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# The American Papers

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Volume 44

Number 1

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The American Papers  
2025-2026



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# The American Papers

2025-2026

Volume 44

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The artwork on the cover of this journal was designed by CSUF student Mattie Burnett. Below is the artist's statement:

My piece, entitled "Resilient Yarrow," is inspired by the themes of resilience, hope, oppression, and resistance. The intention behind my piece is to convey my sadness and hope for the millions globally affected by oppression. In America, fascistic policies, ICE, and the Trump regime actively attempt to villainize and violate our immigrant, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ communities. Meanwhile, in Palestine, there has been an ongoing genocide propagated further by American aggression in the region.

I highlight the Yarrow plant in my piece because various species of it grow virtually everywhere around the world, including on American soil and within the country of Palestine. It is one of the most resilient plants around, thriving in the harshest conditions. Yarrow reminds us of the universally shared solidarity of millions facing war and terror. It is a reminder that we are all in this fight together.

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## Letter from the Faculty Advisors

Professors Golub and Kanosky would like to thank all of the CSUF students who helped make Volume 44 of *The American Papers* possible. We commend the editorial board for their professionalism, enthusiasm, and willingness to give of their time during summer break and throughout a busy school year. We also applaud the student authors for producing outstanding scholarship and engaging agreeably with the editorial process, not to mention showing the courage to submit their work in the first place. We thank Mattie Burnett for creating the mighty and moving artwork that graces the cover of this year's issue. And we extend special recognition to Sasha Westerfield for her expert layout design.

*The American Papers* was first published in 1980, just eleven years after the department of American Studies was founded at Cal State Fullerton. It was the brainchild of American Studies students who wanted to create a journal that would showcase the finest papers written for AMST courses in a given year. Back then, the hope was that the journal would “provide a valuable set of models and resources for students and faculty.” That tradition continues to this day. *The American Papers* is a living archive of American Studies teaching and learning, a snapshot of some of the courses faculty teach and some of the ways students write and think about culture. Every year, the journal receives many submissions of work written in GE, elective, methods, capstone, and graduate courses. Over the summer and into the fall and winter, the AP Editorial Board discusses and evaluates every submission, makes final selections, and works with student authors to further develop their essays for publication. What you are holding in your hands—or reading on your screen—is the product of this year's community of students who came together to publish outstanding scholarship and create another artifact of department history, a snapshot of American Studies at this moment in time.

We would like to thank the Printery for their work in printing the journal. Thank you as well to the AMST faculty members of the Weaver Committee, who evaluated submissions and composed an elegant statement praising this year's winner. And thank you to American Studies chair Carrie Lane and our exceptional department staff for their behind-the-scenes help bringing this journal across the finish line.

Finally, we sing the praises of editors-in-chief Sam Semcheshan and Trevor Stoller. They logged many hours doing final edits, or what they thought would be final edits before doing additional final edits. They kept us to a timeline and demonstrated leadership while cultivating a collaborative and collegial environment for all involved. Working with them has been a pleasure and an honor.

Professor Adam Golub and Professor Alison Kanosky



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## Welcome to the 2025–2026 issue of *The American Papers*!

In the forty-fourth edition of the journal, we are excited to share the scholarship of this year's authors. Every year, the context in which American culture exists changes, and each issue of the journal reflects that. This year has brought new challenges to us all. As uncertainty and fear plague our world, it is more important than ever to remember the struggles that have persisted and how people have remained resilient. In no other discipline will you find scholars researching topics such as Bad Bunny and a local Southern Californian cemetery in the same space. Indeed, the American experience is vast, and we are proud to showcase it in this issue.

Artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly common in higher education and society at large. Reviewing works to ensure they were written by humans is a grueling task, but one that the board sees value in. Research and writing are arts. While tedious and unforgiving, the art of crafting an original thesis after a caffeine-induced all-nighter, or the joy of finding the exact document that backs up your argument after hours, is a special kind of fulfillment. When AI can spit out an essay within seconds, student works created with time and passion are all the more valuable. For those reasons, all authors published in this issue disclosed using little or no AI, with it used only for basic spelling and grammar editing, and this practice shall continue in future issues. *The American Papers* is firm in ensuring our student journal remains written by students, not machines.

As freedom of speech comes under higher scrutiny, the board is aware that publishing certain content can result in backlash. The last thing the journal wants is for authors, editors, or any of our American studies community to be targeted or face repercussions for what we publish. However, American Studies' strength lies in its breadth of scholarship, and limiting that would diminish the discipline. As the board, we wish to ensure that we are not the ones who suppress student voices when they wish to write about a topic they are passionate about. *The American Papers'* purpose is to uplift student voices rather than censor them.

We are grateful to all the authors who submitted to *The American Papers*. Submitting anything for publication is never easy, but your willingness to do so has ensured this journal's survival year after year. We also thank the CSUF American Studies faculty for encouraging students to submit their work to the journal. The unwavering support from faculty for even the most absurd research topics has changed the lives of more students than they will ever realize. Furthermore, we cannot express enough gratitude to our advisors, Dr. Alison Kanosky, who served as our advisor during the fall semester, and Dr. Adam Golub, who advised us during the spring. They've navigated this board through every snag and unexpected twist that occurred in the editing process. We will forever be grateful for their guidance and support.

Despite these dark times, we are glad to have our American Studies community with so much unique scholarship to celebrate. Lastly, we would like to thank you, the readers, for picking up this issue of the journal. Without you, none of this would be possible.

-The Editors

# Course Descriptions

## **AMST 300 Introduction to American Popular Culture**

Adam Golub

This course introduces students to different ways of thinking about the history, development, and meaning of American popular culture. We will explore how popular culture can shape our identity, our social experience, our sense of community and belonging, and our understanding of the world. Genres for study include the freak show, horror, true crime, science fiction, and reality TV.

## **AMST 332 Science and Modern America**

Carolyn Thomas

Interdisciplinary analysis of the relationship between science and culture in the American past and present. Topics include questions of trust, ethics, objectivity, power and identity in developing scientific knowledge in health and medicine, the environment, and technology  
AMST 332: Science and Modern America

## **AMST 350 Seminar in Theory & Method of American Studies**

Dustin Abnet

Understanding and appreciation of methodology, theories of society, and images of humanity as they affect American studies contributions to scholarship.

## **AMST 401T Love in American Life and Thought**

Sara Fingal

This interdisciplinary research seminar examines the concept of love within the context of American Studies. We will explore various forms of love—familial, platonic, communal, and romantic—by investigating how these relationships shape and reflect American culture and society.

## **AMST 401T Race in American Culture**

Susie Woo

This seminar examines how racial difference is constructed in American culture. Readings offer perspectives on the racial meanings within cultural products and practices, the intersection of stereotypes and social experience, and the changing notions of race over time.

**AMST 405 Images of Crime & Violence in American Culture**

Alison Kanosky

Cultural analysis of meanings ascribed to law and order, authority, violence and punishment in the American past and present. Examined in selected symbols, images, traditions, and realities, including: the gun, police, vigilantes, 'hard-boiled detectives,' 'romantic outlaws,' and 'crime waves.'

**AMST 428 American Monsters**

Adam Golub

Interdisciplinary study of the monster in American culture. Monsters in historical context as reflection of fears and anxieties surrounding nature, science, gender, race, community, the body. Images of monstrosity in film, literature, folklore, art, television, public spectacle, and other expressive forms.

**AMST 502T Theoretical Approaches to Studying Popular Culture**

Adam Golub

This seminar introduces graduate students to various theories and methods for making sense of the stories we tell in popular culture. We will learn how to 1) analyze popular culture texts through close reading; 2) connect popular culture to its broader historical and cultural contexts; 3) study the production and reception of popular culture; and 4) make an argument about the power and significance of popular culture.

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Building a Legacy: The Cultural Impact of Forest Lawn Memorial Park

# Building a Legacy: The Cultural Impact of Forest Lawn Memorial Park

Sara Chaffin

This essay examines the cultural legacy of Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Southern California, and its relationship to the Fallen David installation at Cal State Fullerton. The paper argues that Eaton revolutionized the American cemetery model by transforming it into a space for multi-usage. Through the invention of traditions and the use of consumerism, Forest Lawn serves as a relic of a mid-century vision lost to time. The essay contends that while Forest Lawn is no longer as well-known as it once was, its impact remains embedded in spaces where visitors may not know of its origins. The essay was written for Dr. Abnet's AMST 350: Theory and Method of American Studies class, where the class was assigned to write a paper using a close reading of a text and expanding on its greater context through the use of American Studies theories and methodologies.

Embedded along a small portion of the elaborate labyrinth of walkways on Cal State Fullerton's campus lies an unusual piece of sculptural art. Located close to the Sea Bee Ship's Plow rests a series of scattered sculpted body parts all reclining upon a compact patch of grass. This sculpture is named *The Fallen David*, a piece of public art that was upcycled from its previously intact form. Unfortunately, the previously intact *David* did not survive 1987's Whittier Narrows earthquake, where it toppled onto the grounds of its first home, Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Cypress. Upon hearing this news, Cal State Fullerton Professor Donald Lagerberg decided to make an unexpected move, "On an impulse, I called Forest Lawn – I was interested in acquiring the pieces for Cal State Fullerton," Lagerberg said<sup>1</sup> Once it was decided that Cal State Fullerton would acquire the broken statue, Lagerberg came up with an unconventional plan for its display. "What I wanted to do was to install it like a fallen ruin," Lagerberg said, "[it would be] a dignified use of the piece."<sup>2</sup> Lagerberg was onto something when he made the decision to install the statue in this way, the display could be interpreted as a metaphor for what the original *David* represented, a piece of mid-century ideology

lost to time. The *Fallen David* is one of several Davids that have been commissioned by Forest Lawn due to Dr. Hubert Eaton. Eaton would go down in history as a successful businessman and cemetery innovator due to his construction of several ideologies that would correspond with the overall vision and business model of Forest Lawn Memorial Park



Early in his career, Dr. Hubert Eaton observed what would become his next business venture, a tangled mess of land with a few tombstones inside. Eaton had questions as to why American cemeteries were so full of doom and gloom, always filled with ghostly statuettes of sad angels, clasping hands, and/or unkept greenery. Eaton believed that the living and the dead deserved a place unlike others from before. Modern Americans no longer needed reminders of death; what they needed were joyful relics of life. Eaton contemplated his ideas while basking in the glow of the Southern California sun, as if Christ himself was smiling down upon him. Forest Lawn would become a new kind of cemetery, one that was unlike all the others. He believed that only he had the power to change the landscape for the better, and he would spend the rest of his earthly existence working towards this goal. Upon acquiring this property in 1917, Hubert Eaton penned a statement, a manifesto if you will, stating his vision for the creation of a park-like utopia where the living could co-mingle with the dead and entitled it *The Builder's Creed*. Here, Eaton makes a statement that would become essential to the structure of his cemetery, one in which he promises that he “shall endeavor to build Forest Lawn as different, as unlike other cemeteries as sunshine is to darkness, as eternal life is unlike death.”<sup>3</sup> This would become one of the many promises Eaton would make within his *Builder's Creed* that would influence the shaping of Forest Lawn-Memorial Park.

Once construction began on the park's grounds, Dr. Hubert Eaton would commission several buildings influenced by European architecture throughout the park. Forest Lawn's chapels would include the following three chapels: The Little Church of Flowers, The Wee Kirk O' the Heather, and The Church of the Recessional, which would fulfill the *Creed's* promise of erecting “Noble memorial architecture with interiors full of light and color, and redolent of the world's best history and romances.”<sup>4</sup> This would include bridging the gap between heaven and earth by building structures for multipurpose use. “Since 1929, more than 35,000 couples have exchanged vows at this cemetery,” according to a 1989 *Los Angeles Times* article. “In the '40s, if a couple wasn't married in the Wee Kirk, they just weren't married. It was the elite place to be married,” said Forest Lawn's wedding coordinator, Mildred Broking.<sup>5</sup>

Creating a space for both the dead and for the living would become an integral part of Forest Lawn's business model, and would culminate in the creation of photo opportunities and ceremonial traditions. One of these examples would be located right

outside of the Church of the Recessional, in the form of “The Ring of Aldyth,” where lovers place their arms through a stone ring to recreate a manufactured ritualistic pledge that invites lovers both new and old to take. “The Ring of Aldyth” is just one of the many ways in which Dr. Hubert Eaton and Forest Lawn Memorial Park have created cultural traditions within its wrought iron gates. This would continue the Creed’s pledge that “Forest Lawn shall become a place where lovers new and old shall love to stroll and watch the sunset’s glow.”<sup>6</sup>

To coincide with the demand for marital ceremonies and the sale of plots, Forest Lawn would commission hand-painted billboards pushing slogans like “To Lovers, we’re a Place to Wed” and “Beauty That Comforts” as part of their advertising campaign. This would coincide with Eaton’s plan to turn the memorial-park into a tourist destination, one that would be unexpected and baffling to some. “It was Southern California’s top visitor draw until 1957, when the recently opened Disneyland surpassed it,” wrote Bob Pool of the *Los Angeles Times* regarding Forest Lawn’s Centennial.<sup>7</sup> This similarity between Disneyland and Forest Lawn isn’t a coincidence, Dr. Hubert Eaton and Walt Disney were good friends. Author Greg Melville summed up Eaton’s influence on Disneyland perfectly, stating that:

“[t]he cemetery’s themed attractions are meant to transport visitors to a cartoonish time and place: Its fake 17th-century Scottish stone chapel, Wee Kirk o’ the Heather, looks stolen from the movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.”<sup>8</sup>

Disney and Eaton would share an acute eye for detail in the design of their parks, even down to the perfection of the smallest of features. Just like the maintenance of Disneyland magic, “[e]ven the trash cans [at Forest Lawn] are camouflaged as fake logs, so the magical experience won’t be broken.”<sup>9</sup> This would coincide with another aspect of Eaton’s Creed guaranteeing that the park would be utilized to “educate and uplift a community.”<sup>10</sup>

As Southern California grew in population and infrastructure, so did the number of options for leisure and amusement. Many living in present-day Southern California have forgotten about Forest Lawn as a tourist attraction, and that is not a coincidence.

American Studies scholar Eli Cook explains the kinds of ideologies that Americans held during the first half of the 20th Century, stating that they “often thought more in terms



of stability, solidarity, security, and safety—not the capacity to choose between various options on a menu.”<sup>11</sup> Cook continues stating that post-war America “seemed to believe that it was often better to have stable institutions provide, as Roosevelt famously noted, freedom from ‘want’ and ‘fear’ than dynamic markets provide freedom of choice.”<sup>12</sup> There was comfort and stability in the services that an institution like Forest Lawn was providing, due to its the selling points of perpetual care and pre-sold plot plans. The clients of Forest Lawn did not have to worry about what would happen to them and their loved ones once they passed, because it was reassured that everything would be taken care of.



Dr. Hubert Eaton’s legacy would live on in his business model, and by impacting the cultural fabric of Southern California. In 1937, Eaton commissioned a Carrara marble replica of Michelangelo’s *David* for outdoor display, yet there would be complications regarding its ability to be constructed as an exact copy. Sources from Forest Lawn have stated that “Hubert Eaton wanted the *David* statue

to be sans fig leaf, but he was overruled by the ‘Victorian influenced art committee.’”<sup>13</sup> A new leafless *David* would be installed after the seismic destruction of the original, setting a precedent for the downfall of many *David*’s to come. Like Eaton, Lagerberg chose to place the *Fallen David* outside for public viewing instead of housing it in a structure. Many of California State Fullerton’s art students come by with paper and pencils in hand to utilize the installation for higher artistic learning. Occasionally, Lagerberg comes by to check up on the statue and has witnessed *David* being “used as a teaching tool for blind children, who were led to come touch his face and body,” as well as becoming familiar with the tradition of rubbing *David*’s bottom for good luck.<sup>14</sup>

There is a commonality between Lagerberg and Dr. Hubert Eaton in the sense that they have both spent a lot of their time dedicated to making art appreciation accessible to the public. Like the statues of Forest Lawn, the *Fallen David* was installed with the intention of creating new experiences for visitors and tourists on campus. The use of the *David* sculptures in both places are examples of how art can be used within a space with the intention of being utilized by the community. Social media scholar danah boyd argues that “[p]ublics provide a space and community for people to gather, connect, and help construct society as we understand it.... They can be political in nature, or they can be constructed around shared identities and social practices.”<sup>15</sup> In the case of the *David* statues, their public display has come to symbolize the shared identities and social practices within the institutions themselves.

The bulk of contributions that Dr. Hubert Eaton handed to the American funeral industry is immeasurable, causing author Jessica Mitford to state that Eaton had “more influence on trends in the modern cemetery industry than any other human being.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Dr. Hubert Eaton’s influence can be found all over Southern California, in places where you may least expect it. His influence can be seen in how modern wedding packages work, utilizing fantasy chapels and photo opportunities to impress and entertain couples and guests alike. One cannot argue how his influence has impacted the “theme parks” of Southern California, with the creation of different themed areas that evoke fairytale fantasies of eras that have long since passed. Dr. Hubert Eaton’s legacy can be experienced on the campus of Cal State Fullerton, where many students walk past the *Fallen David*, probably unaware of who Hubert Eaton is and what the statue was originally intended for. However, the *Fallen David* also represents a legacy that Eaton built which no longer exists in the same capacity as it did prior to Eaton’s death. Although Forest Lawn Memorial Park is still in operation, the park will never reach the same amount of foot traffic and cultural recognition as it once did many years ago. The impact of the vision promised in Eaton’s *Creed* now lay scattered and splintered about just like pieces of *David* that lay broken about.

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AMST40IT: Love in American Life and Thought

# “Bobby, they’re playing our song”: Music and Couple Identity in American Adult Animated TV

Markus Albihn

This research examines the phenomenon of *our songs*—shared musical associations between romantic partners—as a culturally ubiquitous yet understudied form of folk knowledge embedded in American popular culture. This study analyzes *our songs* as a recurring trope in the American Adult Animated Sitcom genre. It argues that these series frequently misrepresent the phenomenon by using *our songs* to resolve relationship conflict or to privilege male perspectives which ultimately undermines the collaborative and mutual nature central to their meaning outside of media. The trope also serves a meta-narrative function by lending romantic capital to otherwise dysfunctional relationships, especially those featured in the genre that center aloof or immature male protagonists. This study calls for further interdisciplinary study of the *our song* phenomenon as a meaningful cultural practice with broader implications beyond the animated sitcom genre.

## Introduction

In the middle of Jimmy Pesto’s Pizzeria, husband and wife duo Bob Belcher and Linda Belcher are getting ready to have a double date with their neighbor Mort and Samantha, a woman he met online. The restaurant band is playing a culturally-appropriated reggae song about tonight’s special. Linda, having been in the spirit of romance, affectionately tells Bob, “Bobby, they’re playing our song.”<sup>1</sup> To which Bob, frustrated with the assertion of a random song about ziti being their song, simply replies, “What? Our song isn’t ‘Ziti Tonight.’”<sup>2</sup>

This small scene from *Bob's Burgers*, Season 1, Episode 11 "Weekend at Mort's", says a lot about the cultural phenomenon of "our song(s)." "Our songs," sometimes described as couple-defining songs by scholars, are songs that couples together select that somehow defines their relationship.<sup>3</sup> Scenarios that create these couple-defining songs vary greatly. For example, sometimes the "our song" is the song that was playing when they first met or it's a song that was playing at a key point in their relationship (first kiss, first dance, first something).<sup>4</sup> In the case of Bob and Linda Belcher, Linda, in the narrative of this specific episode, is attempting to rekindle a romantic spark in her relationship with her aloof husband by describing a song playing in the restaurant as their "our song." However, the humor in the moment comes from Bob's reaction to Linda romanticizing the inappropriate and racist song selection that is simply a marketing ploy by the brash restaurant owner, Jimmy Pesto. This specific scene is one of the many examples of one member of a couple shutting down the assertion of an "our song" in popular culture.

The American Adult Animated Sitcom genre is ripe with various tropes, as the genre itself gives a great level of respect and credit to *The Simpsons*, inarguably the most well-known TV show of the genre and most successful "adult cartoon." The genre is steeped in the history of the sitcom and the complacent 1950s image of a "normal" TV family in which "the ideal family consist[s] of a man who specialize[s] in the practical, individualistic activities needed for subsistence and a woman who t[akes] care of the emotional needs of her husband and children."<sup>5</sup> *The Simpsons*, specifically, was released in the cultural climate of the late 1980s that relied heavily on intertextuality and, as such, *The Simpsons* and its successors drew/draw on various other popular culture sources. Media scholar Marsha Kinder writes that by the 1980s... intertextuality and its commodification had been greatly elaborated and intensified," citing that this occurrence was especially prevalent within the cartoon genre.<sup>6</sup> As such, other cartoons that followed *The Simpsons* formula and replicated its desire for an adult audience, such as *Family Guy* and the aforementioned *Bob's Burgers*, rely on the same genre conventions and tropes. Therefore, this genre is a perfect space to examine the "our song" trope as full episodes are themed around it.

As bell hooks asserts, "Were we, collectively, to demand that our mass media portray images that reflect love's reality, it would happen. This change would radically alter our culture."<sup>7</sup> Although the genre effectively portrays the folk cultural idea of "our songs" as a trope, the portrayals of "our songs" in this genre of television are improperly male and patriarchal and do not reflect the egalitarian reality of "our songs" in the corporeal. Researchers have theorized that "couples may acquire [an 'our song'] because having [one] helps to support positive, warm, intimate relationships."<sup>8</sup> Yet within these portrayals, the relationships are neither positive nor warm.

The existence of "our songs" seems to be rather ubiquitous and a well-known phenomenon in the American cultural imagination; however, there is very little research available on the occurrence, its historical grounding, or its prevalence in popular culture. Research on the topic generally focuses on the use of music to

assist with amnesiac patients' (dementia, brain injury, or other circumstances) recall of autobiographical memory. As neuropsychologist Ameer Baird describes, "music often triggers personal, or autobiographical memories... called music-evoked autobiographical memories (MEAMs)... most commonly of a person (usually a girlfriend or boyfriend) or a time of life (such as the high school years), and typical situations were dancing or driving a car."<sup>9</sup> Alongside the lack of research in the topic, the phrase is also used more directly by specific bands or artists that are using the phrase "our song" to denote actual ownership (in the writing/copyright sense) of a specific song. "Our song" can also relate to nationalism, a country's national anthem, or ethnic identity. Thus, there are particularly difficult research hurdles that impact the efficacy of this research.

The earliest mention I've been able to find, thus far, is from a 1945 ad for Crosley a corporation known for its development of various forms of home-audio equipment, using the phrase "our tune" (instead of "our song").<sup>10</sup> This specific ad features a radio-phonograph combination unit with a couple, Jerry and Barbara, remembering their first dance at their high school prom when a specific song plays. It features the tagline,



"This is 'Our Tune'.. Remember?" followed by "Life is set to music. Romance begins with a melody. Just as you remember." (see the image) The aforementioned connection between music and autobiographical memory for the couple is featured in this example from mass cultural advertising. Prominent folklorist Alan Dundes writes, "although these commercial inventions are produced only for a limited objective, they often become folklore."<sup>11</sup> That isn't to say that "our song(s)" (or in this case "our tune(s)") were a direct creation by marketers or ad men in the 1940s; however, their spread was most likely directly influenced by mass cultural objects like the aforementioned Crosley ad campaign.

The first direct "meta" popular culture example I've been able to find in American popular culture is Little Anthony & The Imperials' track, "Our Song," released in 1964. In the chorus, Little Anthony sings "Our song (Our song, our song)/Yours and mine (Our song)/To let you know (Our song)/I love you so (Our song)."<sup>12</sup> The song also features historical context that may be relevant for the prominence of the "our song" phenomenon in the lyrics "I sent a letter the other day/Asking the disc jockey/Won't you please, please play [our song]."<sup>13</sup> The practice of radio DJs ala Casey Kasem taking requests could be responsible for the spread of prominence in the phenomenon.

Another meta example from the same era comes from the song, "Hey Baby (They're Playing Our Song)," by the American pop band, The Buckingham, released as a single in 1967.<sup>14</sup> Lead singer Dennis Tufano describes the "our song" within the song

as “the one that made you... [f]all in love with me.”<sup>15</sup> The singer, in this case, is dictating that the song somehow directly impacted the development of romantic feelings within the couple. This echoes language from another advertisement by Columbia that uses the phrase “the song that first brought you together” from 1960.<sup>16</sup> Another song from 1967 entitled “Our Song” by Jack Jones also features similar language, “Our song.... It helped us say hello once/ It made us fall in love once.”<sup>17</sup> This song actually presents the “our song” phenomenon in the negative as Jack Jones sings, “All you left me was our song/Every time I hear that song I could cry/Now we don’t belong—we’ve said our goodbyes/I’m still wondering why with tears in my eyes.”<sup>18</sup> However, negative portrayals of the “our song” phenomenon are not part of the scope of this research.

It is also not within the scope of this current research to track the historical basis of this phenomenon or its prevalence in American popular culture, and it’s perhaps not realistically possible to do so, as “our songs” can be considered to be, in some way, a type of folklore, folk knowledge, or folkway. I assume that the “our song” phenomenon is connected deeply to the history of recorded music, even before the time of companies like Crosley. At a time when American composer John Philip Sousa described recorded music as “an impending harm to American musical art” that would somehow remove the soul of music.<sup>19</sup> Instead, it found new meaning for people and, more specifically, couples who began to use popular culture as a means to relate with one another. Media scholar Henry Jenkins writes that “popular culture is what happens to the materials of mass culture when they get into the hands of consumers...” using “our song(s)” as a prototypical example.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, this research does not attempt to theorize the connotations of the full turn of phrase “they’re playing our song” and its usage of the proverbial “they,” which may signify some level of destiny, fate, spirituality, or some other level of inconspicuous religiosity. “Our songs” can still, however, be considered to be on some level a form of “audiotopia” as cultural historian and music scholar Josh Kun describes:

“music functions like a possible utopia for the listener, that music is experienced not only as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our bones but as a space that we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from...”<sup>21</sup>

“Our songs” put couples into a specific mindset and headspace, calling on their collaborative history and collective identity; in other words, “our songs” function as containers of memory. Researchers have theorized that “[our songs] may serve an important purpose for couples in facilitating positive relationship-based memories, which in turn support intimacy and cohesion within relationships.”<sup>22</sup> This research aims to further analyze and interpret the utilization of “our song(s)” as a trope within the American Adult Animated Sitcom genre. Philip J. Deloria and Alexander I. Olson write about tropes that they

“are created when many different texts offer up the same plot twist or motif, to the point where its larger cultural meanings become second nature.... [a] cultural producer... can expect an audience to quickly glean the cultural meaning of a trope because the audience is already intimately familiar with it, whether consciously or unconsciously, from the wider cultural atmosphere”<sup>23</sup>

I will argue that these shows often incorrectly portray the reality of “our songs” by using them to justify (or solve) problems within a couple’s relationship and/or to privilege the male perspective by limiting the collective and collaborative aspect essential to the defining of “our songs.” The usage of the trope within these series also serves a meta purpose by providing a counter-narrative to the often unhealthy relationships that are shown in these series by adding some level of romantic capital to the aloof and dull-witted husband characters.

I will draw particular focus to *The Simpsons* and its use of The Carpenters’ song, “(They Long To Be) Close to You,” which appears in many episodes throughout the series, as well as the film. The Carpenters’ track seems to serve as Homer and Marge’s version of an “our song.” Albeit not directly referenced as such in the narrative of the series, it does garner that reputation from fans. Additionally, the *Family Guy* episodes “Death Lives” (Season 3, Episode 6) and “Internal Affairs” (Season 10, Episode 23) will be discussed and analyzed as both episodes heavily feature an “our song” narrative that also plays alongside other romantic comedy-esque tropes.

### **“Why do birds...?” The Use of The Carpenters in The Simpsons**

“Why do birds suddenly appear/Every time you are near?”<sup>24</sup> sings Karen Carpenter with her infamous, melancholic, low voice, described as “chocolate-and-Valium,”<sup>25</sup> to open “They Long to Be (Close to You).”<sup>26</sup> The song appears throughout the canon of *The Simpsons* set in the mostly fictionalized town of Springfield. The series features an assembly of archetypal characters alongside the namesake Simpsons family of half-witted patriarch Homer, nonchalant mother Marge, troublemaking son Bart, flower child Lisa, and baby Maggie. *The Simpsons* is no stranger to featuring music and has had many romantic instances featuring various tracks throughout its time on air, although the series does not ever directly use the phrase “our song” with reference to the aforementioned track by The Carpenters. The song is collectively remembered by fans (and writers of the series) as “Homer and Marge’s song.”

I will admit dedicating time to analyze the use of the track despite it not being explicitly acknowledged as an “our song” may seem odd, however, there are various videos on YouTube featuring the song along with stills from the series.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the Wikipedia page for the song even prominently dedicates a section labelled “Uses in other media” to solely mention Homer and Marge Simpson and the use of the song in the series.<sup>28</sup> Put another way, it is an “our song” by proxy. Even in the DVD commentary for *The Simpsons Movie*, the creators state that they “wanted to use ‘Close to You,’ [in

the film] because it was their song in the show [and] it's something that means the world to Homer."<sup>29</sup> The series' canon often privileges Homer by allowing him to get away with not being the most affectionate or loving towards Marge. This is acknowledged within the climax of *The Simpsons Movie*, which sees Homer alone in Alaska watching a VHS tape left by Marge. On the tape, it shows Marge sitting on the bed speaking to the camera:

"Lately, what's keeping us together is my ability to overlook everything you do. And I overlook these things because.... well. That's the thing. I just don't know how to finish that sentence anymore... and to prove to myself that this is the end, I taped this over our wedding video. Goodbye. Homie."

The remnants of their wedding video plays after this alongside The Carpenters' song, which appears more pessimistically in the context of the film compared to the other instances of the use of the song in the canon of the series.

The song first appears in Season 2 Episode 12 of *The Simpsons* entitled "The Way We Was" airing in January 1991.<sup>30</sup> "The Way We Was" is a flashback storyline about how Homer and Marge met and became a couple with the framing of The Simpsons' family television on the fritz, much to the dismay of Bart. The Carpenters' song appears multiple times in the flashback, but first it appears on Homer's car radio as he drives to school and he changes the song in disgust. Later, when Homer first lays his eyes on Marge in high school detention the song plays in his head. A prototypical example of a "love at first sight" trope. Homer and Marge decide to go to prom together before Marge gets upset with Homer for lying about needing to be tutored in French. Homer misunderstanding still attempts to go to prom with Marge only to find that Marge has committed to going to prom with another student, Artie Ziff.

