The Journal

The Journal

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
Dartmouth College

“To chase down the truth, wherever it lies.”

Fall 2014
The Journal

Chief Editors
Amani Liggett
Kelsey E. Smith

Assistant Editors
Amanda Spoto
Gregory Poulin
Kelley Bumstead
Brian Young
Carmen Brady

*The Journal* is a biannual publication for the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program at Dartmouth College. We showcase the strongest creative and analytical work produced by current MALS students as well as MALS alumni. We believe by selecting and integrating work from all four of the program’s concentrations, we’ll promote intellectual engagement, fruitful questioning, and honest discourse within the realm of liberal studies.

We are currently accepting submissions in all MALS concentrations. We are looking for creative (short story, short non-fiction, poetry, photos) as well as analytical pieces. If you have any questions, comments, or are interested in writing a feature piece, please send your email to either Kelsey.E.Smith.GR@dartmouth.edu, Amani.N.Liggett.GR@dartmouth.edu
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Dear Reader,

When we began thinking about the Fall 2014 issue last spring we were thrilled at the prospect of sorting through what we knew would be a fine collection of creative ideas, striking photography, and inspired writing. Since then, the two of us have spent many fall afternoons working out the finer details of every aspect of the issue for you, our reader.

We have the past editors of *The Journal* to thank for the sturdy foundation they left for us work off of. Erin Tiernan worked to expand our readership across the Dartmouth campus and Kate Moritz and R. Jamaal Downey succeeded in acquiring an ISSN number *The Journal*, which allows for issues to be distributed and displayed at other universities within the United States. For this issue, we have contributed by adding a special feature to each issue called “MALS Spotlight.” This new addition was designed to bring attention to MALS students or alumni that have been involved in inspiring projects or academic research. The Fall 2014 Spotlight will focus on Brian Young’s thesis research in Bhutan. This year we also decided on a motto for the Journal, “To chase down the truth, wherever it lies.” The quote is attributed to Tom Zoellner, MALS ‘11, in describing the vision of our program.

We would also like to thank Wole Ojurongbe for the time he continues to commit to *The Journal*, from visiting classrooms to help promote it, to encouraging students to submit their work. We would additionally like to thank to Professor Donald Pease, Amy Gallagher, and Sarah Kleberg in the MALS office, Jackson Schultz for his management of our online presence, and our five assistant editors.

In reviewing the final list of pieces for the fall issue, we found ourselves wondering, “Is there a central theme weaving these pieces together?” It quickly became clear that we were looking at a very global collection of work. These submissions covered journalism, travel, history, and culture from around the world. This international Fall 2014 issue will take you
from the hot asphalt in Florida to the frenzy of an Indian marketplace, from Kublai Khan’s capitol of Xanadu to the imperial family of Japan. With the encroachment of the Digital Age and the ease at which we are able to travel, the world is getting smaller, but *The Journal* is not.

We are already thinking about the Spring 2015 issue and what the next steps might be for the further development of *The Journal*. We are eager to hear from you, our readers, about any ideas or suggestions you might have. In the meantime, enjoy this issue and the journey.

Sincerely,

Amani and Kelsey
Editors-in-Chief

Amani Liggett is from Sacramento, California, where she received her bachelor’s degree in English and Philosophy at UC Davis in 2011. Afterwards, she worked as an inner-city reading comprehension tutor in Sacramento, as well as a grant writer for a Sacramento-based nonprofit that focused on refugee resettlement, victims of human trafficking, and helping the financially illiterate. Amani began attending Dartmouth College as a graduate student in the fall of 2013 in Dartmouth’s MALS program, where she is now the Co-Editor-in-Chief of the MALS Journal publication. Through Dartmouth she attended a Literature Summer School at Oxford University this past summer, and presented a paper at the 2014 AGLSP annual conference. Amani is currently working on her thesis about the history of women who have acted as Hamlet onstage.

Kelsey Smith, originally from East Corinth, Vermont, graduated from The University of Vermont in 2011 where she received a bachelor’s degree in political science. After college, Kelsey worked as a public relations and communications assistant for The Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, and then as an account management specialist at The Advisory Board Company, a healthcare consulting company based in Washington, D.C. In the winter of 2014, Kelsey ventured back to New England to attend the MALS program at Dartmouth and is currently working on her Independent Study with Professor Christopher Wren, former correspondent and bureau chief for The New York Times. Her study seeks to address the question of whether print magazines can still be considered relevant in today’s digital age.

Assistant Editors

Carmen Brady finished from Dartmouth with an AB in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology in 1998 and spent time working as a juvenile services assistant for Child Haven in Clark County, Nevada before moving to Washington, DC in 2006. After working as a Congressional intern in the House of Representatives, she transitioned to the Senate in 2007 with a permanent position as Constituent Services Coordinator for a Nevada Senator. Her time as a MALS Creative Writing student has allowed her to hone underdeveloped creative gifts and has opened up numerous opportunities such as the Oxford Creative Writing Summer Program in 2014. She hopes this time will also work towards building a bridge towards a career in helping coach and counsel others in the future.
Kelley Bumstead, originally from Cape Cod, studied journalism at the University of Tampa and Boston University before coming to Dartmouth. She has lived and traveled all over the world and is researching sports culture and expatriate communities in the Far East, where she taught English for five years.

Gregory Poulin is currently studying government and globalization at Dartmouth; he is a graduate of Wheaton College where he earned his BA in political science and history. His research has appeared in a variety of publications including *The Diplomat*, *Real Clear World* and *China-US Focus*.

Amanda Spoto, originally from Staten Island, New York, is a recent ’14 graduate from Dartmouth College. She majored in English (Concentration in Cultural Studies and Popular Culture) and did a minor in Native American Studies (Concentration in Government). She wrote a senior English Honors Thesis entitled, “Decoding the Alternate Gaze Amidst the American Labyrinth: Counter Memory and Re-remembering in Native American Literature,” under Professor Pease (ENGL Dept.) and Professor Taylor (NAS Dept), and is currently on the Cultural Studies track in the MALS Program. She has a strong interest in law school, and may soon pursue a Ph. D.

Brian Young is a MALS student currently writing his thesis on development and its impact on culture within the country of Bhutan, specifically within the Brokpa ethnic group. He recently returned from doing ethnographic field research in Bhutan, where he lived with a semi-nomadic yak herding family in the jungle. His research focuses on three generations within one family, analyzing the changing structure of the family, relationships between each generation, and different identities of each generation formed by, among other things, their different experiences with modernization and development.
AUTHORS

Wes Benash is 32 years old and originally from New Jersey, but has been living in Claremont, New Hampshire for the past 9 years. He graduated from Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey with a bachelor’s degree in journalism, and received a master’s degree in library science from Drexel University in Philadelphia. Wes is a MALS student currently working at the Baker-Berry Library here on campus at Dartmouth. He is married and has a cat.

Laura Jean Binkley is a singer/songwriter/poet and part-time MALS student on the Creative Writing track. She received her B.A. in English from the University of Missouri before moving to Brooklyn where she lived and worked for five years honing her folk-rock style as she sang and played her guitar everywhere from the LIC Bar to the Bitter End (and all the subway stops in-between.) Her favorite poets are the ones who find beauty in all things and who make her laugh. She is planning to graduate in the Spring of 2017.

Sarah M. Decker graduated in 2008 from Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado with a B.A. in English Literature. She was also actively involved with the college’s literary club, Scarlet Letters, as well as submitted work to the college’s literary journal, Images Magazine, and wrote articles for The Independent News Magazine. In 2007, Sarah attended a study abroad writing workshop in India. As a member of Sigma Tau Delta, a national English society, she presented a collection of her poetry titled “Nature of Sin” at the 2006 International Convention in Portland, Oregon. As a MALS student, she looks forward to expanding her academic knowledge, as well as connecting with other colleagues in this profession, while continuing to write and communicate with the world at large.

Trisha Denton hails from the sprawl of Detroit. The interdisciplinary artist writes for the stage, as well as folklore, fairy tales and fantasy for all ages. She also devises, directs and performs original theater. Trish received a BA from Goddard College, and she has worked with organizations such as Shelburne Museum, Burlington City Arts and Very Merry Theatre as a teaching artist and theater director. To date she has choreographed/directed around 55 children’s shows, as well as written and directed over 100 original short plays. Trish currently attends Dartmouth College in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program researching the persistence of imagination in oppressive environments.
Shelby Kittrell is concentrating in Creative Writing at Dartmouth College. She is currently working on her thesis which is a collection of prose poems. Her work is largely influenced by the ordinary words people say and her observations of human behavior.

