledge of [Calvinism]” without “approving of either [its] content...or its forms” (355). Victor’s treatment of the creature has a “particularly Calvinistic” twist in his immediate condemnation of the creature, which actually serves to make the creature a “sympathetic character” (355). All of this is subtly underscored by the fact that John Calvin himself hailed from Victor’s home province of Geneva. Throughout the novel, the characters in *Frankenstein* appear to be living in a Calvinistic world and must wrestle with how this determines their fate and how it affects the way they view themselves. It is important to note that some of the situations that the characters experience—such as a condemned person being fully convinced of his salvation—may not be considered likely or even possible in Calvinist thought. The question at hand is not whether *Frankenstein* accurately represents intricate theological concepts about the nature of God, salvation, and free will, but whether it encompasses the feelings and reactions surrounding Calvinism and Arminianism that affected the Romantic writers.

THE CREATURE

In the context of the idea that, as Ignatius van Wyk summarizes, “some people are elected, while others are rejected” (3), *Frankenstein* seems to portray characters desperately struggling against their “rejected” status without being able to do anything about it. The creature that Victor has brought into being is called a “wretch” (Shelley 35) immediately following his creation and is continually referred to as a “monster” (68). He is physically rejected by society (73) and even refers to himself as “foolish wretch” (79). At this point, the creature has committed no crime; he is simply a “confused” (70) being learning how to navigate the world. The immediate spurning that he experiences from his creator, society, and himself positions him as one who is inherently condemned. This holds true even though the creature desires and attempts to act virtuously. He observes “kindness” in one family and begins to mimic that kindness by “assist[ing]” the family and derives “pleasure” (77) from watching them receive his selfless gifts. Despite his apparent wretchedness, the family considers him a “good spirit” (79) for these actions.

As the creature learns more about the world around him, there are two ideas that rise in his soul. One is the notion that being a “virtuous man” is the “highest honor,” while “to be base and vicious” is “the lowest degradation” (Shelley 83). He begins to make distinctions between right and wrong and judges right actions to be better. The second idea that comes to him is that he is not in full control of his fate. He begins to see the family whom he assists through virtuous actions as “the arbiters of [his] future destiny” who will look past his base nature, acknowledge his virtue, and proffer him “favour” and “love” (79). Thus, the creature is brought to a simple understanding that although he is base, he can learn to act with goodness and attain some form of love or salvation in the eyes of those who would decide his fate. This is a simplistic way of stating the Arminian idea that, although humanity sins against God, they can choose virtue and gain salvation through His favor and love.

The creature’s assumptions about how striving for virtue ought to affect his life are mistaken. He is rejected by the family he has come to love and is subjected to their “fury” (Shelley 94). His status as a being rejected by society does not improve after he flees. The creature hopes that a companion who is his equal will improve his lot (101). But this does not come to pass either. Victor destroys the female creature before she can be brought to life and “destroys” the creature’s “hopes” (120) along with her. The creature is incapable of moving beyond his wretched state in life, and the only response he sees is one of vice and destruction. This hopelessness mirrors the hopelessness of all human beings who are predestined to hell and have no recourse to changing their state. The creature believes that he was “the slave, not the master” of the “impulse” that drove him to his crimes, which he “detested, yet could not disobey” (159). The creature is stating that he does not possess free will. The Calvinistic view in which God directs and chooses everything that happens is portrayed as a cruel truth that the creature cannot escape.

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN

If the creature signifies a reprobate who realizes he cannot change his situation, the character Victor Frankenstein takes things one step further and signifies one who believes himself to be elect but isn’t. Since childhood, Victor has been told by his mother that his cousin, Elizabeth, is to be his wife (Shelley 20) and that this is a sign of “future happiness” (25) in which “[his] future hopes and prospects are entirely bound up in” (108). In the book of Revelation, weddings are an important symbol because the “blessed” are

portrayed as being “called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19.9). Thus, Victor’s belief that he is guaranteed a future state of bliss and happiness correlates to believers on earth who count themselves among the elect. Victor also experiences a lack of free will, but in a different way than the creature. Whereas the creature sees his sins as something he cannot turn away from, Victor—at least while in this “elect” state—believes himself to be “free from blame” of the “neglect” (Shelley 34) of his family. Because there is no free will, Victor does not see himself as responsible for his sins, nor does he see any need to change.

This guaranteed happiness and salvation that Victor holds to does not last. There is an early indication of his coming fate when Victor has a dream about “embrac[ing]” and “kiss[ing]” Elizabeth, only to find her lips “livid with the hue of death” and her image transformed into “the corpse of [his] dead mother” (Shelley 36). As his marriage becomes a more “immediate” event, he is filled with “horror and dismay” (108). His fears take concrete shape when the creature threatens to “be with [him] on [his] wedding night” (121). Even Elizabeth feels that their union and happiness are “not to [be] depend[ed]” (139) upon. Victor’s faith and assurance that he is chosen for eternal bliss are beginning to be shaken.

As the repercussions of his creation begin to pile up, he acquires a “bad conscience” (Shelley 132) that other people are able to sense in him. Victor comes to believe that his future union will not be one of bliss, but will rather bring about his death (136). However, he thinks that an almost sacrificial death on his part will lead to Elizabeth’s happiness and prevent further destruction (136). Once again, he is wrong about his future state. He marries Elizabeth, but is unable to consummate the union on his “dreadful” (140) wedding night before she is killed, and the “last moments” of “happiness” (139) in Victor’s life fade away. He is “left desolate” (142), “plunge[d] lower than dust,” and, “like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence[,]... chained in an eternal hell” (159). Through Victor’s journey, the Calvinistic God is portrayed as a cruelly unfair one who would destroy the hopes of His followers and would count among the damned people who believe themselves to be “elected.”

CAPTAIN ROBERT WALTON

There are two questions left to ponder after Victor’s fall from grace. The first concerns the fate of Walton, who is on a journey to find “a country of eternal light” (Shelley 6), which may be thought of as heaven. Indeed, his “enthusiasm” for this country “elevates [him] to heaven” (8).

If these aspects of his character place him among the elect, there are also moments that place him with the wretched. He “endeavour[s]” (151) to learn the details behind Victor’s sin and, after some peril, his “hopes [for his journey] are blasted” (155) when he is forced to give up his search for that heavenly country. It remains ambiguous whether Walton is truly one of the elect or if he and Victor share a similar fate of damnation.

FRANKENSTEIN’S HOPEFUL ENDING

The other cryptic element in *Frankenstein* is the final moments of both Victor and the creature. As his death comes closer, Victor enjoys “comfort” (Shelley 151) from what he believes are the “real beings” of “his friends” (152) in dreams. He spends his last moments offering moral advice to Walton and dies “with the irradiation of a gentle smile on his lips” (157). The creature similarly goes off to die with an expectation that his “miseries will be extinct” and that “[his] spirit will sleep in peace” (161). These final moments of hope after the utter wretchedness of these characters have been expounded upon point to the feelings of hope that Arminianism inspired in its debates about Calvinism. God is thought to be more merciful, forgiving, and responsive to the ways in which wretched beings try to atone for their sins. In the final moments of *Frankenstein*, an Arminian worldview restores hope where there was previously only wretchedness and unfairness.

CONCLUSION

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* contains multi-layered references to religious works and ideas. In particular, it operates within the framework of the Calvinist and Arminian debate that many of the Romantic era writers were influenced by. It proffers the subtle yet clear opinion that a Calvinist lens is not desirable and leads to the conclusion that damnation is a distinct possibility for each individual. Its final moments suggest that an Arminian worldview offers hope and freedom from this type of thought. By engaging in theological debates of its time, *Frankenstein* invites its audience to ponder what idea of God best represents the professions of Christianity and what doctrines best support the biblical claims of His love and mercy.

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Ace of Hearts

Breezy Semler

Abstract

In a fictionalized Old West, a young bounty hunter, Wilda Erin, is hunting down a fugitive outlaw. However, she's in over her head and finds herself at the wrong end of a revolver. Luckily for her, a charming doctor turned gambler, Doc Hennessey, comes to her rescue. The two women hit it off and form an unlikely friendship, and maybe something more. Doc tends to Wilda's wounds, and their bond grows deeper until Wilda must return to her bounty.



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The first time Doc saved her life was the day they met. Wilda had gotten herself into a scrape in an unfamiliar and unfriendly frontier town, looking around for the same damn outlaw she'd already caught a few days ago. The bastard was slippery, and he'd found his way out of her custody as she was trying to load him up on a train headed back east. Ever since then, she'd been running around, desperately following what little trail he'd left.

After going non-stop for nearly 30 hours, Wilda stumbled into a dusty saloon that looked like it catered to the wrong kinda crowd, which was exactly the crowd she was looking for. She made her way to the bar, gathering a crowd of staring faces—all scars, scowls, and snickers—as she went. She caught a drunken poker player in the corner of the room, staring at her with a grin on her face that made Wilda's stomach twist into a knot. Trying not to flush from embarrassment, she leaned on the bar counter. She ordered a whiskey, drinking it down quick to calm her nerves. She pulled the wanted poster out of the pocket in her vest.

"You ain't perhaps seen this fella around, have ya?"

The bartender looked briefly at the picture, then turned around, back to rearranging the bottles of liquor on the shelf behind the counter. It was a long moment before he spoke again, and the ruffians sitting along the bar were peaking over at the poster. It made Wilda nervous, so she folded it up and stuffed it back into her pocket.

"Cain't say I have, missy." His back was still turned to her.

"You sure? I lost him about a day's ride back north, and I'd be much obliged if you had any information you'd be willing to let my way."

"Sorry."