While there Artie and Marge win Prom King and Prom Queen, Artie sings The Carpenters' song to Marge at the prom, which severely disappoints Homer and he runs out in tears. Marge feels horribly about seeing Homer run out in tears and comes out to speak to him. Homer says that he's never wanted anything in life as much as he wants Marge, and Marge says that it's just not meant to be. Later, Artie and Marge are at a "make out point" type location. Artie tries to engage in sex with Marge only to be fought off by Marge; feeling disrespected by Artie she returns home only to hear through the door her father disparaging Homer with the entire Bouvier family being happy that it was just a misunderstanding that Homer was going to the prom with Marge. Through this, Marge realizes that she actually has feelings for Homer as she gets defensive, so Marge steals her parents' car to try to find Homer who is walking the road at night. In the case of this episode, the song serves as a stand-in for "love at first sight" and its meaning is renegotiated by Homer upon meeting Marge.

This stand-in use of the song for falling in love also appears in Season 24, Episode 2 "Treehouse of Horror XXIII"<sup>31</sup> in a segment entitled "Bart & Homer's Excellent Adventure."<sup>32</sup> In a play off of *Back to the Future*, Bart returns to "The Way

We Was” episode and inevitably prevents the relationship of Homer and Marge, leading Bart to be the child of Artie Ziff. Coincidentally, the Homer from the original timeline meets the Homer from the new timeline and together they bother the “Ziff” family pining for their lost love. The two Homers collect various Homers from various timelines (in a play on *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*) and Marge ends up falling in love with the collective Homers. The song plays as a signal that Marge has fallen in love with Homer, flipping the gendered script of the prior episode. Interestingly, this non-canon segment from a “Treehouse of Horror” episode is the one of only two instances in which Marge directly attaches to/acknowledges the song.

The other instance occurs in Season 10, Episode 17, “Maximum Homerdrive,” in which Marge and Lisa look into getting a musical doorbell as Homer and Bart are off adventure going truck driving.<sup>33</sup> Marge asks the salesperson for a doorbell that plays the tune of “Close To You,” but doesn’t seem to know the lyrics or the actual name of the song. Marge and Lisa install the doorbell and anxiously await for someone to use it, but, eventually, Lisa impatiently rings it and it gets stuck playing. Marge says that it doesn’t matter as “nobody can ever get sick of this song.” Later in the episode, Marge tries to get the bell to stop ringing only for it to start ringing louder and faster. The entire neighborhood hears the doorbell and gathers round the Simpson home in order to try to silence the doorbell.

The DVD commentary for the episode argues that they wanted to use the song as it “has a history with *The Simpsons*... [and] it is also Homer and Marge’s wedding song...in the movie.”<sup>34</sup> *The Simpsons Movie* did not come out until 2007 while “Maximum Homerdrive” aired in 1999, so this seems like an odd bit of justification for the use of the song unless they had always planned to use the song as the Simpson couple’s wedding song. The use of the song also appears as a wedding song in Season 9, Episode 7, “The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemapeitilons” which features a cover of the song in Hindi.<sup>35</sup> The song plays at the Hindu wedding (in the Simpsons family’s backyard) between controversial and since removed character Apu Nahasapeemapeitilon and his arranged partner Manjula.<sup>36</sup> For the song to feature prominently in two weddings (of which she was involved), the fact that Marge does not seem to be able to identify the song’s name or its lyrics seems to indicate that the character of Marge is not nearly as connected to the song despite it being “their song” according to the writers and fans.

The final and most recent instance of the song appearing in the context of the series is Season 28, Episode 21, “Moho House.”<sup>37</sup> In this episode, Marge and Homer endure marital woes that stem from Homer being distant and putting in minimal effort towards their relationship (a common theme throughout the series). Eventually through the narrative, Homer realizes that he’s failing Marge and tries to get her back in various ways. At the end of the episode, Homer and Marge meet up at “MoHo House”, a new kitschy, rich bar and the episode’s namesake financed by a throwaway, rich character named Nigel. Homer shows Marge that he made her a flipbook and while Marge flips through it The Carpenters’ song plays. The song plays in a somewhat meta fashion as it does not seem to be directly embedded within the narrative, but plays

as an indication that Homer and Marge have made up. A flipbook is rather simplistic and does not require a massive level of effort or commitment, yet the implementation of *The Simpsons* couple's song seems to be used to credit Homer with some level of romantic capital.

While the song is portrayed to signify romance and, more specifically, Homer and Marge's relationship, it seems to incorrectly portray the reality of an "our song." Not only is there no direct indication of a conversation between Homer and Marge acknowledging the song or its meaning, but also while it may "mean the world to Homer," it doesn't seem to matter all that much to Marge.<sup>38</sup> The show's narrative seems to constantly privilege Homer's perspective which has heavily influenced the collective memory of fans with regards to the song. This seems to be consistent with bell hooks' assertion that "Male fantasy is seen as something that can create reality."<sup>39</sup> bell hooks continues that "the vast majority of the images we see are created from a patriarchal standpoint."<sup>40</sup> It's worth noting that a vast majority of writers and directors on *The Simpsons* are male and, thus, seem to care far more about Homer's perspective.

### **"It's gonna take a lot to drag me away from you": "Our Songs" in Family Guy**

*Family Guy*, in much the same fashion as *The Simpsons*, takes place in the mostly fictionalized town of Quahog, Rhode Island, centering the Griffin family: resident idiot, father Peter, mother Lois, dimwitted son Chris, unsightly daughter Meg, baby Stewie and talking dog Brian. Much of the humor of the show stems from Peter being grossly incompetent, but not outwardly malicious. In Season 3, Episode 6, "Death Lives," it is Lois and Peter's anniversary and rather than get a gift and have a nice romantic evening Peter blows off Lois to go golfing with his friends.<sup>41</sup> Peter sends Lois on a treasure hunt to nowhere with the show intercutting scenes of her locating clues.

While golfing, Peter gets struck by lightning and "dies." The character of Death appears and talks to him, telling him that he'll need to learn a lesson in order to be brought back to life. Together, Death and Peter walk through memories of his life with a particular focus on Lois. One flashback memory shows Lois and Peter kissing in the road and Peter Frampton's "Baby, I Love Your Way" plays on the radio of a truck that crashes to avoid hitting them. Peter says, "From now on, this will be our song." In another instance, Peter is shown refusing a large sum of money being offered via check from Lois' rich father Carter Pewterschmidt in order to break up with Lois. As bell hooks maintains "Americans [are] asked to sacrifice the vision of freedom, love, and justice and put in its place the worship of materialism and money."<sup>42</sup> hooks continues that

"If money really made up for loss and lovelessness, the wealthy would be the most blissful people on the planet. Instead, we would do well to remember again the prophetic lyrics sung by the Beatles: "Money can't buy me love."<sup>43</sup>

This scene ultimately shows that Peter actively is in love with Lois and unwilling to part with her for money. He truly believes that she is worth more than what her father is willing to offer. Inevitably, Death tells him that his marriage will fail if he doesn't devote more time to it. Lois eventually finds out that Peter is at the golf course.

Upon arrival, she is greeted with Peter Frampton playing their song. Death was able to scare Frampton into playing the song on the golf course. Lois' rage is instantly dispelled and says, "This is the most romantic gift you've ever given me." While the result of Peter having the original artist play their song is not particularly problematic, the circumstances of forcing his romantic partner on a pointless treasure hunt, so that he can golf are. An alternative interpretation of this scene is that Peter is unable to communicate his feelings effectively without the use of an "our song." Music psychologist Sandra Garrido writes that

"song lyrics often dramatize a sort of conversation between two lovers, or at least the expression of one person's feelings toward another. The language of song thus provides a way that the listener can express their own feelings toward a love interest."<sup>44</sup>

Similarly in another episode Season 10, Episode 23, "Internal Affairs," an "our song" is used to dispel anger and "fix" a failing relationship, features Toto's "Africa" as an "our song."<sup>45</sup> The Episode centers around the story of the Griffin's neighbors the Swansons, a paraplegic cop named Joe and his wife, Bonnie. The episode opens with "Africa" by Toto playing in a strip club that Bonnie is working in when policeman Joe (when he was able-bodied) gets to the strip club in response to a call. Instantly, Joe and Bonnie develop chemistry and the song becomes their song. In the narrative of the episode, Joe cheats on Bonnie and Bonnie finds out threatening their relationship. Eventually, the Griffin family interferes and reproduces the circumstances in which Bonnie and Joe met. Lois takes Bonnie to the strip club for their lunch buffet while Peter calls in a false emergency to get Joe dispatched there. Once Joe arrives their song is playing, upon hearing the song, both Bonnie and Joe reconsider the fight that they're in and get back together. In this case, the "our song" is calling up the memory of meeting from their past in order to suppress the ills of Bonnie after Joe cheats on her.

Metatextual irony is very important to *Family Guy* and the greater American Adult Animated Sitcom genre "as it relies on viewers' familiarity with the romcom genre and its tropes."<sup>46</sup> Both the reproduction of the circumstances of Joe and Bonnie meeting in the strip club as well as Peter Frampton playing "Baby, I Love Your Way" at the golf course are examples of a "grand romantic gesture" trope. According to TV Tropes, "Grand Romantic Gestures occur when someone gives elaborate gifts or stages outlandish events in an attempt to be romantic."<sup>47</sup> Additionally, both episodes utilize an "our song" in order to solve some kind of issue in their respective relationships. Similar to *The Simpsons*, the male perspective is heavily privileged in *Family Guy*. The actual relationship problems that both Peter and Joe are responsible for are heavily

suppressed by the narrative of these respective episodes.

## Conclusion

*The Simpsons* prominently features The Carpenters' "(They Long to Be) Close to You" and that has been understood as an "our song" by fans and writers, but the narrative does not portray the phenomenon meaningfully and the song selection simply operates as nothing more than a theme song. *Family Guy* more directly acknowledges the phenomenon by using the phrase directly in both episodes featuring the trope, but does not sensibly portray "our songs" as the narratives effectively weaponize these songs to silence female ills.

Other pieces of media represent different gendered views on the "our song" phenomenon such as musician Taylor Swift's song coincidentally titled "Our Song" released in 2006.<sup>48</sup> Taylor Swift uses the phrase as a shorthand for autobiographical memories in the lyrics. This comes through most obviously in the lyrics, "Our song is the way you laugh/ The first date, Man, I didn't kiss her and I should have,"<sup>49</sup> and "Our song is a slammin' screen door/ Sneakin out late, tappin' on your window."<sup>50</sup> The song ends with the phrase "And I wrote down our song" which furthers the metanarrative of the song. Taylor Swift has been quoted that "[At the time she wrote the song, she] was dating a guy, and [they] didn't have a song. So [she]... wrote [this] one."<sup>51</sup> In essence, the song is a matryoshka doll as a song titled "our song" about "our songs" written to be an "our song." This is just one example of a popular culture object from the perspective of a female-gendered person, but there are most definitely more popular culture objects available that I have not mentioned or am simply not aware of yet that feature a non-male or non-patriarchal perspective of "our songs."

As a "common and understudied phenomenon," more research should be done to satisfy the existing research gaps regarding the "our song" phenomenon, its prevalence in popular culture and its historical grounding.<sup>52</sup> Its existence as a trope in popular culture is almost certainly elsewhere outside of the American Adult Animated Sitcom genre, however as this space is one where intertextuality and tropes are prominently featured as a genre convention it was a palpable starting point for research of this kind.

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AMST 405: Images of Crime and Violence in American Culture

# The Criminal Courtroom as a Display of Power

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This paper was written for Professor Kanosky's AMST 405: Images of Crime and Violence in American Culture class during the Spring semester of 2025. The assignment asked students to observe criminal court proceedings and critically analyze how these observations reflect cultural constructions of criminality. Drawing on both in-person and virtual court observations, the essay examines how power is distributed among judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and bailiffs, and how defendants experience authority through both overt control and subtle pressures. Using Michel Foucault's theories of power and self-regulation, the paper argues that courtroom proceedings, plea bargains, and identity performance reveal how cultural and social inequalities shape who is deemed criminal and how justice is enacted.

The criminal courtroom is widely imagined as a space where justice is administered fairly, and individuals are judged solely according to law. Yet in practice, the courtroom functions less as a neutral space and more as a carefully structured institution where authority is unevenly distributed and tightly controlled. Observing multiple courtrooms both in person and virtually revealed that power does not simply emerge at the moment a verdict is delivered, but operates continuously through routine practices, hierarchical roles, and subtle forms of pressure placed on defendants. The courtroom creates the appearance of choice, but limits the conditions under which real agency can exist.

Power in the criminal courtroom is exercised through clearly defined institutional roles rather than being shared equally among individuals. Judges control outcomes by determining sentencing and shaping plea decisions. Prosecutors construct charges and offers that pressure defendants towards compliance, while defense attorneys act as limited buffers whose influence depends on access, time, and institutional standing. Bailiffs serve as the police authority of the courtroom, enforcing behavioral control through surveillance, restriction of movement, and presence alone. Defendants, by contrast, experience power primarily as something imposed upon them, including rushed decisions, intimidation, and courtroom authority, rather than

as something they control.

Michel Foucault theorized that power isn't something only one person possesses but instead is distributed across various people within a system, often through interactions.<sup>1</sup> This concept is evident within the courtroom structure, where authority is not only exercised through legal decision-making but through subtle instruction. Foucault's theory reveals that modern power no longer relies solely on punishment but instead on constant observation, internal discipline, and forced compliance disguised as something else.

The bailiff embodies one of the clearest examples of this invisible authority. The bailiff functions as the police officer of the courtroom, enforcing behavioral control through physical presence and surveillance. Initially, going into these observations, all I knew about the criminal court process was through popular cultural representations. These depictions aren't able to accurately convey the different levels of power individuals hold within the courtroom. For example, the bailiff has significant power that is often not shown in the media. They symbolize a watchful eye over the courtroom, serving as the first point of contact for both the attorneys and the defendants.<sup>2</sup> They also answered any calls to the specific courtroom and influenced interactions between attorneys and the judge. During one observation, I overheard the bailiff telling two attorneys that the judge "wouldn't like that" and that he's "been doing this for a long time."<sup>3</sup> While observing another courtroom, the bailiff informed my group of what happened with the jury trial up to that point, such as what the case was about, how the jury selection went, opening statements, and what we missed with the first witness since we arrived at the end of their time on the stand.<sup>4</sup> This further reinforces the all-encompassing surveillance of the courtroom.

The judge's power functions more actively because, though they are physically more elevated than the rest of the individuals in the room, they also symbolize a structural authority that shapes the behaviors of everyone in the court. This was especially clear during my observation of only arraignments where the judge exerted their power over the accused in a way that came across as coercive. Everyone in that courtroom, except four people, fell victim to the judge's power and the overwhelming control of the criminal legal system itself. Those four people were outliers in comparison because two had lawyers, while the other two were asked to take a class offered by the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control or one similar, and after showing proof, the judge stated, "It would be like the arrest never happened."<sup>5</sup> A majority of the people being arraigned were people of color or women, while the judge and many of the attorneys were Caucasian men and women. The demographics of these individuals illustrate the racial and gendered disparities in the system and how this power dynamic can be viewed racially. The documentary *13th* explains that the vast majority of incarcerated individuals in the United States never go to trial because they accept plea bargains, reinforcing that what I observed was not isolated, but systemic.

Plea bargains themselves function as tools of psychological pressure. The construction and offering of plea bargains are strategic and curated to appear attractive

to the offender. The prosecutor would present their offer first, and then the judge would counter it by slightly altering it, either adding something appealing or removing one of the negative components of the deal. At the start of the session, the judge made it clear that there were no second chances in her courtroom, and once they rejected her offer, that was it. She would also phrase herself to make it seem like she was doing them a favor. For example, she'd say something like, "I can do this for you" or "You can accept that or..." and then offer them a deal that mainly relied on the defendant's ability to pay fees and appear for future court dates. I heard many of those who pled guilty question the judge along the lines of, "All I'd have to do is pay those fees?" or seem in disbelief of how "good" the deal sounded.<sup>6</sup> These arraignments were so fast that within less than five minutes, people had agreed to a criminal record. I truly believe these individuals didn't fully understand what they were accepting, largely due to the exploitative nature of the courtroom. Fear of a harsher outcome if they refused made acceptance feel like the only rational choice. Foucault's theory of self-regulation explains this phenomenon, where individuals internalize authority and begin to view compliance as a form of agency.<sup>7</sup>

This self-regulation also affects the way individuals speak, dress, and, as Gathings and Parrotta argue, influences the strategic ways defendants and their attorneys construct identities that align with gender roles to make them seem worthy of a lesser sentence or none at all.<sup>8</sup> In one observation, the judge asked a man if he was employed, to which he responded no, but said he was in sober living.<sup>9</sup> This admission signaled responsibility and rehabilitation, demonstrating how identity is performed in response to institutional expectations. The courtroom I observed in Colorado further illustrated how identity construction functions as a tool of persuasion. Unlike the in-person courtroom in Fullerton, every defendant was in custody and represented by a public defender. In each case, the judge heard arguments from both attorneys to determine the kind of bond appropriate and issue protection orders. For every defendant, the defense attorney utilized some form of identity talk, whether through their job status, family responsibilities, or hindrance of better opportunities. From the attorney's construction of the men, I heard "stable employment, primary caretaker, first interaction with the system, and presence is necessary at work."

In specific cases, the public defender would highlight that if her client couldn't return to work, he would be fired and risk destabilizing his family. For some of the men, the judge agreed that these descriptions sounded like people worthy of leniency, especially since many of them had not directly harmed anyone, and thus, their protection order didn't list anyone. She issued a lot of PR or Personal Recognizance bonds, which are when the defendant agrees to show up for all future court dates without having to pay or offer property as insurance.<sup>10</sup> For the others, she set cash or surety bonds, but the amount for most of them was within reason, with one exception of one defendant being deemed unsafe for society and not being allowed this opportunity of release.<sup>11</sup> These outcomes demonstrate that gendered and social narratives are not secondary to legal procedure but central to it. Identity performance

becomes a mechanism through which power is negotiated. Defendants who align with institutional ideals of stability and masculinity are granted greater leniency, while those who cannot perform these identities remain more vulnerable to detention and punishment.

The examination of power dynamics within the courtroom raises the question of whether it's a place of fairness or a stage for control and manipulation. Power does not operate only through verdicts or sentencing, but through the people who enforce authority, the structure of the courtroom itself, and the internal pressure placed on defendants to comply. Judges, prosecutors, bailiffs, and defense attorneys each act as agents through which authority is distributed, enforced, and normalized. What outwardly appears procedural is in fact deeply political. This breakdown of power challenges the ideal of the courtroom as a neutral step toward justice, exposing instead the subtle yet profound ways legal outcomes are shaped through intimidation, hierarchy, and pacing. Defendants are not simply processed through the system. They are disciplined by it. While this analysis is grounded in personal observation, the patterns observed reflect a broader institutional culture rather than isolated experiences. Understanding the courtroom as a space where control is produced, not only where law is practiced, forces a reconsideration of what justice means in a system built on unequal power. If the criminal courtroom is to serve as a place of fairness rather than compliance, its structure of authority must first be acknowledged, examined, and challenged.

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AMST 428: American Monsters

# “It knows how to hunt. But I know how to Survive”: *Prey* (2022) and the Yautja

Emmanuelle De La Cruz

For a film analysis assignment for Professor Golub’s American Monsters course, this paper analyzes *Prey* (2022) as an intervention in American cultural memory, arguing that the film reconfigures the *Predator* franchise’s central monster, the Yautja, to critique U.S. settler colonialism and the historical violence of American expansion towards the indigenous people of the American Great Plains. Situating the film within American monster traditions and drawing on monster theory and cultural history, this paper traces how the Yautja’s symbolic meaning represents American foreign policy based on the setting it is placed in. The paper explains how the Yautja shifts from representing U.S. military intervention in Central America in *Predator* (1987) to embodying the logic of westward expansion and Indigenous dispossession in *Prey*. By centering an Indigenous Comanche woman as its protagonist, the film rejects triumphalist narratives of conquest and instead foregrounds survival, displacement, and structural power. The Yautja’s role as an apex predator destabilizes assumptions of human mastery over land and life, mirroring the hierarchies imposed by settler colonialism on both Indigenous peoples and the environment. The paper further situates *Prey* within contemporary conversations about Indigenous visibility and violence, including the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, arguing that the film transforms a popular franchise into a site of historical reckoning. Ultimately, *Prey* demonstrates how American monster narratives function not to displace national violence onto external threats, but to expose the unresolved contradictions at the center of American history.

“The genius of Melville is that he saw that this country needs a monster,” says Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes. Fuentes, citing the plot of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, was relating the famous novel to the United States’ foreign policy and its proclivity to always chase after “monsters.” Monsters in American culture fill specific needs for the American public. For example, in Fuentes’ case, American foreign policy’s attempt to find “monsters” can justify American action towards other countries. This is a shining example of how the use of monster terminology reflects how people feel or resonate with their own cultural anxieties.<sup>1</sup> Monsters may be produced on a whim, however, the meaning behind the monster is created by the anxieties and fears people put on the monster. In attempting to understand the meaning, we have to learn the context and historical moments that created the monsters. The same monster may have multiple meanings entirely based on when the film it was featured in was made. The film *Prey* (2022) shows the change in meaning of a monster and its historical place.

*Prey* is a film in the *Predator* franchise that began in 1987 with the film *Predator*. The featured monster in the *Predator* franchise is a species of extra-terrestrial alien named Yautja. While there are multiple iterations of the alien species through multiple films, the monsters reflect different interpretations of American foreign policy. The film *Prey* focuses on Naru, who is living on the Great Plains of the United States with her tribe as she fights off colonists, her own social expectations, and the main antagonist, the alien Yautja.

*Prey* was released in a cultural context that refocused American popular media on telling Indigenous people’s stories.<sup>2</sup> Television shows like *Reservation Dogs* (2021) helped accustom viewers to modern Native American stories told by Indigenous or First Nation producers, directors and actors. *Prey*, whose cast was mostly Indigenous or First Nations people, the film was able to tell the story of how Indigenous people were able to survive westward expansion. Opposed to the idea that monsters offer ways to ignore historical traumas and historical guilt to remake the facts into a digestible story, the film does not end with the hero being able to fend off all invaders.<sup>3</sup> The film ends with the protagonist, Naru, telling her village to leave their home for their own survival. Instead of rewriting the history of Native Americans, the film instead repurposes the monster and story to instead describe how Native Americans fought and struggled to survive in the face of colonialism. The monstrous Yautja allows this story to be brought into the mainstream because it already has buy-in from the public because it is part of a successful franchise. It is a vehicle to tell the story of oppressed people and teach the history of the United States that would normally be hidden.

The Yautja is a physically imposing, dark skinned alien. In the film, it arrives on a spaceship onto the Great Plains of the United States and moves between hunting in the plains, the forest, and brush areas. It seems to have little issue navigating through these areas as opposed to the human characters in the film, who take long periods of time to traverse or require a horse. While it moves between places, it attempts to hunt creatures who provide it challenges. For example, the first creature slain in the film is a rattlesnake that threatens the monster. The Yautja easily disposes of it and skins it, keeping the skin as a trophy. The monster is also coded as masculine, an important

distinction to make as the protagonist of the film is Naru, a teenage Comanche girl. It is physically imposing, muscular, and tenacious in its desire to hunt. The Yautja spends the latter half of the film killing most of the male characters with dialogue in the film. Even though Naru was there for most of these events, the monster never focused on killing her as the monster saw her as no threat in comparison to her male counterparts.

A key aspect of the Yautja's actions is the honor code it seems to follow. As the film progresses, it continues to kill any creature it deems worthy of challenge. This is shown when the monster chooses to not kill the main character Naru because it views her as weak and not worthy of being part of his hunting collection in comparison to the human male hunters and warriors in the film. The male characters in the film—both indigenous and colonists—generally attempt to fight the monster before being quickly outmatched by the Yautja's technology and physical prowess. The only male character that respects the monster and is not actively hunting it is Naru's brother, Taabe. The monster's actions show the transgressions it commits. By looking for creatures to add to its hunting collection, it becomes the apex predator in the local landscape. In flipping the status quo, the Yautja makes humans no longer the ones in control of their environment. This flip is important in the context of the film *Prey*. According to Jeffrey Cohen, monsters appear at times of crisis when extremes clash.<sup>4</sup> The film's historical background focuses on the invasion of the Great Plains and Indigenous people's land by westward expansion from white settlers. As such, the Yautja appearing upends the social order and threatens both the Comanches and white settlers in the film, representing a transgression against what is known and accepted in social life and what happened historically.

Physically, the Yautja is a creation of different little fragments coming together to combine different fears and anxieties our culture has. It is a distillation of what our culture can be afraid of.<sup>5</sup> Aside from upending social order, the Yautja also transgresses the human-animal boundary. Its physical form is very human, and its use of weapons and hunting strategy are very human elements. However, it also shows animalistic characteristics. It has no method of communicating in any of the languages spoken by the human characters in the film. It has mandibles like insects around its mouth, which look more like a carnivorous mammal than an insect. It carries advanced weaponry, but they have a crude and primitive aesthetic being clad in bone/leather-like coverings. The fusion of these elements creates something disgusting as it is unlike anything seen in our day-to-day life.<sup>6</sup>

Appearances aside, the film the monster is found in gives us better context to understand why it scares. Naru is trying to navigate the social structures present in her tribe by trying to prove her skill as a hunter just as her brother, Taabe, has been able to. At the same time, her tribe is under threat of encroaching fur trappers and white settlers going through the Great Plains. The film cuts from following Naru navigating her tribe's rules and expectations, and the Yautja encountering different animals and effortlessly killing them. Eventually, Naru, having been knocked unconscious while fighting a cougar, wakes up in her village with Taabe having claimed the title of War

Chief for slaying the cougar. Upset that she did not get recognition for her efforts, she goes out to investigate the tracks she saw earlier. While investigating, she runs into a grizzly bear who attempts to maul her. While the bear is attacking, the alien Yautja comes to fight the bear and kills it. Naru escapes, but gets caught by a group of Comanche who went out to find her. The alien arrives at the scene and kills the members of the tribe. While Naru escapes from the alien, she gets caught by French fur trappers who know of the alien, and tries to get answers from Naru about it. Naru learns that her brother was also captured, and both are planned to be used as bait to get the Yautja to be captured. The Yautja does, but focuses on hunting the fur trappers, as Naru and Taabe are no threat to it as they are captured prisoners. Taabe is able to escape in the struggle, and returns with a horse to save Naru, but is killed by the monster after it deems Taabe worthy of being hunted for being able to injure it. After the death of Taabe, Naru sets a trap later that night to attempt to kill the monster. The Yautja uses its advanced tech to hunt Naru down. However, Naru has seen these weapons in use, and plans an ambush where she lowers her own body heat and is able to knock off the mask the alien wears that guides the projectiles. In doing so, she brawls with the alien and slowly weakens it before Naru is able to get the laser projection to focus on the alien and have it kill itself. Naru beheads the Yautja and brings it back to her village as a trophy before telling her village to move away from their settlement.

The Yautja aliens in this film and in previous films of the *Predator* franchise are aliens that come to Earth to hunt the best warriors or hunters available. Alien invader stories like this are common in American culture. These stories usually rely on preying on fears Americans have of being invaded by malicious forces. As author W. Scott Poole mentions, alien monsters are “perfect monsters for societies seeking containment from outside threats but uncertain in its boundaries”.<sup>7</sup> A key part of understanding the Yautja species is understanding the context for the first film this monster appeared in and how the meaning changed in the film *Prey*. The first film that the Yautja alien appeared in was 1987’s *Predator*. In that film, the Yautja monster appeared in a Central American jungle where it was causing destruction to local villages. An elite American paramilitary group was called in to hunt the monster, but were told they were only there to quell a military insurgency. The monster was the better hunter and was able to eliminate most of the squad without much effort. The monster eventually took its own life after the protagonist ambushed it and was going in for a mercy kill. With invasion monster stories, the monster usually invades people’s home or place and destroys the typical day-to-day life of the people there. The Yautja monster invades Earth and hunts people it views as the strongest of the group. So in invading Earth, the monster is both destroying day-to-day life by ruining our security, and removing the biggest threats to it which also happen to be the people we expect to protect us.

In the years before the first *Predator* film, the United States was exposed for illegally funding the Contra rebellion in Nicaragua. The instability in Central and South America caused by American foreign policy meddling disrupted day-to-day life for Central and South Americans, so in a sense, the Americans were the invaders much like

the Yautja. Even though the paramilitary group was brought in to calm an insurgency, then the monster, the group stands as a representation of American military foreign policy trying to solve problems with force. The monster is only felled by the group once they stop using military force and use more covert and sneaky tactics to beat the monster who kills itself. The Yautja represents American foreign policy in Central America in the first *Predator* film. In *Prey*, the Yautja still represents American foreign policy, but in the context of westward expansion and the genocide of Indigenous Americans. After all, one must not forget that American policy towards Native Americans was first foreign policy before it became domestic policy. Monsters reify events and horrors that happened and that makes them complicated creatures to understand.<sup>8</sup> With the protagonist in *Prey* being an Indigenous Comanche woman, the invading Yautja represents the United States invading the Great Plains and taking out the threats in its way; first the wildlife, then the French who controlled trade, followed by Comanche men who were protecting their home. Ultimately, Naru survives defeating the encroaching Yautja, but has to take her village away to let them continue their survival, much like how many Indigenous Americans had to move to avoid American settlers and colonialism. Naru's struggles are set against the backdrop of the American genocide of indigenous people. While there were no Yautja that stalked the Great Plains, there were settlers who disrupted life. The Native American way of life was severely disrupted with the encroachment of white settlers. The near extinction of the bison (one of the animals in the film that was slain and skinned by the Yautja), the constant warfare between Natives and settlers, and the loss of traditional land because of forced migration were caused by white settler colonialism. As Poole mentions in *Monsters in America*, "Americans tie a mythic significance to the kinds of violence" that have occurred during important events in American history.<sup>9</sup>

The original Yautja in the first *Predator* film stood in to represent the violence caused by the United States' intervention in Central and Latin America, while the one found in this film represents the violence on the American Great Plains. American policy towards marginalized people is pushed out of the master narrative of American history. It is hidden and transformed. Public memory of American history is often misremembered as opposed to disremembered. In this space, monsters serve to help push out the dark spots of history and bring them to the forefront.<sup>10</sup> The story of American history, especially its foreign policy, is one that focuses on a benevolent policy aimed at spreading democracy and the positive results of liberty and freedom. As such, the Yautja from *Predator* and *Prey* represent the history of American violence towards non-white people being pushed into the limelight as a threat and consequence of its foreign policy and expansion.

