spectrum
Spectrum

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Welcome to the twenty-seventh edition of *Spectrum*, the journal of undergraduate writing across the curriculum at Saint Mary’s College of California. By publishing this year’s six award-winning student texts, we celebrate the elegance of language and the mindful practice of critical thinking through writing. We invite professors and students to use these six pieces as models for the power of language to construct knowledge—to facilitate the learning, expanding, and sharing of ideas.

The 2015 edition marks *Spectrum’s* fourth sponsored by the Center for Writing Across the Curriculum (CWAC). We are honored to carry on the tradition begun by the English Department, whose students and professors deserve praise and appreciation for launching *Spectrum* and publishing and championing the journal and contest for twenty-three years.

Each year, the difficult task of narrowing the stack of blind submissions requires much serious deliberation by our diverse panel of judges, consisting of both professors from many disciplines and student Writing Advisers of CWAC. We deeply appreciate the time and devotion the judges lent to this process. Likewise, we thank all the professors who guided their student writers to express themselves and to learn through the process of composing. All of these efforts culminated in a collection of winning pieces that represent a broad variety of genres, as well as discipline-specific citation styles, from across the curriculum.

This is our fourth year using a staged editing process for finalists, mirroring what occurs when writers work with professional publications. We invited each finalist to meet three times with a CWAC Writing Adviser to review issues at both the organizational level and the sentence level in order to refine and then resubmit the piece. Winning texts were selected from among the revised pieces.

This also marks the third year students from the practicum course Communication 190 produced the journal, applying principles of copy-editing and design learned in the classroom. Communication 190 fosters a creative environment for Saint Mary’s students to produce this publication, and we are grateful for the collaboration and support of the Communication Department, particularly Chair Ellen Rigsby, in helping us shape this course.

Our collaboration with the Department of Art and Art History has continued and expanded this year, the second in which the student artwork in these pages was collected with the help of Chair Peter Freund. For the first time, these works were also featured in a collection curated by students in Professor Andrew Mount’s Art 195 Gallery Exhibitions class. We salute the student artists for their generous participation, and the department welcomes art submissions for the 2016 *Spectrum*, due Dec. 5 in the Digital Art Lab.

Submissions of writing for the next *Spectrum* are due on Dec. 31, 2015 to waccenter@stmarys-ca.edu. Please see the back of this journal for guidelines for both art and writing.

*Spectrum* has always been a student-driven journal; it would not exist were it not for the tireless work of students who are CWAC Writing Advisers or enrolled in Communication 190, in addition to the student writers themselves. We extend our gratitude to all the students who submitted their writing, produced during the 2014 calendar year for any course, any discipline.
The six award-winning authors produced engaging and significant examples of writing across the broad spectrum of disciplines. We have asked the winners to share their idiosyncratic experiences of writing, submitting, and revising via “Author’s Notes,” which appear here at the closing of their essays, in order to inspire others to keep working toward the most skillful use of language, deepening the exploration of ideas.

Our cover, “Destination” by Kelsey Carrido represents the journey on which all writers embark. The essays in Spectrum travel many different roads, each in the voice, method, and style of its discipline. Yet the journey is the same, from inspiration and ideas, through expression and organization, to revision and clarification toward some truth. Every destination is another point of departure, every draft a wellspring of ideas for the next, a virtuous circle of inspiration, composition, and revision. Thus we offer these representations of the world, as seen through the eyes of our fellow travelers.
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“Using Knowledge of Evolutionary Processes to Combat Antibiotic Resistance in Medicine”
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Patrizia Longo
Bacterial antibiotic resistance is a growing concern for the medical community. Doctors are over-prescribing antibiotics for diseases that could be combated differently, or that aren’t treatable with antibiotics because they aren’t bacterial (CDC, 2011). This has given bacteria ample exposure to antibiotics and a chance to evolve resistance to them. Examining the mechanisms that drive the bacteria to evolve, however, can help to determine new ways to combat antibiotic resistance in a clinical setting.

First, it is necessary to understand how the problem of antibiotic resistance is harming society. In their review article “Evolution of Antibiotic Resistance,” Fernando Baquero and Jesús Blázquez (1997) outline why antibiotic resistance is such a threat. They explain why the excessive level of antibiotic consumption in industrialized countries has led to widespread antibiotic resistance. When a patient is treated with antibiotics, only those bacteria that are resistant to those drugs will survive. Therefore, the resistant strains will
be the only organisms dividing and growing. The exorbitant amount of exposure to antibiotics has lead to an increased population of antibiotic resistant organisms and a diminished population of susceptible strains that can be targeted by antibiotics (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). Additionally, the slow process of discovery for new classes of antibiotics allows the bacteria a longer period of time to evolve resistance (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997).

Next, Baquero and Blázquez (1997) explain that a high level of antibiotic resistance is dangerous because the human population has become so dependent on antibiotics. Antibiotics are one of the few available treatments that have a high success rate in curing illness. If antibiotics become ineffective due to resistance, doctors will no longer be able to easily cure diseases by conventional means at a relatively low cost. Medicine has also started to rely on antibiotics for preventative measures. A patient having surgery, for example, will be given antibiotics in order to prevent later infection (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). Unfortunately, the possibility of society returning to a pre-antibiotic state is a looming threat in the face of rising antibiotic resistance (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997).

Given an understanding of how relevant the problem is, it is critical to understand the processes by which bacteria develop resistance to antibiotics. Fortunately, antibiotic resistance is one of the most well documented cases of modern evolution (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). Baquero and Blázquez (1997) examine four mechanistic characteristics of antibiotic resistance, and many of them have strong ties to evolutionary processes. First, Baquero and Blázquez (1997) explain antibiotics produced by bacteria as a means of competition with other species pose a significant threat of self-damage. This results in the bacteria evolving biosynthetic pathways that increase their antibiotic resistance. Studies have shown that this process likely results from a coevolutionary process between bacterial species. The coevolution occurs when antibiotic production by bacteria resists invasion of other species, but also selects for organisms that are more highly resistant to the antibiotics, leading to an evolutionary arms race between species (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). This is threatening medical use of antibiotics because doctors use many of the same antibiotics that microorganisms produce themselves (Todar, 2008), so if bacteria are being exposed to these compounds before they’re exposed to our synthetic versions, they will already be resistant to them. Second, bacteria can perform horizontal gene transfer, where one organism uses transformation or conjugation of plasmids or transposons to pass their genetic material to another organism that is not their offspring (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). This exchange of genes decreases genetic diversity (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997), but increases the rate at which resistance genes can be passed around the population. Furthermore, it has been found that this process of gene transfer between bacteria happens extremely quickly in the human body, making it even more threatening to humans (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). Third, when bacteria are exposed to antibiotics, whether from other bacteria or humans, they face membrane and cell wall damage, compromised protein synthesis, and/or altered DNA supercoiling. This multitude of changes causes an increased rate of genotypic and phenotypic variation in bacterial populations (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). This increased variation is the raw material for natural selection, and will likely drive selection for organisms with resistance, since they will be the only ones to survive antibiotic attack. Fourth, studies have shown that only a very small dosage of antibiotics can drive selection toward resistance (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). This means that even low prescription rates and low dose antibiotics could increase the rate of antibiotic resistance in human bacterial populations and seriously threaten our use of antibiotics as curative drugs.

In spite of all these processes that increase
bacterial antibiotic resistance, there is an evolutionary trade-off for evolving resistance. Baquero and Blázquez explain three problems that may arise for bacteria after evolving resistance. Firstly, anatomical and biochemical restraints limit how far bacteria can go to evolve resistance (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). In fact, it is expected that once the saturation point is reached for enzymatic resistance processes, random mutations in amino acid sequences will actually impair resistance mechanisms (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997).

Secondly, some bacteria become dependent on the antibiotics to which they are exposed. For example, some bacteria evolve pumps to pump out antibiotics, but then come to rely on those pumps to get rid of metabolic waste products. These bacteria are often referred to as “prokaryotic drug addicts” because they depend on the antibiotics for growth (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). Lastly, as bacterial populations progressively become more resistant, the competitive advantage of resistance decreases (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). Once a majority of the individuals in a population have evolved resistance, it no longer has an advantage over susceptible individuals when introduced to antibiotics because no susceptible bacteria remain. This creates a problem for resistant organisms with no resistance advantage when they need to compete with other organisms in the presence of antibiotics. These three trade-offs demonstrate how acquiring resistance may actually de-adapt a bacterium to its environment (Baquero & Blázquez, 1997). They create another way in which adapting resistance decreases the competitive advantage of an organism; they cause the bacteria to be poorly adapted to their environment, giving them a disadvantage against predators that are well-suited for the environment.

Once we understand the evolutionary processes behind resistance, we need to explore how we may exploit these evolutionary trade-offs for antibiotic resistance to reverse the increasing rate of resistance in human pathogenic organisms. Recent scientific studies have aimed to determine how this can be done. One study by Angst and Hall (2013) studied the evolutionary history of *E. coli* and how it affects the costs of evolving antibiotic resistance in this species. They point out that the persistence of resistance genes depends on how well the bacteria with these genes can survive in the absence of antibiotics. It is not likely the bacteria will always be exposed to antibiotics, so they must be able to survive when antibiotics are not present.

To study the cost of antibiotic resistance elements in the absence of antibiotics, Angst and Hall (2013) compared the fitness of antibiotic resistant strains of *E. coli* to antibiotic susceptible strains when they were not in the presence of antibiotics. Some resistant strains were shown to have lower fitness compared to susceptible strains. Ultimately, they determined that the fitness of the antibiotic resistant strains in comparison to susceptible strains was dependent on how well they could adapt to their new antibiotic-free environment. Unfortunately, they did not determine the physiological processes behind which strains adapted better than others (Angst & Hall, 2013). There is potential though, if further studies could determine why one resistant organism adapts to an antibiotic free environment better than another, that doctors could use this knowledge to deter...
resistant organisms from adapting when they stop treatment with antibiotics.

This study and the requirement that bacteria must be exposed to antibiotics in order to evolve resistance to them suggest that the medical community should temporarily terminate antibiotic treatment in order to force bacteria to become more susceptible to reintroduction of antibiotics. We must consider the implications of this, however, as society has become quite dependent on antibiotics. If doctors eliminate antibiotic treatment after surgery, they face a significant chance of performing a risky, high cost surgery just to have the patient get a life threatening bacterial infection that can’t be treated. Additionally, some patients have diseases that can only be cured with antibiotics. It would be unethical to tell patients they can’t have antibiotics to save their lives just because we are trying to control the spread of antibiotic resistance for the greater community as a whole. Lastly, patients who are already taking rounds of antibiotics cannot stop antibiotic treatment mid-cycle, since doing so means killing all the susceptible bacteria but leaving the most resistant ones alive and allowing them to multiply. Furthermore, studies on the efficacy of the interruption of treatment methods have shown that it has no benefit to eliminating resistance (Ghosn et al., 2005). Therefore, we may need to find a better solution than interruption of treatment for reducing antibiotic resistance.

