

# RhetTech

Undergraduate journal in Writing, Rhetoric, and  
Technical Communication



vol. 5

# Letter from the editors

RhetTech is much different from your average journal, accepting a wide variety of genres and modes. It's a publication that is edited by students, for students. It's an outlet for undergraduate writers to display the exceptional work they've produced, whether inside or outside of the classroom. It's a celebration of what young writers in writing, rhetoric, and technical communication can do. That's what RhetTech is.

RhetTech is a practicum course within the School of Writing Rhetoric and Technical Communication (WRTC) at James Madison University. The course is offered in the fall and spring semesters each year and is open to all majors. The 2022-23 RhetTech staff consists of 19 brilliant undergraduate students from a number of different majors, including several members who worked on the journal for the entire academic year. Staff members both inside and outside of WRTC are given the chance to gain skills, experience, opportunities, and growth in areas that they may not have found without RhetTech. Being a part of the 2022-23 team has been an extraordinary and worthwhile experience for us, and we hope that the experience for readers is equally rewarding.

Our 2022-23 editorial team was thrilled to review 30 submissions from around the continent, and after careful review, editing, and design processes, we present Volume 5 of RhetTech: "Growth, Reflection, and Change." These terms were meant to be interpreted broadly, allowing submissions to have a wide range of subjects, from personal to professional life. Many of the pieces you will read in this volume center around issues of identity. Some authors grappling with ethnicity such as in "Imbalanced Identity" or with watching someone else's identity become indirectly shaped by others, like in "Bon Appetit." Other submissions attempted to define group identity, such as in "Equality When," which asks how a society can boost healthy male culture, and "A Seamstress's Take on Fast Fashion," which highlights the extent to which our consumerism has harmed the economy. While reading, we ask that you, too, consider your identity and growth, however you define them, and use the following pieces as inspiration to challenge your worldview.

Our editors, design team, and faculty thank all of those who submitted their pieces to RhetTech this year. Because of all of your hard work, we were able to read a diverse selection of personal experiences that gave us insights into different cultures and backgrounds. The 12 submissions we selected for the 2022-23 volume of RhetTech truly embodied the themes of growth, reflection, and change. The success of this journal could not have been possible without the help of our talented staff and designers who handled pieces we received from across the nation with care. Thank you all who submitted entries, and we encourage everyone to continue sharing their stories for future volumes of the journal.

We are delighted to present this fifth volume of RhetTech. Enjoy!

Sincerely,  
The RhetTech Undergraduate Staff

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Note: all photos throughout this volume were found using Unsplash, Pexels, and Adobe Stock





# The Forest

By: Pari Patel (she/her) | University of Missouri

## Author's Note

I wrote 'The Forest' as part of a creative writing assignment in a high school English class. I worked on it for a couple days. I have grown up reading books about Greek mythology, which was my inspiration to a certain extent. I make implicit references to some of the stories and descriptions I have read in these books.

The ideas of growth, reflection, and change are all incorporated into my piece through subtle metaphors, but I personally resonate most with the idea of change. In the piece, the narrator can walk in either direction of the forest: towards the core or away from it.

This symbolizes the choices we make as humans, and how the majority of them are reversible if we choose to walk on a different path. Another way to look at it is that once you have decided to walk a certain route, your surroundings will inevitably change. Not everything can be in your control, and accepting it and trailing along is a part of the journey.

The scent of freshwater flowing across the divine river lured the birds, the enchanting white doves, towards the massive turquoise snake that uncoiled along raw soil, meandering its way into the forest, flowing with soothing splashes amidst a deafening silence. The flock of birds soared through a soft hue of light blue in solidarity, like a cohort of soldiers, even the smallest of movements in sync with one another. Every footstep echoed with a uniform rhythm, in sync with a tranquil melody escaping the doves. The swift flapping of wings reverberated amidst the wrestling of waves, waves that rushed to reach their anticipated destination. The quiet, nonchalant drumming of precipitation filled the air, as did an opaque mist that took shelter on the surface of velvet-lined leaves as dew.

Foreign to the force of my feet, small dunes of parched soil folded beneath my feet into the ground, where they were welcome. The hue of sky-blue had now faded against its superior, more captivating counterpart, giving rise to a shade of green, raw as the Earth, born from mother Gaia herself. Fragrant petrichor emitted from every fine soil particle as silver droplets of water seeped through. Life that emerged from this soil took the shape of wildflowers, bushes, creeps, shrubs and trees, each plant like a

snowflake in a massive heap of pallid snow. My bare feet grazed over shards of glass masked as harmless leaves and the warm blood that oozed out now froze on the icy exterior of rigid rocks. Far from the rocks, a path appeared, hidden from the world by a veil of voluminous, olive-green locks. Surrounding this mystery were families of small insects, crawling their way through. Across the veil was a reality parallel to its adjacent terrain, a land of gloom, a reign of terror.

A deer with the fur of pure gold sauntered its way across the sinister shadows, entering a narrow clearing that seemed to lead to an incessant path, deeper into the forest, straight towards its core. Further into the forest, it seemed, Gaia got angrier. The soil that previously shied away into its own being now swallowed insatiably at my feet, devouring every ounce of energy remaining.

***“Not everything can be in your control”***



Intimidated by the unforgiving darkness that dawned upon it, the forest bowed. Trees bent in despair, weeping for their many lost limbs, for the pears that fell as martyrs in war.

Enigmas of the night howled in the distance. Crickets shrieked. The incessant rustling of crisp leaves followed, as if the wildlife rushed to escape a kingdom enveloped in an armour, sealed by a spell. It was a maze, a trap, a forest of doom.

At the labyrinth's core, an overpowering silhouette emerged, that of an uprooted tree,

its taut roots crawling their way upwards, as if escaping the darkest, most cruel pits of hell; its coal-black bark, with claw marks aligned along its body, as if scars slashed on a face, spitefully, only to destroy every last bit of beauty left in it.

Located in the midst of a circular clearing, almost as if it was sacrificial, the tree, one that grew hungrier by the second, was a furious, insatiable beast that had morphed into the form of a mighty tree, growling at its victims before devouring them.





# Burning Brightly

Christine Sukhwa (She/Her) | Stony Brook University



## ***My alarm shrieks me awake at 4:30 in the morning.***

I'm in elementary school. I jump out of bed recoiling at the cold touch of the floor. I brush my teeth and head to the living room where my family is eating breakfast. I watch the news with them while I eat. When I'm done, I take a shower and dress myself in my uniform: navy pants and white shirt. My sister, mother, and I pile into my father's SUV to be driven to We depart at 6 in the morning to beat the New York City traffic so that we can all be at school on time. My mother is one stop. My sister and I are another. My father is the last. I am smiling and happy when he picks me up at the end of the day, and I chatter to my family on the way back home.

## ***My alarm shrieks me awake at 4:30 in the morning.***

I'm in middle school. I roll out of bed, squinting as I flick the lights on in my bedroom. I brush my teeth and head to the living room where my family is eating breakfast. I watch the news with them while I eat. When I'm done, I take a shower and dress myself in my school uniform. My sister, mother, and I pile into my father's SUV to be driven to school. We depart at 6 in the morning to beat the New York City traffic so that we can all be at school on time. My mother is one stop. My sister and I are another. My father is the last.

## ***My alarm shrieks at 4:30 in the morning.***

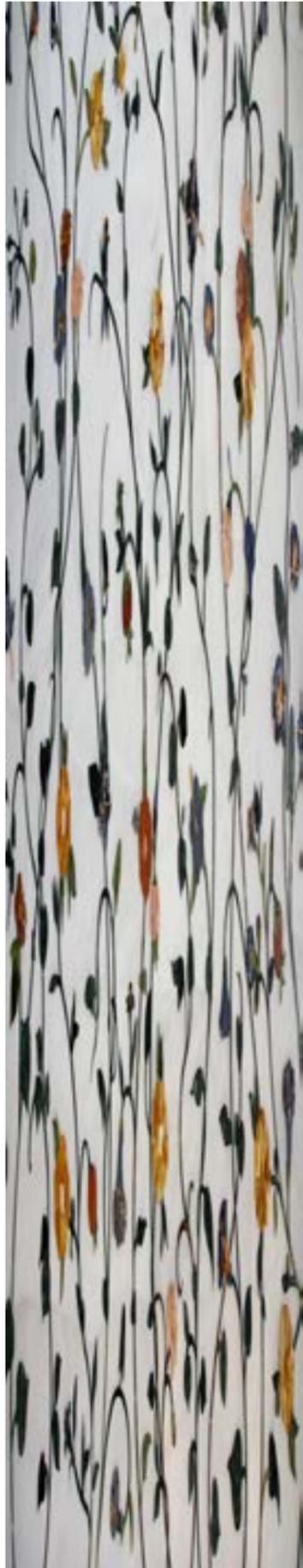
I'm already awake. I'm in high school. I lay in bed until my parents came in to force me out of bed. I brush my teeth and head to the living room where my family is eating breakfast. I watch the news with them while I eat. When I'm done, I take a shower and dress in whatever I see first. My sister, my mother, and I pile into my father's SUV to be driven to school. We depart at 6 in the morning to beat the New York City traffic so that we can all be at school on time. My mother is one stop. My sister and I are another.

## ***My alarm shrieks me awake at 5:30 in the morning***

I'm in university. I commute on my own now, so I can wake up a little bit later than I used to. As I drag myself up from my desk, my back cracks; I am reminded that I should really stop sleeping there. I brush my teeth and take a shower. I check the weather on my phone and get dressed accordingly. I keep dressing in black, and all my outfits look the same. I should fix that, I think. Maybe tomorrow, I tell myself as I lace up my boots and grab my backpack. I forget to eat breakfast. A quick "I'm leaving!" to my dad; I ignore his questions about having eaten breakfast or needing money.

My mother and sister have already left. My dad is still getting dressed, but he leaves a few minutes after I do. I get into my car, back out of the driveway, and begin my commute at 6:30 in the morning.

An hour and a half later, I pull into a parking spot on campus. I head to the library and open my laptop. I don't get much done. I go to class. I don't learn much. I go to the lab. I don't get much done there, either. My hands are either shaking with nerves or frozen. My mind feels stuck and I can't think. I tell my mentor that I'm tired and I'm heading out. "Good job today. Drive safe," he reminds me gently. I pay him no mind as I duck away from his gaze and head out, calling out a goodbye to other members of the lab as I do. I sit in my car, rest my head on the steering wheel, and watch as the pool of tears on my glasses get bigger and bigger. I drive home, and I can't recall most of it. The whole experience is 50 miles of pitch-black road and blurry lights. I'm the last one home—all the other cars are in the driveway already. I knock on the door to be let into the house. The conversation dies as soon as I walk in. No one says anything to me, but their eyes follow me as I move. I don't say anything either. I haven't eaten all day, but somehow I'm not hungry. I shut my bedroom door, pull off my boots, and sit at my desk to study. I force myself to complete my assignments, disappointed in myself for not completing them sooner.



What's done is done. I fall asleep there, too tired to even get ready for bed. The ouroboros will not let go.

I needed a lot of time to realize that something wasn't quite right, and even longer to accept it. Acceptance brought with it the desire to know what was happening. I had an inkling, but I had been quarantining it to an isolated corner in the back of my mind. The first time I looked it up, my fingers trembled so badly that I couldn't type any longer. But I've come to a conclusion: burnout, which is the physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion that comes with decreased motivation and a negative attitude. I was introduced to the term in my first year of university. I'd heard it only fleetingly, as a result of walking past a group of upperclassmen who were lamenting over the loss of their motivation. Even in my psychology lecture, the phrase was not uttered once. How did I fall into a trap this austere? I had been on the Dean's list for my entire university career.

I attended a specialized high school. I was in gifted and talented programs before high school. I was always at the top of my class, no matter where I went. I was always known to work hard and never tire, even when I didn't live up to my own expectations. What went wrong? I've lost sight of all purpose, and I don't know how it happened. Even spending time with friends has become a chore for me. I used to be happy to have time on my hands so that I could hang out with them, but now any free time just seems like a waste of time. It would be better spent alone, tackling the assignments that I know I shouldn't be leaving for the last minute, I would struggle to make a dent.

The word burnout is so glossed over that many people consider it a weakness, a state that only plagues the fragile young people of this day; a psychological syndrome that was ambiguous at best when it was first introduced in the 1970s (Pisarik, 2009).

**“I'm surrounded by their laughter, yet I've never felt more alone.”**

It looms over college students, such as myself and so many others around me, holding us back like a chain that holds a lion. It's cowardly—it never acts on its own. Burnout is just the leader, and depression and anxiety are its side-kicks (Glass, McKnight, 1996). This myriad of mental health issues contributes to suicide being one of the leading causes of death for college students, including both graduate and undergraduate students. Mental health care is growing in popularity, and many people will attest to the benefits of going to therapy. Several universities provide psychological services and counseling to their students. My university even holds events with service dogs that students can play with. I've been to these events myself, and I enjoyed the indiscriminate affection I received from cute puppies. But even with the availability of these services, something is continuing to go awry.

I know that I should enjoy spending time with the people I care about because in a few years, I won't even have the time for a phone call with them. I excuse myself from my entire group of friends, feigning exhaustion and the desire to go home. It's 5:00 in the afternoon—rush hour.

They know something's up with me because I usually stay later to avoid the traffic. They give me a very warm goodbye, but the “are you okay?” texts I receive as soon as I'm gone tell me that not studying acting was a great choice. I force myself to stay sometimes because I know they're sad when I leave. I'm surrounded by their laughter, yet I've never felt more alone. My phone rings, and it's my family wanting to know what I'm up to or when I'm coming home. I let it ring. The texts remain unanswered.

Even with the wider availability of counseling services that target mental health disorders, the prevalence of these disorders remains high. According to Mental Health America, over 50% of Americans with a mental illness do not receive treatment. I won't deny that access is an issue for a lot of people, but I think the negative social perceptions of mental illness have a heavier hand. Perceptions regarding mental health are highly variable between cultures, and this cultural upbringing can impact the willingness of individuals to both accept what is happening to them and seek assistance to get better. In many Asian cultures, the root cause for mental health issues is considered to be the wrath of spirits. In South Asian cultures, it is believed that mental illness is something natural that happens to everyone (Choudhry et al., 2016). That's one way to invalidate your own feelings, I suppose. There are many cultures that simply do not believe in things such as depression and anxiety.

Mine is one of them. One night a few weeks ago, my mother asked me if I believed I worked slowly. She was concerned that I always said I was working. Oftentimes, it was something I said to hide the fact that I had nothing to say. I work quickly when I want to, when I have a clear idea of what I want and what I'm doing. The motivation has to be there to clear a path in the fog between my synapses, but it's ephemeral at best. I told her that I felt burnt out, her eyes betrayed her confusion even though she had ironed her face. My mother has a bachelor's degree, two master's degrees, and a Ph.D. She had nothing to say about the lack of motivation that I was feeling for an undergraduate degree, or the fact that it was leading to a paralyzing fear of failure. I don't think she believed me, even though she teaches college-level psychology. I refuse to believe that this was a unique experience. The lack of validation that I received from a member of my social circle made me believe that I was just being dramatic, even though I knew better than that. I'm lucky that the invalidation is not constant. But how many people can say the same?

The stigma surrounding mental health in South Asian cultures such as my own runs deeper than the Mariana Trench. The social perceptions surrounding mental health issues often cause personal stigmatizing views in turn, and the interplay between the two has the unfortunate effect of discouraging

**“The damage comes from the heavy expectations.”**

students from seeking the help they need. The social perceptions surrounding mental health issues often cause personal stigmatizing views in turn, and the interplay between the two has the unfortunate effect of discouraging students from seeking the help they need. South Asian students do not use psychological services as often as Caucasian students do. This is a result of Caucasian students' relatively positive attitude towards these services (Loya et al., 2010). This damage to South Asian students was not done directly. It couldn't have been. The damage came from childhood, sitting in the car with your parents and listening to their conversations about the devil acting through people who need therapy, and how mentally ill people should be locked up forever. The damage comes from the heavy expectations.

As soon as I was able to speak and walk, my parents made it clear to me that they expected me to become a doctor. All South Asian parents want their children to become doctors or lawyers, and everything else is frowned upon. A few years ago, my parents admitted that they thought I would become an engineer because I liked to build things as a child. I still like to build things. But I want to work in medical neuroscience and have received nothing but disrespect from my family for it.

But at least I'm in STEM. At least I'm studying something I enjoy. Some people can force themselves through it, and they make it to the doctor or lawyer stage. But then comes the drop, and the burnout. This time, however, it is accompanied by regret.

Sometimes I manage to shake myself from the fog. There are days when the words flow from my fingertips. I don't have any lectures to watch, I've begun that one assignment a few days early, rather than the night before, and I have experiments planned for the week. I have no emails sitting in my inbox waiting for a response. I can think. Sometimes I just enjoy being functional, but I can't ignore the question: How do I make this last forever?

I untied the chains around my ankles by reminding myself of what I want from this life, what I need. I want to be successful. If I can take the steps now to help myself get there, I should. That's the best course of action. My bones still feel heavy and my head still swings when I stand, but at least I'm up. It's hard, fighting against your own head, but I know I'll be angry with myself if I don't. It's not the most sustainable approach, but it works for now.

In the most ideal world, none of this would be happening. In recent months, I have found myself trying to find a good balance again. I've noticed that making time for the things I enjoy helps with my feelings tremendously.

Socializing with motivated people makes me feel motivated in turn. I like being outside, too. I grew up with very strict parents, who never allowed me to go anywhere but school and home. That is still the lifestyle they prefer for me, but they're not really around to stop me anymore. I acknowledge that this behavior is akin to slapping a bandage on the problem, but at least the bleeding has stopped.

