

# DELIBERATIONS

*A Journal of First-Year Writing at Duke University • Fall 2017*



THOMPSON WRITING PROGRAM





*"We are very pleased to present these fine examples of student work from Duke's Academic Writing classes. You will see that our Academic Writing courses permit a wide range of work by students in a variety of disciplines. This work is both creative and scholarly, and thus introduces first-year students to the kind of rigorous and innovative thinking that distinguishes an academic community such as Duke."*

*J. Clare Woods, Ph.D., Director  
Thompson Writing Program*





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The "Yelling Scholar" has been selected to represent the scholarly writing of Duke first-year students, and henceforth will be the cover image for *Deliberations*. The gargoyle, "Yelling Scholar," was named by a Duke photographer and sits atop Kilgo, a residence hall on Duke's West Campus. The "Yelling Scholar" serves as a visual reminder for scholars to express and share their scholarship with others.

Thompson Writing Program  
*Deliberations:*  
*A Journal of First-Year Writing at  
Duke University*

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# Foreword

Sheryl Emch

True to the name of the journal, *Deliberations*, this collection of outstanding essays, written by first-year students in Writing 101-- Duke's one-semester, first-year course in academic writing-- are indeed deliberations. That is, each essay was written, and rewritten, with careful and reflective consideration. The process of generating ideas, exploring and reflecting on their significance, writing and revising and editing, was without a doubt an extremely deliberate process, done consciously, thoughtfully, slowly, (sometimes joyfully and sometimes painfully), with the utmost concern for the process and the product. In other words, these essays are deliberations of the highest quality, and have the potential to touch many lives.

I have been teaching first-year writing at Duke for a decade (and loving every minute of it!), so I am no stranger to the fascinating and vast array of topics being offered to introduce first-year students to university level writing. All Writing 101 classes share the goals of helping students to engage with the work of others, articulate a position, situate their writing within specific contexts, and transfer their writing knowledge beyond Writing 101. That said, each instructor, inspired by their academic discipline and personal interests, puts these goals into practice in different ways, creating very distinct classes with an array of unique final papers and projects.

These papers and projects foster the development of strategies for generating, supporting, and sharing their ideas within a community of scholars. While all Writing 101 students are encouraged to write as though they are writing for a broad audience, for most students their immediate community is comprised of 11 other first-year students and the professor. For students whose work is published in *Deliberations* (or elsewhere), however, their community expands infinitely. Their work is no longer being read just by their classmates, their professor, or anyone else with whom they decide to share their work. These students have chosen, and been chosen, to share their work with the entire Duke community and beyond. They have put their ideas out for public consumption, as well as public scrutiny, deliberately and bravely expanding their audience and community of scholars. This is no simple task, but rather an act of strength and courage, an ability and willingness to engage openly and honestly about their own and others' ideas.

Our editorial board, consisting of an extraordinary group of Writing 101 Instructors, Duke librarians, and previously published *Deliberations'* student authors, selected ten remarkable essays that reflect the diversity of academic disciplines of the TWP faculty, and in turn, the impressive range of beliefs about and approaches to academic writing. Each of the published essays touched, inspired, moved, provoked, and/or resonated with several readers in some way.

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This issue of *Deliberations* opens with Lily Koning's thoughtful and thought-provoking short story, *The Mission School*, which tells the story of a young girl coming of age on a mission base in Kenya. After meeting a Kenyan boy and forming a complex relationship, the main character begins to question the constructs of the society around her. The story examines the ways in which Orientalist discourses and colonial power structures function in present-day African spaces. These discourses and system of knowledge depict the Orient as "Other"—inherently different and inferior. This way of looking at the rest of the world serves to give the West identity, strength, and power. In *The Mission School*, Lily attempts to portray some of the perils of Orientalist thought and emphasizes how challenging it is to move past these ideologies, with the hope that her story will cause readers to critically consider their own discourse and ways of thinking. In addition, the story highlights the difficulties involved in communicating one's experiences with others. Although the narrator develops a more complex view, she is unable to explain herself in a way others will understand; thus, the Orientalist narrative continues to prevail.

In Aiyanna Kimble's essay, *Disney's First Black Princess: Progress's Millionth Failure*, she argues that the film *The Princess and the Frog* features a series of distractions that detract from Tiana's role as Disney's first animated black princess. Aiyanna asserts that certain aspects of the film and its characters are highlighted to turn attention away from the color of Tiana's skin and to separate her from the other princesses. Specifically, she focuses on the roles of the setting, the classic Disney villain, and the character development of Prince Naveen in depicting the model Disney film that audiences have come to love. The familiar and whimsical aspects of the film divert attention away from the missed opportunity for education of the quality of life for young black women both in the 1920s and today. Aiyanna also expands on the role of Naveen's race, Tiana's role as a cook, and Tiana's brief appearance as human on the screen and how they undermine Tiana's status as a princess.

Alyssa Cleveland's essay, *Afrocentric Fashion and The Quest Towards Freedom*, explores the relationship between identity, fashion, and history focused on the African-American community. Alyssa unpacks how kente cloth, beads, and afros served as declarations of freedom from oppressive societal expectations and how these trends relate to Pan-Africanism. She investigates how the reclamation of African heritage serves as a powerful catalyst for change within individuals and unity within movements, but without intentionality, mentalities of Africa can become monolithic allowing for the erasure of the diversity and depth of African culture. The complexity of this argument exemplifies the duality of the African-American identity and reveals the anthropic nature of fashion, which serves as a durable medium to express ethnic identity.

In Divya Juneja's essay, *The Cyclical Nature of Crime and African Americans in the Media*, she contends that a cycle exists between how African Americans are portrayed in the media and how they are actually treated by police and the public, especially regarding crime. Divya explores how media techniques exacerbate the



problem by perpetuating stereotypes about African Americans, connecting them to crime, and devaluing their lives in general. The result is an increase in fear and punitive policies, which make it even more likely for African Americans to be featured in the media. Even more alarming is how the media more dramatically influences people living in homogeneous as opposed to diverse communities. The media's effect on people's perceptions of unfamiliar races should serve as a call for action to change media portrayal of African Americans. By exploring this complicated cycle between crime and media, Divya highlights that the media could, and should, be using its platform to expose the injustices and racial disparities in the United States, rather than further the very things that create these injustices and disparities.

In his essay, *Precision vs. Racial Medicine: Lost in Translation*, **Sahil Sandhu** explores how precision medicine, a new movement that promotes the customization of medicine to the individual, may inadvertently worsen health disparities along racial lines. He begins the essay by introducing the faults with the current problematic model of racial medicine and why scientists look to precision medicine as an alternative. Citing a lack of dialogue between the scientific community and the rest of society, he then analyzes the ways in which scientists' complex understandings of race are translated inaccurately into the layman's terms reviewed by doctors, patients, the government, and pharmaceutical companies. As a result, precision medicine unintentionally reintroduces racial biology into American society. Sahil concludes his essay by warning that precision medicine, if not clearly explained by scientists, may lead people to dangerously attribute racial health disparities to molecular differences rather than to social and structural inequalities; in turn, this highlights the critical need for clear communication between scientists and non-scientists.

**Karen Ou's** essay, *Deciphering the Mozart Effect: How Does Prenatal Music Exposure Influence Postnatal Development*, probes into prenatal music education, an interesting, yet controversial application of medical music therapy. Citing primarily research reports from peer-reviewed journals, she elucidates the fetal sound experience and examines the postnatal effects of prenatal auditory stimulation from multiple perspectives. Based on experimental research subsequent to Frances Rauscher's 1993 study on Mozart effect, she makes a nuanced argument about the effectiveness of prenatal music exposure and debunks the enduring myth that "listening to music makes your baby smarter." After thoughtful examination, she concludes that the hype around prenatal music education is largely an artifact of overblown marketing and sensationalism in the commercial culture in which we live. That said, however, Karen remains optimistic about the value of prenatal music education for its short-term benefits on the newborn and its stress-relieving effect on soon-to-be parents.

The volume continues with **Max Moser and Katherine Li's** co-authored research proposal, *Running Away From Neurodegenerative Diseases: The Impact of Endurance Running on Adult Hippocampal Neurogenesis and Cognitive Function*. Selecting this well-written research proposal – writing that is usually not published, but rather the precursor to published work – demonstrates the Thompson Writing Program's commitment to providing students a diversity of writing opportunities, including learning how to develop this important, preliminary, and challenging stage of the writing and research process. Max and Katherine propose a research experiment to address the following questions: 1) Can physical exercise induce adult hippocampal neurogenesis? & 2) If physical exercise can induce neurogenesis, can it improve cognition by inducing hippocampal neurogenesis? While the relationship between physical exercise and neurogenesis has been confirmed in mouse models, it still remains to be determined whether or not this is also the case in humans. Ultimately, this research could help with the development of physical exercise as a therapeutic tool for delaying or alleviating the effects of age and disease-associated neurodegeneration and cognitive decline.

In **Lauren Owens'** essay, *"Bending" the Gender Norms in Sport*, she explores gender inequality in athletic competition. Her paper investigates explicit critiques and implicit reinforcement of normalized female inferiority in the movie *Bend It Like Beckham*, prompting discussion on how these portrayals of femininity impact women in sport. The majority of the analysis stems from deconstructing conversations between the primary characters in order to praise efforts to combat the concept of a single form of femininity, as well as from identifying the movie's unintentional reproductions of masculine superiority that contradict its desired message of female empowerment. The essay works to convey the importance of cultural considerations and media influence in regards to their impact on social behavior.

**Robbie Ha**, in his essay *Macklemore & Kendrick Lamar: The Heirs of Thoreauvian Philosophy*, explores how writers ranging from Martin Luther King Jr. to Macklemore utilized Henry David Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience to combat their respective era's social inequities. In particular, Robbie examines how the advent of technology and mass-reproduction allowed Macklemore and Kendrick Lamar – through their social rights anthems of "Same Love" and "Alright" – reach larger audiences in more personal and *omnipresent* ways by enveloping Thoreauvian civil disobedience into a medium that is already rudimentarily human: music. The millions of listeners of Macklemore and Lamar are receiving the same concepts of nonviolent resistance perpetuated by Martin Luther King and Henry David Thoreau. And thus, Macklemore and Lamar have been the philosopher's most efficacious of surrogates. Robbie concludes by calling for a resurgence of the Thoreauvian school of thought amid this new age of unprecedented politics, drawing parallels between the social inequities of the past with the newfound prejudices of the present.

In the final essay, *The Pursuit of Passion: My Relationship with Music, My Dad, and Myself*, **Vivian Chen** examines the relationship between talent, skill, passion, and grit. By reflecting on her experiences growing up with the violin, she describes the pressure to be excellent, "going through the motions", and her changing motivations to play music. Vivian further examines the repercussions of those experiences on subsequent years, and unravels phenomena, such as imposter syndrome and the fixed mindset, which influence her self-perceptions and self-worth in relationship with music and her dad. Her analysis of her past and present takes a social-psychological approach, as she contextualizes her experiences within the broader experiences of high-achieving students in today's educational institutions. As Vivian began college and found herself without a "passion" for music, she started looking for a way to fill this void, which ultimately lead her to reevaluate and redefine passion in a way that is fulfilling for her.

Individually and collectively, these essays have definitely pushed my thinking, my emotions, and my teaching, informing my ideas about their various topics, as well as about writing, revising, and collaborating. Each author possesses a distinct voice that comes across loudly and honestly, identifying and sharing with others what the authors think is important, and why, and thus, who they are and/or want to be. By reading these essays you will become part of an ongoing conversation about important and diverse ideas, about how to communicate those ideas in compelling and engaging ways, and ultimately, about how to find and make meaning. I hope that you, too, will be touched or provoked by, resonate or empathize with, and perhaps even be moved to take action as a result of reading the following essays. I invite you to experience these essays both personally and academically, or however you see these two dimensions intertwine. Cheers!



**Sheryl Welte  
Emch, Ph.D.**

Sheryl is an instructor of First-Year Writing in the Thompson Writing Program at Duke University. She earned her Bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, her Master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs from the University of Vermont, and her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Michigan State University. Her research and teaching focuses on coming of age, specifically how social and cultural factors influence college students' epistemological and personal development. She loves working with and learning from first-year college students.





Lily Koning

For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to stories about young people growing up. I read with eagerness as

unformed characters come into contact with society, sometimes challenging and sometimes assimilating into the world around them. On the pages, the abstract idea of coming of age gains form, allowing me to watch individual characters' sense of self develop as they respond to the events of their youth.

As a result of this fascination, I was immediately intrigued by Professor Jed Cohen's course *Writing Youth: The Bildungsroman*. Throughout the semester, we learned about and read coming-of-age stories. We discussed what it means to develop a personality and how pivotal social context is to growth. We also considered youth as a symbol for modernity, embodying the restlessness, instability, hopefulness, and inherent contradictions of modernity. As we examined the power of youth as a symbol, Professor Cohen insisted that within each of us was a novel. After all, we had each grown up, living through our own series of interactions with society that formed us into the people we are today. As he spoke, I thought about the days of my childhood spent in Kenya and how they played a significant role in my development. I soon decided to loosely base my final creative piece on these experiences.

I would like to thank Professor Cohen for encouraging me to pursue creative writing and for his guidance throughout the brainstorming and writing process. I am also grateful to the Deliberations Board for this opportunity, and to Professor Sheryl Emch for her patience and expertise as I edited my story.

# The Mission School

Lily Koning

Writing 101: *Writing Youth: The Bildungsroman*  
Course Instructor: Jed Cohen



After descending from the mountain, our caravan of Land Rovers tore across the valley floor, leaving an impressive cloud of dust in our wake. Trapped in the oppressive heat of the car, I gazed out the window to combat my incessant boredom.

When our convoy, carrying lifesaving food and supplies, finally arrived at the village, we parked on the perimeter and proceeded to finish the journey on foot. A leader of some sort greeted us and then guided our group down a dirt road, which was flanked by buildings cobbled together from tin. That they were still standing, despite the fact they should have fallen apart long ago, gave the houses an almost ethereal quality. The few people leaning against walls or watching from windows seemed so engrained in the scene that I was overcome with the feeling that I was walking by a photograph rather than a real place.

I glanced behind me to see that many of these people had silently fallen in step behind us. The entire procession was a solemn affair, as if we were leading a funeral march rather than a Sunday morning picnic. For reasons unclear to me, it seemed as if everyone was collectively mourning a great loss.

The solemn spell was abruptly broken when we arrived at our destination outside a church my parents' team had established a number of years ago. Everyone began to speak at once and rings of laughter rose from the crowd as handshakes and hugs were exchanged. The adults unrolled a picnic blanket over the packed red mud and began to prepare the stew. Younger children ran around, squealing as they chased bubbles blown by my little brother Andrew. I wondered why no one else seemed aware of the sudden shift in mood.

The only other person who had not been immediately swept into the excitement of the event was a boy about my age. He leaned against a baobab tree apart from the crowd. Seeking relief from the sweltering heat, I joined him.

He introduced himself as Timothy. He likely gave me this name assuming that I couldn't pronounce his real name, so I asked him what his Kikuyu name was. He



insisted that he didn't have one.

"Nice day for a picnic, right?" I said, nodding to the crowd. It was an impressive sight, with children who I assumed hadn't eaten a solid meal in days joyfully heaping stew into their bowls.

Timothy didn't say anything. I wondered if he spoke enough English to understand.

We sat in silence for a long stretch of time. I was about to ask Timothy if he wanted to go get some stew when Bwana Richardson stood up. The chattering of the crowd stopped and he began to preach, aided by a translator.

It was a variation of a sermon I had heard before, but his booming voice and enthusiasm was inspiring all the same. The crowd erupted in applause at the end. I clapped. Timothy did not.

We then ate stew as we watched the adults pack up the picnic. I commented on the stew, then the sermon, then the new clinic that we'd just finished constructing in the next village over. He did not respond to any of my inquiries, aside from slight nods. Frustrated with his silence, I said, "Do you speak English?" He nodded yes. "Then do you have a voice?" I don't know why I asked it, since his earlier comment proved he wasn't mute.

But I had asked it all the same, causing him to snap his head up and give me a sideways glance. He said, "Yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"For example, I can say something like 'I hate you,' but does that mean I have a voice?"

I didn't understand what he meant. If he said that, then by definition, he had a voice. But what really confused me was why he had used those words as his example. Did he really mean it? If he did, how could he hate me? We'd built a church, a school, and a clinic in his village, and brought meals once a month when he was probably hungry. As I sat in shock, two small girls ran up to me. One sat in my lap while the other wrapped her arms around my neck, playing with my long, straight hair. As I reacted to their affection—the type of interaction with Kenyans that I was used to—Timothy's statement echoed in my head. I looked back to my right, but he was gone.

The girls each took one of my hands as we made our rounds to the school and hospital. I, however, couldn't muster my usual enthusiasm.

After slamming the car door shut, finally free from the overbearing dust, I told my father my story, finishing with "I don't understand. He barely knew me at all. How could he say that?"

As he effortlessly carved the car through the valley floor, my father replied, "Don't worry about it. It sounds like the joke of a child."

This answer did not satisfy me. I had seen the boy—seen how his eyes narrowed and how the words emerged from deep within. It was no joke. All I could bring myself to say to my father, however, was, "But he wasn't a child. He was my age. You don't think I'm a child, do you?"

My mother spoke for the first time since we got in the car. "We know you're smart and mature for your age. It sounds like that boy was insensitive and hurtful, even before he had gotten to know you." I realized my mother had evaded my question, but I did not challenge her.

The car returned to its usual silence. Sweat beaded on my forehead as we whirled past miles of grasslands and the occasional herd of zebras or gazelles. Sometimes, we would weave through a village, with barefooted children running alongside us, waving and cheering.

Eventually, we ascended into the mountain. The air rapidly decreased in temperature, the oppressive heat giving way to refreshing coolness. We passed



through the gate and into the base. Once we were home, I changed out of my long skirt and into shorts.

The next day, as my brothers and I were passing the ridge on our walk to school, Andrew peered at the valley below and asked, "Which of those villages do you think we were in yesterday?" His question commenced the game we had played on our Monday walks to school since we were small.

"That one," I said matter-of-factly, pointing East at a cluster of huts I had picked at random.

"No, I'm pretty sure we drove past that hill over there," Andrew replied.

Jonathan, who was two years older than me and had recently began feigning annoyance at our games, rolled his eyes. "What does it even matter what village it was? We could have been in Botswana or Togo or even Bolivia for all it matters."

I wanted to argue with him, because I hated letting anything he said go without rebuttal, but I couldn't think of a counterpoint. Did it truly matter which village was which for us to have the same picnic, visit the same clinics, and for Bwana Richardson to give the same sermon? We could have found poor villages that needed these things anywhere.

After school, Jonathan and Andrew both ran off with friends, leaving me to walk home alone. As I passed the school's rugby pitch, where our high school team had remained undefeated for the past seven years, a figure in the distance caught my eye. He was one of the guards who walked the trail around the base, just inside the fence, at all times of the day. I usually barely took notice of these men, but something about this guard's lean figure and fading green-button down caught my eye. I walked closer to find that it was Timothy, the boy whom I had met under the baobab tree.

Remembering what he had said, anger welled up inside of me. I wanted to run away from him and toward him, to avoid and to confront. The pull won out over the repulsion, and I approached. As I did, my anger intensified. I wanted to scream at him that he did not know me, so he had no right to hate me. I wanted to interrogate him, to ask him why he had said what he'd said and if he'd meant it.

However, after I neared, for a reason I can't explain, I instead said, "You never told me your Kikuyu name." I didn't care about his name. I cared about his hatred. But it's what I said.

For a moment bewilderment crossed his face. This was replaced by a knowing smile. He threw his head back and laughed. "My Kikuyu name is of no importance. Timothy is the name that matters, so it is my only name now."

Neither of us spoke for several more moments. He was idly swinging his rungu, the club all the guards carry. I broke the silence, saying, "Why are you a guard? We built your village a school and you're only about 12 years old, right? Why don't you go?"

"School is not an option. I need to work."

"But if you go to school now, you will be able to get a better paying job later in life."

"A job later won't help me now. My mother is sick, my father is not around, and I have two younger siblings at the school. I need to make money. Besides, most graduates of the school end up working here anyways. Why waste all that time to end up in the same place?"

I considered his statement. It couldn't be true. Why would we have gone through all that trouble to build schools if they didn't help anyone? Wasn't the whole reason we had uprooted our lives and moved here to help people?

I was about to tell him I was sorry and that I wanted to help, but instead I blurted out, "Why did you say you hated me yesterday? You don't even know me."

He stared at his feet for a moment, then looked at the forest at the other side of



the fence. "Do you know why this fence is here?" I wondered why he was evading my question by asking about the fence, of all things.

"I asked my father once. He said it's to keep us safe from baboons and lions."

"Do you believe that?" He crossed his arms.

My father's answer, in fact, had never satisfied me. Baboons could easily climb over the fence and our high elevation meant that lions weren't a problem. In spite of these doubts, I answered, "Yes."

"That's why I hate you." Once again, he said it in a matter-of-fact tone, without the malice that usually accompanies hatred.

That night at dinner, I once again asked my father why we needed a fence. He gave me the same answer about protecting us from wildlife. In a moment of boldness, I asked why none of the villages we visited had fences to protect them from wildlife. He told me that it didn't matter and that I shouldn't worry about such silly things.

The next day, on the way home from school, I once again met up with Timothy. I told him about this exchange with my father, and for a moment a saw a flash of anger pass across his face. He, however, quickly hid it with a laugh. "Typical," he asserted.

I didn't understand how it was typical, but I had gotten used to not understanding most of what he had said.

I began to walk the trail with Timothy every day after school. He wasn't like the African boys my parents talked about—the ones in the pictures and in the villages. I'm not sure what he was like. Some days he would get upset with me. He would say that I didn't understand anything, which may have been true. I think for the most part, though, he liked walking with me because at least he wasn't alone.

One morning a few weeks later, after listening to my parents talk about the growing political unease over breakfast, I asked Timothy if his family was voting for Kibaki or Odinga.

He looked at me as if I'd asked the color of the sky. "I'm Kikuyu, so Kibaki, of course."

"What do you think about the fighting?"

He paused, obviously deep in thought. My parents had said Timothy was an immature child, which seemed comical at moments like these. When he did speak, he said, "I am against the fighting. I want Kibaki to win, but I don't want anyone to get killed over it."

"Yes. It doesn't make sense to me to kill someone over politics."

He narrowed his eyes. "You know, that's not the real reason people kill each other."

"What do you mean? That's why they say they do it."

"Yes, but politics isn't the real reason. Power is."

"Aren't politics and power the same?"

"Not always. My grandfather was alive when the British

were here and he says they never really left. Kenyans may be the ones killing each other, but it isn't our war."

Like always, I didn't understand what he was talking about. Of course the British had left. And how did that relate to politics or power?

At dinner, I told my parents about the exchange. "Timothy said the British never left Kenya. What does that mean?"

"Who's Timothy?" my mother asked.

"A guard I've become friends with."

My mother dropped her spoon. "Abigail, what have we always said about talking to strangers without Dad or me present?"

I knew the rule, but I didn't understand why it would apply to one of the guards. How could they be dangerous? Weren't they hired to keep us safe?

"You don't understand," I pleaded. "Timothy is smart. I've learned a lot from him."

My mother and father exchanged a glance. My father said, "Well, he can't be very smart if he thinks the British are still in Kenya. They left in 1963—that's why we celebrate Republic Day."

I was stunned. Obviously Timothy did not believe that Kenya was still under British rule. Was my father putting up an act for my sake? Or did he honestly fail to see what Timothy meant?

My mother cleared her throat, then said, "I don't want you talking to Timothy anymore, or any of the guards, for that matter."

"Yes, ma'am," I murmured. There was no point arguing. They didn't understand—they refused to.

The election results came out a week later. Kibaki had won, but many people thought he cheated. The country had erupted in violence. My father turned on the radio, which blasted news about mass protests, police shootings, and violent acts, mostly directed against Kikuyus. As the announcer presented breaking news about a church burning in the Rift Valley Region which had killed 50 people, my mother abruptly shut the radio off. "You are too young to be hearing about that."

She then shooed us out the door to school like any other day. As we passed the ridge, we stopped in our tracks. The vast green valley below was marred by a billowing cloud of dark smoke. Andrew murmured, "I wonder if it's a village we've visited," as if we were playing our game as usual.

"Does the village matter?" Jonathan said. "It's brutal, no matter where it's done."

He was wrong. It did matter. It could have been Timothy's village. It could have been him. Or what if it was a church we had built? I couldn't handle it. Hot, angry tears fell from my eyes and I found myself shouting at Jonathan. "It does matter. It does. It didn't happen in Botswana or Togo or Bolivia. It happened here." I stopped. It would have still



mattered if it happened there. I didn't know what to think and suddenly had trouble breathing. If the sight of the fire was the suffocating heat, my confusion was the smothering dust.

I couldn't focus in class. Halfway through the day, I asked to go home because I was feeling sick, but my teacher would not allow it. When school finally let out, I sprinted to the spot I usually met Timothy, hoping he'd be there. Soon enough, he rounded the bend and I felt a rush of relief.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"I thought you might be dead."

"What would you care?"

Of course I would care. How could he think I wouldn't care, after all the time we'd spent together? We didn't speak the rest of the way.

When I walked through the door, I was engulfed in a hug by my mother. "Pack up a bag, and quickly, my dear," she said, obviously trying to mask a panic-stricken quiver in her voice. "Where are your brothers?"

"I don't know. I never come home with them. Where are we going?"

"We have to go to Tanzania for a while. Just until the election results sort themselves out." I hated how she still talked to me like I didn't understand anything. We were evacuating. Why couldn't she just say that?

I packed my duffle, and no more than an hour later, we were once again back in the Land Rovers. We tore down the mountain and into the valley, seemingly destroying everything in our path. We were soon engulfed in dust; it raged outside every window, but an eerie sense of calm pervaded the car's cab.

The border was in chaos, but we made it through without much difficulty. We settled into a guest house in Tanzania where Jonathan and Andrew continued to squabble and my parents quickly became involved in the local mission, doing more or less what they had been doing in Kenya. I drifted around for a few days without feeling fully present.

One morning, our parents sat the three of us down on a couch. "We have some unfortunate news," my mother said, her face pinched.

My father cleared his throat. "We won't be returning to Kenya."

"What?" Andrew jumped up. "What about our house? And my room? And all of the toys I had to leave behind?"

Jonathan leaned forward, "I thought we were just staying here until everything in Kenya calms down. What's

changed?"

My parents glanced at each other in that knowing way they always do. "The base has been burned."

"Burned? Like the church? Why?" Andrew asked.

My father nodded. "We're not sure yet, but it was mostly likely due to political instability and tribal tension.

Fortunately, we left in time. Very few people were killed."

"Very few?" I asked, arching my eyebrows.

"We are sorry to say that a few guards attempted to put out the fire and did not make it."

Numbness settled over me, which then gave way to anger. "What were guards doing there? There weren't any people for them to guard."

"Honey, I'm so sorry," my mother said, then began to sob. That's when I knew.

"Timothy?" I choked. Tears welled up in my eyes.

He died fighting a war that wasn't his. He died protecting us even though he said he hated us. It wasn't even us he was protecting. No, we were long gone. He died protecting shells, the buildings we had once lived in behind our towering fence.

"It's my fault," I whispered.

After a few moments, my father leaved over and placed one hand on my shoulder and another on Andrew's. "It's alright to be sad," he said, his voice strong and steady. "If any of you need anything, Mom and I will be always be here for you. We understand what you are going through. We are feeling much of the same shock and grief ourselves." He paused to take a breath, then continued, "We leave in a few days and need to start packing soon."

They didn't understand. I wish I didn't. Darkness closed in. I was overwhelmed, crushed. He was dead, I was safe, and I still didn't know his real name, the name that mattered to him instead of me.

I begged to go back, to see the base, to see his family, but my parents said it wasn't possible. We flew home the following week, away from the fires and the fighting and the dust.

I was soon enrolled at an American school to finish sixth grade. My classmates were all captivated with my life in Kenya, clamoring to ask questions. I told them about the zebras, the bubbles we blew for children, and the breathtaking view from the ridge. I never mentioned the fires, the fighting, or even the dust. Eventually, I stopped thinking about those things.





One day, I offhandedly told a story about Timothy. When I finished, my friend asked me if I knew how Timothy was doing. "Oh, he's dead," I said, surprising myself for a moment with my lack of emotion.

My friend gasped. "What happened?"

"He worked as a guard at the base and ran into some bad luck. There's a lot of political instability and tribal tension in Africa."

"Wow," she whispered. "I understand what my parents say about Africa now"

I nodded, knowing what she meant. "I guess that's why we were there in the first place."