Another study exploring the exploitation of stability costs of evolving antibiotic resistance was conducted by Wang, Minasov, and Shoichet (2002). In contrast to Angst and Hall, they studied evolutionary trade-offs of resistance in the presence of antibiotics. They determined that in the presence of cephalosporins, a class of antibiotics, bacteria evolved to have larger enzyme active sites—the portals where chemical reactions occur—for the antibiotic. This larger active site, however, caused the bacteria to lose internal protein integrity, structural stability, and ability to perform some other activities. They found that this instability was disadvantageous for survival in their environment (Wang, Minasov, & Shoichet, 2002). Additionally, they found that evolving resistance to cephalosporins compromised their resistance to penicillins. Since penicillins are such a widely used class of antibiotics, this would be very unfavorable for bacteria in a clinical setting (Wang, Minasov, & Shoichet, 2002). The findings of this study, in contrast to the Angst and Hall study, actually suggest that we should increase antibiotic treatment, specifically broad-spectrum antibiotics, in order to force instability of the bacteria and/or force resistance of only one class of antibiotics. We know, however, that the high prescription rate of antibiotics is what led to the current state of antibiotic resistance in the first place, so this doesn’t seem like the perfect solution.

After comparing the two contrasting studies, neither retrospective interruption of antibiotic treatment nor increased antibiotic therapy seems to be the solution to the growing problem of bacterial antibiotic resistance. What does seem like a better tactic is taking measures that prevent further evolution of antibiotic resistance. Doctors should be very careful to only prescribe antibiotics when they have confirmed the problem is of bacterial origin and only when it is completely necessary. Additionally, some researchers suggest other tactics for combating antibiotic resistance. For example,
Carl Bergstrom has suggested changing the pattern of antibiotic prescription in hospitals to expose bacteria to many different antibiotics (2004). Other researchers, such as Joel Weinstock, suggest exposing patients to parasites or parasite-like drugs to build up their immune systems against autoimmunity and infection (2012), which could provide an alternative to antibiotic treatment and therefore aid in reduction of antibiotic resistance. None of these treatments are a perfect solution on their own, though. It will take a multifaceted effort to combat the appreciable problem of antibiotic resistance we currently face, and the medical community needs to work together to ensure they don’t perpetuate the problem.

**Works Cited**


The assignment for this paper was given to me in my last semester of my senior year at Saint Mary’s. I won’t lie and say I wasn’t excited to just get this class and all my other classes that semester over with so I could finally say I had a Bachelor of Science degree in biology. I was intrigued, however, when this paper was assigned. Professor Rebecca Jabbour gave us a lot of free reign on this paper. It could be about any topic related to evolution, we just had to include one review paper, and how two to three original research papers supported or contrasted the review paper. I was excited by the opportunity to truly pick my own topic. I had a strong background in microbiology from previous classes and research I had conducted with another professor, so I already had a working knowledge of the appreciable antibiotic resistance problem modern medicine currently faces. I am also starting my career in the healthcare field, and will be prescribing antibiotics to patients when I graduate optometry school in four years. That is why I decided to write on the topic of antibiotic resistance: I thought it would be relevant to my future career.

The review article I found, Baquero and Blázquez’s “Evolution of Antibiotic Resistance,” was a great starting point. It outlined all of the background information necessary to understand the antibiotic resistance problem and how it relates to current understanding of evolutionary processes. I was stuck after summarizing the review paper, however. The paper outlined pretty much everything I already knew about the antibiotic resistance problem. I thought I knew more than I did, so I thought, “How am I going to find two or three more papers that expand further on this topic and don’t just repeat everything I already know?” I was pleasantly surprised and humbled, however, to find there was a lot more to learn. For some reason, I had never considered how the medical community could actually fix the problem without greatly disrupting standard practices in medicine. The research articles I found made me consider this and I was intrigued by their suggestions. After writing this paper, it is clear to me that the medical community needs to consider the solutions outlined in these research papers, plus others, in order to fully tackle the problem of antibiotic resistance. They owe that much to society to make sure this problem doesn’t persist and threaten the way the medical community can treat patients.

When this paper was assigned, I was on a health kick, didn’t want to sacrifice my exercise time, and decided it would be a good idea to write the paper while I was running on the elliptical. Well, I must have been a little oxygen deprived, because the first version didn’t make a lot of sense. I would like to thank Professor Jabbour for seeing the potential in this paper, for suggesting I submit it to Spectrum, and for helping me edit it. Finally, I would like to thank CJ and the other staff at CWAC for helping me finalize this paper by making it clean enough for publication.
For women during the Renaissance, the struggle to maintain one’s agency in both the public Church and the private domestic space was constant, even with the best available advantages. John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* presents this tragic reality in the home of a widowed Duchess. Despite the fact that Renaissance widows held considerable power due to their experience coupled with societal independence,¹ the Duchess finds herself unable to escape the restrictions of her brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal. As a result, the Duchess attempts to reclaim her power by marrying Antonio, a man of lower rank, in secret. Ferdinand’s subsequent rage stems from his obsession with dominance and his inordinate concern about maintaining health and public image. The Duchess fights for her personal and sexual freedom against Ferdinand, who attempts to shackle her by controlling what she “consumes” in marriage whether it is food or sex; when she consumes against his wishes, he correlates her subsequent pregnancy with a sinful poison she has ingested that must be purged to reestablish her purity and restore the family reputation, which establishes him as a voice for Renaissance society’s

¹ From class lecture.
preoccupation with women’s bodies.2 Ferdinand and the Cardinal initially attempt to control the Duchess by insisting that she remain a widow, which would keep her under her brothers in hierarchy. They claim that a second marriage would be a sin because, being a widow, “[she knows] already what a man is” (I.i.295-96). Ferdinand warns her of the ill repute she would receive: “They are most luxurious [lecherous] / Will wed twice” (I.i.299-300). To marry again would debauch her womanly image since she will have passed through many hands that progressively reduce her worth and tarnish her “high blood” (I.i.299). Ferdinand and the Cardinal, as advocates of Renaissance high society’s concern over women’s actions, establish both the sin of remarriage and the shame it would bring to the family’s public image. In their insistence, they exercise their patriarchal rights as the men of her family over the Duchess so that she does not pass out of their authoritative hold and into the hands of another man they have not approved.

The Duchess, nevertheless, endeavors to claim her right to choose a husband—and despite the fact that marriage would nullify her higher status as a widow, her political manner in the marriage scene secures her prominent seat in the relationship once more. First, she claims her legal independence by writing her will “as ‘tis fit princes should” (I.i.377). The Duchess demonstrates her political authority, a tone that carries itself through the rest of her exchange with Antonio. Then, because he is her steward, “This goodly roof of yours is too low built; / I cannot stand upright in’t, nor discourse, / Without I raise it higher. Raise yourself” (I.i.317-19). This promotion, a command for Antonio to physically rise, also raises his social standing up to her level. Finally, in a marriage witnessed by Ca-

2 My argument is inspired by class lecture and discussion from Professor Hilda Ma’s Spring 2014 Renaissance Drama course, which explored the play’s portrayal of the body as a sickness that must be purged in order to bring social order back to proper balance. Here, I argue that Ferdinand does this to translate the correlation to a sinful poison contaminating the family, including both himself and the Duchess.
IV reveals, Ferdinand and the Duchess are twins. Thus, Ferdinand understands their relationship to be intertwined in body, soul, and blood, saying, “That body of hers, / While that my blood ran pure in’t, was more worth / Than that which thou wouldst comfort, called a soul” (IV.i.123-25). Marriage to Antonio and further consummation corrupt and stain the family bloodline, including Ferdinand. Antonio, the one seemingly responsible for this disgraceful marriage, conjures an evil image in Ferdinand’s eye. The Duchess recognizes that “he so distrusts my husband’s love, / He will by no means believe his heart is it” (III.v.39-41). As Ferdinand perceives it, Antonio’s marriage to the Duchess is a demotion of her status while the Duchess believes she was raising Antonio to her level in marriage. All of this calls into question her political authority and potentially dismantles the royal base. Ferdinand also sees it as a grab at the Duchess’ wealth and power despite the fact that he shares these same intentions yet feels he has the right to do it. Ferdinand’s descent into lunacy over his sister’s body causes him to distrust both the Duchess’ integrity and the man who has stolen it from her.

When Ferdinand initially finds out about the Duchess’ pregnancy, he interprets her sin as shameful by drawing a connection between the sex she has had against his will and the food she has eaten that causes her pregnancy to become apparent. Bosola, a spy for Ferdinand, is first to notice the Duchess’ ill appearance. He becomes convinced she is pregnant and tries to prove it by feeding her green apricots, which he believed would induce labor. His assumptions are proven correct when the apricots, in their unripe condition, bring to attention both her growing appetite and her pregnant state and cause the Duchess to experience contractions. From then on, Ferdinand perceives her ingestion of sin to have two forms: consumption (food) and consummation (sex), thus equating her pregnancy to a sickness contracted by the consumption of sin through sexual activity. The connection between eating and sex, specifically food and seminal fluid, is made early on in the play when Ferdinand warns the Duchess, “There is a kind of honeydew that’s deadly; / ‘Twill poison your fame” (I.i.309-10). Ferdinand has already tried to prevent consumption of sin in this scene by discouraging her from marrying a second time. He voices a societal obsession with virtue in women that ultimately seeks to control their bodies through public reputation and the threat of humiliation. Shame hangs over any woman who tries to assert her bodily autonomy and thus shame becomes a patriarchal weapon against sin and sexual freedom.

Such a highly unconventional and therefore sinful expression of sexual freedom is the reason the Duchess’ pregnancy is initially assumed to be an illness and, after pregnancy is confirmed, even so considered a disease. Ferdinand likens her pregnancy to leprosy (III.iv.63). Bosola remarks that she is “sick a-days. She pukes; her stomach seethes; / the fins of her eyelids look most teeming blue; / she wanes i’th’cheek and waxes fat i’th’flank” (II.i.65-67). Just before the Duchess is to be killed, the aspect of sickness is once more highlighted:

DUCHESS. Dost thou perceive me sick? BOSOLA. Yes, and the more dangerously, since thy sickness is insensible. (IV.ii.116-18)

The sickness becomes apparent when the Duchess eats the unripe apricots. The consumption of fruit

3 Class lecture and discussion.
4 Class lecture.
mimics her consumption of reproductive seed; the contamination in the fruit brings the contamination out of her body in labor—the baby.⁵ Later, an unhinged Ferdinand, by drawing connections between “tongue and belly, flattery and lechery” (V.ii.82), compares a stomach full of food to the Duchess’ pregnant body. The Duchess’ body, like the apricot, is unripe and approved neither for consumption nor consummation. In the same way the gardener supposedly “did ripen them [the apricots] in horse dung” (II.i.143), the Duchess ripens the fruit of her pregnancy in waste that must then be expelled from the body similar to defecating or vomiting.⁶ To restore the family’s public image, Ferdinand takes on the task of cleansing the bloodline, purging it of its contamination, and putting preventative measures in place by killing the Duchess.