Brad Mindich left the media business several years ago to start two creative-centric companies: one is a brand-turnaround and consulting agency, and the other is a social archaeology/archiving company. The companies have had the privilege of working with a range of clients – from Metallica, Norah Jones, and Elvis Costello, to Gannett, Price Waterhouse Coopers, and Mercedes-Benz. Brad added some complexity to his life by entering the MALS program part-time, but for good reason as he is exploring ways to combine the interdisciplinary, academic field of Cultural Studies – specifically in the areas of sub-cultures, memory, fans and music engagement, identity, and nostalgia – with entrepreneurship to create new business and creative initiatives.

Joshua Semerjian is interested in cultural histories, particularly in the contexts of childhood/youth, gender/sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and nations/borders. Joshua’s research takes a relational approach to critical inquiry that ends up being paradoxical or otherwise circular where the answer is always a new question. To struggle, according to Joshua, is to know what exists, but it’s also a battle that can never be won. Joshua enjoys hiking, extreme rides, death metal music, and keeping people guessing about where he lives.

Kevin Warstadt grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. He studied film and literature at Georgia Tech where he earned his B.S. in Science, Technology, and Culture. While there he directed the award nominated short film, With a Whimper. He now studies writing and culture at Dartmouth in the MALS program, with a focus on Russian culture. He manages arbitrarity.com and is a contributor to notcatalog.com.

Ethan Woodard is a Second Year MALS student on the Globalization Studies track from Glover, Vermont by way of Portland, Maine. This past fall he began work on his thesis entitled: “Legitimacy & the Foundations of Government: Confidence, Trust and Participation in Modern Democracy”. His primary research interest focuses on questions of legitimacy in Democratic governments, but he is also interested in questions of global public opinion, comparative politics, and the study of sub-cultural globalization.
MALS SPOTLIGHT: BRIAN YOUNG

THE IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT IN BHUTAN ON FAMILY, IDENTITY AND EVERYDAY RURAL LIFE

When Brian Young began thinking about his thesis he knew he was interested in exploring the impact of development on the everyday life and culture of the Bhutanese people. He was specifically interested in focusing his research on the nomadic yak herders of Merak, a village in Bhutan. In 2014, the Graduate Alumni Research Award and MALS thesis award allowed for Brian to travel to Bhutan to live there for three months, part of which was with a Bhutanese family.

Young’s thesis research on the Eastern Himalayan Brokpa people of Merak was centered on the impact development was having on the region’s traditional culture and family life. Brian integrated himself in his host family’s lifestyle in the midst of the Khaling jungle. It was here that he lived in their hut and helped with the everyday chores of milking cattle, sewing, and fetching water, in addition to his research.

The project explores how capitalist development, as well as Gross National Happiness (GNH) (Bhutan’s guide for ethical development) is impacting traditional definitions of family and identity in a rural village in Bhutan. This research plays an important role as Young explains, “It adds to our understanding of contemporary Bhutan and it also contributes to the field of anthropology by showing how modern development affects family, identity, culture, everyday life, and relationships between generations in a rural village.” Located between India and China in the Himalaya, Bhutan is a small country of under 1,000,000 people. Beginning in 2005, the Bhutanese government adopted a framework for modernization in accordance with an articulation of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Young spent time in the capital Thimphu, interviewing government officials about Bhutan’s GNH. “I wanted to see how GNH was actually put into practice, how development impacted the quality of daily life, including relationships across three generations of family,” said Young.

While in Bhutan, Brian interviewed many different people but mostly focused on his host family as representative of Merak people and culture. He was able to compare the experiences of three generations (grandparents, parents, and children) and how the varying generational
Brian Young

differences formed the identity and understanding of everyday life. He witnessed the cultural changes occurring rapidly with the children of the family, such as the daughter talking on Facebook or the son gelling his hair according to fashions popular in Korea. Young wrote that, “While members of the older generations are concerned about the loss of traditional dress and language, close ties are still maintained between children and parents in the family that I lived with, for example through daily conversations by cell phone.”

During the course of the trip, Young was able to collect audio recordings of over one hundred interviews and rituals, as well as video and audio recordings of daily life and stories about religious beliefs and practices.

With assistance from the Nuekom Institute travel grant and the Graduate Student Council travel grant, Brian recently returned to present his research at a conference in Bhutan sponsored by the United Nations Population Development Fund. In his presentation, he emphasized the loss of lands, languages, and livelihoods and the effect on Gross National Happiness and overall well-being. “I see a lot of disadvantages of development,” Young states. “I see how it can interrupt and distract from your happiness.”
A Critical Look at Media Coverage in the Killing of Trayvon Martin

WES BENASH

Ten years ago, I was an undergraduate student of journalism. One of the research projects I produced during that time was an extensive analysis of how partisan media influenced and drove news reporting, most significantly in the case of the Iraq War. In seeing how media partisanship has greatly increased since the early stages of the Iraq War, I chose to revisit the subject, but with a blank research slate. This essay discusses a specific event—the February 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin—as a way of analyzing the influence of partisan media in the American news market.

The Death of Trayvon Martin

On the night of February 26th, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old black male, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a Hispanic community watch coordinator. The case became a media feeding frenzy, with civil rights activists, political pundits, politicians and even President Obama commenting on the killing. Theories and characterizations of both Martin and Zimmerman abounded. Those in the pro-Trayvon camp sought to portray Zimmerman as a virulent racist who had it in for black people, a loose cannon and a radical anti-crime activist. Those on Zimmerman’s side attempted to portray Martin as a thug, a petty criminal, and a punk who sought trouble and got what was coming to him. The debate over the Martin-Zimmerman case became part of a national conversation over gun rights and controversial Stand Your Ground laws; depending on which side you embraced, Zimmerman was either exercising his rights as an armed citizen or acting recklessly, and Stand Your Ground laws were either necessary for self defense or needlessly reactionary. The truth about Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman falls somewhere in the middle of the two extremes and I will provide contextual background information to analyze the case.
On February 26th, Trayvon Martin was staying with family at the Twin Lakes housing community where Zimmerman also lived. Sometime during the evening, Martin left his family’s townhouse to walk to a local convenience store to make a purchase. Martin made this purchase, and was in the process of walking back to his family’s residence when Zimmerman, who was driving through the neighborhood, spotted him. Zimmerman called the police, and reported Martin as a suspicious person walking through the neighborhood. Zimmerman was recorded by the police dispatcher as saying, “This guy looks like he’s up to no good or is on drugs or something,” and, “these assholes, they always get away.” Zimmerman was asked if he was following Martin, and he said that he was. The police dispatcher responded, “OK, you don’t need you to do that.”

At some point, Zimmerman exited his vehicle, and he and Martin got into a physical confrontation. Both men ended up struggling on the ground, and during this struggle Martin was shot in the chest with Zimmerman’s handgun, killing him. The initial police report indicates that Martin may have been getting the better of Zimmerman physically; Zimmerman was bleeding from the nose and the back of the head, and his back was wet and had grass clippings on it, as if he had been laying on his back in wet grass. However, this evidence does not determine who instigated the confrontation.

Zimmerman was arrested that night and his firearm was confiscated. However, citing a lack of evidence, police did not charge Zimmerman with a crime. The state prosecutor’s office initiated its own investigation, and filed second-degree murder charges against Zimmerman on April 11th, 2012. Zimmerman was ultimately tried and found not guilty in 2013. By this time, dueling media narratives had obscured the actual facts of the case: Trayvon-the-thug vs. Trayvon-the-ordinary-kid, and Zimmerman the right-wing-reactionary vs. Zimmerman the honest-citizen. Examining how this case became a racial flashpoint is almost useless; an examination of the cases of Bernhard Goetz, Sean Bell, and Michael Dunn, among many others, shows that practically any incident where a suspicious killing of a person who is a racial minority ends up stirring racial animosity in

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Some background for clarification: Goetz was the man dubbed the “Subway Vigilante” by the New York press after he shot four black men who he claimed tried to rob him. Bell was an unarmed black man who was shot and killed by New York City police the night before his wedding, and Dunn was convicted of killing a black teenager who he claimed was playing his music too loud. Like Zimmerman, Dunn also claimed self-defense.
some form. Instead, I will focus on the positive and negative media narratives that attempted to characterize Martin and Zimmerman.

**From Local to National News**

The death of Trayvon Martin was a local news story from February 26th through the first week of March. In a summary of the Martin-Zimmerman case, Reuters reported that Martin’s death was covered sparsely by The Orlando Sentinel, The Sanford Herald, and local TV affiliates in Orlando, but the national press had not picked up the story. According to Daniel Trotta of Reuters, Martin’s family was frustrated that Zimmerman had not been charged in their son’s death, and hired a publicist as part of their legal team, with the intent of using the national media to bring pressure on public officials to charge Zimmerman. Martin’s family also kept in contact with civil rights activist Al Sharpton.