### Artist's Statement

"The Mission School" is a response to and critique of the ways in which Orientalist ideas operate in the setting of a mission base in Kenya. By focusing on a child coming of age on the base, the story examines the ways in which colonial power structures and Orientalist discourses continue to operate in present-day African spaces occupied by Americans and Europeans.

My paper also responds to Edward Said's work on Orientalism, which he defines as a set of consistent ideas proliferated in the West about Eastern peoples and cultures stemming from a created distinction between the East and the West (2), a distinction that limits the realm of possible thoughts individual Westerners can have about the Orient (3). This system of knowledge claims the Orient as "Other"—inherently different and inferior—thus giving the West an identity, strength, and power (38). The West uses this power to dominate the East and maintain its hegemony (7). That being said, I also acknowledge that because I am a Westerner writing about Africa, it is likely that I have inadvertently fallen into some of the same tropes of Orientalism to which I am trying to respond.

In my story, I also responded to Agnes Czajka's characterizations of how Africa specifically has been

Orientalized. Czajka claims that Africa has been defined based on Western representations that depict Africans as inferior and "Other" (117-118). Furthermore, Czajka contends that Western discourses paint Africa as a passive object of history rather than a subject (120) and represents people as backward, barbaric, and superstitious (126). I express these viewpoints through the characters' responses to the political violence. Finally, Czajka argues that there is a tendency to depict Africa as a child in need of Western help, which again implies inferiority (128). I examined this idea both through the repeated idea that the narrator's family is there to help, that this help is unquestionably good, and through the narrator's parents' insistence that Timothy is acting younger than he is.

"The Mission School" also explores the ideas Achille Mbembe expressed in "Necropolitics." I explore his idea that ultimate power lies with those who get to decide who lives and who dies (11) by showing foreigners who indirectly decide that they get to live while others are left to die. Informed by Mbembe's description of how necropower operates through spacialization, in which the colonizers set clear boundaries (26), I attempted to depict this aspect of space through the use of a fenced-in base on a mountain, outside of which people were seen to live in cramped, improvised housing, without adequate clothing or food.

"The Mission School" portrays the danger of Orientalism and emphasizes how difficult it is to fully escape Orientalist thought, hopefully causing readers to consider their own discourse and thinking about these challenges. Furthermore, the ending can be read as ironic, with the narrator bitterly parroting her parents' words. This reading suggests that while the narrator has developed the ability to criticize Orientalist views, she also realizes that those around her are still limited in how they are able to view Africa. This difficulty the narrator encounters when she attempts to convey the complexity of her experiences highlights the ways in which individual stories can often be erased in favor of a prevailing narrative.

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Aiyanna Kimble

I have always been told that we do our best writing when we write about what we know. I know

that as a black girl growing up in the Southeastern U.S. most heroines and princesses did not look like me. I learned at a very young age that many of the movies and books that I loved would not tell stories that I could relate to. This essay was inspired by my desire to share what I know so that black girls throughout the country can find some of their reality in my experiences.

My Writing 101 class *Decoding Disney* illuminated the powerful impact The Walt Disney Company has on society, influencing what we think of as beauty, heroism, good, evil, right, and wrong. Examining Disney films and questioning the big ideas they convey has been a rewarding experience, providing me with a personally meaningful subject and a voice to share what I know. The class was not only as fun as one could imagine, but also challenged me to explore conflicting and controversial ideas in some of my favorite childhood movies.

In this final essay, I chose to explore racism in the Disney story, *The Princess and the Frog*, because I remember being a black girl, incredibly excited about seeing a princess who looked like me. I remember begging for the Princess Tiana costume, even though I hated that shade of green. I remember telling my mom that we had to buy the DVD because we had to own the movie with the first black princess. And, 8 years later, I felt like I needed to write about this movie that changed who I thought a princess could be and what I thought a princess could look like.

I would like to thank Professor Andrews for her passion for all things Disney, her enthusiasm for my writing, and her ability to turn a class about Disney into a rigorous writing course. I would also like to thank Professor Emch for her guidance and patience through the editing process. Lastly, I would like to thank my mother, for reading everything that I write whether she wants to or not.

# Disney's First Black Princess: Progress's Millionth Failure

Aiyanna Kimble

Writing 101: *Decoding Disney*

Course Instructor: Lisa Andres



When fifth grade started, I began packing away my Mulan pillow cases and Cinderella dolls. By the end of that school year, I had watched my first presidential inauguration and replaced the Mushu figurine on my nightstand with a portrait of Barack Obama. For a long time, faces that looked like Cinderella, Snow White, and Aurora were the only ones that I recognized as princess faces. This is because the covers of my Disney Princess coloring books were painted with blue eyes, red freckles, and flowing blond hair. If I turn to the appendix in a United States History book, "The Presidents of the United States" chart will be filled with white faces, much like the covers of those dog-eared coloring books. As a little girl, however, Barack Obama's face was the only one that I had known as a president.

Unfortunately, just as I can recall the excitement that filled the classroom as I watched the inauguration of our first black president, I remember overhearing how popular news sources such as *The Washington Post* and *Time* magazine had begun to question if Obama was "black enough," even before his election. As many Americans, including myself, celebrated the possible election of our first black president, there were numerous others that in turn pointed out Obama's mixed race, his esteemed education, and his eloquent speech, as if they diluted his blackness (Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates, 2007). Shouts of "Not black!" were offered in response to the cheers for the equality and progress that a black presidency could symbolize. Eight years later, I have begun to fully understand the sting of those arguments and the indignation that they sparked. And even today, there continue to be questions of Obama's "blackness." But much of the black community, via Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter has argued that if Barack Obama had grown up in inner city Chicago and Michelle Obama wore her hair in cornrows, the Obamas would never have made it to the White House. Much like the "too hot/too cold" conundrum famous from the tale of Goldilocks, the public's perception of President Obama seemed to be contingent on where they placed him on a spectrum from "too black" to "not black enough."

In 2009, Disney's release of *The Princess and the Frog* led audiences, movie critics, and scholars to raise some of the same questions about Princess Tiana, the first black animated Disney princess. Just as Michael Jackson, Beyoncé, and President Barack Obama have had their blackness challenged and defended over the years, people began to question, champion, and quantify Tiana's blackness. And just as people argued that if presidential candidate Barack Obama had been seen as too black then he would have never earned the title "President Barack Obama," people argued that if Tiana and her story had been seen as being focused on her blackness, Disney never would have risked its finances or reputation by putting her on the screen. Does being seen as "too black" still impede the chances of a certain type of black, animated character ending up in theaters, as it has been speculated to hinder the chances of a black person's success?



Just as Barack Obama sparked heated debate in both public and private throughout his election, *The Princess and the Frog* started intense conversation in many academic journals, blogs, and households. These passionate conversations support my claim that the answer to this question is “yes,” there is a certain type of black character allowed on the big screen. The production of the film was centered on a combination of distractions, employed to dilute both Tiana’s blackness and her status as a Disney princess. This made it possible for Disney to evade the responsibilities and implications involved in taking progressive social stances in film. I do not use “dilute” to indicate that Tiana, or anyone else, must have certain qualities and a particular story that make her more or less black. Rather, I use the word “dilute” here to mean that Disney reduces the impact of Tiana’s role as a black woman by ignoring her blackness and avoiding telling a story where her blackness matters.

The distractions that I will address include depicting 1920s New Orleans as a colorful and colorblind world, and the clear and necessary contrast of Dr. Facilier and Prince Naveen. These depictions combine to create the illusion of a textbook

Disney fairytale - complete with a whimsical land, a villain, and a hero, that distracts the audience from Tiana’s blackness. Furthermore, I will argue that the same components of food and music that are incorporated to create a fanciful setting, are used to personify Tiana and Naveen in a way that discreetly detracts from Tiana’s status as a princess. While some of these distractions are less subtle than others, Tiana spending over an hour of the film as a frog, effectively and profoundly erases both her blackness and her title as princess.

## The Fairytale Formula for Fun

“Time flies when you’re having fun” is an overused, well-known idiom that suggests that when our minds are focused on something enjoyable, we don’t pay attention to the time and lose track of it. Across ages and generations, it is perhaps just as well-known that “fun” is the figurehead, the specialty, and the priority of the world’s beloved Walt Disney Company. Fun is probably emblazoned on the contracts of every Imagineer, park cast member, and Bob Iger himself, the Disney Company CEO. Fun, however, is not simply a good excuse to lose track of the hour. Disney’s complex and seasoned formula for fun, wonder, and entertainment also proves to be an effective diversion from Tiana’s blackness in the film *The Princess and the Frog*. In the movie, Disney offers a spectacular example of a classic Disney fairytale, complete with a magical world,

a lovable prince charming, and, of course, an evil character. However, just as seconds seem to rush by when we’re having fun, it seems that Disney hoped that Tiana’s blackness would slip right past the audience while they are watching this colorful, musical, and heartfelt production.

If there is a checklist for creating a Disney princess film, *The Princess and the Frog* would seem to fill all of the requirements, one of the most important being the setting. Since there can be no fairytale without a fairytale land, like a magical undersea world or the mysterious expanse of heat and sand that is Agrabah, this film is set in a magical, idealistic 1920s New Orleans. The New Orleans that Disney depicts is full of life, bubbling over with the sound of trumpets and the smell of sweet beignets and gumbo. One of the best representations of the carefree and celebratory air present in the

film is Naveen’s arrival to New Orleans. As soon as Prince Naveen sets foot on the docks, he is strumming a ukulele and leading a parade of talented musicians through the streets of the French Quarter. Musical and heartwarming scenes like this, including the communal scene of Tiana sharing a pot of gumbo with her neighborhood, sends a



clear message about life in New Orleans. Disney states that life in the Big Easy is not only good, it’s magic, filled only with good music and better food.

Some critics, however, claimed that Disney was irresponsible for setting the story in New Orleans. One such critic was M.J. Stephen of *Time* magazine who asks the question, “Why set the film in New Orleans, home to a largely black community still reeling from Hurricane Katrina?” And “reeling” is an ideal word to use here. The film was released just four years after the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina struck and devastated the lives of many residents. Most of these residents were poor and black. Statistics reported by the National Center for Children in Poverty claimed thirty-eight percent of children living in New Orleans when the hurricane hit were black and below the poverty line (Quigley, 2015). In order to utilize the home of these children as the heart of their story, it was assumed that Disney would take extra care in representing Tiana, the heroine of their first black fairytale.

Not only was it a bold decision for Disney to place this story where recently so many lives were lost and livelihoods washed away, it was assumed by most critics and scholars that setting this story in some of the roughest times of segregation would be an even more delicate decision. In an article titled “Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog*: The Pride, the Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First,” Neal A. Lester details some of the same complications that he, his colleagues, and other



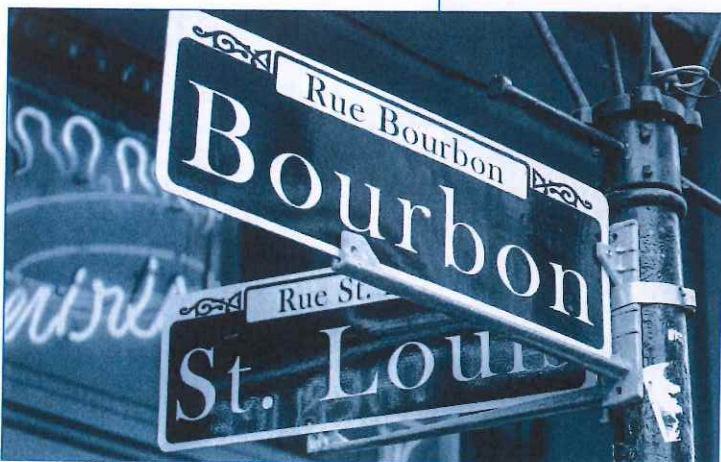
audiences observed and shared with him. In a very succinct and forthcoming way, he argues one of the many faults of the filmmaker's choice of time period: "Disney's fantastical design would have us believe that a poor black girl and a rich white girl in 1920s New Orleans can remain best friends without external social disapproval or scrutiny" (302). In other words, Disney's recipe for magic and fun depicts a romantic and idealistic picture of New Orleans that shows audiences an unrealistic friendship between two girls of dissimilar race and class in the 1920s. The relationship that is described above is the relationship between Charlotte LaBouff, the white daughter of a rich sugar baron, and Tiana, the black daughter of LaBouff's seamstress. This pitfall describes how Disney handled many of the possible complications and uncomfortable issues that telling the story of a young black woman in such a controversial time entails: Disney simply makes it pretty, loveable, and fun. Instead of using a friendship that would have involved the darker, less pleasant realities of racism and segregation, Disney displays a more pleasing, entertaining face by having Tiana, the daughter of a seamstress who works for Charlotte, befriend the young heiress. In similar fashion, the Walt Disney Company transforms the darker, less pleasant realities of 1920s New Orleans into a dazzling display of Creole food and jazz music.

Almost as important to the story as the land it will be told in, is the villain who will attempt to foil the hero and heroine. Although Naveen is not the kindest character—his motives for marrying Charlotte are questionable and his treatment of Lawrence, his manservant, is less than friendly—he is clearly not our villain. Our bigheaded prince of Maldonia instead becomes our Prince Charming, completing the Disney fairytale formula. The audience is eventually given a piece of his story and then they are able to offer him sympathy and understanding, gifts that can never be offered to an upstanding Disney villain. On the other hand, our actual villain, Dr. Facilier, does not get the opportunity to gain this understanding. The audience never knows what debt Dr. Facilier owes to his "friends on the other side." Shrouded in this mystery, Dr. Facilier's actions can clearly be labeled as evil because mystery is misunderstanding, undoubtedly the most important ingredient in creating a villain.

A villain, however, would not be complete without a hero. The hero that audiences love the most is the selfish, arrogant character that transforms into a brave

and compassionate prince charming. The most memorable heroes do not begin as one. Just as fans swoon over Flynn Rider and his transformation from bandit to loyal lover, it is Prince Naveen's evolution into a hero that steals the hearts, and attention, of the audience. For most of the movie, Prince Naveen and Dr. Facilier are very much alike in personality; both men are prideful and charming, with slick tongues and a way with people. Just as Dr. Facilier is able to swindle Lawrence into stealing Naveen's identity in order to marry Charlotte LaBouff, Prince Naveen is able to convince Louis to join them on the river and travel to Mama Odie's. They have equally manipulative plans to acquire what they both want: money.

While mincing vegetables for Tiana's gumbo, Prince Naveen begins to bare his more vulnerable side to the audience. With a heartfelt confession about his shame in his privileged upbringing, and his feeling of inadequacy, Naveen transforms into our prince charming. He tells Tiana the drawbacks about growing up with servants, "Yes, they did everything for me, until the day my parents cut me off, and that's when I realized, I don't know how to do anything." This heartwarming scene is part of the complex and touching character development experienced by Prince Naveen. Because this growth is placed at the forefront of the film, Tiana's race easily fades into the background.





Disney provides the audience with all of the components that they seek when watching a princess story, and when given a whimsical land, a perfect villain, and a loveable prince charming, few moviegoers complain about the loss of historic accuracy and an opportunity to explore racism. Why would Disney choose to take on the task of explaining segregation and the historic struggles of black women in this film, when they can instead tell the story of a pompous prince who finds purpose and love? While a simple answer to this question is to protect its box office sales and keep its more socially conservative audiences comfortable, perhaps a more difficult answer is that Disney does not seem to be able to do this well. It is possible that Disney is unsure of how to, or aware that it lacks the tact to, introduce concepts of historical and modern racism and class separation. But if this is the case, Disney should not have taken on the delicate task of introducing its first black princess until it was ready.

### Fun, Food, Frogs, and Fluff

Disney does, however, know how to utilize important aspects of the story such as food and jazz music not only to create a busy and wonder-filled setting that distracts from Tiana's race, but to impart the lead characters with passions and characteristics that detract from Tiana's status as a princess. The way Tiana's love for cooking is depicted in the film, for example, separates her from other Disney princesses, and even ultimately detracts from the fact that she is a Disney princess at all. Similarly, I contend that Naveen's passion for the jazz music of the era not only distracts viewers from his imaginary origins and ambiguous race, but from the race of his princess as well, and from the fact that the uncommon state of his royalty also diminishes Tiana's place among the renowned Disney royalty of Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora.

Food is placed at the center of Tiana's identity in the film so that her race and humble upbringing are not. Even more important than a distraction from the time and the realities of a young black woman, however, Tiana's culinary prowess is featured in the film as a subtle attempt to mitigate her status as a princess. Tiana becomes less of a princess than the classic Disney princesses that we grew up with because she is a moderate representation of how cooking is used as an oppressive and servile role for black women, and how the white majority feels comforted by the position of a woman of color in that role. In "A Taste of Louisiana: Mainstreaming Blackness Through Food in *The Princess and the Frog*," Fabio Parasecoli constructs a unique and convincing claim that food is utilized in the media as a means to neutralize the threats of black people. He uses historical examples of the depicted relationship between black women and cooking in film to show that cooking has been used as an indicator of a black woman's place in servitude and labor.

Tiana's role as a cook in the film serves as a less extreme

version of this class separation, where she is not too unlike the subservient and unthreatening role that other domestic, black women have played in the media. I would not be so careless as to state that Tiana is the perfect example of the nurturing, subservient mammy archetype that characters such as Aunt Jemima or Beulah emulate. Indeed, Tiana is a young, strong-minded black woman who is often portrayed as independent and strong willed in the film. However, I would not disagree with Parasecoli's statement that "the first black heroine in a Disney's animation film comfortably cohabits with cultural tropes that confirm her working-class status, thus avoiding any challenge to mainstream viewers' possible expectations and preconceptions about her social standing" (459). Parasecoli claims that Tiana rather seamlessly fits the role of the black, working class female so that her position as a Disney princess is not threatening to audiences. I contend that Tiana not only fits this stereotypical role, but also serves as a modern example of the contrast between the portrayal of black versus white women in relation to cooking. This distinction is vital when formulating the argument that Tiana is disarmed by cooking, not because she is a woman, but rather because she is black.

In the 1950s, June Cleaver of the hit sitcom *Leave It to Beaver* was the model of a successful homemaker. She prepared delicious homemade meals for her family wearing a beautiful set of pearls and high heels. The image of a fabulous June Cleaver in her kitchen evokes similar pictures of the iconic Lucille Ball and Donna Reed. These women are depicted as devoted, faithful wives and mothers, and their kitchens are displayed as the centers of healthy, loving households. In this way, their relationship with cooking is different than the social constraint and laborious task that cooking is for black women. Parasecoli describes cooking for black women as a duty, and as an indicator of social standing. In contrast, I identify the role of white women in the kitchen as caretakers, serving in a way that is as admirable as military service, and not serving in a way that is as demeaning as shoe shining. In their frilled aprons and expensive pumps, white mothers and wives from popular sitcoms are often seen as graceful and respected, whereas Beulah, and other black mammy characters, were seen as laboring, servile house workers.

A similar disparity in portrayals of cooking and its connotations can be found between classic Disney princesses and Tiana. In the movie *Snow White* (1937), for example, cooking is displayed as a caring and graceful act. Snow White is graceful and gentle in her baking and cooking for the Seven Dwarfs; and she beautifully coos to birds as she bakes a pie for Grumpy, going as far as to delicately write his name in the crust. This feminine and elegant depiction of cooking, similar to that of June Cleaver retrieving a roast from the oven in her pearls and heels, serves as a stark contrast to Tiana's rushed chopping and sharp style of cooking. Tiana cooks this way because it is a style necessary of someone who plans to sell her food -- a working class cook.



Granted, not all of Tiana's cooking scenes are rushed and heavy handed. One of the most lighthearted and sincere scenes in the movie is when a young Tiana, knee-high and peering over a large copper pot, is cooking gumbo with her father. Although Tiana cooks to connect to memories of her father since it was an experience/activity they shared, it also serves as an occupation, and this distinguishes Tiana as the first working-class princess. It also presents a clear distinction between the purpose that her cooking and the cooking that other white princesses has served. Where other princesses cook for leisure or as displays of affection, both of which are seen as graceful and admirable acts, Tiana's rushed and authoritative motions in the kitchen present her as hard working middle class, a status that is not held by any other princess and a label that ultimately diminishes her status as a princess at all. Tiana's blackness is not what separates her from the fairer Disney beauties, but it is the blue collared princess role that she assumes in the film in combination with the color of her skin, that makes it appear as if she can barely be considered a princess.

While some might argue that this is due to Disney's attempt at a more feminist twist and an introduction to a modern age of princesses, I contend that the story of its first black princess is not the time to make that transition. Black women and girls who have sought representation in fairytales for generations did not receive the glamor and wonder that filled the worlds of Snow White and Cinderella. After waiting so long for a princess that looked like they do, African-American women and girls deserve to see Tiana indulge in the glamour and luxury that the other Disney princesses do. However, I do not believe that Disney had to sacrifice addressing discrimination and racism in order to do so. If

Disney could not incorporate both classic fairytale glamour and progressive social issues into Tiana's story, perhaps they should not have produced the film in the first place. While young black girls do not follow their dreams of happily ever after in isolation from real conflicts of race and gender, this does not mean they do not still dream of castles as grand as Cinderella's. It appears that Disney had no intention of incorporating, even subtly, the struggles and cultures of black communities; introducing the modern, independent princess; or addressing the history of black women in just 98 minutes. Disney simply utilized cooking to diminish Tiana's status as a princess.

In a much subtler way, Naveen's love for jazz music is used to the same effect. Just as his transition from dependence to independence plays a large part in shaping Naveen's character, his love for jazz music is equally as important. Even

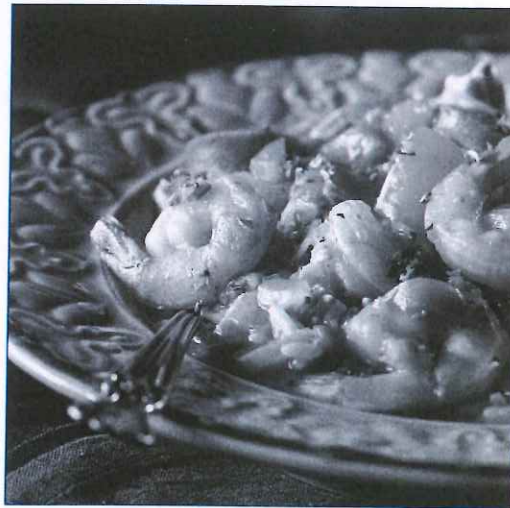
with mucous covered skin, and his livelihood at stake, Naveen strums a makeshift twig banjo in the bayou. Music lies at the center of Naveen's heart, and Disney does not miss any opportunity to show the audiences how deeply it is rooted in his character. It could seem that because music is such a vital part of Naveen's personality Disney opted to not give him a clear race. Naveen's love for music is presented as imperative to the plot because it is meant to distract the audience from both the fact that he is poor and his race is mysterious and unidentifiable. Together, these detract from Tiana's blackness and diminish her status as a princess.

Our prince charming is from the imaginary land of Maldonia; he has a French accent, dark hair of a similar texture to Tiana's, and bronze skin. Naveen's diverse features seem to emphasize Disney's deliberate choice to make Naveen's race unclear to the audience. This is because Naveen's racial ambiguity is a calculated move on Disney's part to avoid giving Tiana a black or white prince. If Naveen was white, Disney would likely be taking a definitive stance on interracial couples. Even today this would cause some controversy. It would be one of the first for Disney films where a minority-white couple lived "happily ever after," for even Pocahontas refuses to leave with John Smith. If Naveen was black then

Disney would be tasked with showing children a fairytale featuring two black characters in a healthy, magical relationship. To some, this would seem like an effective attempt at positively highlighting Tiana's blackness; however, to others it would appear as though Disney was trying too hard or even being too progressive all at once.

In their article, "Of Negation, Princesses, Beauty, and Work: Black Mothers Reflect on Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*," Moffitt and Harris have interviewed many black mothers and gathered their opinions

on representation in the film. Many of the participants expressed discontent and concern in response to the absence of a black Disney prince. One of the black mothers interviewed posed the question, "Does that tell black women and black young girls, 'You better look elsewhere because you're not going to find the prince in your own race?'" Plainly, and without demonizing interracial relationships, she suggests that the absence of a healthy black relationship from Disney's first black fairytale could send concerning messages to little black girls, who often emulate the love that they find in fairytales. Disney misses the opportunity to present a healthy, black relationship in this film, but it also carefully constructs a dynamic that is not meant to draw any extra attention to Tiana's race. If Naveen was white or black, it would have inevitably not only made a statement, but also caused the audience to pay more attention to Tiana's





skin color, something that Disney has clearly tried to avoid.

In addition, Naveen's musical talents and his touching realization of his lack of self-sufficiency combine to create one more distraction: Naveen is broke, and is only a prince in name. When he and Tiana wed, she does not move her belongings into a castle or attend a grand ball like many of the princesses who have come before her. In contrast, some of the last scenes of the film show Tiana and Naveen with their sleeves rolled up on their arms, hard at work building Tiana's restaurant. *The Princess and the Frog* ends in the restaurant that the young couple build together, with Tiana up and around, on her feet, and clearly still hard at work. While Tiana does not seem to mind working hard to support herself, it is noteworthy that every other Disney princess has ended up living in grandeur. Why should Tiana, who has arguably worked harder than any other princess, not receive the same luxury? I do not argue that Disney should emphasize money or splendor, but I do claim that because it is not included in Tiana's story, she is automatically unlike the rest of the princesses.

Lastly, and perhaps the most blatant diversion that Disney uses in the film, is the fact that Tiana spends most of her time on screen with green, slimy skin (Lester, 2010). It is considerably difficult to notice a *black* Disney princess when she is green. This was, and continues to be, one of the most discussed, debated, and deplored aspects of the film. Black mothers murmured about it over coffee the morning after they took their kids, bloggers madly typed about it on their laptops, and journalists took to raising some important questions about it with their readers the next day. No other princess has spent three quarters of their story as an animal, and no other aspect of the film separated Tiana more from the rest of the Disney princesses. While many audiences found it unjust or uncalled for, others barely noticed.

There are some audiences that would, consciously or subconsciously, reject the idea of a strong, black Disney princess. However, the story of a black princess in the 1920s would prompt audiences to acknowledge the history of segregation and hardships for black women in the past and still today. Like other aspects of history, this could be uncomfortable for audiences to remember, and we do not pay for Disney movies to be uncomfortable.

In order to avoid these challenging topics, Disney created a set of diversions, an array of circumstances, which attracted

the audiences' attention and shifted the focus of the story away from a black princess. By whitewashing New Orleans in the 1920s to make for a glossy and clean setting, and creating a Disney villain and hero by contrasting Dr. Facilier and Naveen, Disney was able to distract the audience from Tiana's blackness, and all that might be associated with it. And by utilizing music and food as the heart of Tiana's (and Naveen's) identity, Disney was able to diminish Tiana's status as a princess.

Disney uses these diversions like centerpieces at a Thanksgiving dinner. In the same way that oversized floral arrangements can be used to impede conversation, Disney uses the diversions as an excuse and way to avoid addressing topics such as the history of segregation, black beauty and relationships, and black women in general. Telling a story that the majority of viewers might deem "too black" could be seen as a dangerous risk, one that unnecessarily threatens Disney's pockets and ratings. When Disney avoids some of the thornier tasks of tackling race and history in this film, however, it also avoids creating a story that showcases a true black princess. This robs black girls, women, men, and boys of their own fairytales, and deprives the white viewers of an opportunity for cultural exposure and social education.

Upon reflection Disney never created a true black princess, at least not one who depicts the cultural aspects of being black. Instead, the Walt Disney Company only produced a movie featuring a princess who happened to be of a darker skin tone. *The Princess and the Frog* is a film that could have been produced in any studio, with a blue eyed and blonde princess in Tiana's place. By choosing not to address the history and hardships of black women, or to even introduce an authentic black woman or relationship on screen for more than thirty minutes, Disney robbed the black community of representation in a black fairytale, representation that it has been waiting for 93 years. It avoided a chance to educate white audiences and children of all races in order to make sales and avoid too much controversy. In doing so, Disney not only robbed us all, but did so while pretending that it was making history. Disney should not be praised for progress when it did little more than animate a young woman who is black and call her a princess. We should care because we should expect more from Disney. We should care because it is 2017, when the time to worry about "too black" and "not black enough" should be long past.

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Alyssa Cleveland

As a person deeply interested in art and history, there was never a doubt in my mind

that the Writing 101 course *Art at the Edge of Tradition* was for me. Even so, I certainly could not have anticipated all the exposure and growth that I experienced throughout the semester. Within the first few classes, I was already being significantly impacted by an activity that demonstrated the interconnectivity of art movements, regions of the world, and cultural identity. Learning how colonialism and the dehumanization of African nations was evident in Pablo Picasso's work at the beginning of the 20th century solidified the notion that art is a medium that documents history and society in an authentic and all-encompassing way.