I don't know if there is a specific way to prevent burnout. There is so much more to it than being tired from school or work. I do believe there are ways to lessen its impact. Perhaps the most difficult of these is being able to recognize the signs of burnout and take a break when you realize something is happening. It is easy to recognize that you're no longer enjoying what you used to, or that you're spending more time on a task than you usually would. The hard part is accepting that you need help, and getting it right when you begin to feel something going wrong. We must recognize that getting help when you need it is not a bad thing, and needing help doesn't make you a bad or weak person.

Of course, the stigma surrounding getting help needs to be dismantled, but I don't think that's going to happen overnight. I'm hopeful that my generation will raise their kids in a more understanding and gentle way than our parents raised us. Raising a healthier generation of students who aren't afraid to seek help—that's the future.

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# No Longer Scared to Fail

By: Kira Soricelli (she/her) | Pennsylvania State University

It's my first day of preschool. It's windy, yet sunny and every kid's favorite time of day—recess. Kyle's shoving a woodchip up his nose. Ashley's gagging at the look of the woodchip all covered in snot. I'm hiding under the set of three green slides, hoping to get some peace and quiet. I don't like recess because I know it's the time of day when teachers pay the least attention to kids' actions.

Suddenly, I hear Kyle's voice (I guess he's bored with his woodchip) screaming the words that would shatter any girl's world:

***“HEY, THERE SHE IS EVERYBODY! LOOK IT'S GODZILLA”***

I know he teases me with this nickname because I'm Italian; my arms aren't as smooth as every other girl's (we can have arm hair, too!). Nonetheless, the words feel like paintballs on my ever-so-fragile skin, each one forcing every bit of me to fight to resist letting my knees crumble, my face flush, and the world around me drown in a puddle of tears.

My whole body freezes. I want to tell him how wrong he is, how mean he is, how he has no idea what I'm going through, but I don't. Instead, I find my way to Mrs. Regan. I plead, “Kyle is being really mean! Please make him stop!” She alerts Kyle to stay away from me, expecting that to be enough; this was the first time (not the last) I would witness a bully vindicated without consequences, at my expense.

Grade after grade, the sheep followed the crowd. I became the subject of thousands, maybe hundreds, but it felt more exaggerated at the time—of rumors, fights, hateful phrases, and pranks. I remember one incident in particular in which someone went out of their way to spill water all over me at lunch just for a laugh. I had to anxiously borrow a friend's gym clothes for the rest of the day to get through my classes. Still, I'll always tell anyone who asks that the words—the lies—are the things that hurt the most, the things that stay with me at night.

***“It's windy, yet sunny and every kid's favorite time of day: recess.”***

Through the years, I learned to be too hard on myself for not fitting into everyone's idea of “perfect.” I became hopeless, lost a lot of weight, gained a lot of scars (literally and figuratively), and slept any chance I could get because the idea of getting out of bed was one of those things that didn't seem worth it. I was able to disguise my depression for a long time because my grades never wavered far from excellent throughout my life; it was the one thing I always had to fall back on—the one thing that gave me purpose and confidence. Nevertheless, I started to lack motivation when it felt like it would never get easier, especially with the introduction of anonymous apps on social media that people took advantage of; after reading comments about me day after day, I grew emotionally numb.

***Did you know that one death by suicide occurs every 11 minutes?***

11 minutes is also how long it took for the ambulance to arrive at my house when they got the call over an unconscious thirteen-year-old girl—11 pills deep. The sounds of my mother's sobs—which I later learned was indeed reality—on the way to the hospital still echo in my head. I knew how much I meant to her. I knew how much she wanted me to get better and all the things she would do to help make that happen, yet I could not find the will to get better. I just thought this was how she was expected to act, that she would be better off without me causing more problems in her life.

It wasn't until my dad showed up, after making a two hour drive in an hour, that I really felt something—like I mattered. As his arms quickly and tightly grasped me in what I thought then was anger/disappointment, but what I know now to have been fear/relief, I broke down, bawling over every hateful comment, loss, painful rumor, silenced panic attack, and every heartbreak. At that moment, maybe unbeknownst to me then, I made the choice to let what was “too much” for so long be the pain that brought me through to the other side—the pain that would turn into strength.

One nurse I remember—Naomi Ramos—came in, smiled, and just hugged me. Although it was a hectic evening, I still remember the way her pretty, blonde curls bounced and her dimples creased. She never met me before this, but she sat there, crying with me for a while, as she told me how worthy I really was. I remember her stressing, “The things other people say—the names they call you—only define you if you let them.” This stuck with me and was the reason I accepted help.

It took a lot of work and vulnerability to admit I needed help. I had to tell the doctors how seriously hopeless I felt: how I lacked motivation, couldn't sleep, and felt so worthless that I thought the world would be better without me. In expressing this, I realized that the one thing that made me happy was learning and helping others with what I learned. Even if school was the last place I wanted to go back to, I knew it was the only place I could really find my happiness again.

***“If I had opened my eyes sooner, I would have seen the people telling me in small ways that I really did matter. Lucky for me, it is never too late to appreciate kindness.”***

I pleaded with the doctors to let me attend an out-patient therapy program. It was a relatively smooth transition back to school because not many students even noticed I was gone. When my teachers saw the bags under my eyes and heard about what happened, most of them gave me extensions to catch up on my work. I guess all of the prayers of recovery sent from people in my church after my suicide attempt were finally heard. When my teachers saw the bags under my eyes and heard about what happened, most of them gave me extensions to catch up on my work. I guess all of the prayers of recovery sent from people in my church after my suicide attempt were finally heard.

At this point, I knew I wanted to get better at my own pace, hopefully sooner rather than later. The storm cloud that was following me was exhausting. I was motivated to climb my way out of the black hole and start finding myself again. To do that, I needed to not only show myself and others kindness, but identify kindness in others. I thought of my cousin who came to the hospital and brought me an old iPod with a hand-made playlist to listen to while the doctors ran their endless tests. I thought of my aunt and uncles, who dropped everything to bring me comfortable pajamas during my stay. I thought of my nana who drove hours to hold my hand by an unfamiliar bedside. I thought of my older sister, who always came to my defense, even when it was embarrassing. But most importantly, I thought of Nurse Ramos.

It hadn't sunk in when I was in the hospital, but I still look back to this moment with an overwhelming sense of gratitude that a stranger could care so much and be so kind. It was something—the innocence in the generosity—I hadn't experienced, even from the people closest to me. She took the time to listen to me, sympathize with my situation, and unselfishly gave advice and support beyond her job requirements. Because of her, I realized that not everyone is placed on this Earth to work against you and judge you; I learned that your life matters so much more than your brain can lead you to believe. I understood the importance of loving yourself in a way that makes you happy to be yourself. I saw in another person the light I had given away to everyone else—the slack that I so desperately longed for.

All this thinking made me miss the kind of person I was before I let the depression—the pressure—eat me alive, becoming someone who didn't want to talk to or trust anyone, hold the door for strangers, or stop to help a neighbor with their groceries. Instead of wasting my time with self-doubt and criticism, I put more effort into doing these little acts of kindness again. These things didn't just make me feel better, but slowly made the world around me a gentler place. I wanted to know myself again, to believe in myself again. I wanted to truly believe that there was a balance between looking forward and being excited about what I could do in the present.

***“I didn't want to be scared of failure, but scared of what fear and anger could hold me back from.”***

So, I started talking in therapy about the problems I bottled up for so long—from my parents' relationship to bullies at school. We had group processing sessions, where I could get feedback from other peers, but we also had one-on-ones with a personal therapist and a psychiatrist. I started seeing how genuine other people (some who struggled with similar issues) were. I started to realize I liked them—and better yet, they liked me, even when I came with ups and downs. I met life-long friends in that group session and to this day, I will always root for the High Focus Therapy Program. I stopped caring as much about mean comments and started caring more about my wellbeing; I made sure I was eating three meals a day, sleeping eight hours a night, and actually enjoying the extracurriculars I was participating in (like cuddling my puppy, for example). Dealing with these problems encouraged me to continue to give back and soon, I found myself offering help to neighbors and friends without feeling forced.

After a tiresome three to four hours of therapy every day after school for five months, I graduated from High Focus with new tools and recognized support systems to handle conflict, anxiety, and mood management.

The counselors and other peers taught me to be my own independent person. If a stranger could bring me down like Kyle, or empower me like Nurse Ramos, then there was no point in relying on ever-changing and limited outside perspectives; the only thing that mattered was me being able to provide healing for myself. When I put in the work, this ability blossomed into helping others.

If I had opened my eyes sooner, I would have seen the people telling me in small ways that I really did matter. Lucky for me, it is never too late to appreciate kindness. I wasn't sure exactly what or who I was fighting for, but I knew improving mental health around the globe could only be done by people that fully understood what it was like to struggle—especially at the hands of other people. It could only be accomplished by people who knew the value—the power—of kindness. If there was going to be a way to let people know that this was such a serious problem, and that they were not alone, then I wanted to be a part of it.

For so long, I felt like I couldn't find my place, but, through therapy, I found it in spreading random acts of kindness with the goal of nurturing and improving the mental health of people I meet, just like Nurse Ramos. I pushed through the decision to transfer high schools and even founded a Character Club



that gave me a whole new, happy experience. If there is one thing I learned, battling with mental health issues, is it's never linear. Progress can just as easily sneak up on me as I can forget about it, so it is a fight I must make every day. But each day when I take care of my mind, my mind takes its best care of me.

In retrospect, it was this nickname—Godzilla—that reminded me of my own inner strength. It taught me the power of words; the impact of a story; the importance of kindness, advocacy, empathy, and mental health. This nickname simultaneously tore me down and built me up, making me my own ally, but preparing me in the end for future mental hardship. It awoke something in me that—even when I struggled with mental health later in life—would remain forever: the desire to help others overcome it too.

If I let the monster, Godzilla, destroy me that day—January 11th—I would have never been blessed enough to meet my best friends or my four little siblings.

If I had continued to let Godzilla run rampant over every positive thought I had, I would not be the person I am—someone who is excited to make the most of their second chance and a proud believer in the number eleven as well as the semicolon (the symbol for suicide awareness; choosing to continue a story instead of giving up; my first tattoo). Perhaps a part of me did die that day, but it also gave birth to so many new, beautiful, and stronger parts of me—all parts that made whole.

Looking at the person I have grown to become, including Secretary of the Random Acts of Kindness club at Penn State (where I continue to learn about criminology and how to make a meaningful difference in people's lives, both big and small), I know that what seems impossible in the confines of your head is quite possible in the real world. Sometimes, kindness from a stranger is all someone needs to take off the mask, accept help, and push through mental hardship.



# The Enticing Nature of Fast Fashion and the Need to Fight Against it

Leila Okhravi (She/Her) | University of California, Davis



## A Seamstress's Take on Fast Fashion

When was the last time we saw a celebrity wearing the same outfit twice? What goes on behind the scenes to curate their unique looks? As a seamstress knowing what goes into garment construction, I am in awe at how quickly celebrities discard their elaborate clothing items. While I do not possess the skill of the seamstresses of the high end ateliers, I often imagine just how long it would take for me to construct something like the pieces celebrities wear, even the garments designed for street wear. The process typically goes as follows:

I start by finding or creating a pattern fit to my unique measurements and preferred fit. Next, I visit a fabric store, where I have to take careful consideration of the textiles I choose to ensure it fits properly but also doesn't stray too far from my original vision. Once I finally make it out of the store, I go through a process of learning how to "handle" the fabric. Will ironing it create burn marks? Will the needle of my sewing machine poke noticeable holes in it? Which direction should I lay the fabric in to ensure the light hits it properly?

Once I answer these questions, sometimes with trial and error, I spend hours putting the piece itself together. Given how lengthy and expensive the process is, it is easy to lose the drive to carry a project through to completion. Especially with the world at our fingertips through the proliferation of e-commerce and short form social media platforms, the patience for creation is scarce. Not only is the patience for creativity wearing thin, but so is the tolerance of the higher price points associated with sustainability-made items. I cannot fault consumers for feeling this way when it is clearly the more attractive option to buy an abundance of cheaper, trendy clothing in comparison to spending more on timeless, higher quality items. Ultimately, when we lose sight of what it takes to create the goods we consume on a daily basis thoughtlessly, we cannot fathom spending our limited, hard earned income on them.

However, it is because I have undergone the tedious and detail-oriented process of fashion creation that I often face difficulty in pricing products I make and seamstressing services I provide.

Understanding how garments are made and the value of high quality craftsmanship is half fast fashion battle. While many of us simply cannot afford to spend more than we already do on clothing, it is important for us to consider if we could be spending the amount of money we already do in a more intentional manner. And while the issues that the fast fashion industry perpetuate are not the fault of the consumer, we as consumers must call for increased regulation of the industry to ensure garments are sustainably made in safe, fair working conditions.



# The Enticing Nature of Fast Fashion and the Need to Fight Against it



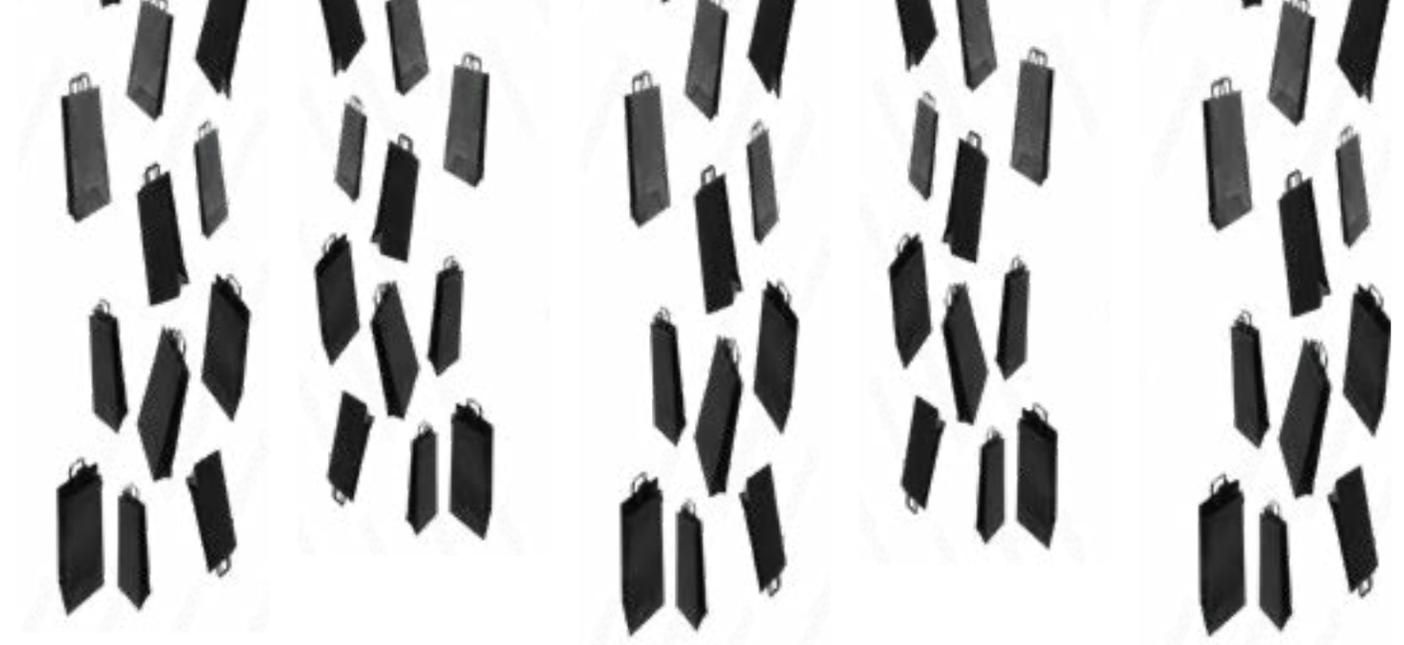
With conscious consumerism on the rise, consumers need reliable information concerning the inner workings of the fashion industry so that they can push back against highly compelling, yet covert, advertising that incentivises consistency over consumption. After surpassing savvy marketing and learning more about the fast and slow fashion industry (fast fashion's more sustainable counterpart), consumers may choose to make different choices when it comes to fashion consumption, but at what cost?



As the world becomes increasingly aware of the impending climate crisis, Generation Z and Millennials have begun to implement sustainable changes in their everyday lives to combat its impacts. Most methods to curb the climate crisis on an individual level involve an overhaul of our consumption habits. Because of this, Generation Z and Millennial fashion consumers are reevaluating their clothing consumption habits by becoming more conscious of how their clothing is made. Will this new era of conscious consumerism usher in effective and accessible change in the fashion industry?



They will be on the lookout for sustainable clothing options that still fall within their budget, size, and style, which has proven to be a challenge. Modern fast fashion consumption is almost unavoidable, but a significant decline in its consumption is necessary for a liveable planet and ensuring its workers are free from exploitation.



## What is Fast Fashion?

Currently, the most accessible way for the majority of consumers to get clothing is through fast fashion retailers, such as Zara and H&M. These fast fashion brands rely on business models where clothing is mass produced at extremely low costs but is sold at very affordable prices (Ertekin & Atik, 2014). The low cost element of the model makes it attractive to all consumers no matter their income level, essentially “democratizing” the industry. As a result, it has become ultra successful, fast fashion retailers make billions in annual revenue and expand their operations internationally.

In 2019, one of the largest fast fashion retailers today, Zara, accumulated an astonishing \$22 billion in annual net sales. Zara's revenue in 2021 approached many well-established, designer brands like Louis Vuitton and Gucci in less than half the amount of time (Investopedia).