The first national report was done by CBS on March 8th; reporter Mark Strassman interviewed Martin’s father Tracy, who expressed his frustrations that Zimmerman remained free. “Why would he attack this guy?” Martin said, “He don’t know this guy. What he going to attack him with, a pack of Skittles? … My kid went to the morgue and this guy went home and went to sleep in his bed. There’s no justice in that.” The next national report was issued by the Associated Press the next day, and once again relied mostly on Martin’s family as sources. It also included an erroneous sentence that stated Zimmerman was white. By March 12th, the story had blown up nationally, reaching news broadcasts in all corners of the country.

Much of the early reporting on Martin’s death relied heavily on statements from the Martin family and their legal counsel. It is understandable why those on Zimmerman’s side might have looked at the early reporting and concluded that the press was biased against Zimmerman. However, it is worth noting that Zimmerman refused all interview requests early on, issued very few statements, and did not give an interview of any significance until mid-July 2012. Until then, Zimmerman’s side of the story was represented through secondhand accounts offered by friends, acquaintances, police reports and statements by legal counsel. The partisan press picked up on the story around the same time.

† It should be noted that Zimmerman did this on the advice of his lawyer, since any public statement Zimmerman may have made after the shooting could have been admitted into a court of law. However, this had the effect of his side not being heavily represented in the press.
Sharpton’s show “Politics Nation” was the first partisan outlet to report on Martin’s death, and from the first report, Sharpton framed the shooting as an act of vigilantism:

So, this young man is dead. The police confirm all he had was Skittles and an iced tea. The other man, who was not a policeman, not in uniform, we don’t even know if Trayvon knew who he was, approaches him, kills him, and he says, self-defense? Even if they got in an altercation, how is that self-defense and how do you -- how are you allowed to kill somebody? … I think that that’s critical there, so the neighborhood watch supposed to watch, call the police, he didn’t do that went and took it in his own hands with a 9 millimeter? 

Sharpton’s comments are troubling on several levels. First, they assume Zimmerman acted as a vigilante when this had not been determined yet by police investigators. Second, Sharpton paints Zimmerman as a man out for blood. Even now there is nothing that suggests Zimmerman intended on killing anybody on the night he encountered Martin. Third, the comments amount to race baiting. As an activist, Sharpton is unquestionably aware that there is a significant amount of distrust of the justice system and especially of white authority figures within the black community. Some of this distrust is entirely justified; black motorist Rodney King was beaten, and the police officers that beat him were found not guilty, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. NYPD officers were acquitted in the shooting death of African immigrant Amadou Diallo, who despite being unarmed, was shot 41 times in an excessive display of aggression. Martin’s community of Sanford has its own history of racial tensions. According to Reuters, “black mistrust of the (Sanford) police runs deep. In 2011, a previous Sanford police chief was forced out of the job after a white police officer’s son was captured on video sucker-punching a black homeless man outside a bar. Sanford police did not arrest the assailant until video of the attack surfaced on local TV and provoked an outcry from Sanford civil rights leaders.”

These incidents and many others have polarized Americans along racial lines; Sharpton knows this, and more cynically, he knows how to
exploit it. Where he is disingenuous in his comments is in assuming the justice system will not work long before the case is settled. At this point, Zimmerman’s destiny as a free man was hardly set in stone.

MSNBC heavily covered the story in the ensuing weeks, with “Politics Nation,” Lawrence O’Donnell’s “Last Word” and Ed Schultz’s “Ed Show” all airing segments on Martin’s death. Sharpton appeared on the “Ed Show” on March 19th, again indicting the police and Zimmerman. “So, how is he killed and police decide that they’re the judge and jury and let Zimmerman go,” Sharpton said. “Zimmerman was told not to follow him. He followed him any way, he ends up killing him. That is probable cause to make an arrest. It’s up later to grand jury and a prosecutor presenting the case in front of a judge and jury whether he’s convicted. To not arrest him, to let the young man lay there three days dead shows real, real concern about how the police handled this matter and it’s something that warrants national attention.”

Sharpton flat-out gets several facts wrong. Zimmerman was arrested after shooting Martin. He was not charged. Furthermore, Martin’s body did not lie unclaimed for three days due to misconduct by the local authorities; Martin’s father indentified his son’s body the morning after his death. The facts Sharpton got incorrect were easily verifiable by public police reports. Sharpton’s mangling of the truth indicates that he had chosen not to do his research (in which case he should not have been on television), or had already made his mind up about the case and didn’t care about the facts. Either way represents irresponsibility on the part of Sharpton and MSNBC.

Fox News treated the shooting much differently. The Martin/Zimmerman story was not heavily covered on the network until late March; one of the first substantive segments Fox ran was on the March 20th edition of “The O’Reilly Factor.” In the segment, host Bill O’Reilly discusses the case with contributors Kimberly Gulifoyle and Lis Wiehl. The segment is much more sympathetic toward Martin than Sharpton was toward Zimmerman. The exchange below suggests a healthy amount of pro-Trayvon skepticism:

WIEHL: Right, right. And to be clear, in the state of Florida, along with 17 other states, there is a “Stand Your Ground” law, but that doesn’t -- means you don’t have to retreat. It doesn’t mean you can go after somebody.
O’REILLY: OK, but let’s stay on the facts of the case. Was Trayvon Martin carrying a gun?

WIEHL: No. He was carrying a bunch of Skittles.

O’REILLY: Easy, easy, easy.

WIEHL: Sorry.

O’REILLY: Was he carrying any weapon?

WIEHL: No.

O’REILLY: He had no weapons at all?

WIEHL: No.

O’REILLY: He had candy?

WIEHL: Candy and an ice tea.

O’REILLY: Did he have a record? Had he done anything wrong?

WIEHL: No. Not that we know of.12

Two nights later, Sean Hannity made these comments on the case: “Could this just be a terrible tragedy? Could this just be, you know, a case where Trayvon was running because he thought he was in jeopardy? He was in the neighborhood and that we had a series of crimes, they have a community watch. Is it possible that it was just a horrible accident? … I want a full complete investigation. We need to get to the bottom of it. And our thoughts and prayers go out to the family. This is a tragedy, this young man. We don’t know if it was an accident or if this was somehow intentional.”13

Fox’s weekly media analysis program also covered the story, and the show’s panel also seemed at least partially skeptical of Zimmerman’s side of the story. Conservative commentator Cal Thomas commented, “I live in Washington, D.C., and watch the local news every night. It’s true in many other big cities, too. Most of the crime stories that local stations focus on involve African-American perpetrators. Dead black children,
perpetrating adults with guns, this sort of thing. You almost never see stories on local news about successful, family-oriented, honest, law-abiding African-American people. And I’m suggesting to you, Jon, that this helps feed the racism in some minds and gives the gated communities and the alarms more credence.” The show’s entire panel agreed that racial suspicions likely factored into the shooting.

During the month of March, the coverage of the Martin/Zimmerman case was much more fair and balanced, to cop a phrase, on Fox News than it was on MSNBC. Fox News can be accused of jumping to conclusions in many instances. However, this is not one of them.

Newspapers were also more sympathetic toward Martin. The usually conservative New York Post headlined a Martin/Zimmerman story with, “Cop wannabe on paranoid patrol.” An op-ed by Charles Blow in the New York Times read in part, “As the father of two black teenage boys, this case hits close to home. This is the fear that seize me whenever my boys are out in the world: that a man with a gun and an itchy finger will find them suspicious.” And the Washington Post’s Jonathan Capeheart wrote that Martin’s death served as a reminder that for black men, “the burden of suspicion is still ours to bear.” Editorials sympathetic to Martin were published in the Philadelphia Inquirer, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, USA Today, and numerous other newspapers. They establish one thing for certain – that any insinuation that the national media was totally anti-Trayvon is completely false.

As the investigation into Trayvon Martin’s death continued, and media coverage became more intense, the press began reporting more on the personal character of Martin and George Zimmerman. Both men would be placed under a media microscope; the intensity of the public attention ultimately led Zimmerman to go into hiding.

Martin was suspended from school at the time of his death. On March 25th, CNN reported that the reason for this suspension was marijuana possession – a baggie with trace amounts of pot had been found in Martin’s backpack. It was also around this time that Martin’s online presence was made public; photos of Martin wearing a removable gold grill, a hoodie, and giving the middle finger were circulated through the media. Martin’s Facebook and Twitter posts were also widely read, and revealed a teenager who joked (sometimes profanely) about street culture, expressed a distaste for school, and quoted the lyrics of hip-hop artists such as DMX.
and Mystikal. None of this content is terribly surprising; there are millions of teenagers like Martin who tweet profane jokes, hate school, and listen to hip-hop. Unlike most teenagers, Martin had his digital footprint observed by millions.