We were challenged with the task of selecting a form of art and conducting research on how it had changed over time. Being passionately intrigued by the concept of identity, and on my own personal journey of self-discovery, I took the opportunity to research how the complexity of African-American identity has been expressed through fashion. As an African-American woman, learning to love my natural features has certainly been and still is an ongoing process. Wearing my hair in an afro, for example, is an expression of my confidence found in loving my natural features and identity despite society deeming them inferior. My exploration into the African-American identity expressed through fashion, without a doubt, is an exploration into my own psyche.

I am ever grateful for Ms. Wren, my high school English teacher, for giving me a strong foundation, Professor Font for guiding me through my big ideas, Dr. Emch and the Deliberations board for helping me strengthen my paper, and family and friends who listened to me talk endlessly about this topic.

# Art at the Edge of Tradition:

## Afrocentric Fashion and The Quest Towards Freedom

Alyssa Cleveland

Writing 101: *Art at the Edge of Tradition*

Course Instructor: David Font



African-American woman powerfully embracing her natural hair Photo: In *Ebony Magazine*. Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1970.

The fluidity of art is demonstrated in its ability to evolve over time and space. Clothing is widely used as a means of expression of cultural and ethnic identity across centuries and continents. In this case, Afrocentric clothing has the ability to serve as a platform to make social and political statements. Sentiments of Black pride and reclamation of "African" identity within the African-American community during the 1960s heavily influenced the Afrocentric fashion trends. The usage of clothing and hairstyles with apparent ties to West Africa were used as statements of liberation from Eurocentric expectations in society. African clothing items were utilized by African-Americans adding to the complexity of the ethnic identity tied to the particular items. These fashion statements demonstrated solidarity with the paralleling political movements and unity with each other. As well as being a platform of expression, clothing is an art form in which taken out of its original cultural context, can very commonly be a vessel for cultural appropriation. The symbolic usage of "African" items becomes appropriation when they are only utilized as a fashion trend rather than a genuine expression of a desire to understand and reclaim an identity based in African roots. But at what point do African-Americans



cease to be African? The complexity of discussing the ideas of appropriation of African culture within the African-American community parallels the duality of the African-American struggle of identity.

### Judge A Book by Its Cover

Expression of personal identity through style and fashion has proven to be paramount to the understanding of different cultures (Griebel 1995). Fashion is a particularly personal form of art that allows the wearer to not only be a consumer of art by wearing the work of other people, but it allows the wearer to be an artist and a curator as well. When putting on an outfit, people make a choice as to what story they are attempting to tell about themselves in that moment because, whether we admit it or not, judgements about a person upon first meeting them are based on outward appearance, and a key aspect of this outward appearance is the way in which a person dresses. Griebel plainly, but eloquently asserts that, "...dress is a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time..." (89). Viewing clothing as means of linking personal and social identity through expression allows for the study of fashion to become anthropologic. Thus, by dissecting fashion trends, it is possible to dissect issues of identity as well.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of Black pride and rebellion against Eurocentric beauty standards and this is expressed through the usage of Afrocentric clothing (Moth TV 2017). If you see a person of African descent incorporating a dashiki, headwrap, or African print into their own personal style, it might be safe to assume that they are expressing the idea that African roots are important to their own ethnic identity. As movements spread, however, based on my observations of recent styles, it seems very natural for the meaning behind the usage of the clothing to be lost, and for apparel like dashikis to become "just" a fashion trend.

This recent explosion of Afrocentrism, or emphasis on African culture, is reminiscent of similar fashion trends during the Black Power movement when "Soul Style", or "race-conscious fashion" (Ford 2015, 97), was utilized as a statement of liberation from the pressing racial issues of the time.

### Don't Forget Where You Came From

There was an immense push in the African-American community during the Black Power movement to recognize African roots and combat the Eurocentric standards in society, whether this meant equality in education and treatment under the law, or just acceptance of natural black beauty (Griebel). Black youth no longer felt the need to fit the mold that America had placed on the black community. African-American people who were continually marginalized by the American system became rebellious against the very ideologies that America pushed on them (Griebel, 223). How could they place their identity in a system and place which did not even acknowledge their humanity and right to exist in their own ethnic identity? Where else could they look for a foundation in identity other than their Motherland?

There was a newly kindled desire to unify under the commonality of West African roots and look towards Africa as the motherland and source of creativity (Walters 1993). "Don't forget where you came from" is a common statement used to express the sentiment that excluding your past identity from your current identity



*A woman wearing what is described as an "exotic look". Photo: In Ebony Magazine. Chicago: Johnson Publisher Co, 1970.*



would be a disservice to yourself and those who paved the way for you. In a simple way, this saying highlights the ancestral element of ethnic identity.

During the Black Power movement, the predominant sentiment was that those who are a part of the African diaspora should be united by their common ancestry. This sentiment, known as Pan-Africanism, was an attempt to bring African-Americans together because people of African descent all share a common ancestry and therefore must unify. Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism within the African-American community tends to expand during times of political unrest and activism. A key element to achieving Pan-Africanism was to change how African-American

people viewed and categorized themselves on a personal level; instead of solely viewing themselves in the context of America, they began to view themselves in the context of Africa. In addition, this new personal identity was an attempt to transform how society identified and categorized them as well. To understand this thought process, it is imperative to understand the difference between social and personal identity. Hinton (2004) offers the explanation that,

Social identity they [Bullough & Bullough] define as 'knowledge that one belongs to certain social groups and that membership in groups has emotional significance.' Personal identity they define as 'specific attributes of the individual such as feeling of competence, bodily attribute, ways of relating to other, psychological characteristics, personal tastes, and so on' (19).

In order to change one's social identity, one must start with personal identity and express this in a way that is understandable to other people. Based on personal anecdotes, many African-American people choose to identify as descendants of "African kings and queens" instead of being solely the descendants of slaves in order to change the narrative around what it means to be African-American. As an attempt to control the negative social identity placed on them, they took control of the way in which they viewed themselves. Afrocentrism began as a personal movement, a grassroots movement, and a way for common people to find what they personally characterized themselves as in relation to how the world and country characterized them. Once this personal identity founded in ancestry was strengthened and molded, it could then be expressed outwardly. In turn, this expression could be utilized as a mechanism to change



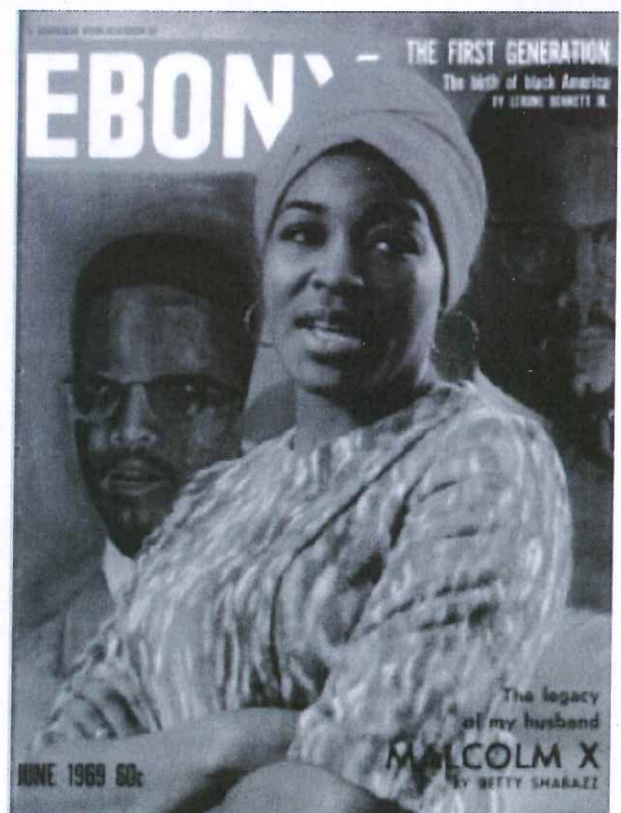
*Power and unity (symbolized by the black fist), the Pan-Africanism (symbolized by the Pan-African flag), and Africa were three main elements in the reshaping of African-American identity. Photo: Black Power. Digital Image. Pinterest. Accessed December 5, 2016. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/524106475358226476/>*

the way in which one they were preserved and grouped by others. Discovering what it meant to be of African descent in America required looking back at what being African meant and still means.

## African-American: Emphasis on African

While looking through Ebony magazines published from 1966-1974, it became very apparent that Africa was being portrayed in a way that supported the corresponding ideologies of the time. Articles about the fashion in Africa and photos of women dressed in vibrant African prints aided the idea that being of African descent was inherently superior to being solely American.

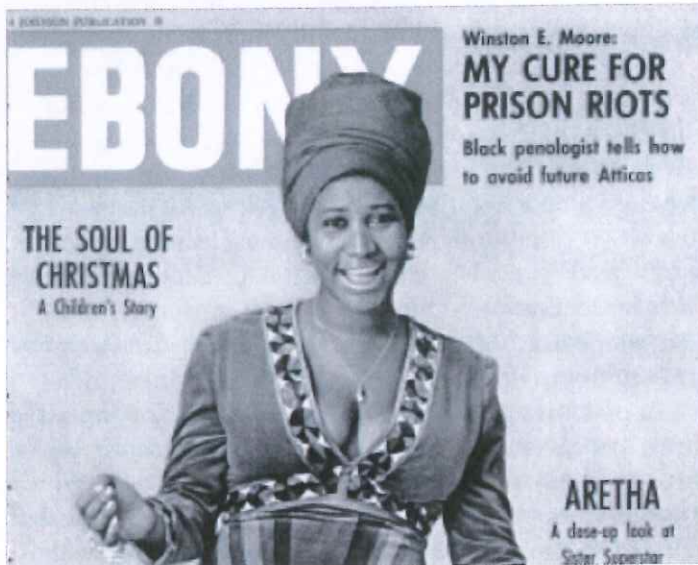
Hinton (1995) explains that being African was seen as being more desired than being African-American. But what social and personal parameters would cause this phenomenon? *African* was constructed to mean pure, while *American* came to mean having struggles and obstacles that would not have occurred had Africans never been brought to America.



*Cover page of Ebony Magazine demonstrating Soul Style. Photo: In Ebony Magazine: Chicago, Johnson Publisher Co., 1969.*



African-American people's desire to be free from the oppressive social identity associated with being American was expressed through embracing an *African* identity because being African would mean that they could fully express their ethnic identity without fear. However, this empowering idea of freedom found in African identity becomes problematic when the entirety of the continent is reduced to solely existing within the realm of the African-American identity.



Soul music icon Aretha Franklin wearing a headwrap and African-inspired dress. Photo: In *Ebony* Magazine. Chicago: Johnson Publisher Co., 1971.

When explaining this phenomenon, Hinton reductively states that, "In other words an African-American in African clothing is trying to pass for African; an identity deemed superior to that of African-American..." (22). While I agree with how the mentality is analyzed, this view that African-Americans were essentially attempting to pass as African does not encompass the complexity of the ethnic identity of African-American people. While African-American people cannot directly link their heritage to West Africa, a major component of their personal and social identity is having roots in Africa. It is unreasonable to separate the *African* from *African-American*; the ethnic identity is tied to a self-awareness and pride in what makes them strong and resilient in a nation that continues to marginalize them. This strength is usually found in the idea of a past history of reign in Africa. Admittedly, this is an *Africa* that some African-Americans have imagined to build their own identity and find their place in American society. Based on my own personal reflection and experience, however, for some African-Americans being of African descent is essential to the production of their identity. There seems to be no way to justly separate the two.

### Black is Beautiful

People within the African-American community began to exude this new selfhood grounded in a West African

past through personalized adaptations of African clothing. In her book *Liberated Threads*, Ford observes that African-American students began to sport African-inspired beads, African print, natural hair, and headwraps in their personal style as a symbol of unity and rebellion.

African-American women, especially, took much pride in being able to incorporate Afrocentric qualities into their personal American style. Ford (2015) highlights how African-American women expressed their ethnic identity as being characterized by roots in Africa, as well as, being an American: "...they stitched garments that blended their vision of African attire with Western silhouettes and black southern flair..." (97). In addition, these women, continued to



Women embracing African roots by wearing African-inspired beads. Photo: In *Ebony* Magazine. Chicago: Johnson Publisher Co., 1970.

say they saw, "Africa as a motherland and [drew] inspiration from African prints and modes of adornment..." (Hinton, 9). This personalization of African clothing exemplified the duality of the African-American ethnic identity.

Ford further argues that, "In the early years of soul style, it was about identifying with a body and style politic that was African in origin" (97). For African-Americans, the embrace of West African roots manifesting itself in fashion trends was an approach at combating the narrative that their identity would be found in the oppressed and silenced character that America was attempting to give them. There is nothing silent or timid about vibrant African prints and big natural hair.

These new trends simply could not go unnoticed. The very aesthetic of Afrocentrism alone is enough to express that black people in America would no longer fit the molds of a Eurocentric society. Eurocentrism is explained as "...a modern phenomenon and cannot be dissociated from the political economic and cultural domination of Europe and, later, the United States" (Ritzer 2007). While ethnocentrism is often associated with the sentiment that one's own ethnic background is superior to others, Afrocentrism does not follow this pattern. Instead, Afrocentrism is the revolutionary thought that culture derived from Africa is indeed valuable despite societal notions that it is inferior to Eurocentric





Amye Glover, seen wearing a zebra print dress and matching headwrap, sewed her own Afrocentric clothing. Photo: Ford, Tanisha. Figure 4.5. 1972. In *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

culture. Through slavery, African people were coerced into building a country that continued, and continues, to deny their right to exist and succeed within their own cultural identity. The powerful aesthetic of Afrocentrism paired with the complexity of

the reclamation of a cultural identity that was stripped from Africans as they were enslaved and exploited is where the power of non-verbal communications comes into play.

The sixties are characterized as a time of globalization, decolonization, utopianism, countercultures, and protest movements (Shatanawi 2015, 7). The new embrace of Afrocentric aesthetics certainly paralleled the political and social unrest of the times evidenced by the revolutionary Black Power movement, in which African-American people stood up against the injustices of the time. The term "Black Power" was first brought to public attention in 1966 when the Black Panther Party was established (Ford 2015). They were a group that was revolutionary in the sense that the popular submissive, passive attitude in the African-American community would not work against the atrocities of time. Ford explains how, "Soul style garments became the uniform of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defenses (BPP), linking the style with radical activism..." (98). People desired to be as powerful and daring as those associated with the Black Panther Party, and this made the soulful aesthetic even more appealing. In hindsight, it is apparent that the usage of the Afrocentric fashion trends was a symbolic expression of embracing roots in Africa, as well as expressing solidarity with the political movements of the time. But it is still unclear what allows these culturally tied items to become symbols of entire movements.

### **Africa: The Monolithic Notion**

The universal, romanticized, monolithic view of Africa within the African-American community allowed for an African print to become more than just a print (Griebel). The African print on the body of an African-American

expressed a new ethnic identity based on a people brought from the motherland. Even more than solely expressing a new identity, the print also represented the very reclamation of the assumed forgotten cultural identity founded in this motherland. These beads represented an entire notion of freedom found in being *African*. But what is unnerving about this notion is that Africa becomes one place, with one cultural identity and atmosphere.

Pan-Africanism may be a powerful and mobilizing ideology based on its ability to unify a people of the African Diaspora in order to combat marginalization and oppression; however, it aids in the notion that Africa is a monolith. This allows for the creation of many different "Africas", none of which encompass the entire truth of the continent and its people. Hinton explains that, "...African-Americans have invented a number of 'Africas', designed to serve American purpose..." (19). The generalization of Africa within the African-American community is certainly displayed in the rapid spread of Afrocentrism in the African-American community.

This Pan-African view of *African* clothing strips away the personhood tied to ethnically identifying as African. Hinton states that, "Every artifact on the continent belongs to someone or some culture more specific than 'African'" (22). According to Angelo Bonomi, who was born



The amount of black students embracing their natural hair creates a sense of unity and power. Photo: In *Ebony Magazine*. Chicago: Johnson Publisher Co., 1970.

in Nigeria and moved to America at a very young age, "...back home, clothes are just clothes.... It's just when you come here [America], they mean something more because it is all you have to hold on to" (personal communication October 2017). Angelo further explained that each print represents a different tribe because usually one person supplies clothing for the entire tribe. Cultural anthropologist Svasek (2016) explains that, "Dress styles characterized by their...use of a



variety of materials ranging from locally produced hand-woven or -coloured materials to a variety of imported fabrics and styles, all of which contribute to the constitution of what is considered Nigerian" (39). Angela's experience supports this finding as she explains that the particular print one owns and wears also demonstrates who one knows, and thus, one's social status. None of these significant aspects of African culture are consciously taken into account when African print becomes just a trend for African-American people.

## Complexity of Ethnic Identity

At what point, exactly, do African-Americans cease to be African? Is being a part of the African diaspora justification enough to participate in the culture? At what point does their usage of particular African prints to display their own ethnic identity appropriate African ethnic identity?

When there is a lack of true understanding of actual African culture within the African-American community due to the monolithic, utopian view of a home where they could be free, the trends of Afrocentric fashions become a vessel for appropriation and reduction of the validity of African ethnic identity. To take an already existing cultural aspect and strip it entirely of its original context to use for your own purpose completely marginalizes that culture and ultimately deems it inferior to the new usage of a cultural aspect that originated in this "old" culture. It would then follow easily that African-Americans were culturally appropriating African culture since they took clothing which was not a part of their direct identity out of its context to use for their own radical purpose. However, this view does not take into account the complexity of the African-American ethnic identity. Soul style was the usage of African-inspired clothing which represented the African foundation of African-American people; the added context of the fight against oppression of America, allows for the African clothing to shape into a new meaning in order to fit a new identity. This new usage of established cultural dress epitomizes how as cultural and ethnic identities evolve, so do the mediums that express these identities.

African-American people ceased to be African when the material aspects of their culture were stripped from them. Enslaved Africans were forced to take on a new ethnic

identity when they were reduced to being a monolith and thus mixing all cultures. Cultural ties continuously became lost as they were forced to understand their new social identity. This new social identity came to shape the personal and ethnic identity of enslaved Africans. By attempting to reclaim this past personal and cultural identity which existed before centuries of enslavement, black youth in America essentially make powerful statements against the very moments in which Africans were forced to become African-American. This moment is marked with reduction of humanity and marginalization (Griebel 1995); the same aspects which were plaguing the African-American community during the civil rights movement.

Even so, the Afrocentric fashion trends grew from characterizing a movement to being just fashion trends to some people. Another Nigerian living in America, Morenike Ibidapo, expressed that African-American usage of African clothing becomes appropriation when there is a lack of genuine desire to embrace heritage through an actual understanding of the culture and a false understanding of the culture which is painted from a generalized view of the continent (personal communication October 2017). The reclamation of a cultural identity that was stolen represents how African-Americans hold a new ethnic identity that has a duality of existing within both African and American contexts.

By dissecting the context around the usage of beads, afros, and dashikis, the complexity of ethnic and personal identity is revealed. It can become understood that an African-American person incorporating African print into their everyday wardrobe is a symbol of liberation against the limiting social identity that American society awards them. The internal search for identity for African-American individuals is an ongoing process due to the oppressive nature of American society and a separation from Africa. While an imaginative view of Africa allows for freedom to be found, it also reduces the cultural identity that African people have when African culture is viewed as a monolith. Understanding the elements behind ethnic identities allows for not only improved intercultural interactions, but a deeper understanding of one's personal role in these interactions.

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Divya Juneja

Though I have been interested in the United States justice and legal system for years, it wasn't until my Writing 101 class *Contemporary*

*Political Philosophy* that I truly started to understand just how much the system disadvantaged African Americans. The racial disparities in incarceration and arrest rates disturbed me, so I became curious to know some of the root causes of such astounding statistics. With the Black Lives Matter movement so heavily covered in the news at the time, these racial disparities were something that were ever-present outside of class.

When I attended Duke's Provost Forum, *Policing Color: Black, Brown and Blue*, I finally decided the focus of my final paper: The way in which the media and news networks portray people of color. What were these mediums doing that perpetuated stereotypes about African Americans and had the potency to influence public opinions on people of color? And just how strong and far reaching were these effects? Race, especially within the legal system, continues to cause conflict and injustice, but I am a firm believer that the more we talk about and address the problems, the closer we can get to being a society in which racism no longer exists in the ways that it does today.

This paper would not have been possible without the help of my Writing 101 professor Dr. Matt Whitt who was constantly available as a resource while working on the paper and whose perspectives on the topics of our class were always thought-provoking. Ms. Klein and Ms. Winter, two of my teachers in high school, were also a few of the incredible teachers I had who first inspired my thoughts on the American justice system; they taught me how to formulate my own ideas on these complex issues and put these ideas into words. The many peer reviewers from my writing class were also invaluable in helping me to make this paper what it is now, and I also owe thanks to Professor Sheryl Emch and the rest of the Deliberations board for giving me the opportunity and suggestions I needed to really finalize the paper. Finally, I would not have gotten anywhere without the support of my family and friends who were the first people to really shape my thinking.

# The Cyclical Nature of Crime and African Americans in the Media

Divya Juneja

Writing 101: Contemporary Political Philosophy

Course Instructor: Matt Whitt

African Americans living in the United States today face a formidable obstacle in how they are portrayed in the media and then actually treated when interacting with others. It is a cycle of criminalization where the media, when discussing crimes in which black people were involved, perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans which then go on to foster fear and hostility. With fear and hostility comes more criminalization of African Americans by the public and more coverage of them by the media in the same way. The end result? A vicious cycle that is unlikely to stop. Knowledge of these obstructions that black people face is varied, ranging from ignorance, to awareness, to actively taking steps to stop the problem. Black Lives Matter, as an oppositional force, is actively attempting to make the public more aware of how the media shares news stories regarding African Americans with the hope that the media's negative influence will diminish.

While Black Lives Matter started as a simple, yet widely circulated hashtag responding to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who fatally shot seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2013, it has grown into an immense social movement known worldwide. Today, the platform covers a wide breadth of issues ranging from the economic inequalities faced by African Americans to ways in which the criminal justice system has destroyed black communities through high levels of incarceration and criminalization.<sup>1</sup> At the movement's root, however, is a fight against what is often used as a justification for the way black people are treated in the United States. A fight against respectability politics, which is "the notion that minorities can best respond to structural racism by individually behaving in a 'respectable' manner that elicits the esteem of Whites as a way to insulate the self from attack while also promoting a positive group image that can 'uplift' the reputation of the group."<sup>2</sup> Contrary to this idea of respectability politics, the Black Lives Matter platform argues that the current perceptions and devaluing of African Americans in this country is what needs to change, not how black people dress, speak, or act.<sup>3</sup> In the end, the lives of all black people should matter significantly more than their supposedly non-respectable clothing or behaviors that, in some instances, result in death.

1 The Movement for Black Lives, "A vision for black lives: policy demands for black power, freedom, and justice," *The Movement for Black Lives*, <https://policy.m4bl.org/> (accessed April 2, 2017).

2 Newman, Zachary, and Osagie K. Obasogie, "Black lives matter and respectability politics in local news accounts of officer-involved civilian deaths: an early empirical assessment," *Wisconsin Law Review* vol. 2016, no. 3 (June 2016), 543.

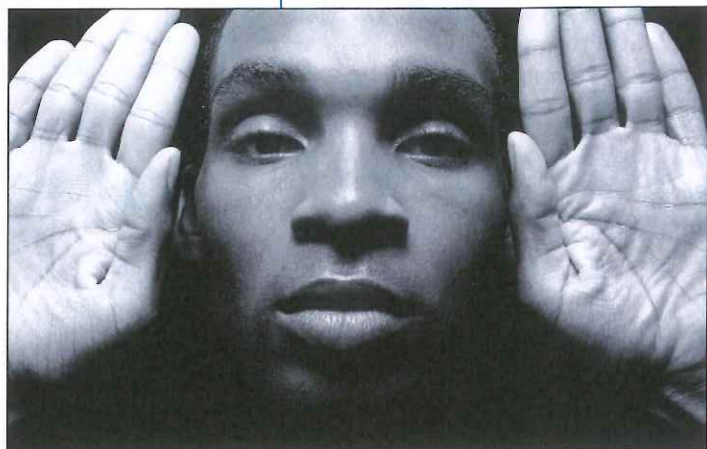
3 The Movement for Black Lives.



The media often disproportionately present African Americans as dangerous and less valuable, propagating respectability politics, and thus shaping the current perceptions of African Americans in society. For the purpose(s) of this paper, I have defined the concept of media broadly to encompass all forms of media, from local and national newspapers to television networks to documentaries and any other source of news in this country. I will claim that African Americans in the United States today are stuck in a cycle of crime and the media. The scripting and framing techniques employed by the media, which, as studies have shown, almost exclusively influence homogenous, white communities, have three major consequences for society: furthering negative stereotypes regarding African Americans, connecting race to violence and crime, and reinforcing the devaluation of black lives.<sup>4</sup> These three consequences translate into increased police caution and fear around black communities, more punitive policies that target African Americans, and the heightened criminalization of black people—all of which are then featured in the media, continuing the harmful cycle with crime and the media.

When news networks or television programs speak about African Americans, it often comes with a certain script, or “coherent sequence[s] of events expected by [an] individual,” that tell the story of unstable family life, poverty, low intellect, and general disorder.<sup>5</sup> To exemplify this script, we can turn to any number of news stories. For instance, the media used this narrative to tell the story of the Urban Debate League, a program that encourages inner-city students to get involved in debate and improve their performance in school. In order to have the emotional, yet predictable story of a disadvantaged, minority student overcoming all odds to achieve success, the local news, when covering the Urban Debate League program, overwhelmingly stressed and focused on the backgrounds and childhoods of these participants rather than their accomplishments since joining the program. The problem with this script, and scripts like it, is that it continues to stereotype African Americans as poor, of a lower status, and in need of help. We, the American public, see this so often in the media nowadays that the association of African Americans with poverty and family problems has almost become automatic.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, by sticking to such scripts and narratives, not only can the media foster these negative stereotypes about black people, but they also perpetuate the idea that black family life is culpable whenever black people take part in violent encounters. Bill O'Reilly, host of Fox News during the Trayvon Martin coverage, argued on air that the violence in African American communities was “due to single parenting and ‘disintegration of the Black family in America’”; there was no mention of “the 300-year systemic disenfranchisement of people through slavery” having “a lasting effect on future generations.”<sup>7</sup> When stereotypes about African Americans and their families and monetary situations are continually shown in the script as hanging in the balance, these images are engrained into our minds. Consequently, it becomes extremely easy to point to these readily available stereotypes as the reason



4 Beckmann, Matthew N., Franklin D. Gilliam Jr., and Nicholas A. Valentino, “Where you live and what you watch: The impact of racial proximity and local television news on attitudes about race and crime,” *Political Research Quarterly* vol. 55, no. 4 (December 2002).

5 Beale, Sara Sun, “The news media’s influence on criminal justice policy: how market-driven news promotes punitiveness,” *William and Mary Law Review* vol. 48, no. 2 (2006), 448.

6 Reid-Brinkley, Shanara Rose, “Ghetto kids gone good: race, representation, and authority in the Scripting of inner-city youths in the urban debate league,” *The Journal of the American Forensic Association* vol. 49, no. 2 (2012), 78.

7 Madison, Ed, “Media Portrayals of the Trayvon Martin Tragedy,” *Sage Journals* vol. 15, no. 4 (July 2015): 278-282, accessed March 23, 2017, doi: 10.1177/1532708615578418, 278.



behind a violent encounter involving an African American, whenever such encounters occur. The media's narrative disregards how America's history of slavery and discrimination has disadvantaged and placed African Americans into circumstances where they are more likely to experience violence.

Framing, another media technique similar to scripting, also furthers negative stereotypes about black people by disproportionately showing African Americans as the perpetrators of crime. The technique is used by the media to "[select] some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient . . . to promote a particular problem definition."<sup>8</sup>

For example, when the local news features a violent crime and chooses to show the people involved, the suspects are most commonly black while the victims are much more frequently white. Moreover, images of black defendants often show them in handcuffs or surrounded by police, while images of white defendants have them in normal clothes with their lawyers.<sup>9</sup> When the media discuss crime stories, they make a conscious decision about which stories to cover and which elements within them to stress. As of now, the media is not only highlighting more of the crimes in which an African American was the perpetrator and a white person the victim, but also very clearly portraying the race of these perpetrators and victims. By framing violent crimes with these racial connotations, the media solidifies the stereotype that African Americans are more prone to being the instigators of violence and crime.