Aside from dealing with the face of imperialism and historical place, the film also touches on the current intersection of indigeneity and femininity that has appeared in film and television. Since the early 2000s there has been a renewed effort in bringing awareness to missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) in the United States and Canada. A study in 2016 by the National Crime Information Center reports that

5,712 American Indian or Alaskan Native women were reported missing, while the Center for Disease Control reports American Indian/Alaskan Native women have the second highest rate of being victims of homicide.<sup>11</sup> A few months after the premiere of *Prey*, ABC Studios aired the television show *Alaska Daily*. The show focuses on a newspaper office in Alaska where a white female investigative reporter works alongside an Indigenous female reporter to find a missing Indigenous woman. The end of every episode ends with statistics related to MMIW and is framed to bring attention to the crisis. In contrast, the movie *Prey* is a more subtle representation of the crisis. In a film series named *Predator*, the choice of focusing the film on a young Indigenous woman being the “prey” that is hunted and could be killed certainly brings in the broader conversation of MMIW into the discourse of the film. This story could very easily devolve into a reskinned “captivity narrative” where an Indigenous man saves an Indigenous woman from a savage alien to address the issue of MMIW. Except the film instead drops that trope and flips into a story of empowerment. Naru is lost to her tribe for parts of the film as she goes to hunt down the Yautja. Her brother, in searching for her, represents the effort of the village to find missing Indigenous people. While eventually found by her brother, Naru has to witness the Yautjakill others who would do harm to her and ultimately her brother, who himself comes to represent the other side of the crisis of murdered Indigenous men in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, Naru becomes the person hunting the Yautja, and by defeating it, offers hope that other Indigenous people will be found instead of murdered or missing. However, the death of Yautja is not supposed to represent the death of the systemic forces that make it difficult to find MMIW. It stands as a warning of how dangerous and present these forces can be, even in their absence. There is a reason why Naru asks to move the village out of the area. Naru knows that nothing will change if these predators stay hidden among them or actively hunt them down. In the ending credits, the events of the film are reinterpreted as cave paintings, with one scene showing more Yautja spaceships coming down on the Comanche village. The death of one Predator alien is not the death of the system, it’s the death of one part of the system.

Ultimately, the Yautja represents the fear of our social order being upended, and of monstrous creations that threaten our perceived safety. At the same time, it represents the anxieties of telling American history to the public. Our fears and discomfort with facing the consequences of our action is routinely seen in monster films, much like *Blacula* (1972) made Americans confront the effects of slavery and *Godzilla: The King of Monsters!* (1956) attempted to broach the fallout from nuclear war. *Prey* was an attempt to have people see how destructive American settler colonialism was under the guise of a big, scary monster hunting people down. The Yautja monster is a great mirror for American foreign policy. It is big, technologically advanced, aggressive, preferring to fight not speak, motivated for glory not practicality. It is not the hero in the film, it is the antagonist, but not the only villain. While all these factors make it an intimidating monster, it is beaten by the ingenious abilities of someone who has been marginalized in her community, and historically in American society. The Yautja allows Americans to

be afraid of alien invaders, but it also allows Americans to vilify their own government and people's decisions in the world with proper comeuppance. America does not need to find a monster abroad to validate our actions, sometimes it comes for us as the consequence of our actions.

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AMST 502T: Theoretical Approaches to Studying Popular Culture

# “Who Are You?” Fan Identity, Labor, and Survival in *Severance*

Danielle Swiderski

“Who Are You?” examines the Apple TV+ series *Severance* as a contemporary American cultural text that interrogates labor, identity fragmentation, and survival. This paper was written for AMST 502T, Theoretical Approaches to Studying Popular Culture. The assignment was to select a pop culture text and apply theoretical frameworks from American Studies to an artifact to analyze the cultural work. Using *Severance* as both text and cultural phenomenon, this essay argues that the series functions not only as a dystopian critique of corporate labor but also as a symbolic survival framework adopted by its most engaged fans. Drawing on theories of identity, pop culture, and audience labor, the paper analyzes how fan communities in digital spaces actively engage with the show’s themes to process burnout and their fractured selfhood in post-pandemic work culture. Readers should approach this essay with the understanding that *Severance* is treated not simply as entertainment but as a participatory cultural site in which viewers negotiate their identities and labor realities through fandom, theory-building, and collective meaning-making.

On January 14, 2025, thousands of Grand Central Station commuters encountered a corporate workspace staged as a public theater in the heart of Vanderbilt Hall, where the cast of *Severance* performed inside a glass cube of cubicles. This immersive pop-up, a fitting promotional choice for a series obsessed with the discourse between work and life, captures how *Severance* collapses the boundaries between labor and spectacle. The show debuted in its first season from February to April 2022 on Apple TV+. It is a seemingly absurd sci-fi series about a mysterious company, Lumon Industries. There, employees have undergone a surgical procedure that implants a chip in their brains, dividing their memory into two parts. Their “innie” knows only the workplace, while their “outie” knows only life outside work. This creates a world where one version of a person is always at work, and another is completely removed. On the surface, the show appears to be a dystopian workplace thriller, yet its minimalist aesthetics and emotional architecture motion toward something far more

urgent: a cultural text about contemporary labor, identity fragmentation, and survival. The immediate effect is terrifying and fascinating: we meet characters who live in a perpetual Monday-through-Friday loop, forced to clock in with no end in sight and no memory of freedom or rest.

*Severance* critiques our current corporate labor structures, interrogates modern identity, and offers many fans a survival framework for navigating post-pandemic work culture. As viewers follow the “innie” and “outie” versions of the ‘severed’ employees, the show forces a deeper question: *Who are you?* This simple yet profound question resonates sharply in a workforce shaped by burnout, remote work tensions, and corporate overreach. This psychological thriller is a critique, a reflection on identity, and a survival story disguised as science fiction. The brain-splitting procedure dramatizes a sentiment many viewers know intimately: the sense of existing as different people at ‘work’ and ‘home,’ where our jobs take up more of our identity than we realize, and where we are expected to suppress parts of ourselves to conform to professional expectations. *Severance* captures this dissonance of contemporary American labor, where emotional detachment, corporate control, and economic precarity have been normalized.

What makes *Severance* particularly significant as a pop cultural artifact is its critique of labor under capitalism and how a subset of ardent fans has taken it up as a symbolic framework for survival. The series has inspired an active and interpretive fan culture that treats the show as more than entertainment, transforming it into a space for emotional processing and reflection. From YouTube content creator videos and Discord theory threads to transmedia interactions like the fictional Lumon Industries LinkedIn page, fans use the world of *Severance* to articulate their experiences with overwork, surveillance, emotional compartmentalization, and a disintegrating sense of self. Drawing on popular culture and identity theory, this paper argues that *Severance* not only functions as a television series but also as a toolkit for life. Through its portrayal of fractured identities, oppressive labor structures, and the urgent search for meaning, *Severance* provides its most engaged fans with a framework for emotional and political survival. Its participatory fan communities are not merely viewers; they are interpreters and critics using the show to make sense of and push back against the systems that shape their everyday lives.

Dan Erickson, creator of the series, moved to Los Angeles in 2012 after graduating from NYU. He based the show on his own experiences of emotional exhaustion in low-level office jobs. While working at a door manufacturing company, his disdain for his job led him to fantasize about skipping to 5:00 PM. Through this, the first version of what *Severance* would later be. In 2015, Dan met Ben Stiller’s team at Red Hour to begin developing the show. While the original script was a more fantastical story inspired by *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, released in 2004, it landed on a more relatable storyline for the pilot episode.<sup>1</sup> Filming for the first season began during the COVID-19 pandemic in October 2020 through April 2021. The pilot episode finally premiered on February 18, 2022, almost two years after the onset of nationwide work-from-home orders.<sup>2</sup>

The plot centers on Mark Scout (outie) and Mark S. (innie), played by Adam Scott, a recently severed employee grieving his wife's death. His outie is depressed and emotionally numb, while his innie becomes a reluctant leader on Lumon's Macrodata Refinement (MDR) team, alongside the other employees, Irving B., Dylan G., and Helly R., who each represent different responses to corporate control. Irvine B., the moral compass of the group, devotes himself willingly in exchange for comfort, structure, and purpose.<sup>3</sup> Dylan G.'s compliance with the system, reminiscent of 'capillary power,' involves his daily adherence to Lumon's rules to collect rewards.<sup>4</sup> Then, finally, Helly, R., and her rebellion, continually fighting for freedom and resisting conformity, offer viewers multiple entry points for identification. The show's stark visual design, looping hallways, and retro-futuristic tech construct a placeless environment that erases individuality. Rather than presenting a linear mystery, the narrative emphasizes emotional disorientation and bureaucratic entrapment, mirroring the recursive structure of contemporary work.

When the show first debuted on February 18, 2022, America was entering its third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis forced a dramatic shift in work culture and a widespread reevaluation of workplace norms. The rapid adoption of remote work across industries has resulted in new tensions between flexibility and surveillance. Before the pandemic, "only 5% of American employees worked from home, which increased to over 60% in May 2020."<sup>5</sup> What began as a safety and health measure evolved into a rethinking of the nature of labor itself. Companies began grappling with maintaining productivity while addressing employee burnout, digital overload, and growing demands for flexibility. The pandemic forced many people to reevaluate their relationship with work and reexamine their careers overall. This period gave rise to the "Great Resignation" movement. In mid-to-late 2021, millions of workers voluntarily left their jobs, citing toxic work environments, low pay, limited growth, and a desire for more meaningful work. "Before the pandemic, the U.S. resignation rate never exceeded 2.4% of the monthly workforce. However, in September 2021, it reached 3%, which was the largest spike on record."<sup>6</sup> Companies struggled to retain talent and began reconsidering how to structure their labor force. Even with the shift in worker expectations, many corporate responses focused on controlling the narrative around labor, emphasizing "culture," "engagement," and "fun" while doubling down on performance metrics and productivity. Wellness initiatives became part of the corporate lexicon, with companies offering virtual meditation, resilience training, and mental health days to combat the burnout their employees were experiencing due to work and societal demands during the pandemic. In an article published in *Forbes* on July 1, 2021, the target audience for corporate HR leadership was to prioritize wellness programs as a strategic approach to support their workforce and improve overall business outcomes.<sup>7</sup> However, even as workers reported increased surveillance, unrealistic workloads, and blurred boundaries between home and work, Tools like Slack, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams became omnipresent, enabling constant monitoring and often increasing worker anxiety. Employees' expectations to work longer hours and

perform more emotional labor are the new normal. As Beth Kowitt coined, the latest corporate trend is “forced joy,” which introduces new technologies designed to assess whether an employee’s smile is genuine.<sup>8</sup> This “forced joy” concept is another way corporations do not just want employees to perform as if they are happy, but to give more emotionally, and they will use surveillance technology to ensure compliance. In this context, *Severance* did not simply entertain; it offered language and symbolism that helped viewers process the emotional cost of contemporary labor. Its portrayal of the innie/outie split mapped directly onto lived experiences of compartmentalization, exhaustion, and identity loss.

The workplace has undergone significant transformations, shifting from industrial labor manufacturing to service-oriented and information-based economies. The rise of corporate structures and office environments introduced new dynamics where job titles and professional achievements are closely tied to one’s social identity and status. It becomes necessary to “negotiate with and perform an acceptable identity” for any company you are employed with.<sup>9</sup> While there is no specific category for what constitutes a corporate job, in September 2024, the private sector employed roughly 132 million Americans. We can roughly assume 34 million could be considered “corporate roles.”<sup>10</sup> Then, in 2025, with Apple TV+ viewership around 45.9 million and approximately 45% in the 35-45 age range, there is likely an intersection of viewers who relate to the corporate landscape. However, regardless of the direct correlation with office workers, the themes in *Severance* still translate to any workplace with a hierarchical power and identity structure.

The backdrop of the served floor, where the innie lives out their life, consists of a minimalist office ambiance. With the labyrinth-like hallways physically manifesting the looping of the daily routine, a metaphor for entrapment and bureaucratic complexity arises for the viewer. The lack of windows and retro-futuristic tech all create a timeless, placeless environment designed to erase context and, by extension, selfhood, which most workers struggle with daily. These visual choices are deliberate and elicit feelings of dread and a sense of loss of self. Just as the black, glossy surveillance domes are mounted discreetly yet in plain sight along the sterile hallways, they create an omnipresent sense of observation without revealing their gaze direction. The hidden-in-plain-sight cameras create a constant feeling of ambiguity and control, since the team never actually sees where the cameras are pointed and self-monitors their behavior. Naomi Fry notes that the show draws on earlier dystopian visions, such as Orwell’s *1984*, Lang’s *Metropolis*, and Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*. She shows how the show mirrors contemporary corporate realities, sharing a real-life scenario: days after an Amazon fulfillment center successfully voted to unionize, an internal messaging app was created that blocks words such as “union” and “slave labor.”<sup>11</sup> The heightened surveillance in the workplace has no bounds. Whether through watching employees on camera, digitally monitoring activities, or even physically watching them, employers make it clear they are watching you, which is something all people relate to these days.

The storytelling in *Severance* deliberately withholds narrative resolutions,

which echo the recursive, unresolved nature of modern labor. There is no single villain, final breakthrough, or neatly tied arc. Instead, it builds a structure of fragmentation and tension, mirroring the lived experience of workers today who live in systems they cannot fully see, change, and understand. This narrative design becomes a form of thematic storytelling, reinforcing that emotional and existential severing is not just a plot point but a condition of life. *Severance's* deep resonance with real-world events and emotional landscapes makes it especially powerful. Visual aesthetics give it a clean but cold vibe, and repetitive language is at the core of the show's appeal. The question "Who are you?" haunts almost every episode, becoming a mantra that cuts to the heart of the show's philosophical and emotional center. It is explicitly asked by characters, implied by situations, and mirrored in viewers' engagement.

This question first appears in Episode 1, "Good News About Hell," when Helly awakens on the conference room table. She is disoriented, frightened, and alone. A calm voice, later revealed to be Mark S., vibrates through the speaker and asks her, "Who are you?" The question is literal, existential, and weaponized. Helly's inability to answer dramatizes the terror of identity erasure and mirrors the cultural experience of workers entering environments where they must suppress prior selves to adopt a "professional" identity. Her panic and attempts to escape foreshadow her ongoing resistance to Lumon's rules, making her the clearest embodiment of defiance against institutional control. As Helly resists the confines of the severed floor, she repeatedly attempts to quit, only to be denied by her outie, who records a message where she is told via a recording of *herself to herself* that the innie version of her is 'not a person.' This moment embodies the series' core horror: the self is both agent and oppressor. Then again, in episode 3, "In Perpetuity," after attempting to send a message pleading for her release, Helly is punished in the "break room," a misnamed disciplinary space where she must repeat a confession under Mr. Milchick's supervision. The use of repetitious language to emotionally discipline the innie into conformity. Helly must read the statement below repeatedly until the 'company' feels she 'means' it.

"Forgive me for the harm I have caused this world. None may atone for my actions but me, and only in me shall their stain live on. I am thankful to have been caught, my fall cut short by those with wizened hands. All I can be is sorry, and that is all that I am."<sup>12</sup>

The break room becomes a literalized metaphor for workplace emotional regulation, where dissent must be converted into submission through scripted language. This is a training ground for Michel Foucault's theory that "the individual is formed into a subject by, against, and to social institutions," who will self-govern and discipline themselves as the institution expects.<sup>13</sup> Language is a plot device and ideological conditioning, illustrating how emotional disconnection is presented as professional normalcy.

The question of "who are you?" intensifies in episodes Episode 6, "Hide and Seek" and Episode 7, "Defiant Jazz", when the Macrodata team begins to understand their "outie" versions make unilateral decisions affecting the "innes." In these moments,

“Who are you?” becomes a question about themselves and the other version of themselves that they will never fully know. In episode 6, Dylan G. is ‘awoken’ in a closet at his home, where Mr. Milchick interrogates him just as his son rushes in, yelling, “Daddy.” At that moment, Dylan was not even aware he had a son and experienced an identity rupture that exposed the cruelty of the procedure. When Milchick abruptly ends the “Overtime Contingency,” the outie version of Dylan seems to have no emotion other than irritation. When Dylan G. returns to Lumon, the irritation turns into anger based on knowing that he is being denied a piece of himself, the self that loves, is loved, and has no access to this. This realization reflects broader reflections on the fractured modern identity, in which the self is often compartmentalized, professionally altered, and disconnected from one’s emotions. This withholding of knowledge is itself a form of corporate control, fracturing identity to maintain compliance.

While Dan Erickson admitted in the official podcast that the show’s central thesis is “Who am I?”, the cultural work of *Severance* becomes most visible when viewers take up this question themselves. Stuart Hall argues that popular culture is not simply consumed but constantly contested and reworked, and the fan communities surrounding *Severance* display this process in real time. Hall contends that meaning in popular culture is never fixed; instead, it is made “at the point of consumption,” and *Severance*’s ambiguity invites viewers to fill its narrative gaps with their own experiences of alienation, exhaustion, and identity fragmentation.<sup>14</sup> What emerges is a fan culture that treats the series not only as entertainment but as a framework for living, a way to name and interpret the emotional realities of contemporary labor. The recurring question, “Who are you?” is more than a character-driven mystery; it invites viewers to confront their fragmented selves. In this way, the fans are not merely decoding the text of *Severance*; they inscribe themselves into it, using the show’s symbolism to articulate their labor anxieties, emotional dissonance, and fractured sense of identity in late capitalist life.

Bethan Jones’s analysis of *Twin Peaks* fandom helps contextualize this phenomenon by showing how fans use complex, unresolved narratives to engage in long-term identity work. Much like *Twin Peaks: The Return*, *Severance* leaves intentional gaps, emotional, narrative, and symbolic, that invite the fan to step in and make meaning.<sup>15</sup> Jones identifies how fans use nostalgia and ambiguity to revisit earlier versions of themselves; similarly, the fans are drawn to the show’s recursive structure and narrative complexity because it mirrors the fractured realities of their own lives. The innie-outie split resonates with viewers who feel disconnected from their laboring selves, and fan engagement becomes a means of reconciling those divisions. Using the *Severance* framework, the frothing fandom engages in theories, artwork, and digital communities as a dynamic space where identity is not just represented, it is reassembled. The fans can identify with innie and outie’s, hypothesize theories about who they are, and reflect deeply on their own compartmentalized lives. It is also essential to address that while the overall audience engagement is successful for the show’s bottom line, including the show creators, AppleTV+, and content creators, Mark Andrejevic examines audience labor. From passive viewership to active engagement,

he assesses that community fan discourse offers engaged viewers the illusion of influence. Andrejevic is critical of how this “productive audience labor” also supports media industries by generating buzz and prolonging viewer engagement, often without compensation or real agency.<sup>16</sup> Dan Erickson, the show’s creator, routinely states that he purposely limits his engagement on fan sites to ensure he stays true to his vision for the show. Given that the fans cannot influence the outcome of the show’s ending, it is truly for their entertainment. In order to understand how *Severance* fans engage with the text, I analyzed three interconnected fan spaces on YouTube (ThinkStory), Reddit (r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus), and Discord (the Lumon Industries server), as well as a fourth transmedia site, the fictional Lumon Industries LinkedIn page. Each platform fosters a distinct mode of meaning-making: theory-building, community affirmation, role-play, satire, and workplace critique. However, I did not evaluate the monetization streams of the digital creators themselves and focused solely on fan comments and engagement.

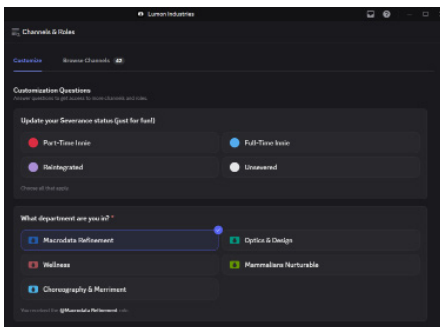
I first analyzed the YouTube account, ThinkStory, who has created content since November 1, 2017. He provides content “breakdowns, deep dives, and theories for the best in film & television!” with over 867 posted videos, totaling over 226,092,256 views.<sup>17</sup> While his analyses are often more accessible than academically rigorous, this is precisely what makes his channel influential: he provides an interpretive scaffold that viewers use to articulate their own emotional responses to the show. His episodic breakdown summaries were posted 20–40 minutes after the weekly episode concluded, giving him an advantage over his competitors. The approach to sorting through the comments included identifying the number of views, the number of comments, and the topic. Then, they were prioritized by any topic related to identity formation, by number of views, and by number of comments. While many comments engaged with *Severance*’s theories, others analyzed fans’ sentiments. One fan posted her analysis of Helly’s mental state in the “SEVERANCE Ending Explained! Season 2 Theories & Details You Missed!” video recap. This video was originally posted over three years ago, the comment post was only from a year ago. The first reply by @Insp. CountMorisWinshipKlaw references their own experience of identity formation, which occurs daily. The author expresses their disturbance about how *Severance* “relates to our own lives. We are a doctored version of ourselves but have lost the memory of who we are.”<sup>18</sup> In the post, it is safe to assume they are referring to their own experience of losing the memory of who they are and relating to Helly’s outrage that her outie version knows what is happening on the severed floor but continues to send herself back each day as Helly. The discussion ultimately displays how they could see themselves and how Helly’s actions mirror their daily cyclical experiences. This is a striking example of Hall’s argument that audiences inscribe their own experiences into the text.

In another recap video posted on ThinkStory’s channel, he provides a short video for quick reference, where he discusses season two episode three, in which Mr. Milchick receives a token of gratitude from Lumon for his performance. He is gifted a portfolio of paintings depicting Kier Egan “recanonicalized” as a black man.<sup>19</sup> Within the video clip, the actor who plays Mr. Milchick discusses what he feels it must be like

for his character. Within the comments is where the debate of identity formation within the show is expressed. The whole post received just 42 comments overall, and the last comment reads, “Ah man, wish they wouldn’t go down this ‘race’ path. They’re going to flush their good momentum this show has down the tubes if they push this,” received 26 comments alone.<sup>20</sup> The debate among fans in the comment section then focused on the identity of the person who initially made the post. Whether the discussion is about the characters or the fans’ identity, they interact with the story, a recap of the story, and each other to discuss identity. These exchanges show how *Severance* fandom becomes a contested space where cultural values, biases, and personal identities are negotiated in real time.

While not all engaged fans explore YouTube videos, another fan community that displays how fans explore and inhabit *Severance* is the Reddit page, r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus.<sup>21</sup> Here, fans can engage in theory-building, humor, and art, and discuss all things related to the show. Even in the informational summary section of the page, the reference to how many members is a part of this community uses the terminology of innies and outies, for those who are currently off-line (outies) to those online (innies). This playful reclassification signals how fans willingly adopt the show’s vocabulary to describe themselves, creating a shared identity rooted in the series’ language. Reddit thus becomes a site of performative fandom where users signal belonging, expertise, and emotional investment through their chosen roles, theories, and interactions.

From here, fans are also invited to join a Lumon Industries Discord server, a customizable, shared digital community space where people gather around a common interest, identity, or purpose. This Discord channel is linked directly from the Reddit page.<sup>22</sup> Upon entering the channel, you must set up a profile based on *Severance* classifications. New members are asked to classify themselves using *Severance* categories, department, severed status, and role. This onboarding process functions as an act of self-fashioning, in which fans momentarily inhabit the show’s world and perform identities that echo their workplace tensions or aspirations. Choosing to identify as an “innie,” “outie,” or “reintegrated” allows fans to explore their relationships to autonomy, compliance, and emotional compartmentalization. These digital formalities blur the boundary between fiction and selfhood, making the server an immersive, participatory space of identity experimentation. (Figure 1)



Within the channel, there are subgroups to engage with to narrow your interests even further. When season two aired in January 2025, groups would gather weekly at 6:00 PM PST on Thursday evenings for online viewing parties. These online weekly watch parties demonstrate Stuart Hall’s theory that popular culture is a site of negotiation, where, essentially, strangers in real life and

across different time zones come together to experience the shock and terror of each episode. These fans would engage and negotiate meaning, forming a community and identity through a shared interpretation.<sup>23</sup> When the season two finale premiered on Thursday, March 20, one fan summed up his experience watching with his Lumon Industries Discord family, “This is a wonderful thing to experience as a community I’m so hyped.”<sup>24</sup>

Another space where fans engage and negotiate identity is the fictional Lumon Industries LinkedIn page, which serves as a piece of transmedia storytelling in which the show’s universe extends into a real corporate platform. Unlike Reddit or Discord, which are playful in nature, LinkedIn introduces a satirical approach: her fans engage with the page through the professionalized language of corporate culture itself. LinkedIn is a professional social networking platform where people connect to share their work experience, find job opportunities, and build their careers. Lumon Industries’ LinkedIn home page is a space where fans blur the lines between fiction and reality. The overview about the company is transparent in the description of the account: “Lumon is a fictitious company from the Apple Original Series, *Severance*, streaming on Apple TV+.”<sup>25</sup> Then continues to describe Lumon Industries, specifically focusing on what it would be like to work there.

We offer select employees access to our patented *Severance* process. What is *Severance*? Imagine being able to come into work completely uninhibited by your home problems. Or imagine being able to go home and never think about work. Using a minimally invasive surgical technique, we are able to ‘sever’ your brain so that, essentially, you’ve got a part of you that works and a part of you that plays. We want to change the way that major corporations approach the ever-evasive “work-life balance.”<sup>26</sup>

Lumon’s profile aligns with the show’s theming. It allows for an inversion that critiques workplace norms while safely performing exaggerated versions of their corporate selves, in line with *Severance* jargon, such as multiple comments on posts that read, “Prais Keir.” This term is used numerous times throughout the show by Lumon employees to express their loyalty to their founder, Kier Egan. Through comments, reactions, and reposts, fans use the page as a site to parody professionalism, reveal anxieties about real workplaces, and explore how corporate identity is constructed and policed. The profile features posts that echo corporate jargon and culture, including employee spotlights and company achievements. For instance, one post highlights an employee’s nine-year tenure, emphasizing their transformation into a “model employee,” mirroring the show’s exploration of identity and corporate brainwashing.<sup>27</sup> The profile content and audience responses demonstrate how the series provides a framework for reflecting on their work-life balance and personal identity within the corporate sphere. In one post, welcoming new Macrodata Refinement members to Lumon, a person commented on how well the transmedia experience is ideal for Lumon to have their fictitious company on LinkedIn, drawing on parallels to existing corporate realities (Figure 2).

Even more noteworthy about this post is the number of ‘likes’ the comment received; of the other 145 comments, it was one of three that had over 50 ‘likes’, displaying that this message resonated with others who visited their page. While strictly entertaining, the LinkedIn page demonstrates a fan base that engages with it as if it were real. In another

**The fact that *Severance* is such a good fit for LinkedIn advertising feels very very foreboding for LinkedIn**

Like ·    110 | Reply

post, visitors to the page are encouraged to bookmark the post for future “Lumon-appropriate attire.”<sup>28</sup> The post received over 2,000 reactions, 71 comments, and 46 reposts. The fans engage with these fictitious posts, which use humorous satire that would likely not be tolerated on their company’s LinkedIn page. This outlet provides the commentators with a safe digital forum of a fictitious company to express the frustrations that they experience in their workplaces, making the page a playground for critiquing professional identity formation. *Severance*’s engaged fans actively use it to explore, process, and affirm their fractured identities.

Albert Murray’s notion of “impromptu heroism” offers a framework for understanding why *Severance* resonates so profoundly with fans.<sup>29</sup> Murray argues that the “blues hero” improvises through adversity, transforming disjuncture into continuity. In this sense, the characters in *Severance*, Mark, Helly, Dylan, and Irving model strategies in line with the “blues hero” of survival within an oppressive institution, where the use of their limited agency asserts some control over their selfhood. Their struggles echo Murray’s arguments: survival is not triumph over the system, but the creative expression of self despite it. Fans who also resonate with this struggle gravitate toward this principle, interpreting the series as a reflection of their own efforts to maintain emotional power within corporate structures that demand the fragmentation of their identity. *Severance* operates as a contemporary “working blues,” offering workers a space to process burnout, wrestle with their demons, and practice the emotional survival needed to make it through another day.

*Severance* is not just a pop culture text and television show; it is a mirror, a metaphor, and a guide. In a cultural moment marked by exhaustion, fractured identities, and heightened corporate control, the series offers viewers more than an escape; it offers language, structure, and symbolic tools to name their own experiences. Its portrayal of severed selves, corporate euphemisms, and recursive routines speaks directly to contemporary labor. However, it is in the fan response where the show’s work becomes the most powerful. Fans do not passively watch the show; they inhabit it. They use the fragmented narrative and open symbolism to explore their relationships to work, surveillance, and autonomy. Through digital spaces, fan theories, emotional identification, and collective interpretation, *Severance* becomes a participatory experience that fosters community and self-reflection. In a world where labor increasingly demands emotional compliance and personal erasure, *Severance* offers its fans something rare: a story that does not provide escape but recognition and the ability to reimagine who they are in institutions that thrive on their subjugation.

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AMST 332: Science and Modern America

# All the President's Dietitians: How the Federal, State, and Local Government Changed the Way We Look at Food and Patriotism

Trevor Stoller

For well over a century, the federal, state, and local governments in the United States have explicitly connected Americans' dietary habits with patriotism. In my paper, written for Dr. Carolyn C. Thomas's Science and Modern America class, I examine this long history of food and patriotism spanning from the Progressive Era through the beginning of the 21st century. Specifically, this paper looks at how various government agencies have consistently redefined how Americans' eating habits are directly linked to how patriotic they are. This paper also examines how, through these very agencies, it was noted that Americans who did not conform to these dietary standards were threatened with being ostracized due to their perceived lack of patriotism. This is a history worth exploring, as a wide array of the ways that we talk about dieting and food in American culture today can be traced back to this movement by the United States government.