Media coverage of Martin and Zimmerman began to change at this time. Conservative and liberal partisan media began sniping at each other, each accusing the other of exploiting Martin’s death for political points. Neither side is completely innocent of these accusations, but conservative media did have a leg to stand on, and it was provided by NBC.

**NBC Wrecks Their Credibility; Media Take Sides**

Several times in between March 19th and March 27th, NBC News and its affiliates played a deceptively edited audio selection of Zimmerman’s call to 911 on the night he encountered Martin. The original transcript records this following exchange between Zimmerman and the 911 dispatcher:

Zimmerman: Hey we’ve had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there’s a real suspicious guy, uh, [near] Retreat View Circle, um, the best address I can give you is 111 Retreat View Circle. This guy looks like he’s up to no good, or he’s on drugs or something. It’s raining and he’s just walking around, looking about.
Dispatcher: OK, and this guy is he white, black, or Hispanic?
Zimmerman: He looks black.¹⁹

NBC producers edited the tape to make it sound as if Zimmerman had said, “This guy looks like he’s up to no good, or he’s on drugs or something. He looks black.”²⁰ The differences, though minor, changed the context of the conversation and had the effect of painting Zimmerman in a much more sinister light. In the original transcript, Zimmerman volunteers the information on Martin’s race when asked. In the edit, Zimmerman was made to sound as if he was making a racial judgment and profiling Martin on the basis of his skin color, an accusation Zimmerman faced repeatedly in the weeks and months after the shooting.

The clips were produced by NBC affiliates in Florida and aired
multiple times on the “Today Show,” “NBC Nightly News,” and MSNBC. The edits were first noticed by conservative media blog Newsbusters, and condemnation was quick to follow. The New York Post called the edits “damning evidence of willful misconduct by NBC News.” The Washington Post said that “to portray that exchange in a way that wrongs Zimmerman is high editorial malpractice.” Bill O’Reilly accused the media of trying and convicting Zimmerman on television.

NBC later apologized for the misleading edits. Several local reporters and producers were fired or disciplined. Lilia Luciano, whose segments were used in national broadcasts, was also fired. The broadcasts and transcripts containing the misleading edits were taken offline. In December 2012, George Zimmerman filed a libel lawsuit against NBC. Despite NBC’s apologies, this episode poisoned the national discourse. In the eyes of millions, Zimmerman was a racist and those defending him were suspect. Conservatives, meanwhile, had a bona fide example of the media bias they had long claimed. Zimmerman’s lawsuit was ultimately thrown out of court in June 2014.

Partisan media continued attacking each other over perceived slights to either Zimmerman or Martin, and the effect of this sophomoric back-and-forth had an oddly similar effect as in the case of the Benghazi situation, in that the actual facts stopped being important and the case began more about scoring points for one side or the other. As the Pew study quoted above shows, Fox viewers don’t watch MSNBC and vice versa. By the time Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder on July 13th, 2013, most viewers had likely already made up their minds whether he was guilty or innocent.

The character of Trayvon Martin was left relatively untouched. Fringe right-wing blogs regularly attacked Martin with racist caricatures and epithets, but this form of overt racism was not a major element of any media narrative. For all of MSNBC’s griping about Fox News and right-wing media, Fox treated Martin’s death as a tragic event; their grievances were primarily directed at media coverage of the case, which they accused of wallowing in needless sensationalism. It is a slight difference but an important one.

George Zimmerman fared differently. From the very start, Zimmerman faced accusations of racism and speculation as to whether he had profiled Martin. These were not inappropriate questions. Black men and
women are well aware of numerous instances of racial profiling, some of which have turned violent. Zimmerman’s father Robert defended his son in a letter to the Orlando Sentinel, stating that, “the media portrayal of George as a racist could not be further from the truth.” During a July 18th interview with Sean Hannity, Zimmerman said that he was sorry for shooting Martin.

It may not be possible to truly know what Zimmerman thought when he first observed Martin, but one slightly reported event in Zimmerman’s life prior to the shooting may provide some idea as to his real attitudes on race. In a 2011 Sanford town hall meeting, Zimmerman protested the beating of a homeless black man at the hands of a police officer’s son. Zimmerman expressed his belief that the suspect was given preferential treatment due to his association with the police. This action does not suggest someone with a deep-rooted hatred of black people.

Conclusions

Perhaps the second tragedy of Trayvon Martin’s death is the exploitation of the story by ideologues driven by ratings. The events of February 26th, 2012 and beyond effectively illustrated that though we share one country, Americans of different races and political beliefs are often separated by vast social and ideological chasms. Martin’s death proved how easily these differences can be exploited.

The facts behind the altercation between Martin and Zimmerman are difficult to discern. We know that Zimmerman exited his vehicle against the advice of the police dispatcher. We know that he and Martin fought before Zimmerman shot Martin. We do not know who threw the first punch. We do not truly know Zimmerman’s frame of mind on that night. Instead of responsibly reporting these elements of the story as unknown, the media engaged in needless speculation, and in some cases irresponsible distortion.

Zimmerman was needlessly dragged through the mud by MSNBC. With Al Sharpton leading the charge, the network used the Martin/Zimmerman story as red meat for its more liberal and racially diverse viewership. It also had the effect of proving Bill O’Reilly’s statement correct – Zimmerman was tried in the media before he was tried in a court of law. Though Zimmerman has remained silent since his trial, one could reasonably conclude that the ordeal was stressful, and that it will be difficult for
him to return to a normal life.

For his part, Sharpton does not belong on television. He has continued to engage in partisan activism while hosting his MSNBC show. Sharpton’s continued involvement with civil rights organization the National Action Network is a direct violation of every form of journalistic ethics imaginable. Sharpton’s leadership of the organization coupled with his role on MSNBC amounts to a significant conflict of interest for both Sharpton and MSNBC. Journalistic ethics dictate that someone employed by a news organization cannot maintain said employment while engaging in activism. For MSNBC to allow Sharpton to maintain this dual role seriously damages their credibility. On the flip side, Fox News may have handled the story more responsibly, but the end result still amounted to the case of the proverbial “thinnest kid at fat camp,” when one considers that Fox has no problem using needless sensationalism when it has served their interests. However, they should be commended for having the decency to silence the racist elements of the Tea Party’s lunatic fringe this time around.

The straight news coverage of Martin and Zimmerman by broadcast networks and newspapers was much more responsible, and newspaper columnists tended to refrain from the excessive hyperbole of television. Black columnists and commentators, such as Jonathan Capeheart and Fox’s Juan Williams, made statements that were not so much anti-Zimmerman as they were sympathetic to the realities of life for black Americans. USA Today asked perhaps the best question of all: If Zimmerman were black and had shot a white, unarmed 17-year-old, would he have been let go by the police? Furthermore, would the case have become the national spectacle it did? I personally think the answer to both questions is no.

The death of Trayvon Martin was tragic. The exploitation of that death was equally tragic. Events such as these, unpleasant as they are, can also be opportunities for Americans to gain a greater understanding of their countrymen. This conversation can best happen with a responsible media as a moderator. In this case, the media was anything but responsible.

Afterword

The events surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin were important news stories, but it also represents missed opportunities. The
importance of this story lies in its ability to generate greater discussion about important subjects; the killing of Trayvon Martin could have led to a much-needed discussion about the still sore issue of race relations in the United States.

However, this conversation did not happen, and it is partly due to the continually problematic news media that it did not. This brings me to the issues of corporate media ownership raised by Chomsky and Hermann, and Michael Schudson, “If the corporate structure of the media does not in itself determine news content, it still tends to marginalize some news and some ways of telling the news,” Schudson writes. 30 This is a more academic way of saying that while it is easy to use a racial conflict frame for the death of Trayvon Martin, it is much harder to do a journalistic examination of the American domestic policy decisions that make such frames possible. Doing so would likely require examining those voices on the political fringes that so often get overlooked by the corporate media.

It is easy to be cynical about the state of the news media. It has numerous problems that the corporate structure of the press compounds, and frequently chooses sensationalism over tough, fact-based reporting. However, it is also easy to forget that the world as a whole has more information at its fingertips than ever, and that despite its shortcomings, our media is better organized than ever. This in turn makes critical thinking easier than ever. Furthermore, our increasing interconnectedness allows us as news consumers to be informed and to care about a teenager shot dead in Florida. Fifty years ago, the death of Trayvon Martin would likely have been a footnote in a local newspaper. That it is not today reflects a world that is more informed and perhaps more tolerant. I believe this is a net positive.