The media's high coverage of crime stories may not be motivated by the intent to target a certain race. Instead, the ways in which the media racially frames the perpetrators and victims in these stories is what negatively affects African Americans. In the 1980s and 1990s, television networks, especially those owned by big corporations, made the switch to covering and widely dramatizing crime stories in attempts to raise their profits. Getting hard news, which includes information on government policy action and the economy, was costlier, while covering big trials, like the O.J. Simpson trial, would significantly increase viewership and thus bring in more money. As a result, crime became a very popular

topic for big news networks like ABC and NBC to cover.<sup>10</sup> The merits of such profit-motivated actions can be debated, but what is undeniable, regardless of whether the high crime



coverage is justified, is that high amounts of crime coverage mean a large proportion of stories framing perpetrators almost exclusively as black, which strengthens the association of African Americans to violence and crime. The media may not have bad intentions in regards to black communities, but the way they are framing the stories that have taken over primetime has extensive, adverse implications for African Americans that are incomparable to the monetary gains news outlets are making.

Alternatively, stories about police violence against African Americans can also be framed in ways that adversely impact black communities even though, in these cases, African Americans are the victims of the crime and no longer the perpetrators. Several local newspapers from *killedbypolice.net* framed violent police encounters with African American victims by leaving out the race of the victim and police officer completely—a phenomenon coined “colorblindness.”<sup>11</sup> In “framing violent police engagements as isolated moments rather than putting them in a social and historical context that allows for connections to be seen between individual engagements and established police practices in minority communities,” the possibility that race at least somewhat led to the fatal shooting is not even considered to be an option.<sup>12</sup> Though leaving out race may have been an attempt to endorse the idea of a post-racial society and not promote certain stereotypes about African Americans, in ignoring race in a story where the black person was a victim of the police, further analysis on the role race and implicit bias could have played in the shooting is closed off.<sup>13</sup>

To the media, the fact that a person involved in violence or crime was African American seems to only be worth noting when said person was the perpetrator of the violence and not when this person was the victim of the violence, especially when it is police violence. Choosing to tell the narrative by framing and stressing that a person was black only when he or she committed or initiated the violence solidifies the association between African Americans and crime. Therefore,

8 Beale, 447.

9 Beckmann, Gilliam, and Valentino, 758.

10 Beale, 422-429.

11 Newman and Obasogie, 561.

12 Newman and Obasogie, 563.

13 Newman and Obasogie, 563.



there is a question worth considering: if the media showed more white perpetrators or provided the race of victims, would it have an effect on the connection between race and crime that exists today? As of now, the media's focus on African Americans as crime perpetrators instead of victims generates the misguided belief that the criminal justice system is rightfully targeting the violent and crime-ridden neighborhoods in this country—neighborhoods that have a high proportion of African Americans.

Another way that media framing contributes to these misinformed perceptions of African Americans and their connection to crime is by revealing that the victims of police violence are African American, but then moving on to criminalize these victims in the story. In fact, this framing technique is a pretty common practice employed by news providers: 29% of articles examined from *killedbypolice.net* had information on the criminal record of the victim even though these records “[were] often not relevant to whether the police acted appropriately in using deadly force in the particular moment in question.”<sup>14</sup> By framing the story as a police officer having to deal with someone with a past police record, the officer's actions become more correct, necessary, and just, even though this is not necessarily true. Police officer perspectives and written police reports, which in 73-81% of newspapers were the only sources referred to when recounting the incident, are taken to be rational, sufficient explanations for the police officer's actions.<sup>15</sup> However, this type of framing not only reinforces the idea that black lives are not worth further investigation, but also devalues their lives. What any black victim did in the past, even if it be participating in criminal activity, should never justify his or her death.

If media reporting told the truth about the criminal justice system in the United States, they could reveal the enormous racial disparities that exist in our nation's incarceration rates rather than further the false ideas that African Americans are more prone to crime. Incredibly, “while 3 out of 200 young whites were incarcerated in 2000, the rate for young blacks was 1 in 9.”<sup>16</sup> These numbers reveal that the United States has a huge problem with disproportionately incarcerating African Americans. Instead of addressing this disparity, however, “the mainstream media's tendency

to portray people of color as being more prone to criminal behavior than Whites leads to false presumptions about the racial disparities in incarceration rates in the United States.”<sup>17</sup> The media, along with many other groups, is making the public believe that the higher number of African Americans in prisons is due to them being more likely to take part in criminal activity and be violent.

Most unfortunate, however, is that the consequences of the media's scripting and framing techniques are most significantly influencing white people who live in neighborhoods and communities where they have minimal interactions with African Americans on a daily basis. When exposed to a local news segment reporting on a crime with a black suspect, those from primarily white, homogenous communities are more likely to absorb negative stereotypes about African Americans. On the other hand, those from heterogeneous communities are not influenced by the negative portrayal of African Americans because they have previously had real-life interactions with black people and are thus less likely to be influenced by news reports.<sup>18</sup> This illustrates that the media is one of the only sources of information people from less diverse areas have shaping their opinions on people of other races. In turn, if the media presents African Americans negatively, then this is how white people in isolated areas will think about them.

Besides influencing the general public's opinions and feelings regarding African Americans, the media's influence on



police, a subset of the general public, has particularly significant implications for the African American community. The media, therefore, can foster fear in police officers, especially those raised in homogenous areas or those who have only interacted with African Americans in crime settings. Fear creates division among people by highlighting the differences between groups

and developing an unwillingness to truly learn what others are like; “it can seem easier to live with false beliefs than to risk venturing out to experience what is unfamiliar.”<sup>19</sup> The police and African Americans are only being distanced further by what the media is showing, which can make encounters tense and more likely to end up with violence or death. Because a good portion of what people are watching is centered on

<sup>14</sup> Newman and Obasogie, 569.

<sup>15</sup> Newman and Obasogie, 565.

<sup>16</sup> Loury, Glenn C., *Race, Incarceration, and American Values*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Madison, 280.

<sup>18</sup> Beckmann, Gilliam, and Valentino, 766.

<sup>19</sup> Madison, 280.



crime—which is being framed in ways that give a negative image to African Americans and strongly influence white people from homogenous communities—apprehension about crime and supposedly violent African Americans is high.

Ironically, since crime started getting more coverage, the crime rate in the United States has actually dropped considerably, implying that by choosing to cover so much crime, not only are news corporations promoting fear, but they are also giving Americans the wrong perception about safety in this country.<sup>20</sup> What results is an unreasonable fear of crime and, because African Americans are tied to crime by the media, an unreasonable fear of African Americans as well. On top of this increased police and public fear surrounding crime and African Americans, much of which is falsely based, media coverage also leads to a higher support for greater punishments in the criminal justice system. The unfortunate consequence of media tactics, like scripting and framing, and high crime coverage is that “public opinion polls . . . [demonstrate] high levels of anxiety about crime, a persistent unawareness of the drop in crime rates, and a strong support for more punitive measures.”<sup>21</sup> If the public is under the impression that crime is a problem in the United States, then they will support whatever policies help people feel safer, no matter what the actual state of safety is.

News reports can also more directly contribute to a greater support for punitive policies. Those from white, homogenous communities are more likely to support tough, punitive, crime policy after watching a news report on a violent crime committed by an African American person.<sup>22</sup> The media can thus be more powerful than affecting personal feelings about a certain group of people because they also shape the public policy that is created from these feelings. Therefore, the fear fostered in the public by the media leads to concrete punishments that mostly affect African Americans. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, crime policy drifted towards targeting the drug-use problem that had exploded among white, middle-class teenagers. Despite being designed to control this subset of the white population, the newly

implemented laws were mostly enforced with black teenagers. They were easier to catch and less likely to be able to defend themselves in court because of an inability to afford lawyers and the implicit bias against black people held by many judges.<sup>23</sup> Proponents of these types of laws argue that black communities are also pushing for more punitive policies to protect their own neighborhoods; however, the policies, as they are currently implemented, disproportionately hurt African Americans.

These unjust applications of punitive policy send more African Americans to prison, which means more of their crimes are featured on the local news, only to be covered in a negative light. A vicious cycle forms, whereby the media portrayal of blacks leads to fear and punitive policies which ultimately feed back into the media showcasing blacks repeatedly in the same negative ways. We saw this in 2007 in a school in Jena, Louisiana where a white student and a few black students got into a fight after the white student used the “n” word when referring to his



black counterparts. While the white student suffered a few injuries, the black students were put on trial and considered for twenty-two years in prison. Throughout this case, the media, including shows like *Dr. Phil* and *Oprah*, continued to portray the white student as a victim and cast the black students as criminals. No focus was placed on the unjust policies and punitive ways the black students had been forced into this situation in the first place.<sup>24</sup> These were the same punitive policies that were first created out of a fear of African Americans from the media’s portrayal of them—policies that were now exacerbating the impact of the media on the black community, bringing these communities in contact with the media once again.

This cycle between media and crime is driven by criminalization, or the way in which African Americans are continually criminalized in the media and then in actual interactions with the public in ways that whites never experience. In order to “control” these African Americans that are cast as criminals, violent, and disorderly, the United States is exerting a “punitive social control” over black communities.<sup>25</sup>

20 Loury, 4.

21 Beale, 418.

22 Beckmann, Gilliam, and Valentino, 767-768.

23 Loury, 17.

24 Rios, Victor, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, New York: NYU Press, 2011, 20.

25 Rios, 21.



As soon as black children are born, they assume this violent and dangerous criminal role—which is partly designed by the media—and are affected by “hypercriminalization,” a concept that describes how black children are forced to be thought of and treated as criminals.<sup>26</sup> Whether black youth are being “pulled over by police officers, questioned by teachers and administrators,” or “looked at with suspicion by merchants and community members,” African Americans are persistently thought of as guilty until they can otherwise prove their innocence.<sup>27</sup>

Time and time again, African Americans are criminalized by society in ways that the media then chooses to feature on its shows. For example, Michael Brown, a teenager in Ferguson, Missouri shot by a police officer in 2014, was immediately attacked by the media for his past illegal actions while his family had to fight to prove that his life had worth. In the news, “the descriptions of his character included the alleged theft of cigarillos (often invoked to legitimize his death), the fact that he ‘dabbled in drugs and alcohol,’ and that he ‘had taken to rapping in [the months leading up to his death], producing lyrics that were by turns contemplative and vulgar.’”<sup>28</sup> When we criminalize African Americans in our everyday interactions with them, we continue to use these characterizations of blacks as justifications for their deaths, no matter the circumstances when they occur. Therefore, the media picking up these justifications and using their storytelling tactics, leads to the negative stereotyping of African Americans that explains why society continues to criminalize black people in the first place. It is a cycle that for many years has been unable to even slow down.

Before concluding, it is important to note that the media is not the only factor that can and does shape our perceptions of African Americans. The institutional bias, racism, and discrimination that have come from previous government policies are a few of the many other factors that shape racial perceptions in this country. The media’s role, however, is large

enough to deserve examination and evaluation. This is also not to say that all media and news networks are selectively scripting and framing stories in ways that negatively impact African Americans. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* is a good example of a show that makes an effort to reveal the problems in the criminal justice system and how these problems affect African Americans. In his episode on police accountability, instead of attempting to justify police officer actions, John Oliver investigated how little the FBI knows about the number of police shootings in this country, criticizing the way the US Department of Justice “intentionally cast[s] an officer in the best light possible when investigating the officer’s use of deadly force.”<sup>29</sup> Shows like this contrast the majority of news sources, which do disproportionately portray African Americans negatively, by acting as a fact check on what is so often shown on television.

The criminal justice system in this country is far from perfect, with massive racial disparities in incarceration and arrest rates as just one piece of evidence showcasing this. The media has a unique position and could use its platform, as John Oliver did in his piece on police accountability, to reveal these injustices and the truth about crime, race, and institutional bias in America. These kinds of changes would be an invaluable departure from the current reporting on crime that most of the media has been covering until recently. It could be the critical first step in eliminating the effects of the media’s scripting and framing techniques that perpetuate negative stereotypes about black communities, link them to crime and violence, and devalue their lives. Furthermore, it would profoundly benefit not only African Americans, but all Americans, by eliminating fear of blacks and the need to increase punitive policies that cost the nation much more than they help. We stand at a crossroads as the media decides what to do next about how and what to report. Ultimately, this choice will determine the fate of the cycle between media, crime, and African Americans.

26 Rios, 21.

27 Rios, 19.

28 Newman and Obasogie, 553.

29 HBO, “Police Accountability: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO),” Filmed [October 2016], YouTube video, 19:54, Posted [October 2016],

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Sahil Sandhu

In the Writing 101 class *Medical Anthropology*, my professor challenged us

to use an interdisciplinary lens to examine a health topic discussed in American culture and medical practice. As medical anthropologists do in their research, we were to apply a truly holistic approach and take into consideration the biological, cultural, and political-economic dimensions of health and illness. The ultimate goal of the project was to analyze what was missing in the narrative that we chose to research.

I decided to look into precision medicine, a new model in which patient care is customized to the individual, especially through genetic profiling. From the government to the media, precision medicine seemed to be lauded by all parties as a bold and revolutionary effort with unbounded potential. I came across an article, however, that warned that precision medicine may falsely lead some people to connect racial health disparities with genetics. Was it possible that this new movement could accidentally reintroduce racial biology into American society? Could such a praised model have unintended and problematic social consequences? These were some of the questions that guided me as I began my research, collecting as much information as I could on the topic from a wide array of sources including medical journals, sociology critiques, legal reports, and magazine articles.

Writing a paper in a discipline so new to me was definitely an academic challenge. Nonetheless, the experience forced me to think, investigate, and organize my thoughts in new ways. I am so grateful to my professor Dr. Boyette for all his guidance and encouragement throughout my writing process. I would also like to thank my editor Dr. Emch for all her help and for pushing me to produce the clearest and strongest writing I could.

# Precision vs Racial Medicine:

## Lost in Translation

Sahil Sandhu

Writing 101: *Medical Anthropology*

Course Instructor: Adam Boyette



Precision medicine is a new approach to medicine in which individual differences in genes, environments, and lifestyles are used to make decisions about illness prevention and treatment. With the advent of more affordable genome sequencing, scientists have heralded precision medicine as a way to move past the current problematic model of racial medicine, whereby physicians use their patient's race to determine treatment. While most scientists and anthropologists claim that there is no biological basis for race (Yudell et al., 2016; Collin, 2004; Foster & Sharp, 2004; Templeton, 2013), there is still much discussion about the potential for precision medicine to address racial health disparities. In other words, even though scientists dismiss the idea of biological races, they acknowledge the utility of social constructs of race to address disparities in public health. This differentiation between the social and biological notions of race, however, is often misunderstood by doctors, patients, pharmaceutical companies, and the government. In fact, such ideas about race from the scientific community is often written in dense jargon and is not translated accurately into layman's terms.

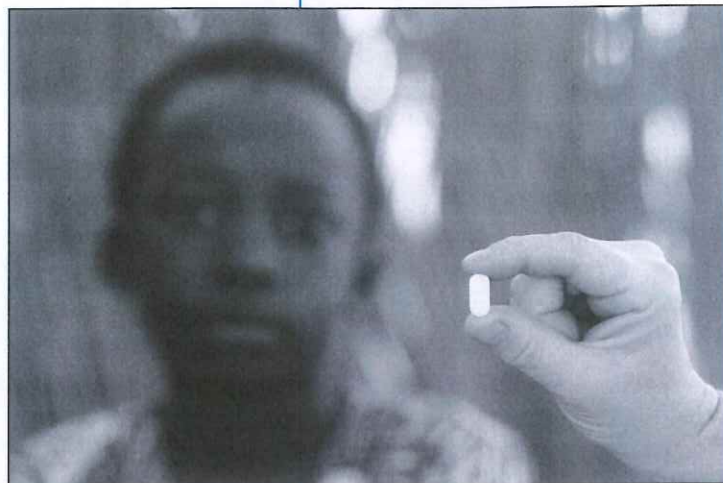
A lack of dialogue between the scientists investigating precision medicine and the healthcare industry and the public may unintentionally reintroduce the concept of racial biology into American society as the sophisticated and nuanced understandings of race in the scientific community become overly simplified and misconstrued. As the conversation moves towards genetic difference and away from the structural violence of poverty, environmental stress, and poor access to health care that disproportionality affect minority groups, health disparities may ultimately increase.

For decades physicians have had no way of determining their patients' genetic makeup as they attempted to make informed decisions about drug response. A drug may work with greater success on certain patients than others due to the particular



gene expression of drug-metabolizing enzymes and drug transporters that improve drug intake and efficacy. Consequently, many doctors turned to race as a proxy for genetic profiling. For example, doctors are less likely to prescribe ACE inhibitors for African-American patients due to the belief that African-Americans will respond worse to the drug than white patients (Collier, 2012). As a result, African-American patients who would respond well to ACE inhibitors to reduce hypertension may never receive such treatment (James et al., 2014).

Many scientists assert that race-based medicine is a crude tool that should only be considered a makeshift solution for precision medicine because it is too approximate (Ng et al., 2008). One reason race-based medicine is seen as imprecise is that most patients do not have extensive knowledge about their own ancestral lineage (Collier, 2012). For example, a study revealed that 96% of the self-described African Americans in Cleveland had significant European ancestry (Sinha et al., 2006). The study showed that self-identification with a race reveals more about societal and individual constructions of identity rather than the immense genetic variation that exists within them. More importantly, scientists from the Human Genome Project concluded that human populations do not make up biologically distinct racial groups (Hunt, 2013). In an article published by the Council of Responsible Genetics, Harvard evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin calls racial medicine “a fallacy” given that 85% of human genetic variation occurs among individuals occurs within local or linguistic populations. Furthermore, scientific experiments have indicated that in complex organisms, environmental and epigenetic effects influence health more than then pure genetic information (Graves, 2015). As a result, the scientific community often looks towards precision medicine as a way to reduce and eventually eliminate the use of racial medicine in drug prescribing.



## Understanding Race in Medicine

Despite their criticism of racial medicine, scientists still use the social constructs of race in their writing and research on precision medicine. They often discuss the potential of precision medicine to combat racial health disparities and the need to collect epidemiological data from all racial groups to ensure equal access to precision medicine. In fact, when scientists try to enroll the public in their clinical studies, they have to use self-reported race labels for the initial recruitment and enrollment of individuals because the public is only familiar with the traditional social constructs of race. (Applebaum et al., 2016). Consequently, scientists end up grouping clinical participants in large groups such as “Asian” or “Latino” (Konkel, 2015) because they need to aggregate mass amounts of data for each subgroup to produce statistically significant results. Such aggregation, however, fails to account for the vast genetic variation that exists within in each group. For example, while Asian Americans as a group appear to have similar rates of heart disease as white Americans, the prevalence is much higher in Filipinos and Asian Indians than Korean, Chinese, and Japanese Americans (Jose et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, although scientists understand that such categories will eventually be dropped for more specific DNA markers, they are forced to use broad racial and ethnic categories to initially recruit and categorize clinical participants. Non-researchers, however, may not recognize the complexity of these studies and incorrectly view such research as relating genetic markers to race. In 2005,



for example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People supported BiDil, the controversial first drug approved for self-described African-American patients, even without scientific proof that BiDil works differently for black people.

The complex social constructs of race used by scientists to frame their research is simplified when shared with the public, and in turn, the concept of racial biology reenters the societal psyche. The utility of “race” as a social construct for improving public health disparities despite the danger of viewing “race” as biological (i.e. racialized medicine) is explained well in a paper by law professor Jonathan Kahn (2013):

Unlike *racialized* medicine, which treats race as genetic, the use of race in medical practice has many legitimate and important places. Collecting broad-based epidemiological data is perhaps foremost among these. Only by using social categories of race is it possible to identify and track racial disparities in health, healthcare access and outcomes. Such information is needed to address on-going issues of racial justice in society (11).

The irony is that as medical researchers in precision medicine emphasize the need for collection of data from diverse population subgroups to ensure drug access for all, they unintentionally shift the conversation about health inequity from structural disparity to molecular differences (Taussing & Gibbon, 2013). As a result, a focus on molecular differences among races reintroduces the concept of racial biology into society.

## Immediate Effects

One way that precision medicine may propagate societal beliefs about racial biology is that it focuses on genetic differences among *groups*. Even leaders of the movement recognized that precision medicine is more about grouping patients together by genotype rather than focusing on the individual. In the last few years, the biomedical community rebranded the “personalized medicine” movement as the “precision medicine” movement (Juengst et al., 2016, p.22). However, this grouping of patients makes it is easy for doctors, pharmaceutical companies, public health initiatives, and even scientists themselves to use race as a simple proxy for genetic difference, especially in the current “infrastructure of racialization” (Lee, 2005, p. 2133). Dominant social ideas and values about human differences will inevitably impact society’s understanding of genetic human variation as Americans are unable to separate the “social” and the “biological.” As a result, we never move away from race-based medicine, and precision medicine might continue to exploit science’s societal credibility to propagate the belief that race is genetic.

First, doctors have been trained to use race-based medicine practices and believe strongly in its efficacy. A study revealed that many primary care physicians equate racial differences with genetic differences and see race/ethnicity as a valid marker for disease risk and drug response (Hunt, 2013). In fact, physicians have unconsciously used the advent of precision medicine and the supposed authority of cutting-edge science as a carte blanche for practicing racialized medicine. In an age when new medical information is being produced exponentially, clinicians may have a hard time staying up to date on the true science and intentions behind precision medicine.





Second, pharmaceutical companies embrace the concept of racial medicine. They have exploited, and will continue to exploit racial medicine in order to advertise drugs to niche markets. When pharmaceutical companies have narrower patient target populations (i.e. defined by race), they can have a larger share of the market and increase their profits. The president of the pharmaceutical company Nitromed has even said, for example, that creating drugs for Black and Hispanic males makes “good business sense” since they are an untapped market in the drug industry (Lee, 2005, p. 2136).

In addition to physicians and pharmaceutical companies, most patients, especially African-American and Hispanic patients, are open to race-based medical treatment (Feldman, 2014), even though the media has tried to debunk the practice. From a TED talk titled “The problem with race-based medicine” (Roberts, 2015) to a NPR interview called “Is it Time to Stop Using Race in Medical Research?” (Chen, 2016) to an *Atlantic* article about “Precision Medicine’s Post Racial Promise” (Newkirk, 2016), the media has voiced its concerns about precision medicine and its impact on societal understandings of race. However, the public still does not know much about race-based or precision medicine, let alone their implications.

This misunderstanding about precision medicine can be attributed to the absence of dialogue between different health care participants. Scientists write about the potential of precision medicine to move past the current problematic model of racial medicine. Social scientists, lawyers, and anthropologists passively counter such claims in niche genomic and precision medicine academic journals, often arguing that precision medicine may reintroduce the concept of racial biology back into American society. The media has even tried to communicate some of these concerns to the general public. Surprisingly, there is an overwhelming belief by doctors, the public, and pharmaceutical companies that racial medicine is a good proxy for precision medicine.

## Long-term Implications

The public perception that health disparity is rooted in racial biology moves the focus away from conversations about the structural violence of poverty, environmental stress, and poor access to health care that disproportionality affect minority groups. When individuals view race as genetic, they may view efforts to address social inequalities as futile and

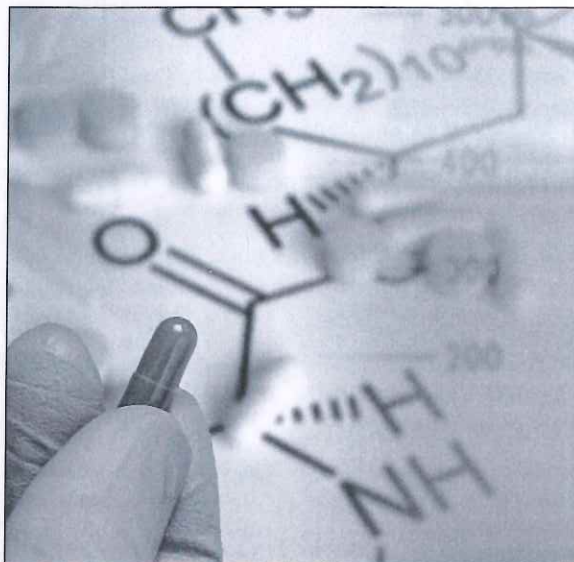
may see little need to connect with those different from them (Fullwiley, 2015). The dialogue about race and genetics needs to extend beyond specialized academic circles. As medical anthropologist Dr. Lee (2005) wrote, “At stake are struggles over equity access, and resources for public health” (p. 2133).

A potential area for the mistranslation of ideas is the application of precision medicine to “precision prevention” public health initiatives. Public health experts in government may try to use precision medicine to address racial health disparities on a large scale. As they analyze macro data, they

may try to use genomic differences in populations to explain health inequalities. While precision medicine uses specific genetic markers to create subgroups, public health interventions cannot define their target recipients in genetic terms. For example, a public health program cannot target all citizens who have the apolipoprotein E-e4 allele, which may predispose individuals to developing Alzheimer’s disease. Instead, public health traditionally defines target subpopulations along social lines such as ancestry, family, ethnicity, and race (Juengst et al., 2016).

When precision medicine is extended to precision prevention, public health initiatives may claim that a population’s negative health outcomes are due to genetics rather than social and structural inequalities. Such an argument could justify a reduction in governmental health aid programs for marginalized groups. Public officials might assert that racial health disparities should be dealt with at the molecular level by pharmaceutical companies rather than on a public health level by the government (Kahn, 2005). Ultimately, if precision medicine fails to be communicated clearly by the scientific community to others in the health professions, the government, and the public, it may significantly worsen health outcomes for racial groups by problematically changing the conversation from social disparity to genetic difference.

Precision medicine is a way to remake our fate, to not let the circumstances we were born with bring us down. It has the capacity to save many lives if implemented correctly. Nonetheless, precision medicine cannot take away from discussions about structural health disparities rooted in poverty, environmental stress, and poor access to medical treatment. If this loss in translation continues and scientists do not explicitly clarify their complex understandings of race to society, health care in America will continue its long history of inequality along racial lines.





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# Deciphering the Mozart Effect:

## How Does Prenatal Music Exposure Influence Postnatal Development

Karen Ou

Writing 101: *Music As Medicine?*

Course Instructor: Cary Moskowitz

### Introduction

Have you ever heard of the term “Mozart Effect” and wondered why it’s not “Beethoven Effect” or “Chopin Effect”? Well, the term “Mozart Effect” was first coined in 1991 by French researcher Alfred A. Tomatis who attempted to treat various learning disorders using Mozart’s music, but it wasn’t until the publication of a research study in *Nature* two years later that the term was first brought to public attention<sup>1</sup>. The study by Rauscher et al. reported a causal relationship between listening to Mozart’s music and short-term improvements in spatial-temporal reasoning<sup>2</sup>. In the study, a group of 36 college students listened to Mozart’s Sonata for Two Pianos in D Major, K. 448 for 10 minutes and scored higher on the spatial reasoning portion of the Stanford-Binet IQ Test. Even though the improvements only lasted for 10-15 minutes following exposure, the seemingly promising results of this study attracted much attention from various fields, and very soon the term “Mozart effect” was popularized to a tremendous degree. Since then, Rauscher’s study has been widely cited as scientific evidence for the IQ-enhancing power of music, but the transient nature of the enhancing effect is frequently neglected.

The inaccurate portrayal of Rauscher’s research findings in the popular press gave rise to a belief that still persists to this day - exposing the unborn child to music during pregnancy “makes the baby smarter”. Acute business people readily saw this as an opportunity to profit from prenatal music education, and expectant parents, aiming to give their babies a leg up later on in life, cheerfully bought the music-related products advertised in pregnancy books<sup>3</sup>. However, this phenomenon then begs a compelling question: what, if any, effects does prenatal exposure to music have on postnatal development? It is easy to buy into the idea that music must have some positive effects on the unborn child because it sounds good to the ears of an average adult, especially when such a claim is constantly seen in newspapers, book reviews, and music CD advertisements. Nevertheless, it’s important to think critically about the scientific basis for prenatal auditory stimulation and examine the neural, behavioral, and cognitive effects of prenatal music exposure on postnatal development in order to remain clear-headed in the face of pervasive commercialization of music in the consumer culture.



Karen Ou

Having casually wondered about the healing power of music every time I felt intimately attached to a particular song, I was immediately

intrigued by the question posed by Dr. Moskowitz’s Writing 101 class: *Music As Medicine?* My initial speculation about the therapeutic effects of music was transformed into a guided inquiry into the science of music therapy as we investigated this question. From my first group review article about musical association and memory improvement in Alzheimer’s patients to my final commentary on prenatal music exposure and postnatal development, my curiosity about music therapy grew exponentially as I came to realize the scope of its applications in various medical contexts.

Focusing on scientific writing rooted in empirical research and informed skepticism, Dr. Moskowitz’s class taught me the essential skills for developing a detailed analysis and critique of a research study and constructing a nuanced argument based on scientific evidence. The skills I acquired in this class helped me grow both as a researcher and as a writer; I learned how to evaluate and synthesize scientific literature to inform my understanding of a scholarly topic and how to effectively tailor the language of science to a target audience.