Since the late 19th century, the way Americans eat food has been heavily influenced by key societal institutions, from academia to politics, as depicted in Charlotte Biltekoff's 2013 book, *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health*. As Biltekoff shows, starting in the Progressive Era, the federal, state, and local governments of the United States have used the ideas of prominent nutritionists on healthy eating and morality to uphold preconceived notions of what it means to be a "Proper American." First, with the emergence of the Domestic Science movement

of the late 19th century, its leading figures connected eating right to new moral codes emerging in the United States, redefining what it means to be a “good American” and directly influencing the relationship between the government and food. As the United States entered the 20th century and World War II, the federal and state governments, in an attempt to mobilize for the war effort, connected the proper intake of calories and nutrients when eating as vital to the country’s strategy in winning the war. Nearly half a century later, the concept of dieting would be used to the same effect by the federal government during the War on Terror, once again interlinking the concepts of eating right and patriotism, all the way to the present day.

While the concept of what it means to eat right is hardly a new idea, it gained steam in the United States during the Progressive Movement of the late 19th century. Heavily influenced by the extravagance and abundance that defined the Gilded Age, reformers during this period sought to dramatically reexamine various aspects of people’s lives, including how they consumed food. The Home Science Movement built on this by connecting food with morality. Led by food scientist Ellen Richards, it helped redefine what it meant to be a good American, moving from the individualism that was seen during the Gilded Age to the sacrificing of some freedoms by citizens for the greater good of the community.<sup>1</sup> Richards was not alone in this idea. Wilbur Atwater, known as “the father of American nutrition,” was a leading proponent of connecting eating right to social reforms of the era. One of the earliest examples of this, which ultimately serves as a foundation for connecting patriotism to how one eats, is a study done by Atwater with the help of domestic scientists in 1885 about the eating habits of American families. Conducted across the country, these studies tracked the amount of nutrients that were consumed by a family within seven days.<sup>2</sup> It did not matter if the food was good, as long as it meant the certain nutritional requirements that were needed for someone to be “healthy”. The goal of the study, according to Atwater, was to find out how families got the energy needed for work and daily life from food and whether or not it was actually efficient. These studies were monumental, as the results of the studies were not only shared with the families, but were made public in pamphlets published by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).<sup>3</sup> These publications, which were read by thousands across the country, publicly condemned those families who participated in the study for their supposed improper eating habits. The United States government, by releasing these pamphlets, endorsed the study and the condemnation of these families. They were seen as careless and greedy, and while the government avoided directly calling them unpatriotic, it was heavily implied by using negative language to describe the amount and type of food that these families personally decided to put in their bodies.

The study done by Wilbur Atwater was a catalyst for not only the Home Science movement, but also for the government to directly influence Americans’ relationship with food. Originally, this movement hit a road bump when the New England Kitchen, which home scientists introduced as a way for immigrants to be “taught” what a proper meal looked like, promptly failed in Boston communities. Few immigrant families that

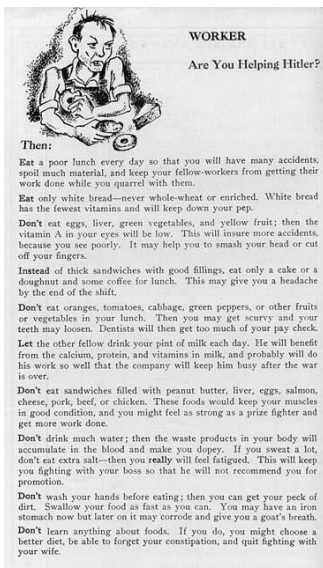
participated had a desire to change their eating habits to the healthier but blander food that was offered in the kitchens.<sup>4</sup> Despite this setback, leading home scientists, including Ellen Richards, continued to push the idea that food and being a good moral American citizen were connected. Richards' strong belief that these two were connected heavily influenced the way federal, state, and local governments would see Americans' relationship with food over the next century.

Richards' belief that it is immoral to think solely about oneself, especially when it comes to food, was on full display during the fourth Lake Placid Conference in 1902. Notably, Richards gave a speech that effectively served as a blueprint for how the government would connect the way people eat with patriotism. In one of the most revealing quotes from the conference, "Each man likes to be law unto himself in the first flush of freedom. He thinks that this is democracy. But the student finds that true democracy is sacrifice for the sake of many. In food, not what we like but what is good for the many should be the standard," according to Richards's speech.<sup>5</sup> This one line from the conference is essential to understanding how the United States government would link American's eating habits to their perceived patriotism. Richards argues that the main way people can truly show that they care about their community is the way that they eat food. Once again, the idea that people eat food that they find to be the best is inherently selfish and therefore immoral. Food is used here to argue that a good American will think about their neighbor and what they need before they go to the store and start cooking. If one still follows the old norms of individualism that were prominent during the Gilded Age, according to Richards, they were immoral and refused to fight for freedom because, supposedly, they wanted to take all the resources (in this case, food) for themselves. The irony about this is that Richards and the governments that adopt their views on eating are the most individualistic of them all, as they place the burden of waste and making sure everyone gets their proper share of food not on themselves, but instead on everyday Americans. The central issue with Richards' argument is that the burden of sacrificing for the greater good falls on everyday citizens, while the government used the extent of their sacrifice to judge who was patriotic and morally upstanding and who was careless and selfish. Ellen Richards and the Home Science movement ultimately became deeply embedded in everyday American culture, as their ideas were adopted by the government as a way to determine who is a "good American."

As the United States mobilized both soldiers and the general populace to help fight in the second World War, the federal, state, and local governments further elaborated on the theory that a good American eats properly. Building on the ideas developed by Ellen Richards, the federal government, in particular, established a new definition for what it meant to be healthy. While Richards' view that eating food one liked was immoral, since it failed to benefit the rest of society, remained prevalent, the government now put out another argument. People must also get the proper nutrients and calories to have enough energy to work in factories that helped make equipment during World War II. The concepts of having hollow hunger (those who did not eat

enough food because of a lack of access) and hidden hunger (those who did not eat enough food out of supposed ignorance) were introduced to ensure that Americans were getting their proper daily intake of food.<sup>6</sup> The Food and Nutrition Board and the Committee on Food Habits were created to directly alleviate the problems of workers not eating the right foods to have energy needed for working in factories that produced vital instruments of war. These boards, along with a wide array of other agencies and committees run by the federal government, created posters and guidelines for how workers should eat.<sup>7</sup> These guidelines served as direct propaganda, associating consuming the right amount of nutrients and vitamins with being a good factory worker and therefore a good American.

One of the most notable examples is a booklet called *Eat Well to Work Well*, which was published in the *War Emergency Bulletin*.<sup>8</sup> Sent to households across the



country, the booklet paints a striking image, comparing two workers who are helping in the war effort on the home front. A tired and disheveled man, with visibly little energy is shown under a banner that asks, “Are You Helping Hitler?”, while on the opposite page, an enthusiastic worker is shown under a banner, “Are You Helping Uncle Sam?” The duality of the workers here is a striking example, showing how the federal government associated patriotism with how one ate their food. Borrowing the ideas previously expressed by Richards, the pamphlet accused the worker with little energy of aiding Hitler. The pamphlet noted that the worker does this by not getting enough energy from his food due to his low-nutrient diet. To help Hitler, according to this pamphlet, is to eat food that will produce low energy such as white bread instead of whole wheat bread, cake instead of stuffed sandwiches, and refusing to drink milk. Meanwhile, the worker depicted with an exuberant amount of energy is working for Uncle Sam and is shown to drink plenty of milk and water, while eating plenty of foods rich in nutrients, such as sandwiches and fruits.

This pamphlet is one of the clearest examples of how the federal government used food as a way of deciding who was truly a patriotic American. Those who do not eat the food heavily suggested by the government are immediately deemed to not only be unpatriotic, but also fascists who either indirectly work or support Hitler because they lack the energy to be productive, while making tools needed to fight in battle. Depending on your diet, you were immediately seen as either unpatriotic or a good American, ignoring the fact that some people did not have access to much of the food the federal government said was essential for one to have enough energy to be a productive wartime factory worker. While the last sixty years of the relationship between the food, the federal government, and patriotism were far more subtle, this marks the first time

that people who do not comply with the government's eating standards are directly seen as selfish and working to help the Axis Powers. It relates to those ideas brought by the early Home Science movement, that people needed to be concerned with eating whatever would help the general population, instead of what would only help themselves.



The pamphlet *Eat Well to Work Well* is not the only example of the government directly associating people's poor food consumption and low energy with a lack of patriotism. While the federal government played a unique role in producing propaganda, creating the link between food and patriotism, state governments did as well. One of the most notorious examples of this comes from a pledge sheet distributed by the New York Federation of Home Bureaus. Aimed at housewives, which directly states that they will work to feed their family the right foods to make them

strong and healthy, and because of this can effectively contribute to the war effort on the home front. One of the most striking lines states that, "I am a Kitchen Kommando—a homemaker in the SERVICE OF MY COUNTRY,, as the pledge opens.<sup>9</sup> Another line in the pledge promises, "...I will serve my family simple, nutritious meals; using the 'daily' food guide to help me plan." These two lines represent how it was hardly just the federal government that aligned patriotism with the way people ate food, but various state government agencies as well. The homemakers, who are identified as Kitchen Kommandos, promise to be in service to their country, trying once again to encourage those who promise and practice eating healthy as "true Americans" because of their contribution to boosting energy in the workforce. Kitchen Kommandos and workers who eat the right foods with a good amount of nutrients and vitamins are patriotic because they are boosting their productivity in the war effort. While Ellen Richards may no longer be at the forefront of the movement connecting good citizenship and healthy eating, her ideas live on as both state and federal governments during World War II blatantly equate the way that people work and eat as a key measurement of how patriotic one is, a trend that continues to persist even after the war is over, albeit in a different form.

The Second World War was not the last time the link between food and patriotism was made, although the definition set by state and federal governments of what it meant to eat right shifted once again. Amid the post-World War economic boom, eating right was redefined as the avoidance of consuming an overabundance of food to avoid becoming obese. The main basis for this fear came from a survey conducted in 1951 by the insurance company MetLife, which directly connected

obesity with major health concerns.<sup>10</sup> This study would become monumental, despite its various flaws in the methods used, and would serve as the main basis for the new way people would be defined as patriotic based off of their eating habits. No longer would eating large quantities of high nutrient food be considered healthy but instead would be seen as unpatriotic, according to proponents of the findings in the MetLife study. By inheriting the same ideas that had previously been espoused by Atwater and Richards over a century earlier, the company turned obesity into the next great issue facing the United States. As a direct result of obesity being put into this characterization by an insurance company looking to create a profit by conducting a flawed survey, the government almost immediately adopted this same view. Obesity was now simply depicted as an alarming and shameful disease that would only serve to make Americans lazier.<sup>11</sup> One of the clearest examples of this is a chart that was released by the CDC starting in 1989 that tracked obesity across the United States.<sup>12</sup> This map became one of the clearest indicators of how the federal government thought thinner a person was, the more patriotic they were. This chart depicted obesity in terms of red, with the darker the shade, the more obesity there was in the state. As a result, an alarmist attitude about obesity was set off across the country.<sup>13</sup> By depicting obesity as an epidemic that looked as if it rapidly spread across the country, the federal government used the ideas of morality and food to directly depict overeating as unpatriotic. Calling it an epidemic that creates laziness amongst the general population and implying that it can spread between people, the federal government depicted obesity as an unpatriotic and a direct threat to the success and stability of the United States.

The government's definition of what it meant to be patriotic when it came to eating habits would be shown again in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The idea that obesity was a major hindrance in the growth and safety of the United States was on full display in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, when the Bush Administration attempted to mobilize the troops and the general population, in a war effort similar to World War II. Obesity was seen as the major obstacle to this, as the federal government once again associated patriotism with how much one weighed, which was most clearly seen with two articles that ran in *Reuters* and *The Washington Times* that declared obesity a threat to national security, with the latter declaring that over half of the U.S. military was obese.<sup>14</sup> Once again, being seen as overweight was directly used as a threat to national security, arguing that those who helped the "Axis of Evil," as President George Bush notably called terrorist enemies of the country.<sup>15</sup> To be obese now meant that one was directly harming the United States' efforts to combat terrorism. This was further emphasized directly by the federal government from the top medical officer in the country, the then Surgeon General Richard Carmona, who stated in an interview with NPR, "I've come to refer to it as the terror within because it's every bit as devastating as terrorism," when discussing obesity.<sup>16</sup> This is a blatant example of how the government of the United States continued to connect not only morality with how one eats to their patriotism. By directly stating that being overweight

is just as bad as terrorism, the federal government is directly called a portion of the population unpatriotic and un-American, people who would rather see their country fail than change their diet. Here the idea that one must eat not for themselves but for the greater good that was first noted by Atwater and Richards is on full display, as Carmona compares those who eat too much to terrorists who hate their country and kill Americans, showing that well over two centuries later the idea that particles can be associated with one's eating habits is still glaringly apparent.

In today's society, parents, whose kids who are overweight in the United States are routinely shamed as being neglectful and hinder their child's ability to be productive members of society. As Biltekoff notes, the federal, state, and local governments have adopted ideas such as MyPlate during the Obama administration based on the ideas first espoused by Richards. Used as a justification to launch a moral crusade that will place the burden of productivity and patriotism in the United States on citizens, instead of government bodies and agencies. Not on the government that actually fixes the problems, but instead on everyday American citizens, the effects of which are still seen today. The early ideas of the Home Science Movement are used as a justification to launch a moral crusade the places the burden of the United States' success and productivity on everyday citizens, instead of government bodies. This has stood the test of time through several social movements, a World War, and the deadliest terrorist attack in history. While Ellen Richards, Wilbur Atwater, and the early Home Science Movement now seem like vaguely distant memories from the Progressive Era, their ideas continue guide the actions of the United States government on the federal, state, and local level, while simultaneously defining what it means to be a good American at the dining table.

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AMST 401T: Love in American Life and Thought

# Unknown Love in the Eyes of a Stranger: The V-J Kiss in American Memory

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“Unknown Love in the Eyes of a Stranger: The V-J Kiss in American Memory” was written for Professor Fingal’s AMST 401T class on Love in American Life and Thought. Professor Fingal proposed a topic of how a specific personal fascination with American culture becomes a symbol of love and thought in society. With Alfred Eisenstadt’s *V-J Day in Times Square*, I examine how Pre- and Post-World War II ideas on traditional love were depicted in the photograph. Flipping through historical and artistic depictions of the photograph describes how American society has perceived an intimate embrace throughout the 20th century. Yet, the image itself has a more complex and invasive history to it that tends to be overlooked or outright idealized. Even if a photo appears to be one of romantic kinship doesn’t make it ultimately true, revealing that a symbol of past American culture can be misleading

On August 14th, 1945, Times Square erupted with celebration as people of all ages crowded the downtown streets of New York City. Over two million people joined together in the intersection at West 45th Street, awaiting news of the war’s end. On that fateful day, President Harry S. Truman announced via radio that the Japanese had surrendered. The message passed through the Times Towers ticker sign displaying the words, “Official: Truman announces Japanese surrender,” and word of mouth shortly followed. Everyone from shopkeepers, students, sailors, and pedestrians gathered in the streets to rejoice in winning the war. Chaos soon ensued as the streets filled with people celebrating the joy of peace at the end of a World War. Following the commotion in the streets, photographer Alfred Eisenstadt went to Times Square to record the event. Grabbing his camera, he began to push through the crowd. With an

artist's eye, he fixated on a particular sailor maneuvering through the crowd at a rapid pace. Following closely behind, the unknown sailor was kissing any woman in sight. He later recalled, "whether she was a grandmother, short, thin, old, thick [didn't] make any difference."<sup>1</sup> It was in these moments of victory, love, and joy that the famous black and white photograph by Alfred Eisenstaedt was captured in a spur-of-the-moment shot. Taking exactly four pictures of the sailor in the navy-blue uniform kissing a dental assistant in a white uniform, the iconic *V-J Day in Times Square*, also known as *The Kiss*, was captured.

This world-renowned photograph, later published in the August 27 issue of *Life* magazine, became a symbol of the war's end.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it wasn't only a symbol of war on a larger scale; it became a reflection of American culture and a nostalgic representation of love. The media and scholars have often noted that the photograph represented a spontaneous moment of postwar joy, romantic love, and passion. The image continues to circulate as one with multiple interpretations. Media experts and the American public have debated over whether this image is an authentic representation of American culture framed as a symbol of consensual love or if it consists of a deeper message of consent and self-identification. The photograph is remembered most for its post-war domesticity and gendered specific roles often painting the war image as an American icon.

The photograph has been consistently examined as a top representation of American culture by many historians, art critics, and the public as a form of national unity and perfect love. With the photograph being represented repeatedly throughout American society, author and historian Stephanie Coontz dives into societal perceptions on love and marriage spanning before and the years following World War II in her book, *Marriage, A History*. Her iteration on how love and marriage transitioned during a post-war society into one that valued traditional gender roles and emphasized domestic care reflects the interpretations the photograph has been presented with. Coontz states, "The end of the war also brought a renewed enthusiasm for marriage, female homemaking, and the male breadwinner family," emphasizing the romanticized values of the time, having a full effect on American society.<sup>3</sup> The implementation of postwar ideals attached itself to this image transforming it into a culturally symbolic representation of love despite the photo's underlying nonconsensual reality.

With many interpretations and discussions surrounding this photograph, I question why it has continued to be a symbol of American love in popular culture and whether its interpretation is accurate. In many cases, history and art seem to continuously repeat themselves. Eisenstaedt's *V-J Day in Times Square* photograph gained national recognition not due to the pair's love for one another, but due to the recurrent portrayal of unrequited passion between stranger throughout history. Postwar American culture and media took the form of transforming this image into one of romance, victory, and nostalgia. This paper delves into why this image serves as a testament of American cultural ideas about love, why it reflects an idealized depiction of love, and whether that depiction is accurate. How has the idea of true love's kiss

reappeared throughout numerous European and American artworks, such as Francisco Hayez and Gustave Klimt's *The Kiss*, and how have the underlying messages from those works been placed onto Eisenstadt's photograph by Americans? Those messages help elaborate what occurred that fateful day, the reaction to the image, and what it symbolizes about American culture in the mid-late twentieth century. Yet today there is a contemporary take on how the photo has been reinterpreted and the backlash it has faced in the past years. The photograph continues to serve as an important symbol to the American people, but for different reasons. Serving as a reminder not just of national victory, but one of significant cultural value and idealization of love.

### **True Love's Kiss**

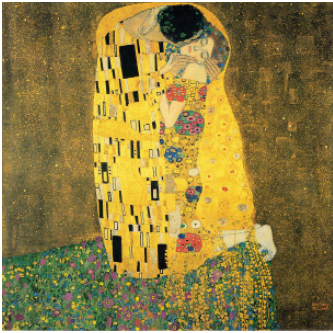
To truly understand the photograph's cultural impact, it's crucial to revert to several artists' interpretations that constructed Eisenstadt's vision for the image. The representation of a close, leaning dip embrace with a man on top of the submissive woman has come to represent passionate love between a couple. Especially in Western culture, the depiction of a kiss has continuously been associated with an expression of love's triumph through numerous art forms such as sculpture, paintings, and later photography. That pose expressed through an intertwined twisting of two human forms between the couple, the immediate fixation or position of the couple in the foreground, and the close grasping between the two symbolizes the eternal embrace of love throughout history. That pose is ultimately meant to represent what true love looks like and what the embodiment of a true love kiss feels like: sudden, overwhelming, and passionate, with a man dominating the woman.

One of the first depictions of this striking pose was in the oil painting created by Francisco Hayez in 1859, depicting a passionate kiss between two young individuals. *The Kiss* painting consists of a deeper meaning of desire for unity between Italy, relaying its political urgency and nationalism during the Risorgimento period. Depicted in the couple's traditional attire of that time, the man is in a muted brick red ensemble symbolizing the colors of Italy, while the woman is in a light blue dress representing what is perceived to be France. The kiss itself is the representation of unity for Italy; however, an unknown unity. Love and tension fill the painting, shown through the creeping shadow figure on the lower left-hand side in the background, perceived to be a potential threat to the couple. The painting was completed at the end of the Romantic period, a time where society was heavily influenced by love yet shifted towards a new perspective called realism. The loving embrace shows a pivotal point where the painting reflects a change from abstract emotions and implements real-world action and political critique. Yet, with further examination of the couple in the foreground, the longing grasp, the closed eyes,



and the dipping embrace encapsulate the longing depiction of love. She looks at him with open eyes while he holds her face, almost as if a last goodbye kiss ensues. The significance of the painting reflects a romantic shift in the way people represented love, unity, and nationalism within art.

With those emotions described through the body motions, Gustav Klimt's 1907-1908 *The Kiss* painting represents that same sudden longing embrace and kiss, inlaid with Klimt's signature gold leaf. It takes from traditional concepts of art nouveau by incorporating decorative, elaborate details within the painting. The man bestows a kiss on the woman, depicting a perfect unity between the two as they are grounded innature itself. In traditional interpretations, the painting represents a strong longing for love, passion, and an intense relationship of connection and desire between the two. However, in recent years, the artwork has also represented a more complex notionof submission and abrasion, often relating to Eisenstadt's war photograph, sharing similar meanings. Both sharing ideals of unity and a grounded representation of love but recently scrutinized for non-consensual undertones towards the women in the images. The painting depicts a sole connection, one that is often captivating, dramatic, and elaborate, represented through the posture of the couple and the male dominant holds onto the woman.



What is interesting is that these portrayals of love and affection are not isolated; they often reflect the common beliefs of the Romantics: “What evades the grasp of philosophy is desire, in all its sublime infinity.”<sup>4</sup> Although they show desire as ultimately unsatisfactory to maintain, the concept is constantly trying to be fulfilled. During the early 1800s to the late 1860s, the Romantics emphasized the importance of individualism and the portrayal of emotions in their art, literature, and music. A portrayal of intense emotions and dramatic sacrificial love. It was in this moment, when photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt found his muse in the middle of a crowded street, as an impulsive sailor embraced an unknown dental assistant, that it reinforced the deep-seated visual and cultural cues that have been embedded within society portrayed in the Romantics' beliefs and the paintings above. Those being that the image does not simply reflect a spontaneous kiss but rather a kiss of everlasting love, one that reimagines the narrative that has been depicted for decades. With the swaying of the figures, the dipping of the women, and the overall control of the man over the women, this representation of love is one not just strictly passionate, but one of male dominance. In many cases, the kiss in these artworks has been overlooked as a strict cultural representation of love, but rather, each artwork and photo revealed a deep meaning, met with an underlying narrative and messages. With a modern light, the narratives of these works are being brought to reality as topics of consent and possession have spurred reconsiderations regarding these true love “couples.”

Modern reinterpretations have redefined what the concept of love truly means



to the average American. What does love mean in the twenty-first century, and how is it reflected in these artworks? This concept is revealed in bell hooks' book *All About Love*, where the definition of love, passion, and true love's kiss comes under discussion as she reimagines the realities of what these terms truly mean. The American public has projected this fairytale idea onto these images, suggesting that the couple embracing is expressing genuine love for one another and displaying a magical moment. However, bell hooks states, "To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and

responsibility."<sup>5</sup> The photograph draws upon earlier romantic imagery and paintings to stand as a beloved symbol of American love and unity through the couple's gestures and overall action in the image. Tied into the cultural shift valuing nostalgic representations of true love that was often romanticized in the early 1950s. Yet, what is not revealed on the surface is accountability regarding consent and the sudden but forceful embrace that occurred that day. True love's kiss is an idea that long precedes any of these artworks, yet is constantly being attached to the works, regardless of the actions before or after that moment. Eisenstadt's New York Times photograph embodies the perceived belief of genuine love due to many factors, such as the posing, the historical moment, and the couple's embrace.

### **Making an Icon**

The values that remain within the belief of a true love kiss have permeated American culture, whether it be through historical paintings or in media itself. This is evident in the photograph *V-J Day in Times Square* by Alfred Eisenstadt, taken on August 14th, 1945. The photograph itself shows a sailor taking hold of an unknown dental assistant in a dramatic kiss as the streets of New York erupted in celebration due to the surrender of Japanese forces, marking the end of the war. Captured in the dead center of Times Square, the photograph symbolized in many ways national unity, as it froze a moment of intense public joy. The image itself rose to a famous status not solely based on the photo's composition and mythologized version of love but rather due to the media frenzy that engulfed the photograph and made it an iconic symbol. The photograph itself was published numerous times in the world-renowned *Life* magazine. Soon, the media took hold of the image, plastering it across several headlines, films, newspapers, and later the internet. It became a symbol of post-World War II American love, one that reflected traditional values, domesticity, and gender norms.

What emphasized these norms was the photographer Eisenstadt's vision and composition for the photo. An already renowned photographer before the image was taken, Eisenstadt was sent to the Times Square sector to photograph the streets of New York

during the historical celebration of the end of the war. As he wandered the streets looking at the crowds of people celebrating, the streets were littered with paper and confetti, people parading, and embracing one another. Yet, beyond the chaos, Eisenstaedt locked eyes with one sailor, later identified as George Mendonsa, who expressed his overwhelming gratitude for life by kissing almost every woman he encountered. Intrigued by the sailor's boldness and his Navy uniform, Eisenstaedt saw him as a potential subject matter. Following the sailor through the crowd, waiting until the perfect moment. In the 1983 BBC interview, Eisenstadt recalled, "I turned around and saw him grabbing something white..." That "something white"<sup>6</sup> was Greta Zimmer Friedman, a young dental assistant, dressed head to toe in a crisp white uniform. Mistaken as a nurse, Mendonsa grabbed Friedman and kissed her, recreating century-long historical romantic imagery.

It was within that moment that history began to repeat itself. Eisenstadt snapped four shots to capture this brief interaction, where his composition came to life in a timeless image. He later explained, "If this woman had been dressed in dark, it would have never taken a picture."<sup>7</sup> The contrast between the dark sailor's uniform with the bright starkly white outfit of Friedman revealed a visually striking silhouette in the black and white image. The twisting forms of their bodies create a dramatic line that feels intimate. Mendonsa's firm grasp and the emphasis on the bend of Friedman's body echo past romantic tropes while still creating a modern reinterpretation. In 1995, Mendonsa stated, "There isn't a Navy man alive who didn't serve in World War II who hasn't looked at that photo and said 'I wish I were that guy'... I only wanted the recognition."<sup>8</sup> Mendonsa's assertion of "being that guy" who got the girl at the end of the war, reveals a reoccurring belief regarding male masculinity during the mid to late 1940s. The photograph not only gave Mendonsa recognition, but it also represented a form of dominance that men emphasized in romantic encounters. His bold, assertive action wasn't solely about a kiss but rather about gaining a badge of identity and pride that he could show off. In later years, Mendonsa reflected on his search for recognition regarding the image, seeking to explain his perspective. Recalling how, at a moment of immense joy and relief, that is how he expressed his gratitude for the war's end, using a woman's autonomy for public celebration.

However, past the couple's strong embrace, the photograph is riddled with important imagery that reveals the meaning of the image in plain sight. Although not planned, the street sign in the back displays the words "Bond," referencing the couple's uncontrollable bond with one another that the kiss enacted. Beyond the "couple" in the foreground are the bystanders in the crowd gazing at them from several angles. Scattered onlookers are frozen mid-gaze upon the kiss, some with large grins while others look distracted or indifferent. The spontaneity of the image creates a new iconic myth within the photo, the significance of nostalgia being reformed into a modern perspective. When asked if Eisenstaedt viewed the image as one of his best photographs, he stated, "When I am in heaven, people will tell you who took it."<sup>9</sup> Even though the photographer himself doesn't view it as his best work, he knows that it is and will remain one of his most iconic and famous works due to the publicity and the self-identification people feel towards the photo.<sup>10</sup>

Self-identification came into play regarding the photograph as time progressed.

Where people began to attach their personal beliefs to the meaning and interpretation of the photograph. The American public began to shift into a post-war era, and with that came a shifting of values. Society began to be filled with a resurgence of previous values, beliefs, and norms of traditionalism that were tossed away during the war. Even before the war ended, World War II had already shifted many of the ideas during the Great Depression. Specifically, many women, especially women of color, were able to make their way into the workforce to help aid in the war effort. Although the majority of women and many others saw this as a temporary solution for the time being, those ideals will soon transform into ones that uplift individuality. However, that was until the war came to an end in August, when the iconic image was taken. Once the war ended, the men saw women working and expressing individualism rather than familial values, no longer needed since men could go back to work. This began the resurgence of traditional values, morals, and beliefs about domesticity and a male-dominant society. Stephanie Coontz reveals that in 1945, American magazines such as *House Beautiful* were reminding women of their place in society, “Your part ... Is to fit his home to him, understanding why he wants it this way, forgetting your own preferences.”<sup>11</sup> Women were being prepped for returning home to accomplish their roles as homemakers, wearing a “white glove of appreciation” as men became the head of the household once again.

The *V-J Day in Times Square* photograph became attached to this shift in societal gender roles and ideals, as the media and society viewed the image as an iconic representation of national value and traditional depictions of love during that time. As Stephanie Coontz describes in her book *Marriage, A History*, after the war, society shifted into one that valued the nuclear family ideals and male-centered households. Those values are evident within the photograph, as George Mendonsa is forcefully controlling dental assistant, Greta Zimmer Friedman, representing a male-centered American culture. On the other hand, the woman within the photograph represents an unknown symbol of submission that was often romanticized during this time. With those values in mind, the image itself became a nationwide symbol not just because it represented American victory but also because it played into people’s beliefs of love, passion, and unity. Coontz describes that during this time, even though marriage was valued at the highest degree, desires were often left unfulfilled.<sup>12</sup> Revealing how only 47 percent of married couples were very happy. Due to the longing desire that husbands should “help out” with child rearing and make sure that sex with his wife was “mutually satisfying,” which before was often not the case for young married couples.<sup>13</sup> Eisenstaedt’s photograph came to represent a nostalgic perception of those American beliefs about love and, by extension, marriage.

### **Reimagining and Reckoning**

Today, the *V-J Day in Times Square* photograph has shifted its meaning throughout the years. Even though the photograph itself is 80 years old, it has continued to stay in the limelight in many ways. In contemporary society, the image remains a symbol of American nostalgia for love during the post-war period. Reflected in monuments at San Diego’s harbor, Pearl Harbor and a local beach in Florida. However, the interpretations

of the image have been challenged in recent years. Love remains as the centralized focus within the image, but the representations and notions of love have progressed. Depicted in Amy Sherald's painting, *For Love and Country*, finished in 2022, she reimagines the image from the point of view of two African American sailors embracing one another in an impactful kiss, defying the gender dominance that the originals depicted. Instead of reflecting on traditional societal values and norms, Sherald wants to represent love in a contemporary setting, focusing on a gay couple. While simultaneously borrowing aspects of traditional depictions of love, such as the dip of the couple, the painting itself is more sensual than dominant. It is with these interpretations and many others that give light to the image in an up-to-date look and appeal, stripping it of its negative attributes.