Ferdinand’s solution to his problems lies in controlling the Duchess’ body, purging the evidence of sin from her and keeping her from sinning in the future. The purging has already been done in delivering the children and is furthered when they are then flippantly murdered, but the desire to consume may yet remain in the Duchess. Fearing that he will lose his power over the situation, Ferdinand cures the Duchess by having her strangled. At first, the Duchess proposes she cleanse herself in other ways: either by swallowing hot coals or by fasting to death (IV.i.72-76), both of which are methods intended to stop or abstain from consumption yet still retain a desire to consume things that are unwholesome. Even here, the Duchess attempts to reclaim her independence and female autonomy. However, by strangling her, the throat is closed and consumption is entirely prevented.⁷ The strangling serves as a kind of contraceptive, even castration, that keeps the Duchess from consuming more sin not only in her death but also in her subsequent inability to ingest. The Duchess herself asserts, moments before her death, that his plan succeeded in cleansing the family of the sin of her depraved consumption: “Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out, / They then may feed in quiet” (IV.ii.233-34), thus allowing them to eat without fear of sin. Ferdinand has identified the poison, eradicated it, and thwarted its chances of happening again. This way, he finally obtains the control over the Duchess that he has been working to achieve throughout the play and temporarily restores honor to the royal family.

In her search for the independence and female autonomy denied her by her brothers, the Duchess becomes a victim of the socially upheld obligation to contain a woman’s sexuality using any means necessary. This pious, oppressive obligation is embodied in Ferdinand whose motives concern the perceived defilement of body and blood, a defilement that is only defined as such because of the control it has taken away from him. His fixation on the Duchess’ body and what it consumes is what drives Webster’s play to tragically follow the working order of gender hierarchy and authority. The Duchess of Malfi chooses to highlight the struggle of the Duchess, a Renaissance widow looking to own herself in a world and family ruled by men; Webster then depicts the dismal reality of the Duchess’ attempts viciously thwarted by the very embodiment of dominant, moralistic benevolence: her own twin. Ferdinand, by acting as an agent for a societal structure dependent on a woman’s virtue, restores the patriarchal balance of gendered authority while quelling any opportunity for women, even widows, to hold onto their freedom.

Works Cited

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⁵ Class lecture and discussion.
⁶ Class lecture.
⁷ Class lecture and discussion.
Inspiration is a funny thing. It happens in the shower, or in bed at three in the morning, or when you’re flipping through channels before you default to TLC. It can begin as a loud spark or grow from a gentle, loving, gnawing sensation in the back of your head. It often happens when you’re not looking for it — and that’s the best and worst thing about it.

“Control and Consumption in The Duchess of Malfi” began as many papers do: with an inkling of a concept that had nothing to do with anything. In the midst of class discussion about a pregnant Renaissance widow condemned to death by unripe fruit, I thought to myself, “Hey, ‘consumption’ and ‘consummation’ sound similar.” Then I laughed and said it aloud, got a few chuckles, got a few crickets. Then I began to think, “Well, Juliet, what does that mean?” Rather than tossing away what I thought was a silly idea, I wrestled until a connection appeared, right in front of me: Webster’s play uses the parallel of consumption and consummation to dramatically depict the patriarchal obsession with women’s bodies. The rest is a history in loose-leaf papers, half a dozen drafts and, finally, the work you see here.

Thank you to all those friends and fellow writers who didn’t blink twice when I told them my paper was about sex, food, obsession, and murder. Thank you to Hilda Ma for nominating an essay written in crowded hallways, notebook margins, and the leftover spaces in my head. Thank you to Annie, my writing adviser and darling coworker, who gasped, and hrmn’d, and high-fived me through the rest.
#HandsUpDontShoot
By Erin Burke

Characters:
FACEBOOK POSTER (a young, exasperated person in one-toned clothing who posted the original Facebook status)
DARK CLOTHING COMMENTERS #1-#5 (people of all ages, genders, and appearances wearing dark clothing)
WHITE CLOTHING COMMENTERS #1-#5 (people of all ages, genders, and appearances wearing white clothing)
POLICE OFFICER (middle-aged man in police uniform, with gun in holster)

Setting:
“Facebook” in America, September 2014. No props are onstage, though blue and white lights shine down and a digital ping noise sounds before each line is spoken.
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(Stage lights go up on one person, the FACEBOOK POSTER, standing center stage, hands behind back and face down, eyes closed)
(FACEBOOK POSTER looks up, ping!)
FACEBOOK POSTER: (Monotone) Feeling—disappointed. (Makes frowning face to mimic emoji, then switches to more animated voice and begins to pace a bit) Ferguson, Missouri is making me sick. That boy was someone’s SON. These cops and their supporters are making me lose my faith in humanity.

(FACEBOOK POSTER freezes in an agitated position and remains in that position until dark-clothed commenter approaches quickly from stage right—ping!)

DARK CLOTHING #1: Amen. I don’t want to live in a country where I’ll have to explain to my children how not to get killed by cops, and even then I won’t be able to let them leave the house without worrying. These people are supposed to protect us! I wish I could be there supporting the movement myself. Something’s got to give.

(FACEBOOK POSTER nods in agreement, then turns to meet the next commenter, entering quickly from stage left)

WHITE CLOTHING #1: (with an air of authority) I understand that this was a tragedy, but I think you two may not have all of the information. Now, I’m not trying to start an argument (others exchange skeptical glances) but I think you should consider other news sources. Most police officers are simply doing their jobs, and if this particular officer felt threatened, it was within his right to stop the threat. If you look at the facts, the kid stole cigarettes and was reaching for the cop’s gun. It was obviously self-defense.

(As he is speaking, a second white-clothing commenter appears and immediately starts speaking between the first stops. All three of the others turn to look at this commenter—ping!)

WHITE CLOTHING #2: His right? His RIGHT? What about the child’s right to grow up and graduate and walk down the streets free of fear from an institution that has been trying to kill his people since before he was even born? Where do Michael Brown’s rights fit in according to your “sources”?!

(People onstage break off into groups and begin to mutter to one another, occasionally with passionate hand gestures. This muttering can be pantomimed, with an accompanying background audio track of crowd chatter. Another commenter appears—ping!)

I don’t want to live in a country where I’ll have to explain to my children how to not get killed by cops, and even then I won’t be able to leave the house without worrying. These people are supposed to protect us!

WHITE CLOTHING #3: (Speaking quickly and loudly over the mumbled background arguments, with only the FACEBOOK POSTER turning to listen to them) I mean, yes, this was a bad situation, but it was one isolated incident. The looting and rioting, however, is not a one-time thing, and the way people in Ferguson have handled this whole incident is just counterproductive. They’re making it all about race.

(DARK CLOTHING #2 appears behind his shoulder as he says the word “race,” and WHITE CLOTHING #3 turns around to face her, startled—ping!)

DARK CLOTHING #2: Not about race? My whole life is about race! It’s been about race since the day I was born, since the first slave ships came to America, since Jesus was first depicted as a white man. You may not see racism in your
heteronormative, middle-class, White suburban paradise, but newsflash!—just because we have a black president, it doesn’t mean racism is over!

(A long pause follows as all the commenters stop their arguments to look at DARK CLOTHING #2 before resuming their conversations more loudly than ever. Another dark-clothed commenter joins the stage unnoticed, their “ping!” nearly drowned out by the background noise)

DARK CLOTHING #3: (Not loudly enough) I think we’re all overreacting. This isn’t the time or place to discuss a sensitive topic like this.

(Enter four more commenters, two white-clothed, two dark-clothed. The remaining lines are shouted over the agitated, loud disagreements going on among all people on stage and a series of seemingly unending digital pings. A few phrases stand out above the noise—)

DARK CLOTHING #4: Then when is the time?

WHITE CLOTHING #4: —polite discourse!—

DARK CLOTHING #5: —dying every day!—

WHITE CLOTHING #5: —self-defense, not murder!—

DARK CLOTHING #2: —criminalizing the victim!—

WHITE CLOTHING #3: —reverse racism!—

(As they yell and speak, the commenters subconsciously and gradually move into like groups, with white-clothed people and dark-clothed people shouting amongst them. As the noise reaches its height, the sound of a lighthearted, whistled tune can be heard onstage)

WHITE CLOTHING #1: —institutionalized racism just does not exist anymore!

(A policeman enters from stage left and strolls slowly across the stage, whistling, with a hand casually placed on the pistol holstered on his right side. Immediately upon his entrance, the dark-clothed group becomes quieter, tensing their posture and nudging one another. As the white-clothed group continues to shout and argue without noticing the policeman’s presence, the entire dark-clothed group silently and solemnly raises their hands above their heads. The light-clothed group’s continuous chatter is the last thing that is heard as the lights go down)

End scene.

Ferguson and a Revival of the Living Newspaper

From the moment I saw the midterm play outlined on this class’ syllabus, I knew I had to write about something that had been on my mind every day for weeks: Ferguson, police brutality, and institutionalized racism. Discourse about the death of Michael Brown and resulting events had become increasingly chaotic and overwhelming, due partly to the integral role social media played in the news story breaking. As misinformation and anger spread like wildfire across Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook, the story began to feel both aided and debased by its online element. Hoping to examine the ways in which online discourse differs from reality, I came up with a piece that I felt shined light on several sides of an argument, before revealing an uncomfortable offline reality in the scene’s final moment. The finished product is a short play, titled “#HandsUpDontShoot,” which uses elements first introduced to the theatre scene by German playwright Bertolt Brecht. These elements include some that are demonstrated in the Living Newspaper, a product of the New Deal’s Federal Theatre Project. While the Living Newspaper addressed a range of issues, the intention of “#HandsUpDontShoot” is to inspire a new critical awareness of American race relations in its audience.
I employed Brechtian alienation techniques to achieve the play’s purpose of shifting viewers’ focus from a logistical evaluation of the Michael Brown case to a broader examination of racial realities. Brecht pioneered epic theatre in the early 1900s, a performance format that he said requires “that stage and auditorium must be purged of everything ‘magical’” in order to create an alienating, uncomfortable effect on its audience (Brecht 136). Brecht believed that the plays that would make a difference in the world would not be fun and fictional, but would convert audiences to support a cause out of sheer discomfort with the realities being presented on stage. In “#HandsUpDontShoot,” I attempted to bring that Brechtian feeling to the stage by transporting viewers to the online world without making an attempt to remove their awareness of the stage itself, through blue and white lights, gratingly repetitive digital sound effects, and a lack of props that would have denoted a physical world. The break from narrative and awareness of stage is made complete by the final moment, in which a police officer strolls by, breaking any illusion that the set is actually limited to Facebook.