Wilda swore under her breath. She wasn't sure she believed the man behind the bar, but she was a might too tired to argue. She ordered another whiskey, knowing full well that it was a mistake. She couldn't find it in her to care. She swallowed down every drop of alcohol in her glass. Wilda decided she'd rather not stay the night here; she was pretty sure the bartender wouldn't have given her a room anyway. So she slid off the stool she'd perched herself on and headed, woozy, to the front door. If she weren't so dog-tired, or if she hadn't had that second glass of whiskey, well, she probably would've seen the bartender whisper to the rough-looking fella at the bar. And she probably would've seen that rough-looking man stand up and slip out the back door. And she probably would have realized where he was going and to whom. But she was that tired, and she *did* drink that second glass, so she didn't notice any of this before she got jumped in the dark alley around the side of the saloon.

Two pairs of rough hands shoved her back against a brick wall, knocking the wind out of her and making stars dance in the corners of her eyes. In front of her, the wide frame of Dodie Griffin towered over her. She cursed herself silently. Wilda was supposed to catch *him* by sunrise, not the other way around.

“Griffin—,” she started.

Griffin slammed a beer bottle against the brick wall, just above her head. She flinched as pieces of amber glass shattered down on her, and she closed her eyes, hoping to spare them from the sharp shards.

“You got the upper hand the other day, little bounty hunter. And I don’t intend to let that happen again. Not ever.”

That sounded bad. Wilda’d never heard the term ‘not ever’ used in a friendly manner. In fact, in her young life, she’d experienced it mostly as a death threat. Folks tended to fail on the follow-through, though it wasn’t always for lack of effort. This time, Wilda felt pretty certain that Griffin meant business. And when he wanted something, he usually got it. Last time, she’d taken him on, he was alone. With these lackeys holding her down, she could hardly move, let alone fight off three people who were bigger, older, and stronger. Not that that was going to stop her from trying.

Wilda kicked out, landing the heel of her boot square in Griffin’s stomach. He let out an *oof* and stumbled back. In the brief moment of shock, she managed to pull her left arm free. She kept the arm’s momentum going as she freed it, sending it flying at the third fella’s jaw. She hit him hard, and he went down to the ground, but she could hear that it hadn’t been enough to knock him out. He’d be up soon. Foolhardy as she was, she knew well enough that she couldn’t win this fight. She looked around and took a big step, ready to take off running. She didn’t get far. One of those boys swung something hard, catching her in the gut, and she fell to her knees. That’d hurt in the morning. When she felt the two pairs of hands wrap around her arms and the cold brick against her back again, she was pretty sure she wouldn’t need to worry about tomorrow morning. She barely saw the light catch the glass bottle before the broken end was racked across her face. She cried out, but it was drowned under Griffin’s laughter. Hot blood poured down the right side of Wilda’s face.

“It ain’t polite to play with a girl,” she panted. “If you’re gonna kill me, you’d better damn well do it. Now.”

Griffin’s cold chuckle filled the tight alleyway. “We was just having some fun, wasn’t we, boys?”

This elicited harsh snickers from the men holding her to the wall. They laughed like the vermin they were.

“Of course, it would be impolite to deny your request, and since you’re hell bent on manners, I guess I’m bound to oblige.”

A sick smile crossed Griffin’s ugly mug. He pressed the sharp end of the bottle against her throat. Just hard enough to break the skin, but not yet hard enough to do any permanent damage. She felt the blood trickling out of the cut on her neck, the trail of it mixing with the blood pouring down from her face. She stared up at him defiantly. He wanted her to cry, to beg for her life, to make a fool of herself and fall groveling at his feet. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Pride was the one thing Wilda Erin had in spades, and she’d die before she gave that up. In fact, she had always been sure that would be the death of her; might as well prove herself right.

He pulled the bottle back, and Wilda felt a pang of regret that this was where her life would end. Griffin brought the bottle above his head. Wilda wondered where he would strike the killing blow. Throat would kill her fast; he’d be able to make sure the job was done and then get on about his day, plus it was a messy spectacle. He might like that. Then again, he might well go for the gut; it was sure to kill her, if he did it right, and she’d die slow and painful. Sadistic bastard would enjoy that even more. It was an effort for Wilda not to close her eyes, to imagine herself somewhere else. But she couldn’t let him have that win.

A gun fired, and the bottle shattered in Griffin’s hand. The lackeys dropped her arms as they rushed to shield their eyes from the spray of glass. Standing at the other end of the alley was the poker player from inside. She didn’t look drunk anymore. She looked sober as a judge, with eyes dark green and sharp like a fox’s, calculating and cool. She was holding her pistol out in front of her, the smoking barrel still pointed at the space the bottle no longer occupied. Before Wilda could notice anything more, the shock had worn off of Griffin and his men. One of the men grabbed Wilda, wrapping his arm around her neck tight. She scratched at his arm, trying to pry him off. He pressed the cold steel of his revolver to her temple. Wilda seethed, but stopped fighting. The other man, along with Griffin, had his pistol trained on the poker player.

“Run along, Hennessey. This don’t concern you,” the man sneered.

“Quiet!” Griffin snapped, then turned his attention back to the woman. “What exactly do you think you’re doing, Doctor?”

“I was about to ask you the same question, Dodie. I don’t think it’s entirely appropriate, this kind of behavior with a lady,” the poker player, Doctor Hennessey, had a deep southern drawl and a dry tone. She seemed to be completely serious and making a wisecrack all at the same time.

“She ain’t no lady, she’s a bounty hunter. She’s bad for all of our business, including yours.”

Wilda had a feeling Griffin was referring more to the gambling and drinking business than to the doctor’s medical practice. The doctor continued as if she hadn’t heard Griffin at all.

“A drunken lady, no less. Why, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dodie Griffin. Now, why don’t you let the young woman go, and you and I will have no more unpleasantness. And I do abhor unpleasantness, particularly at this hour of the day.”

“I can’t rightly do that, Hennessey. You know it.”

Doctor Hennessey stepped forward, tilting her head up, revealing the rest of her face. Her shaggy auburn hair was mussed from a night of gambling. Despite that, she looked composed and clean, a much higher-brow criminal than any of the other patrons at this saloon. She shot a glance at Wilda; it was that same smile from inside. It made Wilda’s stomach knot once more. Before she had mistaken it for mockery. Now she wasn’t sure what it was.

“Well, this is unfortunate. And not at all how I had intended to spend my evening. But if you must insist, then so must I.”

She fired her pistol. The man not holding Wilda fell to the ground, a bullet hole right through his forehead. His expression was slack, and he hit the dirt with a *thud*, sending up a cloud of dust. Chaos erupted. Griffin fired at the doctor, but she was quicker. She had already ducked out of the way, around the corner of the building. The brim of her hat was just peeking around the corner, letting Wilda know she was still there. Griffin let out a frustrated yell. In the midst of the chaos, Wilda grabbed her assailant’s arm and used all her might to back them both up against the brick wall. He gasped for breath.

He slipped down the wall, but grabbed her arm on the way down. He tugged her down by the arm and kicked her legs out from under her. She landed on her back. He got on top of her, throwing a punch that hit her in the jaw. He seized both of her wrists, pinning them down above her head. Then, with his other hand, he pulled out his revolver. Wilda struggled against his grip as she heard the hammer click. Earlier, she had been resigned to dying, but not now. Not when she felt she had a real, honest chance of making it out of here alive. She writhed and thrashed, looking for any opening she could find. Then, spotting one, she grinned, mouth wide, and she could taste the blood still trickling from the cut on her face. She pulled her knees to her chest, slipping her feet between her and him and using her legs to flip him over her. The man gasped, and he landed flat on his back, the force knocking the wind out of him.

Keeping the momentum going, she rolled over too, ending up in a crouch beside him. Wilda grabbed his revolver before he could and sprang to her feet. The gun fired just once, the bullet hitting the man in the chest. Something like guilt filled her gut, and she had to remind herself that he would have killed her.

She stared down at his body until she heard a struggle behind her. She spun around. Griffin and the doctor were grappling. Neither of them had a gun in their hand anymore, but Griffin brandished a sizable buck knife, and there was a nasty-looking cut on the doctor's arm. Wilda raised the revolver, her hand shaking, either from exhaustion or terror. She took in a slow breath, released it, then fired. The bullet tore through Griffin's knee. His knife clattered to the ground at the same time that he did, clutching at his leg. Doctor Hennessey straightened up. She walked over to where her gun lay in the dirt. She picked it up and brushed it off. Then, walking over to where Griffin was huddled in pain, swung the gun down on top of the man's skull. He fell limp to the ground.

Wilda was breathing hard, her chest rising and falling rapidly. The doctor was staring at her. Wilda looked away, trying not to flush under the scrutinizing gaze of the woman, and knelt beside the fallen outlaw. She pulled her belt off, making a tourniquet above his knee. Wilda could still feel the doctor's gaze on her, questioning her movements.

"I can't very well let the bastard bleed out," she clarified for her.

"Sure you can."

Wilda gave her a bewildered look. The doctor reached forward, grabbing onto Wilda's vest. She felt her breath catch and hoped that the doctor didn't notice. Then, she reached into Wilda's pocket and pulled out the wanted poster she'd brandished in the saloon. She unfolded and gave it a cursory glance before handing it back.

"Just as I thought. That says dead *or* alive. No need to ruin your apparel over a low-down, no-account like Dodie Griffin." The doctor's playful smile had returned, although it didn't reach her eyes. "Though, I suppose you're much more amenable to the latter option. Oh, well. That's your choice, Miss...?"

Wilda took a moment to answer. Her mind was still trying to untangle the web of confusion the doctor seemed to weave anytime she spoke.

"Huh? Oh," she extended her hand. "My name is Wilda, Wilda Erin. I'm a bounty hunter and I don't normally like accepting help, but—"

The doctor shook her hand, suppressing a laugh. Wilda was rambling, and she knew it. She tried to wrap up without embarrassing herself.

"Well, anyway, I appreciate it. Thank you, Doctor Hennessey."

The doctor laughed and held up her hand.