If a consumer walked into their local Zara at any given moment, they would be overwhelmed by hoards of clothing. This is because Zara follows a five week design-to-retail model, meaning that new collections of merchandise must be designed, produced, and on clothing racks in thousands of Zara locations across the globe in a neck breaking speed of just five weeks. Zara accumulates more than 20 collections a year as opposed to slower-fashion or high fashion brands where it is commonplace to put out no more than two lines a year. So, the clothing that fast-fashion produces only remain in fashion for about three weeks, until the new collection is advertised. Zara's 20 collections a year may seem like a lot when compared to luxury brands but other retailers push out lines even fast. Fashion Nova, a popular retail brand that many social media influencers tout as the best of the best to remain trendy, releases anywhere from 600 to 900 new styles weekly (Vox).

# The Negative Impacts of Fast Fashion on our Planet and Garment Workers:



The only way to produce at the capacity fast-fashion retailers do while maintaining sky high profit margins is by cutting manufacturing costs. What does this mean for the clothing you and I buy? Our affordable clothing is often made with low quality, environmentally unfriendly materials with faulty manufacturing techniques by severely overworked and underpaid garment workers in dangerous conditions.

Consumers are buying more clothing because of fast fashion's low price and their desire to keep up with fast-changing trends, but this desire is causing more clothing than ever before to end up in landfills only after a few wears. The United Nation Environmental Programme estimates that the production of a single pair of jeans (from production to sale) uses about 999 gallons of water and is responsible for emitting 33.4 kilograms of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. We must also consider that approximately six billion pairs of jeans are produced a year (EcoWatch). When adding in environmental impacts of other types of garments produced, the industry as a whole uses an approximate 4%

***“The planet and its inhabitants pay the ultimate price for the industry’s environmental destruction.”***

of freshwater globally or 24.9 trillion gallons every year. The fast-fashion industry alone is responsible for 2-8% of global carbon emissions which is the main advancer of the climate crisis (UNEP).

The environmental havoc caused by the fast fashion industry does not stop at production, but continues when a shopper brings their item home and washes it. A majority of clothing produced by fast fashion brands are made from synthetic textiles such as polyester, spandex, nylon, and acrylic. A majority of brands favor them because they are more cost-effective to produce. Fast-fashion manufacturers blend synthetic textiles into pricier material. When we wash our clothes made from synthetic textiles, they shed microplastics that pollute our waterways and enter our bloodstream through the food we eat and water we drink (PSF). Although fast fashion's low price tags are enticing, the planet and its inhabitants pay the ultimate price for the industry's environmental destruction.

Besides harming the planet, fast fashion harms workers, who pay the price of their health and sometimes their lives to produce our clothes.

Although some of these companies benefit from exploiting garment workers domestically in the United States (Garment Workers Center), labor outsourcing to countries with relatively lax labor laws in terms of minimum wage requirements and factory conditions is common. For instance, a report conducted by the Center for Research on Multinational Corporations featured in The Guardian found that recruiters in southern India convinced parents in poor rural areas to send their young daughters to spinning mills where textiles were produced. In return, they are promised sufficient wages, “comfortable accommodation, three nutritious meals a day and opportunities for training and schooling, as well as a lump sum payment at the end of three years.” However, it was discovered that, “in reality, they are working under appalling conditions that amount to modern day slavery and the worst forms of child labour.”

Southern India is not the only place this devastating phenomenon is occurring. Ras Jebel, Tunisia is also known as Lee Cooperville due to the presence of a massive Lee Cooper jeans factory. Hundreds of women work in the factory, sewing feverishly on machines that have no safety guards. They must “work hard and fast and have to concentrate to avoid the pounding

needles punching through their fingers” (Crewe p. 28). Aside from horrific working conditions, garment and textile workers are usually never fairly compensated for their labor. The American staple, jeans, cost an average of \$34 a pair from fast-fashion retailers (Time), however approximately 85% of garment workers around the world are not paid the minimum wage and are instead paid 2 to 6 cents per item they produce (Garment Workers Center). These particular examples and thousands of others just like them show that fast fashion retailers will cut worker wages and limit safe working conditions if it means they can continue to sell merchandise at a low price and increase their profit margins.

## **Evolving Media's affect on the Fashion Industry :**

Though consumers do not have to follow every trend that is marketed to them, brands have become increasingly savvy with marketing, specifically on short form social media platforms that make constant consumption incredibly enticing. Additionally, they pour resources into driving up consumption by taking advantage of large audiences on TikTok and Instagram where they can make short and entertaining videos that are 60 seconds or less.

Many experts agree that they have shortened our attention spans and the fast fashion cycle (Cainz).

However it has not always been this way. In fact, in the latter half of the 20th century, the average fashion trend lasted anywhere from five to ten years. Fashion trends were carefully created by a powerful few in the fashion industry for a powerful few in society and meant to last for years to come. These trends were seen on the pages of magazines, a much slower disseminating medium—produced daily, weekly, monthly, or seasonally. The new medium of marketing has since strayed from print media and instead gone towards short-form platforms. The message of the marketing being persistent consumption, aligns completely with short-form social media.

Fast fashion has also perpetuated “microtrends” that barely last three to five months, meaning as soon as it arrives at your door it is practically “last season”. Influencers must grow and maintain a social media following for the purpose of promoting products to their audiences so microtrends are needed. Combine the fashion influencer with the algorithm’s demand for daily content to remain relevant and the concept of microtrends come to be.

Consumers are perpetually incentivized to buy, buy, buy in the hopes of remaining trendy.

Chinese fast fashion behemoth Shein serves as the best example of the aforementioned phenomenon. Shein has been wildly successful in reviving the dying industry. In 2022, the Wall Street Journal reported that Shein was valued at \$100 billion, one and a half times more than the previous year. This makes them worth significantly more than established fast fashion giants Zara and H&M combined and the third most valuable private corporation in the world (Bloomberg). How was Shein able to shift consumers away from sustainable shopping back to fast fashion? The same ways Zara and H&M were able to in the past but on a new, unprecedented scale: unfathomably low prices and significant amounts of new styles available at any given time. Where Zara and Shein differ is in their marketing savvy.

Shein’s CEO, Chris Xu, is known to be a Search Engine Optimization expert, which serves to be a valuable asset to a corporation that relies heavily on following and understanding online fashion trends. A significant portion of the company’s costs/resources are dedicated to mining data from popular social media sites like Instagram and TikTok as well as Google

to predict what consumers want before they want it. This usually includes sophisticated software tracking user engagement on celebrities’ and influencers’ fashion, and even non-fashion related content on social media.

After cultivating a list of next month’s or, in the case of Shein, next week or tomorrow’s fashion trends, Shein quickly begins to produce items with similar characteristics in small batches to begin and make them available online in a matter of days or even hours. If an item sells out, Shein will produce more inventory of the item. However, more likely is that most of the inventory initially created will not sell, at which point they will be dumped in favor of new merchandise. With this highly successful method of manufacturing clothing with the young, fashion savvy consumer in mind, Shein puts out thousands of new styles daily, culminating to a staggering 314,000 new styles year-to-date in 2022. Consumers are often floored as they are able to refresh their page every few seconds to see hundreds of new items for their enjoyment at unbeatable prices. The unbeatable prices are another way Shein is able to entice consumers who are craving fashion consumption. According to Zara and H&M’s brand websites’, the median price point of a dress is \$49.90 and \$29.99 respectively. Compare this to Shein’s median of just \$13.00 and there is no question for consumers as to where to get their trendy, affordable fashion from. With median prices that low comes low quality and unsustainable merchandise that is sewn by an exploited, severely underpaid workforce. Providing no transparency on their supply chain; significant use of harmful synthetic textiles that do not biodegrade in a reasonable amount of time; and their marketing strategy that promotes overconsumption on an unprecedented scale should show to consumers that Shein only means to cut corners in any way to maximize revenue.

**314,000  
news styles  
in 2022**

**\$29.99  
to \$49.90  
median  
dress price**



*“#SheinHaul”*

*“#ZaraHaul”*

*“#ThriftHaul”*

Additionally, given their practice of “recreating” designer fashion worn on celebrities and influencers with a quick turnaround time, Shein is regularly guilty of knocking off independent designers and, while doing so, diverting the customer away from the original designer with their low price point. With each wrongdoing, Shein does not necessarily see a dip in sales or less support for the brand. It is due to the affordability of the brand that they continue to see record-breaking amounts of sales, especially during and after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important to emphasize that consumers shopping at Shein due to not being able to afford any other clothing brands should not be held responsible for the corporation’s wrongdoings. And although it is in best practice to avoid placing blame on consumers for the corporation’s unethical practices, it is necessary in this case to examine the ways in which social media influencers have contributed to the Shein’s success.

As of April 7, 2022, the hashtag “#sheinhaul” on TikTok has amassed nearly 5 billion views, more than twice the viewership

of the hashtags “#zarahaul” and “#thrifthaul” (Bloomberg). The retailer credits much of their brand’s success to the numerous influencer deals and collaborations they have where popular social media figures show off their Shein purchases (“hauls”) often worth hundreds of dollars. Given the low price point, hundreds of dollars of Shein clothing often equates to upwards of 20 to 30 low quality garments. After influencers create and maintain a strong relationship with the brand, they continue to do regular Shein hauls, often on a weekly basis, only further contributing to Shein’s environmental footprint and exploitative practices.

Ultimately, Shein is not just a retailer for those who cannot afford higher end fashion, but also a brand who satiates the desire youth have for constant fashion consumption.

## **What can be done to remedy it?**

Although it can be quite uninspiring to hear of the ills of the fast fashion industry, there is a list of potential solutions that can push the industry in the right direction.

Consumers are often uninformed as to the ills of the industry, do not have the resources to change their consumption patterns, or are affected by a variety of other factors causing them to choose fast-fashion.

Education about the topic is slowly but surely expanding amongst the youth on social media, interestingly enough. In fact, much of the youth on social media have shifted away from fast fashion and towards a relatively economical, sustainable alternative: thrift shopping. “Thrifting” addresses and solves these two issues in slow fashion because it is generally considered affordable and it is diverting clothing from landfills, meaning no new clothing is produced to meet demand. The generally affordable prices make thrifting a great option for low-income individuals. Also, had the thrift store clothing not been donated to the thrift, the garments would have most likely ended up in a landfill, creating more environmental destruction. Many local thrifts and larger thrifting nonprofits also often support a specific charitable cause. Profits earned by well-known thrift store Goodwill go to community programs such as jobs training and courses individuals with disabilities who may find it more difficult to hold long-term employment (Carter). These reasons and the rise of conscious consumerism among youth have caused a significant surge in thrifting even among individuals who are not low-income. More expensive, curated versions of thrifting including vintage clothing shops have also seen a rise in demand. Kelsey McCarthy, vintage vendor for Heir Vintage based in Denver, Colorado says of vintage clothing shopping/thrifting: “It is an acceptable form of adult treasure hunting. It means I am helping to close the loop on capitalist trajectories that harm certain communities” (303 Magazine).



In their comment, McCarthy highlights another important aspect of the rise of thrifting amongst higher income individuals who do not necessarily rely on thrifting: it being a generally fun activity. While thrifting is generally accepted by many as a great sustainable alternative to fashion consumption, it is not completely accessible to everybody, specifically plus-sized shoppers. Emma Zack, owner of a plus-sized vintage clothing shop in Brooklyn, New York explains that the issue lies in that a majority of plus-sized clothing in existence today was produced around the 1980s, meaning compared to straight-sized individuals, they have significantly less options available to them when they shop secondhand. Zack goes on to say that this cycle will only continue "until plus-size people are treated with the same consideration as straight-size people. There will continue to be a lack of plus-size vintage items in traditional vintage stores". While thrifting addresses the cynicism, environmental concerns, and economic barriers, it still leaves behind conscious plus-size shoppers, indicating that there won't be an appropriate “one-size-fits-all” approach to tackling fast fashion. Conscious consumers who have the money are looking towards slow fashion brands. Many of these slow fashion brands pride themselves in the use of eco-friendly and non-exploitative textile and manufacturing alternatives.

For instance, some have begun using Tencel lyocell, also known as Teneel, as an alternative to cotton. Like rayon (another relatively environmentally conscious textile fiber), Tencel is constructed from wood pulp, making it completely biodegradable. Unlike rayon however, Tencel requires significantly less energy and chemical solvent to transform from wood pulp into textile fibers for manufacturing purposes (Treehugger).

Tencel is merely one example of a new world of sustainable textile alternatives that are mostly used by slow fashion brands. While most would like to invest in clothing items from brands that boast high quality and sustainable items, the justified, yet steep price point of slow fashion is a serious inhibiting factor. Even for former fast fashion consumers with higher incomes who are not looking to change their consumption levels, this will stand in their way as conscious consumers. However, the premise of the slow fashion movement urges people to consume less in general, meaning they may actually spend a similar amount on clothing each year, but the quality of the garment will allow for them to keep an item for much longer. While the opposite of fast fashion is slow fashion, they share one key similarity that makes the slow fashion industry less sustainable than a consumer might initially believe: every garment produced is still new. Although slow fashion produces far less garments than fast fashion and is relatively far more sustainable, there is still room for improvement.



Another possible step is the advocacy for new legislation that pressures fast fashion retailers to change their harmful production methods. The United Kingdom's Environmental Audit Committee proposed several recommendations to the UK government to address the issue, one being providing substantial tax credits to retailers who met sustainability standards that included a reduction in their carbon footprint. However, this financial incentive on its own may not be enough. Nations with the most fast fashion retailers could, in addition to tax incentives (or perhaps even significant disincentives), work closely with environmental experts, textile engineers, fashion industry experts to determine a clearer definition of what it means to be "sustainable" in fashion. Seeing as though the term "sustainable" is often overused and misrepresented in fashion, in conjunction with experts of various fields of work, the Swedish government created a list of chemicals and materials that fell under the title "Substances of Very High Concern" or "SVHC" for clothing and footwear specifically. This coupled with a tax disincentive levied against those who continued to use materials on the list aided Sweden in creating



a significantly more sustainable fashion industry. Along with defining sustainability, it is also crucial to define 'labor exploitation' in the fashion industry. By consulting with qualified members within the field including labor rights groups, labor economists, structural/industrial engineers, and fashion industry experts, we will be able to identify exploitation and deliver the appropriate response to factories who cease or continue to mistreat and underpay their workforce.

Further, brands who don't use any materials or chemicals on the SVHC list, actively work to create more sustainable merchandise, and pay their employees fair wages so they can label their products with that information. Upon seeing labels that tout their environmentally friendlier products that are also produced in improved working conditions, consumers may be more inclined to purchase from them rather than another retailer who does not meet the nation's standards (The Fashion Law). If a substantial group of conscious consumers get behind this cause, they will, in essence, have enough of a power to determine which brands stay in business and which do not, purely based on their conscious shopping choices. Many European nations have seen great success and improved sustainability as a result of implementing versions of the aforementioned regulations.

**“We as conscious shoppers, must advocate for significant improvement in fairness and sustainability in the fashion world.”**

If consumers continue to learn more about the harmful impacts of the industry, they can lobby for legislation that pushes brands to make the appropriate changes.

Among Generation Z and Millennials, it is no secret that fast fashion brands are responsible for environmental destruction and exploitative labor practices. While it can be easy to become overwhelmed when first learning about the issue at hand, we, as conscious consumers, must overcome these feelings in support of the labor force and the planet. A united front is necessary in combating the devastating impacts of the fast fashion industry. Conscious consumers must apply pressure to leading fast fashion brands, by advocating for supply chain transparency laws and by empowering large portions of the population to boycott the leading fast fashion retailers when they do heed consumer demands. They can do this by spreading awareness about the issues exacerbated by fast fashion and overconsumption and by promoting relatively accessible alternatives with minimal judgment of individuals who have no choice but to consume affordable fashion. Even though the negative impacts of the fast fashion industry are not consumers' fault alone, we, as conscious shoppers, must advocate for significant improvement in fairness and sustainability in the fashion world.

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# *Forget Escapism, I Read for the Badass Heroine*

By Camille Norman (she/her) | Villanova University

## *I'm done with love.*

That's right, I said it. I'm done with Valentine's Day, *The Bachelorette*, and I'm most certainly done with romance novels. As a child, I reveled in stories of adventure where the main protagonist stormed a castle, defeated a villain, and saved the day. I wanted to be just like them; I wanted to face the world with strength and fearlessness despite the obstacles that stood in my way. All of these stories that I read, all the tales that consumed my imagination and inspired me to chase my dreams had one problem: most of the protagonists, the heroes, were men. The women were left filling romantic gaps as they found love, got married, or advanced the plots of their male counterparts. Instead of being strong, they were delicate; instead of fearless, they were sympathetic; instead of men, they were women. For a while, male-dominated novels like *Harry Potter* and *Percy Jackson* satisfied my hunger for literary exploration. But as I grew older, I became uneasy. Is that going to be my story?

Am I destined for just love? By comparing Susanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* with Victorian novels such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, I navigate my relationship with marriage plots. In doing so, I highlight the life-giving necessity of representing female protagonists in stories of adventure and self-discovery.

There's nothing wrong with loving love. I wanted a tall, brunette, blue-eyed, carved-from-the-Gods, prince charming like anyone else, but the day I realized Chris Pine was a bit out of reach was the day I realized life wasn't a fairytale. With my parents' divorce, I felt like a damsel in distress as my middle-school self waited and waited for my knight in shining armor to save me. I mean, that's what the stories on my bookshelf said would happen, right? I sought courage but felt like I didn't need it as a girl. I wanted someone to tell me everything was going to be okay.

Better yet, I needed a female role model that suffered, grieved, and overcame hardship within her own adventure; I wanted to put down a book mid-chapter and shout: nevertheless, she persisted!