During the play’s final moment, a group of dark-clothed Facebook commenters who have spotted the police officer somberly raise their hands up in the universal surrender motion that has become closely associated with the Michael Brown case. At the same time, the light-clothed Facebook commenters continue their disorganized discussion, which has devolved into continuous conversation represented by an audio track. At this point, the play shifts from merely observing a phenomenon—online discourse surrounding the Michael Brown case—to making a political statement about it. The police-fearing, dark-clothed individuals, contrasted with their oblivious white-clothed counterparts, stand as a visual metaphor for the differences between white and black reality in modern America. Despite all of the theoretical, logical approaches each group can take to the issue, “#HandsUpDontShoot” argues that when Americans log off of Facebook, only one group will have to fear for their lives whenever they see a cop, while another will not. This ending was intended to spread recognition about the effect tragedies like those in Ferguson have had on young African Americans, and to separate the anonymous safety of the Internet from the racially persecuting real world. The final silence of the surrendering dark-clothed characters, juxtaposed with the incredibly loud, unintelligible conversation of the white-clothed characters, demonstrates the often unintentional but incredibly condemning silencing of African-American and non-white voices that still occurs in personal and political discourse today.

This play offers the type of conversion ending typically seen in agitprop theatre. Unlike most conversion endings, however, the intended audience conversion is not in support of a political party, but in support of a persecuted group whose problems have often gone unrecognized. The conversion is made abrupt by the audience’s gradual understanding that the costuming denotes the color of the commenter’s skin, an observation that doesn’t seem important and in fact may contradict the actual actor’s skin tone (both to offer more roles to people of color, and to further surprise and alienate audiences), until the play’s group-oriented end. This play also borrows from the Federal Theatre Project’s use of stock characters; in this case, anonymous commenters inspire various levels of sympathy or annoyance depending on the audience’s inherent feelings about the situation. Both “Triple-A Plowed Under” (the Federal Theatre Project’s most famous play) and “#HandsUpDontShoot” also manipulate sounds, using changes in volume and number of voices to parallel a rise in tension. In “Triple-A Plowed Under,” the best example of this comes when a Depression-era mother who drowned her starving son repeatedly shouts “Hungry!” at the same time that a jury shouts “Guilty!” (Living Newspaper
43) This pattern of frantic noise ultimately drowns out the reality of the scene, inspiring my own use of digital “pings” to signify an increasingly fast overlay of voices.

Traces of Brecht’s epic theatre appeared throughout “#HandsUpDontShoot,” most significantly through the presentation of a self-contained scene that could hopefully make its point without any further narrative. Additionally, the fourth wall is broken by the initial Facebook post, which appears to be delivered directly to the audience. Although the play is bookended by Brechtian elements that attempt to make the audience feel uncomfortable, Harry Elam’s idea of communitas sneaks in briefly during its middle. The audience nods in agreement to the Facebook comments they have often heard, or makes sounds of agreement when a comment resonates with them, subconsciously forming a brief but present community among themselves.

Some elements of the Living Newspaper were left out of “#HandsUpDontShoot,” including a close examination of those in power, including mainstream journalists. During the play’s initial drafting, the predominance of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and Darren Wilson’s non-indictment were still to come. At that point, so much of the movement following Michael Brown’s death had been done online through an individual-to-individual basis, so it didn’t seem necessary to include stock media figures or shadowy portrayals of figures in power; I wanted to point out that on Facebook everyone has equal power. Likewise, the unseen yet omnipresent Voice of the Living Newspaper, used to give background information throughout plays like “Triple-A Plowed Under,” would have cheapened the importance of social media by putting the facts back into the hands of unreliable media figures.

The largest obstacle my play faces in expressing its message is the absolute necessity of it being performed on stage. When it was read aloud in the classroom, its message was partially lost since its aesthetically epic elements couldn’t be fully portrayed. Elements reminiscent of the Living Newspaper, including the symbolic blocking, the large cast, and the aural accompanying track help to create a sense of drama and impact during the play’s politically charged conclusion. Without the benefit of these stage-only elements, the play loses efficacy and becomes bogged down by what seems like a Facebook gimmick rather than an impactful Brechtian device. However, the play’s weaknesses are also its strengths, as its symbolic ending—beginning with the sudden shift from the Internet to real life—is also the most likely to create a positive impact and get audiences thinking. The play lacks a clearly proposed solution, instead revealing racial problems in a manner that is meant to alienate the audience, pushing them toward change due to discomfort.

Brecht believed that theatre could be a learning experience while still impressing and entertaining audiences. While “#HandsUpDontShoot” is just a beginning project, I think it embodies the theoretical director’s belief by presenting both a fun image of familiar social media personalities, and a sobering message about the status of race relations in the United States. If even one viewer goes home questioning his or her preconceived notions about what Ferguson does or doesn’t mean for all races, the play has served its purpose.

**Works Cited**


Author’s Note

Erin Burke is a senior studying English at Saint Mary’s. Erin has a passion for storytelling through film, television, and literature. After becoming involved with social justice groups on campus over the past few years, Erin felt compelled to write about the situation in Ferguson, MO that eventually led to the current #BlackLivesMatter movement. After graduation, Erin hopes to continue writing and working in the Bay Area, get a pet cat, and go to lots of concerts.
Sometimes people learn more about themselves by taking an outsider’s perspective and critically evaluating their society through a different lens. Too often we find ourselves so immersed in a way of life that we do not take the time to consider how or why our world operates the way it does. Watching fictional movies allows us to take a step back and analyze such things as human interaction, the power dynamics of a society, or gender discrimination that may otherwise go unnoticed. As contemporary cinematic sociologists have explained, “film is used as a concrete means of illustrating principles in the study of social life” because it “neither causes social problems nor simply reflects them” (Sutherland 8). Films are inherently social and cultural objects due to their production within and for a certain society. They portray stories representative of the ideals of people, and are thus appropriate expositions of the thoughts and behaviors of human beings. They are mirrors through which viewers see themselves from a critical, unbiased perspective, although not unassisted. For an untrained eye, spotting the parallels between reality and film, while not impossible, can be difficult. Thus, viewers can turn to the many great sociologists who have developed theories attempting to explain the existence of the social phenomena observed in life on and off screen. Emile Durkheim and Dorothy Smith, two of these theorists, provide critique and analysis of the societal forces of power, genderization, and organization of community, present in humanity and showcased in the 2010 film Winter’s Bone.

Directed by Debra Granik, Winter’s Bone is based on a novel of the same name by Daniel Woodrell, and set in the Missouri Ozarks. It follows a week in the life of Ree Dolly, who is anything but an ordinary teenage girl. At the young age of seventeen, she is forced to be the head of her household due to her father’s disappearance and the onset of her mother’s mental illness. This overturning of generational and gendered expectations makes Ree very interesting sociologically. After investigation into the lives of her meth-cooking relatives, Ree confirms that her father, Jessup Dolly, is dead, and she embarks on a treacherous journey to find his corpse, causing upset and paranoia in the Dolly clan, and revealing the power dynamics and organization of the family. Completing this task is imperative to saving the house she desperately needs to support her younger siblings and incapacitated mother. The movie is a haunting, gruesome portrayal of life, drug culture, and family in the Ozarks and is laden with rich social commentary, exposed by the application of sociological theory.

Durkheim is considered the father of sociology for his dedication to establishing the discipline and his functionalist theory of societies. He believed the natural order of the world is harmonious and that everything existed to serve a distinct purpose (Bulman). In his essay, The
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*Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions*, he argues that there is a duality in the human conscience due to the simultaneous egoistic and altruistic tendencies present in all people. In the late 19th century when the world was rapidly becoming more modernized, Durkheim worried that people would forget their social identity and resulting obligations, and thus emphasizes the importance of maintaining integrity and coherence in groups. He argued that pre-modern societies had mechanical solidarity, meaning the community was formed based on the members’ similarities in skills, beliefs, lifestyles, appearances, and speech, among other characteristics (Bulman). Conversely, modern societies are held together by organic solidarity, characterized by the interdependency that arises from the division of labor and specialization of skills. Due to this developing interdependency, Durkheim advocated for a balance between integration and regulation, social attachment and individuality, which he explains in the context of suicide.

Had Durkheim watched *Winter’s Bone* and evaluated Ree and her family, I believe he would classify the Ozarks as a mechanically structured, functioning society. It is clear from the film that the organization of the Dolly family is akin to that of a clan and all the members relate to each other based on their similarities. The audience quickly sees how everyone dresses alike and talks in the same dialect. When Ree visits her cousin and uncle, viewers see the parallels between their lifestyles; all three homes are run-down, with trash scattered around the yard, meat hanging from trees, and old junk cars in the driveway. The whole family is also involved in the drug culture of the Ozarks to the extent that when Ree mentions that her father “cooks crank” her cousin Megan replies: “They all do now. You don’t even need to say it out loud” (*Winter’s Bone*). In this way, the Dollys relate to and understand each other based on their commonalities. According to Durkheim, the Dollys also exhibit a mechanical solidarity in the way breaking conformity is punished. When Jessup Dolly is caught cooking methamphetamines and jailed, he “snitches” on some of the other Dolly men involved in the operation to reduce his sentence. As a result he is bailed out and killed by Thump Milton and his underlings. In this way, disloyalty to the clan is fatal. Additionally, when Ree begins asking her relatives for information regarding her father’s disappearance, she is stepping outside the social norms. She is not supposed to be snooping around in her father’s drug business or questioning authority, and she is beaten by Merab and her sisters because, as Merab said, “You was warned. Why didn’t you listen?” (*Winter’s Bone*). Thump and Merab’s actions devalue the authority of the police and exhibit Durkheim’s conclusions about the power of community hierarchy. The Dolly men were unsatisfied with Jessup’s jail ing as an enactment of justice and therefore took matters into their own hands, and Merab brutally punished Ree for overstepping her place without getting authorities involved. These scenes prove that, in this world, the rules of the clan transcend those of society at large.

Durkheim would explain Rees’s behavior as an example of the duality of human nature: the individual struggle to reconcile the opposing motivations of one’s identity. Ree as a character has agency in her actions and her embodiment of different roles, however the appropriateness of her actions is defined by the societal norms. She has an obligation to her family as a social creature to respect their authority and to care for her siblings and mother; yet her individual, egoistic self craves the knowledge of what happened to her father and the freedom of joining the Army and leaving the Ozarks. Hence, Ree models the balance between integration, social connection to a group, and regulation, the need to be governed by rules, that Durkheim encourages. She is loyal to her family and proudly tells Baskin that “I’m a Dolly, bred and buttered, and that’s how I know Dad’s dead” (*Winter’s Bone*). Her social attachment to her
family is strong, she refuses to give the police information about her father, aunts, and uncles, and raising her younger siblings gives Ree something to live for. However, this is tempered by the rules of society. For example, she is forced to compromise her allegiance to her family by gathering evidence of Jessup’s murder for the police and she is denied by the army recruiter because she is too young to enlist, even though she needs the money to keep her house and family together. Even the film’s portrayal of the people and activities of the Ozarks appears dysfunctional to present-day viewers, according to Durkheim, it is an explainable example of a functioning, mechanical community inhabited by people simply balancing their relationship with their society and with themselves.