"No need to thank me. Getting this damned fool out of this town is repayment enough, believe you me. The name is Doctor Jemma Hope Hennessey. Though the doctor title seems ill-fitting these days. I do believe I have taken more lives as of late than I have saved." She gestured to the goon with a bullet through his brain. Then, she looked the unconscious Griffin up and down, smirking a bit when her eyes stopped over the tourniquet. "Perhaps we ought to be calling you Doctor, Miss Erin."

Wilda shuddered, her eyes falling on the body of the man she'd killed. Blood was soaked through his shirt, all of it originating from the fountain she'd created in his chest.

"No, I don't think we oughta. We'll be leaving that title to you, Doc."

Wilda looked over at her. She was taller than Wilda. Much taller. Wilda was by no means short, but the doctor stood over her by nearly half a foot, maybe more, with a dreamy, faraway look in her eye. In the pale moonlight, the doctor looked almost unearthly. Her too pale skin and dark auburn hair made her look sort of like some kind of avenging angel Wilda'd seen in old books, bloody and drenched in sweat. She looked, well, beautiful. The thought made her stomach knot and twist again. Wilda was growing even less sure of what that feeling was. She shook her head. Maybe she was still a little drunk. She cleared her throat, which seemed to startle Doc out of her dream world.

"Sorry." Wilda knelt down. "I'd better be getting him to the Sheriff's office until morning."

Wilda looped her arms under Griffin's and tried to pull him up so she could drag him to the Sheriff. Suddenly, Wilda's world was spinning. She felt her whole body get hot and then cold all in an instant. She dropped Griffin and leaned against the wall, trying to get her vision to stop swimming. She felt Doc's hand on her back, helping hold her up.

"Hold on there, Wilda, you're in no condition to be moving that great buffoon." Doc's hands were cold. It was nice, considering Wilda was burning up.

"I'm fine! I just stood up too fast, that's all. Anyway, it's not like I can leave him here."

"No, I suspect not. But you can't be lifting a man twice your size when you look like you've got most of your blood on the outside rather than in."

"I didn't lose that much—" she stopped. Wilda had no idea how much blood she'd lost. But it certainly wouldn't be good if she passed out. Griffin would probably wake up before her, and who knows what would happen then. "I've got to do *something* with him."

"I'll tell you what. You wait for me here. I'll take your outlaw to the Sheriff, then I'll come back here and we'll go to my office. I think I had better give that nasty gash on your eye an examination."

Wilda reached up and touched her eye; she winced in pain. When she pulled her hand away, her fingers were shiny with her dark blood. She swallowed hard. Then she nodded.

"Okay," she sighed, too tired to argue, too tired to realize she probably shouldn't trust this random doctor turned gambler, even if she had saved her life. Doc's cool hands lowered Wilda to the ground. Wilda's eyelids were heavy, and she wanted to close them, to let sleep wash over her.

"Hey now, Wilda. Open your eyes. I need you to stay awake, darlin'," Doc cooed. Her voice was soft, soothing.

If she's trying to keep me awake, Wilda thought, this ain't the way.

"Just... gonna—just gonna take a little...nap," Wilda whispered, sleepiness invading her voice.

"Darlin'," Doc lifted Wilda's face to hers, so she had to meet her eyes. "Please."

There was something in those big green eyes that compelled Wilda to obey. She wanted to promise her she'd stay awake, that she wouldn't fall asleep. It was just that, as compelling as Doc was, the soft dirt seemed even more so. Wilda didn't like making promises she couldn't keep.

"All right. 'S the doctor's order, right? I'll stay awake."

"This isn't funny, darlin'. Please, promise me."

Wilda wasn't stupid, contrary to popular belief. She wasn't a *doctor*, but she knew if she fell asleep, she might not wake up again. She looked into Doc's green eyes. They were so expressive. Right now, Wilda thought she saw a glimmer of fear in them, fear for her. She sighed.

"I promise," she gave her a weak smile that she hoped was convincing.

With that, Doc nodded. She walked over to Griffin and, with what looked like a good bit of effort, hoisted him up enough to drag to a horse. Doc pushed the man up onto the saddle, grabbed the lead, and began walking away. When Doc was out of sight, Wilda tried to stand. She got herself all the way to her feet, with the help of that damn brick wall. She tried to take a few steps. She didn't want Doc to look over her. She already owed the stranger enough; she could hardly afford a medical bill.

Wilda didn't like making promises she couldn't keep, but after just three steps, she felt her knees buckle and her legs give out beneath her. The last thing she felt before she broke her promise was the cold dirt on her face and the stinging in her hands from trying to catch herself.

Wilda, much to her surprise, wasn't dead. Instead, she was vaguely aware of someone saying her name and of a creaky, old mattress beneath her. It was uncomfortable, but still softer than the ground, and she was grateful. The room smelled clean, but she could see a layer of dust on everything. As it wafted into her nose, she sneezed, and instantly, she wished she hadn't. Wilda winced and clutched her ribs. They must've been cracked when Griffin's boy had hit her. She hadn't noticed then, but of course, there had been more pressing matters than a broken rib. She heard the voice calling her name again. Standing beside the bed, looking worried, was Doc. Wilda looked at her and instantly felt ashamed.

"Sorry I broke my promise," she whispered.

Doc smiled, a sincere, relieved smile.

"I'm just glad you aren't dead. I wasn't sure when I came back and saw you lying there."

"Did you get Griffin to the sheriff?"

"Back to business, then?" Doc's smile faded. "Yes. The good sheriff is holding your outlaw for you until the train comes this afternoon. Though I have to say in my professional opinion, you are not fit to leave this bed, let alone escort some criminal fool to jail."

"The sun ain't even risen. I'll be ready by this afternoon, you'll see," Wilda swung her legs over the side of the bed, trying hard not to wince visibly. Doc looked grim, but she helped Wilda to her feet.

"Yes, I suppose I will."

Doc walked Wilda over to an examination area, where she ordered Wilda to climb into the chair. Wilda tried to refuse, but quickly learned that Doc could be quite scary when she insisted on something, deathly still and eyes dark. So Wilda sat. Doc pulled out several tools that Wilda didn't recognize; she had rarely been to a doctor in her life, and she had certainly never been to one that seemed so qualified. She had also never been to a doctor whose touch made her breath catch, but that was besides the point. Doc's cool hand traced gently along the gash on her face. She winced.

"Apologies, Miss Erin," Doc drawled, continuing to examine the wound. Wilda looked anywhere but at the doctor's face, so close to hers. The doctor picked something up and began cleaning the wound. Wilda sharply inhaled at the sting. Doc began talking, clearly trying to distract her. Wilda thought she was much too old for that trick, but she played along.

"I don't believe it'll need stitches, luckily. But it'll have to be bandaged if you want to avoid an infection."

"Will it scar?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm sorry, perhaps if I'd arrived sooner..."

"Ah, it doesn't matter. What's one more?"

Doc paused for a moment and looked at the other scar she spoke of. It was just a little one, right across her cheek. A permanent reminder. Doc reached out, her long, thin fingers brushing gently against it. The caress made Wilda shiver. Doc pulled her fingers away quickly and went back to cleaning the wound.

"This one will have quite a story, at least."

"I guess they both will."

"How do you mean?"

Wilda's gaze shifted away as the memory stirred at the back of her mind.

"I don't mean to pry. You don't have to answer, of course. I apologize for intruding."

"No, it's alright. My father, Nolan, had a real penchant for drinking and hating his children. Combine those two with a toddler who likes to wander around and well..."

"Then, that scar wasn't meant for you? I mean, not originally."

"I guess not. But better me than Mason."

"Your brother?"

"Yeah. He was 4. I was 15. So I dealt with the old man. He cracked my ribs, too, so I know how to deal with those. No need to worry."

"I think I'll still worry some, if you don't mind," she smiled softly, and it made Wilda smile, too.

"And what's your story?" Wilda asked, wanting nothing more than to keep talking to this strange gambling doctor 'til sundown. Doc huffed a laugh before replying.

"My tale," she began, "is complicated and I'll spare you the sordid details. But believe it or not, rich aristocrats are not rather big fans of illegitimate children. I suppose we have some similar experience in the familial department."

"Oh," Wilda said, not quite knowing what to say. "I'd love to hear the rest."

"Someday," Doc said, smiling. She had started bandaging the wound. Wilda realized she hadn't felt a sting since they'd started talking; she couldn't believe she had fallen for it. They sat quietly for a moment while Doc applied the bandages. Wilda hated them; she hated the way they itched and messed with her vision. But the instant she'd started picking at them, Doc slapped her hand away and gave her a sharp look. Better to endure the bandages, rather than Doc's wrath, she decided.

"So, you're 19," Doc looked at her, with that calculating look, once more reminding Wilda of a fox. "A little young for a bounty hunter, don't you think so?"

"No, I don't think so! How old are you, anyways?"

"I'm 22."

"A little young for a doctor, ain't you?"

"I suppose," Doc grinned. "I meant no offense, Miss Erin. Simply stating a fact."

"And what about it? Yes, I guess 19 is a teensy bit young for most bounty hunters. And yes, when I walked into that saloon last night, everyone stared at me. And yes, I noticed *you* smiling at me like I was a fool, you—!"

Doc smiled that smile now, and it infuriated Wilda. She hated how her stomach twisted itself into a knot and made her feel like she was falling whenever Doc did that. She hated that she had no idea what that look meant, and she hated that Doc was doing it deliberately to get a rise out of her.

"Would you quit that? Damn it!" Wilda shouted, springing to her feet and sending a shockwave of pain throughout her body. She tried to catch herself on the counter, but Doc's arms were around her in an instant, holding her up. She hated that, too. "Get off of me!"

Doc took a step back, hands raised in surrender. The ghost of that damn grin was still on her face.

"Be sure of this, between your temper and that new scar, next time people in a saloon are staring at you, it will be with fear and reverence. I can promise you that."