Then *The Hunger Games* came along, and upon reading the novels and watching the movies way too many times than I'd like utterly obsessed. As in "I put my hair in a Katniss braid every single day" kind of obsessed. I found myself captivated by 16-year old Katniss' journey as she gets chosen to participate in the annual 74th Hunger Games. In the games, children from the 12 districts of Panem are randomly chosen to fight to the death in a symbolic display of the consequences brought by the districts' past rebellion against the Capitol, the tyrannical government that runs the country. Throughout her journey, she not only found herself in the middle of a love triangle subplot (#TeamPeeta), but more prominently, she sparked a nationwide rebellion.

***"For the first time in my entire life, I saw myself in a character."***

While my unapproving parents were appalled at the thought of me reading about a government forcing children to kill each other, the female protagonist Katniss Everdeen captivated me; For the first time in my entire life, I saw myself in a character.

Just like me, Katniss faced the real world at a young age. Her troubles were nuanced and relatable as she had a family to provide for, games to survive, and a rebellion to lead. From the second sentence of the novel where Katniss mentioned "seeking Prim's warmth," the reader recognized that she took on a motherly role towards her younger sister and would do anything, even sacrifice her life, to protect her (Collins 3). A moment that particularly struck me occurred when Katniss volunteered to take her sister's place at the reaping; in a valiant

act of sacrifice, Katniss ran to Prim and "with one sweep of [her] arm, [she] pushed her behind," shouting, "I volunteer...I volunteer as tribute!" (21). Even when Katniss gets thrown into the games, she never loses sight of what she appreciates and who she loves.

The value she places upon independence, compassion, and most prominently, her family ends up playing a major role in her survival; While her bow and arrow proved itself useful, Katniss's true superpower was her femininity.

What I found revolutionary about *The Hunger Games* was that it was positively accepted by the public; men, women individuals of all identities; basically the whole world. The novel was the first time I encountered a story that reached international praise and recognition with a female protagonist whose plot doesn't revolve around love or developing the storylines of her male counterparts? While difficult to believe now, it seemed groundbreaking for me at the time; I didn't realize how suffocated romance novels and marriage plots made me feel until I found myself believing that my happiness depended on others. The rise of young adult dystopian fiction specifically highlighting strong female characters in contrast to stories of the past, prompted me to reflect on my ever-changing relationship with stories. In doing so, I recognized the overt distinctions and vast disparities between male and female narratives throughout time.

Like any bookworm, I grew up on the classics. I dove into Jane's love affair with Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, reveled in Lucie's compassion as she reconnected with her father and started a family in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and prayed for my own real-life Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*. Per most Victorian novels, they depicted women on their journey of finding love, getting married, and, you guessed it, starting a family. The same can be said for Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, which followed the life story of Heathcliff as he encountered generations of family structures and fell in love with Catherine Earnshaw. Brontë posed Heathcliff as the main protagonist of *Wuthering Heights*, but the novel undoubtedly claims itself as Catherine's story as well. Nevertheless, like many other female Victorian characters, she befell to a marriage plot amidst a male-dominated narrative.

While Katniss fought a sadistic president and patriarchal government, Catherine decided on who to marry. In alignment with gender scripts of the time, Catherine's world revolved around men because her soon-to-be spouse dictated her entire romantic and financial future.



A similar love triangle formed in *Wuthering Heights* that appeared in *The Hunger Games*, where the female character must choose between two men; Catherine particularly wavered between the scholarly, quiet Edgar Linton and the tortured, husky Heathcliff. However, her true love for Heathcliff shone when she exclaimed, “Nelly, I am Heathcliff—he’s always, always in my mind,” and marrying Edgar could never change that (Brontë 71). Unlike *The Hunger Games*, Catherine’s choice became her main climax, and consequently, her narrative as a whole. She not only fell for Heathcliff, but considered herself a part of him. In the process, Catherine lost her identity when she held his presence and validation above her own self-interests, and became infatuated to the point of fatality because of it.

Dying for love? That was it. Romance just wasn’t for me. In fact, I might as well avoid Victorian narratives as a whole. Why do we even read outdated novels like *Wuthering Heights* anyway? Don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed relishing in Heathcliff and Catherine’s story as they grew their connection with one another, but I just couldn’t connect with them. Especially after the division of my family, my whole life revolved around love (or the lack thereof) and I just needed a break. I saw relationships as a driving force of heartache, pain, grief, and, in Catherine’s case, death. For the time being, love was doing me, and the characters in my novels no favors.



I couldn’t help but feel that Catherine deserved more than what *Wuthering Heights* depicted her life as; she deserved to have interests, to go on adventures, and to find fulfillment. I was tired of stories that depicted romance as the only thing that could make women accomplished and happy. Catherine might’ve been lovesick, but I was totally sick of love.

It took further inspection to identify redeemable qualities of Catherine’s story and recognize the proto-feminist attributes of Emily Brontë’s writing. While Catherine remained confined to the gendered expectations in her novel, she also expressed how unnatural marriage and domesticity felt. She equated her life to a “shattered prison,” constantly “wearing to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there” (Brontë 139). Despite her narrative following a marriage plot, Catherine denied wifhood as her purpose of existence; when Nelly refused her desires to jump out the window and “be a girl again, half-savage and hardy, and free,” she desperately proclaimed, “you won’t give me a chance at life” (109). Through portrayals of marriage as a prison, Catherine negated the rules society set for her, and as a result, Brontë depicted marriage as an institution that oftentimes hindered women from accomplishing their goals and reaching self-actualization.

I wanted to hate Catherine. I wanted to hate all the female characters that only cared about men,

marriage, and children, but I couldn't. As much as I wanted to throw my Victorian novels to the back of my bookshelf to never see the light of day, I shouldn't blame women whose stories were limited to marriage plots. While Katniss fought a war against the oppressive regime of President Snow, I should've recognized that Catherine was fighting a war as well; She employed agency to the best of her abilities despite being confined to societal expectations for women to get married and start a family. That being said, I wonder what women's stories would look like if authors liberated them from society's gendered chokehold. What if marriage for Catherine wasn't an expectation or duty, but a choice? Perhaps she would have her own adventure like Katniss did, and if so, the 21st-century feminist would view her with kinder eyes. Maybe then, I wouldn't be so quick to toss her story aside. It wasn't until I read Laura May Alcott's *Little Women* when I found exactly what I was searching for: a story that offered its women a choice. Jo March, the fierce and daring protagonist of Alcott's novel, notably turned down a marriage proposal from her best friend, Laurie. He was handsome, rich, kind, intelligent, and respected Jo's need for freedom as well as her ambitions to become a writer. In other words, just imagine a 19th century Chris Pine. However, despite exhibiting all of the attributes of a suitable bachelor and amiable potential husband, Jo simply didn't love him.

Amidst a heartfelt and honest conversation, she revealed to Laurie, "I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (Alcott 406). Similarly to *Wuthering Heights*, *Little Women* brazenly critiqued romance, and by extension, highlighted the restricting nature of marriage for women. As Jo shamelessly denied the prospect of a husband, her story consequently followed her alluring career as a writer because of it.

At last, a Victorian love story between a woman and her passion; Now that was something I could sink my teeth into. Jo eventually moved to New York by herself to work as a governess and provide for her family back home. Soon enough, she acquired a job at a newspaper where she honed in on her craft as a writer. Amidst Jo's tales away from home, Alcott gifted young readers, like me, with a much-needed self-discovery plot where a woman finds adventure in her independence. Just as Jo didn't need a husband to accomplish her goals and to feel fulfilled, I didn't need one either. However, as much as I sought a reprieve from romance, deep down I wanted Jo to find love; Even worse, I wanted her to fall in love with the charming and dashing Laurie. Amidst personal contemplations on whether I was a bad feminist or not, Jo grew lonely and desired a loving relationship along with her career. In doing so, she highlighted that hard-working, headstrong,

and autonomous women deserve fairytales too.

*Little Women* led me to recognize that the root of my frustration wasn't me, romance novels, or even love; It was the lack of women's stories being told outside the realm of their male counterparts. Jo, in Greta Gerwig's film adaptation, accurately conveyed my frustration when she preached, "women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for." My heart warmed as Jo eventually fell in love with Professor Bhaer, but I'm grateful that their marriage was only a sliver of her adventure. Navigating her close relationships with her sisters, enduring the struggles of living far from home, and becoming a brilliant writer were all aspects of her life that I could relate to. Jo's story wasn't about romance, it followed a narrative of freedom and self-exploration where she found love but also found herself.

Katniss, Catherine, and Jo all exemplified that wanting love and adventure "Nelly, I am Heathcliff—he's always, always in my mind," was never too much to ask for. Whether joining the revolution of women in the workforce like Jo, or leading a national rebellion like Katniss, their stories provided representation for my younger self. They instituted agency over their aspirations and dared to imagine better futures for themselves, all

while encountering love along the way. Even though I'll always find a home in the classics, I look forward to exploring more stories like *The Hunger Games* where women protagonists are freed from the gendered constraints of the past. For me, Katniss was the hero I didn't know I needed and her story provided the gendered freedom I wish Catherine and Jo could've had. While it may take time, and a lot of nights reading at ungodly hours, I hope to consider Katniss one of many female protagonists I can look to when seeking courage amidst my own story.

Thanks to Katniss, I turned into the woman I always wanted to be: I'm an adventurer, leader, and alright, I'll admit it; maybe I'm an admirer of romance too (c'mon, who doesn't love a good enemies-to-lovers trope?). She helped me through my parents' divorce by leading me to realize that even though some relationships may not last forever, they're absolutely worth a shot. I'm still waiting for Cupid's arrow to strike me, but in the meantime, I have a lot of work to get done. On top of independently traveling to and studying in Ireland, I'm looking to soon start my career in Public Relations. On the side, I'm growing my passion for theater, learning more yoga moves, and of course, reading a lot of books (I have to catch up on years of avoiding romance novels somehow). I'm going to be the author of my own adventure, where contrary to the narratives I grew up with as a kid, I plan on making love a joyous subplot in the grand storybook of my life.

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# Equality When? : How Discourse Around Masculinity Must Change

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My parents never shy away from uncomfortable topics. This has been the bane of my existence since I was born. On my first day of kindergarten, we were getting to know our classmates by going around the room and sharing about ourselves. I had recently learned about my anatomy and was eager to share with the class my private information. The story goes that when it was my turn, I stood up, walked to the center of the room, and said,

***“Hello! My name is Andrew, and I have a penis!”***

This story has been told at countless family gatherings and will forever be known as the reason I was sent home on my first day of school. Little me was right. I have a penis. But what little me didn't understand is the implication that my biology carries with it, nor did I understand at that time that masculinity is not limited to anatomy.

Masculinity has inserted itself into every culture across the globe. With our understanding of gender and gender expressions continuing to expand in America, male-identifying people must reevaluate what it means to be a man. This is the only way that we can move towards a more egalitarian society— where all people can be treated equally regardless of their gender identity. The path to progress won't be easy, but it's the only way forward.

A map is only useful if you know where you stand in relation to your surroundings. Likewise, in order to understand how to reach our destination, we must examine where we (our society) are at the moment. Currently, gender politics are entrenched in, among other salient debates, a vague battle over “toxic masculinity.” According to Psychology Today, toxic masculinity is “the result of rules that prescribe what being a man should be.” These “rules” are, including but not limited to “A man should suffer physical and emotional pain in silence”, “A man shouldn't seek warmth, comfort, or tenderness”,

***“Regardless of someone's gender identity, they are impacted by toxic masculinity.”***

“A man should only have the emotions of bravery and anger. Any other emotions are weaknesses. Weakness is unacceptable”, “A man shouldn't depend on anyone. Asking for help is also weak”, and “A man should always want to win, whether in sports, work, relationships, or sex” (Neves 2021). This general definition is seen in most discussions of the subject, be it explicitly or implicitly. That said, the concept of gender identity is nebulous and tricky. While anyone can identify as a “man,” it should be noted that toxic masculinity and discussions of gender disparities typically focus on a bimodal model of gender expression, identifying “men” as being people like me who happen to have a penis and “women” as people who happen to have a vagina. While these definitions are rigid, transphobic, and reinforce the gender binary in an unhelpful way; data, studies, and articles that take a more progressive, nuanced approach are unfortunately in the minority. Moreover, regardless of someone's gender identity, they are impacted by toxic masculinity.

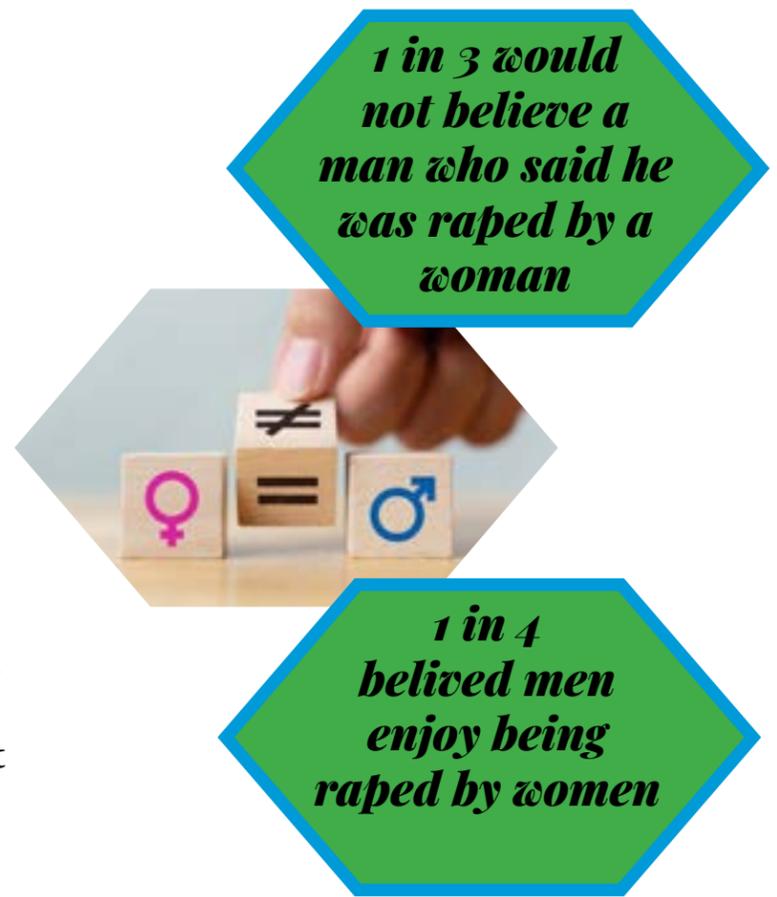
In her book *To Raise a Boy*, reporter Emma Brown discusses sexual assault and its link to unhelpful narratives of masculinity.

According to Brown, men assaulting women has a direct link to the messaging they are exposed to growing up: “When we convey to boys that unwanted touch is a serious issue of sexual assault only when it affects girls and not when it affects boys, we are sending a message that only girls' bodies are worthy of protection. [...] Why should boys treat other people's bodies with dignity and respect if their own bodies are not also treated with dignity and respect?” (Brown, p. 30, 2021). There is a pervasive idea that being feminine is being weak and needing protection and that being masculine is being aggressive and in need of restraint. Despite a pervasive narrative of men as perpetrators of sexual violence and women as victims, Brown found staggering evidence to show that, “as many as one in six boys is sexually abused during childhood. About one in four men is a victim of some kind of sexual violence over the course of his lifetime, from unwanted contact to coercion to rape. [...] in 2015, a national survey by the Centers for Disease Control and prevention found that nearly 4 million men (and 5.6 million women) had been victims of sexual violence just in the previous year” (Brown, 18-19, 2022).

***“Men assaulting women has a direct link to the messaging they are exposed to growing up.”***

The statistics here are both alarming and contradictory to the primary narrative of American society, and I would argue that toxic masculinity is to blame. Men may not have the language to identify what's happening to them as sexual assault, more likely to categorize the actions as horseplay, just a joke, or hazing, but these are a little more than euphemisms for what would be otherwise considered a heinous crime. Men are also likely to underreport sexual assault. See the previous paragraph, when Neves reports that men are made to believe that they should strive to win in all things—sex included. This viewpoint leads to many men not wanting to admit that they could be violated (read: emasculated), especially when the perpetrator is a woman. Throughout her book, Brown also unpacks this idea that sex is a thing men want and women endure, leading many people to have a startling level of cognitive dissonance. A final note from Brown, “A 2018 survey of twelve hundred adults found that one in three would not quite believe a man who said he was raped by a woman, and one in four believed men enjoy being raped by women” (Brown, 32-33 2021). We have nothing to blame but toxic masculinity for this delusion. This is just one (admittedly glaring) example of the harm caused by toxic masculinity, and one that will be given the most light.

It isn't just the individual that toxic masculinity brutalizes; there is discourse currently surrounding perceived traditional manhood that has a direct link to ethnonationalism and fascist values. In his punchy opinion piece, 10 Red Flags the Guy You're Dating is an MRA or an Incel, Jef Rouner illustrates this link by explaining common arguments from the traditionalist worldview and authoritarian ideals. Rouner explains that “scrambling to protect a definition of masculinity that is only hard and violent” has connections to fascism and the “might makes right” mentality (that the strong should govern solely on the basis of them being stronger).