I got the idea for this commentary from a story my mother used to tell me when I was younger about how for months during her pregnancy she wore a belt-like device around her belly and played music to me in the womb from a small MP3 player. Having always been entertained by the anecdote, I found this project to be a perfect opportunity to delve into the subject of prenatal music exposure through a scientific lens, and it turned out to be a very enlightening exercise for me (and my mother).

This essay would not have come near its completion without the help and support from many of its readers. I would like to thank Dr. Cary Moskowitz for his excellent instruction and continued guidance throughout the course and the development of my writing. I would also like to thank Duke alumna Hilary Robbins, *Deliberations* editor Dr. Sheryl Emch, and my writing consultant Brigid Burroughs for their valuable insights and thoughtful feedback critical to my revisions every step of the way. I am also grateful to the *Deliberations* editorial board for providing me this opportunity to showcase my work and my love for science and writing.



## Background: Fetal Experience of Sound

The human sound experience begins early while the baby is still in its mother's womb and is enriched by a myriad of sound stimuli coming from within the mother's body and from the external world, including maternal heartbeat, breathing, digestion, voice, and music<sup>4</sup>. One fundamental question that has intrigued many expectant parents and researchers is: what and how can babies hear?

In the womb sound does not travel through air but rather through abdominal and uterine tissues of the mother, and we have good reason to believe that this difference in transmission medium makes a baby's perception of music somewhat different from ours. According to *The Child As Musician: A Handbook of Music Development*, the auditory system of the fetus begins to develop around the 20th week of gestation, and by the 25th week the fetus is equipped with auditory structures that allow it to detect sounds. Scientific studies have established that externally generated sounds are muffled due to the fluid-filled amniotic environment of the fetus as well as the uterine walls, and sounds at high frequencies are more attenuated than sounds at low frequencies. However, despite the muffling effect in utero, various features of sound including intonation, rhythm, and accentuation are preserved during transmission which suggests that music as we hear it retains its structural components as it reaches the ears of the unborn child<sup>8</sup>.



To proceed further in our discussion of fetal auditory experiences, we need to establish a set of criteria to analyze various studies on prenatal sound stimulation. To this end, we will focus on two basic characteristics of sound - frequency and loudness. Frequency plays an important role in that it determines the extent to which sounds are weakened when received by the fetus. Within the audible frequency range, sound attenuation ranges from less than 10 dB for sounds below 300-500 Hz to more than 40 dB for sounds at about 2000 Hz, with higher frequency sounds being increasingly attenuated<sup>5</sup>. Some example sounds in the low frequency range (below 500 Hz) include a bass drum, thunder, and a man's deep voice; while a whistle, squeal, and a child's voice are examples of high frequency sounds (above 2000 Hz).

Loudness, or sound pressure level (SPL), measured in decibels (dB) is also a key player in the fetal perception of sound. According to Arabin's opinion article in *Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynecology*, the mean SPL in the uterus is about 90dB, and the minimum SPL to elicit a fetal response is 20-30dB<sup>6</sup>. (To put this into perspective, whisper is about 30dB and the sound produced by a lawn mower is about 90dB<sup>7</sup>.) This marks the remarkable ability of the fetus to hear considering all the obstacles it has to overcome - it is sensitive to quiet sounds from the external environment such as lullaby in spite of the muffling effect and the noisy fetal environment. Although there is not yet consensus among researchers about the SPL in the natural fetal environment, it is well established that the fetus is inundated with a rich collection of sounds in the womb, which is critical for its growth and development.

## Effect of Fetal Sound Exposure on Structural and Functional Brain Development



A large body of experimental evidence suggests that repetitive sound exposure prior to birth alters brain structures and modulates brain functions, thereby increasing the brain's potential for learning and memory. These structural and functional changes induced by prenatal sound stimulation can be sustained for a period of time after birth depending on the duration of exposure<sup>9</sup>. However, ethical limitations and practical constraints present a roadblock to directly investigating the postnatal effects of sound exposure in humans. It is often difficult to experimentally manipulate sound stimulation in human embryos and impossible to study structural brain changes in human newborns because structural analyses of the brain require dissection and can only be achieved in animal models.

Nevertheless, researchers have been able to draw meaningful conclusions about the effects of prenatal sound stimulation on human postnatal development from animal studies because humans and animals are developmentally very similar and have comparable organization as well as function of the auditory system. Furthermore, in animals and humans alike, fetal perception of music is neither conscious



nor reflective, but rather rudimentary in the sense that sounds are perceived on the level of basic elements such as frequency and loudness, and stimuli with features most similar to the fetal sound environment are preferred over unfamiliar ones. Thanks to their developmental and perceptual resemblances to humans, animal models such as chicks and mice have helped researchers gain considerable amount of insight into how prenatal auditory stimulation affects postnatal brain development.

On the structural level, a multitude of studies indicate that repeated exposure to *music* in utero increases neurogenesis and synaptic plasticity in the infant brain, whereas *noise* exposure decreases the two. Moreover, music's beneficial effects are not only limited to soft, calming music like that of Mozart; loud music can also stimulate neural

growth and enhance brain development. In two separate studies Kumar et al.<sup>10</sup> and Sanyal et al.<sup>11</sup> found elevated expressions of synaptophysin and PSD-95, which are protein markers of synaptic activity, in the chick hippocampus following prenatal exposure to loud music at 110dB. In contrast, chicks prenatally exposed to noise at the same SPL had decreased protein expressions in their hippocampus, indicating impaired synaptic plasticity due to noise exposure. In addition to studying the expression level of proteins integral to synaptic activity, direct measures have also been taken to quantify neural growth in the music-stimulated brain. By staining neurons with BrdU, a chemical used to identify proliferating cells, Kim et al. documented an increase in the number of neurons in the mouse hippocampus with prenatal music exposure, but observed decreased neurogenesis due to noise exposure<sup>12</sup>. One potential limitation of Kim's study is that the "comfortable music" was 65 dB and the "machine noise" was 95 dB. While it is true that this failure to control for the SPL of the sound stimuli might have compromised the data accuracy to some degree, it is unlikely that the 30dB difference entirely offset the benefits of prenatal music exposure given the large difference in number of proliferating neurons between the music and the noise-stimulated groups.

Interestingly, the same brain-enhancing power has also been shown in species-specific sound stimulation in animal studies. Roy et al. exposed incubating chicken eggs to 65 dB species-specific sounds (i.e. maternal and hatchling calls) and found that levels of synaptic proteins including synaptophysin and PSD-95 were significantly upregulated in the hippocampus of sound-stimulated chicks compared to the unstimulated controls<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, Chaudhry et al. found that the extent of the increase in synaptic protein levels in the chick hippocampus did not significantly differ following exposure to either species-specific sounds or sitar music<sup>14</sup>. These studies suggest that maybe the magic does not lie in music - perhaps repeated exposure to rhythmic sounds in general stimulates brain growth regardless of the type of prenatal sound stimulus.

On the functional level, changes in the brain have been observed postnatally following prenatal auditory stimulation in the form of enhanced auditory and visual preferences, corresponding to early maturation of the auditory and visual cortex. Using a choice chamber with two opposite approach areas, Roy and colleagues found that species-specific sound-stimulated chicks demonstrated a stronger preference for maternal calls of its own species and were more responsiveness to species-specific visual cues compared to the control group at posthatch day 1<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, the sound-stimulated chicks took less time to initiate a behavioral response upon hearing the maternal calls, suggesting that prenatal sound exposure facilitated the integration of sensory input and motor output in the chicks' central nervous system. Employing similar methods, Jain et al. exposed incubating



chicken eggs to either species-specific sounds or sitar music and concluded that both types of stimulation increased the chicks' preference for species-specific sounds compared to the controls, which indicates that the beneficial effects of prenatal sound exposure are not limited to music alone<sup>15</sup>. The fact that music-stimulated chicks also preferred chicken maternal and hatchling calls over sitar music further shows that, depending on the species, ethologically relevant sounds are given preferences irrespective of the auditory stimulus presented in utero.

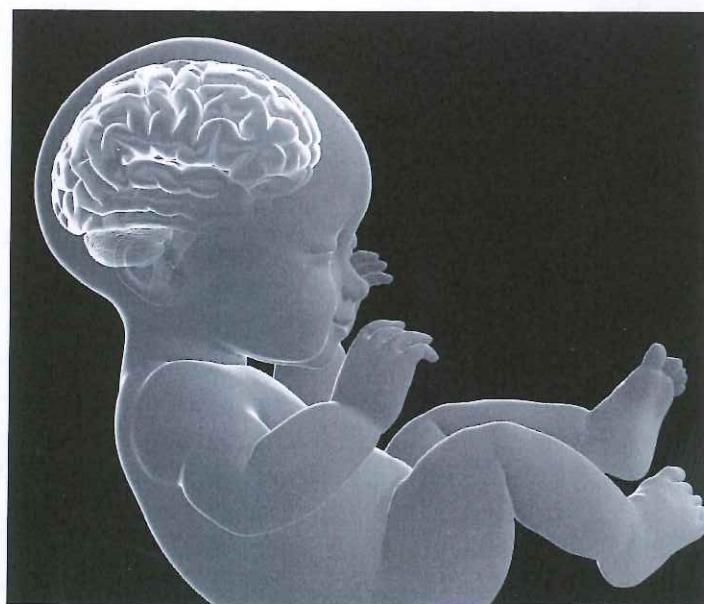
## Effect of Fetal Sound Exposure on Behavioral and Cognitive Development

The effect of prenatal sound exposure on postnatal cognitive and behavioral development is another area of extensive research. Any behavioral or cognitive consequences found in prenatally stimulated neonates rest on the premise of fetal learning, the idea that the developing fetus has the ability to acquire auditory information in utero and retain it after birth. Employing techniques of "habituation, classical conditioning, and exposure learning", researchers have established that the fetus is indeed capable of learning while it is in the uterus<sup>16</sup>. In the context of prenatal sound stimulation, researchers use the exposure learning method to study how repetitive fetal exposure to a specific sound stimulus affects neonatal behavior and cognition. One frequently employed strategy is to subject sound-stimulated newborns as well as the controls to a choice situation and observe their behavioral patterns in response to familiar and unfamiliar stimuli respectively. Cognitive learning is inferred from the experimental group's sensitivity to or preference for the familiar sound stimulus from the fetal environment by way of behavioral observances. Additionally, researchers also use strategies such as standardized assessment tests and brain electrical potential recordings to study behavioral and cognitive development of newborn babies.

Immediate improvements in postnatal behavior the effects are not very enduring without additional stimulation. For example, in the previously discussed study comparing species-specific sound-stimulated and unstimulated chicks in a choice chamber, Roy and colleagues found that behavioral differences between the experimental group and the controls were only statistically significant in 1-day old chicks<sup>13</sup>; on post-hatch day 2 and 3, the controls demonstrated comparable levels of auditory and visual responsiveness as the experimental group. Hence, prenatal sound exposure may improve postnatal behavior immediately after birth, but the advantages afforded by extra auditory stimulation in the womb appear to quickly diminish because the unstimulated brain soon adapts to the rich collection of sounds outside the fetal environment and develops neural pathways that strengthen the controls' behavioral response.

Direct behavioral assessments of prenatally stimulated newborns also show the beneficial effects of prenatal music exposure on neonatal behavior. For instance, the Brazelton Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale (BNBAS) evaluates term infants' neonatal behavior based on 27 different items grouped in 7 clusters, including habituation, orientation, motor performance, and reflex<sup>17</sup>. Using the BNBAS, Arya et al. found that babies born to mothers who listened to the same 50-minute recording of calming music every day from approximately 20 weeks of gestation until delivery scored significantly higher on 5 of the 7 clusters compared to the controls<sup>17</sup>. Orientation and habituation were most significantly improved in the experimental group, and there was also a trend towards better motor performance. This study again affirms the beneficial effects of prenatal music exposure; however, it remains unclear how long the behavioral benefits endure since the BNBAS was administered to the infants on day 2-3 after birth and no long-term follow-up was included in the study.

As for cognitive development, prenatal sound exposure has been shown to facilitate spatial learning and memory, in accordance with the previously discussed increase in neurogenesis and synaptic plasticity in the brain<sup>14 18</sup>. Chaudhury et al. found that chicks prenatally exposed to either species-specific sounds or sitar music demonstrated superior maze-navigating ability and therefore improved spatial learning compared to the unstimulated chicks on post-



hatch day 1<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, Kauser et al. also reported enhanced spatial learning in sound-stimulated chicks for a short period of time after birth, but argued that *memory* was transiently impaired in the prenatally *music*-stimulated group<sup>18</sup>. After 3 learning trials at post-hatch ages 24, 72, and 120h, a fourth trial was conducted to test memory of the maze 24 hours after training at each post-hatch age. While total time spent in the maze generally decreased with increasing age, the

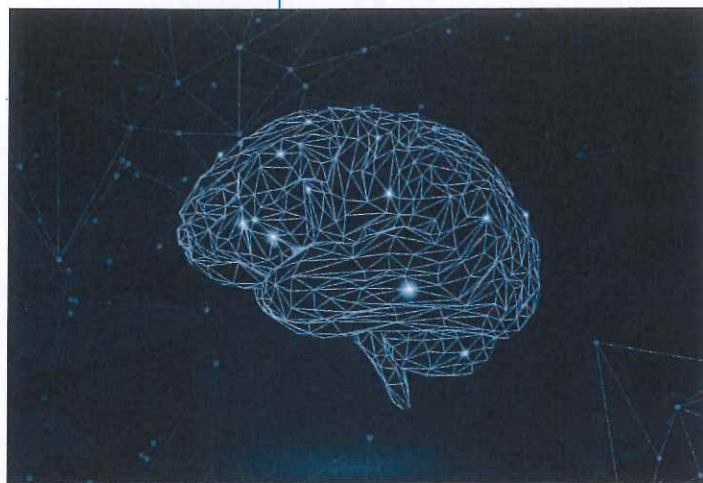


music-stimulated chicks at age 24h experienced a statistically significant peak in time spent in the maze during the fourth trial (i.e. 24 hours after training at 24h post-hatch) compared to the controls and the species-specific sound-stimulated group, indicating reduced retention of the learned task and therefore temporary memory loss in one-day-old music-stimulated chicks. Although we can reliably trust the results in this study because it was published in a reputable peer-reviewed journal, the singularity of this deviant behavior in chicks renders little relevance to our discussion of prenatal sound stimulation and does not suffice for the conclusion that prenatal music exposure indeed impairs short-term memory.

In addition to behavioral studies, tests that measure electrical activity of the brain provide us with another set of tools to analyze cognitive processes such as learning and memory. Event-related potentials (ERPs) are electrical impulses of the brain evoked by specific stimuli or events and can be used to study the physiological underpinnings of individual cognitive processes. Partanen et al. found that infants who were stimulated prenatally with a particular song had stronger ERPs upon hearing the same song from their prenatal environment than the unstimulated controls<sup>9</sup>, showing direct evidence that prenatal music can indeed enhance neural responsiveness in the *human* brain. Surprisingly, the effect was sustained in the music group 4 months after birth without additional stimulation. While stronger brain responses to a particular song don't directly translate into better cognitive development, this finding offers valuable insight into the foundation of human cognition since what goes on in our mind is essentially inseparable from what goes on in our brain. Just as memories are formed through the strengthening of synapses due to increased signal transmission between neurons after repeated exposure, stronger electrical impulses of the brain could also mean a higher potential for learning and memory. Furthermore, a positive correlation was found between the amplitude of the ERPs and the number of times the song had been played to the infants in utero, suggesting that the effect of prenatal music stimulation depends on frequency of exposure<sup>9</sup>. This study has profound implications about the discrepancies between human subjects and animal models. In contrast to the animal models in which only transient effects of prenatal music exposure have been observed, human infants seem to have longer-lasting neural effects following exposure, possibly due to increased complexity of the human brain and thus higher capacity for long-term potentiation. However, more research is needed to confirm the long-term effects of prenatal music exposure on human postnatal development.

## Significance and Applications

One practical application of auditory stimulation in utero is prenatal music education. While science has established that prenatal music exposure indeed induces improvements in various aspects of postnatal development, there is not sufficient scientific evidence verifying that fetal exposure to music in addition to normal sound stimulation in everyday life provides any long-term benefits for a healthy baby. Furthermore, there is a substantial disconnect between scientific research and popular opinion with respect to prenatal music exposure. It's not hard to find sensationalized newspaper articles and blog posts that emphasize the importance of prenatal music education to "make baby smarter in the womb"<sup>19</sup>. Disappointing as it may be, much of the evidence supporting this claim relies heavily





on anecdotal accounts of improved postnatal musicality due to prenatal music education reported by parents as well as music professionals born to musician families<sup>4,8</sup>. Researchers have yet to find convincing results that demonstrate a causal relationship between prenatal music exposure and increased intelligence in postnatal life.

Questionable marketing is also responsible for perpetuating the unrelenting belief in the value of prenatal music education. Of course every parent wants their child to become a genius by starting education as early as when the child is still in the womb. Taking advantage of exactly this “baby Einstein” psychology, companies create mesmerizing advertisements of “Lullabelly Prenatal Music Belt” and “BabyPlus Prenatal Education System” with alluring promises of “lifelong benefits” of prenatal music education<sup>20</sup>.

In response to pervasive media sensationalism and overblown marketing of prenatal music education, even Rauscher, who first brought the “Mozart effect” into public attention in her 1993 study, conceded that the heightened interest in “Mozart effect” in the popular press is largely unfounded and admitted “there is no compelling evidence that children who listen to classical music are going to have any improvement in cognitive abilities”<sup>3</sup>. However, this is not to say that all the time and money invested in prenatal music education are completely futile – science does show that prenatal auditory stimulation is conducive to neural, behavioral, and cognitive development of the baby, but the

short-term temporal persistence of the effect demands a continued effort for music education in early childhood. Therefore, the best bet is to be optimistic, but not gullible when it comes to prenatal music education. For expectant parents and especially the mom-to-be, sitting back and enjoying some music amidst the hustle and bustle of pre-parental life is a wholesome exercise for *both* you *and* your baby, and there is no need to overly concern yourself with preparing your unborn child for the outside world when there are plenty of opportunities waiting for him or her ahead in life.



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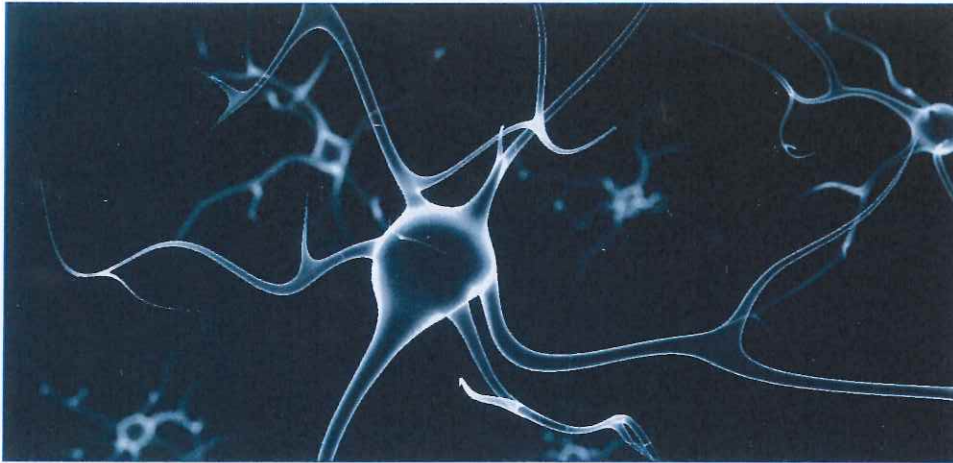
# Running Away From Neurodegenerative Disease:

## The Impact of Endurance Running on Adult Hippocampal Neurogenesis and Cognitive Function

Max Moser and Katherine Li

Writing 101: *Introduction to Cognitive Neuroscience*

Course Instructor: Emily Parks



### INTRODUCTION

Physical exercise plays a key role in promoting physical and mental health (Warburton et al., 2006), enhancing neuroplasticity, and improving cognitive functions such as spatial learning, memory, attention, and executive function in the human brain (Ma et al., 2016; Killgore et al., 2013; Yau et al., 2014). Studies in rodents over the last two centuries were able to further confirm this relationship, as well as indicate a correlation between enhanced cognitive abilities and increased adult hippocampal neurogenesis in the brain following physical exercise (Ma et al., 2016). Thus, these results have led to the hypothesis that neurogenesis, the postnatal generation of new neurons in the brain, is the mechanism by which exercise improves cognitive function in rodents (Ma et al., 2016; Yau et al., 2014).

Driven by these pioneering findings in animal models, scientists turned their attention to the human brain. With their discovery of adult human neurogenesis in 1998, Gage and colleagues overturned the widely-held tenet of the 20th century that the human brain is not capable of generating new neurons throughout life (Ma et al., 2016, Sierra et al., 2011) and paved the way for a new area of neuroscience research. While the correlation between exercise and cognition has been established in both humans and rodents, the mechanism by which physical exercise improves cognitive function in humans still remains to be explored. This study will examine whether



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Never having taken a neuroscience course before, both of us were extremely intrigued when we heard about the Writing 101 course *Introduction to Cognitive Neuroscience*. We've always been fascinated by the brain and the complexity involved in understanding how people think, and this class allowed us to challenge ourselves while diving into unknown territory. Over the course of the semester, we read scientific journal and popular press articles to get a sense of the variety of writing styles used in science today. We explored cutting edge research topics ranging from neuroplasticity to the neuroscientific basis of free will.

As we headed towards our last big assignment at the end of the semester, we found ourselves becoming more and more interested in the ability of physical exercise to alter our brain chemistry and health. Under the guidance of our professor, Dr. Emily Parks, we conducted a comprehensive literature review that ultimately led us to our research question: Does physical exercise improve cognition by stimulating neurogenesis in the adult human brain?

This topic is especially meaningful because it allowed us to apply our interest in sports and exercise to a field of neuroscience that had just recently begun to be developed following the discovery of adult neurogenesis in the late 1900s. One of the main goals of our paper is to draw attention to the many questions about the human brain that still remain unanswered. We thought it would be fascinating to explore whether running and other forms of physical exercise could serve to enhance neurogenesis and prevent age associated cognitive decline.

We would like to thank Dr. Parks for introducing us to the broader field of cognitive neuroscience, as well as helping us to find our own place within the seemingly overwhelming conversations revolving around neuro-degeneration and neurogenesis. This course offered us the opportunity to not only learn about scientific writing, but also break into and begin exploring the world of writing about cognitive neuroscience so that ultimately we can make our own contributions.



participation in regular treadmill running exercises can induce hippocampal neurogenesis in adult humans and cause improved cognitive function as has been demonstrated in rodents.

On a broader scale, a better understanding of the relationship between physical exercise and neurogenesis is important for the treatment of neurodegenerative diseases. The hippocampus is one of the first areas of the brain damaged in Alzheimer's (AD), Parkinson's (PD), and many other neurodegenerative diseases caused by the aging process (Ma et al., 2016; Yau et al., 2014). Human adult neurogenesis has primarily been observed in the subventricular zone (SVZ) of the lateral ventricles and subgranular zone (SGZ) of the dentate gyrus of the hippocampus (Ma et al., 2016; Sierra et al., 2011) and thus could play a role in alleviating the negative effects of neurodegenerative diseases (Ma et al., 2016; Yau et al., 2014). As a growing body of research indicates that a decline in adult neurogenesis may underlie the cognitive decline associated with many of these neurodegenerative diseases, the role of neurogenesis in the hippocampus has become an area of increasing interest (Ma et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2008).

In this research proposal, we will evaluate recent discoveries from literature on neurogenesis studies in animals and then lay out what is currently known about neurogenesis in humans. Before presenting our proposed experiment and the methods, we will establish our research gap by synthesizing and contrasting the current knowledge on animal and human neurogenesis. Overall, the study of neurogenesis in humans is still developing and future studies could greatly benefit from our findings. If our experiment can establish physical exercise as one of the mechanisms that enhances neurogenesis in the human brain, an effective alternative treatment option for thousands suffering from neurodegenerative diseases could be developed.

## Neurogenesis Studies in Animals

Adult neural progenitor cells, precursors for neurogenesis, were first discovered in the rodent brain in the 1960s (Ma et al., 2016); since then, numerous studies have been conducted on rodents to investigate the role and mechanism of adult neurogenesis in the brain. In addition to revealing functional roles of adult hippocampal neurogenesis in the rodent brain, studies also investigated whether neurogenesis could be induced in the brain. Rodents that were forced to run regularly on the treadmill demonstrated that physical exercise enhanced neurogenesis in the hippocampus and facilitated synaptic plasticity (Ma et al., 2016). Experiments conducted by van Praag, Kempermann, and Gage (1999) further revealed that running exercises doubled the number of surviving newborn cells, increased cell proliferation, and increased net neurogenesis in the hippocampi of female mice, thus confirming that physical exercise can actually induce neurogenesis in the brain.

Furthermore, when exercising rodents were tested on cognitive function, it was found that physical exercise improved memory performance by enhancing neurogenesis. Improvements in spatial pattern separation (Creer et al., 2009) and spatial learning (van Praag et al., 1999) in adult mice following voluntary wheel running have been tightly correlated with increasing levels of neurogenesis in the brain. These results suggest that hippocampal neurogenesis could be the mechanism by which exercise improves cognition. Despite the abundance of research that supports this relationship in rodents and other animal models (Ma et al., 2016; Sierra et al., 2011; Yau et al., 2014), much still remains to be discovered not only about the relationship between human neurogenesis and cognitive function, but also about whether physical exercise can induce neurogenesis in human brains like it does in rodent brains.





## Neurogenesis Studies in Humans

Research on the human brain over the last 20 years has revealed that: 1) the brain is capable of neurogenesis throughout its lifetime, and 2) exercise serves as an accelerator of cognitive function in the brain. Experiments by Killgore et al. (2013) examined the correlation between physical exercise habits and neuroplasticity and demonstrated that the human brain is in a “constant state of morphological change” (p.1). By comparing an exercising group to a sedentary control group, Killgore et al. (2013) discovered that hippocampal volume changes corresponded to the total number of minutes of weekly physical exercise performed by a subject. Furthermore, regular exercise was not only associated with higher grey matter volume measurements within the left and right hippocampal region, but also with better performances on memory task tests when individuals with higher aerobic fitness levels were compared to less fit individuals. These results show that frequent physical exercise can affect physical aspects of the brain, improving cognition by playing an important role in remodeling brain tissue and increasing the connectivity of grey matter.

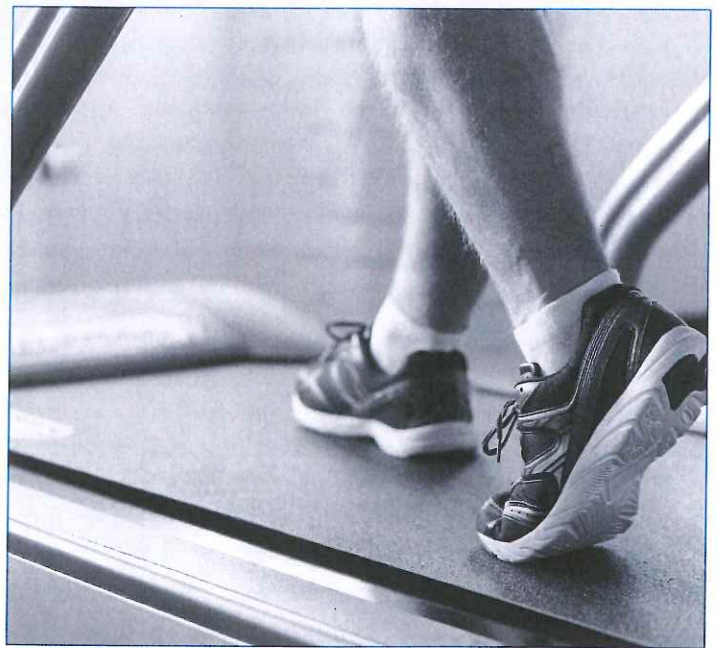
Other publications further establish the link between cardiovascular exercise and cognition. Experiments by Ma et al. (2016) and Yau et al. (2014) suggest that physical exercise can lead to benefits in memory, attention, processing speed and executive functioning after just one month of consistent exercise. In vivo imaging studies by Yau et al. (2014) using cerebral blood volume (CBV) as a measure of physical exercise indicated a correlation between CBV levels and cognitive performance that confirmed that exercise improves these aspects of cognition. Individuals who exercised for more than three months had increased blood volume levels and improved scores on neurogenesis-dependent tests following exercise (cited in Yau et al., 2014). Thus, these studies showed that higher aerobic fitness and participation in regular physical exercise is associated with neuroplasticity in terms of grey matter volume, as well as increased cognitive function and intelligence.