Wilda wasn't used to accepting help; she felt like there had to be a catch. But she'd yet to discover one with the woman who'd saved her last night. It seemed that Doc wanted nothing from her, save for company. Maybe she just wanted a friend. It couldn't hurt Wilda to have one, either.

Wilda looked at the doctor, who had gone back to work and was smiling. Her smile was nice. It was soft and friendly when it was genuine; it crinkled the corners of her eyes and made that hard, calculating look go away. Wilda liked seeing it. She resolved herself, then and there, to make sure that smile stayed as long as she could manage. She reached out, resting her hand on Doc's arm. The doctor winced. Wilda lifted her hand and noticed, for the first time since the alley, that Doc had been injured, too.

"Doc!" She cried. "You're bleeding!"

"It's nothin', darlin'."

"It most certainly isn't!"

"We really have more pressing matters—," Doc insisted, but Wilda had been plenty tended to.

She climbed out of the chair and gestured for Doc to take her place. When the doctor began to protest, Wilda attempted to copy the stern look she'd given her when she fussed with her bandages. The twinkle in Doc's eyes told her that her glare was a poor imitation, but she hushed anyway.

Wilda didn't know much when it came to medicine, but she knew how to clean a wound. She grabbed the things she'd seen Doc using on her earlier and began gently dabbing at the cut on her arm. Doc didn't wince the way Wilda had, which only served to further embarrass her. As she cleaned the wound, the sun began to peek in through the windows. It sent glittering rays of light in through the glass, illuminating the room with a warm glow. It seemed to give the doctor's office a dreamy quality, making Wilda feel like she was floating.

Maybe it's the blood loss, she thought. But she knew better than that. The butterflies weren't from her injury. Doc was watching her, eyes soft, as she worked on the wound. Wilda tried not to look too long at the woman's face, as she could feel her own face flushing. She fixed her gaze downward, reaching for the gauze to wrap Doc's arm with. Wilda mused that Doc had held up remarkably against Griffin last night. She must have led quite a life, but she was hardly any older than Wilda. How much trouble could one girl get into in 22 years? She wished that Doc would tell her the rest of that story.

"I'm sorry about your arm," Wilda said, not looking at the doctor.

"My own fault," Doc replied, instantly.

"No, it isn't. You saved my life. It's my fault."

"It's not as if you forced me to fight that boorish brute. I made that choice all on my own."

"Why?" Doc tilted her head, so Wilda repeated her question. "Why *did* you do it?"

Doc stared off, looking out the window. A faint trace of a smile appeared on her lips.

"Seemed like the gentlemanly thing to do."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Doc turned her face back, catching Wilda by surprise. She leaned forward, her face less than an inch away from Wilda's, so close she could feel her breath. Doc stared at her, gaze flicking from Wilda's eyes down to her lips. Wilda was fairly certain she wasn't breathing. The doctor smirked down at the bounty hunter, revealing her teeth, the sharp canines adding further to Wilda's fox comparison. If she just tilted her head up, if she closed the short yet infinitely huge distance between them, if she pressed forward even the slightest amount, their lips would be touching.

Wilda realized how badly she wanted to close the distance, how badly she wanted to kiss Doc. Then, Doc pulled away.

"Well," Wilda started, backing toward the door in defeat. "I'd better head out. I've gotta talk to the sheriff and be getting Griffin back into custody."

Doc stood, tearing the piece of paper she'd been furiously scribbling on off of a pad. She made it over to Wilda in four long strides and handed her the paper.

"I think not," she said.

Wilda looked at the paper. Doc had scribbled out a doctor's note saying she needed "at least 2 days of rest before escorting any criminals back from whence they came."

"Like you said, Miss Erin. It's the doctor's orders."

Wilda agreed to wait a few days before escorting Griffin back where he belonged. After securing lodging at a local saloon, they spent their time learning about each other and taking in the nightlife. Wilda told Doc about all of her siblings, and Doc taught Wilda to play poker. She didn't think she was half bad at it herself. Doc, though...Doc could sweep the floor with any player. She had all the strategy in the world and, it seemed, all the luck. Doc would send Wilda to bed promptly at 10:30, insisting she get the rest she needed to heal. Every night, though, Wilda would sneak back down the stairs and watch Doc gamble and drink and laugh.

Two days later, around noon, Doc arrived at the train station just as Wilda loaded Griffin aboard. The hot desert sun was high in the sky, beating down on them. Despite this, Doc was dressed in all black. Wilda smiled at her.

"Making sure I don't get my other eye slashed?" She joked.

"Not necessary. I'm quite sure you can take care of yourself, Miss Erin."

Doc seemed almost somber when she spoke, though her eyes were warm. Wilda nodded, unsure how to reply.

"I just came to see you off, since you insist on leaving." It was a joke. Doc even laughed at it like it was funny. She didn't smile, though.

"I'm sure our paths will cross again," Wilda said, hoping she sounded reassuring.

"Hopefully sooner rather than later."

"Hopefully."

The train whistle sounded. Wilda suddenly wished the train was leaving tomorrow. She felt like she needed more time to say goodbye. She stood frozen. Her mouth opened, but no words came out. Doc leaned down and picked up Wilda's single bag.

“Allow me,” she went over to the steps, extending her hand. Wilda took it. Doc helped her into the train car and handed off the luggage. “Goodbye, Wilda. Next time we see each other, I hope it’s in less dire straits.”

Before letting go of her hand, she brought it to her lips. They brushed the back of her hand softly. Wilda’s breath caught, and she mentally chided herself when she felt her face flushing. Doc dropped her hand as the train started pulling away.

Say something! Wilda thought. *Before it’s too late!*

“Hey!” She shouted, hoping Doc would hear her over the roar of the coal engine. Doc stopped and turned, much to Wilda’s relief. She said the only thing she could think of. “Why did you do that?”

Doc smiled.

“It seemed like the gentlemanly thing to do!” she shouted back. She raised a hand, a parting gesture. Wilda returned the favor, giving a small wave.

Wilda stared out the window, watching Doc, who in return watched her, neither one of them willing to look away first. It wasn’t until Doc had disappeared beyond the horizon that Wilda looked away, the knots in her stomach growing with every mile.

Winning Time and the Decadent Eighties

Ben Verstaete

Abstract

HBO's *Winning Time: the Rise of the Lakers Dynasty* is set during a widely acknowledged point of transition between liberal and neoliberal economic and social values in America; *Winning Time* displays nostalgia for those values while also revealing them as cynical and illusory. Showtime-era Lakers basketball embodies the spirit of 1980s economics in its emphasis on speed and unstructured play, and the aesthetic of the team during this period reflects the decadent spirit of 1980s culture. However, the show also contends that the world of basketball is one of fantasy, requiring sacrifice on the part of women and racial minorities to be maintained. *Winning Time*, then, exhibits a unique mode of eighties nostalgia which sincerely longs for a version of the decade that it ultimately finds empty—the decadent eighties.



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Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty is a historical sports drama created by Max Borenstein and Jim Hecht that ran on HBO from 2022 to 2023. Based on Jeff Pearlman's (2014) book *Showtime*, it follows the Los Angeles Lakers as they revolutionize the game of basketball at the dawn of the 1980s. From the outset, the show was in a precarious, dual position. On one hand, it is inherently hagiographical to dramatize the lives of players like Earvin "Magic" Johnson (Quincy Isaiah), coaches like Jack McKinney (Tracy Letts) and Pat Riley (Adrian Brody), and an owner like Jerry Buss (John C. Reilly). On the other hand, as a prestigious HBO television show executive-produced by Adam McKay, there are also aspirations toward social commentary in the same vein as something like *Vice* or *Succession*.

In turn, reception for *Winning Time* was always mixed. Critics saw flashes of brilliance—mainly in the performances—but took issue with the inconsistent and often historically inaccurate writing as well as the show's sidelining of female characters (Chaney & Quah, 2023; Daniels, 2022; Dator, 2022). The series was effectively cancelled before it was officially cancelled—the second season aired during the 2023 SAG and WGA strikes, which crippled the ability of HBO to promote the show, and the decline in ratings was so steep that Pearlman took to Twitter [recently renamed as "X"] to beg people to watch (Valdez, 2023).

The dual nature of the series, which helped sink it, is also what makes it illuminating to study—it is interested in nostalgic recollection of iconic moments in a vitally important team's history, but it is also interested in criticizing everything that the team and those moments represent. In particular, this analysis will focus on two episodes—"Who the F**k is Jack McKinney" (S1E4) and "California Dreaming" (S1E8). Throughout these two episodes (and the series more broadly), *Winning Time* uses basketball to engage in nostalgia for a very particular conception of the eighties—the *decadent* eighties. Yet, the show is also intent on revealing that conception as fantastical, a construction which obscures a reality of exploitation along lines of gender, economics, and race.

NEOLIBERALISM IN THE “LONG” 1980S

“Neoliberalism” encompasses a lot of things. Scholars generally agree on the broad definition of “the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society” (Springer et al., 2016, p. 2). Though variations of the ideology are many—Reagan’s neoliberalism was not Thatcher’s or Pinochet’s—Eagleton-Pierce identifies three key values from the broader liberal tradition which neoliberalism tends to espouse (Springer et al., 2016). The first value is individualism, defined as the ontological priority of the individual over the collective. The second value is universalism, narrowly defined as the globalization of the market and broadly as the capitalist logic of expansion. The third value is meliorism, defined as the ability of people and institutions to improve themselves. All three will become relevant as *Winning Time*’s characters begin to espouse (and subvert) the values of the eighties.