The self-proclaimed “defenders of traditional/toxic masculinity” have been able to collectivize themselves in our digital age through social media sites including 4Chan, Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter. The two most well-established groups under the aforementioned umbrella—Men’s Rights Activists and Incel, known colloquially as incel(s), shorthand for involuntarily celibate (Rouner, 2022) are the most active in virtual spaces. As with all online identities, a majority of the members within these groups understand there’s a time and a place for these ideologies. To draw an equivalency, I am a die-hard Taylor Swift fan (a Swiftie), but I refrained from mentioning it until the middle of this paper. This initial omission is due to my own personal reasoning, but that doesn’t mean there weren’t several attempts at making a pun out of the title using Taylor Swift lyrics. Likewise, while the men of these groups subscribe to the harmful ideology of toxic masculinity as a positive, they understand that theirs is the fringe opinion. In an effort to attract a potentially uninitiated romantic partner, these men may hold off on the Bible-thumping or faux biological argumentations at least until the second date. For these men, explains Rouner, these ideals are “just a

smokescreen for the insecure who don’t know what being a man is without archaic patriarchal trappings to shore up their image.”(Rouner 2022). Rouner is openly transgender. His identity as a man is one shaped off of introspection and a deep understanding of the self—something that traditional masculinity frowns upon. By leaving America’s men without the tools to define their own identity, many men are left ill equipped to identify with themselves outside of this outdated and toxic ideology. While, in some contexts, young women in America are told that they can embrace the masculine as an aspect of their identity, young men are often discouraged from such discovery. To be a man, and show some femininity, is often perceived to be lesser than the presumed default.

America’s men need a role model. Polarization in American politics has made it so that the rise of a woman’s rights movement spawns a reactive men’s rights movement. This reality engulfs the two sides into a tribalistic and myopic worldview that only serves to alienate individual humans from one another—too often on a basis of biological sex.

Likewise, men's rights groups have a monopoly on self-help for men. Aaqib Hasib, sub-writer for The Daily Star, describes several of these figureheads, such as Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, and Andrew Tate, as creating a "Cult of Toxic Masculinity" (Hasib 2022). Admittedly, The Daily Star is a tabloid, and this topic does not appear to be a regular one for Hasib, so I will leave it to readers to assess their own stance on the credibility of this source. In any case, I find it interesting that his article argues that feminists need to support positive role models for men as much as they do for women, or else they may lose the culture war. Hasib also exemplifies the feedback loop of these role models—wherein they convince men that masculinity is under attack, then define masculinity as they please, typically by branding their own problematic behavior [read: the actual reason they are being persecuted] as masculine. On Peterson "a [former] professor [former] at the University of Toronto, [...] increasingly concerned about a federal amendment which would add gender identity to the Canadian Human Rights Act" (Hasib 2022). On Rogan; "When Joe Rogan talks about his opinions about men needing to be dominating,

these viewers latch onto these ideas" (Hasib 2022). Finally, on Tate; "The former kickboxer preaches everything from the idea that women are a man's property to suggesting that victims of rape should bear responsibility for the crime they have suffered. Tate takes on the persona of a cool, collected, and rational playboy who even has 'justifications' to back up his arguments." (Hasib 2022). If we fail to promote positive male role models as a movement (or even a group of people who wish to see fewer people like Peterson, Rogan, and/or Tate), and fail to encourage the expression of femininity across biological categories, people will continue to suffer.

While Hasib is, in my estimation, correct in many regards, I disagree with him labeling toxic masculinity as a "cult." Cult members often have no easy way to escape, while people who subscribe to these ideals can be dissuaded with an honest conversation, and ultimately because cult leaders are typically intelligent individuals—and the self-proclaimed king of toxic masculinity, the aforementioned Andrew Tate—is anything but. Tate is an egotistical influencer masquerading as an intellectual

bad boy who tells it like it is. In a podcast appearance, Tate describes toxic masculinity as, "a term made-up by women nobody wants to f\*ck used to describe men everyone wants to f\*ck" (Tate et al 2022). If you can look beside Tate inflating his ego, you'll see the pattern of affirming, potentially influential, young men's preexisting fears of prosecution take shape. Tate doesn't make these arguments in good faith either; He describes an imagined scenario where a group of people consisting of both men and women are stranded on an island, reverting to traditional gender roles as ingrained in their nature. This is a straw man argument with a refutation using the fallacious appeal to nature. This is my claim to calling Tate a pseudo-intellectual; he lines up dominos and pats himself on the back for being able to knock them down in a straight line. This type of man should have very little influence on our most vulnerable young men, if any at all. It is through the inclusion of his claims that I hope to motivate those of you committed enough to read almost ten pages of critical gender theory to commit yourself further.

Incels, 'involuntaru celibates' mentioned previously, have a language of their own and devote subsections of online chat forums such as 4chan or Reddit to espousing hateful rhetoric aimed specifically towards feminism as a broad movement and women as a whole. While Rouser's article described them as merely the opposite of a feminist,

the reality is much darker than that. Most alarmingly, it is the onset of a phenomenon known as Catastrophizing, "a cognitive disorder where anxiety and/or depression leads [one] to infer apocalyptic conclusions from mundane setbacks" (Wynn), which can lead many men prescribing to the manosphere that their only choice is to Lay Down And Rot (LDAR, a part of the incel lexicon). This dismal approach is colloquially called The Black Pill (a reference to The Matrix), and is

***"Incels have devote subsections ... espousing hateful rhetoric specifically aimed towards feminism."***

based on the same effect of catastrophizing. To borrow again from ContraPoints/Wynn, "Step one. Experience rejection. Step two. This rejection is because you are unattractive to women. Step three. You will never be attractive to any woman ever. Step four. You will be alone forever. Step five. You will always be unhappy. Step six. Women did this to you. Step seven. Feminism has empowered women to do this to you. Step eight. The social trends that made this possible are only getting worse. Step nine. Humanity itself is doomed. Step ten. The only option? LADR" (Wynn).



Wynn explains that this “black pill” thinking leads to a higher rate of suicidal ideation and related posting.

When it is mentioned that these posts are troubling, the men mask it as just a joke, saying it’s a part of edgy, dark humor. Finally, and strangest of all, is how ContraPoints states that incels who have hope that things will get better in the future (nicknamed Hope-cels) are at the bottom of the incel hierarchy, and are actively shunned from the online community. The manosphere is an infinitely negative feedback loop, which shuns hope for the future and otherizes those not part of their “in ” group privy to the secret information of society. However unwitting or unintelligent I may find the leaders of this cult, the pain their followers feel is very real.



1. Manosphere is a term referring to a collection of websites, forums, and blogs that promote toxic masculinity, misogyny, and more (Wikipedia) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manosphere#:~:text=The%20manosphere%20is%20a%20heterogeneous,adversarial%20relationships%20with%20one%20another>

***Ultimately, this is my call to action.***

***First, the problems at hand:***

Thousands of men and boys are participating in communities like incel—this is only made possible through online spaces like 4chan and Reddit remaining complacent. Their administrators should take care to help moderate content that gets posted on their websites and provide resources for mental health services that cater specifically to men. If this doesn’t work, pull the plug and stamp out the fires of hate from any and all online services.

***Next, we need to examine our own biases.***

Ask ourselves, “Am I more inclined to believe female survivors of sexual assault than male survivors?”, ensure that we’re conscious of stereotypes we may hold towards either gender. We need to provide our young men with more positive role models that help to mitigate the issues caused by toxic masculinity without making these boys feel persecuted.

***Finally, if you have children, know someone with children, or have ever been a child yourself, think about the impact of the language you use.***

Children need accurate language to describe the world around them, even if it makes our adult brains grimace from time to time. An honest conversation with children may lead to some embarrassing moments, but it’s much better than delegating our nation to a future of spinning tires in vain, or much worse.

After graduating, I got a congratulations letter from my previous kindergarten instructor, along with a note. Unbeknownst to me, my first day of school was also hers. She had recently been certified to teach elementary education, and told me that even though she had to take disciplinary measures due to school policy, she went home that night and laughed about it for hours with her husband.

***Boost positive male role models***

***Encourage gender discovery in early age playing***

***Buy your son's dolls***

***Teach them compassion***

***Let them know that big boys do cry***

***Let them know that nobody can determine who they are in this life besides themselves***

Compassion is the only path forward. While this is certainly a difficult hurdle to overcome, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure; in this case more than ever; we owe it to them.

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# “White People Can Join Too”: A Critical Autoethnography on the Concept of “Whiteness” in Relation to Middle Eastern American/Iranian American Racial Identity

Meredith Granmayeh (She/Her) | Chapman University

## ***An Unforgettable Interaction:***

Towards the end of my junior year of high school, a college counselor I was working with suggested that I look into the clubs each of the universities I was interested in had to offer. For the most part, I was only able to find partial lists or spreadsheets that weren't up to date. The only college with a comprehensive club list online was the university I ended up attending, Chapman University. I scrolled through a PDF of Chapman's clubs; the extracurriculars were divided into categories. I eliminated “Recreation, Fitness, and Wellness,” “Performance and Arts,” and “Religious and Spiritual.” People do change when they go to college, but I knew that I wasn't going to start exercising, joining theater, or searching for God. I did a double take when looking at the “Diversity and Cultural” section. I lit up with excitement when I saw the words Iranian Student Cultural Organization (ISCO). Finally, I had a chance to become friends with Iranian Americans my age.

There was only one Iranian American that I personally knew in high school; her name was Alma, and we had one dance class together as sophomores. Well, me knowing one Iranian American was not entirely true. The only other Iranian Americans I spent time with were my dad's side of the family, various family friends, and my younger sister. However, my sister doesn't count because she's an absolute nightmare in the body of a popular, 5'9 basketball player. I only saw most of those people on select weekends depending on my schedule. The Iranian Student Cultural Organization would change all of that. I could explore this aspect of my identity with other college students, a connection I had been lacking for so long. While I was not completely convinced this school was the right one for me—Scripps College had been my top choice for a variety of reasons—my mind held on to this club and wouldn't let me forget it.

After over a year of waiting and a couple weeks into my first semester, Chapman held a Student Involvement Fair. This event was one where every club on campus could promote themselves to gain more members, usually first-year students. The Involvement Fair is always chaotic and crowded with people practically on top of each other in such small spaces, but it is the only time over the course of the semester when everyone can check out all of the organizations on campus. ISCO was one of the clubs there.

At eleven in the morning, I made my way from my dorm room to Chapman University's Attallah Piazza where over a hundred gray folding tables were set up. I had been counting down the minutes until the event began since I had woken up four hours earlier at seven in the morning to get ready for my Spanish class. I had a break before my Intro to Psychology class, and I wanted to see what groups were active on campus. The club tables were formed into two different circles, an inner circle around the four pillars of Halfacre Fountain, and an outer circle around the perimeter of the piazza. The latter circle's shape was less a circle and more a scattering of tables covered by tents and colorful banners. I took a tour of each of the clubs present, gladly accepting any of the candy or free merchandise given out by these organizations, most of which I didn't end up joining.

I spotted ISCO close to the Leatherby Libraries steps. Eagerness from when I had first discovered this club a year and a half prior bubbled to the surface. I walked with purpose over to them, a smile on my face. When I arrived, a girl stood behind a laptop while her hands

swayed to the Iranian music emitted from a speaker. Her friends were around her to the side of the table, not paying attention to the anxious eighteen-year-old who approached them. The upperclassman looked over at me, but didn't say anything. She had stopped moving her hands around. I waited for her to begin a conversation. Once I realized she wasn't going to, I started talking.



***“Hi. Can I sign up for your email list?”***

I could see that a spreadsheet was open on the laptop, but I was too nervous to type my name and email address without asking.

While her eyes weren't visible to me as she wore sunglasses, I could tell that she was suspicious of me. Her posture went from relaxed to rigid. Her head tilted up and down as she scanned me over, leaning back slightly to get a better look at me. I can understand why. I am half Iranian American and half European American. My light skin, medium brown hair, hazel eyes, and slightly pointed nose are features that are not normally associated with Iranian women.

If I were to ask a stranger what race they think I am, it would be unlikely that they would say anything other than White. Even with my more apparent, Whiter elements, I was persistent in joining this organization. “Uh, yeah,” she said while pointing at the laptop.”

I leaned over, my backpack moving with me, its contents shifting in the bag and hitting the back of my neck as I typed out my contact information. My fingers tingled, and giddiness filled my lungs once I completed the task. I was now on ISCO’s email list. I could make Iranian American friends. I could relearn the Farsi I was taught as a child that had since escaped my mind. I could celebrate Nowruz (Iranian New Year) for the first time in over ten years—a holiday I last participated in as a child when I attended the weekend school that taught me Farsi. I could actually feel like an Iranian American, not just an American or White American, an Iranian American.

I popped back up into a standing position. The tense nature surrounding her hadn’t dissipated. I talked to her about being excited for the first meeting of the semester that would take place on Thursday. We exchanged some words, but the interaction felt stiff. Our conversation ended shortly after she made a remark that has stuck with me ever since.

***“White people can join too.”***

### ***White people being me. I’m the White person.***

Discussing race, when it comes to Middle Eastern people in the United States, is incredibly complicated. Especially when the concept of “Whiteness” is analyzed. Whiteness can be defined as “the way that White people, their customs, culture, and beliefs” act as the “standard by which all other groups are compared” (National Museum of African American History and Culture). In other words, aspects of this dominant racial group in the United States are considered mainstream and typical. Whiteness and a White racial group are rather new concepts in the grand scheme of human history ranging only as far back as the 17th century with European colonizers and the enslavement of Africans in America (Baird). From there, Whiteness has morphed and changed over time with the definition expanding to include more and more ethnic groups such as Irish, Jewish, and Italian people in the 20th century (Bernstein).

Another group that’s included in the White category is Middle Eastern people. On any US federal government document, Americans who are ethnically from European, Middle Eastern and North African countries or backgrounds are considered to be White (Lang). Remember how I mentioned earlier the complex nature of Middle Eastern American racial identity? This is because of the benefits associated with the White label;



Those who are White in the United States “hold most of the political, institutional, and economic power” in the nation (National Museum of African American History and Culture). These advantages are known as White privilege. Filling out the White bubble on the Census, for example, inherently assumes that Middle Eastern get to enjoy the same benefits that European Whites do. Except that is not true.

Middle Eastern people experience discrimination with the prevalence of Islamophobic, racist rhetoric in the United States, and poor treatment in work and social environments. Many of those who are a part of the MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) category do not believe that they are White and have advocated for a change.

While there was hope under the Obama administration, in 2018, when Trump was in power, “the bureau announced that it would not include a ‘MENA’ category” (Parvini and Simani). Instead, people from this ethnic group were encouraged to fill in their country of origin in a section titled “origins.” This move has led to social activist organizations pushing back against the lack of adjustments made to this significant government form. The National Iranian American Council and the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian American have persuaded Iranian Americans to select “Other” on Census forms and write the word “Iranian” (Sakha). Even with these efforts, there is still an obvious sense of confusion when it comes to Middle Eastern and Iranian racial identity.

After hearing the words “White people can join too.” at the ISCO booth, a pain hit and hollowed out my chest. The sudden ache that started in my chest

spread to my arms, legs, head and feet. Everything felt heavy. With a single misstep or an accidental shifting of my backpack, I would've landed on the ground, the control I should've had over my body was nonexistent at the time. The smile that once felt natural on my lips began to drop, a crack forming and splitting the fantasy I had built up in my head for over a year. The grin hadn't fully left my face, but the elation in my eyes vanished.

She stood across from me and gave me a small, superficial smile. A smile that couldn't mask her skeptical perception of me, unaware of the mistake she made. Unaware of the sleepless nights and self-conscious thought spirals that I'd experience for years after because of her words. I put more effort into maintaining a face that didn't display the hurt I felt. A face that would keep the screams and tears I wanted to release a secret. I attempted to catch the pieces of myself that were falling apart and drifting away from me. My initial feelings of nervousness escaped from my mind and were replaced with ones of shame and embarrassment.

After taking a couple seconds to stabilize myself, I responded with "I'm Iranian, but that's good to know. Thanks." Her mouth opened and a small laugh was released as she realized her error, a blunder she brushed out just as easily as she had vocalized the oversight.

We exchanged quick goodbyes, and I walked off to another table. Before moving on to another club, I glanced back at ISCO and saw that her friends started dancing and chatting with her. All these women had pitch black hair, pronounced noses, and dark eyes. Each of their skin tones ranged in lightness and darkness. But none of them were as light as me, as White as me.

At the time, I tried to dismiss what happened. I suppressed the humiliation that slowly consumed my thoughts as I walked around the plaza observing other clubs. What happened was insignificant and I was going to treat it that way; I had convinced myself of that idea. I thought it was funny that an Iranian believed that I was a one-hundred-percent White European.

It's been three years since that interaction, and I don't view it the same way. I should've had the capability to push aside a false assumption innocently made about me, except I couldn't then, and I can't now. I can't forget what happened because it connects to a larger, painful problem I have. Like many White passing people from various ethnic and racial groups, I feel like a fake minority.

My desire to be in ISCO was one I had since my junior year of high school, but I also wanted to join because I felt assured in the fact that I was Iranian American. I was Iranian American and there were others like me

***"I couldn't then, and I can't now. I can't forget what happened because it connects to a larger, painful problem I have."***

I would find them. I would find my people. When I did spot the group I thought I belonged to, I wasn't recognized as one of their own. I wasn't wanted. I was an outsider looking in on a club that wasn't mine. I felt like I had to justify my need to be a part of this organization. I had to justify my apparent, off-putting Whiteness in a place for Iranians. It didn't matter that I was Iranian, that I am Iranian. What mattered was that I looked White and White people aren't Iranians. According to the United States government, that girl and I are technically White, me in more ways than one. But it didn't matter. My Whiteness othered me from my own people.