Given the correlations between physical exercise, cognitive function and neuroplasticity, scientists have become interested in elucidating the mechanisms by which physical exercise increases cognitive function and neuroplasticity. One proposed mechanism is adult hippocampal neurogenesis. Although adult neurogenesis in rodent brains had already been established in the early 1960s, the existence of adult neurogenesis in the human brain wasn't confirmed until the groundbreaking studies of Gage and colleagues in 1998 (Eriksson et al., 1998). Despite the immediate interest in this new area of research, progress to further understand adult neurogenesis in the human brain has been hampered by the lack of reliable methods to assess neurogenesis in live human brains. Most animal experiments

rely on ex vivo examination of freshly frozen or properly stored postmortem brain tissue. Furthermore, the usage of bromodeoxyuridine (BrdU) labeling technique, the method used in the initial discovery of human neurogenesis by Gage and colleagues, is no longer allowed due to safety concerns as BrdU has been shown to potentially disrupt the blood-brain barrier (Sierra et al., 2011; Ma et al., 2016).

While a few methods have been developed to assess neurogenesis in humans, the majority of them provide inconsistent results and there are significant differences in each of them that make comparative studies even more difficult (Sierra et al., 2011). Among the more promising techniques though is a methodology developed by Manganas et al. (2007) for in vivo neurogenesis measurement. By using magnetic resonance spectroscopy (MRS) and singular value decomposition, they were able to detect a neural progenitor cell (NPC) biomarker whose levels were shown to correlate with neurogenesis in vivo and thus use it to assess neurogenesis levels in vivo (Manganas et al., 2007). While the validity and precision of the usage of MRS and the NPC biomarker for in vivo assessment of neurogenesis still require more testing (Ma et al., 2016), the results are extremely promising and simply need to be researched and developed further.

## Physical Exercise and Neurogenesis in the Human Brain



Due to the limitations associated with assessing neurogenesis in humans, not much is known about the impact of physical exercise on neurogenesis or neurogenesis on cognitive function in human brains. Multiple rodent studies have indicated that not only can physical exercise induce adult hippocampal neurogenesis, but it is also correlated with enhanced cognitive function and slowed progression of cognitive decline in neurodegenerative diseases. Although



these relationships are well established in rodents, the lack of reliable in vivo human neurogenesis measurement techniques has limited the ability of researchers to investigate these relationships in humans.

Thus, while physical exercise has been shown to enhance cognition in humans, it still remains to be discovered whether: 1) physical exercise can induce neurogenesis in humans, and 2) increased neurogenesis is the mechanism by which physical exercise enhances cognition in humans. The existing knowledge and preceding questions have led us to the following research question: *Can endurance running increase hippocampal neurogenesis in adult humans?* In order to determine whether physical exercise can induce neurogenesis in the human brain and investigate whether neurogenesis is actually the mechanism by which physical exercise improves cognitive function in the brain, our study will examine the impact that regular treadmill running over a period of 6 months has on neurogenesis in adult male humans of three different age groups. Based on the results of previous research done on rodents, we expect the neurogenesis levels of our subjects to be slightly higher immediately following a running session, as well as higher on average after 6 months of exercise. On a larger scale, our research tries to address the question of whether neurogenesis is the mechanism responsible for increased cognitive function by coupling neurogenesis measurements following physical exercise with performance on cognitive tests. Due to the established correlation between regular physical exercise and improved cognitive function, we expect the participants to consistently perform better on cognitive tests assessing attention, memory, etc. following every two-week running period. Thus, if better performance on the cognitive tests over time can be correlated with increasing neurogenesis levels, it would demonstrate that the enhancement of neurogenesis by physical exercise is the mechanism by which physical exercise benefits cognition.

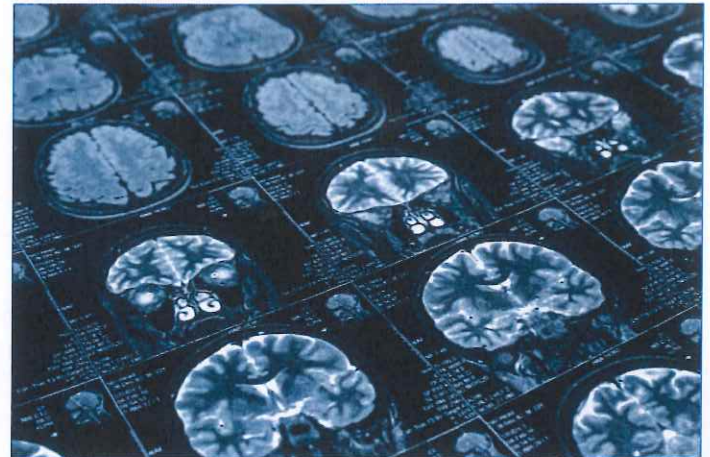
## METHODS

After careful consideration, it has been decided that this study will focus on male participants aged 30-60 years old; 300 total participants fitting these specifications will be recruited in order to have a significant sample size for statistical analysis.

**Gender.** This study will include only male participants. Differences in neurogenesis in humans of different sexes have not yet been shown because of the limitations in measuring neurogenesis in vivo and the uncertainty of whether adult neurogenesis can be induced in the brain. The recruitment of just one sex both prevents the introduction of additional variables related to sex differences that could skew the data and simplifies the analysis of the results of the study.

**Age.** The main reason for choosing to include 30 to 60

year-old participants is because the probability of the onset of neurodegenerative diseases has been shown to increase after 25 years of age as cell division and metabolism rates begin decreasing (Hung et al., 2010). Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated that the human body can lose up to 45% of lean body mass between the ages of 30 and 80, resulting in a loss of 20-40% of muscle strength by the time people reach 70-80 years of age (Hung et al., 2010). Thus, the exercise regimen used in this study could potentially be too strenuous for people older than 60. This limited age range will allow us



to better focus on understanding the relationship between exercise and neurogenesis in each specific age group.

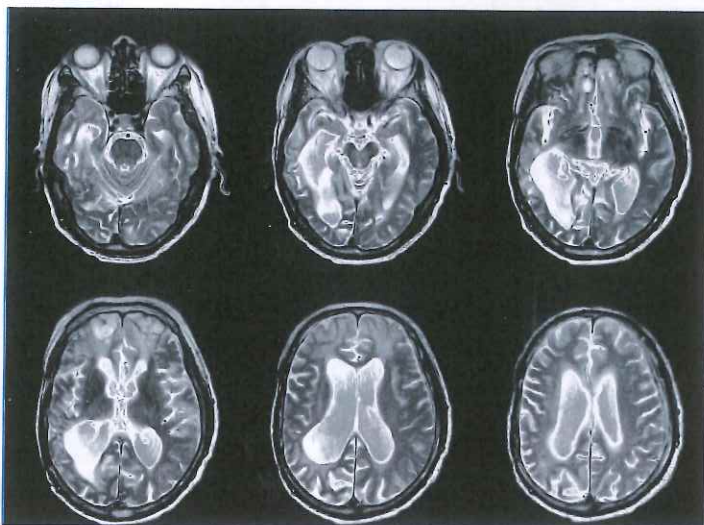
**Fitness Ability.** Once a group of 30-60 year old males is selected, a fitness test will be used to further determine the most appropriate participants for our study from within this group, i.e. males who are actually physically able to complete the exercises. This fitness test will closely model the execution and level of difficulty of the physical exercises that will be conducted in the study, helping us to better identify individuals who will or will not be physically capable of participating in the study. In addition, the fitness test will allow for the selection of individuals with similar aerobic fitness profiles in an attempt to avoid large-scale variation in individual fitness levels that will affect measurements, as well as to simplify and increase the accuracy of conclusions drawn at the end of the experiment.

**Athletic vs Sedentary.** Following the selection processes outlined above, the experiments will be conducted on three different age groups ranging from 30-60, each spanning ten years, which will then be further divided into athletic and sedentary groups as indicated below:

- Athletic subgroup 1: 50 male aged 30-40 years
- Athletic subgroup 2: 50 male aged 40-50 years
- Athletic subgroup 3: 50 male aged 50-60 years
- Sedentary subgroup 1: 50 male aged 30-40 years
- Sedentary subgroup 2: 50 male aged 40-50 years
- Sedentary subgroup 3: 50 male aged 50-60 years



Since the goal of our study is *not* to compare the impacts of physical exercise on participants across age groups, but rather to determine differences within each age specific sedentary and athletic group before and after the exercise



regimen, we divided our participant pool into the above-mentioned subgroups to simplify this comparison. Previous research has shown that elderly men are more prone to developing neurodegenerative diseases than younger men, so the age of the brain *does* have an impact on level of cognitive function. Thus, dividing the participants into narrow age groups and assessing changes within these groups will help ensure that observed responses are due to the exercise regimen and not to natural variability in brains of different ages.

The athletic subgroups will run on a treadmill twice a week for 45 minutes each time, while the sedentary subgroups will be given no running exercises to complete. In order to identify the correlation between endurance running and hippocampal neurogenesis, neurogenesis levels in each athletic subgroup will be compared to neurogenesis levels in each corresponding sedentary, same-aged and same-sized control group over a period of 6 months. To detect any changing neurogenesis levels as a result of the physical exercise, the neurogenesis level of each participant will be measured at the beginning of our experiment and serve as a basis for comparison for future measurements. Once we have established these baseline levels, additional measurements will be taken every two weeks to regularly update and compare the new results to previous levels. Furthermore, periodically testing the neurogenesis levels of the individuals will reveal important trends in how neurogenesis levels change over time and determine potential patterns, such as delays in the effects of exercise on neurogenesis levels or plateauing of the rate of change of neurogenesis levels after a certain amount of time. This time series data could be used to help design future neurogenesis experiments or even develop treatment plans for patients affected by neurodegenerative diseases.

Only comparing neurogenesis levels at the beginning and end of the experiment patterns would not detect these patterns, and the future applications of the study would not be as robust.

The difficulty of each workout for the age-specific subgroups is determined based on the average fitness level of all participating individuals. To control the intensity and difficulty of the physical activity of each subgroup, heart rate and VO2 max levels (maximal oxygen consumption) will be monitored for each individual. Moreover, the rate of miles/minute of each individual will also be measured to further ensure that testing groups have the same amount of difficulty in each workout.

By examining the brains of the test subjects using MRS (magnetic resonance spectroscopy) after every two-week workout period, the relationship between physical exercise and neurogenesis could be recorded. Based on the results, it would eventually be possible to determine whether or not physical exercise is responsible for the activation of neurogenesis. Furthermore, comparing and contrasting the results within athletic and sedentary subgroups will also allow for the identification of differences in age groups and their physical activity in terms of neurogenesis. To examine whether neurogenesis could be the mechanism by which physical exercise improves cognitive function in humans, each individual will also be subjected to a cognitive test at the beginning and end of the 6-month experimental period, as well as before and after each 45-minute exercise session to assess both short-term and long-term changes in cognitive function.

## DISCUSSION

A better understanding of physical exercise and its impact on neurogenesis could have significant implications for the development of therapeutic treatments for neurodegenerative diseases. Adult hippocampal neurogenesis has already been shown to play an important role in everyday cognition, learning, and memory (Ma et al., 2016). As humans age and experience a reduction in cognitive function, the number of newborn neurons in the dentate gyrus has also been found to decrease (cited in Ma et al., 2016; Yau et al., 2014), indicating a potential relationship between neurogenesis and cognition. Furthermore, a decrease in hippocampal neurogenesis has been associated with the cognitive decline and impairment that occurs as a result of common aging-related neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease (Yau et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2016). Thus, it is not surprising that neurogenesis is a major area of interest in the neuroscientific community as a potential treatment option for patients with neurodegenerative diseases.

Despite the interest, neurogenesis studies in humans have been limited by the lack of reliable methods for



assessment of neurogenesis in live human brains. There are currently two primary methods of measurement of neurogenesis: one using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to measure cerebral blood volume (CBV) levels as an in vivo correlate of neurogenesis (Pereira et al., 2007), and another using magnetic resonance spectroscopy (MRS) to measure levels of a neural progenitor cell (NPC) biomarker whose levels were shown to correlate with neurogenesis in vivo (Manganas et al., 2007). While both techniques have their flaws, this study will use the MRS method because previous experiments demonstrated that the MRS method can detect neurogenesis in human brains, while the MRI method was only confirmed in rodents. Furthermore, by using MRS to measure neurogenesis in this study, the data gathered could be applied to improving MRS for future neurogenesis studies.

By examining the relationship between physical exercise, neurogenesis, and cognition, this study will help further develop regular physical exercise as a therapeutic tool to slow down age and disease-associated cognitive decline or even repair brain tissue damaged by cognitive decline. According to Ma et al. (2016), the promotion of neurogenesis in hippocampal specific regions could help to delay the onset of age associated cognitive decline and the manifestation of neurodegenerative diseases. In conjunction with this, recent reports have also shown that regular physical activity performed by elderly people plays a protective role against Alzheimer's disease by improving cognition and should be used in combination with drug

therapies in treating Alzheimer's and cognitive decline (Santos-Lozano et al., 2016). Thus, developing a better understanding of how physical exercise improves cognition in humans and whether neurogenesis plays a role will allow for more personalized and better monitored preventative and therapeutic treatments for patients affected by age and disease-associated cognitive decline. Data collected in this study would have a crucial impact on how we understand and treat neurodegenerative diseases and could serve as a basis for therapeutic intervention for millions of people with these diseases (Yau et al., 2014).

Future studies would not only need to assess the impact of physical exercise on neurogenesis in women of different age groups, but also compare the impact on women with the impact on men. In addition, studies should also explore different types, intensity levels, and durations of physical exercise, along with better methods of measuring neurogenesis levels in vivo to ensure that the results of the experiments are comprehensive and accurate. The data and results of this research could then eventually be used to develop therapies incorporating physical exercise regimens of certain lengths and difficulty levels that are customized for the patient. Ultimately, this study and future ones will tackle the question of whether *literally running away* from neurodegenerative diseases can serve as an effective treatment option for cognitive decline and become a widely-used form of therapeutic intervention.

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# “Bending” the Gender Norms in Sport

Lauren Owens

Writing 101: *Social Inequality and Sport*

Course Instructor: Nathan Kalman-Lamb

Gender has traditionally been and continues to remain a common way of assigning people characteristics that emerge from expectations for each sex. Because of this history, there has been much analysis of how society reinforces gender stereotypes and responds to violations of the preexisting gender roles that extend into the realm of sport. Since women in sport are viewed as a disruption to the norm, female participants are often subjected to criticism from their male counterparts, other athletes, and spectators alike. For example, women athletic leagues generally develop much later than the male divisions of the same sport, professional female athletes are paid significantly less than males at the identical level of competition, and sport media coverage is disproportionately concentrated on male rather than female athletes. Many scholars such as Katheryn Henne, Sarah Fischesser, and Elizabeth Daniels have studied aspects of this issue, ultimately concluding that women in sport have yet to receive equal treatment to male athletes because of the notion that women are inherently subordinate to men that's been instilled into social culture. The 2003 movie *Bend It Like Beckham* by Gurinder Chadha attempts to combat this mentality by taking a feminist approach and advocating for women in sport. However, some of the representations of female athletes actually reproduce the same inequality the movie is working to chastise.

Modern-day movements demanding social equality have sparked many discussions regarding the unfair treatment towards women in sport, a theme that's been examined through multiple theoretical lenses. Henne, in her 2014 feminist research analyzing gender verification regulations and the protection of fair competition in international women's sport, shapes an argument centered on the principle that society regards male characteristics as fundamentally superior to female characteristics (p.788). She goes on to explain how the perpetuation of the idea that a “woman is inherently distinct from and less able than man” has normalized stereotypes of inferiority, objectification, and abnormality regarding women in sport with harmful consequences (p.808). Fischesser expands on Henne's model of society by observing how female identity is influenced by sport. Discussions of assumed lesbianism, the tomboy stereotype and even hyper-feministic behaviors to compensate for involvement in “un-ladylike” activities are dissected through Fischesser's analysis of women in sport. Fischesser identifies that there are countless female athletes who are labeled as homosexuals due to their



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Growing up involved in athletics from a young age, the opportunity to take a Writing 101 class

entitled *Social Inequality and Sport* immediately captivated my interest. A course committed to exploring the inequalities that exist as a result of socioeconomic status, gender, race, culture and sexual orientation appealed to my own experiences as an African American female, as well as to my curiosity about the experiences of others different from me.

As the semester progressed, the theoretical lenses extracted from the various texts we read revealed more and more real-world applications, drawing considerable attention to the injustices and controversies within the realm of sport that too often are ignored. This course provided a platform for comparing perspectives ranging from the views of student-athletes with dreams of professional careers to the opinions of individuals no longer participating in athletics but with a love of sports. These conversations provided incredible diversity and insight on the current state of inequality in sport.

This paper ties together my passions for culture, justice, and sport through studying how societal and cultural norms may unintentionally perpetuate inequality. The challenge of analyzing and critiquing a movie in an academically credible way was daunting, yet exciting, and encouraged me to become a more cognizant consumer of the media. I'd like to thank Professor Kalman-Lamb and the peer editing group with whom I worked closely over the course of the semester for their critiques and encouragement throughout the research, writing, and revision processes. I'd also like to say a huge thank you to the Thompson Writing Program editorial board for providing valuable feedback and to Professor Sheryl Emch for her patience, positivity, and commitment to pushing me to develop my writing into the best that it can be.





athletic interests and abilities. In addition, she scrutinizes the ways that magazines counteract this stigma by depicting female athletes in traditionally feminine states that refocus attention on their beauty or motherly characteristics rather than on sports. Finally, developmental psychology scholar Daniels surveyed popular magazines targeted towards teenage girls to explore the ways in which the media portrays female athletes, and discovered a greater prevalence of concentration on “physical appearance and sexual appeal” and less frequent emphasis on utilizing “the body in instrumental ways” (p.16). This finding aided in the development of a lens that employs objectification theory to examine how appearance-based ideals of beauty, especially physically feminine characteristics, affect impressionable, young athletes. Daniels’ argument branches off into two compelling issues. First,

she analyzes the disproportionate coverage of men’s and women’s athletics exposing the media’s tendency to showcase its male athletes and allocate more resources to documenting men’s sports compared to female athletics. Second, Daniels draws attention to the idea that when women’s sports do receive coverage, too often it is centered on how a woman looks rather than her athletic accomplishments or contributions to her sport, an issue that arises much less frequently in male athletic competition.

The movie *Bend It Like Beckham* provides a forum to examine the issues reinforcing the blindly-accepted notions of feminine inferiority that have been integrated into many aspects of society. In particular, detailed attention is brought to how the challenges women face in the context of sports are not only explicitly exemplified, but also implicitly reproduced. As the plot progresses, the audience follows the journey of a talented teenage soccer player, Jess Bhamra, as she struggles to be accepted by her traditional Indian family and her community. Because Jess is a woman, her family discourages, and ultimately forbids her from pursuing her passion for soccer because of their strong belief that sports are designed for male, not female, participants. Throughout the movie, Jess struggles to surreptitiously continue to play for a local women’s soccer team while balancing her parents’ expectations for her as a traditional Indian woman. This struggle is used to review major elements of gender inequality that arise throughout the plot, including the difficulty of embodying the archetype of the *perfect woman*, blatant differences between acceptable activities for men and women, and overcompensating to avoid being labeled a lesbian. Analysis of conversations between central characters revealed scenes that repeatedly show women in stereotypically feminine settings, including the kitchen or mall versus men working or competing in sport, indicating how heteronormative gender roles are perpetuated. The extent to which gender inequality is reinforced throughout *Bend It Like Beckham* will be evaluated beyond a cursory acceptance of the movie’s intention to support female empowerment and will reveal a reluctance to address underlying gender inequality issues.

To begin, *Bend It Like Beckham* provides commentary on how the activities men and women are traditionally allowed to engage in affect the characterization of the model woman. Through this lens, the objectification of women is effectively replicated and rebuked by drawing attention to the negative repercussions of the sexist ideology of the protagonists. By situating Jess in a culturally conservative family, objectification theory is directly addressed through Mrs. Bahmra’s disapproval of her daughter’s bare legs being displayed when Jess wears her uniform. This worry of disgracing the family by revealing her body is reinforced when Mrs. Bahmra remarks that she doesn’t want Jess “running around half naked in front of men,” again referring to her daughter’s mandatory soccer attire. The issue continues when it is revealed that even Jess, a modern young woman lacking many of her



mother's traditional views on gender roles, struggles with self-consciousness regarding her appearance during sports. Jess's discomfort is evident when she hesitates to remove her track pants in fear of showing her legs. This communicates that even though younger generations may grow up in a more progressive environment, stereotypes of women needing to cover up continue to prevail.

In addition to showing society's desire to maintain women's modest appearances, the movie also demonstrates how men may sexualize female bodies during sport and be reluctant to view women as equal competitors. During an important match, one of Jess's former friends from unorganized soccer in the park yells, "Check out the boobs on the captain!"; immediately after which another one of Jess's male friends reprimands him for defining female athletes by their bodies rather than by their talent as soccer players. Even though on the surface this exchange reflects Daniel's theory

athletes and subconsciously communicates the imbalance of recognition given to men compared to women's sports teams. Initially only able to play pick-up soccer in the park, Jess was not even aware that a league for girls existed in her community. Jess's acceptance of being restricted to soccer in the park while boys could belong to structured soccer teams highlights how accepted the differences in opportunity and what passes as "fair" have become ingrained into society (Henne, 2014). Early in the plot, Jules Paxton, Jess's close friend and teammate, complains that until recently there was no organized team for girls and that the community doesn't support the women's team although the women's team has won "just as many trophies as the men" since being established. Additionally, Joe, the coach of the newly formed women's soccer team, neglected to tell his father that he had taken on the coaching position speculating that "(his father) would piss himself if he knew that (he) was coaching



of the prevalence of objectification in sports by criticizing those who reduce women to their physical attributes, the scene actually normalizes this issue. Directly following the interaction, the camera focuses in on the group of boys laughing at the boy who stood up for female athletes and the jokes regarding women in sport continue. For example, following Jess's venture into the city for heels, her sister, Pinky, confronts Jess for returning home with new soccer cleats instead of formal shoes, mocking her for prioritizing sports over her femininity. While these reoccurring examples invalidate the little progress that a comment in support for gender equality could have made, they more realistically reflect the prevailing influence of culture in establishing societal norms. These instances demonstrate a greater need for change within the power structures at play in order to embrace a more flexible approach to gender roles across cultural differences.

In addition to reproducing society's attitude towards the female body, *Bend It Like Beckham* also directly discusses the disparity between opportunities for male and female

girls." Through this powerful dialogue, *Bend It Like Beckham* reviews the lack of access to athletics and recognizes the negative stigma associated with women playing sports.

Moreover, even though this form of inequality is directly critiqued, the idea of sports being a male domain is integrated in a less explicit manner. For example, when Joe receives an offer to become an assistant coach of the men's soccer team, Jess responds with genuine congratulations for the accomplishment. However, this raises the question of what makes an assistant position for male athletes more desirable and prestigious than a head coach position for a women's team? The fact that Jess, one of the characters most invested in advocating for women's participation in sports, is the one to react in such an enthusiastic way reinforces that society is far from reaching a place in which the endeavors of men and women are viewed equally. Next, this naturalization of male athletic superiority is further revealed through the posters displayed around Jess's bedroom. Even though Jess dreams of moving abroad to play professional soccer, Jess's walls are composed of images depicting male



athletes and *their* triumphs rather than pictures of potential female-athlete role models who have already accomplished what she herself hopes to achieve. These scenes reflect the degree to which society has accepted women in sports by unknowingly reproducing themes that celebrate exclusively male athleticism.

One of the primary ways that *Bend It Like Beckham* defies traditional gender norms is by electing to highlight non-feminine athleticism. By portraying Jess and Jules as strong, independent athletes focused on prioritizing and pursuing their soccer goals, the movie actually recognizes the value of female athletes and acknowledges that women, not just men, are also able to be exceptional competitors in intense athletic environments. Another important dimension of gender inequality in sport addressed is how some women fight tomboystereotypes with hyper-femininity outside of athletics. The two main female athletes, Jess and Jules, are presented

as the ultimate tomboys by emphasizing their aversions to traditionally feminine activities, such as shopping and prioritizing beauty before other parts of their lives. To further depict how Jess's tomboy image strays from stereotypical femininity, Jess is contrasted with her sister, Pinky. For example, when Jess and her sister go shopping together, Pinky is seen wearing a pink tank top, a skirt, and makeup, whereas Jess is wearing a black athletic track suit with her hair up in a ponytail. Similarly, when Jules's mother tries to take her shopping, Jules makes her lack of interest in the clothing her mom loves very clear with sarcastic comments and bored expressions. These characterizations demonstrate the ways in which *Bend It Like Beckham* fails to stray from the traditional association of female athletes with un-feminine mannerisms, and instead defaults to the tomboy stereotype, thus perpetuating heteronormative logic.

On the other hand, the stereotypical woman athlete is juxtaposed with characters who embody extremes of conventionally feminine traits. Immediately after a scene showing Jess and her male friends kicking a soccer ball around in the park, the camera flashes to Pinky and her friends sitting on a nearby bench, gawking at the shirtless boys and squealing that if one of them looks their way, they "really will faint." This contrast - between Jess casually interacting with her male peers, and her sister and friends fulfilling the role of the sideline admirers who praise boys'

very presence - reinforces the narrative that femininity should be used to support men (Daniels, 2009). In addition to these comparisons, the seemingly natural association between women and feminine characteristics is also subtly reproduced through the romance underlying Jess's and Jules's relationships with their coach, Joe. When Jess goes to the soccer field to tell her coach that she plans to quit the team, rather than arriving in her typical athletic attire, Jess is dressed in jeans and a nice shirt with her hair and makeup done. Along with this physical change to make the audience perceive Jess in a more feminine way, the scene is framed with close ups of Jess and Joe's faces with slow, romantic music playing in the background. All of these components contribute to an implicit portrayal of hyper-femininity that suggests a need to compensate for less feminine attributes, such as involvement in soccer (Daniels, 2009).

The final gender role issue examined is the lesbian stereotype commonly associated with female athletes who excel in traditionally unfeminine competition. In particular, *Bend It Like Beckham* depicts the way women are encouraged to obtain the attention of men. The Paxton family's attitude towards sexuality is conveyed through Jules's mom's insistence that Jules purchase a push up bra, as well as through Mrs. Paxton's frequent reminders that "No boy's



gonna want to go out with a girl who's got bigger muscles than he does." This mentality is expressed again when Jess's mother insists that Jess's sari for her sister's wedding be made tighter because "who's going to notice [her]" if she looks like a sack. Both mothers begin to express parental concern over their children being perceived as anything other than heterosexual, desirable women (Fischesser, 2008). In these scenes, they not only express dissatisfaction with the girls, but also obstruct them from publicly following their athletic pursuits. Therefore, the girls' parents are effectively seen as antagonists much of the time, positioning the viewer to empathize with Jess and Jules throughout their struggles in a heteronormative society. These similar attitudes of and approaches to prioritizing appearance with the goal of pleasing men bridge the cultural gaps between the different family backgrounds. In turn, by portraying this ideology through beliefs and behaviors consistent across cultures, the sexist system is determined to be universally problematic rather than limited to existing in select contexts.



Furthermore, *Bend It Like Beckham* challenges heteronormativity in the way it addresses how women in sport who may not identify with the heteronormative model of sexuality are impacted. The assumption of homosexuality associated with female athletes is conveyed and later confronted over the progression of the movie, demonstrating that "because lesbians and female athletes are both challenging hegemonic heterofemininity, they have often been linked" (Fischesser, 2008, p.120). For example, when Jess tells her male friends from the park about her new opportunity to play on an organized, female soccer team, one boy asks her if she and her teammates "swap shirts at the end of the matches and get in that big bath together," insinuating that because Jess was now on an all-girls' team, she must be homosexual. Later in the movie, Jules is shown defending herself to her mother, shouting that "just because I wear track suits and plays sports does not make me a lesbian." This scene exposes the consequences of having these stereotypes by encouraging the viewer, who is aware of the entire story between Jules, Jess and Joe, to empathize with Jules and characterize Mrs. Paxton as judgmental and hypocritical for her assumptions. These moments demonstrate criticisms of a community that has adjusted to its sexist norms and neglects to acknowledge how deeply they've been incorporated into athletics, relationships, and society as a whole.

The movie, however, not only criticizes the lesbian label placed on these athletes, but also further reproduces the stigma associated with these women. For example, when accused by her parents of kissing Jules in public, Jess's hostile and disgusted reaction to such an allegation communicates her own disgust at the thought of someone thinking that she would kiss another girl. Similarly, the same idea is expressed through Jules' rapid denial and infuriated response to her mother's belief that she was a lesbian. Through these scenes, *Bend It Like Beckham* implies that there is something wrong with homosexuality and that it is something to reject, thereby reproducing the preexisting stereotypes.