The plot of *Winning Time* actually starts in 1979, which, for all intents and purposes, was the first year of the eighties. David Harvey (2005) identifies 1979 as the year of the “dramatic consolidation of neoliberalism as a new economic orthodoxy,” the year when Thatcher was elected, and the US Federal Reserve started raising interest rates to control inflation at all costs (pp. 22–23). Though Reagan (elected in 1980) acts as a convenient reference point for neoliberal policy, the economic and, thus, cultural trends of his decade predate his presidency. *Winning Time* begins amidst skyrocketing wealth inequality—what Krugman (2007) called the “Great Divergence.” This makes the show’s focus on executives and star NBA players relevant; the nostalgia it engages with is situated in a particular, newly ascendant class context.

CONCEIVING NOSTALGIA

The impulse to label eighties nostalgia—or nostalgia as a whole—as inherently reactionary is a natural one. Nevertheless, the impulse should be resisted. Tannock (1995) argues that while nostalgia is a structure of feeling which “approaches the past as a stable source of meaning,” this does not necessarily indicate a desire for a “stable, traditional, and hierarchized society” (p. 455). Though nostalgia can be and often is reactionary, Tannock’s model for nostalgic periodization is politically neutral: a prelapsarian past that possesses something now missing (though said past need not necessarily be an all-around good time), a lapse, and a postlapsarian present perceived to be deficient in some manner. Under this scheme, the Nostalgic may just as well long for a time of things being in play as a time of stability—leftists appeal to a tradition of dissent as much as rightists appeal to a tradition of hierarchy.

Tannock’s schema encompasses only what Boym (2007) calls “restorative nostalgia,” that which “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” (p. 19). This contrasts with what she calls “reflective nostalgia,” that which “delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately.” While both modes encapsulate a longing for some kind of lost home, reflective nostalgia takes a critical eye to that home—it is a nostalgia of distance, lacking in absolute truths. Of course, these modes do not comprise a binary, and most media exist somewhere between the two poles. Insofar as *Winning Time* is concerned, the notion of reflective nostalgia is relevant, as it means that nostalgia must not necessarily be fixated on a “real” past. As will become clear down the line, the show longs for a past which, as the series progresses, seems less and less like it was ever real to begin with.

Winning Time, far more than a historical show, is a nostalgic show. Like any dramatization, it takes liberties regarding the timeline of events, particular details of games, and personal details (see Melendez, 2022, for some examples). What’s attracted the most criticism from the show’s subjects, however, has not been the details but the general characterizations: Abdul-Jabbar (2022, para. 8) called the characters “stick figure representations,” and the late Jerry West notably threatened legal action on account of his portrayal by Jason Clarke as prone to cursing and extreme mood swings (Braxton, 2022). It’s not hard to see where they’re coming from; *Winning Time* characters have extreme personalities. Yet this feature of the show also speaks to how *Winning Time* does its remembering.

In her account of the “docucharacter,” Piper (2022) describes publicly available information about a figure as forming a “silhouette,” which the docudrama must fill with storytelling conventions, the ideas of the filmmakers, and so on to invent an inner life (p. 1). What fills out the silhouettes in *Winning Time* is the nostalgic memory of the Lakers. When Jerry West throws a trophy through his window in a fit of emotion during the first episode, it reflects his near-mythic status as a player/coach/executive far more than it represents a supposed real person. Moreover, the remembered Jerry West is a sympathetic figure, one whose extreme devotion to the game of basketball at his own expense comes off as charming.

Crucial to understanding *Winning Time*’s nostalgia is its reflexive and presentational (rather than representational) style—a sort of “Adam McKay was here” tag. Characters break the fourth wall, and while the show seems to forget about that stylistic choice for entire episodes at a time, it happens enough that Michael Shannon quit the show after being cast as Jerry Buss to avoid having to do it (Rose, 2022). Perhaps the best example of this feature is the film grain. The show is shot on a combination of 35mm cameras, 8mm cameras, and a Betacam predecessor manufactured by Ikegami (Lash, 2022). Though the vintage technology sometimes has the effect of something like *The Holdovers*—which obsessively recreates the look of 1970s film in restoratively nostalgic fashion—it often has the reverse effect, changing film stocks mid-scene to conspicuously draw attention to the construction of the series. Return to Boym’s reflected nostalgia: *Winning Time* displays a nostalgic affection for film grain and the associated aesthetic, but it is also interested in distance, periodically breaking the illusion created by the film stock. The show indulges in nostalgia, but also highlights the very construction—and thus, unreal nature—of that nostalgia. With the groundwork of how *Winning Time* addresses its subject established, it’s now possible to put a lens on the subject itself: basketball.

BASKETBALL AS A GENRE

THE SPORT

That *Winning Time* is a show about basketball, specifically, is relevant. Ewers (2023) conceives of any given sport as its own micro-genre of film, each with its own machinery for creating fantasies and transmitting ideology. Since sports are dynamic and change over time, they are not allegories with a static meaning—Ewers points to the way rule changes, shifting playstyles, and the popularity of different sports all affect how a sport functions ideologically. As an example, he contrasts the films *Rocky* and *The Wrestler*—though both films are about combat sports, the nature of boxing as a process and the nature of pro wrestling as a “meeting of essences” (p. 1209) changes the type of story that can be told within those sports.

Examining *Winning Time*’s use of basketball, then, starts with an examination of two genre determinants of interest. For one, basketball is a team sport, but a team sport played with small squads—contrast basketball’s five with, say, football’s eleven. In addition, the line between offensive play and defensive play is a loose one—again, contrast possession in basketball with possession in football. The result is that even though team cohesion is vital to success, basketball is a very “carriable” game where a star player can do a lot on their own. Thus, there is a tension between the player and the team—between the individual and the collective. The second tension arises from basketball’s nature as a very dynamic game. A player can move from one side of the court to the other in a matter of seconds, and as a result, formations are less “set” than in other sports—contrast the mobility of the basketball player with the relatively territoriality of the baseball player. Thus, there is a tension between the need to impose team structure and the destabilizing nature of the game itself.

Both of these tensions manifest in one of the major conflicts of “Who the F**k is Jack McKinney.” As the players make their way to training camp, it is still unclear whether the team’s starting point guard will be first-round draft pick Magic Johnson or the more established Norm Nixon (played by DeVauyn Nixon). During scrimmages at camp, the two players—always placed on opposite teams—compete intensely with each other. Pursuing their individual interests, the two are pitted against each other by the standard structure of the basketball squad—only one player can run point.

Related to this conflict (and arguably the main plotline of the episode) is brand-new coach Jack McKinney attempting to implement his innovative style of play. His approach to the game is less structured and much faster than a classical basketball offense, relying on the fast break as a primary method

of scoring. In a segment where he explains his theory directly to the viewer, he compares the classical basketball offence to classical music: “coaches put the notes in place, x’s and o’s, and all the players are supposed to do is hit their cues” (19:55). The new style of the Showtime Lakers, however, is more like jazz: “instead of chaining [players] to spots, you let them improvise, so they can flow...Everything unpredictable has underlying patterns. And when those patterns become reflex, individuals become an unstoppable force” (20:28).

This is the point at which the notion of sport as ideology-genre becomes apparent—the two styles of offense can be mapped to pre-neoliberal and neoliberal understandings of economics. The postwar Keynesian understanding of the economy is one of volatility: market economies are prone to instability and, therefore, government regulation is necessary to control unemployment and inflation. Though this approach to monetary/fiscal policy and regulation is not *planned* per se—private firms have freedom to do far more than “hit their cues”—the basic ideological assumption shared by pre-McKinney basketball and the postwar economic consensus is that individual actors will not act harmoniously and thus must have structure imposed.

By contrast, the neoliberal understanding of economics is one of stability: market economies are naturally self-regulating, and the government must give private firms the freedom to allow this self-regulation to occur. Similarly, the Showtime Lakers theory of basketball, with its emphasis on “underlying patterns,” is rooted in a belief that players can and will act harmoniously in the chaos of the fast break, which the playstyle therefore prioritizes. In both cases, there is a belief that individuals allowed to follow their self-interest will aggregate into a collective, an “unstoppable force” of infinite growth/scoring—remember, here, the value of universalism. Presented as fundamentally newer than the classical style—via the jazz/classical comparison—and as fundamentally of the time—via *Winning Time*’s sense of nostalgia—the Showtime style of play embodies the political values of the Reagan era in the assumptions which underpin it.

Of course, one may read this assertion and counter that the neoliberal emphasis on the individual is at odds with McKinney’s ongoing appeals for team play over individual score-seeking—at one point, he reprimands Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for using his signature skyhook instead of passing. Neoliberalism, however, is in fact deeply interested in the notion of cooperation. Take, for example, Milton Friedman’s infamous example of the pencil (Free to Choose Network, 2012). To Friedman (the single most influential American neoliberal economist), production in a free-market

system represents an apex of global cooperation, in which people “who might hate one another, if they ever met” are brought together by the impetus of the price system, such that free trade is vital “to foster harmony and peace among the peoples of the world” (1:28; 2:20). Individual interest and societal interest, then, are not opposed but fundamentally a part of the same process. If there *is* a contradiction between allowing players to “flow” and not allowing Kareem to do the skyhook, it is a contradiction parallel to the one between the rhetoric of personal freedom and the rhetoric of self-discipline—that is, constraining one’s own freedom for self-improvement, the value of meliorism.

What eventually comes of McKinney’s theory, at least within “Who the F**k...,” is the resolution of the Magic-Norm conflict. Receiving criticism from his players and requests by then-consultant Jerry West to allow some structure into the team’s playstyle, McKinney is eventually forced to open his formerly closed practices up to management, to whom he must demonstrate his approach’s viability. In response, he proposes a team formation of even *less* structure: Magic and Norm both play on the A-squad, with “whoever has the ball” being the point guard (52:51). Magic and Norm then proceed to play to each other’s strengths and score constantly, much to the delight of the team’s management. That a fight eventually breaks out between squads mainly serves to indicate that Magic still needs acclimating onto the team—the executives leave happy, and McKinney gets his closed practices back. After an episode struggling to get his players to cooperate, the solution is not regulation but deregulation—Magic and Norm, left to their own devices, will naturally work efficiently. Such is the effect of the market, bringing out the innate meliorist quality of the players and bringing them together towards a universalist end.