This occasion wasn't even the first and only time someone mistook me for being completely White. I've had this happen to me before and after the ISCO event. I receive the same look of disbelief and resistance when I approach people who are Iranian or tell others about this part of myself. To them, I am White, and that is the only thing that matters. This connects to another issue related to my own racial and ethnic identity. Because of the privilege attached to my socially acceptable White look, a part of me believes that I am not allowed to feel the pain attached to Iranian and/or Middle Eastern discrimination. Expressing emotion related to prejudice against me and people like me makes me feel guilty. I've been called a terrorist and asked if I had a bomb more than once, but I receive those comments after I am explicit about



being of Iranian descent. Before then, I'm a regular White girl. Before then, I'm seen as a cultureless, naïve being with ties to an oppressor. After people find out the truth, I'm stereotyped in a joking manner. Even if being referred to as a violent person when they hear the words "Middle Eastern" hurts my feelings, I shouldn't be upset. Instead, I should ignore what's being said because I don't deserve to be upset. I haven't earned the right. These words aren't hurled at me while I cross the street or get gas, so I should be grateful rather than disturbed and wounded.

I am forbidden to feel pain surrounding Iranian/Middle Eastern hate because of how I look, because of who I am. I can't be frustrated with the lack of Iranian representation or the way in which Middle Eastern people are presented in the media. I am only allowed to point out how wrong this is. Because of how I look, my heart can't beat erratically when I read articles with headlines detailing hate crimes against Middle Eastern people. Because of how I look, I can't feel threatened by Trump's "Muslim Ban" or any other political effort that targets Iranians or Middle Eastern people. I'm White, so I'm safe. Even my sister believes these notions. I once asked her about our mixed background, and she responded with "We're not really Iranian." Because of how I look, the tears I've shed over my internal crisis are pathetic, because I'm White and that's the only way I should see myself.

This feeling of inadequacy is not unique to me. In an opinion piece titled, "As a 'White-passing Asian American,

I feel grief, shame, and confusion right now," author Maura Hohman discusses her feelings surrounding the rise in Asian American hate in the United States during 2020 as a White-passing individual.

She states that being biracial—White and Asian—has led to her having an "identity crisis" as "people are being targeted for a White stereotype of what Asian features look like," which is an image she does not fit. (Hohman). This disconnect between the general perception of the Asian American identity/community and the actual nuanced nature of this group has allowed Hohman a sense of protection that does not feel deserved. She considers herself to be an "undercover minority" (Hohman). At times, I also feel like an undercover minority, a White imposter among real Iranians. My own racial crisis, similar to other half and full Middle Eastern people in this country, has been further exacerbated by inconsistent labels and a false association with Whiteness. In a 2022 study centered on identity, 333 people who are of Middle Eastern and North African descent were surveyed to see how significant specific racial labels were to them. The researchers found that when MENA participants were not "offered a MENA label, 80% choose to identify as White"; however, when offered, "only 10% continue[d] to exclusively choose White" (Flores, Maghbouleh and Schachter 4). This lack of racial recognition of MENA people disregards our experiences and does not value our place in America.

This is very apparent by the unclear and inaccurate Census data. When I checked out the federal website to see how many others there were like me, the data came back inconclusive and had large margins of error. Results for Iranian Americans specifically do not exist or are at least inaccessible to the public. I was able to find more information on Wikipedia about the number of Iranian Americans than on a government-funded and run website. For now, those who fall under the MENA label will continue to be viewed as White, but not always treated as such.

Remembering this ISCO experience makes me feel embarrassed. The situation was awkward for both me and the girl behind the laptop. I don't blame her for saying what she said. She was trying to be inclusive when she really didn't have to be. This extracurricular was created for Iranians, and they wanted it to stay that way. I was obviously an eager freshman who couldn't wait to join, and she didn't mean to come off as rude.

Even after the ISCO incident, I stayed as positive as possible and went to the first meeting of the semester. My imposter syndrome was further solidified the instant I walked into the room where the club was being hosted that night. My Whiteness stood out to the girl running the Involvement Fair booth, but my light skin and passing features were unavoidable among a sea of Middle Eastern-looking people.

My racial identity, as someone who is Middle Eastern and European White, is something I am still attempting to understand and come to

terms with. Even while writing this critical autoethnography, I struggled with distinguishing the different "types" of White and noting the times when I meant European, occurrences that were referring to Middle Eastern people, and what Whiteness meant to ISCO. I understood what I put down, but I can see how readers could be possibly confused by what I attempted to convey. I am also confused and constantly questioning myself. Am I a hundred percent White? Am I half White? Am I mixed? What am I? Due to lacking consensus on the classification of people like me in America's limited, and even inaccurate, views of the social construct of race, a solution to this issue does not seem like it will come about any time soon. I have no choice but to call myself White and hope that people can understand how that label fits me and also how it simultaneously does not.

***"At times, I also feel like an undercover minority, a White imposter among real Iranians."***

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## Bon Appétit!

Scott Maier (He/His) | University of Winnipeg

I

I can remember my early days with stark distinction, not so much by what I did but by what I ate. Each chapter of my life seemed to be colored by strong flavors and surprising textures—by smoked gouda, golden turkeys, and toasted pumpkin seeds. There was always butter growing up, and a certain joie de vivre because of it. I remember the simple morning delight of waking up to cheese melts in elementary school, with sharp cheddar broiled and bubbling on toast, slathered in chutney and covered in black pepper. I remember cold, dark winter nights cut with the warmth of hot leek soup, swimming with morsels of crisp green onion and crumbled bacon. I remember how each summer brought cardboard boxes of fresh produce, so vibrant in color and odd in shape. It all looked somewhat extra-terrestrial, but could not have tasted more like home. My favorite summertime greeting, one that marked the season with more certainty than the hot sun on my skin and the sweet smell of flowers in my front garden, was my mother's ratatouille.

Ratatouille dinners meant a full afternoon of preparation. Fresh eggplant, tomatoes, and patty pan squash—a mini squash shaped like a Christmas ornament—had to be individually washed and chopped into careful cubes, a creative liberty that set my mom's rendition apart from the paper-thin julienne slices of the classic French dish. Consistency in size was of utmost importance to ensure an even cook, but my mother was no rookie. Once prepared, the cubed vegetables were bathed in olive oil, or what I refer to as liquid gold, and covered with huge chunks of garlic before entering our double-decker oven. Of course, the evening's highlight was eating the ratatouille—soft and juicy morsels of each vegetable decorated with a chiffonade of fresh basil. But an equally satisfying joy came from watching my mother in her element, one hand occupied by a glass tumbler of red wine and the other by wooden spoons, glimmering silver pots, and sharp steel knives. Chet Baker was a consistent accomplice in the kitchen, his smooth voice pouring out of our kitchen

speakers from my mother's iPod classic. But I was an accomplice too—quiet and to the side yet always feeling somehow involved in the magic happening before my eyes. When I dream of summer days on a cold winter afternoon like today, I don't miss the ratatouille dinner as much as I do watching my mother prepare it.

Even today, as I think about her, I can't help but think about food. Retired from nursing at the age of 42 when my twin brother and I were born, my mom, Colleen, was launched into the unforgiving and sometimes underappreciated role of a stay-at-home mom. While my father, Ron, worked long shifts at the hospital, my mother worked longer shifts at home. She once shared the old saying with me: "A man may work from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done." This was true in my home. I often think that my mom could have worked less, such as choosing to make canned soup or boxed macaroni, or using pancake mix or pre-grated parmesan, but these things were simply out of the question. For my mother, food was not only a source of sustenance, but rather of joy, hard work, and life itself. When an elderly man stopped my mother in the grocery store one day to ask why she was buying brown eggs instead of white ones (brown eggs were more expensive), he was both shocked and offended by her response: "Because they look nicer." Food brought simple pleasure to my mom, and there was no need to snuff out the joy that came to her when finding the best ingredients, both by looks and taste, to make a meal.

## II

My mother was born in 1959, the year the Barbie Doll launched, Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, and Alaska and Hawaii became the 49th and 50th U.S. states. That year Ben-Hur had premiered on big screens in North America and Playboy magazine released its first issue, featuring Marilyn Monroe as its centerfold. My mom was born a baby boomer, a Catholic, a fierce redhead, and the eldest in what would eventually be a clan of four children. Just like I grew up with a home cook, so did my mom. Although my grandmother Audrey was not a real chef (what's a real chef, anyways), she was in a similar echelon as my mother: always chopping, boiling, and baking to the tune of jazz and the taste of red wine. But at that time, my grandmother's sit-at-the-dining-table dinners of fresh, hot food were not shared by all.

The 60's had a lot of things going for it, but food was not one of them. These were the days of TV dinners, where many families' suppers came out of a segmented aluminum tray that went into the oven ice-cold and came out lukewarm. Later versions included a microwave option too, for those looking to get an even quicker—and soggier—fix Turkey with gravy, peas, and mashed potatoes or roast beef with green beans gave families a bland, mushy, and most certainly 'blah' meal to accompany an evening in front of the television, eyes glued to Bonanza or The Ed Sullivan Show. If today's society is critiqued for its constant

demand for immediacy, the same can be leveled against the Carnation instant breakfasts and Lipton onion soup dips of the 1960s.

At a time when North American food culture was hitting an all-time low, Pasadena-born, Paris-trained chef Julia Child changed the trajectory of American cuisine on I've Been Reading, a Great Blue Hill TV show dedicated to reading books. With a hot plate, whisk, and eggs from home, Child cooked an omelet live on-air without the knowledge or permission of the show's host P. Albert Duhamel, who was under the impression that Child would be promoting her cookbook Mastering the Art of French Cooking. Child's future producer Russell Morash recalled the moment in a 2004 piece featured by The New York Times: "I thought to myself, 'Who is this madwoman cooking an omelet on a book-review program?'" Her bold move on Boston's television network resonated with thousands of women watching from home, who went on to pen dozens of letters to the television network. These letters were filled with one simple request: more Julia. This was the beginning of what would become Child's TV dynasty, which started with The French Chef, hosted by Child, which aired on February 11, 1963 and lasted for ten years. The key to Child's success came from her mastery of French cooking, which she feverishly studied at Le Cordon Bleu, a cooking school in Paris.

***"You didn't need to be a Michelin-star chef to make Coq au Vin in your own home. You just needed to give it a try."***

Beyond her expertise in the kitchen, Child's admiration from women across the globe was rooted in her spirit—always kind, never harsh, and most certainly endearing. In the spotlight, Julia could have easily turned sour. Standing six foot two with a certain breathy, high-pitched drawl that was anything but ordinary. However, she never took critiques to heart, and she most certainly never reflected the criticism in her interactions with others. Julia was a positive spirit who did what she wanted in a male-dominated culture, leading not only a successful and professional life, but also enjoying an exemplary marriage with her life-long confidante, Paul. Her biggest accomplishments were the changes she made in the lives of women across North America, women like my grandmother Audrey and mother Colleen. Through her cookbook written alongside Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle, and her countless television programs, Child taught women one thing: they could cook. Sure, French cooking was oftentimes complicated—but it was something that anyone could master, with just a bit of practice and a lot of heart. You didn't need to be a Michelin-star chef to make Coq au Vin in your own home. You just needed to give it a try.

Julia Child changed the culture of cooking.

To my mother, Child is a hero who altered the philosophy of at-home cooking, gave women confidence in the kitchen, and showed the world what a successful marriage could look like in a time of overly domineering husbands and unjustly subservient wives.

I allow this mantra to soothe my anxieties in the kitchen, quietly repeating to myself “I just need to give it a try” when I get to a tricky spot in a recipe. I remember I have the power and skills to use a mandoline or deglaze a hot cast iron pan. It requires courage to take up space in the kitchen. My grandmother needed courage when she cooked dinners for her four hungry children as a new wife and mother. A well-cooked dinner at that time was more than a small victory, as the contrary deemed women as poor wives and failed caregivers. My mom still needs courage today when cooking for friends at fancy dinner parties or testing out a new recipe. For me, I am still learning to foster a sense of courage in the kitchen as I don’t often stray from my comfort zone of spicy vodka pennes and herb-laden omelets. I get nervous when I pull out a recipe and see an ingredient I don’t recognize, or read a technique I have only seen my mother try. Coming from a lineage of well-disciplined home cooks is oftentimes intimidating, but I embrace Julia’s reminder that anyone can cook—and because of it find the shake in my hands steady as I pull out a cutting board and start preparing dinner.

### III

In the kitchen of my family home, there is a cupboard of cookbooks. Titles from Lucy Waverman, Ina Garten, Thomas Keller, and the Silver Palate women fill the shelves, each curling at the edges and bursting with bookmarks and post-its, covered in smatterings of splotches from different sauces. Squished on the top shelf is *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, its turquoise cover still glimmering with shiny laminate and its pages mostly untainted. It’s not that my mother doesn’t like Julia Child’s food—she just hasn’t occupied herself with many of her recipes. But that’s not the point. The point is, Child changed the culture of cooking. To my mother, Child is a hero who altered the philosophy of at-home cooking, gave women confidence in the kitchen, and showed the world what a successful marriage could look like in a time of overly domineering husbands and unjustly subservient wives. My mother doesn’t admire Julia for her recipes—she admires her for her philosophies.



One afternoon in the early 2000s, my mom drove down to the Norwood Hotel on Marion Street to meet her father Gerry for some lunch and beers with some old cronies from his hockey days. After exchanging stories over the taste of imported brews, the waitress came to take everyone’s orders. After the man beside her didn’t order any food, my mom asked, “Aren’t you going to get a bite to eat? The ribs are excellent.” He replied, “I don’t need anything. I only eat to survive.” Every time I hear that story, I am still as shocked as I was the first time. I’m so happy that my mother instilled the opposite in me, a personal philosophy taught to her by Julia Child—I don’t eat to live. I live to eat.

*“It requires courage to take up space in the kitchen.”*



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# The Imbalanced Identity: To First-Generation Immigrant Parents

Anonymous | Stony Brook University

## **In less than two years, my parents will be losing their daughter.**

The ongoing dismissal of my 23-year-old sister's opinions in the back-and-forth conversation about marriage has been the final push for her to prepare to move out and cut all contact from them by 2024. They have no clue. She has stressed to them that she is not interested in an arranged marriage with a Muslim man. Although she does not feel ready to divulge the reason she does not wish to marry a man; she protests unconvincingly. Thus, they half-haphazardly dismiss her refusal by interpreting it as a temporary hesitance.

What is the full truth? What is the reality she cannot communicate to our Pakistani Muslim parents? Well, after four years of self-reflection and conversations with yours truly, she has learned two things about herself: she is an atheist and a lesbian. The conversations she has with me are never had with our parents.

Based on how we were raised, we know what their reaction would be if we attempted to talk about such things. The "conversation" would be cut short by tears and arguments, and our parents would view her as an embodiment of one of their largest fears: a child tainted by the Western society they immigrated to.

This move to the United States entailed signing onto the American Dream: granting my parents newfound access to clean tap water, consistent electricity, and economic progress. But a distinct struggle has weighed the dream down. My parents bear the burden of balancing assimilation to American society and their continued adherence to their own cultural and religious identity. Having to strike that balance not only within themselves, but also in their children, has been a daunting task. They are among many parents who bear a similar weight.

## To: Immigrant Parents

Dear immigrant parents,

What language should you raise us with? What food should you pack for our lunch? What kinds of clothes should you buy for us? Urdu, biriyani, and a shalwar kameez will turn heads and risk ostracizing your children, so you opt for the English version, a peanut butter sandwich, and a T-shirt with shorts. You still have cultural and religious values that you'd like to instill in your children, so you do your best at home—occasionally speaking in Urdu so we pick up the words, serving biryani for dinner, having us wear a shalwar kameez on weekends, teaching us Arabic and how to pray, and reading the Quran and the Hadiths to us. You prohibit us from watching TV shows with messages you deem inappropriate based on cultural values. You prohibit us from going to sleepovers and from hanging out with male friends outside of school.

That said, you know you cannot stop us once we are in school, once we develop relationships outside of the family, and once we develop our own values. You can educate and guide, but there are limits to your influence, as we develop our own mixed, American-Pakistani identities. While raising your children, you have to avoid asserting your own identities with such force that it discourages communication. When you depict the battle over identity as one that is occurring between a binary “right” and “wrong” side, your children will never come to you when we discover a propensity for the “wrong”. My sister and I have never felt comfortable with sharing our uncertainty about religion with our parents. Instead, we've opted to talk to each other, creating our own chamber of confusion before branching out to research online.

My parents' inflexibility has this unintended consequence of closing themselves off as resources for spiritual guidance in a diverse society. This inflexibility is the reason why they have no clue about my sister's impending departure or her identities. It's the reason why my sister has no intention of ever divulging the full truth of why she is leaving, so long as I wish to stay with them, with the hopes of mitigating the consequences of her unceremonious graduation from our lives on the rest of mine. I urge other parents to carefully reconsider what you've decided is right or wrong, and when it comes to the more objective “wrongs” you're left with, you should at the very least approach the conversation with tact and an emphasis on being open to communication.

I also urge immigrant parents to consider the more generous interpretations of your religions and recognize that faith is an individual journey. While there is no doubt that your influence plays a huge role in our adherence to religion, it is not possible, ethical, nor halal to force children to believe or practice your faith. If we don't believe, that will be reflected in our behavior when you're not around. What's the point in creating an environment where children are more inclined to pretend to believe than to communicate our doubts to you? It's an environment that is more likely to hurt than to help our relationships not only with God, but with you.

You continuously take on the aforementioned responsibility of balancing assimilation with adherence to cultural and religious identities. You bear the weight of a scale that you created on the basis of your own personal values influenced by your origins. Rather than forcing us children to bear the same scale, allow us to customize our own scales, on the basis of our unique sets of values influenced by our origins. My sister changed her scale to what matched her values from the scale imposed by our parents.

Yet, I've been hesitant about messing with my scales. For now, my decision is to prioritize my relationship with my parents over my own journey. But that should never have been a source of conflict in the first place—family and religion should not be mutually exclusive. It's difficult to be flexible with a scale you've carefully balanced, and to dismantle walls of intolerance when creating more open relationships with children, but the alternative is losing us entirely.