Despite the valorization and reinterpretation of the photograph, the topic of consent has lingered in the background of the image for years. Specifically, when the two people in the image came forward with their participation in the photo, the woman in the photo, Greta Zimmer Friedman, revealed how the kiss itself was not consensual and not her choice. Describing it as a jubilant act, she explained how Mendonsa grabbed her mistakenly to show gratitude for the nurses who helped the wounded. However, later in the interview in 2012, Friedman clarified, "I can't think of anybody who considered that as an assault. It was a happy event."<sup>14</sup> The once iconic image had a newer and darker interpretation reflecting shifting ideas about consent in American culture in the 2010s and 2020s. The topic of consent came more to light during the rise of the #MeTooMovement in 2017, which gave awareness and support to women who have experienced sexual violence. In the midst of this movement the kiss statue standing in Sarasota, Florida, was graffitied in red ink with #MeToo across the leg of Friedman.<sup>15</sup> This act of protest symbolized a rejection of the image's nostalgic valorization in American culture. Visualizing an act of defiance against the traditional depiction of women being symbols of love. As referenced earlier, Gustave Klimt's painting is often depicted as a symbol of a unity but can also reflect an abusive and controlling nonconsensual relationship. The topic of consent is one that is beginning to gain traction in recent years, changing the course of some of history's most iconic symbols of love into ones of discourse.

### **Unmasking the Icon**

Love and consent go hand in hand, so why is it overlooked constantly by the American public? In bell hooks' 2000 book, *All About Love*, she references how love itself cannot flourish or be successful without consent. The word consent isn't directly stated in the book but rather interwoven throughout the text. She writes, "To truly love, we must learn to mix various ingredients –care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication."<sup>16</sup> Communication is emphasized as an important loving act. So why does the overall American public and the media continue to view the V-J Day photograph as an act of pure love? There are a multitude of reasons for this viewpoint, such as the continuous self-identification that the American people feel regarding the image, but also due to the media's misrepresentation of the image itself. Although some have opened their eyes to the truthful reality that the image is not a pure

depiction of love or passion, but rather a spontaneous, nonconsensual act at a key historical moment. It's hard to show that an image can have both ideas be true at the same time. Yes, it is a historical interpretation of the idea of what love looks like while still being shrouded in negative realities.

Recently, television and film have depicted the couple in the image negatively, specifically the woman in the photograph. Such as in the 2009 film, *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*, Ben Stiller's character, Larry, jumps into the photograph, grabbing the woman and recreating the image. However, at the end of the scene, the woman is shown as liking the kiss, telling Larry to "call her."<sup>17</sup> The scene implies an unrealistic interpretation of the image, one that is misinterpreting that she was open to the nonconsensual act. In the most modern depiction of the photograph, a recent *SNL* skit from April 2025 reflectson what occurred that day in a nonsensical and comedic interpretationof the hypersexual woman seeking out men in the crowd and cuckolding her male partner. The "nurse" in the skit is a reinterpretation of Friedman, where she is now kissing every man she meets while "her boyfriend," played by Jack Black, is off getting several hot dogs.<sup>18</sup> The skit itself is meant to be funny due to the switching of gender roles and Jack Black playing a befuddled boyfriend. Yet, this modern representation reinforces the misrepresentation of the woman in the photograph. She is misidentified as a nurse in the skit, and her character is portrayed as the temptress rather than the victim. It's important to note that this harmful depiction of the nurse in the photograph is not something new; more times than not, Friedman's identityis often disassociated in the photograph and instead is given a new identity of mystery, symbolism, and temptation. As she is often seen as a figure or a generic women character, with no identity, where people often bestow their own ideas and identity to her. The washing away of Friedman's identity reveal show women in history are more often than not stripped from reality, removing their personal experiences and transformed into depictions of love.

The *V-J Day in Times Square* photograph has gone through many discussions and iterations throughout the decades. While some stand the test of time symbolizing idealized love, other symbols reflect nonconsensual and problematic issues. Yet, the image through all that is still widely regarded as a symbol of national unity and nostalgia. The sole reason this image is being discussed is due to media and popular culture; without them, the image might have faded into another history book. Love has a profound hold on people, causing an attachment to certain recurring symbols that are displayed in Eisenstadt's photograph. Love is often distorted in American culture due to societal and cultural norms that are not built on a love ethic.<sup>19</sup> So, what does it mean for this photo to stay an American symbol of love? Back in 2013, the construction of a large-scale statue in San Diego's harbor commemorating the event was broadcast on the local news. During that event, live interviews from locals provide their remarks regarding the implementation of the statue. One of the men in the interview summarizes the significance of this moment by saying, "There was a time in this country's history when we came together, and this symbolizes this."<sup>20</sup> That is why this photograph matters. It was a moment in time and an image that reoccurs throughout our nation's history that Americans can project their own idealized conceptions of love, passion, and unity onto.

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AMST 401T: Love in American Life and Thought

# The Racist Roots of American Diet Culture

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This paper was written for Professor Susie Woo's 401T research seminar on race. As the final research project for this course, it examines the relationship between race and diet culture in the progressive era. I hope my paper entices the reader to question the validity and intent of the ideals that involve our bodies. I believe that racist ideologies control our lives more than we like to think. No one is immune to propaganda and the racism built within our systems. It's up to us to question and challenge our world and its ideas. Although this is scary, delving into unknown territories is necessary to break the harmful cycles of our supposed comfortable ones.

Today is just like any other day. You wake up and start scrolling on TikTok, where you find Ozempic-crazed celebrities and gym bro what I eat in the day videos. You stop scrolling and attempt to pack a sandwich before heading to campus, but there's only keto bread in the cupboard since your parents started their new diet. On the way to class, you stop by the vending machine to buy a drink and notice a sign plastered on the machine that says, "Calories count, check then choose." While waiting for class to start, you overhear the group next to you discussing how fat they feel and reminiscing about their smaller high school bodies. Fast forward to the end of the day: you have just finished dinner, but instead of feeling satisfied, you are left with a sense of imminent guilt and shame.

"I should have just skipped dinner."

"Oh god, I'm going to gain weight!"

"I need to skip breakfast tomorrow to cancel this out."

This is diet culture. Diet culture is a system of social beliefs that focuses on and places value on thinness. It's a status-based system with many rules about what is and isn't healthy. In diet culture, health is equated with weight loss and thinness. Those who actively participate in diet trends and struggle with eating, like the person in

the story, are not the only ones affected by this. Diet culture is inescapable. It's in the way we talk about food and our bodies. It's aligned with society's standards for physical appearance and beauty. It's intertwined with our medical system and its practices. The presence of diet culture in our society has caused much harm, with widespread disordered eating and body dissatisfaction. And that is not all of its downsides. The origins of diet culture in our society can be traced back centuries and vary across cultures. For America, one of its most formative years was that of the turn of the century. With social movements like Progressivism and Eugenics, American diet culture took root to form the monster that it is today. Eugenics is known as the notorious pseudoscience that used science to excuse racism and racial ideologies. Eugenicists portrayed black Americans, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized communities as doomed lesser races.<sup>1</sup> This form of race science began in the late 1880s, strongly focusing on heredity and genetics. One of its main focuses was the ideal human: white, thin, and able-bodied. Eugenicists contributed to public health and even created organizations dedicated to improving people's lives and forming more of them into the ideal human. The first eugenics organization was the Race Better Foundation, which related genetic concerns to health measures like diet, exercise, and public hygiene.<sup>2</sup>

Fatness was used as a racial signifier in the late 1800s and early 1900s. During this era, it was common for black Americans to be labeled as an inherently "indulgent" group. Scholars such as Andrew Sparman suggested that South Africans lacked skills in moderation when it comes to eating. Although you can equate this to other factors like food scarcity, Sparman claimed this was proof of an intrinsic link between blackness and indulgence.<sup>3</sup> Sparman wrote this in 1777, but this idea continued far into the turn of the century. This train of thought was also applied to non-Anglo-Saxon Europeans. Large body sizes being categorized as an African trait was used as a reason to claim racial inferiority to other ethnicities and races. Groups like the Celtic Irish were seen as hybrids with potential "Africanoid" descent. So, any traits they exhibited that were seen as undesirable, such as laziness and body size, were associated with and blamed on blackness.<sup>4</sup> In our systemically racist society, their stereotyped large bodies, linking them to blackness, made them impure and less than. The label of racial inferiority is commonly used as an excuse to treat different groups in a poor manner. Ultimately, racist ideologies surrounding the black community led to fatness being a sign of racial inferiority.

It was not just race scientists who associated fatness with racial inferiority. A *New York Times* article from 1874 discusses how, in Huntsville, Alabama, Saturdays were known to be the day when black Americans would visit town the most. The author used this article to speak about his observation of one of these Saturdays. In the section labeled "Colored Women-Types of Southern Characters," he compares and describes the women he saw on that day. The author begins his description by stating that he can't "fail to appreciate the term colored women." He then goes on to observe a black woman by a fire. The author describes her as a "fat-old creature"

whose skin color is “as black as the coal she puts in the fire.”<sup>5</sup> He then describes two young white women with a “cream-like complexion.” He says their physical condition is far better than the previous woman’s and describes them as beautiful and desirable. The author writes this comparison to emphasize there is a stark difference between black women and white women. Just like the race scientist previously mentioned, he believes black women’s supposed inherent larger physical appearance is one of the things that makes them inferior to white women. This is exactly why he starts off the article by stating how important the term “colored woman” is. The term “colored woman” is important to him because it emphasizes that black women are not the same as white women and need to be identified as something entirely different from them. This leaves the image of white women as perfect and thin and black women as fat and unattractive. Thus, fatness being associated with the black community and racial inferiority was a well-known idea at the turn of the century.

Race scientists’ assertion and majority belief that indulgence is inherent to black people created a new reason for others to prove their white superiority and attain whiteness. If being fat is a symbol of racial inferiority, then being skinny is one of racial superiority. The eugenics movement helped bring out this point. Eugenics’ push for the ideal human enforced racist ideals that a fit body equates to whiteness and white superiority.

Fit bodies being linked to white superiority led to non-white communities being blamed for public health concerns. A eugenicist named Jane Davenport created a statue called “The Average American Male” and displayed it at the Second International Exhibition of Eugenics in 1921.<sup>6</sup> The statue was created based on the average body of 1,000 white soldiers reported by the United States War Department. The male statue is presented as a naked man with little muscle and a small but visible bloated belly. Jane Davenport created this statue to highlight America’s decline in masculinity and the white male’s body corruption from people mixing with other inferior European races.<sup>7</sup> The average male having these proportions was a cause for concern. In a eugenicist’s eyes, skinniness was a source of whiteness, and anything other than that stemmed from races that were viewed as less than. This further implemented the thought process of thinness linking to white superiority and fatness linking to lesser races in American society. Eugenic views on the ideal human show that the negative view of fatness and appraisal of thinness comes from racist ideologies of white supremacy.

Eugenics promotion of how to become the ideal human was also partially done with the intention of creating a better human race in the future. This race was fit and skinny and didn’t include non-white communities. In the Third Race Betterment Conference of 1928, scientists banded together to promote eugenics and race betterment. In part of the conference, the scientists discussed biological and physiological aspects of life. The president of the Race Betterment organization, Dr. John Henry Kellog, wrote in a section labeled *Habits in Relation to Health and Longevity*, where he discussed ways humans could improve their physical health

and different diets.<sup>8</sup> To end this section, Kellogg reveals the purpose behind all of this. He states that there will be a point where a superior human race will present itself, and humans must work to control this evolution for racial betterment, “Thus, he may improve desirable qualities and eliminate defect and undesirable characteristics, and in time produce a race of human thoroughbreds that will be as much superior to the average existing man as is the thoroughbred horse to the average horse of the farm.”<sup>9</sup> The intentions behind staying fit and skinny were so much more than just health reasons. The need to be skinny was a direct opposition to the categorized indulgent minority communities. It was a way for the white race to stay superior to other races and outlive them. In being skinny, white Americans were able to claim dominance over other races and plan a future that catered to only them. With this, the pressure to remain slim in our society begins to make much more sense.

Now that thinness was viewed as a symbol of whiteness and fatness of racial inferiority, being thin became a way for non-white Americans to assimilate. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the United States received high volumes of immigrants, which encouraged white Americans to reinforce racial ideologies on what categorizes a person as white. This oppression that non-white Americans experienced vitalized the assimilation narrative in American culture. The assimilation narrative consists of immigrants absorbing and blending into the dominant racial groups’ culture, inevitably leaving their own behind.<sup>10</sup> One of the ways people can assimilate is by aligning with the racial categories of whiteness. As Andrea Shaw states in her book, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women’s Unruly Political Bodies*, “Thanks to the large black woman, other women of her race can assume the posture of their white counterparts by recognizing themselves to varying degrees as being physiologically what the black fat woman is not.”<sup>11</sup> With thinness symbolizing an antithesis of blackness, being skinny was a way for people of color to present themselves as similar to their white neighbors. Being closer to whiteness, they are more likely to receive the benefits that whiteness brings within American society. Motivated by the racial ideologies surrounding thinness, the pressure for white Americans to remain thin carried on to people of color through assimilation. The Progressive era was key in influencing people of color to assimilate into a thin body.

In the Progressive era, being skinny was one of the qualities needed for citizenship. This era focused on social and individual improvement through one’s health, which is manifested in a thin body. Progressives felt that a slim body marked knowledgeability and self-control. Immigrants from marginalized communities who did not assimilate into the image of an idealized thin body were subjected to having their request for citizenship.<sup>12</sup> Immigrants of color were already seen as undeserving of citizenship because of their race; now, their bodies were used as a tool to deny their rights further. A popular diet columnist at the time, Lulu Hunt Peters, asserted this idea of someone being unworthy and useless if they were to be fat. In *L.A. Times* on September 28th, 1922, she published “A Disgrace to be Fat,” which stated that it would soon be a disgrace to be fat and “no one should have the right” to be so.<sup>13</sup>

Peters reasons this by claiming that being fat makes people less useful to humanity. This idea not only created another area of struggle for non-white immigrants to attain citizenship but also elevated the pressure of assimilating into a thin body just to obtain basic rights. If one should “not have the right” to be fat in the US, then they have no other choice but to be thin. Through Progressives’ view on citizenship, achieving thinness became a way to assimilate into white America successfully.

Progressives’ work to promote body assimilation in the hope of manufacturing whiteness was also displayed in Indigenous boarding schools. In addition to what they learned in their classes on what to think and act, white fitness culture played a part in the enforceable assimilation of Indigenous people. Many boarding school staff members brought in exercise techniques and fitness ideologies from white schools.<sup>14</sup> This was done to replace the existing fitness culture in tribal communities. Some of these replacements included things like various sports, such as basketball. Through managing their fitness, white Americans were able to form Indigenous people’s bodies close to the standards of white culture and into what they viewed as acceptable. In the chapter “Exercise for Assimilation,” Shannon Walsh states, “Indigenous women, according to their overseers in the boarding schools, needed physical culture to demonstrate their usefulness and submissiveness for their white audiences.”<sup>15</sup> Marginalized communities shrinking into smaller ones represented them becoming more useful to the white race and was a display of American assimilation. In controlling Indigenous bodies, white Americans were able to take a step further in erasing their cultures and taking away their sense of self and freedom.

Progressives’ thought process behind assimilating Indigenous bodies is evident in the Bacone College’s published journal, *The Bacone Indian*. On January 12th, 1929, a white man named Frances McIntosh wrote a column called “What I Would Do with a Million Dollars.” He begins this article by first comparing young Indigenous women to caged squirrels. He says that Indigenous girls are similar to them because they both are naturally called to the forest and other wildlife.<sup>16</sup> This highlights how white Americans saw the Indigenous people as inherently uncivilized. A group of people that needed to be “caged” and formed. McIntosh then goes on to say, “Girls need physical exercise just the same as boys since the real American tomorrow is dependent for life upon the Indian girls of today special care should be taken in developing sound bodies.”<sup>17</sup> He finishes his column by stating if he had a million dollars, he would use it to build a gymnasium solely for young Indigenous girls. Progressives had a notion similar to eugenicists that their work was done for the better of tomorrow and the future of America. This future was one where white culture ruled American society. As McIntosh states, Indigenous girls’ bodies were “dependent” on America’s future. This exemplifies how important it was for people at the turn of the century to enforce thinness on minority communities. More and more people began to feed into and promote these ideologies surrounding skinniness and race. The pressure of body assimilation remained high, implementing it further into

American culture.

The turn of the century's racial ideologies about our bodies being normalized to the point that it became a mode of assimilation have ultimately embedded diet culture in our society. Diet culture formed into a social structure that intertwines with nearly all aspects of American life. This era's effects on diet culture should not be ignored. Its racist ideals and assimilation narratives that implanted it in America give further reason to how much of a flawed social system it truly is. With diet culture already causing harm through eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, we must begin to ask ourselves what purpose it has and why we continue to hold it so dearly. Its racist roots and damaging effects prove that diet culture is not here for the health of others. Its design is for something sinister, something greater. These racist and classist narratives are controlling our bodies and minds to the point where they are no longer ours. We malnourish and harm ourselves because of this. With diet fads and Ozempic, we continue to assimilate into smaller bodies against our nature. Our diet culture holds no beneficial purpose and must change.

I started off this essay surrounding an individual who is greatly impacted by diet culture, to the point where it's inescapable for them in their day-to-day life. That individual is me. As someone who has been suffering from anorexia for the past three years, my call for a big change and criticism of American diet culture comes from a sincere place of hurt and pain. I have seen first-hand the lies of diet culture and the harm it ensues on people. I've seen how our society is structured in a way that works directly against people like me who seek recovery. I've seen the real truth. That skinniness is not the superior measure of health. Being thin does not bring you automatic joy or satisfaction. It brought me emptiness and sadness. To find out these ideas have an extensive racist past and those racist ideologies are why it's still in place today is reason enough to break down this social system. I acknowledge that this is something that would be incredibly hard to do, but it is clear that we have no other choice. For the betterment of society, we must move to eliminate diet culture. Hopefully, in doing so, we will begin to have more agency over our bodies and be freed of the racist ideologies from the turn of the century that built this system.

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AMST 300: Introduction to American Popular Culture

# Dawn of the Dead

Arielle Hobbs

For Dr. Golub's Introduction to American Popular Culture course, the film *Dawn of the Dead* is analyzed as an example of the horror genre. An overview of the history of horror as a genre is discussed, as well as the historical context of the film. This film subverts audience expectations with sound, setting, and main characters in true horror fashion. Audiences are forced to confront their own humanity when viewing this film. *Dawn of the Dead* is one of the first horror films to engage audiences with a monster that is seen as partially human, while also placing that monster in a very mundane, familiar setting. In all, the film forces the audience to face their cultural anxieties, as the film comments on racism and othering, sexism, violence, and the rise of consumerism

*Dawn of the Dead* (1978) is more than a classic horror film that showcases zombies and gratuitous gore. Taking place in a shopping mall, the film confronts the audience with some of their deepest cultural fears. In order to fully understand this film, it is important to look at the history of horror and the history of zombies. It is also important to look at the cultural context of the world at the time, with an in-depth analysis of how *Dawn of the Dead* explores themes of racism, feminism, violence, consumerism, and the "Other."

Horror is one of the most controversial genres in pop culture, and for good reason. Innately, horror is designed to make people uncomfortable. It is meant to shock, frighten, disturb, and repulse its audience, and it does this by threatening what we believe to be normal. In fact, the word "horror" originates from the Latin word "horrere," which means to stand on end, to bristle. Horror transgresses boundaries, norms, classification systems, and categories that we take to be a given. In order to disrupt our understanding of the world and unsettle us, horror uses images, themes, moods, atmosphere, and situations. Some of the main themes within horror include alive vs. dead, human vs. animal, and us vs. them. Horror examines what scares us as a society and reflects it, using monsters as a metaphor for what we fear or are anxious about. Horror reveals what society has repressed and/or oppressed, largely including the fear of the Other.

Before horror films, there was horror literature. While themes (such as monsters, spirits, life after death, etc.) that can be found in modern horror have been around as long as human stories have been, the genre of modern horror is relatively

new.<sup>1</sup> Modern horror, as well as the term itself, originated around 250 years ago, with the Gothic fiction novel *The Castle of Otranto—A Gothic Story* by Horace Walpole in 1764. Horror literature blew up in the 1800s. *Frankenstein*, one of the most influential horror novels of all time, was published in 1818. It soon became a stage play in 1825, demonstrating its level of popularity. Throughout the 1800s, authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe began to publish their works. Near the end of the 1800s, in 1897, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker was published. All of this to say, horror as a genre in literature developed and became popular in the 1800s.

Film was invented in 1895, and with the popularity of horror literature, it only makes sense that they immediately began to use elements of horror in film. In 1895, the short film by Thomas Edison, *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* was produced. This was also the first use of special effects in film. In 1896, George Meiles produced *The House of the Devil*. This short film featured ghosts, skeletons, magic, and the devil. Almost 40 years later came the Golden Age of Horror in the 1930s. From 1931 to 1941, some of the most famous and influential horror films were created. This includes *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Wolf Man*, as well as many sequels.

The reason horror exploded in the 1930s is partially due to the introduction of sound to film. Not only could filmmakers use dialogue, but they could also use sound effects and music. In addition to sound, there was also the context of the world at the time. The 1930s brought many new horrors to the world. There was the aftermath of World War I, as well as the Great Depression. There was also a large debate about science vs. religion in society. Furthermore, there was the “Other” in America. The topic of the “Other” includes real-world experiences such as racism, lynching, racial violence, the Immigration Act of 1924, freak shows, and the idea of the “new woman.” The “new woman” refers to the fear surrounding women being given the right to vote and new levels of independence, which led to changes in the domestic sphere. Overall, there was a fear of the Other and of change. People wanted to escape their everyday horrors, and horror films seemed to be a good way to do that. As mentioned, horror was (and still is) connected to deep-seated cultural fears that people had. It provided an outlet and a solution in which the monster is defeated and the norms are restated, which was satisfying and relieving to people.

After the 1930s, horror movies took a hit due to the Hays Code. The Hays Code were restrictive rules for the American film industry that outlined what was or was not acceptable to include in film. As a result, horror movie makers had to get creative. With this need to depict horror creatively came new cultural contexts. In the 1950s, fears related to the Cold War arose. This included focusing on the enemy within, nuclear horrors, and alien invaders. Movies such as *The Thing From Another World* (1951), *THEM!* (1954), *Godzilla* (1956), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) were produced. All of these films relate to fears and cultural anxieties that stemmed from the Cold War.

In 1968, *Night of the Living Dead* came out. This film in particular is incredibly relevant to the focus of this paper, which is the analysis of its sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*. *Night of the Living Dead* was a film that fully reimagined and created the idea of the modern zombie. George Romero, the director, introduced cannibalistic zombies who are controlled by their hunger for flesh. Before this, the only zombie that existed was the Haitian voodoo zombie. These zombies were the result of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. The voodoo zombie is under the control of a master who has killed and reanimated them to use as a slave. This initial version of the zombie was the result of the fear of being enslaved, where one lacks free will and has no independence. Additionally, unlike the modern zombie, there was a cure for the voodoo zombie. In 1915, the U.S. military occupied Haiti. While stationed in Haiti, U.S. citizens brought the idea of the voodoo zombie back to America. From there, films about the voodoo zombie were made, such as *White Zombie* in 1932. Over 30 years later, the modern cannibalistic zombie was created. *The Night of the Living Dead* taps into cultural fears regarding race, desegregation, the Vietnam War, the youth movement, and the second wave of feminism.

Zombies did not have a long history in the United States by the time *Dawn of the Dead* rolled around. Modern zombies had only really existed for a decade at this point. They are creatures that are between alive and dead, which is one of the main themes addressed in horror. “They are not men... [they are] beings without humanity.”<sup>2</sup> This is inconceivable to audiences, a difficult concept to grasp. Their bodies still move, and yet they have no soul. They are only driven by the insatiable need to feast on the flesh of others. Furthermore, “Horrific creatures seem to be regarded not only as inconceivable but also as unclean and disgusting.”<sup>3</sup> Modern zombies spread their curse by being unclean and disgusting; if they bite you, you will become one of them. Their bite, germs, and contact with them are enough to make you the same as them. This is absolutely horrifying to audiences. Given that their very being is inconceivable and the fact that they can change you with one bite makes them “not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> Zombies are horrors to the mind and the physical body. To their very core, they are a threat to humanity as they will take yours.

*Dawn of the Dead* came out in 1978. Before summarizing the film, it is important to look at the context of the world at the time. In the 1970s, the Vietnam War ended, the Cold War was still going on, *Roe v. Wade* was established, second-wave feminism was still going on, and consumerism was on the rise. In addition to all this, violence and guns were becoming increasingly popular in films, which is likely due to the amount of violence that the U.S. was currently involved in. Now that we have an understanding of the world in which this film was created, we can discuss the plot of the film itself.

*Dawn of the Dead* starts in the midst of a zombie apocalypse. The country is aware that the dead are being reanimated as flesh-eating zombies, and that to kill them, you have to decapitate them or destroy their brains. The film opens in a

television news studio with Stephen and Fran, who both work at the studio. Stephen has decided to steal the news station's helicopter to escape the zombie horde, and invites Fran (his girlfriend) and his friend Roger. Roger is introduced as a SWAT officer who is part of a team carrying out a raid on an apartment building that is mostly home to Black and Latinx individuals, as they are refusing to hand over their dead. Within this scene, another officer goes haywire and takes delight in killing every person of color he can, after exclaiming slurs. In the middle of this raid, Roger meets another SWAT officer, Peter, who is from a different unit. Roger suggests to Peter that they go with Stephen. Once they meet up and get into the helicopter, they have to stop for fuel, which leads to encounters with both adult and child zombies. All are killed without hesitation. Additionally, in this encounter, Stephen points his gun at Peter, who is Black. After this, Peter comes back and points his gun at Stephen to show him how terrifying that experience is. The group gets back into the fueled helicopter, and they end up deciding to take shelter at a shopping mall.

The shopping mall is the stage for the rest of the film, as it has food, medicine, clothing, etc. Before entering the mall, the four gather around and observe the zombies wandering around the mall aimlessly. Peter remarks that they are there because going to the mall is instinct. The mall was an important place in their lives, something that they were used to doing. After getting inside, they find a secluded office space upstairs. Here, Fran reveals that she is pregnant, resulting in her only being allowed to leave their hideaway if she learns to look after herself. She learns to shoot and fly the helicopter throughout the film. Next, the group blocks all the exits of the mall with huge trucks, in order to ensure that zombies cannot get in. In the process, Roger is bitten by the zombies but remains alive. Once the group is back in the mall, they go on a shooting spree, emptying the mall of zombies. This is followed by a joyous shopping spree, where they run through the mall and take whatever they want. Slowly, Roger gets sicker and sicker. Before dying, Roger asks Peter to kill him if he comes back as a zombie. He eventually succumbs to the bite and is buried in the mall by Peter, who shot him.

After this, quite some time passes as shown by Fran's growing belly. She, Stephen, and Peter live a domestic, quiet life within the mall. They are not happy there, they are just surviving. Soon, a new group shows up outside the mall and radios to the three in the mall. Peter is immediately suspicious of them, knowing that they are raiders who will destroy any semblance of safety that they have. The raiders break into the mall, allowing zombies to pour in. They are chaotic, shooting zombies and destroying things for fun. Peter and Stephen go out into the mall to try to stop the raiders, however, Stephen becomes a zombie and starts to lead the zombies to the secret area that they had inhabited. His zombie does this out of habit and almost causes the death of Fran and Peter. Fran manages to escape through the roof, and she gets to the helicopter. She waits for Peter, who contemplates killing himself; however, at the last second, he gets up and makes his escape to the helicopter. Fran and Peter both get out of the mall and fly away over zombie-covered land. This is where the film

ends—with hope, but also with hopelessness, as the audience knows that there is no real safe place to escape to.

This film is a prime example of what it means to be a horror film. First, starting with sound, the film subverts the normal expectations of how sound is used in a horror film. While there were the sounds of zombies groaning, flesh-tearing, and bullets flying, there was also cheery mall music throughout the entire film. Multiple scenes in which the group was mass slaying zombies, loud cheery music and sales announcements were playing. The use of cheerful music and announcements gave the impression that all should still be functioning as normal; this mall should not be overrun with not-quite-dead people. This made the film even more unsettling to watch, as the audience is made aware of just how abnormal the situation is. Furthermore, the traditional horror movie setting of being in a faraway, isolated place is subverted as well. As mentioned, the majority of the film takes place in a mall. The mall is a place that people love going to, it is a social place. To some, it is a home away from home. For the film to take place in a mall is to bring the monsters home. No longer are they in the rural south as they were in *Night of the Living Dead*; they are in your favorite spot to hang out. This threatens any sense of normalcy that the audience may have. In subverting audience and traditional horror expectations, the movie truly stands as a horror movie: “The violation of an audience’s expectations contributes to their experience of terror.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the majority of the scenes including zombies depict them aimlessly wandering around the mall, very similar to what the mall actually looks like when it has real people in it. Obviously, there is a difference in that the zombies are slow, dead, and cannibalistic, while regular, alive people are not. However, this leaves the audience with the knowledge “that somehow what they saw upon the screen was an accurate, if allegorical, depiction of their own collective fears and concerns.”<sup>6</sup> They are shown how they may appear when in the grips of consumerism. Scenes in which sales announcements are blaring and the zombies are gathered at the windows of a department store, banging their hands on the glass, and crowding the entrance, offer a unique interpretation of how consumerism has influenced Americans to act. We are all zombie slaves to the master that is capitalism. Furthermore, the characters discuss how zombies are still coming to the mall because it is what they were used to doing. For people to spend so much time at the mall that when they die, they go back there, is a significant comment on how society has become overrun with the need to consume. Even in death, they long to go to the place that represents consumerism and capitalism. Lastly, the four main characters all go on multiple shopping sprees during their time in the mall. The threat of their possible death at the hands of the zombies that still roam the mall does not deter them from grabbing clothes that catch their eye, as well as any trinkets. Of course, they are shopping for practical reasons in that they need weapons, food, and survival supplies. However, they are also seen shopping with utter glee. Even in the face of death and destruction, we still want to consume. The pull of capitalism is so strong that it is the master of the living and the

living dead.