Smith may be less forgiving of the film. Upon first glance, Winter’s Bone may be considered rather progressive in the way Ree is portrayed as a strong and independent woman, single-handedly caring for her siblings and mother and saving her house and land. Smith might agree that promoting these qualities in a woman is a step in the right direction, but ultimately flawed. A proponent of feminist theory, she criticizes the absence of the female perspective in the development of mainstream culture, which she proposes is the underpinning of power in a society. In her essay, “A Peculiar Eclipsing: Women’s Exclusion from a Man’s Culture,” Smith makes a compelling argument about the exclusion of women in positions to influence the ideological apparatus of the civilization they live in and shows that what is “normal” in society is highly gendered (Bulman). Females, Smith finds, are typically not expected to advance or achieve in their field, and are rarely seen in positions of power, whereas men are viewed as unquestionably authoritative. Smith observed that the male experience of life and their interests are generalized and normalized and women are expected to adhere to a society “made for them but not by them” (Bulman). Smith concludes that the solution to gender discrimination must go beyond eliminating individual and institutional biases, prejudices, and sexism. Women must be made equal participants in the formation of culture, the image and identity of a society, because social expectations of gender compel people to behave in a certain manner. For men, this means demonstrating strength, competence, and independence, whereas women are expected to show vulnerability, humility, and dependence.

The men of Winter’s Bone adhere to the gender expectations Smith describes; Thump and Teardrop radiate authority, are intimidating, and display incredible strength and power. Conversely, the women are not necessarily vulnerable and dependent. There appear to be many strong females in the film, including Merab, Gail, and Ree, yet upon closer examination, all three are actually still controlled by men, making this a less radical film than modern viewers may think. Merab is a commanding and powerful woman in the Dolly clan, but her actions are actually in service to the patriarchy. When she and her sisters physically beat Ree as punishment for pursuing information about Jessup, she is simply performing the work a man cannot do. Tear drop makes no attempt to rebuke those guilty of harming Ree after he is told that it was the women who hit her because they are socially allowed to do so. Therefore, Merab and her sisters are not only allowed, but also obligated to put Ree in her place and defend their men’s honor, thus protecting the
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patriarchal hierarchy of the clan. Smith would say this movie makes progress in theory by including strong, female protagonists; however in execution I believe she would harshly critique the ultimate triumph of the patriarchy.

Smith also concludes that, on an institutional and organizational level, the exclusion of women from the forming of culture is purposeful, whereas, on a micro scale, people are not aware of the oppression because society has internalized it. This concept is embodied by Gail, Ree’s best friend. Ree expresses her frustration with Gail’s husband Floyd’s ability to control his wife when Ree says: “Man, that’s so sad to hear you say he won’t let you do something, and then you don’t do it” (Winter’s Bone). Even though Gail shows agency when she takes Floyd’s truck without permission and runs away, she returns to her husband by the end of the film. She does not think much about Floyd’s denial to help without giving her a reason because she has internalized her own oppression. She responds to Ree’s comment saying simply, “It’s different once you’re married” (Winter’s Bone). Her role in society is clearly defined as a wife and mother, and she sees no reason to defy that expectation, unlike Ree.

As a teenage, female, head-of-household, Ree straddles the line between feminine and masculine, maternal and paternal, and even blends the two when she must. She is teaching her siblings how to fire a shotgun. She approaches this masculine task in a maternal way, holding their arms and guiding their hands gently, as if they were learning to write rather than to kill. Ree’s defiance is an anomaly to the characters and viewers, showing how the mindset of society has not yet been altered to view women and men as equal contributors to the formation of culture.

The conclusion of Winter’s Bone showcases how each of the two sociological perspectives views the overall organization of society both in fiction and reality. As Smith would see it, Ree expresses interest in joining the Army, a traditionally masculine realm, but she is thwarted by the patriarchal structure of society. By the end of the film, she is put back into her rightful place and forced to remain within the domestic sphere, caring for her brother, sister, and mother because she cannot enlist at the age of seventeen. Her resignation to domestic work preserves the patriarchal organization of her family and the Ozarks at large. Another element of feminist theory argues that
women’s domestic work is unrecognized and unrewarded even though it is the basis upon which capitalistic production is made possible (Bulman). Without Ree as a nurturer, her family unit, and the capitalistic structure of her society, would fail. Smith’s theory dictates that this is due to Ree’s status as a maternal female; however Durkheim’s functionalist theory of sociology explains the conclusion of the film as a righting of the social order. Ree must remain in her home not because she is oppressed by the patriarchy, but because it is the function she carries out in the social order. Durkheim believes that social problems are anomalies and signs that the organism of society is sick. Therefore, to continue to function as it should, it must resolve the issue and restore its health. At the film’s opening, Ree is the caregiver of her family, but as the plot unfolds, this normality is threatened by her actions in defiance of her previous life. She must, by the end of the film, return to the role she began with to signal that her society is functioning healthily once again. Because the film ends in this way, Durkheim can conclude that the Ozarks depicted in Winter’s Bone are a functioning society because the natural order is reinstated despite any upsets.

Applying Smith and Durkheim’s sociological theories to Granik’s film, Winter’s Bone, exposes the social forces still at work in modern society, in the Ozarks and elsewhere, that would remain unseen if not exemplified in fiction. Both theories show how society has an incredible influence over the individual, though from drastically different vantage points. Durkheim argued there is a duality to human nature, which is obvious in Ree’s character though possibly harder to identify in ourselves, and a community structure based on interpersonal relationships that is blatant in the Dolly clan. Smith’s dated observations about the eclipsing of the female perspective and authority are proven relevant by the numerous instances where women are seen subconsciously promoting the patriarchal structure of society. Though she makes a strong argument about the plight of women in the social order, Durkheim’s presentation of functionalist sociology more thoroughly explains not only the motivations of the Dollys, but also their whole society’s structure. Through the application of functionalist sociology to the film Winter’s Bone, audiences learn to recognize the struggles of balancing personal and social identities and see the benefits and dangers of organizing a society based on the principles of mechanical solidarity. Durkheim’s conclusions were originally intended to expose the patterns of reality; however they serve to analyze fictional characters as well. The ability to successfully apply sociological theory to both fiction and nonfiction is proof of the parallels between the two worlds and the authenticity of film as a medium of serious sociological interest. “Movies are part of the social curriculum—the continual, informal, collective of families, peer groups, neighborhoods, churches, organizations, institutions, and other societal influences that ‘educate’ all of us throughout our lives” (Sutherland 121). What viewers learn from watching movies and observing alternate realities, in conjunction with the study of theory, informs people about themselves. By recognizing social phenomenon in a work of fiction, audiences are challenged to turn their critical eye away from the silver screen and become aware of them in reality.

Works Cited


Have you ever empathized with a character in a film, or predicted exactly what would happen next in the movie because you’ve experienced something similar? It makes sense that movies are reflections of the society they are made for, albeit sensationalized and exaggerated. However, under all the Hollywood magic, there is some truth to the characteristics of people and communities we see on the screen. Every movie provides social commentary, either purposefully or by virtue of its appeal to certain people. I believe the ability to recognize the parallels between what we pay to see in the theater and what we live daily helps us become more aware of the type of people we are and the way our society functions. While this paper began as the final assignment for my sociology course, I quickly became fascinated with the concept of pointing real theory at fictional societies, and I was amazed that it worked! I hope readers of this essay, and the vast literature of cultural sociology, come to realize that video games, books, music, and even film are incredibly important to the creation of our society. They impact how we think, what we think about, and how new generations are socialized into the world.

Many thanks to Professor Robert Bulman who first introduced me to the field of cultural sociology and the practice of watching movies “not for fun,” and also to Professor Kathryn Koo who had me read Daniel Woodrell’s novel, oblivious to the existence of this essay. The text offered additional inspiration and guidance, and I will admit, was better than the movie. Also to the skilled and incredibly patient advisers in the Center for Writing Across the Curriculum, without whom this essay would have remained in the archives of my school work. Never have I edited an essay so many times, and never have I felt as much pride in a thesis statement. As always, my friends and family support me through everything and never let me surrender to an unfinished draft. My utmost gratitude to all of you.
Fra Filippo Lippi’s *The Madonna and Child with Angels: Rebellious Justification*
by Holland Enke

The illustrious friar and painter Fra Filippo Lippi is remembered for his spectacular artwork and spectacularly scandalous life. Born an orphan in 1406, Filippo was sent to live at the Santa Maria del Carmine monastery\(^1\) where he eventually became a friar in 1421 at the age of fifteen.\(^2\) Filippo’s lover Lucrezia Buti, whom he met when serving as chaplain of the Santa Margherita at Prato convent in 1456,\(^3\) faced the same circumstances, being indoctrinated into vocational life with her sister Spinetta after the death of their father.\(^4\) The beautiful nun and the lusty friar met when Lucrezia posed for Filippo’s Santa Margherita altarpiece,\(^5\) which sparked their torrid affair. Defying religious laws, the couple had to have a special dispensation granted to them with the assistance of their supporter Cosimo de Medici and Filippo was finally excused from his vows by Pope Pius II.\(^6\)

Despite being a less than devout friar, Filippo was still a man of the cloth and associated himself with the Carmelite Order.\(^7\) This order of friars placed Mary in the center of their devotion, modeling their lives after the Virgin’s virtues of “obedience, silence, simplicity, chastity and poverty.”\(^8\) However, the Madonna in Filippo Lippi’s *Madonna and Child with Angels* seems to veer from these virtues of simplicity and chastity. In this piece, painted between 1460 and 1465,\(^9\) Filippo goes beyond devotional adherence to Mary and depicts “the Virgin in a more personal way,”\(^10\) demonstrating an intimacy between the painter and his subject. This tenderness is seen in how Filippo “paints himself in close proximity to his images and above all in a more intimate relationship with the earthy Madonnas that often occupy a central place in his works.”\(^11\) Clearly Filippo feels a close connection to his Madonna and treats her portrayal as such, making her unique from the other Virgins he painted, populating her environment with many suggestive details, and placing great attention on her physical beauty and material splendor. Filippo paints his Madonna rather unlike the simple Madonna his Order devotes them-

\(^5\) *Ibid*, 106.
\(^8\) *Ibid*, 331.
\(^9\) Holmes, 148.
\(^10\) Nygren, 331.
Holland Enke

selves to and breaks from societal and religious taboos. This unconventional Virgin in *Madonna and Child with Angels* in conjunction with Filippo and Lucrezia’s own rebellious lives suggests that perhaps this Madonna, like Filippo and his lover Lucrezia, is transgressing the divide between the sacred and the secular.