## The Besa Code of Honor: Albanian Muslims Who Saved the Jewish People During World War II

By: Chloe Freeman (she/her) | Pace University

***“There is no trace of any discrimination against Jews in Albania, because Albania happens to be one of the rare lands in Europe today where religious prejudice and hate do not exist, even though Albanians themselves are divided into three faiths.”***

***— Herman Bernstein, United States Ambassador to Albania, 1934***

In 1939, a war that would change the course of history struck. It was a destructive war where millions of lives were lost. The Jewish population of Albania was especially affected by Nazis trying to eliminate them. However, citizens of one Nazi-occupied country were able to secretly save the Jewish people. During the “Shoah”, translating to “calamity” in Hebrew and also used to refer to the Holocaust, many collaborators in other nations betrayed their own people due to their beliefs, ethnicity, and a fear of the consequences of sheltering those being targeted. Albanian culture was devoid of hate as the importance of preserving life was a fundamental and essential belief.

Albania is a small and mountainous European country on the Southeastern Balkan peninsula, located on the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. The majority of its citizens are

Muslim. Through the centuries, it had a minuscule Jewish presence and never developed a permanent Jewish community. The first Jews arrived in Albania in 70 C.E. as prisoners on Roman ships. Later on, their descendants built the first synagogue in the fifth century in the city of Sarande and the Jewish population remained small up until the war.

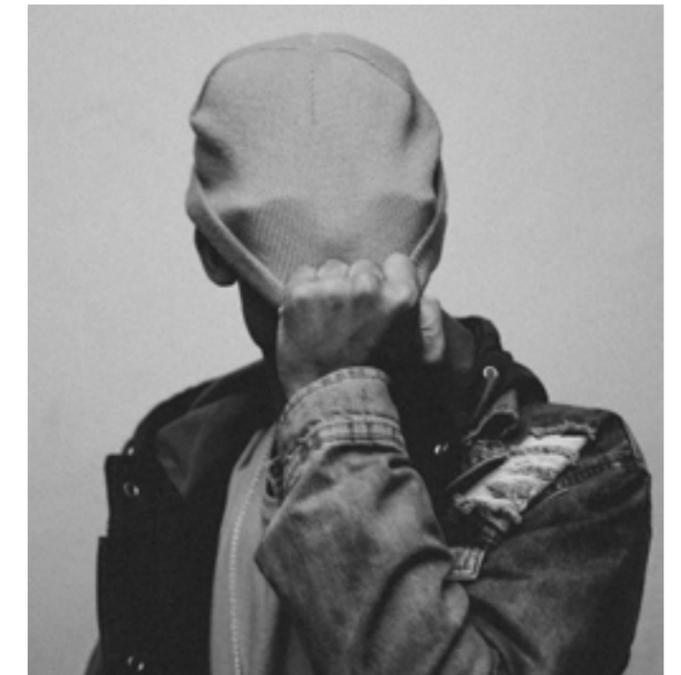
During World War II, following German occupation, Albanian citizens helped to rescue the Jewish people. The Albanian code of honor, known as Besa, is what saved the Jews from the horrors of the Holocaust. Besa, literally meaning “to keep the promise” in Albanian, is deeply rooted in Albanian culture and significant to the nation’s identity. Living by the Besa code means keeping one’s word and protecting the lives of others at any cost. During the war, Albanians did

whatever was necessary to shield and rescue the Jewish people because it was honorable to do so. This included hiding, feeding, and sheltering them. Furthermore, the country provided free transportation alongside false documentation to seek refuge and live among the rest of their people. In doing this, Albania became the only Nazi-occupied country to have more Jews after the war than before. In 1939, there were 200 Jews in the country, and after the war, there were over 2,000 (Davids). This statistic highlights the impact of Besa’s intention, as they were the sole nation in Europe whose Jewish population expanded exponentially during the war.

There are some incredible stories of Albanian Muslims who were involved in these rescue efforts. When asked why these Muslims risked so much for the Jews, their answer was that it was the right thing to do. “Why did we hide our Jewish family? Well of course we would. We were one family,” said Bahrije Seiti Borici, an Albanian Muslim whose family protected Jews and saw them as no different than their own kind (qtd. in Gershman). These people have been honored by the Jewish Holocaust Memorial with the title of “Righteous Among the Nations”. A book called “Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II,” published by Norman Gershman, tells their stories and displays pictures of these heroes.

The book mentions several different stories of Muslim Albanians and how they helped the Jews during the war.

Enver Alia Sheqer, an Albanian, recalls the story of his father, Ali Sheqer Pashkaj, and how he saved a Jew from being shot. The Germans stopped at Ali’s general store while



transporting nineteen Albanian prisoners and one Jewish male. When they entered, Ali offered the Germans food and wine. While they were occupied, he secretly put a note into a piece of melon and handed it to the Jew. The note told him to run to a specific hiding place in the woods. When the Germans discovered the news about the escapee, they brought Ali into the village and began tormenting him into releasing information about the Jew’s whereabouts. Even after they put a gun to his head 4 times and

threatened to burn down the village, Ali remained silent and did not disclose any information or details on where the Jew was located. Once the Germans left, he ran into the forest and led the Jew back to his home, where they took refuge for 2 years.

Another Albanian couple who risked their lives saving strangers, are Besim and Aishe Kadiu. In Norman Gershman's book, readers learn how the Kadiu family took in a brother and a sister, who are Greek Jews from Tirana, named Jakov and



Sandra Batino. They took shelter in a bedroom shared with Besim and Aishe's daughter, Merushe. "I remember we cut a hole in the bars of our rear bedroom window so they could escape if the Germans discovered that they were hiding with us," Merushe reminisces (qtd. in "Besa: A Code of Honor"). When

the extensive search for Jews began, Jakov and Sandra were taken to a nearby village - soon after they were liberated and left for Israel.

Besa Muslims are incredibly selfless people, whose hospitality and compassion saved so many lives. Their creed "my house is G-d's house, then it is my guest's house, then it is mine" tells how they would sooner die than violate their code (qtd. in Davids). It is important to continue to tell these stories, especially when people stereotype Muslims and the faith of Islam as being evil and destructive. Madam Jehan Sedat best sums up how these Muslim heroes used their courage and generosity to give to the world and preserve the Jews: "We can see that beyond our individual identities and desires, there is a common core of self, an essential humanity whose nature is peace, whose expression is thought, and whose action is unconditional love" (qtd. in Gershman). Through her words, we see that there is humanity and kindness in how Muslims opened their land and welcomed the Jews when most others were not.

Many people believe that Muslims and Jews have been in conflict for years and that their religious practices and beliefs are very different. However, there are many religious similarities that can unite these two groups. Observant Muslims and Jews worship the same monotheistic God as their creator,

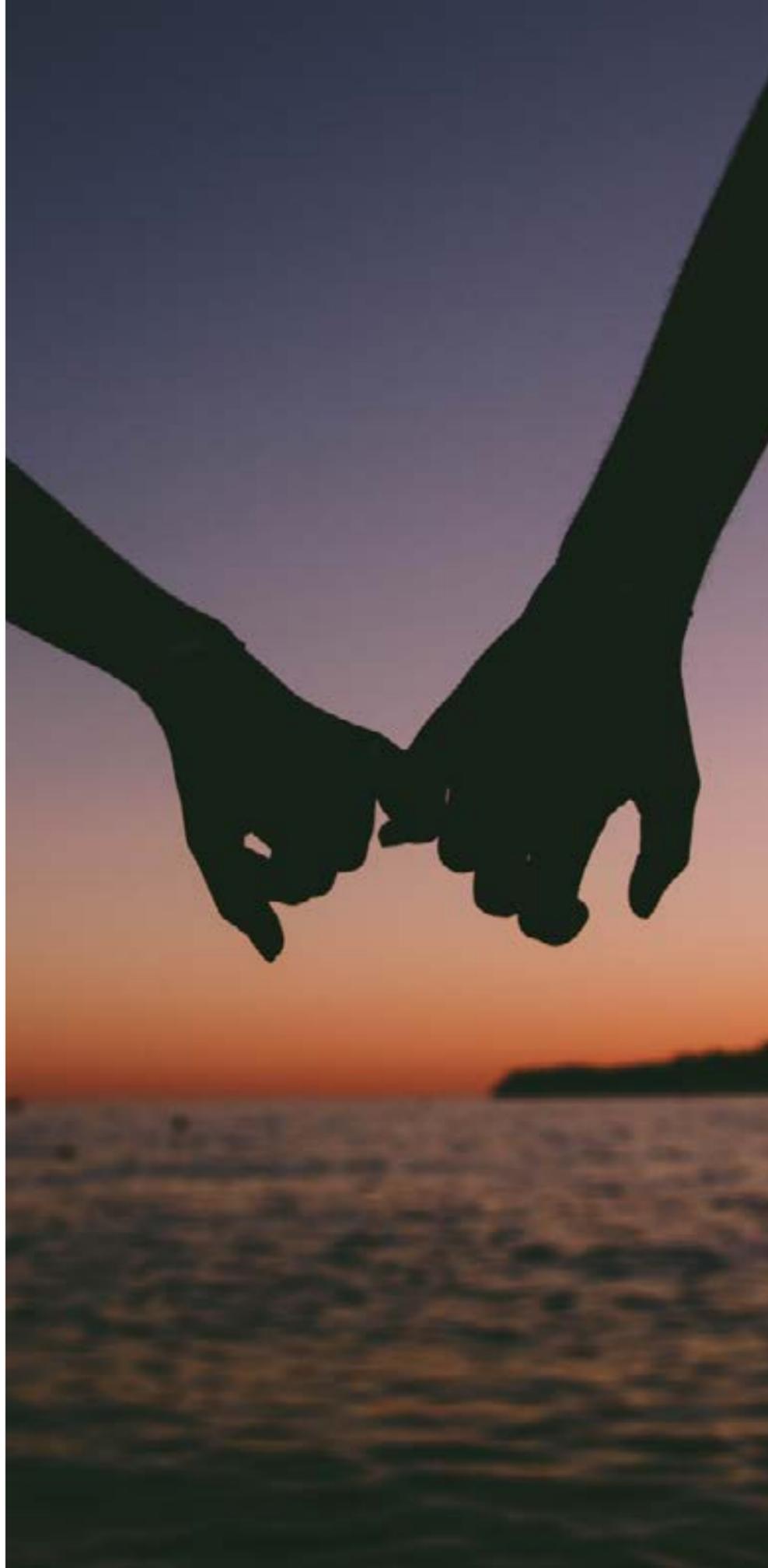
sustainer, and provider. Both religions believe that the prophets were the messengers of monotheism and included Moses, Abraham, Noah, David, Solomon, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. They also hold that Jerusalem is a holy city where the prophets resided. Furthermore, similarity is seen in dietary restrictions with Jews eating kosher and Muslims eating halal. Both prohibit pork and mandate that foods be prepared in a certain fashion in order to be eaten. These two religions also encourage modesty where Muslim women and married Jewish women must cover their hair and dress modestly according to one's level of observance. Within Judaism, this is done to ensure married women remain modest while saving their beauty for their marriage. These similar principles show that there are many more aspects that bring together these two groups than many other religions.



Antisemitism is still an issue today. In 2020, there was an international conference on the fight against Jew hatred which included discussions on current obstacles and challenges alongside best practices to fight antisemitism and promote tolerance. The parliament in Albania voted and unanimously approved the definition of antisemitism, from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, and became the second Muslim-majority country, after Kosovo, to do so (Semini). This definition refers to acts that discriminate against Jews, Israel, their property including religious objects, and any hate speech. "At a time when antisemitism is increasing across the world, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition has never been more important. Not only does it spell out exactly what hatred of Jews looks like, but adopting HRA's definition makes

clear that antisemitism has no place in free, democratic and tolerant societies such as Albania,” says Sacha Roytman, head of New York’s Combat Anti-Semitism Movement (qtd. in Semini).

Being tolerant of religion, culture, and beliefs is critical for peace. We have only recently learned about the Muslims in Albania and Besa’s role in preserving lives. Albania and its people showed dedication and promise that few other nations had. Not only did the Albanian people go against orders to turn over the Jews in their country, they assisted and saved them at great risk to themselves. The Jewish population grew greatly in numbers as a result of Albanian altruism. The Albanian code shows all humans how important it is to be understanding and tolerant of all religions and cultures in order to maintain peace.



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# In Virtual Proximity: Choosing Community Over Solitude

Deea Deb (she/her) | York University

I am in a café sipping a large cappuccino on a chilly fall day in Toronto. My headphones are sealed tight around my ears and Evanescence is drowning out the café music while I draft this paper. As I write, I wonder why I am alone—I don't mean in an existential crisis kind of way, but more in a why am I writing alone kind of way. Why have I shut out the world with my headphones? I may as well slap a “Do Not Disturb” sticker on my forehead.

Yes, I know that I am not really alone; my social context keeps me company. What I mean is, why am I not brainstorming this article with, say, the person at the next table? Why do I, like some other writers, prefer solitude—aleness—over community collaboration? Are some writers simply terrified of collaborating, sharing their work with a group—exposing their writerly vulnerabilities, their “is this good enough” selves? We can't all be introverts, yet most of us likely struggle with fear for

our “is this good enough” selves. But why fear collaboration?

What we discover through a peer review session can change not only our relationship between ourselves and our writing, but also our relationships with others, our audience, and what they think of our writing: we fear being judged by our peers.

While I am fine with redefining the connection between myself and my writing, the “what if others think my work is shit?” thought terrifies me. I am sure that I'm not alone. Because of this fear, we feel more secure when in solitude, with writing alone. Even though digital media has bridged the writer-audience gap and connected writing and reading communities globally, our writing does not exactly flow among others. Instead, virtual proximity has amplified the fear of judgement by enabling anonymity and negativity. But if we want to change this world with our words, we must create and build a stronger “we”.

*“...writing is a flow among others.”*  
- Gilles Deleuze

*“only connect...”*  
- E. M. Forster

We need to think of the audience, our virtual community—not as a judge of our work—but as the gear in our writing process that helps us produce exemplary work, meaningful work. We must change our mindset, connect with fellow writers, embrace their critiques, become a part of the wider community, and grow together—write together.

To change our mindset from writing-in-solitude to writing-with-an-audience, we must discard our fear of not being good enough. This fear usually stems from seeing beautiful final copies produced by the publishing industry (Edwards and Paz, 2017, p. 67). We forget about the messy back-end process that leads up to the final product: numerous drafts, multiple rounds of editing, and understanding what writers want the audience to think, feel, or do. In her article for BBC Culture, Hepzibah Anderson talks about Dorothy Parker's process of writing "a book, or a short story, at least three times—once to understand it, the second time to improve the prose, and a third to compel it to say what it still must say." And all this before the editor gets a hold of your manuscript. Parker is not alone—Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (to name a few) all endured multiple drafts and edits before they became the beloved works we still read today.

Digital media has made connecting with an audience easier than it was in Woolf's time. Writers can now not only identify, but also engage with



*"We can be in virtual proximity to our audience as we write not only for them, but to them, toward them, and with them."*

their audience; we can be in virtual proximity to our audience as we write not only for them, but to them, toward them, and with them. My question then is, should our virtual audience have "the sole power of evaluating writing" (Ede and Lunsford, 1984, p. 158)? A "yes" would mean that writers get minimal control over their work. If we relinquish this power to the audience entirely, we could sidestep the troubleshooting process that happens in our head, which in turn could help us reinvision our writing. Collaboration can provide a variety of benefits to help writers: with seeing, reading, generating ideas, and creating productive writer-audience relationships. While writers can offer cues to help their audience navigate their way through the text, if the audience does not share the same social context and knowledge as the writer, these cues may not work; It may also be challenging for the writer to imagine the audience's complex social system. Digital platforms bridge this gap by gauging their audiences' demographic through back-end analytics and understanding engagement levels; This functionality gives writers the power to invest their time and effort in building symbiotic relationships with their audience and engendering community.

To build a productive relationship with a virtual audience, writers need to be open to sharing their work online.

Take for example, YouTuber Shaelin, from ShaelinWrites. Shaelin uses her channel to share her writing process and her writing advice. In her video, "Losing NaNoWriMo & Thriving | Writing Vlog," she shares her screen with her audience and takes them through her draft, edits, re-readings, and revisions. She explains her stylistic choices and debunks writing myths. This video shatters the image of the lone writer, grinding away in a corner, and breaks the illusion of that imagined (and impossible) perfect-draft-in-one-sitting perception. By sharing her writing process and stepping outside of printed pages, Shaelin's virtual proximity puts her beside her audience, where she becomes an in-real-time member of that discourse community. In turn, that discourse community—her audience—has the ability to play a more active role in providing her with real-time feedback. "This feedback can help a writer to think about her writing, and even herself as a writer, in a different way" (Magnifico, 2010, p. 175-76). Shaelin's virtual audience-in-proximity not only weighs in on and facilitates her internal dialogue, but helps her solve intentional problems, and provides invaluable feedback about what the text means to them, and how and why it matters to them: Ultimately, Shaelin gets to create a text that her audience loves.