Returning to the film as a horror film, not only does it use sound to establish itself in the genre, but it also makes great use of violence and gore. If “*Night of the Living Dead* brought the grotesqueries of splatter to American Cinema”, then *Dawn of the Dead* greatly amplified those grotesqueries.<sup>7</sup> Countless shots of shooting zombies in the head, flesh being ripped apart, organs and blood spilling out, and more are shown generously in the film. Furthermore, guns are featured prevalently as the weapon of choice, whereas they had not been in the previous film. This demonstrates the increased popularity of guns and violence in not just cinema, but in America, due to involvement in various wars. Violence has become the norm, which is another commentary on society that the film provides. However, this is also a way in which the film is a horror film. The audience is being shown grotesque, disgusting images that inspire shock and revulsion. By definition, *Dawn of the Dead* is a horror film as it subverts normal expectations while also inspiring shock and disgust.

This film not only offers commentary on consumerism and violence, but also on racism. Zombies can also be interpreted as the Other. “Zombies were faceless masses: a new means of robbing the Other of its individuality in order to keep it as the Other.”<sup>8</sup> When zombies became cannibals, they became another way to separate groups into us vs. them.<sup>9</sup> They are mindless beings, and it is easy to forget that they were once human because they no longer have any humanity. Stripping them of their humanity makes it socially acceptable to kill them, similarly to how people of color have been treated. Hurting and killing another person is not an issue if they are not actually perceived as a person. It is obvious that the film is pointing to this, as at the beginning of the film, a low-income Black and Latinx apartment building is raided with glee by countless white men. None of them seems to have any remorse, as these people are not handing over their dead, which then strips them of their humanity by association. Furthermore, when Peter is at the end of Stephen’s gun, and then later points his gun at Stephen to show him how it feels, it is obviously a point of racial tension. Stephen is a white man, a news anchor, who has never had to worry about being unjustly killed. However, Peter is a Black man, and even though he is on the SWAT team, people see his skin color first. Throughout the film, he is the only level-headed, strong man. He is also the only one of the men to survive. For people of color and zombies to be killed without hesitation throughout the entire film, and for the only Black character to survive, is also to subvert audience expectations. The audience at the time most likely felt shocked that the Black character and the woman were the only survivors, as this was after the end of the Civil Rights era and during the second wave of feminism. At this point, a strong female lead and a Black lead were still uncommon. To shock the audience with a (pregnant) woman and a Black man is to comment on what society really thought of these groups of people. It is also important to acknowledge that women were just starting to receive reproductive rights, and for a pregnant woman to have this much agency in a film was very different. By shocking the audience and making them uncomfortable, their own racism and sexism are

pointed out to them. They are forced to realize that the very groups they have been trying to strip of humanity are the only people with humanity left.

*Dawn of the Dead* is a wonderful follow-up to *Night of the Living Dead*.

Zombies as modern monsters are more fleshed out by Romero, creating a formula that countless films and television shows would follow in the decades to come. This film subverts audience expectations with sound, setting, and main characters in true horror fashion. The audience is forced to face their cultural anxieties, as the film comments on racism and othering, sex rise of consumerism. The living dead are brought to them, to their favorite place to be. The horrors have been placed on their doorstep, and they refuse to be ignored.

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AMST 405: Images of Crime and Violence in America

# Coerced Courage: Incarcerated Firefighters in California

Max Maggio

This essay was written for AMST 405, taught by Professor Alison Kanosky, for the final essay of the class, in which students were directed to “write a 6-8 page essay critically analyzing TWO representations of crime and violence” using class materials as well as one piece of outside material if a student found it useful. This essay analyzes the ethical context of the volunteer firefighter program that California’s incarcerated population can take part in. It assesses the benefits of the program and weighs it with the risks. Additionally, the paper criticizes the lack of social safety nets that lead to the circumstances behind criminality, and the willingness of the public to turn a blind eye to the exploitation of incarcerated people without considering the context of their actions.

In January 2025, wildfires ravaged the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area in southern California. Prior to the fires, in November 2024, the state had voted not to ban forced labor for the incarcerated within California’s state penitentiaries. The use of incarcerated firefighters in California is not new; as early as 1941, prisoners who had been working in conservation projects in labor camps were considered for firefighting and fire prevention work. They would be filling in for absent workers from the Division of Forestry (now known as Cal Fire) who had left to fight in World War II.<sup>1</sup> The first dedicated firefighting camp for inmates was the Rainbow Conservation Camp in San Diego, opened in 1946 and operated by corrections and forestry departments like today’s camps.<sup>2</sup> Incarcerated people in California continue to fight fires today, making up thirty to forty percent of the state’s firefighters.<sup>3</sup>

For these inmates, firefighting is a job with several perks. On January 12, 2025, Hasan Piker, a popular political commentator and journalist who streams on Twitch, interviewed incarcerated firefighters—namely Kimbo, Angel, Sean, Xavier, and Williams—on their experiences. Those interviewed detailed their well-being, the benefits they received, their motivations for joining the program, and the treatment they received during their firefighting deployments. Kimbo explained that firefighting

was the highest paying job in the prison, making an inmate \$180 a month.<sup>4</sup> He also mentioned that while in the prison yard he would see fellow prisoners get attacked by one another, and the firefighting job allows him to escape the prison yard. Additionally, “the cops [presumably prison guards] treat us like shit” and at fire camp, “they talk to us like humans.”<sup>5</sup> Kimbo elaborated, “...we’re underpaid, but we got a job... and then the community comes out and shows us all kinds of love.”<sup>6</sup>

Another incarcerated firefighter who was not introduced commented on the positive psychological effects, explaining that the job allowed inmates to readapt to the outside world and lessen the feeling of being “institutionalized”—the experience of “culture shock” from the transition of prison life to the outside world is lessened.<sup>7</sup> Angel explained that minimum sentence times are reduced for those in the firefighting program. Violent offenders, who start at eighty-five percent of minimum sentence time, can get to a minimum of fifty percent after some time.<sup>8</sup> This means that someone who is sentenced to ten years for a violent offense must serve at least eight and a half by default, but firefighting service can get that minimum time served down to five years. Many of the incarcerated firefighters also enjoy the small luxuries that they get at the fire camp, such as Sean who mentioned that the fire camp had multiple PlayStation 4 video game consoles for them to enjoy.<sup>9</sup>

The program has the potential to rehabilitate convicts, but there are also valid criticisms that the otherwise very grateful incarcerated firefighters have for the program. Xavier explained that the training they received consisted of light physical training and was not sufficient to prepare them for the reality of the backbreaking labor they would be performing.<sup>10</sup> The pay is abysmal in proportion to the dangers and difficulties of firefighting, with incarcerated firefighters receiving one dollar an hour for a total of twenty-four dollars a day.<sup>11</sup> Kimbo explains that there is supposedly a pay increase to five dollars an hour for incarcerated firefighters on the horizon, but even this is paltry considering the minimum monthly pay for CAL Fire, which is \$3,975 not counting benefits.<sup>12</sup> He also noted that if the pay for this work increased, “more guys will be more grateful for the opportunity.”<sup>13</sup> Williams expressed that he probably will not take up firefighting once he is released due to long-term health concerns about inhaling “different chemicals and stuff.”<sup>14</sup> The incarcerated firefighters are clearly grateful for the opportunity that the program provides, but it is also far from perfect and in need of improvement. Though the program has its upsides for those who take part, the conditions under which the labor is extracted are engineered to make a service that is usually expensive cost far less, and many turn a blind eye to these ethical issues because it is happening to the imprisoned.

A major issue with the program is the matter of translating firefighting experience in the prison program to a career in the outside world. The Ear Hustle Podcast had an episode where they focused on a firefighter training program for parolees fresh out of prison who had been firefighters while incarcerated. The program would allow them to become career firefighters in the outside world.<sup>15</sup> A formerly incarcerated firefighter named Bay touted the benefits of the program to

some hopefuls—Eric Kesselmark, Levi Rosier, and Andrew Morales—who were drawn to the idea of being seen as heroes by the community.<sup>16</sup> The program is pretty competitive and not every applicant is admitted.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the program is a rigorous eighteen months for men just out of prison, who have not seen their families in years, potentially decades, and are then expected to sleep in conditions that evoke painful memories of prison within them.<sup>18</sup> Some formerly incarcerated people face added challenges, such as Eric Kesselmark, who had to visit his parole officer ten miles from where he was initially dropped off when he was let out of prison. He had to walk the distance with a seventy-pound duffel bag over his shoulder.<sup>19</sup> Levi Rosier ended up leaving the program due to the asinine expectations of the program authorities; despite having a GED, he was asked to take high school classes on top of fire training to earn his high school diploma.<sup>20</sup> There is also the element of danger that dissuades many trainees from completing the program. Andrew Morales shared some news about a formerly incarcerated firefighter who got burned on fifty percent of his body and ended up in a medically induced coma.<sup>21</sup> Morales also lamented that the training schedule was not given out in advance, making it difficult to plan outings and events with his friends and family.<sup>22</sup> Simply put, the program is extremely difficult for people who have just gotten out of prison. Strict and unwieldy schedules restrict trainees from seeing the people they longed to see while they were incarcerated, and the camp refuses to extend the basic decency of giving them these schedules ahead of time. Some feel like they are relinquishing their freedom once again, for a year and a half. Some fear that the career they earn from this program will leave them scarred and comatose.

The pathway from convict to firefighter is one that shows promise as a means of genuine reform and rehabilitation. In its current form, however, it is merely a tool of exploitation for the state to use against the imprisoned. It is much cheaper to overwork and underpay a bunch of inmates than it is to reform them into actual firefighters with a firefighter's salary; the state saves about \$100 million in labor costs by deploying these incarcerated firefighters.<sup>23</sup> The state can get away with neglecting to properly prepare them to fight a wildfire because many people in the United States simply would not care if an incarcerated person received horrific burns like the man that Andrew Morales heard about. It is reminiscent of a phrase that Christopher J. Lebron uses in the afterword of his book, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, the phrase being “the morally dim-witted.” This term that Lebron coins in his writings refers to people who question the actions of those brutalized by police rather than the police themselves.<sup>24</sup> Though the book is centered on the experience of Black people in the justice system, this classification also fits for the people who question convicts' pasts rather than the unjust system that exploits them; it succinctly describes those who are fine with the exploitation of prisoners because “they simply should not have committed any crime.” Many of these people had terrible starting positions in life through no fault of their own.

Levi Rosier started in the foster care system, moved to the delinquency

system, and returned repeatedly to juvenile hall because he was homeless and kept fleeing the group homes he was assigned.<sup>25</sup> Eric Kesselmark was homeless from the age of thirteen, living in a van with his mother. She had been unable to work after being beaten by a man so severely it necessitated an ambulance; Kesselmark witnessed this incident at seven years old.<sup>26</sup> He was later put in foster care, was on med by age eighteen, and was arrested at twenty years old with a sentence of ten years.<sup>27</sup> It is far more worthwhile to question the failure of the state to provide for people like Rosier and Kesselmark than it is to question their actions in such a desolate state of life. Their circumstances do not justify their actions, of course, but they do explain them. These were desperate people acting out of desperation. Rather than treat the cause of this desperation, however, the state opts to imprison these people when they inevitably act out and then exploit their labor afterward. Lebron says of many White people that “they are afraid to be *without* us [Black people] in the exact position we are today.”<sup>28</sup> The same is true of prisoners and their vulnerability to exploitation; most Californians voted against Proposition 6 to preserve the institution of forced labor in prisons. They perceive the socioeconomic situation they find themselves in as the “zero-sum game” that Lebron describes: the gain of those in prison is a loss for everyone on the outside.<sup>29</sup>

Though it is hard to state what effects a more just system would have on the economy, Lebron makes a great case for change:

To loosen the purse strings, to open one’s mind and heart means to commit to a change in the civic and economic landscape that one cannot understand until it happens, and when the change comes it will, like all changes, cause all of us to rethink the grounds for our association. It will challenge us to extend thoughts, feelings, and actions in directions we previously thought foreclosed or unwise.<sup>30</sup>

It is easy to blame those who so easily tolerate this system of mass incarceration and subsequent exploitation. However, it is difficult to imagine a world without the exploitation of prisoners, even for the imprisoned themselves. At the end of Hasan Piker’s stream, fellow streamer Caroline Kwan and film producer Scott Budnick discussed the surprise they saw from the incarcerated firefighters that people cared about them and their stories.<sup>31</sup> They expect apathy from society at large, having been discarded by the state, and are shocked that somebody would care to speak to them like human beings. Many people on the outside, as the incarcerated would expect, fail to sympathize with them. Many Americans, even the supposedly progressive people of California, ignore the exploitation of prisoners because they do not see a world where they themselves become incarcerated and believe that they benefit from the system that underpays and overworks incarcerated people.

Firefighting is seen as one of the most commendable professions a person can take up, and for good reasons. Firefighters dash headfirst into the most terrifying force of nature, risking gruesome injuries and death, but do so anyway, protecting

people and their homes in the process. Not many are cut out for it, and it is this reason the state of California coerces incarcerated people into performing this vital service for abysmal pay, enticing them with the prospect of reducing their bloated sentences and an escape from their poorly run prisons. It has become unhealthily reliant on a system devised as a temporary solution to ease World War II's strain on agencies that dealt with wildfires. The state makes it difficult for incarcerated firefighters to pursue firefighting careers after they have served their sentence, proving that they do not want to pay rehabilitated people full firefighter salaries. Many Americans simply do not care about prisoners and perceive benefits from their exploitation. As it stands, the use of incarcerated firefighters is driven by the state's archaic reliance on slave labor and enabled by the masses' apathy and fear of change.

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20. *Ibid.*, 42:32–42:57.
21. *Ibid.*, 46:31.
22. *Ibid.*, 48:40.
23. “More Than 200 CDCR Inmate Firefighters Respond to Oroville Spillway Crisis,” California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, February 14, 2017, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/news/2017/02/13/more-than-200-cdcr-inmate-firefighters-respond-to-oroville-spillway-crisis/>.
24. Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 191.
25. Woods, Poor, and Thomas, “From the Vault,” 15:17–15:41.
26. *Ibid.*, 24:16–25:43.
27. *Ibid.*, 25:48.
28. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, 198.
29. *Ibid.*, 196.
30. *Ibid.*, 196–197.

31. Hasan Piker, "Talking to the Prisoner Firefighters," 52:00–52:17.

AMST 502T: Theoretical Approaches to Studying Popular Culture

# Rhythms of Resistance: Salsa, Reggaeton, and Puerto Rico's Struggle with American Imperialism

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The significance of this essay lies in its examination of Puerto Rican identity and music as they respond to American imperialism. It explores how salsa and reggaetón, having been shaped by global commercialization and diasporic movements in New York, operate both as a product of American popular culture and a form of resistance to U.S. colonial power. This paper situates music as a form of political expression. One that Puerto Ricans use to negotiate their identities, critique injustice, challenge erasure, and promote storytelling and activism. This essay bridges historical context, contemporary debates, and lyrical analysis to demonstrate how art can be utilized to protest and why these genres of music are significant to understanding Puerto Rico today.

## **Introduction**

Before delving into this paper, I would like to acknowledge several key points. In conducting this research, I could not overlook the transnational nature of salsa and reggaetón, evident in their origins, popularity, and global prominence. Although neither of these genres originated in the United States, the country, especially New York City, played a crucial role in shaping and elevating the production, dissemination, and mainstream success of these genres. The Latin American and Afro-Caribbean diaspora had a profound influence on the emergence of salsa in the 1960s and 1970s in New York, where Puerto Rican musicians drew inspiration from jazz and urban storytelling.<sup>1</sup> Many salsa musicians would collaborate and learn from one another, gaining additional influence from diverse countries, including Cuba,

the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. By the late 1960s, with the creation of Fania Records – seen as the Latin equivalent of Motown - salsa had established a global epicenter in New York, pushing out salsa records.<sup>2</sup> Disputably, salsa music would not have had its prominent success had it not had Fania Records in New York City.

Today, Bad Bunny is recognized as a household name in the music industry, transcending the Latin music genre and gaining popularity on American and international airwaves. For three years in a row, Bad Bunny held Spotify's most-streamed artist globally, from 2020 to 2022. Bad Bunny has not only made a name for himself in the music industry, but he has also starred in TV shows and films, made a professional wrestling debut, and collaborated with various prominent clothing brands for apparel lines. Before Bad Bunny's commercial success, there was a notable success with English-speaking pop artists collaborating with Reggaetón artists. In 2017, Justin Bieber collaborated with Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee on the remix version of the song "Despacito", making it the most-streamed song at that time, amassing more than 4.6 billion streams across all platforms since the song's release in January 2017.<sup>3</sup> Reggaetón, undoubtedly, has established a strong presence in American popular culture. However, it took many years to get there.

Like America's own culture, Reggaetón can be seen as a melting pot of inspiration in its origins. Reggaetón, with roots in Puerto Rico and Panama, gained traction through the weaving of Latinx experiences in the U.S. and hip-hop, ultimately becoming the global powerhouse in popular culture that it is today.<sup>4</sup> Artists often discussed themes surrounding their identities as minorities in America, as well as the rough upbringings they experienced, set to a catchy hip-hop and Caribbean-influenced beat. Yet, as salsa and reggaetón prospered within the American music industry, they each became tools of cultural resistance, challenging U.S. imperialism and advocating for Puerto Rican autonomy and identity. Salsa's strong emergence in the 1960s and 1970s in New York played a significant role in representing the identity of Nuyoricans. This term became prominent due to the large diasporic community of Puerto Ricans that lived in New York. These individuals faced a struggle of a split identity: one on the island and one on the mainland. Many of the themes these songs discussed were of poverty, racism, and the struggles of living as a minority American. While not addressed in this paper, Willie Colón has a song, "Pedro Navaja," which discusses the poverty and violence experienced in New York City's Puerto Rican neighborhoods, but is a frequently lived experience across other Latin American communities. Much like the start of hip-hop in America, the early days of reggaetón began as a way to speak out against the unjust treatment of Black people by the police.<sup>5</sup>

This paper seeks to examine how Puerto Rican music, from the rise of salsa in the 1960s and 70s to the global surge of reggaetón, embodies a dual identity—thriving within American popular culture while simultaneously challenging the colonial dynamics of U.S. imperialism, serving as both a product of cultural assimilation and a form of resistance. With salsa and reggaeton, these genres utilized

the lived experiences of their artists to discuss the negotiation of their identity as Puerto Ricans, resist cultural erasure from the broader American culture, and critique imperial structures. These genres of music have often been perceived as low-brow forms of popular culture, given that songs usually center around the glorification of sex and drugs. Additionally, these genres can frequently be dismissed as lacking political significance because they so heavily center on the themes mentioned above and typically feature catchy dance beats. I would also argue that because these genres are not sung in English, they are also dismissed by the broader American popular culture. However, it is because Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory and we have had a complicated past with Puerto Rico that it is vital to examine the complex dynamics both these artists and Puerto Ricans face. Currently, one of the most prominent musicians worldwide is Bad Bunny, from Puerto Rico. In the more recent past, he has faced criticism for shedding his Puerto Rican identity to be more American. However, we cannot forget that he is technically American as well. We also cannot forget the heinous comment made about Puerto Rico during a Trump Rally at the tail end of the 2024 presidential campaign. Puerto Rico has long been viewed as a pawn, with little importance or worthiness in the eyes of the U.S. government, and not worthy of being granted statehood. However, we often forget that they hold the identity of being Americans, though that identity looks different from what it does to mainland Americans. Therefore, this research feels relevant and timely in relation to pop culture today, as well as Puerto Rico's musical history, particularly in its origins with salsa.

### **A Brief History of American Imperialism in Puerto Rico (1898-Present)**

The landscape of Puerto Rico's politics has been shaped by American imperialism since the United States acquired the island from Spain because of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Puerto Rico became an unincorporated U.S. territory under the Treaty of Paris, subject to American governance and without full democratic representation. In 1900, the Foraker Act established a civil government controlled by the U.S., and seventeen years later, the Jones Act in 1917 granted U.S. citizenship, although without full political rights, such as voting in presidential elections. The limitation of not allowing Puerto Ricans the right to vote in presidential elections has been a source of serious contention over the years. It is often cited as the reason why the colony should be granted statehood or independence. Scholars like Petra R. Rivera-Rideau argue that this ambiguous political status reinforces Puerto Rico's colonial state under U.S. governance, maintaining political and economic control while denying the full adoption of a nation-state framework.<sup>6</sup> The United States' economic power has controlled the island in several ways. The island is unable to borrow on global markets when it struggles during natural disasters or recessions; therefore, the island must depend on the U.S. government to bail it out. However, they have no federal voting representation.

Throughout the 20th century, Puerto Rico remained a strategic economic

and military asset, with U.S. policymakers overseeing colonial economic structures that effectively fostered dependency on American markets. In the mid-20th century, Operation Bootstrap further intertwined Puerto Rico's economy with the U.S., transitioning its agricultural economy to an industrial one. With this shift in industry also came a mass migration to the mainland. Today, Puerto Rico remains a U.S. territory, with much debate over independence, statehood, and territorial status at the core of Puerto Rican identity and political discourse. Especially, as we have seen a decline in natives on the island, the state of the island, as well as discussions of Puerto Rican identity, have been at the forefront. The island's colonial history has long fueled the desire to share cultural expressions of resistance, particularly through music.

### **Puerto Rican Music as a Cultural & Political Tool:**

Puerto Rican music has long occupied a space for negotiating its diverse identities, rooted in Taíno, African, and Spanish heritage, as well as its complex colonial relationship with the U.S. Salsa music is no exception. The origin of salsa music has long been a subject of dispute, with some claiming that it originated solely in Cuba or Puerto Rico. Regardless, the Latin American genre has drawn considerable influence from Cuban genres, including montuno and son cubano, mambo, bolero, and chá-chá-chá, as well as additional Puerto Rican elements such as bomba and plena. These genres all have foundations of Afro-Caribbean resistance and storytelling; segway to the rise of salsa in the mid-20th century, Puerto Rican music has continuously represented cultural pride and political commentary. Additionally, salsa also draws influence from American genres like R&B and jazz, particularly with the influence of New York City. Scholars like Ángel G. Rivera Quintero and Mariana Ortega Breña discuss how, as a result of New York's Puerto Rican migration and diaspora, salsa became a voice for the working class.<sup>7</sup> There were common themes of resilience, struggle, and migration. Despite the sometimes somber themes, salsa music can be characterized by vivacious and energetic instruments, including brass, woodwinds, and percussion. The percussion, the bongos, the congas, and the *timbales* provide the rhythmic backbone of salsa, while the brass instruments, the trombone, trumpet, and saxophone, provide melodic elements. The strings, the guitar, and the piano harmonize, bringing everything together.

Ironically, it is primarily due to the United States that we have reggaeton music. In 1904, the U.S. entered Panama to construct the Panama Canal, connecting the Pacific and Atlantic trade routes. To complete this work, the U.S. brought workers from across the West Indies, including Barbados and Jamaica, making Panama City a melting pot that was multilingual and multicultural.<sup>8</sup> The descendants of these workers incorporated dancehall music into their culture. Dancehall music builds upon reggae beats and includes a mix of Latin influences and hip-hop-style beats. Unfortunately, from there, as a result of whitewashing to gain commercial success, black voices became silenced, and reggaeton took off from there.<sup>9</sup>

Reggaetón, a relatively recent musical genre and movement, has also become

a vehicle to represent Puerto Rican identity, just as salsa did years prior. However, with the heightened popularity of the genre, especially among artists like Bad Bunny, the musical genre and perhaps the Puerto Rican identity also grapple with globalization and commercialization that salsa didn't necessarily face, at least not to the same scale that reggaetón is currently encountering. While some could argue that the mainstream music industry has co-opted the genre, early reggaetón artists like Calle 13, Tego Calderón, and even Daddy Yankee and Don Omar, in the early stages of their careers, used the genre as a platform for social and political critiques.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, scholar Joniel R. Pacheco Muñoz advocates that reggaetón remains a decolonial force, offering a subversive critique of racial and cultural hierarchies imposed by colonial structures.<sup>11</sup> These early artist used their songs to discuss racial injustice, racial profiling, and the sentiments of feelings as though Latinos or other minorities were not as respected in American society. More recently, Bad Bunny has seen commercial praise and success for challenging issues of colonialism, economic exploitation, cultural suppression, and Puerto Rican pride in his most recent album, "DeBÍ TirAR Más FOTo." Puerto Rican music, whether in traditional or modern genres, remains deeply intertwined with questions of resistance, assimilation, and sovereignty. Puerto Rican artists have made a name for themselves outside of the Latin music charts and spaces and are being noticed in global spaces and charts. They are doing so by speaking Spanish, embracing their Puerto Rican identity and experiences, as well as calling out injustices from the U.S. government, much like salsa singers had done years prior.

### **Methodology—Close Reading**

The album "Siembra" by Willie Colón and Rubén Blades was released in the fall of 1978. It is widely regarded as one of Latin America's most politically influential salsa albums. From the start of the album, the song "Plástico" targets the deeply rooted consumerist and imperialistic values prevalent in Latin America. The song begins with a funk and disco soul influence, transitioning into a classic salsa beat featuring brass and percussion. The introduction can be viewed as a nod to New York, where the album was recorded.

The song takes a jab at affluent Latinos who aspire to assimilate into American appearances, economic power, and whiteness. Scholar Frances Aparicio argues that this song operates as a form of musical resistance by "exposing the false consciousness amount the Latin American upper classes shaped by U.S. imperialism."<sup>12</sup> The song opens by describing a woman who is plastic, leading the audience to imagine she has had plastic surgery; however, she is defined as one out of a sea of many other similar women. Then, she is described as having the scent of Chanel No. 3, an expensive perfume regarded as a status symbol. This woman seeks a man who can take care of her, preferably a doctor or someone of a similar status, indicating a divide between classes. "Eran latinos como tú y como yo, / pero con diferente ideología." | "They were Latinos like you and me, / but with a different

ideology.” Colón and Blades sing about the clear divide that can occur as some Latinos begin to obtain wealth; American consumerism and capitalism have changed these individuals. The latter part of the song offers a point of optimism, “Llegará, llegará... la esperanza del pueblo vencido.” | “It will come, it will come... the hope of the defeated people.” This lyric offers insight into the value placed on community over individualism, a theme that is also expressed in the earlier part of the song. There is a desire to elevate a community together, rather than relying on a single person. Rubén Blades discussed in a 2017 interview how important he felt music was as a form to “talk about the world as it really is,” reaching the marginalized instead of just providing entertainment.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, while Colón may have reached celebrity status, his songs were for the people and were intended to prevent him, as well as others, from losing sight of their humble roots and identity.

Known as *The Singer of the Singers*, Héctor Lavoe released his second solo album, “De Ti Depende,” with the hit song, “Periodico de Ayer”, in 1976. Though often interpreted as a song about romantic heartbreak, Lavoe’s “Periódico de Ayer” carries a metaphor of colonial disposability. He sings, “Tu amor es un periódico de ayer / que nadie más procura ya leer.” | “Your love is yesterday’s newspaper / that no one else tries to read anymore.” Scholar Frances Negrón-Muntaner suggests that Lavoe’s voice came to represent “those who are disposable under colonial rule—used, then ignored.” Although the Puerto Rican government began promoting industrialization in the late 1940s through the creation of industrial incentives to attract U.S. firms, by the 1970s, the plan had mainly collapsed. Wages on the island could not keep pace with the higher incomes that people earned on the mainland. “Even the relatively lower official unemployment rates of the late 1960s and early 1970s were the result of large numbers of Puerto Ricans who migrated to the United States, thus reducing the size of the labor force and the number of unemployed.”<sup>15</sup> As a result, throughout the 1970s, Puerto Rico experienced economic decline and an increasing diaspora into the broader United States. Lavoe’s woeful delivery of heartache is symbolic of the abandonment many Puerto Ricans felt under U.S. policy, disregarded like yesterday’s news. Unfortunately, Puerto Ricans would also have to leave behind “their love of yesterday” to gain better opportunities. Whichever way you look at it, Lavoe’s lamenting of love during this time of mass migration potentially resonated with many Puerto Ricans who felt that they were having to abandon their own loved ones, their own cherished homes, for an unknown territory, due to being used and ignored by U.S. colonial rule.

Moving ahead to the early aughts, in 2005, Calle 13 released “Querido FBI” in response to the FBI’s unintentional assassination of Filiberto Ojeda Ríos, a leader in the Puerto Rican independence movement. The event coincided with the anniversary of the Grito de Lares, also known as the Cry of Lares, a Puerto Rican uprising against Spanish colonial rule that took place on September 23, 1868. As a result of this coincidence, the assassination carried more symbolic meaning. Residente, singer of the group Calle 13, spoke out against the violence the American government had used against Ojeda Ríos.



During an interview with Democracy Now!, he stated, “It was a murder.”<sup>16</sup>

*Figure 1: Puerto Ricans protesting the botched assassination of Puerto Rican independence movement leader; Filiberto Ojeda Rios*

Residente was so disturbed by the actions of the FBI that he wrote the song, asked his record label to release it, and promoted it through the internet and viral marketing, a somewhat up-and-coming tactic for the time. To this day, the song remains available only on YouTube and is not accessible on Spotify or other traditional music streaming platforms. The opening of the song is a call to attention, addressing all people in Puerto Rico. Residente then expresses his anger towards the murder of Ojeda Ríos and details the murder as being a metaphor for how the American government views Puerto Rico, “*a’ nuestra bandera la han llena’o de mea’o*” in other words, “Our flag has been pissed upon.” Additionally, the lyrics would go on to say “Este gobierno es una dictadura / Y no me digas que soy un loco o un exagerado.” | “This government is a dictatorship / And don’t tell me I’m crazy or exaggerating.” The FBI was able to enforce colonial power over Puerto Rico and wrongfully assassinated a known Puerto Rican independence leader, causing Puerto Ricans to feel personally attacked and openly oppressed and silenced by their colonial rulers.

Thousands would attend Ojeda Rios’ funeral. The nationalist group led by Ojeda Ríos had vowed to avenge his death and declared a public message “Yankees murderers, your days are numbered! ... The fight will continue now and until the Yankees leave our soil,” read the letter, which was signed by Commander Guasabara “from somewhere on the island.”<sup>18</sup> Residente, like other pro-independent

Puerto Ricans, condemned U.S. colonial control and the violence used to suppress opposition.