WORKS CITED
2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. CBS This Morning, March 8, 2012.

*Note: This piece is Part 2 of a longer work, which includes the media coverage of the assault on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi. For the full story please contact Wes Benash through the MALS Office.
LEAVING BEHIND, AND COMING TO FIND

SARAH DECKER

It’s hard to say “No thank you,” when they swarm like ferocious bees; beautiful, but relentless in their desire to push a product. “You need?” the woman with jars filled with fresh cut flowers, asks as I walk by. I pause to take a look and breathe in the unfamiliar scents bursting from the flora. She takes a green stem with multiple fuchsia orchids attached to it and juts it out for me to take hold. Each petal, in the shape of an oblique starfish, quakes as she entices the cash from my pocket. In the center of each bloom a gnome-like face stares back at me with a mildly interested smile. “You take. Very pretty.” She says thrusting it toward me. I shake my head and continue to walk with our group. We are all Americans, with the exception of our local guide, Amit, who was born to barter, as he grew up in these congested streets of New Delhi. Around another corner of the market a group of women sit behind a mesmerizing stack of saris. The cheerful dazzle of color brings me closer. “Lady you like? Name your price lady. Good quality. Very beauuutiful.” The saleswoman draws out this last word and she caresses my hand with the delicate cloth.

Under my hands I can feel the time and care woven into each design, but I just came to look today and assess my options. This is our second day of the two-week trip and I have budgeted in only so much. The saleswoman coaxes another sari into my hands, and I am stunned by the shimmering-iridescent light that catches the ever-present sun. In a flash I see the street beggar with no hands and no teeth who we passed along the highway to get here. The stubs of his hands upraised supplicating for a meager allotment to extend the misery of his existence. Arms upraised without the means to clasp them in prayer. I hold the fabric as it flows through my fingers like water. I want to buy this garment to support these women, because I do not want to feel guilty for looking away from the beggar. “Beautiful, yes?”

I ask the women how much and they give me a price in rupees, but I have only American dollars. Dazed by the exhaustion of travel I cannot remember the exchange equivalent of rupees to dollars. “Do you
want?” another saleswoman asks. I am doing the math, and chastising myself for studying words in school instead of numbers, as the aromatic and pungent smells of the Paharganj Bazaar alert me to the unfamiliarity of my surrounding. I look around me only to realize that between this hounding and my own remorse, I have separated from the group, which has guaranteed my protection and familiarity. Realizing that I have no guide or interpreter I kindly decline and walk quickly past the spectacular spectrum of color and sound that is an Indian bazaar. On the Navajo reservation where I grew up we had flea markets and craft fairs, but these bazaars are louder and less docile. In India they target you for business and lock on to their target to the point of walking a block down the street and lowering the price with every step.

In a booth filled with maps, I see something that I like. “Very nice.” I say pointing to the large display of maps, covering all the parts of India, Asia and the world. I linger staring at the names and land formations, imagining the places I might see soon, and others reserved for another day. I am back to a comfortable range of my group and have them in my sight. I find my way back into the safe bubble and we move in unison to the other side of the market, just as bustling and frantic as the one left behind. Our American guide, Galen, suggests that we go to the exchange office to trade out our American cash. We agree and slowly make a path through the curious shoppers and pleading shopkeepers. On the way to the exchange office I am bumped on the arm by the child I have left working at the map stand. “Look lady, not cheap. Very nice.” The product now is a laminate map the kind you see rolled up in classrooms. He knows my weakness. Can he see my room back in Colorado covered with places I’ve been to and the destinations that I need to see? “Look lady see?” As this child and I continue to barter my group moves further away and the crowd keeps bumping me closer to the seller.

Yes. I see. I see that my group is getting further from my grasp and the western thread is tight enough to snap. I see that if given another hour of this alone, I would be bent down in a corner, rocking without a jolt of self-recognition. I can see that my group is waiting and this child has followed me to the end of the market. “Please lady, you buy.” The boy’s determination and pleading is noticed by our guide. They fire back and forth finding a compromise. Galen hands me the correct currency and I buy the map for 250 rupees, paying so little to know where I am, knowing
that this map would do me no good in finding my way back home.

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The pungent colossus of stagnant refuse hits me like the pile of bricks found every few feet, littered on the capital streets of Agra, mixed with the piss of humans and sacred cattle alike. India is being rebuilt and torn down in a single. My cash is an open hand economy that brings wealth and cultural destruction with each exchange. My American waste, its dung heap, crowed with flies. I am the boil of beggars and the sore of century’s old exploitation. The decay of progress is seen as Agra’s mongrel monkeys watch like derelict sentinels over children shitting into a Folgers can on top of a heap of waste, as the towering billboard reads, “Progress Needs a Power Stroke.”

In the narrowing streets, men unashamedly piss on walls that house a shine to Kali – black goddess of revenge. A Hindu pantheon of death and destruction glares back from the temple walls. A sweaty wad of cash bruises my thigh as beggar after beggar without limbs, teeth, or nourishment, enough to hide the skeletal protrusions under their skin, plead for one wrinkled rag. Mere pennies paid to ride a camel’s back. Slow plod of burden and mange. We drive away packed like sardines from the ransacked Taj, pillaged of its opulent jewels and meaning. Postcards haggled from those casted for nothing better, lay forgotten at the bottom of my bag, unsent, never to show the truth of what I see here.

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Soaked to the core in a humid 90 degrees plus Delhi day, sweat heaves against my face, sticking wet to clothing and burning skin. Feral Brahmas blend into medians, their worship ignored between congested lanes. Rickshaws, bikes and motors wait impatiently for the removal of a mangled mess. At night the rains come steady but do not cool. Filth flows down where children wash, marriages are united and the dead are set free.

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In the Ladakh region alone there are over 220 species of birds. Many of these natural pilots migrate to wetter regions of this land to take advantage of the higher elevations where glacial runoff fills crystalline lakes during the summer months. They flutter with the seasons, following the directions of earth’s internal compass. I come to this land following my
own internal pull to explore, to experience the unknown, and to release the fear of being locked inside.

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In a tumbleweed desert, the color and consistency of a discarded lunch sack, I see my old reservation homes of Kayenta, Arizona and Cortez, Colorado. These places weathered my life like sandstone into the shape it holds now and taught me how to conserve my energy so that it could burst with action when needed. The open expanse of the land, with pockets of verdant life, reminds me of the swelling flash floods and the thirsty desire aching in the belly of the Southwest desert to suck moisture into every root and extending branch of anticipating life.

I am continents away from these familiar scenes, yet, I see it reflected in the sun etched people and places of the Ladakh region in India, where trees sprout from brown patches and inhabitants cultivate every last drop, twisted through ingenuity from the cloth of the skies. These same thirsty oases greedily hold every molecule of water, reserving them for use in a tense gamble of survival. From a hilltop advantage I can see how the deep depressions in the crumpled landscape have sprouted sporadic green clutters, where animals – all species, domesticated and wild along with our oldest ancestors, the flora, have gathered in an unspoken pact of symbiosis.

Our group arrived in Leh the night before. We flew over the great Himalayan range from New Delhi in a Boeing 737 that caused my sister to grip my hand at every unexpected bump and request the allotted amount of complimentary drinks. The guesthouse where we are staying is near the Women’s Alliance of Ladakh on Sankar road. From the balcony view of our accommodations the Nyamgail Tsemo Gompa and Royal Palace can easily be seen. The way these buildings and sacred sites cling to the mountainside reminds me of the Ancestral Puebloan dwellings of Mesa Verde and other ancient sites. The hosts family welcomes us with an enticing spread of traditional Ladakhi cuisine such as thukpa and momos, a creamy vegetable soup with thick square noodles accompanied by steamy meat pouches that remind me of egg drop soup and pot stickers from the Hong Kong restaurant on the eastside of highway 491, but this mixture is more fresh and the flavors please my tongue. Along with the traditional chai tea, we are provided with chang, their barley brew to wash it all down.

While the rest of my group is sleeping off the flight and the dinner celebration the night before, I am restless. I’m on a 7 AM walk listening to

Sarah Decker
the birds singing in the tall poplars and the dogs barking in a distant dirt patch. I suppose the dogs work just as well as any rooster would to wake up the populace, rising like every sun-enslave society, to greet the new day. I take to a dirt trail that opens to more paths popping out of the land like veracious veins. I follow a path that runs parallel to the mani walls, built over centuries by smoothed stones inscribed with the prayer of “om, mani, padme, hum.” Alongside the mountain I find an isolated outcropping where I can sit and think before our group meeting at the Women’s Alliance center.