The nostalgia of *Winning Time*’s basketball, then, is a nostalgia for 1980s neoliberalism. This is not to assert that nostalgia for the Showtime-era Lakers represents some kind of sublimated longing for austerity, but rather a longing for a certain *ethos*. The notion of self-regulating, natural systems that simply work on their own; the spirit of individualism and self-improvement—these are ideas with a certain optimistic appeal. Ewers (2023) contends that no matter the particular game, sports stories have an inherent dual nature, placing characters between the reality-obscuring fantasy world created by sport and the “real.” The fantasy of Showtime-era basketball, according to *Winning Time*, is a Reagan era that really worked. Filtered through basketball, the show is able to display nostalgia for that ethos while, as demonstrated later, also revealing it to be a fantasy.

THE BUSINESS

To separate the game and business halves of *Winning Time* is to miss the point—it is Buss, after all, who courts Magic Johnson in the first episode, and the ongoing friendship of the two indicates a *Moneyball*-ish continuity between gameplay and financials. While the primary conflict of “Who the F**k...” is the implementation of a new offensive strategy, running parallel is the development of a new *marketing* strategy. In one scene, employees Lon and Linda (Joey Brooks and Molly Gordon, respectively) present Claire Rothman (general manager of the Forum stadium, played by Gaby Hoffman) with a fairly standard package of entertainment for games: “family friendly halftime shows, a marching band, our own spirit squad, and the cherry on top: a mascot,” that mascot being “Slam Duck” (22:07). Claire is unimpressed, and Jeanie Buss (Jerry’s daughter, played by Hadley Robinson) recommends “something like the Hollywood Bowl, or the Oscars, or the Playboy Club” in addition to the standard “Disneyland stuff” (23:22). Later, Jeanie, Linda and Lon develop a more complete version of the concept—“two hours a night where you escape real life and step into the world of Jerry Buss...you pretend you’re him, like he does” (56:46). Rothman signs off and presents the idea to Buss, saying that “a cheer squad is a good idea—for 1963. Our girls are tailored for the eighties” (57:09). Eschewing cheering for more provocative dancing, the Forum would feature an exclusive nightclub and a new row of floor seats specifically for celebrities. Impressed, Jerry Buss turns to the camera and exclaims, “It’s showtime” before the episode’s credits roll (57:54).

The object of nostalgia here and throughout much of the rest of the series is a sort of innocence, an uncritical eye towards excess. *Winning Time* was greenlit based on Adam McKay’s involvement (Rose, 2022), and that his brand of openly left-wing film and television about political and financial corruption was valuable enough to pull the show’s seemingly massive budget (Adalian, 2023) indicates that we find ourselves in a time of heightened distaste for the rich. *Winning Time* presents the audience with a time before this sentiment—a time of moral and institutional decline, yes, but of *new* decline, a time when floor seats and scantily-clad cheerleaders were novel, and the rich-poor gap had not become quite so visible. The C-plot of the episode sees Buss hang out with women around a hotel pool with his shirt mostly unbuttoned, while his mother and daughter devise and enact a plan to transfer ownership of the Lakers to his ex-wife to shelter his assets during bankruptcy proceedings. Morally laudable? No. But there’s a man-childish fun and aesthetic thrill to Buss’s endeavors that is easy to miss when

the ruling class resembles something more like the miserable, greyed-out world of, say, *Succession*. The thesis of the episode is clear: the Showtime-era Lakers embodied the eighties. Yet, these are merely worlds of illusion—team deregulation is not actually the same as economic deregulation, and Jeanie Buss describes the new imperative of the Forum as “selling a fantasy” (56:45). So, if everything up to this point has been the fantasy eighties, what, to *Winning Time*, constituted the real eighties?

THE REAL EIGHTIES

To reiterate Ewers (2023), most sports films “have a doubleness at their heart,” a tension between ideological fantasy constructions and real relations (p. 1206). Sports, then, are ideological in Althusser’s sense, presenting “not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (1970). In other words, the narrative of a given sport (including the broader *world* of that sport) will cast players, coaches, and owners in a given position—usually an empowered one. In doing so, the actual economic relations of the sport are obscured, and fantasy substitutes for reality. The episode “California Dreaming” centers the tension between ideology-fantasy and real relations in two plotlines: one following Jerry Buss, and one following player Spencer Haywood.

JERRY BUSS

In the opening of the episode, Buss relates the story of Roger Bannister, the first person to run a sub-four-minute mile. Though previously the feat was thought impossible—“God, I hate that fucking word,” he says (0:55)—Bannister, a neurologist, was able to accomplish it because he knew “that the only real limitation wasn’t in the body. It was in the mind” (2:11). Buss, who sees himself like Bannister, “running straight into the wind,” is in that scene articulating the notions of universalism (infinite growth and expansion) and meliorism (self-improvement) articulated earlier. The rest of the episode is, essentially, a counterpoint to that notion.

The subversion of Buss’s ideas begins in an early scene where Jeanie Buss picks up Jerry’s mother Jessie (Sally Field) from the hospital and learns that she is terminally ill, having been discharged to die at home. Jessie makes it an imperative not to tell Jerry—“you see exactly who he is. The act... That’s what it is to love a man. They’re weak. They’re feeble. They need the show” (14:11).

In the following scene, the two arrive at Jessie's apartment, greeted by Lucia—a hospice nurse—and Jerry—in denial about hiring a hospice nurse. An uncomfortable Jeanie goes along with the act.

Later, the group is eating KFC—Jerry's favorite food—while watching the All-Star game on the color TV Jerry purchased—despite Jessie's request to watch *Dynasty* instead—and drinking heavily when Jeanie deliriously hallucinates her father in an orgy and vomits on the carpet. Jessie starts to clean it up, but in the process, her wig slips off, and Jerry sees. While Jeanie and Jessie sleep the incident off, Jerry attempts to seduce Lucia by offering to pay for her night school tuition, gets admonished by Jeanie after she walks in, and then later drives Lucia home—breaking down over Jessie's condition and then initiating sex with a visibly reluctant Lucia.

The point, of course, is that Jerry's quintessentially eighties lifestyle is an illusion maintained at the expense of women, made to participate either by material concerns (as in the case of Lucia) or emotional ones (as in the case of the more privileged Jeanie and Jessie). Though Buss believes that his mindset is the only limit on his potential, the reality is that he owes his success to the people who have sacrificed for him. His fantasy world is also the fantasy world of basketball; it is the lifestyle of Buss, after all, which inspires the aesthetic of the Forum. When Jeanie is pitching the idea to Rothman, she hands her Jerry's scrapbook of women he's slept with, an artifact revealing an attitude towards sex more indicative of an acquisitive mindset than any concept of sexual freedom. The world of the Showtime Lakers (at in the Buss stratum), to *Winning Time*, is comprised of the exploitation of women by men.

It's at this point that the dual nature of the show's nostalgia clarifies that there is, on one hand, the fantasy-eighties Jerry Buss, a crafty businessman who takes the NBA by storm with a cocktail in his hand and a much younger woman at his hip. The show indulges this fantasy—celebrates it, even. Yet, it also peels back the construction, revealing the real-eighties Jerry Buss (remember the "docucharacter"—this is not the real Buss but the Buss of the real eighties), a deeply sad individual who gets by at the expense of the women in his life. *Winning Time* longs for the ideal which the earlier Buss represents, but ultimately delays homecoming, finding in reality only the latter Buss.

SPENCER HAYWOOD

The other main source of this tension in “California Dreaming” is Spencer Haywood’s (Wood Harris) plotline. After a game early in the episode, Haywood is walking with a limp because his role as the team’s enforcer is taking a toll on his knee. Pat Riley implores him to get his knee checked out, telling Haywood that even though his position (which leaves him with a lot of time on the bench) is somewhat thankless, his contributions are still important to the team. Then Jack McKinney shows up. At this point in the season, McKinney’s been absent for a while after a cycling accident, and assistants Westhead (Jason Seagal) and Riley have been filling in (to great success). McKinney wants Haywood off the bench and onto the starting five, but Riley counters, citing Haywood’s knee and a possible trade with the Detroit Pistons. Eventually, McKinney mentions the possibility of a trade to Haywood, who confronts Riley about it, telling him that “now I know you don’t give a fuck about me. Just checking my teeth for the auction block” (20:38). Reeling from the possibility of having to move his family, Haywood uses crack cocaine to cope—an addiction which, later in the season, gets him ejected from the Lakers.

Return to the Ewers/Althusser notion of fantasy relations and real relations was—in this case—economic. Haywood begins the episode believing in the fantasy relations created by essentially all team sports, that he and his coach are, if not equals, at least compatriots who share a common interest. By the end, he glimpses, viscerally, the real relations: he is an employee, and Pat Riley is his boss. Professional athletes find themselves caught between narratives: though they have beaten the odds and risen to the highest level of their chosen sports, their contracts offer them relatively little autonomy. Until free agency kicks in, a player cannot simply quit and work for another team—they must ask to be traded, assigned a value, and bartered for another player of equivalent value.

In that way, professional athletes are, in fact, *less* free than a typical employee. Qualitative studies by Dufur & Feinberg (2009) as well as Beamon & Messer (2013) found that black professional athletes tend to understand this position as a racialized one. Black athletes interviewed widely compared professional sports to slavery—like Haywood—and noted that while the majority of players are black, the majority of coaching and almost all of ownership are white.

The dynamics of employment and race create a situation where the pressure to show deference is extremely acute, and relatively few avenues for resisting racial discrimination are available. Relevant here is that while *Winning Time* presents the eventual firing of Haywood as the result of a team vote, Showtime details that it was actually Westhead's decision.