While few people are likely to admit prejudice against

homosexuality during a time when acceptance and tolerance are being encouraged by an evolving society, the movie explicitly analyzes and unknowingly reproduces the public's aversion to women athletes and lesbianism. Similarly, the justification for the prevalence of lesbian stereotypes for females in sport are also utilized to characterize society on a larger scale. The most prominent character used to exemplify the hypocrisy of a homophobic feigning tolerance is Jules's mother, Mrs. Paxton. Although Mrs. Paxton claims to have nothing against the possibility of her daughter being a lesbian, her actions contradict her words. During a scene preceding an intense moment in a high-stakes soccer match, the camera shows Jess and Jules grab hands and then immediately zooms in on Jules's mother's disapproving face before returning to the action on the field. Likewise, when Mrs. Paxton misinterprets an exchange between Jess and Jules, she sobs uncontrollably while under the impression that Jules is in love with a girl. These examples of responses to homosexual women in sports reflect people's negative views towards homosexuality. However, the movie's emphasis on Jules's relationship with her coach, Joe, contradicts the stereotype rather than reinforcing it by adding another dimension to Jules's character that sets her apart from the assumed labels to which she may otherwise have been subject.

In conclusion, *Bend It Like Beckham* both critiques and reproduces the challenges faced by women in athletics. The normalization of promoting masculine superiority, assumptions of homosexuality and compensation to appear more feminine, and objectification of women are all topics addressed. However, while very informative and effective at communicating the problems concerning gender, *Bend It Like Beckham* also inadvertently perpetuates several of these issues, proving that cultural views and social constructions can be very difficult to fully change. Ultimately, the reproductions of structural sexism that *Bend It Like Beckham* attempts to criticize serve as evidence that society has not come as far in its movement for gender equality as one may think.

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Robbie Ha

At the ring of the alarm clock, the first thing I do every morning is reach for my phone, go to

Spotify, and listen to a playlist of music until I feel ready to conquer the day.

My writing 101 class, *Literature in the Age of Mass Reproduction*, brought new insights to what seemed to be my mundane morning ritual by introducing me to the convergence of the humanities with technological advancement. I brought my own set of questions and skepticisms to the class: Isn't technology the very antithesis of humanity? Hasn't Hollywood and its share of human-destroying-emotionless-robots taught us *anything*?

By analyzing literature, watching videos, listening to music, Professor Chinn revealed that the appropriation of intangible, human ideas can become palpable through the technological beat of the music. All the cables, pixels, megabytes and gigabytes together immortalize this anthropological history for the mass global audience to see and to hear. My paper is founded upon this subsequent blur of anachronism that allowed me to connect modern day rap artists and transcendentalist thinkers. So, no, technology isn't the antithesis of humanity; it is an extension of it. Killer robots need not apply.

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# Macklemore & Kendrick Lamar:

## The Heirs of Thoreauvian Philosophy

Robbie Ha

Writing 101: *Literature in the Age of Mass Reproduction*  
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2016 has undoubtedly shaped up to be a watershed moment in history; one where politics have become the kingpin currency of the realm of mass media. From late night television shows to social media clickbait, current headlines and dialogue have become sensationalized echoes of Capitol Hill, fulfilling the demands of a divided electorate eager to justify frustration, pride, or both. Yet, beneath the rubble of a concluded presidential election is a forgotten political firestorm that inaugurated this rule-defying year. *Yes* – before Donald's upset victory, before Hillary's vanquishing defeat, before Rudy Giuliani's regrettable reemergence into the national stage – was Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter, the *de facto* head of state in the modern-day pop music empire. *Yes* – this media mogul (who usually stays within the confines of her throne) riled up angry right-wing commentators with her Super-Bowl performance of her newest single, "Formation." In her fiery production – one which intertwined catchy melodies with lyrical black empowerment – the Queen and her dance-squad uniformly flaunted black berets and black jackets, ending with their triumphant fists in the air without once falling on their glossy black stilettos. The audience's reaction was positively deafening; the subsequent media attention, oppositely so.

"Beyoncé Turns Political" dominated the chyrons of evening news television. "Beyoncé: Pro Black Panthers," "Beyoncé Promotes Racial Violence" – these headlines, aided by the vitriol spewed forward by the likes of Tomi Lahren, Steve Doocy, and Rudy Giuliani (the living, breathing, antithesis of the acclaimed pop singer herself), dominated the national conversation after the Super Bowl's conclusion (Falzone). Yet, despite the critics bemoaning that Beyoncé "*should stay in music*," her entrance into the political realm was one with modern day precedence (sorry Beyoncé, you can't win *everything*). The most blaring example appears within



today's LGBT and Black Lives Matter movements. Within the social rights anthems of "Same Love" by Macklemore and "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar, lies the echoed words of Martin Luther King Jr., who himself found ideological precedence in the father of civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau. The acclaimed philosopher's concept of civil disobedience – one of peacefully resisting a *de jure* status quo of injustice – has, through years of intertextual and intermedial appropriation, equipped the pens of artists with mass-reproducible literary and lyrical bullets for use towards social equality. Subsequently, the *musicality* of the bullets penned by Macklemore and Kendrick Lamar have passively permeated such politics of civil disobedience into the national psyche of 21st Century America.

Before the catchy upbeat of Macklemore's songs and Kendrick Lamar's charismatic prose, before the fruition of the LGBT movement and before the Black Lives Matter protests, was a cerebral individualist who secluded himself for several years in a forest. Well known for romanticizing simple living with *Walden*, philosopher Henry David Thoreau was an ardent, outspoken critic of the United States' Fugitive Slave Law as well as its involvement in the Mexican-American War. After brief incarceration from withholding his poll taxes in protest, he published *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, a staunch rebuke against his government's acts of injustice. In it, he asks, "Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislation? Why has every man a conscience, then?" (2). A sense of morality and the authority of government are separate entities, he implies. Legislation does not dictate morality as morality does not dictate legislation. Thus, it is within the man to act accordingly when he encounters injustice within the system, "If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go... perchance it will wear smooth – certainly the machine will wear out" (Thoreau 7). For Thoreau, civil disobedience is a natural consequence of man's innate sense of morality. If these voices are not validated, the permeation of injustice will "wear" the government machine – comprised of its many people – apart. He furthers this idea when he states, "If such a nature... requires you to be the agent of injustice to another... break the law" (Thoreau 8). It is within the moral obligation of the citizen to act upon injustices that he sees. Whether or not that requires breaking from the fold of government, so be it.

One may ask: What is the seemingly minute power of the individual to the enormous power of the state? *What is a virtuous citizen to a corrupt government?* Thoreau (and later Dr. King, Macklemore and Kendrick Lamar) implies the answer comes from the individual. It is the virtuous citizen who gives the government the power, the authority. It is the virtuous citizen who builds, who bankrolls, who conforms to the wills of their superior. According to Thoreau, "The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies" (2). If it weren't for the individuals, the citizens, the parts of the machine of government, what is the government? The power surrounding any one thing, whether it be a person or an entity, is rooted from the people choosing to support it. Once that dissolves, the power, the authority, the office is nothing but a house of cards. Consequently, repeated acts of civil disobedience will garner enough traction to require action of the government. As he writes, "A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority... but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight" (8). The *government* didn't construct the state – the *citizens* did. Thus, another Thoreauvian postulation reveals itself: A corrupt government





requires *all* citizens to function. And who is it to dictate they should conform but themselves?

This idea is undoubtedly appropriated by a virtuous “King,” the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. An outspoken activist against the black and white paradigm of a segregationist America, King himself was incarcerated for following his conscience over the law. A leader of the 1963 Birmingham campaign, he and his followers practiced civil disobedience against the city’s ardent segregation by boycotting businesses and institutions. Once imprisoned by consequence, he drafted an impassioned letter against a statement issued by eight clergymen denouncing his efforts. In what is now referred to as *The Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King echoes the words of Thoreau’s civil disobedience, citing the “need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism” (King *Letter 2*). Conformity equates to the silencing of voices of those that need it most. For change to occur, the issues must be brought forward into the political conversation. Dr. King is also cognizant of the fact that society requires all the wheels and bolts to function, such that even a minority of people represents a consequential block of the government machine. With this knowledge, Dr. King shifts the narrative of unfounded submission into one of exigent defiance, “This ‘Wait’ [for racial integration] has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see... that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied’” (2). King, channeling the ideas of Thoreau, suggests that it is the duty of the citizen to take actions the government is unwilling to take. He furthers his appropriation of Thoreauvian philosophy when he states, “One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all’” (3). This mantra that the individual is the *true* moral authority behind the mantle of government power is one echoed by both scholars. King later noted the ideological precedence of Thoreau in his autobiography, acknowledging, “As a result of [Thoreau’s] writings and personal witness, we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest,” (King *Autobiography*). This “we” would soon include two modern-day rappers who expanded upon the meaning *creative* protest. And this legacy, this message, due to its timelessness, has been easily appropriated intertextually.

In *Adaptation and Appropriation*, author Julie Sanders asserts that “appropriation” unapologetically transposes the original textual work into a different contextual

realm of culture (35). Though Dr. King echoes the heart of civil disobedience originated by Thoreau, the context clearly diverges. King is calling for civil disobedience through a different means and for a different cause. And unlike Thoreau, he isn’t approaching the act of injustice as a spectator. He *is* the main player. He *is* African American. He *is* subjugated. He is bound by the shackles of racial discrimination that Thoreau, as a white Protestant American, could only observe second hand. Thoreau’s call for civil disobedience was mostly driven through moral sympathy. King’s is driven by a poignant and lived reality. Accordingly, Thoreau’s message has shifted away from the anthropological dilemmas of a divided Antebellum America into that of a Jim Crow America. Thoreau’s words provided Dr. King (albeit with Gandhi as an intermediary)

the bullets of the pen to write against Jim Crow Alabama. Through appropriation, civil disobedience was able to transverse different periods of America’s history and be used for different causes.

These words of civil disobedience, carried through by the likes of Henry David Thoreau, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, entered its newest vehicle in modern day rap artists such as Seattle rapper



Macklemore. His song, “Same Love,” was released during the campaign for Referendum 74 in Washington State in 2012, which successfully passed in November, legalizing same-sex marriage in the state (McKinley). Like many before him, Macklemore tries to communicate with those who blindly believe that legislation is a vehicle void of injustice and bigotry, “The right wing conservatives think it’s a decision / And you can be cured with some treatment and religion” (11-12). Here, he explicitly targets the members of society who have chosen to denounce one’s sexual orientation as a disease, a choice, an abomination, as well as the politicians who perpetuate discrimination for the sake of political expediency. And just like Martin Luther King and Thoreau, he encourages the people, the citizens, to take actions over a state that has ascribed to indifferent injustice, “No law is gonna change us / We have to change us” (Macklemore). Echoing the words of St. Augustine through Dr. King, “justice too long delayed is justice denied” (Letter 2). Throughout the song, Macklemore explicitly creates a connection between the fights fought before him, “It’s the same hate that’s caused wars from religion / Gender to skin color... / The same fight that led people to walk outs and sit ins” (Macklemore). With this song, he appropriates the concept of civil disobedience (one that was originally set in Antebellum America and its



struggles) against the backdrop of a deceptively major-keyed melody. To use Julie Sander's own vocabulary, Thoreau's message successfully went through "mutations, repetitions, evolutions, and variations," such that it became a multifaceted musical weapon to assert social equality (23). Furthermore, a clear distinction emerges despite the song's brevity; unlike Thoreau or King, Macklemore proposes civil disobedience as the bystander, the second-hand observer, demonstrating that justice is not a spectator sport. One does not need to get arrested or be discriminated against, one need only to be human. As the rhythm of the drum ebbs to a fade, the same lines are continually perpetuated by featured singer, Miranda Lambert, "Love is patient / (not crying on Sundays) / Love is kind" (Macklemore). *Be patient*, the song implies, *be kind*, *be* the change one wants to see. To cry is to admit defeat, to accept a *de jure* status quo of oppression. With the defiant beats that supplement the innocently sweet melody, Macklemore effectively condenses the words of Thoreau into a five-minute, easily interpretable, quickly distributable, and instantly memorable rap song.

Kendrick Lamar, the acclaimed American Rapper from Compton, provides another such *evolution* with his track, "Alright." Immediately, he opens the songs with the words, "Alls my life I has to fight nigga... / Hard times like yah... / But if god got us then we gon' be alright," immediately followed by a repetition of the phrase "Nigga, we gon' be alright" sung by featured artist, Pharrell Williams (Lamar). On first glance, it is a modern day version of the Civil Rights Movement anthem, "We Shall Overcome." Both songs similarly propel the idea of living through the pain, living through the discrimination, living through racial profiling, racial hate, racial slurs and racial incarceration. Yet, Lamar *calls* for action. The Thoreau inside of him reveals itself with the lines, "I rap, I, black, on track so rest assured / My rights, my wrongs I write till I'm right with God" (Lamar). His wrongs are an assertion of expressing his blackness, his identity that American society has perpetually stigmatized for generations. He implies that his judgement comes not from the voice of the state but from his *own* God. Hence, his act of nonviolent protest is through his pen. Lamar also possesses a distinct quality in his lyrics that makes his embodiment of civil disobedience a strain unlike his peers'. While the latter three seek to initiate change from the outer society, Lamar preaches from the pulpit of introspection. His lyrical salvo serves to give purpose, to give shared identity, to give sense of optimistic solidarity to his community rooted in the message that "we gon' be alright," as much as it does to bring awareness to the broken system (Lamar).

The song's fruition as the anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement, one that is sung in marches across the country, is one of natural succession. Lamar's prose empowers, justifies, and amplifies the voices of the minority that has long been suppressed by an unjust majority. The root of this message is expressed by Thoreau himself, who asked, "Why is [the government] not cherishing its wise minority... Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and do better than it would have them?" (6). The citizens are the barometer for justice, the true seers of morality when government has gone awry. This unabashed yearning for justice is a commonality shared in the American Revolution, the American Civil War, the American Civil Rights Movement, and now the American LGBT and Black Lives Matter movements. *That* is the common message between the works of Thoreau and his unbeknownst modern-day surrogates. In consequence, Thoreau has planted the seeds of civil disobedience that has been able to provide a check against injustices across a





multitude of different generations. And this seed's tenacity through the weathering of time comes from its ability to transverse both the realms of literature *and* media through mass reproduction.

The appropriation of Thoreau through the works of Dr. King, Macklemore and Lamar first had success due to the ease with which they were reproduced. The whole concept of mass reproduction, whether through the printer press or through Spotify, has greatly widened the breadth of the audience. It can reach the pacifist in Durham County rejecting the country's actions in Syria, the black kid in the projects in Compton living off government issued food stamps, the 15-year-old Asian American in the suburbs of Seattle questioning his identity and future. Given this, Walter Benjamin, the renowned German philosopher, was correct to assume that mass availability and reproduction would allow for *revolutionary* changes in the realm of art such that the entire masses become the audience (2). However, he was wrong to assume that this is the product of technology's displacement of art's aura – specifically, its originality, aesthetic and spatial identity (Benjamin 4). The political message of civil disobedience isn't propelled because there is *no* aura, but rather because there *is*. The politics comes from the aura of a black teenager knowing that their local police “wanna kill [them] in the street for sure,” from the aura of gay kids getting called “faggots behind the keys of a message board” (Lamar; Macklemore). The politics comes from the aura that allows others to experience the tears, experience the blood, experience the scars and wounds of wearing a label “synonymous with the lesser,” not in spite of it (Macklemore). Therefore, Dr. King, Macklemore and Lamar are all beneficiaries of the political implications of mass reproduction. Yet, Dr. King preserves the use of text as a medium, and thus practices *intertextual* appropriation, whilst that of the rappers, upon changing what was originally text to sound, demonstrate *intermedial* appropriation.

The effects of the distinctions in appropriation are found in the practicalities. *Think about it* – Would one rather read a letter of a “mere” seven thousand words or listen to a song that's three minutes and thirty-nine seconds long? And *which sticks more*? Despite the virtues and successes of Dr. King's intertextual appropriation of civil disobedience, it's important to remain cognizant that the *pen* has its bounds. The pen wasn't what directly allowed the words of Thoreau and King to initiate sit-ins and protests – it was the person in between who *condensed* the message, who *orated* the written message, who made it *catchy*, who made it *human*. Both *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* and *Letter to Birmingham Jail*

require an intermediary to translate the ink into language such as to reach the mass audience; without it they are but engines with no ignition. Macklemore and Lamar effectively removed this barrier by enveloping Thoreauvian civil disobedience into a concise, memorable medium that is already rudimentarily human – music.

Thus, the success of Thoreau's distinct message today also comes from the *intermediality* of its appropriation by both rappers. In *The Audible Past*, author Joseph Sterne puts forth that sound is by its very concept a *human* construction – such that human and sound are ineradicably inseparable (11). Before writing, before reading, humans spoke, humans listened. Hence, by the intermedial transformation of Thoreau's concept of civil

disobedience into the realm of sound has allowed the message to become more human, more relatable, and more efficacious. Subsequently, the aura of the specific spatial components of each medium becomes personally palpable. In his notorious *Realism Test*, acclaimed inventor Thomas Edison wrote “you should get the same emotional re-action experience when you last heard the same kind of voice” (Taylor).





Of the many listeners of the aforementioned tracks, they share the same emotional experience because *everyone* has faced prejudice. Everyone has faced discrimination. Everyone has faced pain. Macklemore and Lamar tap into this wealth of human emotion with a Thoreauvian pipe sharpened by the emotional poignancy of sound. And that subsequent human emotion is what allows the listener to see the human behind the pen.

The power of sound as a medium is furthered by scholar David Suisman in *Sound* when he claims that audible sound (both subtle and overpowering) is humanly impossible to ignore; man by nature is simply unable to strictly control which sounds

he perceives (3). Hence, by mass reproduced intermedial appropriation, artists such as Macklemore and Kendrick Lamar popularize Thoreau's message of civil disobedience to a larger audience, in a more personal and *omnipresent* way. One source of sound can captivate the minds of hundreds – can *one* copy of letter do the same? Furthermore, human's inability to ignore sound is important under the context of Walter Benjamin's idea that the politics of art are *habitually* absorbed (18). With this principle, the politics of "Same Love" and "Alright" have passively permeated into the national conscience because they're music with innately catchy melodies and rhythms – not just *sound*. As the song – with its memorable musical motifs – habitually *sticks*,



so does the message. Therefore, unbeknownst to many, the millions of listeners across the nation of Macklemore and Lamar are receiving the same concepts of nonviolent resistance perpetuated by Martin Luther King and Henry David Thoreau. And equally as unbeknownst to scholars of Thoreau, Macklemore and Lamar have been the philosopher's most efficacious of surrogates.

Each of the intertextual and intermedial appropriations of Henry David Thoreau's original concept of civil disobedience came with their respective era's social inequities. Martin Luther King wrote to combat racial segregation. Macklemore sung to combat same-sex discrimination and Lamar rapped to combat racial discrimination. Now, America again faces new warts and scars of prejudice. America is once again divided as Donald Trump now wields the powers of the highest office in the land. Yet, one mustn't resign to solace. History has shown that oppression ignites the Thoreauvian torch of civil disobedience. And whomever this next torchbearer shall be, he or she will stand upon the shoulders of entire communities. Lest we forget, we are still here. We, the students. We, the academics. We the racial minorities, the women, the immigrants. *We are still here*. And in a government of *We the people*, our combined voices cannot be marginalized. So, in the "appropriated" words of Beyoncé, "Let's get in formation" (Knowles-Carter).

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Vivian Chen

In the past few months, I've learned that some stories are easy and desirable to tell, while others are difficult and complex, and many times

uncomfortable. But the latter can hold a mirror up to our lives and help us to learn something about ourselves. For me, this story revolved around growing up with the violin, and my dad's controlling presence.

Knowing only how much previous students loved *Coming of Age at Duke* before deciding to take the course, I assumed we would be talking about ourselves at length, but I had no idea how much vulnerability and honesty would be required. Our final project was to write a case study about one aspect of our coming of age, and although the violin was the first thing that came to mind, I tried to push it aside, thinking that my story would be unimportant. But after some self-reflection and a revealing conversation with Sheryl, wherein the imposter syndrome was brought to my attention, I realized that I had just scratched the surface. The more I began to research, the more I began to understand how I came to build up walls to prevent others from seeing my weaknesses. I needed to write about my relationship with music to come to terms with my past and the fact that the present isn't neat and pretty like I wanted to believe.

This experience has been extremely cathartic, making me more self-aware than ever before. It has shown me the power of reflection, writing, and sharing, and it brings me joy to think that what I've written may resonate with someone else. I want to thank Sheryl for her continuous support and guidance from start to finish, and for being an incredible person. I also want to thank my peers for their vulnerability in sharing their own stories, which in itself required a great amount of courage. And finally, I want to thank my friends (especially Natasha and Jill), and my parents for listening and giving me pushes in the right directions in just the right moments.

# The Search For Passion:

## My Relationship with Music, My Dad, and Myself

Vivian Chen

Writing 101: *Coming of Age at Duke*

Course Instructor: Sheryl Welte Emch

### PROLOGUE

I'm on stage at the final concert of my middle school chamber music camp and my heart is racing. The intense beam of the stage lights on my sheet music keeps me alert. My mind is quiet with concentration, and yet so noisy with doubts. But I'm first violin. *No time for doubts.* I inhale quickly and sharply to initiate the beginning of the piece, and we're off. After I've played the first few lines, I glance at each member of my chamber group. I don't hear them, I *listen* to them, and truly feel how it is that our notes intermingle, how they dance with each other, so in sync. Muscle memory kicks in, and the past ten days of chamber coaching, eight hours a day, is all channeled into the music.

I'm speaking to the others in my group through music. My line, their line, our lines together. It's so beautiful to be a part of this unspoken communication, and to perform it is exhilarating. I've realized that I love playing with others; I love the vulnerability of being the only person who plays my part, the only voice, while also having the assurance of the presence of others. Everything must come together perfectly. We breathe the music we play so as to feel the start and the stop together. Memory and practice can only take us so far.

I lock eyes with the cellist across from me, and I catch her smiling, as we both take our rest during one of the middle movements. It's moments like this - when I catch another musician in their element, speaking to me through their instrument - that I feel contentment wash over me. The presence of others makes me work harder to lift the team up, and they make me a better musician with their undeniable talent.

And just like that we're finished with the piece. It went so fast. We bow to the loud clapping filling this dark auditorium, and I'm just so relieved and happy, but also sad that it's all over. My summer has been devoted to this chamber music camp. I've grown so much as a musician; I've been motivated like I've never been before to practice. No one had to tell me to do it, least of all my dad. I wonder when I'll feel like this again. Like my heart is on fire and my whole body is still pulsating with the rhythm of the piece. All the hard work, violin hickies, calloused fingers paid off. *This is why people play music.* I've never felt this before, this connection with music, an understanding of why people subject themselves to endless hours of practice. *This is the reason.*

I'm overwhelmed with remorse because it's taken me nine years to figure it out. I'm meant to play with other people. That night, all the tears and hours of practice seemed to make sense, and I finally felt like I understood why I play.



## PROFILE

### *The Machine*

"You have one of the most efficient left hands I have ever seen", my violin teacher says.

I smile, satisfied and relieved by his comment. It's my first lesson with a Duke violin professor, and my stomach is still churning from the nerves I had built up in anticipation of our meeting.

"That might sound like a good thing, but it's not", he says abruptly.

I'm surprised. No one has ever told me that before. I'm caught off guard and embarrassed that I even felt flattered in the first place. My past violin teachers never tried to hide their criticisms behind a compliment. I play for him again, and this time I take notice of my fingers, the fact that they barely lift off the fingerboard. They stick close and hover, only moving when they need to, as to avoid making mistakes.

He continues, "And your bow. You're holding it in this perfect position...But it's locked in so tightly, like a grip of steel".

The more my teacher talks, the more I realize that the way I hold the violin, my posture, the way my fingers curl in and stick close to each other, the way my bow hand grip is tight and mechanical – these are not products of years of teaching. No, this body language is self-taught.

According to my parents, I saw one of our family friends play a concerto at her senior recital and I was in awe. Three-year-old me aspired to be like her: musical, beautiful, expressive. I started so young that I don't remember much of the time that followed, only the strict teachers, the yelling, the hours I spent chained to my instrument, with my dad hovering over my shoulder.

My dad was demanding. He wanted me to be excellent, so he sought out skilled teachers, sat in on every single lesson, bringing my books, carrying my violin, and making occasional comments that I needed to focus if I was having an off day. At home, he enforced a daily practice schedule that was not negotiable, always listening as I practiced in the living room while he worked on his laptop. "More musical!" he would interject, "More expressive! Play that again". On hot summer days when my cousins visited, I wanted more than anything to relax, but instead I was trapped in my dad's office, doors closed, temperatures rising from the heat of the sun through the glass windows, and my sweat seeping into my shoulder rest. My anger was red hot, boiling, at times when I felt trapped playing the same passage of a piece repeatedly, uncertain of when my dad would finally let me move on to the next section. But my frustration would always cool to a sad resignation at the end of the day when I was done.

I didn't understand why I practiced so much. I also didn't understand the connection between practicing and improvement because I never had the chance to see what it would be like not to practice. I was a machine, going through the motions because I had little control over my life. So much was decided for me: when I practiced, how long I practiced, what pieces I played, which teachers I had, which ensembles I had to audition for. I resented it all, and when I had the energy, I resisted. One time, my dad became so fed up with my resistance that he snapped. He told me that if I hated it so much that he'd break the violin into pieces and burn it in the fireplace then and there, and I would never have to play again. But I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. *I've already spent so*





*much time on violin. Years. What will I do without it? What good am I without it? As much as I despised the violin, it held a part of me captive.*

As I grew older, there was less crying and screaming, less resistance, as I accepted that this is how my life was meant to be. I didn't have to like music to be good at it, so I stopped paying attention, and I played my role as the machine, and continued.



Because practice makes perfect, I became good for my age, or so my dad says. I was never truly cognizant of my abilities, and I didn't see myself as being as good as my dad told me I was.

Despite how painful it was to watch my friends decide what sports they wanted to play or clubs they wanted to join, there were moments when I'd let the music soak in, let the barricades down that I put around my heart to protect me from disappointment and false hope, and I'd feel something. I loved playing with others, chamber music especially, but this wasn't a large part of my dad's agenda. So those moments of pure joy and contentment were few and far apart, mostly overshadowed by the constant pressure from my dad and teachers to be good.

### *Oceans Apart*

There wasn't much about growing up that was constant for me. I spent seven years in North Carolina, a happy and energetic kid. I then spent second grade in four different schools, as we moved to New Jersey, and then to Pennsylvania because of my mom's job. Two years later we relocated to Kansas City. Always the new girl in school, I got used to the staring, not knowing where to go on my first day, and the struggle to make at least one friend. Everything I loved about my life was always changing and slipping out of my fingers. *Time to move again? But I just got here.* Every time we packed our stuff and said our goodbyes, it was as gut-wrenching as the first time we moved. I hated how much it would hurt to sever relationships and part with familiarity, but change became my new normal. With a new school, new house, and new life, there was always one constant in my life: violin. Its sinister presence greeted me everywhere in the form of different teachers, and renewed rigor. As much as I tried, I just couldn't escape that black case. Even moving across the ocean didn't change things for me.

Naturally, my dad's priority when we first moved to Germany was to find me a violin teacher. His determination to do so was suffocating. When we explored the local park, and wandered downtown, my mind reeled, overwhelmed with the novelty of every cobblestone street corner, every red tram car that passed, and every glimpse of the Rhine River. And then my dad would talk about an upcoming audition, the trip we would be taking to the next city over to find me a new teacher, and I was suddenly pulled back into the all-too-familiar world of music and misery.

The situation was exacerbated by the fact that my dad was temporarily unemployed. As a doctor and researcher, I knew he felt ashamed that he didn't have a job, which was why he lied to friends and family. To make matters worse, my mom alone had been supporting the family for the past few years, and was the reason we moved to Germany. Manifestations of his insecurity and damaged pride found their way into my practice regime. His moods were like changing tides, one minute affectionate, the next outraged. As much as I pitied him, I was also afraid of him, especially as he tightened his grip on my violin. In moments where my own anger would provoke a momentary bout of courage, I'd accidentally remind him a little



too forcefully that he had his own life to tend to. My words were daggers, but he breathed fire. His tone lowered, eyes shifted, and he warned me never to disrespect him again. Unable to crawl away fast enough, I was scorched by his empty threats.