The Virgin of *Madonna and Child with Angels* is not confined within a definable architectural space,"12 but positioned in an ambiguous and open one—a large window that dominates her background. This positioning greatly differs from Filippo’s other Madonna portrait, *Madonna and Child* (housed in the National Gallery of Art), which was painted in the 1440s"13 and in which the Madonna is placed inside what Megan Holmes describes as an “architectural niche,”"14 a scalloped wall that defines the Virgin’s space. Rather than being sequestered into the pristine nooks that restrain other Madonnas into their tight spaces, this Mary is placed in front of a more natural space that does not confine her but rather opens her up to the viewer and to the world. Not limited by the architecture, the Virgin sits at a “thirty-degree angle,”"15 thus suggesting she is either right up against the window or slightly hanging out of it. This ambiguity of her place, this confusion caused by her lack of confinement, speaks to the rebellious nature of the depicted Virgin. She cannot be located in a set place but rather hovers in this limbo between enclosed and freed.

The painted building does not confine the Madonna just as the convent did not confine Filippo’s beloved Lucrezia. Lucrezia abandoned the convent in 1456 to live with Filippo along with Spinetta and three other nuns."16 The women did not return to the convent until 1459, and Lucrezia actually returned to Filippo’s home in 1461,"17 Lucrezia’s constant teetering back and forth between the convent and Filippo’s home mimics the Madonna’s position. Filippo could have sympathized with Lucrezia and possibly used such sympathy to depict this Madonna who is half-in-half-out of the enclosed space. Attempting to understand the relationship between the friar and nun, scholars have conjectured:

Filippo and Lucrezia […] had been destined by their relatives for a monastic life at an age when they themselves had no choice in the matter. The practice of handing over to monasteries children who would later find they had no vocation whatever for a religious life inevitably produced a great many cynical monks and nuns."18

Filippo captures Lucrezia’s not so perfect fit in religious life by having his Madonna not so perfectly fit inside her designated spot. She, like Lucrezia, is not meant to be confined in the organized realm, and thus transgresses to the secular. Despite her limbo state, the woman in the portrait is still the Madonna, thus the viewer does not question her motives. He is suggesting that a woman, like Lucrezia, can be free in the secular world while still being a part of the religious world.

Already breaking his Madonna from the architectural confines, Filippo eschews a conventional technique by not painting any sort of barrier between the Madonna’s pelvis and the viewer. According to Jennifer Megan Orendorf, barricades in front of the Madonnas’ reproductive areas serve

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12 Holmes, 146-147.
13 Ibid, 146.
14 Ibid, 146.
15 Ibid, 147.
16 Ibid, 106.
17 Gaetano Milanesi in Holmes, 10.
18 Rudolf and Margot Wittkower in Holmes, 108.
as “virtual architectural chastity belts,”\(^{19}\) which reveal the confinement impressed upon women to “keep family honor and virtue intact.”\(^{20}\) In several of Filippo’s other Madonna portraits there seems to be a consistent divide between the viewer and the Virgin’s lower half. In the National Gallery of Art’s Madonna portrait, for example, the Madonna is placed behind a ledge that blocks her pelvis, preserving her virtue. The Virgin in *Madonna and Child with Angels*, on the other hand, is completely stripped of this protective barrier. Instead of a chastity belt placed in front of her, a lavish, elaborately decorated chair with a gold brocaded cushion and brilliant pearls sits underneath her. The chair is actually calling attention to her lower half rather than concealing it. As Holmes’ notes, “The sacred figures are separated from the viewer by the most richly tactile features in the painting.”\(^ {21}\) Earthly delights like the ornate chair that dominates the left-hand corner and the rich blue gown that drapes Mary’s figure are placed between the viewer and the Madonna. With an open view of the Virgin’s lower half, Filippo is not pointing out any explicit promiscuity, but he is not necessarily defending any sense of chastity either. He is bringing her chastity into question but still making her the Madonna, still representing her with the Christ child. Once again, he is creating a divine female who is able to rebel from the restrictions of her religious society and still partially participate in the celestial world.

The Madonna’s breaking from the chastity-protecting confinement mimics yet again Lucrezia’s freeing herself from the convent’s confinement, rejecting chastity and becoming the mother of Filippo’s two children.\(^ {22}\) Rather than hiding their transgression, the couple bears its scandal and actually attempts to pull the Madonna into the same scandalous ambiguity. Both Madonna and Lucrezia break from their respective chastity belts, in the painting and in society, breaking expectations and displaying a harmony between the secular and the religious. Filippo continues his campaign for this balanced woman by placing the Madonna in front of the rather controversial window. During the fifteenth century, windows were rebuked by popular texts like Alberti’s *Della Famiglia* and Barbaro’s *Trattati della donne*\(^ {23}\), both of which declared these open surfaces as invitations to “vice, lust, adultery, vanity and profligacy.”\(^ {24}\) Forgoing a structural, enclosing frame, windows opened up the space and took women out of the safety of their homes, placing them instead in an “architectural boundary between public and private spaces.”\(^ {25}\)

If windows are such marks of promiscuity, then why is Filippo painting the Madonna, the ultimate virgin, in front of one? Whereas the Madonna in the National Gallery of Art is safely tucked away in her walled space, this Madonna is freed. She is

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\(^{20}\) Ibid, 106.

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 150.

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 147.

\(^{23}\) Orendorf, 140.

\(^{24}\) Ibid, 140.

\(^{25}\) Ibid, 141.
not being presented to the viewer but presented to the world, the window opening her up beyond the religious space and into the public. This is what people feared: “In popular culture, these orifices were continually used as symbols of deviant behavior and settings for clandestine affairs: small ‘windows’ of opportunity that allowed female protagonists to manipulate their confinement and interact with the public.”

Lucrezia’s life is an example of the “deviant behavior” such windows suggest. She “manipulated her confinement” in the convent and “interacted with the public,” scandalously running off with Filippo and participating in such secular acts as an affair and childbirth. Filippo places his Madonna in this compromising position to juxtapose the scandalous associations of the window with the pious associations of the Virgin, blending the two ideals rather than separating them. Mimicking this Madonna, Lucrezia runs away from the convent – essentially just jumps straight out the window – yet still remains a holy, reflective woman. The same can be said for Filippo himself. Although he left the religious life, the ex-friar apparently still signed his name “Frater Philippus.”

He, like his Madonna, was straddling the line between the enclosed, the religious, and the open, the secular. The window invites speculation about the Madonna’s virtue, but Filippo’s continuation of all other images of Mary – the baby Jesus, angels – allows the viewer to accept this scandalous position, promoting the same acceptance of Lucrezia and Filippo.

This window as the demarcation of the compromising position between the sacred and the secular worlds allows viewers to interpret the landscape behind the Virgin. This telling landscape symbolizes the dichotomies present within both the Madonna’s portrait and the artist’s life. When observing the landscape from left to right, one sees a transition from green, fertile fields to barren, brown desert and boulders. As noted by other scholars, these tended fields to the left of the Madonna evoke a sense of order while the boulders to the right give a sense of disorder. Once again, the Madonna is associated with both the tamed and orderly and the unknown and freed.

The same is true for Filippo and Lucrezia’s lives: they are the cultivated fields in the hands of their religious officials and the scattered boulders transgressing the Church’s rule in their affair. According to scholars, such a symbolic landscape was a key aspect of the Carmelite Order, contrasting the “nature tamed by people and the uninhabited wilderness.” Filippo, who was raised by this order, is merely following the principles he had been taught and using this contrasting landscape to symbolize his own struggle. A bridge in the distance merges the two terrains, linking the constrained with the unrestrained. He is using his “window of opportunity” to paint a landscape about his position, to create an allegorical representation of the two worlds he and Lucrezia are trying to merge.

Despite being so liberal with the amount of space the Virgin inhabits, Filippo is meticulous with how the Virgin is depicted, focusing more on the Madonna’s materialistic fineries than on her divine markings. Harris and Zucker have pointed out the Madonna’s lackluster halo, stating, “The halo is becoming a simple circle we can just barely make out above Mary’s face and also around

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26 Ibid, 142.
28 Megan Holmes, Fra Filippo Lippi: The Carmelite Painter, 150.
29 Ibid, 150.
30 Jennifer Megan Orendorf, 142.
Rebellious Justification

Christ.”

Looking at the Virgin’s halo, what should be a glorious signifier of celestial grace, one can see that it is rather plain and resembles a quickly drawn chalk circle, almost an after thought compared to the other examples of rich adornment within the painting. Even in the National Gallery of Art’s *Madonna and Child*, which in all other regards presents a much plainer Madonna, the Madonna’s halo is far more carefully drawn, bright and speckled with gold. This lack of emphasis on the divine crown confirms scholars’ assertions that Filippo desired to “create an image of *Madonna and Child with Angels* that looked very earthly, and very natural, and very real.”

Revoking the golden halo, Filippo grounds the Madonna in the secular world and focuses on her material beauty. This Madonna with her elegant head-dress, a translucent fabric that delicately folds into her locks and is sprinkled with pearls, is a vast contrast from the plainly adorned Madonna presented in the National Gallery of Art, who is crowned with a plain veil void of any jewels and draped in two-dimensional cloth unlike the luscious velvet in the *Madonna and Child with Angels*. As Harris and Zucker comment, Filippo is displaying “a real love for the beauty of the things we can see with our eyes.”

He is making the Madonna a much more secular woman than the holy mother of Christ, her material splendor outshining the references to her divine splendor.

Filippo is lessening the Madonna’s divine markings and enhancing her secular markings in the hopes of creating a Madonna that can represent both. This is the plea for Lucrezia: just because her secular life – her children, her living with Filippo – is technically more apparent than her religious life, does not mean she cannot still be a part of the Church. Filippo has captured this beautiful Madonna who almost appears to be an aristocrat, so adorned in the earthly beauties, to paint his beloved Lucrezia in both her earthly and religious heights.

Despite seemingly apparent connections between these sacred images and their secular counterparts, most scholars do not connect Lucrezia or Filippo’s personal lives with this Madonna. Scholars assert, “his works, in fact, are the expression of a fervent religiosity united with a capacity to transcend the sacred scenes, expressing them with the most lyrical human feeling.” Despite acknowledging the personal emotion Filippo puts into his painting, scholars have not connected Filippo’s “human feeling” within his paintings to his feelings toward Lucrezia. Rather than seeing an indulgence of materiality with the Madonna, some scholars view her veil as “Christ’s swaddling cloth” and the elaborate seat as her “Throne of Wisdom.”

There are also differing views of the landscape, which to some scholars represents the “City of God” and established connotations.

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33 Ibid, 3:42.


36 Ibid, 248.
between Christ and rocks\textsuperscript{37} rather than serving as indications of Filippo’s split life. Thus, these scholars are focused on the religious iconography Filippo would use rather than the personal symbols he may explore. Scholars have noted the playful feeling of the painting,\textsuperscript{38} but what is Filippo playing with? His characteristic “fervent religiosity,” turning a sacred figure into an example of the secular woman. Scholars even admit to the secular nature of the woman, assuming Filippo is giving viewers “a figure we can relate to here on earth.”\textsuperscript{39} Thus though her items may be majestic symbols, they are all items one would identify with a beautifully adorned Renaissance woman.