Entire papers could be written about how changes from the source material alter the racial dynamics of Haywood's storyline, and how *Winning Time* approaches the commodification of the black body in sports more broadly. As far as this particular analysis is concerned, Haywood's story in "California Dreaming" exemplifies the breadth of the gap between fantasy and reality in the show along the lines of class and race. Though the players appear to be wealthy, self-made, and having a great time in a very eighties way, they in fact occupy a deeply disempowering economic position. Though the Lakers, a team mostly comprised of black men, appear to be a space of racial equality, the egalitarian quality of the basketball court fails to carry over behind the scenes.

What has to be stressed is that, despite all this, *Winning Time* still loves the Showtime-era Lakers. The team has a foil in the form of the Boston Celtics, a team from one of the oldest American cities with a dingy stadium and a hard-nosed style of play. The Celtics are everything the Lakers are not—they embody "not-eightiesness"—and *Winning Time* hates them. Or, to more accurately describe the tone of the show: *Winning Time* loves to hate the Celtics. In the episode "Invisible Man" (S1E7), the Lakers travel to Boston. Every fan there is rude and loud. There are rats in the stadium. The referees make bad calls constantly, and the announcers refer to the (again, mostly black) Lakers as "hoodlums" (51:34) when a fight breaks out on the court. That the Celtics are this comically awful in the nostalgic sports memory of *Winning Time* indicates that this sense of nostalgia is genuine. It's not a *Wolf of Wall Street*-type story where a veneer of flashy wealth is shown to be wholly rotten. Rather, the veneer is understood separately from the thing it obscures—fantasy understood separately from reality.

CONCLUSION

Basketball provides *Winning Time* with a vehicle to engage with reflective nostalgia—to be, in Boym’s words, both “homesick and sick of home” (para. 32). As Ewers contends is true of most sports films, the cast of *Winning Time* find themselves caught between the world of basketball and the real world it conceals. Yet, it is precisely the fantastical nature of basketball that allows *Winning Time* to both long for the decadent eighties and condemn it entirely. Fiske’s (2011) notion of semiotic excess is as relevant here as is in any other discussion of television—there is enough going on that the degree to which one approaches *Winning Time* as either a story about one of the best teams in the history of the NBA or a story about rot at the dawn of the Reagan era is probably dependent on the degree to which one is the sort to watch either basketball or prestige television.

Ultimately, *Winning Time* is a show about delayed homecoming. It longs for a decade of excess, of optimism—of innocence. It recalls fond memories of fast play and flashy halftime shows, yet also finds something emptier, men propped up by women performing invisible labor, coaches who can trade their players like chattel. The film stock changes. The fantasy dissolves. There is no simpler time to return to—only Showtime.

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Gramma's Pan-Fried Memories

Harmony Rose Vodicka

Abstract

This piece was written for my Writing About Food course, where we were asked to create a memoir depicting a “food memory” from our past. As I began thinking about some of my most vivid memories centered around food, I quickly realized that it would be impossible to complete this assignment without thinking about my grandma. Although she was technically my great-grandmother, Gramma was the only “grandmother figure” I had growing up and was my absolute favorite person in the world. We were incredibly close, and I miss her every day. She connected me and my siblings with our Hispanic culture through her love of cooking and providing for her family, and she was often in the kitchen or at the dinner table, encouraging everyone to eat just a few more platefuls of her delicious homemade meals. Losing Gramma was incredibly difficult for me, and replicating some of her famous dishes that I grew up loving has caused some overwhelming emotions more than once. Carrying on Gramma's love of cooking and continuing to learn about my culture through food are some of the ways I feel most connected to her and our shared memories. I chose to write about a memory I have of using Gramma's homemade *masa* to make tortillas with her and my younger sister. We had some wonderful times in the kitchen, and I enjoyed documenting one of those times here to look back on again. My greatest takeaway from creating this piece is this: the care that we put into preparing meals and savoring the flavors of good foods should also be directed toward cherishing our best memories with our loved ones.



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*In loving memory of Gramma.
I miss you so much.*

It was the sound of the cooking tortillas that reached me first.

The hiss of the oiled pan, popping and sizzling as the first disk of *masa* was laid down, echoed from the small kitchen and into the living room. My head whipped toward the sound as I sat up straighter on the couch, sliding myself to the very edge of the cushion.

“What are you making, Gramma?” I shouted toward the bubbling symphony, desperately trying to sniff out what food my grandma must have started cooking.

Her curt and clearly distracted voice shouted back, “Tortillas.”

A smile spread across my face, and I eagerly stood to head toward her. The salty smell from the first tortilla had finally reached me. My feet hurried across the plush carpet and onto the smooth tile of the kitchen floor, and my smile grew wider as I glanced around the room.

Gramma was hard at work, flour floating in the air and clinging gently to her clothes, as she mixed the ingredients for homemade tortillas. The fleeting sunlight shining through the small window above her head clothed her in gold to further accentuate the dusty air surrounding her.

She had divided her limited counter space into sections for ease and efficiency, dedicating one to the mixing and one to the rolling and flattening of the *masa* balls. The stove was set with her cast-iron tortilla pan; vegetable oil on standby to be reapplied as needed. Her movements were fluid and practiced, and she glided without a sound or a pause from one section to the next. I stopped to study her for a moment as she rolled out the next ball of *masa* she had plopped onto the floured countertop.

Gramma was a petite woman; the counter and stove rested around the height of her waist, and her clothes always hung loosely on her small frame. Her strong voice and rebellious attitude always added some weight to the space she filled, but there were certain movements, the ones she had repeated all her life, that showed the hidden strength she truly had. The speed at which she moved and the precision she had mastered as a lifelong cook brought strength to her muscles, hardly seen in her otherwise slim arms. She kept her long-nailed fingers raised as she rolled out the *masa*, pushing with the base of her palm against the wooden rolling pin she had used for as long as I could remember. Her brow was furrowed and focused, a sharp contrast to the ease with which her arms flexed and pulled at the pin. The *masa* flattened out and spread beneath her steady hands. Once it had reached the size and thickness only Gramma had perfected, she picked up the disk, pinched it around the edges a bit with her fingers, and tossed it into the pan.

I watched the process with care and a quiet eagerness, waiting until she had gone back to pulling out another handful of *masa* to ask, “Can I have some *masa*?”

Without a word, she finished shaping the mound she had just grabbed into a small ball, being careful to keep her nails away from the wet dough, and handed it to me. I squished the soft, doughy blob slightly in my hand, the smell of flour and the salty stinging air of the cooking tortillas overwhelming my senses. Before I could ask, Gramma reached into one of her utensil drawers and pulled out the child-sized roller my younger sister and I often played with. A perfect miniature replica of my grandma’s roller. Her other hand was already reaching back into the bowl of *masa* as she set the pin in my palm.

I grinned again and giggled, “Thank you!” before sitting down at the tiny dining room table set against the wall facing the kitchen.

The dough had begun to stick to my hand, stretching and squishing apart as I pulled it away from my sweaty palm. I shivered with disgust, “Bleh,” and plopped the dough down onto the table. After plucking a few stray globs from my hand, I excitedly got to work rolling out the dough.

Taking care to center the pin at my palms and lifting my fingers high like she had, I began pressing the rolling pin back and forth against the *masa*. Just like Gramma.

The sounds of slapping feet against the kitchen floor and shouting chants of “Me too!” let me know that my little sister had caught wind of the tortilla-making. She made her way over to Gramma and reached up to receive her own *masa* ball. With the *masa* in her hands, she climbed up onto the chair across from me and squished her dough down onto the table. I shook my head at her in disappointment and tried to ignore her, continuing to roll out my dough and staying focused on matching my technique to Gramma’s exactly.

Shyila noticed me working on my ball and began to whine, “I need a rolling pin too!”

I shook my head again and rolled my eyes at her while I continued working, “Leave Gramma alone. Just use your hands.”

She huffed at me and called out again to Gramma for sympathy. Luckily for her, Gramma had finished rolling out her own *masa* balls and was now focusing on frying the tortillas. She grabbed her rolling pin off the counter and walked it over to Shyila.

“Here. Roll it like this,” she turned Shyila’s mangled ball toward herself and showed her the rolling technique that I had watched her use before. After handing my sister the pin and turning the *masa* back toward her, she turned to me.

I grinned at her and quickly showed that I could roll the dough just like she had, “Like this, Gramma?”

She smiled and placed her hand on my arm to give me a small squeeze, “Yes. Good job.”

I felt a swell of pride rush through me as she walked back to the kitchen to pull some of the finished tortillas off the stove using just her fingers. I watched her calmly pluck each one from the popping oil until she added the last tortilla to the pile resting on a plate off to the side.

Scooping up the dish, she returned to set her homemade tortillas down between us on the table. The warm smell of salted oil and baked flour rushed up from the stack of pan-fried dough. Shyila cheered and grabbed the top tortilla, hissing with pain as the heat reached her fingers. I chuckled at her and grabbed my own tortilla from deeper in the stack, as Gramma scolded my little sister’s hasty choice.

The tortilla was firm and crisp, with varying-sized black spots speckling the pale-colored dough where the oil had been especially hot. The warmth of the tortilla flushed my fingertips as I took my first bite.

My mouth immediately began to water as the rush of heat, salt, and flour filled it.

I smiled up at my grandma and cheerfully exclaimed, while still chewing, “It’s delicious!”

She smiled back at me with a tight nod, “Good. Eat them.”

Shyila was already reaching for her third tortilla, and I quickly grabbed another one to save before she could stuff them all into her grubby little hands.

Gramma walked back into the kitchen and began cleaning up, placing her utensils back in the mixing bowl and preparing to wipe down the counter. As she began stacking her bowl and pan into the sink, she turned toward me for just a moment, and I caught a glimpse of a slight smile resting on her face. I couldn’t help but smile back at my beautiful grandmother as I took another bite of her perfect tortilla.