At the time of Ojeda Ríos' murder, he was 72 years old but was on the FBI's Most Wanted List for an infamous Wells Fargo heist in 1983, where he stole roughly \$7.2 million. He and his crew, the Macheteros, had been relatively inactive for fifteen years.<sup>19</sup> The death of Ojeda Ríos sparked protests not solely in Puerto Rico but in New Jersey, New York, Boston, and Chicago, providing proof to the growing Puerto Rican diasporic community in the United States. The murder was so impactful that a riot at the University of Puerto Rico forced an "academic recess to allow professors, staff, and students to attend Ojeda Ríos's funeral."<sup>20</sup> As a result of Calle 13, community activism, journalists, and elected officials publicly became vocal towards the FBI for using excessive force to capture Ojeda Ríos, especially to have done so during the anniversary of El Grito de Lares, the Office of Inspector General investigated the circumstances surrounding the shooting. Scholar Petra Rivera-Rideau describes "Querido FBI" as an early expression of "anti-colonial consciousness emerging within reggaetón."<sup>21</sup> It is because of Residente's activism through his music, as well as his call to action to encourage young Puerto Ricans, regardless of their location in the world, to also speak out in protest, that drew attention to this incident. Additionally, this moment brought Puerto Ricans together in an effort to resist imperialistic rule and



the oppressive nature of the events that occurred.

*Figure 2: Residente, featured in the blue cap, and Bad Bunny, seen holding the Puerto Rican flag, are at the protest demanding the resignation of Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Rossello in 2019.<sup>22</sup>*

Fourteen years later, Residente would collaborate with iLe and Bad Bunny

for “Afilando los Cuchillos,” or Sharpening the Knives. This song became the anthem of Puerto Rico’s historic 2019 protests, which ultimately led to the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. The song was released on July 16, 2019, as a response to leaked group chat conversations that were had between Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his staff that contained offensive language containing sexist, homophobic, elitist, and misogynistic remarks. One message mocked the struggle that many Puerto Ricans faced in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. While the messages were later found to be edited and manipulated, the damage was already done. It was estimated that on July 17th, one day after the release of “Afilando Los Cuchillos”, 500,000 people protested the resignation of Rosselló. iLe, Residente, and Bad Bunny denounced corruption, misogyny, and colonial subservience, “*La corrupción no se tapa con maquillaje / Aquí la indignación se convirtió en coraje.*” | “*Corruption cannot be covered up with makeup / Here indignation has turned into anger.*” Jean Hostetler-Díaz notes that this song captured “a cultural turning point where popular music catalyzed political transformation.”<sup>23</sup> These Puerto Rican artists leveraged their platform and voices to speak out against corruption and advocate on behalf of their fans, as well as other island citizens. In response, or in support, depending on how one views it, to have half a million people show up in protest and to have musicians be the faces of a political protest speaks a lot to the impact these artists hold, but also the value that other Puerto Ricans place on having them speak towards their own identities and experiences. Additionally, this also shows that as Puerto Rican artists continue to establish a larger platform, their political capital to speak out against American imperialism carries more weight and visibility. While salsa artists were politically engaged, they did not drive political movements to the same extent as these reggaetón artists have. This would not be the last we see of Bad Bunny’s political momentum.

In January 2025, Bad Bunny would release his most politically charged album to date, titled *DeBí TiRAR Más FOToS*, also known as *I Should Have Taken More Photos*. At the same time, the album is collectively praised for its numerous references to the throwback sound of classic and famous salsa groups and beats, such as El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, as well as its many references to New York. One song in particular, “NUEVAYoL,” a play on “New York” in Spanish, even challenges listeners to imagine a Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans. At its core, Bad Bunny’s album toys with the idea of embracing two versions of Puerto Ricans: those who have left the island, perhaps for New York, and those who remain on the island. Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, also known as Bad Bunny, acknowledges the significant influence New York has had on the Puerto Rican diaspora, as well as the history of its music, ranging from salsa to reggaetón. The album as a whole is heavily influenced by the 1970s salsa icons, including Héctor Lavoe, Rubén Blades, and Cuban salsa icon Celia Cruz.

One of the last songs on the album, “LO QUE LE PASÓ A HAWAII,” is one of the most overt political songs in Bad Bunny’s catalog. The song translates to, What

happened to Hawaii; Bad Bunny draws a poignant parallel between Puerto Rico and Hawaii:

*“Nos jodimos igual que Hawaii / ahora solo hay hoteles y no hay na’. We got screwed just like Hawaii / now there are only hotels and nothing.”*

Like Puerto Rico, Hawaii is another of the United States’ territories. Puerto Rico doesn’t have statehood and is independent of the United States, as was Hawaii over half a century ago. Bad Bunny suggests that Hawaii, in this song, lost a lot of its identity in the process of becoming a state of the United States.<sup>24</sup> He warns against Puerto Rico becoming another overrun tourist economy, stripped of sovereignty and cultural identity. He attributes these fears to the rise in young people leaving the island, as well as the increasing gentrification of the island. The combination of these two issues has created a pervasive fear, especially in more progressive circles around this idea that there might actually be one day a Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans.<sup>25</sup>

“Aquí, nadie quiso irse, y quien se fue sueña con volver. Si algún día me tocara, qué mucho me va a doler. Otra jibara luchando, una que no se dejó. No quería irse tampoco y, en la isla, se quedó. Y no se sabe hasta cuándo...| Here, no one wanted to leave, and those who left dream of returning. If it were my turn one day, how much it would hurt. Another jibara fighting, one who wouldn’t give in. She didn’t want to leave either, and on the island, she stayed. And no one knows how long...

Joniel R. Pacheco Muñoz interprets this as an “anti-colonial lament, projecting a future of total economic dependence and displacement.”<sup>26</sup> Hawaii, like Puerto Rico, has also been impacted by natural disasters in recent years and has had to depend on the United States for support. As a result of these natural disasters, so many young people had to leave the island, leaving it open to be gentrified due to tax incentives that would motivate mainland Americans to move to Puerto Rico, making it more expensive for Puerto Ricans on the island.

While each of these songs has left its mark in the music industry, as well as making its impact on political and social commentary, there appears to be a distinction between what these artists’ Puerto Rican identities sing about. Salsa artists appear to focus more on the Nuyorican experience and what it is like on the mainland. They view New York and being on the mainland as an opportunity for success and better opportunities than they would have otherwise had on the island. While salseros do not seek to shed their Puerto Rican identities, they recognize that they have formed new identities through their time in New York. They feel that they do not check a box that is just Puerto Rican, nor just being a New Yorker. Instead, they create a category all their own, producing music that speaks to the experiences they lived through during the 1960s and 1970s. Their songs discuss wanting to assimilate while still maintaining Puerto Rican pride. They discuss the duality of visiting family in Puerto Rico, who may be experiencing different working-class

struggles than they are in the city of New York. These two worlds of physically going back and forth, remaining connected to your roots, and never losing sight of where you came from, are deeply embedded in Puerto Rican salsa music. The mainland isn't necessarily viewed so negatively, but rather as a place to gain opportunity and a more progressive way of living. However, their point of view of the U.S. government was sung more through the lens of the migrant experience via racial profiling of minorities, living in rough areas, and corruption. Salseros' political momentum tended to start and end in their music.

On the other hand, artists like Residente and Bad Bunny speak more directly to the experiences felt on the island. While both of these artists address more modern-day topics, the themes surrounding their songs speak far more to their identity as Puerto Ricans holistically, rather than focusing on a Nuyorican or solely island-living experience. The identity of being Puerto Rican or having Puerto Rican pride is centered more on being Puerto Rican, no matter where in the world you are, with the understanding that so many people have had to leave the island for economic purposes. Ultimately, what brings Puerto Ricans together is the shared identity of being just that, Puerto Rican. Ultimately, both genres share a criticism of the U.S. government doing wrong by the Puerto Rican people for making them feel abandoned or like second-class citizens. These artists have fought for ways to uphold their Puerto Rican identities and challenge how the government has failed the island and its residents.

### **The Role Music Plays in Shaping and Expressing Resistance Against Colonial Rule**

In Puerto Rico, music has historically served as a powerful tool for resistance, enabling artists to critique colonial rule and advocate for self-determination. Genres like plena and bomba, originated from enslaved African communities in the Caribbean and were among the first musical forms used to resist colonial oppression. These genres often carried coded messages and stories of rebellion that only reinforced collective resilience and shared identity in the face of colonial subjugation.<sup>27</sup> While the roots of salsa can be traced back to Cuba in the 1930s and 1940s, with several artists like Conjunto Chappottín, Arsenio Rodríguez, and Roberto Faz, the rise of salsa music coincided with the popularization of "Latin" music in the United States during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.<sup>28</sup> Salsa manifested as a reflection of the urban Latino barrios in the United States, particularly in New York City

In the 1970s, salsa became a transnational voice for the Puerto Rican experience. It was artists like Willie Colón and Rubén Blades who addressed themes of social justice, racial inequality, and oppression, catapulting the Puerto Rican experience through the airwaves. An example of Colón's activism can be demonstrated during the height of Colón's career in 1989, when he released the song "El Gran Varón" aka The Big Man, arguably one of the most popular songs in salsa history, and a song about a trans woman who presumably dies of AIDS.<sup>29</sup> Salsa's

popularity within the island and the Puerto Rican diaspora helped shape a collective consciousness that rejected the colonial standard. There was a shared unity and pride that allowed Puerto Ricans to feel more connected to a shared culture. In the case of Colón's song, there was a huge generational divide, but also a divide in sentiments regarding the AIDS crisis based on progressive sentiments in the city and more conservative perspectives on the island.

Emerging in the late 20th and early 21st century, reggaetón has continued in the footsteps of musical resistance set forth by salsa and music before it. While reggaetón is commonly associated with and commercialized as party music, reggaetón holds deep political undercurrents. Early artists, such as Residente of Calle 13 and Tego Calderón, have utilized the music genre to address economic disparities, challenge racial discrimination, and confront American colonial control over Puerto Rico.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the genre has played a vital role in mobilizing political activism, most notably seen during the 2019 protests that led to the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. Artists iLe, Bad Bunny, and Residente became vocal leaders of the movement, releasing a viral song, "Afilando Los Cuchillos" (also known as "Sharpening the Knives"), a day prior to an estimated 500,000-person protest on the island.<sup>31</sup> Throughout each era, Puerto Rican music has not only reflected but also keenly shaped resistance, offering a diverse range of anthems to those who challenge colonial rule and envision a new future for the island. Frances Aparicio argues that salsa lyrics have often reflected the frustrations of Puerto Ricans living under U.S. rule. This serves as a parallel of expressing both political dissatisfaction and cultural pride.<sup>32</sup> Like in "Periodico de Ayer", the song has been seen as a metaphor to express the feeling of frustration of being discarded by the U.S. government. Through economic hardship and experiencing mass migration to the United States to seek better financial opportunities, Puerto Ricans have felt abandoned like yesterday's newspaper.

### **Legacy, reception, & fandom**

As previously mentioned, the album Colón and Blade's "Siembra" has been recognized as one of the greatest salsa albums of all time. It would go on to sell millions of records worldwide and remain Latin music's best-selling album for decades after its original release.<sup>33</sup> Willie Colón's legacy has left him to receive various awards, such as a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Latin Grammys in 2004, an induction into the International Latin Music Hall of Fame in 2000, an induction into the Latin Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2019, and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Trombone Association in 2010. Colón has also been listed as one of the 30 most influential Latin Artists of All Time by *Billboard Magazine* in 2015.<sup>34</sup> As a musician, composer, arranger, singer, trombonist, producer, and director, Colón still holds the record for sales. He has created 40 productions that have sold more than thirty million records worldwide.

Additionally, Colón has gone on to receive 11 Grammy nominations, one

Grammy award, 15 gold records, and five platinum records. Currently, Colón gets 8.9 million monthly listeners on Spotify. Without a doubt, Willie Colón has cemented himself as one of the titans of salsa music. Héctor Lavoe, on the other hand, was seen as half of the dynamic duo with Willie Colón. In the 1970s, the two artists collaborated on several albums, launching the success of both. However, Lavoe's personal life, due to his drug use, would cause a rift in the duo's relationship.

However, Lavoe's legacy would go on to establish his name "El Cantante," the singer, and he has been remembered as the voice of salsa. Less than a year after the Billboard Hot Latin Songs chart launched in September 1986, Lavoe gained his first and only entry with "Plato de Segunda Mesa," which debuted and peaked at number 43 in May 1987. In 2007, Lavoe earned his first top 10 entry on Top Latin Albums with his album *El Cantante: The Originals*, which peaked at number 5 in August of that year.<sup>35</sup> More recently, Rolling Stones ranked the singer at 73 on its list of the 200 Greatest Singers of All Time.<sup>36</sup> Lavoe was also nominated for a Grammy in 1988 for his 1987 album, "Strikes Back," and was inducted into the International Latin Music Hall of Fame in 2000. *Latin NY* magazine recognized him with the Best Male Vocalist award and Best Conjunto award for his album "La Voz". Lavoe would have two biopics made, the most notable of which was produced and starred Marc Anthony as Lavoe and Jennifer Lopez as Lavoe's wife.

Additionally, in the 1990s, Off-Broadway productions about Lavoe's life were produced shortly after his death. In Lavoe's hometown in Puerto Rico, a statue has been placed in front of a recreational and cultural complex. Tremont Avenue in The Bronx was even renamed after him in 2009. This further highlights the significant impact that Lavoe had in New York and Puerto Rico. Lavoe garners over four million monthly listeners on Spotify. Lavoe's legacy has only gone to show how impactful his music was to Puerto Ricans as well as the Nuyorican experience.

While Residente initially started his career with the group Calle 13 and transitioned into a solo career in 2015, he still amassed an impressive number of accolades. In total, he has won 31 Grammy awards, including his Latin Grammy Awards. He currently holds the record for the most Latin Grammy Awards wins, alongside his step-brother, Visitante, with 24 awards each.<sup>37</sup> Between Calle 13 and his solo career, he holds over 10 million Spotify monthly listeners. Although his music focuses on the Latin American experience, it appears to have an impact that extends beyond the music charts. Due to Residente's lyrics, his influence on popular culture, and his commitment and commentary on sociopolitical issues, Amnesty International, the international non-governmental organization that focuses on human rights, awarded Residente the Emissary of Awareness award in 2012 for his "social commitment and identification with young people in Latin America."<sup>38</sup> Additionally, beyond music, Residente also won the Nobel Peace Summit Award in 2015, a yearly event focused on peacemaking that gathers representatives from prominent international organizations, governments, media, and businesses. Residente was again recognized for "his lyrics and his support for social causes."<sup>39</sup>

Without a doubt, Residente has put a spotlight on the political strife that has affected Puerto Rico and the Latin American community. His music has significantly impacted the way the broader American popular culture views Puerto Rican politics, as well as how the world perceives Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican identity. Residente has shown that it is appropriate to fight back against corruption and American imperialism. He has demonstrated that by using his platform as an artist, he can make a significant impact in elevating the representation of the Puerto Rican experience, as well as highlighting the injustices the island has faced.

Lastly, one of the top artists in the world, Bad Bunny, can really take a lot of credit for elevating reggaetón music to a national stage. He currently has nearly 82 million monthly Spotify listeners. For almost 60 years, the Grammy's top award, album of the year, had never seen a nomination by a Spanish artist—Bad Bunny's album "Un Verano Sin Ti" was nominated in 2023.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, he lost out to Harry Styles, but it was a monumental moment for Spanish artists and the music genre. With that level of popularity, one would imagine that Bad Bunny's fan reception has been broadly accepted and critically acclaimed. However, Bad Bunny has often faced criticism for not being perceived as Puerto Rican enough or for shedding his Puerto Rican identity to become more American. He especially faced backlash from fans after not dating women he prefers, "Latin women and culture," model Kendall Jenner.<sup>41</sup> The irony for Bad Bunny is that he holds both identities of being American and Puerto Rican, and by no means does his dating someone outside of his race make it appear that he's going against his fans or his "people." While Bad Bunny does pride himself on speaking predominantly Spanish in his interviews, none of his albums have been released in English. In a *Vanity Fair* interview, he stated, "I am never going [to sing in English] just because someone says I need to do it to reach a certain audience."<sup>42</sup> This reveals his profound pride in his native language and his determination to maintain his identity as he navigates his own path to the top of the charts. It's fairly apparent that this tactic has been successful for him, as he has received a total of 141 nominations across various awards, winning 71.<sup>43</sup>

It was with Bad Bunny's recent album that this research provides a full-circle perspective on the impact that salsa has had on current music and popular culture today. The recent album, *DeBÍ TiRAR Más FOToS*, brought a resurgence of classic salsa songs and beats back to the forefront of global airwaves. The album blended reggaetón with trap, salsa, plena, and trova beats. "The album is one of only 28 non-English albums to reach the No. 1 spot and is the first non-English album to make the top spot this year."<sup>44</sup> Not only is Bad Bunny responsible for putting reggaetón on the map, but now he is doing the same for salsa, all these years later. With that, he carries on their political messages and their discussions of their Puerto Rican identities, further putting Puerto Rican identities and the island at center stage for the globe to take notice, rather than being in the shadows of being a U.S. territory. The mix of nostalgia and political messaging in his music, along with cultural references and mentions of Puerto Rico's colonial history, has demonstrated the

profound impact that previous generations of music and musicians have had on current generations.

### **Closing: Where is Puerto Rico Today?**

During the 2024 presidential campaign, then-candidate Trump had comedian Tony Hinchcliffe open at one of his rallies, where he called Puerto Rico a “floating island of garbage.”<sup>45</sup> This rally was held at Madison Square Garden, in the heart of New York. However, these negative sentiments towards Puerto Rico are nothing new. Puerto Ricans are all too familiar with how the Trump administration failed them during the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria, which to this day they have not fully recovered from. In popular culture, in 2012, the ABC sitcom *Work It* had Puerto Rican actor Amuary Nolasco’s character say, “I’m Puerto Rican. I would be great at selling drugs.”<sup>46</sup> The show would be cancelled after two episodes. ABC issued an apology. In 1998, during the last season of *Seinfeld*, NBC issued an apology after their character Kramer burned a Puerto Rican flag after the Puerto Rican Day Parade in the city caused too much traffic.<sup>47</sup> The episode had been removed from being aired via syndication; however, as of 2024, it was available on streaming platforms.

Over 125 years since America conquered Puerto Rico, the island and its people continue to be viewed as second-class citizens or punching bags in popular culture. Despite producing one of the world’s top global artists, there appears to be very little movement towards improving Puerto Ricans’ fortunes. Instead, politically, a colonial system continues to oppress Puerto Rico, making it difficult for young Puerto Ricans to succeed on the island and leaving them with no choice but to leave in hopes of better economic opportunities. Since 2012, the Puerto Rican government has offered mainland Americans an enticing incentive: to move to the island, they can pay no taxes on interest, capital gains, dividends, or crypto assets.<sup>48</sup> “According to a study by the Department of Economic Development and Commerce, about 4,500 individuals and businesses relocated from the mainland United States to Puerto Rico from 2012 to 2019; this number has only continued to rise.”<sup>49</sup> With any case of gentrification, the impact results in the displacement of local Puerto Ricans, many of whom were born and raised on the island. Now, you see investment properties, Airbnbs, expensive hotels, or temporary stays catered to non-Puerto Ricans in the prominent cities within the island: Ponce, Arecibo, and San Juan. For context, Puerto Rico’s average income in 2022 was roughly \$38,227. Approximately 41.7% of Puerto Ricans are living in poverty, and unemployment is roughly at a rate of 9%. However, as of 2024, the median listing home price in San Juan, the island’s capital, was \$905,000.<sup>50</sup>

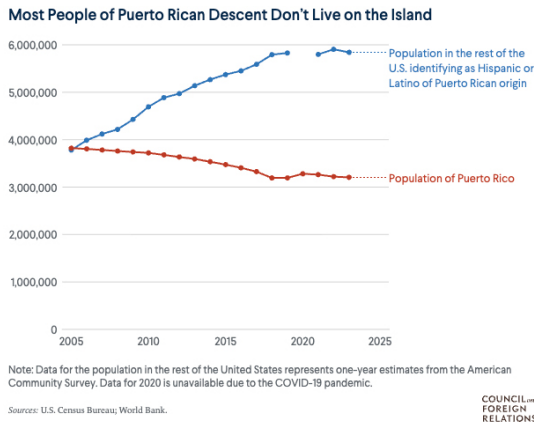


Figure 4: Data from the U.S. Census Bureau depicting a decline in Puerto Rican descendants living in Puerto Rico.<sup>51</sup>

As of 2025, Puerto Ricans elected New Progress Party Candidate Jennifer González Colón as the Governor of Puerto Rico. However, González Colón has also been an elected official under the Republican Party of Puerto Rico. The New Progress Party is the pro-statehood party. Governor González Colón, a supporter of President Trump, recently faced backlash for initially backing an investment of millions of federal dollars in solar projects for Puerto Rico, and ultimately withdrew her support. At this time, the Puerto Rican government has not requested that funds be reassigned. However, many citizens on the islands are outraged. “More than 60% of energy on the island is generated by petroleum-fired power plants, 24% by natural gas, 8% by coal, and 7% by renewables, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.”<sup>52</sup> This funding would have provided much-needed infrastructure support to the island as it continues to recover and rebuild from Hurricane Maria. The governor’s decision to abruptly end support without offering alternative funding options has rightfully sparked concerns about corruption once again.

While Puerto Rico continues to face its challenges, the music of Puerto Rico, through its vibrant rhythms of salsa and catchy contemporary beats from reggaetón, serves as an archive of demonstrating identity, resistance, and ultimately survival. From the diasporic narratives told within the salsa anthems of the 1960s and 1970s Nuyoricans to the larger protests that inspired Residente and Bad Bunny, music has remained at the heart of Puerto Rico’s political and cultural expression of identity. These genres, over time, have not only reflected the historical tension of American imperialism, but the artists and their music have also demonstrated ways in which they, alongside their fans, have pushed back against it. These artists have used their platforms and music as tools of dissent, alongside their pride and community-building efforts, to drive momentum for change and spotlight injustice.

Salsa and reggaetón are a significant part of American popular culture and

beyond, a form of entertainment that is more than just low-brow. These genres of music are a continuously evolving form of cultural resistance. Whether these songs are sung in protest, danced to in joy at a club, or streamed worldwide, they carry a heavy message and reflect the rich identity of people who feel silenced or that their culture is being lost. Bad Bunny's rise to the top of the charts has demonstrated to the world that the Puerto Rican identity cannot be silenced. Through generations and the evolution of genres, Puerto Ricans continue to negotiate their identities, challenge colonial power, and are now asserting their voice on a global level. It is through music, particularly salsa, that multigenerational households have maintained their Puerto Rican identity and the storytelling that accompanies it. Ultimately, the story of Puerto Rico is much like the story of its music: complicated, resilient, and a powerful tool in the face of historical and modern injustice

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*Since this paper was first written, Bad Bunny announced that he would not tour in the United States due to ongoing ICE raids throughout the nation. Additionally, Bad Bunny was also named as the half-time performer for the upcoming performer, causing public discourse due to his decision to not have songs that would cater to an English-speaking audience. Throughout this time Bad Bunny sang, and continues to exclusively sing, the lyrics to his songs in Spanish. These developments have further highlighted the themes explored in this paper. Due to the nature of his dual identity, being Puerto Rican and American, Bad Bunny faces complex politics of representing marginalized communities on one of the largest cultural stages in the nation.*

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## 2026 Weaver Prize

In the spring of 1993, the American Studies Student Association established the Earl James Weaver Graduate Paper Prize to honor the retirement of Earl James Weaver, Professor of American Studies, past Department Chair, and founder of the Department of American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. With an original endowment raised from the generous contributions of American Studies students and alumni, the Weaver Prize is an annual \$250 cash award for the best paper written by an American Studies graduate student during the preceding year. Every year, a panel of American Studies faculty reads submissions and selects the winning essay.

The 2026 Weaver Prize went to Grace Rojas for her essay “Making All Oz Merrier: Challenging Utopia in Oz.” The committee found that this essay stood out for being deeply researched, timely, and offering sophisticated analysis of varying iterations and retellings of Oz. The committee was impressed by the essay’s moving across genres, and its tying of Oz to a theory and definition of “utopia” that was sustained throughout the paper. The essay offers a strong original reading, while also situating itself in the context of other readings and secondary sources—both the notion of “utopia” and “Oz.” Meanwhile, the essay connects to the political and material, contextualizing the close reading in this historical moment. One reader commented that the essay demonstrates the work of “a very disciplined mind.” Overall, the essay offers an original, compelling, and thoughtful reflection on our current political moment through the lens of Oz in fiction across over a century, culminating with *Wicked* (2024).

AMST 502T: Theoretical Approaches to Studying Popular Culture

# Making All Oz Merrier: Challenging Utopia in Oz

Grace Velasco

Making All Oz Merrier was written in Professor Golub's research seminar on pop culture. The assignment was to find a piece of popular culture we would like to analyze and conduct original research to answer our own research question. The cinematic retelling of *Wicked* was analyzed as the cultural text, but I drew on every major film adaptation of Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, as well as the Gregory Maguire novel, and the stage production of *Wicked*. Oz has been a distinctly American utopia since its inception in 1900, and each Oz is uniquely its own, but none have been as influential as the 1939 MGM technicolor classic, *The Wizard of Oz*. Jon M. Chu's *Wicked* goes above and beyond in its imagery to evoke nostalgic remembrance of the classic film in order to usher in the stark reminder that dystopia lies just on the other side of utopian ideals.

“Are people born wicked? Or do they have wickedness thrust upon them?”  
-*Wicked's* Glinda the Good 2003, 2024

The Emerald City, first envisioned in L. Frank Baum's *Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, was always imagined as an elaborate ruse. In the original story, everyone who enters the Emerald City must be fitted with green-glassed spectacles, only removable by a key held by Guardians stationed outside of the city gates. Compliance was obvious to Dorothy, as she was told “if you did not wear spectacles the brightness and glory of the Emerald City would blind you” and “she did not wish to be blinded.”<sup>1</sup> In reality, the city was no greener than any other city, nor so bright as to blind its citizens, but the mandated green glasses and the illusion they represented was the first of many hints that the Wizard, an American settler turned ruler of Oz, was adept at intricate trickery which he used to control the masses.

Jon M. Chu's cinematic reconstruction of *Wicked* is the most recent in a long line of adaptations of the fantastical world of Oz since 1900. Each re-telling incorporates the same core characters, sometimes introducing new ones and leaving others behind, and their own set of winks and nods to the adaptations that came before. Simultaneously, each new creative tinkers with their own set of imagery, line delivery, and plot direction.<sup>2</sup> Musical theater scholar Ryan Bunch asserts that

“Oz musicals tell us something about the performance of an American dream. [...] Each musical version [tells] us something about America as we find it and as we’d like it to be.”<sup>3</sup> New layers of perspective are added, building on the idea that “Oz (the ‘American Fairy Tale’) and musicals (the ‘American Art Form’) reveal American identity as self-inventive performance invested in utopian ideals.”<sup>4</sup> This particular adaptation is a sobering exploration of what America is becoming.

The most recent adaptation comes to us in a time where Americans are deeply divided and increasingly hostile towards numerous people designated as “others.” President elect Donald Trump won the 2024 election on a campaign of bigotry and nostalgia, claiming that he will, for the second time, “Make America Great Again” by dismantling some fictitiously sinister left-leaning agenda that he claims is ruining our country. Within this paper I will argue that Chu utilizes the iconic legacy of the 1939 MGM *Wizard of Oz* to challenge our propensity to view the past through our own green-glassed spectacles, often to the detriment of vulnerable populations. *Wicked*’s story and reception highlight the dangers of rooting a national identity in utopian ideals, reinforced through propaganda *for* the state and *against* an “other.”

### **Somewhere Over the Rainbow: Utopian Theory and Oz**

When the original Oz story was first written, Baum asserted that in his “Land of Oz... outsiders will be insiders; everyone will have a share in the good things in life. All one had to do was wish for them,” and the setting “lacks almost completely the strict judgements, repressions, laws, and punishments that one ordinarily finds in fairy tales” and certainly for Dorothy this has always been true.<sup>5</sup> Across each adaptation of Oz, Dorothy’s utopia is a world where everyone can feel safe to be themselves, including her. She helps those around her believe in themselves until she finds the strength to believe in herself, too. According to scholar Jill Dolan, “the word utopia means, literally, ‘no place,’” and she takes great care to “[respect] the letter of its sense by refusing to pin it down to prescription.”<sup>6</sup> Utopia does not exist, yet it is a term which drives change, always just out of grasp, always full of possibility, and always propelling Dorothy forward.

“Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” perhaps the most widely recognized song within the Oz universe, expresses Dorothy Gale’s melancholic musings of hope and longing, and stands in stark contrast to its sepia toned Kansas setting in which Dorothy first finds herself.<sup>7</sup> Bunch continues that “Dorothy’s longing for something better speaks to the utopian longings of immigrants, Black people, queer people, and others,” or any and all persons who live without the power that comes with simply existing as the status quo.<sup>8</sup> The context in which she sings the song, she is attempting to express distress to those around her, who remind her that they have responsibilities and so does she. Life and social obligation are demanding that she suppress her feelings in favor of growing up.<sup>9</sup> In *The Wiz*, Diana Ross’ Dorothy sings a similar song, “Can I Go On,” expressing her fears of exploration of the world around her which she has yet to fully enter alone.<sup>10</sup>

But Baum's land of Oz is itself a dystopia, shaped by the Wizard after he stumbled across it and realized he could lie his way to power. Baum presented us with a story that "[told] his readers, through the Wizard, that there is nothing at all to be afraid of. There may be a fraud—a joke—at the heart of the universe, but there is certainly no 'real' evil," while simultaneously, in a political writing of his, suggesting "the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians. Why not annihilation? Their glory has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced; better that they die than live the miserable wretches that they are."<sup>11</sup> Baum and the Wizard are both men more interested in appearances and power than bringing to life the inclusive utopia they pretend to champion. Their intentions are questionable at best, and their Oz is shaped by our America, where law and order is historically regarded as being more important than justice and equity.

### **Becoming Wicked**

When Gregory Maguire wrote *Wicked: the Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, in 1996, he drew on his own childhood memories of the 1939 film and identified the one person for whom Oz was explicitly dystopian. He gave the Wicked Witch of the West her name, Elphaba (a nod to original author L. Frank Baum), and her first chance to be seen as a whole person, with a family and a past, and not simply a caricature of evil. Maguire asserts that his novel hijacked the whimsical imagery of Baum's novel and MGM's film to surreptitiously put forth "a serious intellectual inquiry about what we mean when we use words like evil and wicked, and how we use that concept to better ourselves and belittle others."<sup>12</sup> Maguire introduced a major plot point surrounding Animals experiencing institutionalized racism that developed into a genocide in Oz as a vehicle for this inquiry to go beyond the personal and into societal ideas of good and evil.<sup>13</sup> Maguire reimagined Oz as a place representative of our world in its darker moments, rather than the utopian ideal that Oz once represented. There is no joy in Maguire's Oz, no whimsy. While he claims his attempts were subversive, reading the novel doesn't challenge the 1939 film it was inspired by because it simply doesn't feel like the two stories have anything to do with one another outside of the names of the characters and places. Certainly, though, his inquiry was an important one and it did succeed on its own merits.