This depiction of a humanized Mary demonstrates the “Renaissance’s preference for worldly, secular, as opposed to religious, pursuits.”\textsuperscript{40} Thus this Virgin is not the Virgin of the past but the Madonna of the Renaissance, of Filippo’s now. Filippo takes a humanist approach\textsuperscript{41} in his painting, making the Madonna figure an example of what the Renaissance woman can be – a resident of both religious devotion and secular freedom. Yes, she is the beloved Virgin in Heaven but she is also Filippo’s beloved woman on earth. We can look to this beautiful woman framed by symbols of Heaven and earth alike, and feel as though we can relate. Though inspired by Lucrezia, this Madonna is for everyone.

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\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 248.
\textsuperscript{38} Harris and Zucker, 0:46.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 2:59.
\textsuperscript{40} Holmes, 11.
\textsuperscript{41} Harris and Zucker, 0:34.
When it came time for *Spectrum* submissions, I was a little worried about submitting my avant-garde piece about a lusty friar, a naughty nun, and a possibly unchaste Virgin to such a reputable journal. But I thought that if I had so much fun writing this piece, someone else was sure to have as much fun reading it. And after all, isn’t that our goal as writers? We want to create this adventure on the page, a piece that encapsulates our bursting thoughts, intertwines the depths of our knowledge-packed minds, and captures our readers from the start, not letting go until the perfectly crafted end. I hope I have created such a work in this piece.

I had first encountered Filippo and his infamous Madonna in Professor Dopfel’s Renaissance Art class. She introduced the artist and his painting with so much life that I was immediately hooked. Unable to stop thinking about the friar with a nun for a lover and a Madonna for a subject, I knew what my research paper would be.

This is how I go about writing all of my Art History papers: I wait until I am completely overcome by a piece and then let my fascination do the rest. Art History is a wonderful field, allowing you to engage in all sorts of materials, dialogs, and methods to reach your goal. You lose yourself in an artwork, scrutinizing every inch for meaning, sprouting idea after idea in your imagination. You then re-enter the piece’s creation, understanding the time in which it was made, its story. You leave the past for the present, immersing yourself in the dialogue that still circles around this timeless piece, opening your mind to possibilities and interpretations you never thought of. Finally, the best part comes—the writing. Putting into words the story of the past and the story within the art is not only an argumentative essay but also a creative piece. You are creating a tour, a flow of ideas and descriptions, which will eventually lead your reader to the same shocking encounter you first had with the art.

To get to such an encounter, this paper underwent a long revision process, spanning several methodical, whiteboard-assisted sessions in CWAC: the structure was built, demolished, and reconstructed; the thesis was narrowed and narrowed again; repetitive sentences were debated, replaced by new repetitive sentences, debated, and finally adjusted. The final product is an expression of me, of the way I love to engage art and let my imagination run free. I believe this is what all writing should be—an expression of your joyous, frustrating, all-consuming relationship with your thoughts. Such passion is what drove me and I hope is what stirs within the reader.

I am extremely grateful to my advisers, Andy, Madeline, and Rebecca, whose insightful responses helped me realize my final product. I am of course abundantly grateful to Professor Dopfel who has taught me so much about Art History and has guided me to become an avid critical viewer. Thank you to CWAC and all of the judges who considered my piece; this is a true honor.
What is “color-blind racism” and what are the different manifestations of color-blind racism in our social world? If policies are held back or defeated because of color-blind racism, what can we do to lessen racial discrimination in our society?

The image of racism most of us are fed from an early age is one of slaves tilling the fields of wealthy plantation owners; of Jim Crow-era public signs indicating where people of color were and were not allowed to eat, drink, sit, and go to school; and of lynch mobs, the Ku Klux Klan, and burning crosses in the front yards of Black Americans. While these overt forms of racism are not commonplace today, the movements and pieces of legislation that targeted them were by no means the collective off-switch to racial discrimination. Color-blind racism is defined by author and political scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in his *Racism Without Racists* as a particular form of racial rhetoric that “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics.”
Having taken over as the new racial dialogue of our nation, color-blind racism is even more dangerous than old-world Jim Crow racism because it is a covert way to mobilize racist ideology while simultaneously espousing notions of equality and justice. Because color-blind racism relies on the ability of the speaker to frame comments in a way that absolves him or her of racial bias, identifying and eliminating that bias in everyday dialogue is the first step in combating this contemporary racism. Never before has it been more important to dissect and revolutionize the way we perceive and talk about racial issues.

Color-blind racism is a multi-faceted phenomenon, but its most significant characteristic is the way language is used to perpetuate it. The rhetorical structure of color-blind racism relies on four central frames, identified by Bonilla-Silva as “abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism and minimization of racism” (74). Each of these frames respectively allow for (white) individuals to deliver racist proclamations without sounding overtly racist.

Abstract liberalism relies on the use of concepts related to political and economic liberalism in non-specific ways to talk about otherwise racial issues. A person using this particular strategy might claim to value “hard work” and “equal opportunity” above everything else in considering these issues (e.g. employment opportunities or college acceptance rates) while choosing to ignore other factors such as residential segregation and racial profiling. Those who invoke abstract liberalism in discussions of race might claim that testimony from people of color suggesting unfairness in hiring or college acceptance practices is invalid; and in a land of assumed equal opportunity, individuals must simply work hard in order to reap their just rewards. In reality, the most arduous obstacles racial minorities face are racial profiling and a lack of access to the wealth required to pursue higher education.

Naturalization is equally covert in that it allows privileged individuals to “explain away racial phenomena” by attributing these phenomena to “natural” characteristics of a particular group of people (76). This frame is often used to single out racial minorities in community settings, particularly schools. Bonilla-Silva makes ample reference to Beverly Daniel Tatum’s “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations about Race on this point: white students and teachers in high school settings are more likely to notice and call out a group of Black or Latino/a students for sitting together at lunchtime whilst ignoring the fact that they themselves group together in similar ways (Tatum qtd. in Bonilla-Silva). Individuals in this scenario attribute biological difference to people of different races, and deny that their position is racist by citing the fact that “it’s not just whites” who are guilty of only sitting with whites: “they do it, too” (76).

Cultural racism follows the same vein of claim to difference in biology between races, although this frame is mostly used to provide reasoning for more general statistical evidence that demonstrates how minorities are subjugated in society. This frame relies heavily on negative stereotypes perpetuated in a vicious cycle of projection (what minorities hear from whites) and internalization (the ideas that they accept as true). To many people, the stereotype “Blacks are lazy” seems to match empirical evidence that shows Black people are significantly less likely to be hired for high-level company positions. The real reason for this is a systemic disadvantage minorities have in networking (white men tend to offer recommendations to those closest to them—usually other white men) and access to large amounts of inherited/accumulated wealth. Despite these disadvantages, the immediate connection between the “lazy Black” stereotype and the empirical evidence makes it difficult for others to refute these naturalization claims. People of color then begin to internalize stereotypes—usually in their adoles-
ence—which creates a vicious cycle of systemic racism.

The final piece of the structural frame of color-blind racism is the minimization of racism—the claim that all forms of racism were effectively eliminated with the end of slavery and the Jim Crow era. Privileged groups will often reference this frame when asked about the merits of affirmative action or reparations. They cite the end of legal and overt discrimination as the end of any sort of need for aid—financial or otherwise—for racial minorities who still face disadvantage at the hands of the system. Those who utilize this frame look to the existence of legislation intended to prevent issues of discrimination as evidence that racial issues have no place in contemporary discussion, despite the fact that covert discrimination is still institutionalized.

We don’t have to look far to dig out the deep-rooted repercussions of these frames of color-blindness for people of color. If the dominant language of race in our nation is one that denies the existence of discrimination and prejudice where it is still prevalent, people assume that there is less of a need to address issues in which race plays a central role. Authors Jean Halley, Amy Eshleman, and Ramya Mahadevan Vijaya address the implications of inattentiveness to race in public policy in their Seeing White: An Introduction to White Privilege and Race. Tracing the undulating identities of ethnic groups as either white or non-white in the eyes of U.S. immigration policies, they identify how color-blindness might contribute to problems in contemporary policy. Specifically, Vijaya cites a personal experience in which she and a group of white friends traveled close to the Mexican border. She and her friends were stopped at an immigration checkpoint, at which time an immigration officer asked her white friends if they were born in the United States—they replied yes, and were taken at their word. Complications arose when Vijaya mentioned that she was not born in the United States, but was carrying documents that allowed her to remain in the country for occupational purposes. She and her friends were detained while the officers attempted to verify her legal status (Halley, Eshleman & Vijaya 167).

Vijaya gleaned several important questions from this experience: why were her white friends not required to provide proof of their legal status? If she had also claimed American citizenship, would she have been taken at her word? Why is it that immigration officers are so much more likely to target individuals of color, regardless of the legitimacy of their citizenship, rather than “whiter” immigrants who may not have legitimate visas? An individual subscribing to the tenets of color-blind racism would point to the fact that it is illegal for immigrations officers to racially profile, and claim that Vijaya’s questions hold no merit. However, trends in U.S. immigration policy—alongside many other policies—have demonstrated what the authors of Seeing White identify as the “white face of citizenship” (168). By delineating the history of immigration policy that established a normative white culture in the United States—one that scrambled to compartmentalize particular minorities into either “white” or “non-white” groups—they are able to illustrate how whites are far less likely to be targeted by these policies than minorities. The blanket of color-blindness, however,
makes it difficult to address this problem.

To put this blanket into perspective, consider the following scenario: how would immigration laws such as Arizona’s SB 1070 (a law that allows law enforcement to determine an individual’s status of citizenship if there is “reasonable suspicion” that he or she is in the U.S. illegally) be enforced if the Canada-U.S. border, not the Mexico-U.S. border, were under scrutiny? The “reasonable suspicion” exercised most commonly by law enforcement is racial profiling—if an individual does not have the “white face of citizenship,” he or she is subject to an interrogation. The U.S.’s neighbors to the north fit more comfortably into the “white face” stereotype. Without the ability to profile based on race, officers would then have to rely on actual evidence of illegal immigration status to make their claims—a practice they do not often extend to their neighbors to the south.

Even in the face of the dramatic shadow cast by these contemporary problems, there are ways to combat the racial discrimination that rides on the heels of color-blind dialogue. The first step in this challenging endeavor is to make the racism of color-blindness transparent to both whites who espouse it and others who have internalized it. Bonilla-Silva remarks that it is especially crucial for the racially oppressed masses to be “racially conscious;” this means that the power at the heart of the racial movement must be supplemented by knowledge of the mechanisms of contemporary racial language. He also outlines the importance of challenging the dominance of whiteness wherever it exists in the institutions around us—be they schools, neighborhoods or restaurants. He urges us to “undress color-blindness” and force whites to understand how their attitudes and actions directly perpetuate racial bias, segregation, and discrimination (307). The dialogue of change, however, must be as carefully constructed as the complex language of color-blindness. In dismantling racial discrimination, we must be able to demonstrate the flaws of the system rather than the flaws of individuals, lest we risk whites shutting the proverbial door in the face of racial equality forevermore.