In the distance there’s the sound of young Ladakhi children playing and older men working while the women scold, chastising both groups when they get out of hand. The sun’s life infusing rays are arching over the mountains, spreading a blessing of light that our ancestors have prayed for since time beginning. The effulgence surrounding the mountains inside this village reflects off of the spectacular crisp white stupas that line the village the tombs. These mud plastered domes house relics and ancestral bones, holding their position as sentinels of the ancient Buddhist religion that dominates each step and thought of these people.

I am sitting next to a collection of three unpainted stupas facing the mountains with the sun at my right side. In this sacred desert unacquainted with my eyes I can detect east and west but not north and south. Back in the desert of southwest Colorado these mountains would not be out of place and I would know what was up and what was down. Despite the disorientation I feel comforted, as if I were home, but the mani walls whispering their incantations, and the stupas holding the lives and religious icons of the past like a crypt are a constant reminder to me that I am anywhere but home.

This area, where the Ladahki people live, is known by the Indian government as Jammu and Kashmir. The capital city Leh, is a hub for trade where all faiths, ethnicities, and economic classes converge. It is hedged in on each side by scheming governments who seek to occupy more space. At the western head of its united body, India holds a tenuous foothold against the Pakistani government, which has fought unsuccessfully to over-step the Line of Control (LoC) and gain back the northern western areas in India. The Chinese government antagonizes from the east as they build roads into the Aksai Chin, hoping to cut away India’s protective hold on Dharamshala and its commitment to the Tibetan exiles, where they reside below Jammu and Kashmir in an area known as the Himachal Pradesh. It is here in the
city of Dharamshala that the Central Tibetan Administration maintains its government in exile and the 14th Dalai Lama holds residence at the Norbulingka Institute.

Here in the city of Leh, at the northern tip of India, I wake up early to find my place in an unfamiliar land. I have been in India less than a week. Introduced at first by the fast paced clamor and depressive congestion of New Delhi, this desert oasis is quickly becoming a favored environment where I can breathe and piece together my thoughts. The intended purpose of this journey is to find my voice as a writer and to learn from the Buddhist traditions and teachings that flow down from the headwaters of the Indus River in Tibet, miles and many mountain passes away from the home of the original Buddha, Prince Siddhartha in Kapilavatsu, India (now part of the southern border of Nepal).

What strikes me the most is the joy that emanates from the hearts of these Ladakhi people. I don’t know if it has anything to do with their religious ties to the impermanence of living. Whatever the source, they are unfaltering in their friendliness and will say “juley” waving a hello with their hand vertical to the sky touching thumb to nose. This phrase is as universal in its meaning as the Hawaiian “Aloha,” but its main intention is to induce good digestion. I will learn only later how important this is. The openness and welcoming spirit of these people is contrasted by my own American upbringing. Back in the States I’ve never passed an unknown person and said a simple “hello.” Most times a conciliatory smile would cross my face and then I would give them the America courtesy of getting out of their way.

So far I have been passed by five men. Each one shows the sign and declares the “juley” greeting, recognizing my existence as I mimic likewise. Even though I am alone, I do not worry about my own safety as I did in New Delhi. The key distinction is the expanse of space that allows me to maintain my own distance from them, instead of being forced by the sheer volume of bodies to huddle closer. The space allotted by the rugged topography allows us to maneuver without interference, because of that I’m not troubled by their presence and they are not troubled by mine.

At dinner our guide Namgial asked me if I knew about the Buddhist concept of “emptiness.” I told him that all I knew of the idea is that emptiness is the lack of intrinsic reality or better yet, the intrinsic identity of all phenomenon. He laughed a little, showing a wide smile that I would forever associate with all Buddhists, and clarified for me that
emptiness could not kill emptiness. All things are emptiness, including fears; therefore your fears cannot harm you if you recognize their emptiness. I told him that what I gathered from this is that emptiness is letting go of the notion of reality and seeing that it is different for everyone, yet the same for all of us, both living and not living. He gave me another smile and a look that suggested that I was close enough. During this reflection I use the skills of meditation to find my voice and face my demons. After our discussion, I write down this reminder in my journal:

Emptiness cannot kill emptiness.
You are the emptiness and your monsters are emptiness.
Your fears cannot kill you.

For this writing journey I have been reading the Tibetan book of the dead known as the Bardo Thödol. The idea of the bardo is described as the intermediary stage or gap in life when the consciousness is freed from the limitations of the body. The samsarah is representative of one’s memory of suffering. The goal of Buddhist practitioners is to reach enlightenment. In order to achieve this, one must recognize the illusions of their fears and subdue the samsarah. In Buddhism the individual is responsible for everything in their life including their illusions.

My illusion this morning, the one that wakes me once again and beckons me back to the mani wall, is the fear that I have not been honest with myself. I have kept hidden my desires because I did not want to harm the image that my loved ones had of me. As I reach further to the heart of emptiness and the home of my samsarah, I struggle to let go of one self-image in order to claim the heart and soul that was born to me. I seek honesty, knowing that a lie is the highest form of disrespect because it takes truth away from the one it is told to. I was taught this truth from the lips of the Dali Lama himself, when I was given two tickets to see him speak at the Pepsi Stadium in Denver. Of all the things he spoke of, the words that penetrated my heart were his declaration that “honesty is the truest form of compassion.” It is in this recognition of my own deception, that I gain the courage for honesty.

Outside the open courtyard inside the Likir monastery, an aged amala (among the Ladakhi, all revered women are called mother) takes the
bone white mani beads given to me by Namgail, which I had blessed by His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa at the Gyuto Tantric Monastery in Dharamshala. She rubs them between her thumb and pointer finger. The softness of her flesh like taffy envelops each bead as it moves along in prayer. Om, mani, padme, hum. Om, mani, padme hum. She uses the supple pad of her thumb to pull down the next bead after each complete prayer. The prayer is spoken 108 times. One prayer for each bead.

Remember the Dharma and the sacred jewel. This is a loose translation given to me by Namgail to explain a lifetime of teaching contained in six syllables. The wisdom of the Buddha, teaching us that life is suffering, and happiness, letting go.

The amala uses this incantation is to invoke the spirit of Chenrezig, the Buddha representation of compassion. She hands me back the beads and encourages me with a smile to pray. I say each sound the way I see it spelt out in my notes. Om, mani, padme, hum. She repeats her prayer using the beads wrapped around her wrist. My eye catches the six individually distinct beads added to replace the lost or broken ones. 108. Complete. Om, mani, padme, hum. The emphasis lands on the last two syllables and she draws out the pronunciation with exaggerated lips. I mimic poorly. Om, mani, padme, hum. She pulls my arm closer to her. I am to listen this time. Om, mani, peme, hung. I repeat, but she shakes her head and dismisses me like an uncompliant student. Six syllables. The teachings of the Buddha contained in one prayer that will take me a lifetime to understand.
An Autumn Afternoon. Photography by: Mara Laine
IF YOU HAVE ME

LAURA JEAN BINKLEY

If you have me, then I have you, which means there was a time when out of gathering clouds you emerged whole and undaunted by every-day trifles, buying milk for example, when you were out of milk.

If you have me, then I have you, like the daily commute, Brooklyn to New York to Brooklyn, a reflection of itself, and we walked hand-in-hand as pretty people on a poster in the subway, maybe the bus stop.

If you have me, then I have you on the other days too, when out of gathering clouds only more clouds, lightning, thunder, grey and the refrigerator is empty and we only complain, “We’re out of milk.”

If you have me, then I have you even when you are undone by everyday trifles, and we become aliens to each other, rare as a sunrise on the bottom of the ocean, where it doesn’t even rain.
Bikers: A Sustainable Subculture Model

Brad Mindich

I ride a Harley. It’s a 2006, black pearl-colored Road King with almost 50,000 miles on the odometer. I’ve put all these miles on the bike myself from my, mostly solo, travels across the US and Canada.

I have drawers of Harley t-shirts, and a garage full of leather jackets, leather pants, bandanas, wrap around sunglasses, helmets, boots, knives, and skull rings. And on my favorite motorcycle jacket, (it’s black, orange, and white: Harley colors), I have a patch that says: “I RODE MINE. STURGIS ’08” – this is a badge of honor for me because it makes it clear that, unlike many riders, I didn’t use a trailer to get my motorcycle from Boston to Sturgis. There’s also a pin just above the Sturgis patch that says: “DILLIGAF.” For the uninitiated, this stands for: “Do I Look Like I Give A Fuck.”

When I’m on my Harley, I drape the “tough guy” image over me. I have come to expect the almost instant respect I get when I interact with “non-bikers” who are impressed, curious, or concerned when I stare at them in their minivan from the saddle of my 700-pound Harley-Davidson. I carry the attitude and behavior that is expected or imagined from someone who rides a motorcycle; I’m a biker. Or am I?