One More Sip of Coffee

Dalton Young

Abstract

I often say that I write to confront things—often fears, events, or memories—about myself that I have yet to put in front of me. “One More Sip of Coffee” is one of those stories that I wrote, then reread again and again and again to figure things out about myself, searching for whatever fears or anxieties that I wish to put to rest. With the ever-present threat of dementia looming over parts of my family, I found myself writing this story to confront my fears of losing my grandparents to it, and later, myself. The idea that one can forget everything, even the most important core memories, is a terrifying thought. I find myself worrying about it, and I feel as though I am justified, but writing makes it easier to tangle with. I also find myself writing about death a lot. Maybe I am trying to confront my own mortality or decide on what I think will happen during and after death, but it gives me comfort in a strange way. Death is usually portrayed as a scary, skeletal figure wielding a scythe and dressed in a long, tattered cloak, dramatized by the idea that it is a terrifying thing. Death has been described in countless ways throughout the centuries, personified as gods like Hel, Thanatos, and Anubis, but I have always thought of death as a more comforting figure. Someone who is put together and looks like you and me, rather than some ominous, foreboding figure. Someone you can sit down and have a cup of coffee with, even though it may be the last coffee you will ever have.



Dalton Young is a junior majoring in English Education. With a love of creative writing, he is planning on teaching his future students to love writing and continue working to publish a novel. Dalton will graduate in May of 2026 and pursue a master's in English Education.

I loved my morning coffee.

"Here's your coffee, Mrs. Quinn. Two sugars, a splash of milk, and cooled to perfect drinking temperature," the barista said as he placed the mug in front of me. He was young, maybe in his early twenties, and had been working at this cafe since he was sixteen. I knew him well from starting many of my mornings here, although his name had begun to elude me. The workers never wore name tags and dressed semi-casually; it was hard to tell them apart from other patrons. This boy, though, always knew my order. I adored him for that.

I could remember the brief period in which he hadn't worked at this coffee shop; the workers weren't all as personable as he was. He always knew my name, asked how my flowers were doing, and refused a tip, every single time. "I enjoy getting to see you, Mrs. Quinn," he would always say when I would try to slip him a five or a ten. He was such a nice boy.

The cafe itself had changed about a dozen times over the years, being handed off from owner to owner who made their own not-so-subtle changes. This rendition of the coffee shop was meant to look vintage, but it was still "hip," as the owners—a middle-aged couple—liked to call it. The floors were weathered wood, the walls had been stripped down to brick, and decorative signs were hung from the walls and ceiling. Support beams had been exposed and, if it hadn't been so smartly decorated, I would have confused it for being under renovation. My favorite part of it was that it smelled of coffee and, occasionally, bourbon. It reminded me of someone I once knew, but I could never put my finger on it.

The door creaked open as a woman entered. Nobody turned their heads to look at her, as if I was the only one to notice. She was dressed in black with her hair braided into neat coils. Her skin was dark, and her face blank, yet welcoming. Her eyes moved from each patron to each worker, then landed on me. I paid her no mind as I sipped my coffee, my hands shaking as they lifted the liquid gold to my lips. The woman placed a hand on the chair across from me.

"May I sit?" she asked, her voice soft and melodic. I knew her, somehow. I hadn't met her anywhere before, and yet, she was a welcome sight. Like an old friend who had come to visit.

"It's best if you do," I replied, "I'd like to finish my coffee." The woman sat across from me, her hands folded neatly on the table. We were both silent, my eyes remaining on my coffee and hers staying on me. The barista approached us, a charming smile painted across his face.

"Is there anything else I could get you, Mrs. Quinn?" He asked.

"No, thank you, sweetheart," I replied.

“Is there anything you would like?” I asked the Stranger. She said nothing, only tapping her fingers against the table in a rhythmic pattern. The barista seemed confused as he looked to her, then back to me. “I think we’re okay, dear. Thank you.”

The barista nodded and returned to his post at the counter. The Stranger tilted her head at me out of curiosity, then spoke.

“His name is Jason,” she began, “You’ve known him for years, haven’t you, Loretta?”

“Yes, I think so. He’s worked here for a few years now,” I said, taking another sip of coffee.

“He was Adrian’s best friend from school, too,” said the Stranger. “They used to play baseball in your yard. You once called his mother a bitch for spanking him after he broke one of your flowerpots. Don’t you remember?”

“Did I do that?” I asked, laughing quietly, “That sounds like me. I used to be quite the fireball.” My hands, wrinkled with age, held the coffee cup and absorbed the warmth from it. I still hadn’t looked up at the woman, although I didn’t need to; I could feel her eyes piercing my soul. My nose wrinkled as I tossed the name back and forth in my mind, searching, digging for an answer, like filling a bucket with a hole in the bottom. Jason, Jason, Jason...Adrian?

“Adrian? Where do I know him?”

“Your grandson, Loretta,” said the Stranger, “Adrian was your grandson.”

“Was he, now? Why, I haven’t seen him since...” My eyes squinted as I focused on a memory, slipping through my fingers like sand. A flash, red and blue lights, an impact, the lack of feeling, the uncomfortable bed. “I had a stroke,” I said, “He called the ambulance. He drove separately.”

“What else?” asked the Stranger.

“He died on the way. A drunk driver, he hit him head-on,” I remembered. I felt the nurse holding my hand when she told me, then fighting to leave the hospital bed, but my body wouldn’t comply. It was yesterday, surely? Had it been days, maybe weeks? Years? My hands shook when I sipped my coffee again, the warm drip of life calming my panic. “When was that?”

“Five years ago, Loretta,” said the Stranger, “He didn’t blame you.”

“I never thought that he did.”

“But you did, deep down. You blamed yourself after it happened.”

I was silent, my coffee half finished, my hands still trembling as they lifted the mug to my lips. My family had always been a priority. My daughter, a bright, knowledgeable woman, had raised my grandson alone, much like I had with her. I did, didn’t I?

"You weren't always alone," The Stranger told me, as if answering my internal question. "Tell me about your first love, Loretta." I searched for a story, smiling softly.

"Well, we met in my math class," I said, "He always asked to cheat off of my tests, but I never let him. Eventually, I asked if he would want me to tutor him, and he said yes. Studying turned into movies and drive-ins; we had a grand time. He asked me to marry him when we were eighteen. He wanted to join the military, he told me. To fight the Germans. I couldn't say no, of course. I found out I was pregnant a few months after he left, but he never came back."

"What was his name, Loretta?"

"I...I don't remember," I said. It hurt, not knowing his name, but I remember the months after hearing how he would never come back. I kept my eyes on the table in front of me, trying to cast out the unwanted memories, but the Stranger pulled me back to reality.

"It was John," the Stranger told me.

John?

John. Briefly, if only for a moment, I could see his face. Youthful, handsome, kind, mischievous. I could remember his voice, calm and steady, asking me to marry him. His hands shook when he asked, and the cheap ring he saved up for wobbled in the velvet box. Of course, I said yes. Our love felt centuries old, even when he did not come back. I missed when he would meet me for coffee in the mornings, wearing that bourbon cologne that he got as a Christmas gift from his father. My John.

As I retrieved myself from the warm, colorful memory, I met the eyes of the Stranger before me. Dreary, cold reality.

"John," I repeated. "That's right, his name was John."

"His friends from the service found you after they came home. You were friends with them for years while raising your daughter. You never remarried."

"They were such good men. They helped me go to nursing school." Marion and Carter, two of the best men that I had ever met in my life. As I dug for the memories, I could hear their voices as they told me John wouldn't be coming back. I remember crying, but Carter told me stories of John's mischievous spirit, even in the military, and I couldn't help but laugh. Years passed through my eyes in an instant, and my daughter grew up with Uncle Carter and Uncle Marion, who taught her everything that her father could have. At the time, it would be considered odd for a little girl to learn how to change a tire, but her uncles always insisted that she learn not to depend on any man until she found the one.

They were there for her during daddy-daughter dances, Christmas, and every birthday. When it came time for their funerals, their friends always said that they had a daughter, and she loved them like fathers.

A quarter of my cup was left. My hands ached for the warmth the coffee provided, but found comfort as the Stranger grasped them. They weren't warm, but they were welcoming. Comforting. I wanted to ball myself up and place myself in those hands, hiding from the world. The barista approached us again.

"Are you doing alright, Mrs. Quinn?" He asked.

"Yes, dear, just having a chat," I replied, looking up to him.

"With who, Mrs. Quinn?"

"An old friend, I suppose. I'm alright, dear," I said quietly, offering him a reassuring smile. Before he walked away, I touched his hand, catching his fleeting attention. "Thank you for being so good to me, Jason. You're such a nice boy."

The Stranger stood, then walked to my side of the table. She took my hand and helped me stand; my legs were weak in my old age.

"It's time to go, Loretta," she said. She began to walk, but I stopped her.

"Please, dear," I pleaded, "One more sip of coffee?" She nodded, reaching for the mug and lifting it to my lips for me. The bittersweet liquid flowed across my tongue, losing its flavor as it traveled down my throat. One final drop of warmth to accompany me into the chilled hands of the Stranger, as if handing me off to her. It isn't worrying or anxiety-inducing; it is comfort. Reassurance.

My life—my memory—slipped into her hands as she helped me from my seat. I stood the way I had at the altar with John, held her hands the way I had my daughter's while she gave birth to my grandson, and faced her with the same undying vigor that I had held on to since my youth. Though my hands shook and my knees ached as I stood, I held the Stranger as she held me. Hand in hand, the guide and the guided.

"I'm ready, dear."

As we walked through the door together, the outside light was blinding, yet freeing. The sun warmed my skin as the smell of bourbon and coffee receded, and the Stranger guided me forward.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Mrs. Quinn," Jason said from inside the coffee shop.

In all my years and my memories, tomorrow felt so far away. Still, the Stranger guided me toward it, and for once, I looked forward.

I loved my morning coffee.



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