Whilst exploring the concept of color-blindness, I kept remembering a distinct set of conversations I’d had with a friend of mine during my first couple of years at Saint Mary’s. I remembered being both frustrated and incoherent—I knew what he was saying was wrong, but I didn’t know why. I’ve since come to the understanding that it was his racial privilege—and my own, too—that prevented us from having a productive conversation. White privilege is inseparable from color-blindness: they work together, cyclically, to perpetuate a system mobilized by racism. In this next section, I’ll return to these conversations from years past, and hopefully explain to the reader what I was unable to explain to my friend.

Discuss legal scholar John A. Powell’s observation that in a racist system, privilege is often conveyed, not earned: “most of the benefits can be obtained without ever doing anything personally. For Whites, they are getting the spoils of a racist system, even if they are not personally racist.”

In a riveting discussion with a friend of mine several months ago (“riveting” used here loosely as “absolutely infuriating”), I was maneuvered...
into a figurative brick wall with a single line of dialogue: “My parents worked from the ground up to get where we are today, so you can’t tell me I’m more privileged than a rich Black kid with an inheritance from God.” I mentally shelved the overwhelming statistics on wealth and inheritance disparities between whites and Blacks and stumbled over my own words in an effort to refute that statement without insulting his family. I urged him to think about racial profiling in the employment world, about income inequality, about how minorities are underrepresented in higher education. I was ultimately unsuccessful, because he clung tightly to the liberal economic values that characterized his upbringing. The existence of Black families wealthier than his white one was all the evidence he needed to completely negate the existence of white privilege.

What I wish I could have made him understand in our conversation is what scholar John A. Powell remarks about the phenomenon of white privilege: that it is conveyed, rather than earned. The most frustrating misconception of white privilege from those who have it is that it is somehow comparable to common privilege, like a driver’s license or a weekly allowance from your parents. These are earned privileges—they are gifted unto you as a direct result of some purposeful action. This misguided connection between “earned privilege” and “white privilege” causes individuals to view the latter as a label of blame, or as the direct result of doing or saying something overtly racist. They even cite white privilege as a form of “reverse-racism,” without realizing that using that term demonstrates the essence of white privilege. Since the existence of racism within a particular societal structure requires the presence of “prejudice plus power,” a frame described by clinical psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum and followed by the authors of Seeing White, only those who do not feel the oppressive shove of that power can illegitimately reassign the word when a way of thinking threatens the social norm that favors them (Halley, Eshleman & Vijaya 13). If I could return to my friend, this is probably how our conversation would go:

“If a Black person, for example, makes mean racial comments toward a white person, it definitely makes them prejudiced. But it doesn’t make them racist.”

“How the hell does that work?”

“Well, they don’t have the power to actually change the system to fit their beliefs. So like, if you put it in the context of, say, the slave age: if a Black slave said something like ‘white people are all smelly devils from hell,’ nothing would happen beyond maybe a couple of people going ‘yeah!’ or, ‘hey now, that’s not nice.’ However, those same types of comments coming from white people literally lead to the enslavement of an entire race.”

“Yeah, well, if you really want people to be treated equally, you can’t say only one type of person can be racist.”

That last line of dialogue frames another common misconception of privilege: that we are post-racial, and in order to demonstrate our commitment to equality, we must assume that everyone already has it. Establishing that whiteness is a societal norm is key to both rectifying this mistake and understanding the foundations of white privilege, because the normative dynamics of society are both constructed by and catered toward the social group (“white,” “straight,” “male,” “cis-gender,” etc.) with the most power in that society. Those who can identify with that particular social group are the ones with the monopoly on that power. Members of these groups do not have to pass any tests or prove an alliance with any particular set of moral standards: they are members because they have fit certain social categorizations since birth.

“Hey, I saw that weird guy from our Seminar class in the city this weekend.”
“Wait, who? What does he look like?”
“I can’t really describe him… blondish hair? Kinda skinny? Y’know, normal-looking.”

At its simplest, privilege in terms of racial issues has its roots in the culture of “false dualism” that exists as the structural heart of our society. Dualism, which by definition necessitates “two distinct, and only two, positions on an issue,” has historically shaped the way race is perceived in the United States (11). There are only two racial categories that matter within the framework of contemporary society: white, and non-white. This simple racial stratification becomes in-group and out-group categorization, and further, a pattern of “othering,” which is exactly what my friend did by implying that skinny blonde people are “normal-looking.” “White” is the norm implied by phrases like “non-white,” so that social deviants—people who aren’t white—are identified, stereotyped and systematically disadvantaged exclusively by race.

“I KNOW she got into Berkeley ‘cuz she’s Black. I had better SAT scores than her and I got waitlisted.”
“Well yeah, but she’s also the editor of the newspaper.”
“Yeah, but—“
“And she’s on varsity Track. And she’s the best writer in our class. And her parents were both valedictorians there.”

In order to demonstrate how having access to social power affects different racial groups, it is necessary to challenge members of advantaged groups to consider the racial dynamics at play in situations that affect them as well as those without privilege. Several institutions that both comprise these dynamics and perpetuate white privilege in our nation are dissected in both Racism Without Racists and Seeing White. The political controversy that surrounds affirmative action policies in colleges and universities is a specific and complex representation of how white privilege affects certain individuals’ access to social power. Bonilla-Silva provides responses from several white interviewees who claimed that affirmative action violates a sense of equality in academia; some even went as far as to call affirmative action “reverse discrimination” (132). The irony of these statements is that they are revealing the existence and power of white privilege. Those who have racial privilege have long benefited from policies and social situations that have allowed them to enter higher academia with relative ease (i.e. family legacies, inheritances, access to well-funded schools). When those social benefits are challenged, those with privilege are quick to construct rhetorical arguments that shut down the merits of distributing social goods like access to education amongst other groups. Despite the fact that certain affirmative action policies also target student scholarship athletes, legacy candidates, and residents of underrepresented geographic regions, the category given the most consistently negative lip service is race (176). That is racial privilege: to be able to decry inclusive policies on the basis of racial bias without actually being victimized by that racial bias at all.

The next step is determining how to frame white privilege in a way that forces those who have it to consider its effects on their social relationships with power. This is no easy task, as the idea of privilege challenges what the authors of Seeing White call the “myth of meritocracy,” which parallels strongly with Bonilla-Silva’s frame of abstract liberalism (11). This myth is the jumping-off point for every citizen and politician who believes that equality of opportunity is ensured by hard work, and that the only barrier to success is a lack of motivation. It is a myth because there is societal evidence that points to unfair disadvantages faced by those without white privilege in the social, economic, and political spheres. To reject the myth of meritocracy, those with white privilege would have to accept that the institutions
around them are mobilized by racism. For those who confuse having white privilege as harboring overt racism, this rejection is an attack on personal values—values created by their environments and that they have internalized over time—that make up their core identities, causing them to refuse to consider that those values are myths.

“You have your opinions, and I have mine. You know I don’t like talking about this stuff with you. There’s no right or wrong. You’re being stupid.”

When I returned to the unfortunate exchange with my friend at the start of this discussion on white privilege, I realized that my argument was not forcing him to think enough about how ingrained privilege (or lack thereof) is in our daily lives. I should have urged him to think about the last time he was followed through a store on an innocent grocery run. I should have had him recall the last time he had spent more than a few seconds scanning a magazine before he found someone who looked like him. I should have asked him to think about why his parents never had to warn him that his appearance when he leaves the house could be the difference between a simple walk down the street or a bullet in the head. These are all more personal examples of how racial privilege shelters whites from the dangers of not having a share of constructed normalcy or social power. Testimony and examples like the ones from my own friends helped me internalize how privilege affects my own life and the lives of those around me.

In essence, the ultimate danger of whiteness is that it shifts attentiveness from behaviors of groups that fit the norm onto groups that do not; the end result is that whites pay no attention to how race affects their relationships with institutions and other social groups. White privilege supplements this lack of attention by rewarding racial ignorance with social power. Individuals within dominant racial groups then perpetuate this ignorance in order to maintain the power, “even,” as Powell notes, “if they are not personally racist.” The mobilization toward transparency of privilege requires much of the same action as transparency of color-blindness: we must expose the flaws of the original structure without condemning those who live within it before we can rebuild a scaffold of racial equality.

Works Cited


I’m just going to be upfront about this: race is something that most of us white folks don’t think about until someone smacks us in the face with it (and sometimes, not even then). After all, we’ve been brought up in a system that is built by us, for us—why would we need to come to terms with the color of our skin? The only exploration of race I had while growing up was eating the different foods kids in my elementary school classes brought in for “diversity days”—celebrations that allowed us to embrace multiculturalism and ignore the oppression faced by many of the actual people there.

The first person to really “smack me in the face” with race was Dr. Longo, who assigned the midterm that inspired my *Spectrum* piece, along with the amazing friends I’ve made in her classes who are so open about their experiences with injustice. With their guidance—and some heavy-duty self-education—I’ve been able to understand how important it is that we keep these discussions going, especially in a socio-political environment that considers itself “post-racial” (spoiler alert: it’s not. You need look no further than your friendly neighborhood social media scene).

I’m a writer first and foremost, which is why these discoveries I’ve made have primarily manifested themselves in essays and long-winded Facebook statuses. It’s amazing to have your written work validated when it’s your favorite medium of communication, which is why I am so grateful for the opportunity to preserve this piece in *Spectrum* 2015. I was apprehensive when I first learned it was being considered for publication, because I know the people who look like me already take up way too much space in these political discussions. However, I was inspired to go forward by something Alicia Garza, co-founder of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, said about how our world addresses these issues when she spoke at Saint Mary’s: “We don’t speak about race. We act on race.” It’s time we get comfortable speaking about race, because we can’t move forward if we’re not even willing to have the conversation.

Before I forget! Thank you so much to Ruth (an advising all-star) and the rest of the fam over at the Center for Writing for facilitating so many wonderful revision sessions and ensuring our pieces are journal-ready. You are all largely the reason I’ve been able to maintain my sanity throughout my senior year. See you in Dante 202!
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WRITING: We welcome submissions of any genre of writing produced as part of an undergraduate class, of any discipline.

Please submit via email to waccenter@stmarys-ca.edu with “Spectrum 2016” in the subject line, or in person to the Center for Writing Across the Curriculum (Dante 202). Please include the writer’s name, the professor’s name, and the course number. Writing may be submitted by the student writer or the professor by Dec. 31, 2015.

ART: The Department of Art and Art History welcomes submissions for artwork for the cover and interior of Spectrum 2016. The submission format is black & white digital, 7” x 9” at 300 dpi resolution. The winning selections will be determined by a jury.

Please email LRC3@stmarys-ca.edu for the entry form. All art entries will be due on December 5, 2015, in the Digital Art Lab.