A New Type of Subculture: The Super-Subculture

Exploring, analyzing, and evaluating biker subculture raises a fundamental question: can, and should, the term biker be applied to everyone who rides Harley motorcycles and wears motorcycle apparel? I’m specifically focusing on Harley-Davidsons because the typical “biker” has traditionally preferred them:

Bikers are members of a Harley-Davidson cult, and they allow no room for compromise: ‘Harley is the best, fuck the rest.’ A biker will tell you that ‘Harley-Davidson is more than a machine, it’s a
way of life’ and ‘Until you’ve ridden on a Harley you haven’t been
on a motorcycle’ (Wolf 37)

Millions of people ride Harleys and embrace biker style and attitude and,
therefore, make up the dominant culture in this comparison. So are all
these people, by definition, bikers? It is my contention that they are not.
They are, in reality, motorcycle enthusiasts and they idealize and adopt
pieces of biker subculture to fit their particular needs and/or insecurities.

I also believe that biker subculture is more than simply a sub-
culture. It is both a subculture and what I will define here as a super-
subculture. A super-subculture – the oxymoronic naming convention is
intentional – is a subculture that: (1) effectively grows and maintains its
core structure, hierarchies, membership, values, semiotics, and style; (2)
buys (or takes) what it needs from dominant societies to sustain itself and
provide for its members; (3) influences non-subculture members and
other outsider groups, (in the case of biker subculture examples of these
types of groups would be: motorcycle enthusiasts, heavy metal listeners,
fashion designers, and commercial products or services), with its “style”
without becoming fractured; and (4) uses this reflective relationship with,
and respect from, non-members and outsider groups to empower itself
and secure its position in relation to society.

I will use the terms biker subculture and biker super-subculture
somewhat interchangeably because they are terms that are defined by
perspective. In other words, bikers would, theoretically, view themselves
as a subculture in relation to society, and I believe that society should view
bikers as a super-subculture within this specific cultural framework for
reasons I will explain throughout this essay.

Subculture vs. Super-Subculture: What’s the Difference?

When an individual aligns with a particular style, group, or activ-
ity there are adopted patterns of behavior and needs that are desired,
and ideally fulfilled, by that association and identification. We all want to
belong to something in some way, and there is security in identifying with
others who also “belong.”

However, when there is an association or perceived/assumed
relationship with a generally recognizable and publicly-engaged subculture
that has, as part of its modus operandi, clearly identifiable styles, activities,
behaviors, mannerisms, and particularities – as is found in biker subcul-
ture – and only part of that style is adopted by the established or dominant culture, e.g. motorcycle enthusiasts dressing and acting like bikers and riding Harleys, members of the dominant culture cannot legitimately align themselves with the subculture because they are not adopting the entire gestalt of the subculture. That said, how a subculture responds to this kind of style appropriation by the hegemonic culture directly affects the subculture’s sustainability.

For example, just because an individual loves the Sex Pistols and puts safety pins in her jeans doesn’t, necessarily, mean that person is a member of punk subculture. And just because an individual listens to heavy metal music which, as Andy R. Brown states, “derived its style from ‘outlaw-biker-gang(s)’” and rides a motorcycle doesn’t, necessarily, make that person part of biker subculture (Brown 212). Regardless of the specific subculture, a significant risk with popularity-driven exploitation of a subculture’s style and behaviors is that once the uniqueness of a subculture is infiltrated by the hegemony, the subculture risks dilution and potential dissolution. As Dick Hebdige points out in Subculture: The Meaning of Style:

As the subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose, as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar, so the referential context to which it can be most conveniently assigned is made increasingly apparent…The process of recuperation takes two characteristic forms: (1) the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form); (2) the ‘labeling’ and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups – the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form) (Hebdige 109)

With the punk movement, what started as a way to engage and embrace Britain’s disenfranchised youth in the 1970s using, “things to whiten mother’s hair” with regard to attitude, “Punks just like to be hated,” dress, “the swastika was worn because it was guaranteed to shock,” and sound, “Johnny Rotten succinctly defined punk’s position on harmonics: ‘We’re into chaos not music,’” quickly became a commercialized commodity (Hebdige 126, 134):

Punk clothing and insignia could be bought mail-order by the summer of 1977, and in September of that year Cosmopolitan
ran a review of Zandra Rhodes’ latest collection of couture follies which consisted entirely of variations on the punk theme... and the accompanying article ended with an aphorism – ‘To shock is chic’ – which presaged the subculture’s imminent demise’ (Hebdige 111-112)

Punk’s “über-style” was no longer separated from mainstream style and the hegemony could now identify with punk to such a comfortable degree that, “Even punk, when reduced to a neat Mohawk hairstyle and a stud-ded leather jacket, could be made into a cleaned-up spokesman for potato chips” (Clark 229).

The music, clothing, and attitude that defined punk subculture had made an extraordinary impact on the youth at that moment in time but one could reasonably argue that punk subculture made too significant of an impact and reached a level of coolness that was, in fact, too cool to be ignored by commercially-focused hegemonies. And as punk became commercially attractive, accessible, and viable it did not, simultaneously, have the necessary infrastructure to support mass-market appropriation of its style and, subsequently, to evolve into a super-subculture thereby contributing, albeit inadvertently, to its own demise. Lefebvre explains this transitional effect quite well, “That which yesterday was reviled today becomes cultural consumer-goods, consumption thus engulfs what was intended to give meaning and direction” (Hebdige 107).

I would be remiss to not briefly address hip-hop subculture in this analysis as it comes closer to my outlined model of a super-subculture. There are several “counter-hegemonic structures...‘posses,’ ‘families,’ and ‘crews,’” that reinforce the individual and collective identity of hip-hop subculture, as is also the case with biker subculture, and all members share an identity and solidarity through a specific type of music and style that deeply connects them with each other – this is similar to the Harley-Davidson motorcycle and biker style with biker subculture (Potter 463). And, importantly, like the Harley and motorcycle style/attire, hip-hop music and style have been embraced by multiple hegemonies and demographics, e.g. the middle class, suburban, white kid who wears FUBU clothes and Air Jordan sneakers and listens to Li’l Wayne.

The critical similarity between hip-hop and biker subcultures and the critical difference between these two subcultures and, for example, punk subculture is that the gentrification of hip-hop did not destroy the subculture from whence it came.
However, even with these attributes hip-hop subculture is unable to achieve super-subculture status due to the fact that it is not a highly organized, hierarchical and self-sufficient ecosystem where there is, for example, a clearly identifiable “us” (bikers) and “them” (motorcycle enthusiasts). And like punk subculture, with hip-hop one can simply wear the clothes and listen to the music and then there are, instantly, multiple levels of shared understanding between “members.” To be clear, I am not minimizing hip-hop’s musical, historical, social, and political importance or its enormous impact on both black and white culture. But I am saying that even with all of these connections or points of influence, hip-hop is not structured enough as a whole to be considered a super-subculture.

**Biker Subculture: Style and Lifestyle**

Referencing Profane Culture by Paul Willis, Hebdige states, the internal structure of any particular subculture is characterized by an extreme orderliness: each part is organically related to other parts and it is through the fit between them that the subcultural member makes sense of the world” (Hebdige 130). The structure and order Willis describes is critical to understanding the sustainability of biker subculture.

Some of the key differences between bikers – the identified subculture and super-subculture – and motorcycle enthusiasts – the hegemony in this comparison, are found in its clearly structured style. Hebdige asks, “How does a subculture make sense to its members? How is it made to signify disorder?” (Hebdige 116) Although Hebdige presents this initially as a type of paradox, which is understandable in relation to the typical perception of style, he later makes a critical observation that applies directly to bikers and their style, “The communication of a significant difference, then (and the parallel communication of a group identity), is the ‘point’ behind the style of all spectacular subcultures” (Hebdige 118).

Whether we examine real motorcycle clubs (MCs) such as the Hells Angels, Warlocks or Outlaws, or the fictitious Sons of Anarchy motorcycle club on FX TV’s eponymous drama, or look at representations of bikers in films like The Wild One or Hell Ride, they all are part of, or pay homage to, biker subculture; their lifestyles are conspicuously consistent and their style is ubiquitous. Reality and fiction align.

Every member of an MC wears a leather vest with a three-piece patch on the back identifying the club name, logo and location – these are
known as the club’s “colors” and are prized above almost everything else by members, “When I got my colors it was the proudest moment of my life” (Wolf 116). These colors are only to be worn by members, “Hells Angels paraphernalia is only for members of our club. No one else but us is allowed to produce, sell or buy any items with the words HELL’S ANGELS and our logo with our DEATH HEAD” (Hells Angels: FAQs). Members also typically wear “1%er” diamond patches identifying themselves as outlaw bikers (this serves to separate the outlaw biker from the 99% of law abiding motorcyclists as determined by the American Motorcycle Association after the Hollister riot of 1947).