While virtual proximity provokes more conversations and communities, naysayers will likely argue that the digital audience is widespread, unreliable, toxic, and plagiaristic; but an imagined audience is equally unreliable because they are, well, imagined! We may imagine an audience while drafting our text, but once our work is published, the audience becomes real; real audiences can annihilate a text post-publication on social media platforms like TikTok and Twitter. While I am not discounting the drawbacks of a virtual audience, we can overcome—or at least minimize—issues, such as distraction, probability of plagiarism, authenticity, and trolling. Writing, thinking, maintaining aesthetic visuals and managing the pressures of virtual audience interaction can overwhelm most writers. Explaining ideas while writing can be time consuming and tiresome; Peter Elbow (1987) provides a solution. Elbow believes that the writer must know when to engage with their audience. According to Elbow, it is only after we have a complete draft that we should “think about readers and revise carefully to adjust our words and thoughts to our intended audience” (p. 52). Some may think his theory is dated, but it can be applied to our hyper-digital world. A break from the audience can help writers avoid cognitive overload; writers in the virtual world can always take a break from a livestream or film their video and edit out the breaks. Alexa Donne, author of *The Ivies*, and *Brightly Burning*, uses her YouTube channel to share writing advice, and information on book publishing. Donne’s videos are pre-shot and edited, eliminating any stress of simultaneous audience interaction. Concurrently, her 145,000 subscribers can interact with her directly through the comments. Although it can be difficult for a writer to converse with an audience while thinking or drafting, the audience does not have to be ignored in the writing process completely.



Writers who actively use digital platforms to interact with their community have also found a way around the dreaded fear of accidental plagiarism. YouTuber Abbie Emmons, for instance, hosts writing livestreams and keeps her computer screen at an angle, making it impossible for the audience to see what she is writing. Emmons’ “Write With Me LIVESTREAM: super chill writing session” videos, along with providing writing advice, also serve to motivate writers. In contrast with ShaelinWrites, Emmons’ videos are targeted towards an audience that lacks the motivation to write. Emmons’ videos have the effect of a group study session: seeing your peers work motivates you to work. Although she doesn’t always share her writing in videos, Emmons is open to audience feedback when she does; she still interacts and engages with her audiences, in real time and in virtual proximity. The possibility of negative or judgmental comments and trolling may prevent writers from sharing their work on a public platform. As Elbow (1987) reminds us, some audiences are “inviting or enabling” while others are “powerfully inhibiting” (p. 51). But think about it this way: if you want your audience to always praise your work, how will you improve your writing and grow as a writer? This approach of writing solely for gratification defeats the purpose of audience engagement. Negative—or constructively critical—comments can work to ground writers and help them analyze their work, as well as allow them to make their writing better; Negativity will always exist, but it shouldn’t stop us from achieving our writing goals or building a community of writers.

Writing shouldn’t be a solitary act anymore. Our digital world has undone Walter Ong’s (1975) idea that writers and readers do not form a collective; The need for collective connection is so united now that writers

and their audiences have created virtual spaces on social media making it easier for writers to understand their audience's social context and to participate in their community. If the audience base is unfocused, we can narrow it by targeting specific communities based on genres or interests because "writers and readers [have] become active listeners and conversation partners for each other" (Magnifico, 2010, p. 168). Writers all over the world are breaking the barriers of fear, insecurity, and inhibition to foster a community of change and growth, a community that "only connect[s]."

While these are all inspiring examples, I wanted to test the efficacy of collaborative writing myself. So, I left my headphones and *Evanescence* - at home and took this draft to my third-year Substantive Editing class for a peer review session. I was excited about the session, up until the draft was distributed to the 25 Professional Writing majors waiting to tear it apart, or so I believed, and leave it—and me—in ruins. Being the most nerve-wracking three hours of my life, my peers worked in pairs or groups analyzing my paper, debating its arguments, evaluating my syntactical and stylistic choices, and making what looked like extensive marginal notes. Through this, I observed the vehement nodding, some smiles, confused head scratches, and substantively serious discussions; My anxiety peaks so I looked down at my copy and began editing it.



Through this, I observed the vehement nodding, some smiles, confused head scratches, and substantively serious discussions; My anxiety peaks so I looked down at my copy and began editing it. They brought forth issues with voice inconsistency, language, register (in)accessibility, structure, flow, and pointed to areas of redundancy. I was able—in real time—to run new ideas by them and ask follow-up questions that emerged from their feedback. I came out of this substantive editing event as a new writer; not only did this exercise help me improve my draft, but it also changed my perspective on collaboration.

As editors (my initial audience), they applied the art of substantive editing and gave engaging, constructive feedback. This activity took the fear out of peer review and brought our class not only closer as writers, thinkers, and editors; it brought our class closer as a community. Although I'll always wear my headphones in cafes, purely for musical reasons, I no longer feel a need for solitude while writing. I want to continue to "only connect," to "flow among others," collaboratively, writing in and with community—in virtual, and real, proximity.



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# I Bet You Don't Know What's Really in Black Cake: The Rhetorics of Trinidadian Black Cake and Recipe

By: Jessica Lappin (she/her) | York University (Toronto, ON Canada)

It's that time of year. The holiday season is a whirlwind of last minute gift shopping and coordinating dinner plans with friends and family, but for many Caribbeans, it's a time to eagerly visit their local West-Indian grocery store to purchase black cake—or make it on their own.

Black cake has many names, including: rum cake, fruit cake, and Christmas cake. It is also made differently depending on the island the baker hails from. As a child growing up with a Trinidadian mother, I would come downstairs to a tower of bowls in the sink and the mixer running at full speed. I knew it was her designated day to make black cake. The fruits—currants, lemon and orange mixed peel, raisins, red and green cherries, and prunes that were soaked in various liquors, puréed, then re-soaked and stored away in the back of a dark cupboard. Not until the following year was it finally taken out, now well-marinated. After the cake is baked and cooled, more red wine is added to the top and traditionally stored away to saturate for another



month. The year-long waiting stage for black cake is one of tradition and historicity: if our ancestors had to wait years to be freed from enslavement, we can wait one year.

My mother would have a row of danish cookie tins lined with parchment paper on the counter waiting to be filled with the batter—dark in color from the added browning or burnt sugar—to go in the oven. Black cake is shared with friends and family, and adventurous

colleagues, but our family of five always made sure to hide our tin so greedy thieves that were visiting didn't snatch any when we weren't looking. Even still, my mother would open the lid and ask “where de quarter of de cake go? Allyuh eat it out!” from our own stash. We were all thieves.

Black cake is a delicacy that's fought over, talked over, and enjoyed with Peardrax—a Trinidadian sparkling pear drink that's also the subject of many fights at the table about who gets the last drop. For my brothers



and I, those slices of black cake were our first taste of alcohol. We felt like adults with each bite, childishly pretending we were drunk (we were perfectly sober) while sipping Peardrax from our wine glasses. I've been learning how to make this delicacy to carry on the tradition, realizing how it is more than a simple recipe.

## The History of Black Cake

For something that's associated with the jolliest time of the year—and other special occasions like weddings—black cake was born from the enslavement of African people in the Caribbean. But how did we get to such a joyous meaning? First, we have to look back. According to my Professor Dr. Laura Allen, cultural rhetoricians study how community practices create culture and how that culture affects their own meaning making and identity. One of the rhetoricians' goals is looking at systemic power and its effects on cultural-rhetorical practices, such as our delicious black cake.

Flashback to the 1700s: Trinidad was a colonial state occupied by the British. The British brought over plum pudding (also known as figgy pudding) from across the pond, which is a cake made of dried fruits. The concept of fruit cake came from [sausages in the medieval age](#) when meats, grains, and vegetables were packed into an animal stomach. From sausages to plum pudding, another adaptation was made, but this time it wasn't by the English; Africans took their oppressors' dessert and created black cake. Not only does black cake originate from their oppressors, but its two core ingredients were rhetorically made under oppression. Trinidad was widely known for its sugar cane, reportedly [introduced in 1782 by a Martinique planter.](#)

[Fifteen years later, 150 sugar cane estates were established across the Caroni Plain from Port of Spain to Piarco and San Fernando.](#)

The tragic rhetorical irony here is that enslaved people were forced by the English to harvest the same sugar that created their own cultural cake. It doesn't stop there. Rum — a by-product of sugar — is made through the same slave labor in which black cake is saturated. [Caribbean people also drank rum to cope with enslavement, which colonial legislatures attempted to curb by placing laws against drinking, and used it as part of enslaved uprisings.](#) My great-grandfather was an indentured sugar cane laborer, and he used rum as a bug repellent when working on the fields. While some may see these ingredients as common, everyday



food and drink items, cultural rhetoricians would see them as edible symbols of oppression and resistance and resilience.

### **Nutrition Facts: Sugar, Calories, Identity & Power**

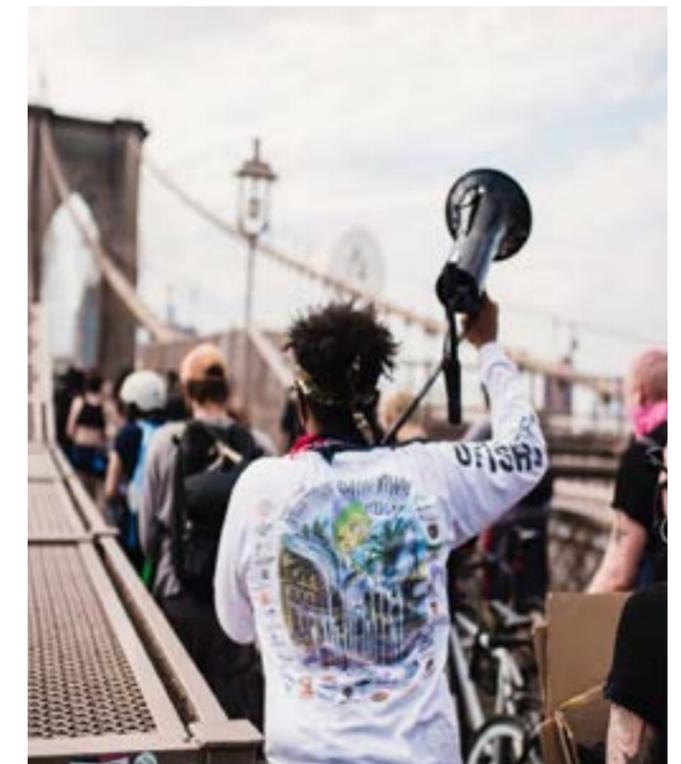
In [“Food Talk: Bridging Power in a Globalizing World,”](#) an essay by John R. Thompson, in the book [“The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power,”](#) Thompson discusses how food intersects with identity. In the 20th century, food talk became a first language for political and cultural meaning that helps people position themselves in a prejudicial world. Talking about food, he says, is similar to talking about rights. When I touch sugar and rum, I'm touching history. When I eat black cake, I'm eating my ancestors' blood, death, and sweat that led to the freedom I have today. When I lick the crumbs off my lips

in a post-colonial world, I'm licking away power and consuming agency. When we talk about black cake, we're talking about the rights we did not have and the rights we're still advocating for because the 18th and 19th centuries is the sugar, the rum, the batter, and even the spices. The nutrition facts won't list that identity and power is in every gram.

Thompson also references theorist Kenneth Burke, who proclaims that “identification is the fundamental aim of rhetoric” in which people are separated at birth — biologically and socially — and seek community through commonality. Using his concept of [identification](#), black cake prompts identity discourse. Although I've never had the opportunity to visit Trinidad, I'm often finding myself hunting for identity in our identity-obsessed world. A slice of black cake is the equivalent of having a slice of the island miles away on my plate. The excitement we feel each year is for the black cake, but also for that warm, fuzzy feeling that is evoked in the community — migration, home, defiance, and the past — and it's not the liquor that's making us feel this way (blame the rhetoric).

In her essay, [“Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice,”](#) Angela Haas describes how Indigenous communities make wampum belts that are encoded with information. Wampum belts are constructed as

a system of knowledge encoded through “bead placement, proximity, balance, color, and the technologies woven into the belt,” as well as the cultural and geographical context where the wampum inhabits, contributing to “cultural knowledge, production and preservation.” However, only those a part of the community can access the identity-driven information.



The rhetorics around wampum belts are similar to black cake. We have to disassemble black cake and sit with its ingredients to uncover the colonial memories encoded into it. [Just as color usage in wampum belts sets the mood while reminding its “reader” how to read the belt’s story,](#) the dark blackish-brown color of the cake orients Caribbean readers with another rhetorical irony. Black is universally, albeit problematically, associated with evil and evokes

tones of grief and melancholy, which are shared feelings around the history of enslavement. In particular, it's also the same color as the skin of those who were enslaved, and some of us. I know it may seem like I'm about to make another commodified metaphor of Black bodies, similar to Blackness and chocolate, but hear me out. The chemical process of burning white sugar — specifically white because sugar is commonly purchased refined today — into dark brown and black communicates the idea of dissolving white hegemony into self-claimed Black power. Having our cake look like our people, our history and future, is rhetorical because it's a symbol of empowerment that we can only access; it's not a commodity owned and controlled by someone else.

### Post-Colonial Messes: Finding the Rhetorical “Unmeaning” of Black Cake

Alternatively, some Caribbeans don't retrieve colonial information; modern information such as Christmas, family, happiness, or that it's just a “rel good cake” is found when decoding black cake. In [“Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics, Act I Scene II,”](#) the authors analyze how the making of cultures are “relational” and “constellated” because cultural practices are “built, shaped, and dismantled” through the world. In



other words, they write, people matter because “people make things, people make relationships [and] people make culture,” sometimes as a rhetorical de-colonial practice. After centuries, just as recipes evolve, people and meanings evolve too. Marlene NourbeSe Philip's short story [“Burn Sugar”](#) offers much to the discussion around the post-colonial messes that factor into the cultural rhetorics of black cake.



In an effort to make the same black cake recipe that her Trinidadian mother sends her each Christmas, a daughter explores how she is untraditionally engaging with the recipe in New York. Philip uses geographical distance to show how culture and traditional processes can change or become displaced when encountering the western world. In reference to Thompson, the social disorientation that the daughter — and I — experience is a [“rhetorical](#)

[chasm,” a gulf between a way of talking about a world that no longer matches our current world, and a discourse that hasn't replaced it](#) because we're still in a period of change.

Particularly, western nutritional standards and baking methods dislocate black cake from its cultural origins. The mother remarks on the difference in eggs, saying how “these modern eggs never smell like they supposed to — like those back home” that rum and lime-skin — a Trinidadian solution that my mother also uses — cannot de-globalize. As well, the mother used an “aluminum bucket” to whisk the eggs and butter, but when the daughter is tasked to make the cake herself, she finds herself “here, over the bucket [is actually] a plastic bowl.” The transition from aluminum buckets to plastic bowls illustrates how the recipe is moving away from tradition.

The cultural-political question of identity and meaning that plagues the daughter throughout most of the text is connected to the cake's historical context. The mother, wanting to denounce Trinidad's colonial past and establish an “unmeaning” of black cake in a post-colonial world, to make it only be “for eating not thinking about during Christmas” is the reclaimed meaning most Caribbean families know today, but something her daughter cannot accept.



The daughter understands that the “the smell [that] never leave[s]” and “fear and death” and “loneliness and separation — exile from family and tribe — even from land” that is in the cake’s scent and appearance is the “meaning for we to be here, the way we was brought here.” She has a different way of decoding black cake, believing that meaning does not have to stem from tragedy. Instead, meaning can be remade into eating and contemporary values of intergenerational empowerment, cultural strength, and resilience from making this cake with her mother and passing down and teaching the recipe to future generations. Both the mother and daughter [exercise the rhetorical strategy among historically oppressed groups called rhetorical or semantic reclamation.](#)

People matter because people make reclamation. Caribbeans make black cake in western kitchens. Caribbeans make unique relationships with their Canadian children and fellow migrated Caribbeans. Caribbeans make black cake with fresh store bought eggs and plastic bowls. And Caribbeans make rhetorical symbols, reappropriating colonialism into Christmas as the new culturally understood symbol of black cake.

## Hungry for More? My Mother’s Black Cake Recipe

### Servings

- Two 9” round pans

### Fruit Mixture Ingredients:

- 1 lb currants
- 1 lb raisins
- 1/2 cup red cherries
- 1/2 cup green cherries
- 1/2 cup orange mixed peel
- 1–2 bottles Red Label Jamaican red wine
- 2 cups white rum
- 2 cups Hennessy Cognac

### Batter Ingredients:

- 2 cups butter
- 3 3/4 cups flour
- 2 1/2 cups brown sugar
- 5 cups soaked fruit
- 7 eggs
- 3 tbsp mixed spice
- 2 tbsp baking powder
- 1/2 cup red wine
- 1/2 cup rum
- 1/2 bottle Sinha Stout (of 330 ml bottle)
- 2 tbsp vanilla
- 6 tbsp burnt sugar or browning

### Topping Ingredients:

- Red cherry wine, as desired

## Instructions

1. Combine currants, orange mixed peel, raisins, red and green cherries, and prunes in a large glass jar with Red Label Jamaican red wine, white rum, and Hennessy Cognac. Soak for one week.
2. After a week, purée fruits, put back in glass jar and add more alcohol. Store in a dark place, allowing it to soak for up to one year.
3. Mix dry ingredients together.
4. Cream butter and sugar until fluffy. Add eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add vanilla.
5. Take out fruit mixture, add red wine, rum, and burn sugar or browning.
6. To cream batter mixture, mix 1/4 dry ingredients and 1/2 fruit mixture. Add 1/4 dry ingredients and remaining fruit mixture. Add 1/4 dry and 1/2 of Sinha Stout. Add rest of dry and rest of Sinha Stout. Do not overmix. Place a spoon upright in the middle of the batter. If it stands up on its own then the batter is ready. If it falls, add 1/2 cup flour (less or more as needed) to the batter.
7. Line two 9" round pans (we use danish cookie tins) with parchment paper and fill with batter.
8. Put a pan of water in the bottom of oven (this helps the cake stay moist). Bake for 90 minutes at 300 F, or until knife is clean.
9. Remove from oven. When the cooked cakes are slightly warm, pierce them (with a knife or toothpick) and drizzle red cherry wine on top of cake. When cakes are cooled the next day, add more as desired. Enjoy!