When my dad finally got a job, he became too preoccupied with work, and too exhausted when he got home to watch me practice. He gave up the search for a prestigious teacher, and settled for me taking lessons with a teacher at my high school. Suddenly, I experienced a newfound freedom that I wasn't quite sure how to use. My stomach and fingers tingled with excitement and confusion. *I don't have to practice today. What will I do with my time? I can do anything...* No longer under a strict practice schedule, I almost didn't know what to do with myself because my mind and body were so accustomed to the routine. During the summer before ninth grade, when I heard the garage doors open, I'd sprint to my violin case and play the last few lines of the same piece every time he walked through the door to cast the illusion that I had practiced the entire thing. He didn't notice. Free of the constraints of violin, I tried new things. I joined the volleyball team, Model UN, Student Council, and the New Student Ambassador Program. I became so busy with academics and extracurriculars that my violin would sit in its case for weeks on end, collecting dust, neglected. I didn't miss it.

Time began to heal the wounds that violin had inflicted on me. I thought that life would continue and that violin would slip into nothingness, as my dad became too busy to remember. I was proven wrong one night when my mom worked late, so my dad and I ate dinner alone. He began with an all-too-familiar loud sigh that indicated he had a complaint. *Here we go.* Indeed, my dad grumbled about how I had been playing worse recently, and how I wasn't practicing at all. As soon as the words left his mouth, I was fed up. I wished he would stay preoccupied with his job, and not with my life. I fought with him, told him he was wrong. He told me that if I continued down this path, that I wouldn't be good anymore, and if that was the case, there was no point to playing. His sentiments still ring in my head. *If you stop playing, you'll regret it. And don't come crawling back to me when you do.* I resisted. I told him that if it was so painful to be good at something, I'd rather not do it. Over the next few months, we had this argument a lot, until eventually he told me to quit. He told me I was wasting money, and that I wasted the potential he saw in me. He told me that he wanted me to win awards and go to competitions so that I'd stand out and get into a top university, but that it wasn't going to happen now. He told me I didn't have the grit. That's how life works apparently. You do things that make you unhappy because you want something out of it. I didn't want to believe him, but I did.



### *The Search for Passion*

It's a warm day in Durham, with the sun shining kindly on my face as I walk with my roommate back to our dorm, and she gushes to me about her love for music. Her face lights up and it's so genuine and positive that I smile because I think I should be happy for her. But I can't help but notice the pang in my chest. It's small, but it reminds me how much I envy her, and how she loves music. Growing up, I



experienced the pain of being forced to practice. But here at Duke, I start to experience a new type of pain, the pain of not having a passion. The students here are outstanding in every respect. Some love dance and spend multiple hours a day in the studio, while others love a sport and can't get enough of the field. That's not me. Every time I talk to these energetic individuals, beaming, full of passion, I sink a little more. When people ask me what I like to do in my free time, I say I play violin, but I feel like a fraud. I don't feel like a violinist. *Violinists should love the violin, shouldn't they? They should hold on to it so tightly, afraid to let it go.* I'm certainly afraid to let it go, but not because I love it, rather because I think it may be one of the only talents I have, regardless of how I got here.

I feel the urge to get involved in something, so I decide to audition for Duke Symphony Orchestra, and I haul myself to the practice room to practice my piece. The piece is well-rehearsed, perhaps slightly without feeling, but I audition anyway. I feel like I'm going through the motions again.

On my first day of rehearsal, I catch the girl next to me, a violist who is a senior, looking at me. I introduce myself, and we quickly discover that we shared a former violin teacher in Kansas City. I'm ecstatic because of the sheer coincidence of our connection. I'm drawn to her love of music. She has this intrinsic urge to practice, to play chamber music, and she gushes to me about it. I'm guilty; I don't have the same love, but I pretend to.

We quickly become close friends, and the more time I spend with her, the more I yearn to find whatever it is that she has- a secret, anything that will make me feel as excited as she does about music. I start going to chamber concerts with her, tagging along as she brings me to small churches, introduces me to new performers. One day she bursts into my room and tells me that she knows why I seemed so familiar on that first day of rehearsal. She tells me that she found a YouTube video of me playing the violin as a sixth grader in chamber music camp, and her face lights up as she says, "You were sooooo good!"

There it is. Past tense. The regrets that had been accumulating in my mind over the past few years suddenly start pouring in. *Why did I give it up? If I had just stuck with it, I would still be good. If I'm not good anymore, what's the point?* I spend a lot of time contemplating this dilemma, and when my friend approaches me about playing with her in a chamber group, I'm almost convinced I should. She tries to lure me in.

"You could learn so much. You could be good again! You

have so much potential". My dad's words echo in my head. She continues, "I want to hear you play sometime!" My throat constricts, and panic starts to build in my chest. She can't listen to me. She can't see how much worse I am now. I don't want her to hear me. I don't want to be heard at all. I want to play quietly, drawing no attention.

## Key Change

The feeling of inferiority, of being a fraud hums at a low pitch at the back of my mind. It follows me everywhere, and as hard as I try to resist, it only clouds my mind further. It's the feeling I get when I'm under pressure, faced with a challenge that I know I can conquer, but my self-doubt makes my muscles tense up and my mind goes into overdrive. *I'm going to look so stupid if I don't know how to do this. Come on. Do it.*

Eventually, I decide that I want to feel like a true violinist, both in terms of skill and passion. I want it because I can't bear this burden of feeling like I don't deserve the title that

has taken me 15 years to build. I know I need it because my life at Duke is moving so fast that I must be strong enough to hang on tight, and not to be shaken by insecurities.

For the first time in my life, I seek out taking lessons myself, and not because my dad is arranging them for me. With every email exchange with my new teacher, I feel more and more confused

and anxious. I don't know why I'm doing this to myself. Part of me knows that I want to take lessons because I want to be good again- whatever that means. I want to have someone dictate to me how to play, what to improve, so I can sound talented. At my first lesson, my teacher asks me a few questions.

"So who did your last teachers study with?"

"I'm not sure", I say, my face reddening. For experienced players, it is an expectation that we know and care about who our teachers studied with. It seems strange to him that I don't know the answer to this question, but he lets it pass without pushing me further. He continues to ask more questions.

"What pieces have you played recently?"

"I've played so many. I just have such a bad memory". I realize that I can't name the complete title and composer of a single piece that I've played in the last few years. More embarrassment burns my cheeks.

He tells me that I need to change my strings. But there's just one thing- I don't know how to. As I simmer in my





humiliation, fumbling for the words to ask for help, my professor demonstrates with an amused patience. I know he thinks I am strange, and he even comments quietly to himself, "Usually you would think that when someone moves to Europe they become even more involved in music, not the other way around". He has me tune the violin, but I can't do it with the pegs. I'm afraid that I'll break something. It was always my dad who turned the pegs for me.

A few lessons later, he asks me how much music theory I had learned. I answer truthfully that I had very little. He points to my sheet music and asks me what key it is in. I can't tell him the answer. "Seriously?" he asked. My vulnerability is showing, and I squirm under his scrutiny. The embarrassment comes and goes as I tiptoe around the eggshell questions that my professor poses for me. Each little embarrassment, each fall gets a little easier to handle.

Eventually, I realize that I've been completely out of tune with what I've been playing for the past 15 years of my life. I've been a machine, going through the actions, and it is painfully obvious.

I don't have much time to let the feelings of inferiority and insecurity creep up on me today, as my professor has me notice my tight bow hand grip and my careful, hesitant left hand.

"We're going to do a lot of work to free you up this semester", he says.

## ANALYSIS

Free me up? I can't help but wonder if I'm truly free now, exploring music on my own without being required to by my dad. Distance and separation has certainly helped mend my relationship with my dad. He is rejoicing because I finally seem to be in tune with and passionate about what I'm playing, no longer viewing violin as the enemy, but rather as something I can do to de-stress, and possibly enjoy. But part of me is afraid that I'm just as trapped as I was before, playing violin because my dad's voice still echoes quietly at the back of my mind. Am I still just a machine going through the motions? Many questions remain unresolved, such as why I continue to subject myself to an art form that has caused me so much pain during my upbringing. How did the pain of being forced to practice influence my feelings toward violin? How was my relationship with my dad affected because of music? How have my self-perceptions changed as a result of this key part of my life?

## Setting the Stage

Truthfully, I don't remember much of my first few violin lessons, except that my dad sat in on every single one. Before I knew it, I had been playing violin for so long that it was an inseparable part of my identity, just as my dad was inseparable

from the violin.

But certain memories are inevitably branded in my mind. My first performance was at a small recital in a local church in Raleigh. My face pressed against the car window, my stomach twisted the closer we got to the venue, I thought about ways to disappear, so that no one would be able to find me and I wouldn't have to perform. My "worry and distorted thinking - that cause a concert's significance to be blown out of proportion" quickly spiraled into a recurring performance anxiety (Klickstein 137). I squirmed in my seat and my breath quickened, as my thoughts "focused on an imagined negative outcome or failure" (Klickstein 135).

Part of me feared the performance itself, and another, arguably more significant part of me was afraid of disappointing the looming figure in the front row that was my father. Before I knew it, I was crying and my tear-streaked face was dragged into the church where I was to play in front of a small crowd of friends and family. No amount of crying could change my dad's mind, as I sat in that cold wooden chair, awaiting my turn. What I interpreted to be my father's lack of understanding and empathy for my nerves started to create a rift between me and him. I don't remember the performance itself, only the fear that threatened to tear me apart, and the way my dad would not change his mind.

My fear of my dad's judgements deterred me from enjoying the experience of performing. I struggled to achieve the flow state wherein "the level of challenge just meets your current level of skill", making you feel like "you're floating [and] you lose track of time...when you're in flow, everything feels effortless" (Duckworth 132). In contrast, performing was *effortful* for me. My self-doubt magnified the challenge of performing. Even as I became more and more technically skilled, I rarely got out of my head long enough to let flow take over my body. *It will be so embarrassing if I mess up. What will everyone think of me?* I envied the students who didn't care if they made a mistake, who were confident in their intonation, posture, and musically uninhibited. When I made mistakes, I felt like another version of me was outside of my body, transforming into my own harshest critic. She shook her head at me and hissed, echoing the criticisms of my dad, questioning my ability, while I held my violin and trembled.

Although I rarely achieved the flow state on my own, which Duckworth contends is a result of something being "intrinsically pleasurable" (132), I sought glimpses of relief when I played *with* others, such as in the summer chamber music camp. There, I attained flow because the presence of others directed my attention toward supporting other musicians and away from myself. When I was able to stop being self-conscious and the possible judgements of my dad and others, my mind and body became free. That's how it should have been. How I wanted it to be. Just me and the music.



## Going through the Motions

As a child, I didn't have the capacity, nor the courage to tell my dad that what I really needed from violin was freedom. I needed freedom from his expectations and I needed him to believe that I would excel on my own without being excellent at the violin. If I had the freedom to explore violin on my own, would things be different? According to Duckworth, "overbearing parents [like my dad]...erode intrinsic motivation", while encouragement and autonomy for beginners in any activity are essential, factors that my dad swiftly replaced with his strict expectations from day one (107). My resentment started to grow because my dad eliminated the "stage of relaxed, playful interest, discovery, and development" necessary for me to develop my own passion for violin in the beginning (Duckworth 107). As a result, I never got to figure out for myself whether or not I truly wanted to play violin because I was always pushed by external forces to continue.

My resentment continued to grow when I caught glimpses of other ways I could be spending my time, other activities I could try. Whenever I had wandering thoughts and curiosities, however, they were promptly silenced, by the constant noise of my dad's expectations: to practice, to perform, and I think even to become a young, budding Julliard musician. I wanted to be like those kids who were allowed to make their own choices about what they liked. It turns out those kids were "more likely to develop interests later identified as a passion" (Duckworth 107). My friends had time for manicures, sledding in the backyard when it snowed, and sleepovers at each other's houses. But me? I had to practice the violin; it was all I knew. Some people are denied other pleasures, but are willing to make the sacrifice; I, however, was not. I resented my dad for causing me to miss out on what I perceived as important moments of my life. In turn, I resented the violin, as it and my dad became one and the same.

In subsequent years, my intrinsic motivation for violin, "doing [it] because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable", waxed and waned (Ryan & Deci 55). I developed a sense of competence because of the sheer amount of time I devoted to the violin, but "increases in perceived competence must be accompanied by a sense of autonomy in order for the enhanced feelings of competence to result in increased intrinsic motivation" (Ryan & Deci 59). Therefore, my intrinsic motivation was suppressed due to the lack of autonomy under my dad's rigid intervention. Furthermore, his extrinsic "threats, deadlines, directives, and [imposed] competition pressure diminished [my] intrinsic motivation because, according to Ryan and Deci, [I] experienced them as controllers of [my] behavior" (59). The more my dad controlled my musical life, the less intrinsically motivated, and the more extrinsically motivated to play the violin I

became. When I was granted "choice and the opportunity for self-direction" at summer chamber music camps, my intrinsic motivation for playing music began to emerge, an indication that I had it within me all this time (Ryan & Deci 59).

Unfortunately, my dad's persistent and excessive intervention continued to undermine my relationship with music, and made it difficult for me to see that practicing was indeed important for enhancing my skills. As a child, I hated practicing the violin, so I assumed that people who had a passion for it must cherish all of it, even the ugly and difficult moments like the endless hours of practice. But contrary to what I thought, Duckworth's work on grit has made me consider that practice; that is, practice with full mental engagement and the aim of improvement, *should* be effortful, and isn't even necessarily enjoyable for experts. Practice is effortful because "you've deliberately set the level of challenge to exceed your current level of skill" (Duckworth 132). Although practice may be demanding, it should be rewarded by moments of effortless "challenge-meeting-skill-flow" during performance. However, due to my fear of judgement and disappointing my dad, I rarely attained rewarding flow. As a result, I couldn't – or just didn't want to – justify the hours of arduous deliberate practice, which caused my whole body to ache with the heat of resentment.

My dad was more deliberate than I ever was about practicing, which made me less willing to be intentional and engaged. My dad dictated the terms; I simply learned to follow his rules, so I never developed a true sense of enjoyment for the violin. I went through the motions, satisfying his demands and playing how I was supposed to. My fingers masqueraded as engagement, while my emotions were detached. Looking back, however, I'm not sure if I was detached from the music itself or from the music as a means of detaching myself from my dad. I was a machine, going through carefully orchestrated actions to avoid error, perhaps learning the techniques required for deliberate practice, but never really developing the desire to initiate such practice without my dad. Although going through the motions was its own form of suffering, it was easier to be a machine than to be fully aware of my entrapment, and as a result, what I gained from music was shallow.

I disagreed with my dad on many things, but I subconsciously internalized his perceptions of me as a violinist and defined myself accordingly. Violin held a part of me captive, and as hard as I tried to quit, those internalized beliefs would nag at me and stop me from severing ties with music. *What will I be without violin? It's the only thing I'm good at it and I'm throwing it away.* I felt trapped.

## Turning the Pegs

My dad's constant push for excellence certainly made me persistent and determined, but his control over my life



made me resent both him and the violin because I so closely associated it with him. However, it wasn't that I wanted to avoid my dad because I wanted to avoid *him*. In fact, I remember wishing he'd take me to the park, build the tree house he said he would, or do something other than show up to one more violin lesson. When I wanted him in my life, he wasn't there, and instead he showed up and intervened when I didn't want it. I couldn't see the point to all of it. Had I known or understood his intentions for pushing me so hard, would I have been so resentful of him?

My dad would go to great lengths to find excellent violin teachers wherever we moved, to seek out music ensembles that I could audition for, and he probably would have walked to hell and back just to give me any better opportunities in music. My dad never asked me if I wanted to play, but rather insisted that I toughen up when things seemed difficult because of the rewards I would get. I thought it was impossible that someone who supposedly loved me could see me suffer so much. In hindsight, I wonder how he could have wanted things so badly that I didn't want for myself. Jellinek et al. help me to understand that I may have been experiencing the effects of my dad's achievement by proxy behavior, which is when "ambitious parents ... potentially damage their children by overstressing them and pushing them toward even such laudable parental goals" as achievement in music in my case (213).

Although it was natural for my dad to have ambitions for me, his behavior often walked, and crossed, a fine line (Jellinek et al. 213). Sometimes, I felt that his success became unbearably dependent upon mine. Ideally, I "should [have felt] that parental love or a relationship with critical adults [was] not contingent on wining or excelling in any one [area]" (214), but I didn't. I wanted more than anything to be his daughter, and not his violinist. I wanted him to be involved in other areas of my life, to be a *normal* dad, like those of my friends who worried about their own life goals instead of living vicariously through their children.

My dad was unemployed for a critical period of my life, and he seemed so preoccupied with my violin, that I, as a potential excellent musician, became his means to success. Jellinek et al. help me to understand that my dad's actions may have unintentionally made my self-worth dependent on my achievement in violin. In particular, my dad's "loss in the ability to differentiate [his] own needs and goals for success and achievement from [my] developmental needs and goals" seemed to have caused him (and me, many years later) to engage in the "single-minded pursuit of success" (214). It wasn't so much that I resented my dad, but that I resented his actions. Our fundamental disagreement on the types of experiences I should have had when growing up resulted in me feeling conflicted - wanting to distance myself from him because of his inextricable link to my violin, but also wishing we could close the growing chasm between us so that I could

have a close relationship with my dad that I always wanted.

Despite our countless arguments, there were moments when my dad would show his pride over a piece I executed particularly well. His words of affirmation created an "inflated sense of self-esteem in [my] capacities", and more importantly an inflated sense of the importance of violin in my life (McAllum 363). Violin was the way my dad defined me, so that's the way I defined myself, and even introduced myself to others every time I moved to a new school. I took solace in the praise and attention I received when I performed for my teachers and classmates, and became convinced that this was the purpose of my hard work. Their "positive feedback [made me] feel happy, competent, and secure" and convinced me that suffering was worth it if I could have a positive effect on people with my playing (Duckworth 105). As a result, my self-worth became increasingly dependent on my violin and "personal meanings [arose] from [my] perception that [I was] successful on [my] chosen instrument" (Hurley 50). In many ways, I had become a machine doing its job, executing commands, going through the motions for the outcome. I was driven by introjection, "motivated for [the violin] because of pressures [I] put on [my]self such as guilt, anxiety, or believing [I] 'ought' to do it, or because [my] self-esteem depended on it" (Comeau et al. 186). For this reason, I continued to play the violin when I first moved to Germany. Despite my lack of enjoyment, I was motivated by the pursuit of praise. Never in my life had I truly sought some deeper connection with music... I wasn't even aware that there could be one.

### *The Imposter*

Although my early exposure to the violin made me outperform my peers, it couldn't be sustained. I was "great at what [I] was doing but with no idea why [I was] doing it" (Deresiewicz 3). Thus, I had advanced technique and an impressive repertoire, as well as a sense of persistence hardened by my dad's expectations, but all those years of going through the motions began to catch up with me.

When my dad eventually found a job, and he stopped paying attention to my violin, I was finally free. It was invigorating, but in hindsight eerily frightening how rarely I would think of the violin. I had the freedom to immerse myself in activities I never had the chance to explore. I neglected the violin because I was finally free, but also because I viewed practice as unrelated to my skill and rarely considered that "skill is a product of talent and effort" (Duckworth 42). As my extracurriculars and academics began to take up increasingly more time, violin began to fade from my life. My weekly lessons became monthly, and I was lucky to squeeze in an hour of practice here and there. Thus, my skills began to deteriorate, as the cold metal of my insides began to rust. This took me by surprise because I was



always forced to practice, so I never had the chance to see what happened when I didn't. After all, it was always my dad who wound me up and changed my strings.

Furthermore, my skill may have deteriorated quickly because I spent so much time mindlessly going through the motions. Had I connected more deeply with the pieces I played, let them affect me and emotionally move me, perhaps I would have practiced music with more awareness and intentionality. As Klickstein explains, "certain ways to practice music ... lead to profound understanding, whereas others cause materials to be shaky and easily forgotten" (20). My way of practice certainly did not lead to profound understanding; I was a machine, only doing what I was told. With no instructions from my dad, I no longer performed the actions, and much of the material I had learned was indeed quickly forgotten. Subconsciously, I may have even *wanted* to forget violin because of the wounds it had inflicted on me.

The joy of freedom from the violin was short-lived, however, because although my dad no longer watched me practice, he noticed my diminishing skills. He commented on my lack of grit, a "combination of passion and perseverance that [makes] high achievers special" (Duckworth 8). Little did I know that he was right. I did indeed lack a key component of grit - passion. Nonetheless, my dad didn't seem to care if I had passion, he was merely concerned that I wasn't at the top of my game anymore. All his comments about my ability rather than effort began to ricochet in my mind, and instilled in me the "belie[f] that [my] qualities [were] carved in stone...creating an urgency to prove [my]self over and over" (Dweck 6). My "fixed mindset" made my situation look futile and out of my control, as I no longer had the skills to prove myself (Dweck 6). As a result, years of training started to look like a waste of time. My dad's mentality that I resisted so much began to be internalized- *If I'm not good, what is the point?* His aimless comments about my worsened technique were detrimental to my self-esteem, so I began to disassociate myself more and more from the violin.

At some point, all of my feelings of being a fraud climaxed, making me feel inferior to others and like I didn't deserve to be called a musician. Consequently, I retreated further into the depths of my low self-esteem and I began to only practice in my room, hiding what I saw as my failures and weaknesses, for fear that my dad would scoff at my poor technique. The fixed mindset I developed as a kid, with the goal of "look smart, don't look dumb", began to manifest itself in other areas of my life, and "risk and effort [became] two things that might reveal [my] inadequacies" (Dweck 10). The foundations that I never learned - turning the pegs, changing the strings, reading the key signature - they all became mechanical by-products of embarrassment, shame, and dangerous pride. The longer I played, the less I felt I could ask for help, and the quieter I became about my shortcomings; I didn't want to be seen as incompetent after so many years of playing. I began

to suffer from the imposter syndrome, the "deep-seated insecurity that [I was] not sufficiently capable" causing me to "become paralyzed by inadequacy" (McAllum 364). I felt like an imposter, afraid that at any moment someone would catch me, and reveal once and for all that I was nothing but a machine that was rusty and broken.

Violin fed into my fear of failure and "the result [was] a violent aversion to risk" (Deresiewicz 22). I avoided any and all opportunities to play for others, even close friends. I didn't want to be judged for a talent I was supposed to have with the possibility of disappointing those people whose judgements I cared about. When it came to college applications, I realized that I didn't even have awards to prove the skill I had devoted 15 years of my life to cultivating. It was embarrassing, and I felt ashamed that I ever thought of myself as a true violinist, or even someone with notable skill. Deresiewicz's text resonated with me because his descriptions of other "excellent" students so aptly captures my own experience. Like many others, "the purpose of [my] life became the accumulation of gold stars", a phenomenon Deresiewicz terms "credentialism" (16). When I didn't have any shiny gold stars to tack onto violin anymore, it felt vestigial, something there for all to see, but of no use to me anymore. I dragged it around with me, but it felt pointless and clunky. I was only validated by things that others could see, and I wasn't validated by myself or others in my life for my commitment and effort. When people would ask me to play for them, panic would start to build in my chest, and this continued when I arrived at college.

## *No Longer Captive*

Growing up, I didn't see passion as a part of the equation. I thought that as long as I pushed myself, that I could be something special. But I didn't realize that this mentality would never result in the special relationship with violin that I strived for. Due to my dad's iron grip on my violin, I had no room to develop passion for an activity that was forced upon me. And yet, as other kids developed their passion in tandem with their skills, I began to envy them. Such was the case with my roommate, whose love for music is infectious, but also made me feel like an imposter for not having the same passion. For the first time, I felt the full gravity of the lack of choice I had in my childhood. I could play pieces, sure, but I couldn't hold a genuine conversation with anyone about my favorite composers or performers. My dad, with his focus on excellence, shaped me to be "smart and talented and driven, yes, but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted of purpose" with regards to violin (Deresiewicz 3). Deresiewicz has helped me realize just how dangerous this aimless pursuit of excellence can be because life is less meaningful, even beyond activities, such as music, and I became less equipped to construct my future. The system my dad manufactured taught me how to be excellent,



first at the violin, then at school, but without any meaning associated with the excellence aside from the accumulation of gold stars. I may have once had skills in violin, but without a sense of purpose, a drive, a passion, I refuse to believe that as a machine I could have become anything extraordinary.

I thought I was ready to leave music behind when I arrived at Duke, but every time I looked at my violin, my mind began to be filled with doubts and questions. I wasn't finished. Although I wasn't a top musician, I knew I had a good chance of making it into the orchestra. When I entered, however, I was confused as to why I was there. My dad didn't make me. I did it myself. I questioned if violin held a part of me captive just like it did when I was younger. Deresiewicz made me realize that I was not alone and like many other excellent students I was "unwilling to submit to doing something that [I couldn't] feel passionate about but still [did] not know where [my] passion really lied" (23). I struggled with my ambition, "not, that is, with a genuine desire for excellence, but with the feeling of being a failure" if I couldn't continue to amass external validation (Deresiewicz 23). Thus, I was stuck in this limbo state, uncertain of whether I was truly passionate about violin, but also afraid to abandon it to see what my passion really could be.

Part of the reason why I continued with the violin was because I didn't feel good enough at anything else. So much of my upbringing revolved around my musical capabilities, rather than the effort I spent trying to improve my intonation or untangle challenging passages of music. Hence, when my skills began to decline, my dad pushed me to quit lessons and to stop wasting money on something that he claimed was now "useless". I started to believe that I'd only be valued if I did things I was good at. As a new student at Duke, I desperately wanted to find something I loved, but this required me to try new things, take risks, and expose my vulnerabilities. Once again, violin left me feeling trapped, but I convinced myself that I could and should find some meaning in music making. After all, now that my dad had stepped out of my musical life, I sometimes experienced a yearning to pick up the violin or to go to the practice room. That's why I joined the orchestra and started taking violin lessons this semester on some pursuit to find a deeper connection with violin. I think I wanted to prove to myself that all those years weren't a waste of my time, and I wanted to make something useful out of my skill.

I realize that my dad loves me, and that's why he pushed me so hard. Unfortunately, he also unknowingly reinforced only my competence rather than my effort or passion. When I became less talented, he discouraged me from continuing with the violin, which confirmed the association of talent and passion. In my mind, my passion for something could only be validated if I was talented at it. Additionally, I thought that talent could only be shown with awards, that passion was rewarded and accompanied by talent. When I had none of

this recognition, my world seemed to crumble around me, I started to feel like an imposter, with no external validation, or talent, or passion to associate with my violin. It's taken me until now to free myself from these beliefs.

I've been searching for the key ingredient in the recipe for grit I've so desperately wanted: passion. But what I haven't realized until now is that developing a passion may in fact require "a succession of interest-stimulating experiences" rather than one "aha" moment (Duckworth 101). Isn't it enough to love something if I put effort into it? Or even if it just brings me happiness? Perhaps I don't have to be good at something to be passionate about it. And perhaps I don't have to have a passion for something to enjoy it. For now, I'm satisfied knowing that I don't have all the answers. I'm still discovering my passions... maybe one will be music.

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## EPILOGUE

Writing this case study was certainly cathartic and allowed me to start to make sense of the twisted, intertwined relationship that I had with my dad and music, and how I became resentful towards both. When I decided to take violin lessons this semester, I tried to tell myself that I was simply interested in developing a passion for music to cover up all of my insecurities that drove me to prove myself again and again. Although I didn't want to admit it, I was lost at Duke, feeling the weight of my past decisions catching up with me.

At college, I wanted to be seen, heard, and valued, if not for violin, for something else. Furthermore, I wanted my abilities to be validated by a genuine passion for music. Although I was too insecure to let anyone truly hear me, I didn't feel good enough at anything else for me to make a leap of faith and completely abandon the violin. So I thought that taking lessons would be the solution to all of this. Instead, however, I found myself feeling powerless, like I had once again submitted to my dad's commands. But this time his expectations for me seemed to have become my own, resulting in my confusion about the role of music in my life.

But this case study has allowed me to ascribe some meaning to my lessons. Now, every time I go to the practice room, or an orchestra rehearsal, and pick up my violin, I become very aware of my emotions, thoughts and feelings. Something about writing this case study made me open up to myself in a way I've never done before, forcing myself to face uncomfortable truths.

My dad is no longer a looming figure, sitting in the front row of my performances with expectations I can't meet. He no longer watches over my lessons or during practice, and no longer dictates what I should do. He is no longer intertwined with my violin. Somewhere along the way, the problems that I had with him became problems that I had with myself. Confronting this uncomfortable truth, the extent to which I



am still self-conscious and care what others think of me has been the most difficult part of writing this epilogue. Without realizing it, the resentment that I held towards the violin and my dad for so many years turned into an unhealthy resentment for my own perceived weaknesses.

Accepting the fact that I don't have to be excellent at the violin, has allowed me to see that my worth isn't and

shouldn't be determined by accolades, praise, or even my abilities. Although there are often days when doubts creep into my mind, I am starting to be more patient with myself, allowing myself to own, and possibly celebrate, the abilities I do have. For the first time, it is just me and the music, like I always wanted it to be. Imperfections, challenges, and all. So I continue to play.

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