While Maguire's novel alluded to various political tensions taking place during the time of its production, Broadway playwrights Stephen Schultz and Winnie Holtzman largely sanitized the novel for a post-9/11 audience. Instead, the duo's stage adaptation heavily referenced the more utopian themes and character interpretations within the *Wizard of Oz*, and Baum's original book. The characters are full of personality and life and are every bit as lovable as their original counterparts, while the setting leans into MGM's dystopian representation of Kansas farmland with a steampunk twist in the stage depiction of Oz. The stage adaptation, then, becomes characters with utopian ideals living in a dystopian world, with the

animal genocide taking a backseat to a story of friendship between Galinda the Good and Elphaba. The Wizard is our obvious antagonist, but his actions don't *feel* as sinister as they actually are because they are not presented with the weight that they deserve.

In interviews about the play's production, the duo often celebrated the influence the *Wizard of Oz* had on generations of young people living in the margins of society, especially the queer community. With the inclusion of a wheelchair bound character in their own story, they attempted to widen that scope.<sup>14</sup> As Bunch asserts, "*Wicked's* ideal of tolerance is complicated by its corporate 'diversity' mentality, its lack of explicit representations of racial difference in conception and casting, and its regrettable ableist subplots."<sup>15</sup> The lack of more than a singular Animal character obliterates the gravity of the genocide central to Maguire's novel, rendering their plight as a simple tool for Elphaba's and Galinda's character development.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, since its 2003 release, Elphaba has only been played full-time by two actresses of color, leaving the Animals, or more specifically the "token goat," to carry the largely weakened plot of systemic racism, while Elphaba's green skin only served as a reminder of the early 2000s well-intentioned "colorblind" version of inclusion and tolerance.<sup>17</sup>

The Oz represented in Jon M. Chu's *Wicked* gives us that same feeling of a utopian setting that we found in technicolor so many years ago, while simultaneously highlighting the danger of what Dolan refers to as a utopian prescription. While Chu's casting is highly inclusive in terms of racial representation and gender identity and expression, he also doesn't draw explicit attention to it. All kinds of distinct identities are simply allowed to be and, perhaps more importantly, be in Oz as normal and not in need of defining nor defending. The Wizard, in contrast, leans heavily on utopian prescriptions, which are "finite and exclusionary" promises of a better tomorrow once certain criteria have been met.<sup>18</sup> He attempts to shape Oz into a version of America as he remembers it and intentionally chooses who is and isn't deserving of inhabiting it. This has been true of the Wizard since his inception, but it has always been presented as largely harmless and unimportant. Chu challenges the Wizard's memory by strengthening the presentation of the discrimination and erasure the Animals experience in Oz, reminding his audience what happens to those left out of the Wizard's utopian prescriptions.

### **A Brief Summary of *Wicked***

Jon M. Chu's *Wicked* is the first installment of a two-part film adaptation. The story is centered around our main character, Elphaba, before she became the Wicked Witch of the West. We briefly get a glimpse of Elphaba's origin, seeing that she is the product of an illicit affair between her mother and who we can assume is the Wizard before or during his rise to power. Chu takes only a few scenes to paint her childhood as one filled with admiration for, and hope to meet the Wizard, while simultaneously experiencing repeated bullying from other children and rejection from her father for

the color of her skin. Elphaba is admitted to Shiz University where she becomes a stand-out student to the most influential sorceress in Oz, Madam Morrible, and we watch her lifelong social ostracization dissolve into social acceptance through her eventual friendship with Galinda.

The plot takes a dark turn shortly after this wish-fulfilment, as we watch as one of the last remaining Animal professors at Shiz, Dr. Dillamond, experience discrimination and hate speech. Animals all over Oz are being forced into silence, literally losing their ability to speak, fleeing the country, and disappearing under suspicious circumstances. The students at Shiz are, at best, bystanders, but Elphaba takes up the Animal's cause and travels to the Emerald City where she meets the Wizard to ask for his help. We watch her realize that the Wizard has no genuine powers, nor any intention to help the Animals, as the Wizard attempts to convince Elphaba that his genocide against the Animals is for the betterment of Oz. Elphaba rejects the Wizard, steals the Grimmerie, and leaves Oz and Glinda behind.<sup>19</sup> Wicked's final scene showcases the panic spreading throughout Oz, as Morrible announces to the world the first propagandic speech against Elphaba, declaring her a threat to the safety and peace of Oz, suggesting her skin color is a mark of a natural predisposition to evil, and giving her the moniker of the Wicked Witch.

### **The Wizard and I: Propaganda and Indoctrination in Oz**

The people of Oz celebrate the Wizard in the same way the American people look to our founding fathers. Sociologist and historian James Loewen describes the process in which "educational media [turns] flesh-and-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest" as "heroification."<sup>20</sup> The Wizard's mythology is immortalized in children's books, statues, and performances. His image is almost sacred in Oz and, interestingly, the images we see throughout the film are largely the same: he is always looking heroic yet friendly in front of either a hot air balloon, referencing his origin, or Emerald City, referencing his accomplishments. To the Ozian public the Wizard is representative of uncomplicated good; he is their hero, with a mysterious origin and proud accomplishments.

In the Emerald City, while we are dazzled by obvious wealth and prosperity, we are simultaneously aware of the propaganda machine keeping its citizens believing in the Wizard's right to power. His arrival, to the Ozians, was destiny, and the ancient wise ones manifested it long before anyone can actually recall. The placement of blatant feel-good propagandic performance within a utopian setting almost makes one forget that the Wizard's lore is entirely fabricated. When a hologram of him begins to chant "Omaha," the film's audience is reminded of the Wizard's deception, while the Emerald City onlookers excitedly cheer and clap at his perceived ability to read their ancient text.<sup>21</sup> They worship him like he is their savior. The Emerald City might be the epicenter for the Wizard's hero narrative, but it ripples beyond the city's walls and influences the way the citizens of Oz think of

themselves and their relationship to their nation.

Elphaba spent her life idolizing the Wizard; he is her personal hero. We watch Elphaba in childhood, teaching her little sister all she knew about him from her pop-up book of his history in Oz. Elphaba believes that the Wizard is her only hope to achieve a life where she will be accepted, even celebrated, despite the color of her skin. She holds on to this hope into adulthood, as evidenced by her song *The "Wizard & I"* where she imagines a future scenario where her and the Wizard join forces to make a better Oz, and she believes associating with him can save her, and others, from experiencing further discrimination. Elphaba was indoctrinated from childhood to believe, with every fiber of her being, that Oz has a great and powerful leader who only has the best interest of all Ozians at heart.

Similarly, Galinda exhibits signs that she was also indoctrinated by the Wizard's version of Ozian history, though to a different end. While Elphaba sees him as a savior, Galinda finds the Wizard representative of a status quo that has served her well throughout her life. While being presented with a brief historical overview of the erasure of Animal culture, she interrupts to ask Dr. Dillamond, an Animal himself, why he "can't just teach us history? Instead of always harping on the past." What she signals, here, is that she wants the prescribed historical timeline that she is used to hearing, and the history of Animals in Oz isn't included. What she has taken away from the history that has always been presented to her, in her *"Greatest Leaders of Oz"* book, is the idea that "celebrated heads of state or especially great communicators" didn't achieve acclaim because they had "brains or knowledge" but rather because they were popular, or able to manipulate the masses.<sup>22</sup> To Galinda, there is nothing to be gained by bothering oneself with history's losers in the pursuit of power and status within a much more dominant culture.

Chu utilizes the Wizard's own heroification to reference the way that we have sanitized the images of our own historical heroes.<sup>23</sup> American children, like Ozian children, have been exposed to a largely sanitized version of our founding, from a very young age, through our public education. We see the result of this educational shortcoming in the constantly reinvigorated discourse in defense or condemnation of Christopher Columbus, whether or not our founding fathers were racist (they were), and whether or not we have done enough to atone for generations of systemic oppression and violence against most "others" that fall outside of our patriarchal, white, heteronormative status quo (we haven't). Our indoctrination-focused foundational education "encourages students not to think about society but merely to trust that it is good. To the degree that American history in particular is celebratory, it offers no way to understand any problem [...] that has historical roots."<sup>24</sup> Like many of our historical figures, the Wizard is just an American man who has consolidated power, wealth, and influence under the pretense of a more utopian existence while simultaneously oppressing entire groups of people and fabricating feel-good historical narratives.

Sitting president Donald Trump famously uses a utopian vision of the past

to argue that returning to the past will ensure a utopian future. One of the most disturbing examples in recent history comes from Donald Trump's first presidency: the response to the 2017 announcement of the removal of Robert E. Lee's statue in Charlottesville, North Carolina. Removing an honorary memorial of a Confederate general who had been fighting to *maintain* slavery seemed obvious and long overdue, but many of us watched in horror as openly racist, tiki-torch and Confederate-flag wielding men marched and chanted "they will not erase us" in what they called the "Unite the Right" rally.<sup>25</sup> Donald Trump took this opportunity to condemn "antifa" and "alt-left" counter-protesters. He claimed that there were "fine people on both sides" and both sides were equally to blame for the death that occurred.<sup>26</sup> He even seemed sympathetic to the "alt-right's" cause, stating "So, this week it's Robert E. Lee, I noticed that Stonewall Jackson's coming down. I wonder, is it George Washington next week and is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You really do have to ask yourself where does it stop?"<sup>27</sup> His equating Robert E. Lee with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson argues *against* critical retrospection and raises Lee's importance in American history significantly. The status of American heroes outweighs the call to acknowledge a unwillingness to acknowledge nor condemn open white supremacy only served to normalize it as an ideology, allowing it fester within his support base alongside vague notions of an idyllic past.

### **Something Bad: Genocide in Oz**

The Wizard's performance in the first act of the film is a façade he utilizes to manipulate Ozians to bend to his will. He expresses to Elphaba and the audience alike the way that the Wizard sees himself: "a sentimental man" who "[treats] each citizen of Oz as son or daughter." The reality is that he is behind the suffering of Oz's Animal population.<sup>28</sup> He explains that when he first arrived in Oz "there was discord. There was discontent. And back where I come from, everybody knows that the best way to bring folks together is to give them a real good enemy."<sup>29</sup> Where he comes from is America, and the unfolding of this scene presents to the audience an understanding that, for the entirety of Elphaba's life, the Wizard had been methodically sowing seeds of intolerance towards Animals within the population of Oz. Those seeds in full bloom produced a genocide in progress within this story, but we are also given the real history that contradicts the Wizard's narratives.

When we are shown the distant past, we see Animals coexisting with humans in society. The doctor that delivered Elphaba was, indeed, an Animal. We know that the Animals founded Shiz University, as evidenced by the original Animal mural in Shiz's courtyard. The University is distinctly Animal accessible, as we see in Dr. Dillamond's first and only lecture in the film. His room is set up with his presence in mind, with levers and pulls and technology designed for his needs; his being an Animal was not an afterthought in the construction of the university. Dr. Dillamond tell us about Animals' rich history, their participation in the sciences, humanities, arts, and religions, and paints a picture where Animals of all variety were equals. We also

know that around this time a great drought hit Oz, throwing its citizens into economic and agricultural decline and marking the beginning of tensions against Animals.

When we are shown the recent past, we see Animals experiencing institutionalized discrimination and erasure. The Wizard had covered the Animal mural in Shiz with a stone façade of himself. Before bringing up the history of Animal culture, Dr. Dillamond provides a disclaimer that “it isn’t encouraged to talk about this in the classroom,” notable because he is a history professor being discouraged from speaking about historical facts.<sup>30</sup> After someone vandalized his classroom, writing “Animals should be seen not heard” on his chalkboard, he and his friends discuss what other Animals are going through in less central parts of Oz in the song *Something Bad*:

I’ve heard of an ox, a professor from Quox / No longer permitted to teach /  
Who has lost all powers of speech // And an owl in Munchkin Rock / A vicar  
with a thriving flock / Forbidden to preach / Now he only can screech!<sup>31</sup>

We are quickly shown the reality of the situation when Dr. Dillamond is violently dragged out of his classroom by Emerald City guards enforcing a new ordinance forbidding Animals from teaching.

When we are told to look to the future, we see allusions to concentration camps, eugenics, and genocide. Elphaba has a vision of a future where Dr. Dillamond is in a cage without clothing, a small bowl of hay in the corner. Dr. Dillamond’s replacement at Shiz is a white man demonstrating the benefits of caging Animals from birth, with the explicit goal of preventing them from ever developing human cognition or speech. Perhaps most striking is that in the very first scene, which we know is narratively the end of the story, there is not a single Animal present for Glinda’s announcement of the Witch’s death. We know that in several points of the past Animals were living normally in Munchkinland, so their lack of presence is not a mere accident.

Dillamond’s plight, his brutalization, and images of him scared and caged draw on public memories of various points in history where authoritarian regimes dehumanized and threatened to exterminate the “other” among us for the sake of solving all of our problems. Even a limited scope of options for what these scenes could represent is uncomfortably long: settlers in America attempting to “civilize” or exterminate indigenous populations, Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, American internment of Japanese-American citizens, America’s highly racist industrial prison system, ICE utilizing cages in their detention camps, and more. Regardless of the political moment Dillamond’s fate brings up for you, the implications of his story are deeply upsetting.

When we look to our distant past we see the heroes and horrors of the founding of the United States of America. When we look to our present moment, the president and his supporters have further emboldened the most hateful in our

population to champion the expulsion of various ‘others’ who have been branded as ‘illegal aliens,’ or ‘predators,’ stripping people of their humanity within our borders. Most recently he invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, the first use since 1948, in order to ramp up the misguided ideas that immigrants are to be feared, rounded up, and what comes next will be their own fault.<sup>32</sup> Trump’s vision of America is a regressive one, and the only insiders are those who already support him. He, along with his political supporters, leverage the general public’s propagandic education of America and its one-sided history to attract “nostalgia susceptible voters” looking to preserve their positive views about the society in which we live rather than challenge them by noticing and acknowledging the suffering of others in the midst of their own privilege.<sup>33</sup> If Donald Trump is America’s Wizard, then the nostalgic voter has Elphaba’s early admiration for a heroic, uncomplicated leader, and Galinda’s disinterest in anything outside of the already established narratives, making space for the erasure of marginalized populations in plain sight.

Recognizing the ways in which power imbalance has historically fostered discrimination, institutionalized ‘isms, and the warning signs of a fascist regime and genocide are all seeds planted within *Wicked*. Chu gave us a full timeline of what genocide looks like before, during, and after. We can hold onto hope that someone in power will right the wrongs that we are seeing in society, but if history has taught us anything, it’s that the people in power are usually the ones perpetuating the societal harm, and it’s our societal inaction and compliance that allows some of the most heinous moments of history to occur. As Dr. Dillamond so succinctly put it: “we cannot escape the past, and we ignore it at our own peril.”<sup>34</sup> This warning is especially important as of late, as it seems more apparent than ever that many Americans do not understand, nor do they care to understand, the truths in our present moment. The presentation of this timeline in *Oz* gives us a framework with which to at least recognize the employment of propaganda at the expense of an ‘other,’ and perhaps even inspire individuals to speak up.

### **To Those Who’d Ground Me: Audience Reception**

It’s no surprise that *Wicked* is an overwhelming success. Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande-Butera have massive fan bases, as do their costars: Jeff Goldblum, Jonathan Bailey, and Michelle Yeoh. Critics use words like “moving,” “inspiring,” and “thought provoking” to describe the film, one critic writing “*Wicked*’s themes of persecution, bigotry, and the various masks behind which power manipulates the powerless and gullible feel particularly pertinent.”<sup>35</sup> The film was also met with a much smaller wave of resistance, some accusing the film of ruining the 1939 classic for them.

Some of the chief complaints of the film were it being woke, and several variations of the idea that the film employed DEI in its casting. One particularly egregious review said “the trend is to have an ‘all inclusive cast’ but this certainly does not represent the real world,” before adding the racist, eugenics adjacent

condemnation of Cynthia Erivo's casting, stating "sure, they wanted a black woman to be inclusive BUT they could have chosen a better looking one with less 'African' phenotype features."<sup>36</sup> Some who claim to love the stage adaptation say that Elphaba's green skin should be representative enough that she is a person of color. Many of these complaints are rooted in the idea that Elphaba should have been played by a white woman, and Oz should be as they remember it: white and simple. Chu is intentionally utilizing a utopian setting to put forth the possibility of a better world: a world where seeing people exist as they are, freely, can and should be normalized.

One commenter claims "the movie doesn't bother showing why we should care; [...] Example: the talking goat teacher. We're told he's a victim, but we are given no reason to actually care."<sup>37</sup> I wonder what burden of evidence is required for people to care when they see suffering, even fictionalized. In light of the way that the Trump administration has been normalizing the dehumanization of immigrants in our country, the inability to care for others' suffering is a notable point. It signifies that there has been some success on the part of our current administration to blunt the ability to empathize with suffering and discrimination. It is exactly this lack of empathy towards those deemed other which has created the need for fictional characters like Dr. Dillamond. Recognizing suffering should be reason enough to care. Overwhelmingly, the film's outpouring of support proves that this sentiment is in the minority of the film's viewers, and Chu's representation did not fall on deaf ears.

### **No One Mourns The Wicked: A Lesson in Hindsight**

This film begins near the story's narrative end. Glinda the Good, now a public figure, arrives in Munchkinland to confirm for its citizens that indeed, "the Wicked Witch of the West is dead."<sup>38</sup> The song, "No One Mourns the Wicked," is an ode to cognitive dissonance. From the citizens of Munchkinland, we hear vengeful cheering, good riddance, and catch visual glimpses of the rampant propaganda against a member of their own community. Glinda's performance is an attempt to appeal to the silver lining that gratitude can provide, but the tension in her face expresses her sheer discomfort at the scene playing out in front of her. And yet she contributes to their celebrations, lighting the larger-than-life epithet of her dearest friend ablaze, propelled by a sense of duty to her position as a public figure. There are no green-glassed spectacles in this film, but there are layers of illusion, indoctrination, and propaganda which our film's heroes must either face or uphold.

As this is only the first half of the story, we do not know what led us to this point, nor do we know what comes next, but one thing is certain: there are no Animals present in Munchkinland in this scene. What this means is impossible to say. There is the possibility that the Wizard has succeeded in the expulsion of Animals from Oz, but nothing is set in stone, yet. We see Dorothy, famously Oz's ultimate liberator, walking down the Yellow Brick Road with Elphaba's broom in hand, and her rag tag group of companions at her side. Across each adaptation of Oz, Dorothy is successful at expelling the Wizard from power, returning Oz to harmony, and returns

to the real Kansas with a sense of bravery and self-determination. But this story isn't about Dorothy's return home: it's about Oz itself and how people respond when bearing witness to injustice. Elphaba had to become disillusioned with the fantasy that the Emerald City presented her and leave society, alone. Glinda succumbed to the promise of fame and power and lost her sense of self and her best friend in the midst of her performative allyship. Jon M. Chu's *Wicked* is a powerful tale which tackles serious issues we are finding in our society today, and he does so in a way which centers the power of personal choice. It begs the question: what would you do? Who do you want to be in this story? Certainly, most would want to do the right thing, but what if the right thing comes at great personal cost?

While politicians promise change, hope, a better tomorrow, it's increasingly difficult to break out of rhetoric and curated talking points long enough to recognize their actual actions. Donald Trump's regressive policy has successfully leveraged a large swath of American people to champion widespread discrimination in public policy, and emboldened white supremacist ideology. Can we knock loose the green glassed spectacles that America has fastened over our eyes our whole lives? If our utopia is at the expense of others, can it really be worth pursuing? *Wicked* was a critically acclaimed cinematic and pop-culture phenomena, and there is no doubt in my mind that it will have a long-standing influence on its viewers. It skillfully and subtly harnesses the utopian memory of Oz in order to raise difficult themes in the public consciousness. A utopia is only a theory—it does not exist, but it does give us a framework towards continued growth. The story is not over, yet, and all we can do in this present moment is notice the ways in which the world around us mirrors the fictional land of Oz. If Oz and its legacy have taught this author anything, it's that every narrative can be rewritten, reclaimed, and propel forward a sense of becoming within the self. Perhaps, for now, that is enough.

# References

1. Frank L. Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1900), 89.
2. By creative, I mean writers, directors, composers, actors, set designers, literally any and all creatively involved people.
3. Ryan Bunch, *Oz and the Musical: Performing the American Fairy Tale* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023), 3.
4. Bunch, *Oz and the Musical*, 2.
5. William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994), 255-259; It is undeniable that there is no clear representation of America's "others" within the original Oz film, as the entire cast is white.
6. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (University of Michigan Press, 2005), 19.
7. *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming. (1939; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer). The most famous and widely recognized Oz story, this adaptation aired annually from 1959-1991 and would serve as the primary inspiration for each Oz adaptation that followed.
8. Bunch, *Oz and the Musical*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190843137.001.0001>.
9. This is true for any and all adaptations of Dorothy Gale before her performance of her longing song, including but not limited to Judy Garland, and Diana Ross.
10. Diana Ross, *How Can I Go On*. Quincy Jones, Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson. Motown Productions, 1978. *The Wiz*, the only all-Black adaptation of Oz, was a box office flop upon its release. It is now a cult classic. Cynthia Erivo cites this film as the Oz that captivated her own childhood, prompting her to incorporate signifiers of her identity as a Black woman into her adaptation of Elphaba (e.g. microbraids, and long nails)
11. Leach, *Land of Desire*, 255; J. J. Sutherland, "L. Frank Baum Advocated Extermination Of Native Americans," NPR, October 27, 2010. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2010/10/27/130862391/1-frank-baum-advocated-extinction-of-native-americans>.
12. Sentimental Men Podcast, "The Man Behind the Second Curtain (with Gregory Maguire) | Sentimental Men Podcast," March 24, 2025, video, 32:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9IJi-zbjzE>
13. Animals with a capital A is referring to animal characters who possess human consciousness and participate in society as any human would. Oz stories also have lower case animals who are the same as any ordinary animals.
14. I say attempted because Nessarose, or the Wicked Witch of the East (Elphaba's sister), was not played by an actual wheelchair user until the 2024 film.
15. Bunch, *Oz: The Musical*, 111.
16. This was glaringly evident when looking at scholarship on Wicked, as most works focus exclusively on queer or feminist theory in regards to Elphaba and Galinda and spend very little time exploring the Wizard and his campaign against the Animals.
17. Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holtzman, *Wicked* (New York, 2003). While the

monkeys were a part of the stage production, they were not capital A animals because they lacked the ability to speak and we are given no indication that they were ever able to speak.

18. Leach, *Land of Desire*, 19.

19. The Grimmerie is their ancient text which holds the power of magic in the land of Oz. Based on mentions of prophecy, magic, and the sacred regard the citizens of Oz hold towards the book, I believe that this book is representative of the Bible or any other real religious text.

20. James Lowen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, (The New Press, 1995), 11.

21. This entire performance is reminiscent of the ways in which megachurch-style Evangelical Christianity is practiced in America, with the Wizard taking on the role of a pastor.

22. *Wicked*, directed by Jon M. Chu. (2024; Universal Pictures), 01:23:23 – 01:23:34.

23. Much like the Wizard, images of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, even confederate generals are scattered across America. Stoic and uncomplicated, each of their portraits and statues are just repetitions of one another, highlighting their so-called respectability and immortalizing their place in American history.

24. Loewen, *Lies my Teacher Told Me*, 351.

25. Jonathan Lemire and Julie Pace, “WATCH: Trump blames ‘both sides’ for violence at Charlottesville rally,” PBS, Aug 15, 2017. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-blames-sides-violence-charlottesville-rally>

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. *Wicked*, 02:01:25 – 02:01:46.

29. *Wicked*, 02:09:54 – 02:10:10.

30. *Wicked*, 40:41.

31. Peter Dinklage and Cynthia Erivo, *Something Bad* (Republic Records, 2024)

32. The White House, “Invocation of the Alien Enemies Act Regarding the Invasion of the United States by Tren De Aragua,” 15 March 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidentialactions/2025/03/invocation-of-the-alien-enemies-act-regarding-the-invasion-of-the-united-states-by-tren-de-aragua/>

33. Spencer Goidel, et al., “Nostalgia in Politics,” in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2024), 1121–40. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfae054>

34. *Wicked*, 00:41:48 – 00:41:53.

35. James Kendrick, Review for *Wicked*, RottenTomatoes.

36. Kyrah K, Review of *Wicked*, Google.

37. Chase Augustyn, Review of *Wicked*, Google.

38. *Wicked* 00:04:04.

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# Meet the Authors

## **Markus Albihn**

He/him/his

Markus Albihn is a graduate student in the American Studies department at CSUF, who has completed his coursework and is currently writing his thesis on television and nostalgia. His research interests include communication history, media and film analysis, television studies, folklore, youth and adolescence, subcultures, consumer culture, and popular culture, as well as craft beer. He plans to pursue a Ph.D. in an interdisciplinary field and ultimately aims to become a professor after completing his master's degree at CSUF.

## **Aissa Bugarin**

She/her/ella

Aissa Bugarin is recent American Studies M.A. program graduate. As a first-generation college student, they completed their undergraduate degree in American Studies and Communications at California State University, Fullerton in 2015. Her academic interests have been centered around masculinity, popular culture, music, and mental health. After working for the university in various capacities for over 10 years, she recently left to work in marketing for a tech company, though she hopes to teach part-time in American Studies, Ethnic Studies, or Gender Studies.

## **Sara Chaffin**

She/her

Sara Chaffin is a graduating senior in American Studies at California State University, Fullerton, completing her degree in Fall 2025. She transferred to CSUF with an associate's degree in art history and museum studies, which has shaped her personal interdisciplinary approach to American Studies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she conducted independent research on Southern California cemeteries, an experience that inspired her essay on Forest Lawn Memorial Park.

## **Emmanuelle De La Cruz**

He/him

Emmanuelle De La Cruz is a third year graduate student returning to California State University, Fullerton after completing his teaching credential here. His desire to get a Master's in American Studies is fueled by his desire to enhance his own career as an Ethnic Studies teacher in Santa Ana Unified School District, while also analyzing his own fascination with how America represents itself. Through his time in the Master's program, Emmanuelle has focused his research on identity, specifically how racialized bodies and space create and force people to negotiate their identities. Emmanuelle plans to finish his time in the Master's program soon, so he can spend quality time with his wife and two dogs.

## **Jacqueline Scott Dukes**

She/her/hers

Jacqueline S. Dukes is a 2025 graduate of California State University, Fullerton, obtaining a bachelor's degree in Art History with a minor in American Studies, Summa Cum Laude. With a growing love for American history, art, and culture, Jacqueline seeks to explore the interchanging relationships between art and America's social and political fluctuations throughout decades, and utilizing that knowledge by applying it to museum galleries and educational programs to bring forth the country's complex history. She intends to pursue a master's degree in Museum and Information Science in the next coming years.

## **Les Gonzalez**

They/them

Les Gonzalez is a 2025 graduate of California State University, Fullerton, with degrees in American Studies and History. They added an American Studies major during the end of their second year at CSUF. After unintentionally taking a few AMST courses, they realized that these classes were always the ones where they felt most welcomed

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and immersed. As a queer Mexican person, they would like to take the time to encourage others to not hide or change their true selves in order to fit into what is deemed the norm. With our current climate, the time is now to embrace our diversity, not be afraid of taking up space, and uplift those who are being met with unlawful prejudice. Continue your passions and education! It's us who can make a difference!

### **Arielle Hobbs**

She/They

Arielle Hobbs transferred to California State University, Fullerton in 2023 as a Sociology major. While at CSUF, Arielle worked as an orientation leader and a Titan Ambassador. She joined the Honors Program, where she completed an independent research project regarding conspiracy theories, parasocialism, and queer studies. They graduated summa cum laude and with honors in the Spring of 2025 with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology. Arielle discovered a passion for research and analysis at CSUF, which they hope to continue to explore in the future. She is currently starting her career with her first role as an Administrator. Arielle plans to obtain a Master's higher education after gaining more work experience.

### **Max Maggio**

He/Him/His

Max Maggio is a transfer student in his junior year at California State University Fullerton. He is pursuing a bachelor's degrees in history (which he plans to get his masters in) and American Studies with the goal of working as an archivist. While in the process of transferring, he learned about American Studies through an event held on campus for freshman and transfer students. He decided to add American Studies as a major due to the flexibility of the department and the wide-reaching applications of the subject. He uses American Studies alongside History to explain the current state of the U.S., and what aspects of American history still echo in our society.

### **Mia J. Sandoval**

She/her/hers

Mia J. Sandoval is a senior undergraduate at California State University, Fullerton, majoring in American Studies and Political Science. As a Mexican American, her academic interests focus on addressing systemic inequalities and historical marginalization faced by immigrants and communities of color. She is particularly passionate about examining power, culture, and policy to promote social justice and equity through research and scholarship, and she hopes to work within law or government to create meaningful change from within the system.

### **Trevor Stoller**

He/him/his

Trevor Stoller is a third-year undergraduate student at California State University, Fullerton double double-majoring in History and American Studies. His research interests include the U.S. Presidency, political history, the American West, and more broadly, the United States since 1865. He would like to thank his parents, friends, and his beloved Stella for always indulging his constant talk of 'the paper.' He is truly a lucky man and dedicates this paper to you all.

### **Danielle Swiderski**

She/her/hers

Danielle Swiderski is currently pursuing an M.A. in American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. She received a B.A. in American Studies with a minor in Criminology from CSUF in 2003 and an M.S. in Human Resources Management from Argosy University in 2014. With a background in Human Resources Technology in the video game industry, her research areas include labor, popular culture, and the intersection of gender, identity, and power in these spaces.

### **Grace Velasco**

she/her/hers

Grace received her B.A. in Liberal Studies at California State University, Fullerton in 2019. She is now a graduate student in her second year in the American Studies M.A. program. Through this work she has become an accidental Oz scholar, with research interests centered around utopian narratives in popular culture and public memory. She is also interested in researching intergenerational feminism, children's media, and religious extremism. She is currently unsure of the path on which this degree will take her, but she is enjoying the process anyway.



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