As Dylan Clark observes, “people find solidarity, revolt, and individuality by inhabiting a shared costume marking their membership in a subculture” (Clark 224). And most “brothers” – how members of the MC refer to each other – will often also have the club name or logo tattooed on their bodies. Incidentally, if a member with a club tattoo wishes to leave the club without the MC’s permission, the club will remove the tattoo for them. In Season 1 of Sons of Anarchy, “Clay Morrow,” the president of the MC asks a disgraced former Sons member named “Kyle” about his preferred removal of his Sons of Anarchy back tattoo and if he wants “the knife or the flame?” (“Giving Back.” Season 1) Kyle chooses the flame.

In biker subculture, style extends beyond the sartorial or artistic, it permeates every part of the biker’s environment and is intertwined with their individuality, “The integration of personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels of participation provides the foundation for the outlaw-biker subculture” (Wolf 346). These deep and multi-faceted connections are due, in significant part, to the lengthy and challenging initiation rites required of all those who wish to join an MC and become part of this recognized subculture and brotherhood.

Returning to the Hells Angels’ website FAQs page for insight into their process, they provide valuable information for the curious:

*How do I join the club?* If you have to ask, you probably will not understand the answer…if you are really interested you should talk to a member in your area. If you have to ask where the nearest Charter is…you are not ready to join our Motorcycle Club

The implied understanding from the Hells Angels about what’s involved with becoming a member of their MC is the first step towards initiation,
while also dissuading most visitors who are simply curious and/or are unlikely to fit in from pursuing this further. This is a critical differentiation point between biker subculture and other subcultures – you cannot just “join” an MC. There is no sign up sheet. And, unlike with punk subculture, dying your hair, ripping your clothes, listening to The Clash, and assuming a particular affect does not cover the price of admission into biker subculture.

The path to becoming a member of an MC is “tough and most fail” (The Death Head). The timeline to move from interested individual to prospect to “full patch member” can range from months to years, and while you are prospecting you, “...never turn your phone off, you never say no to a member, you are available 24/7, you are a slave to the club” (American Bikers). And then once you become a member the MC becomes your life, “Make sure you’re prepared to give up the family life because that’s what’s going to happen” (American Bikers).

Individuals who join an MC and become part of biker subculture typically have working class roots, (much like members of early punk subculture), and are seeking to be accepted and fulfilled in ways they have been unable to find in traditional society:

A man who enters this subculture in search of an identity looks to the outlaw-biker tradition to provide him with long-standing values, behaviors, and symbols. What he will find are heroes and role models, a personal legacy that is consistent with what he discovered on the streets about the complete man (Wolf 33)

Once an individual earns his place in the MC and becomes part of biker subculture they also then become a critical tool in driving the specific MC’s “machine” and helping to ensure its survival. This integration between the biker and the MC allows the continuation and expansion of the organization while, simultaneously, giving the individual a place to belong and a way to explore their own insecurities within a previously unavailable familial framework, and with a sense of camaraderie that may have been what initially led them to the biker lifestyle:

The outlaw who flies his colors is psychologically transformed. For the rest of his remaining days in the club, the colors will actually magnify the member’s ability to perform as a patch holder. On
one level, the colors act as a uniform that conceals the limits and inadequacies of the members’ concept of self, giving them an aura, a collective power (Wolf 125)

As part of the MC, the biker lives within the set rules and regulations set out by his club – and he does not deviate without permission. Every member embraces strict codes of behavior with regard to their brothers and the rest of society, “You back up your brother no matter what – whether he’s right or wrong. You have to let the world know that you don’t fuck with us” (American Bikers). This inherent sense of understanding and absolute loyalty to the club drives the continued success and growth of the subculture. This circular flow of respect and camaraderie between brothers is what provides the security and comfort the member needs, while also providing the club with the resources it needs to sustain itself and grow. In many ways it is a self-regulating society.

As supportive as life inside an MC may be for its members, for those who break the rules there is little sympathy; the worst offense is betraying the club. Mike Lynn, a former Outlaws member sums it up succinctly, “We have saying: ‘God forgives, Outlaws Don’t;’ and we have a shirt that says ‘snitches are a dying breed’ – so if you rat on the club you’re going to get killed eventually” (Inside The Outlaws). The reason a member would consider ratting on his club is, usually, because they were caught doing something illegal, and law enforcement will use that opportunity to go after the club as a whole.

This essay is not about proving, disproving or exploring the illegal activities within biker subculture but, frankly, it is no surprise that MCs utilize both legal and illegal means to sustain themselves considering that many members have chosen to live outside society’s defined rules. But biker super-subcultures are complex and most have a deep enough infrastructure to withstand the occasional legal setback or snitch. The Hells Angels’ Chuck Zito explains, “One man does not run a club. The Feds can arrest anyone they want but there are a hundred more ready to take the guy’s place” (American Bikers).

It is worth noting what happens when a member of a biker subculture is disillusioned and wants to leave the club as the feelings around the member’s departure are felt very deeply by both the departing member and the MC itself. I am not referring to members like Kyle from Sons of Anarchy, this is about members who have determined that the club is not
what they thought and/or they had enough:

Years of battling my own demons living the outlaw lifestyle brought me to the point where I reached a personal crossroads and I decided to leave the club. I returned home and collected everything that reminded me of the club, started a bonfire and burned everything. I was letting go of an identity. Then I burned all my Harley shirts – that was my whole wardrobe. This was my life (American Bikers)

This story from a former member of the Warlocks is not passive commentary or a casual expression of unhappiness; this is extremely emotional and, in many ways, tragic. His entire identity – right down to his Harley shirts – was the MC. Emotional commitment to membership is a cornerstone of biker subculture. Unlike other subcultures where you can come and go as your attitude, interest, or style changes, for the biker the complete devotion of oneself to the group right down to the significance the member attaches to the clothes on his back, is paramount and further highlights the depth of this subculture. It is extremely difficult and takes enormous personal sacrifice to become part of biker subculture and, once in, most don’t leave until they die.

**Biker Super-Subculture and Mainstream Society**

In my list of what I believe is required for a subculture to be considered a super-subculture, I identified in (2) that a super-subculture “buys (or takes) what it needs from dominant societies to grow and provide for its members.” This sets up an interesting dynamic because, unlike subcultures whose members want to disassociate from mainstream society and either do nothing and/or just spend their time on criminal activities, members of the super-subculture understand that they are reliant on society for certain things that then, in turn, allow their subculture to survive. For bikers, there is an acceptance with minimal hypocrisy that they need, or want, things that society provides. So, for example, many bikers have “real” jobs, own homes and cars, take their kids to school, go Christmas shopping, eat at nice restaurants, hire lawyers, go to the hospital when they are sick, pay taxes, etc. In many ways, they participate in, and contribute to, mainstream society just like everyone else. Granted, if a biker wants
something and can not afford it they may “take” it, but if they have to pay
for something that mainstream society provides then they will often adapt.

The relationship between biker and society is perhaps most evi-
dent with regard to biker super-subcultures and Harley-Davidson motor-
cycles. As mentioned, Harleys are the motorcycle of choice for the major-
ity of biker subcultures and have been for decades, and along with Harley
paraphernalia – as described earlier with the Warlocks member and his
t-shirts – are critical components of a biker’s overall identity. So why is this
important to point out? It is important because in 2013, Harley-Davidson
had worldwide revenues of $5.09 Billion, and Harley-Davidson certainly
is not giving every biker subculture member a free motorcycle (Finan-
cial News). Bikers have to buy every motorcycle and shirt from Harley-
Davidson just like the motorcycle enthusiasts. But biker subculture allows
for this kind of reliance on a specific, for-profit, multi-national company
to supply them with the core piece of their subculture and style – these
subcultures are motorcycle clubs; they don’t exist without the motorcycle.

Let’s revisit the Hells Angels to get a better sense of what would
be an expected dichotomy with regard to Harley-Davidson and biker sub-
culture. Individuals are not allowed to even go “hang out” with the Hells
Angels if they do not have a Harley, let alone expect the latitude to believe
there is an opportunity to join.

Although it seems counterintuitive that the Hells Angels would
insist on a specific commercial brand for even the most basic access to
their subculture and their environment while, at the same time, accept-
ing that this particular brand is the same one that is embraced by millions
of motorcycle enthusiasts, (who clearly generate the majority of Harley-
Davidson’s revenues), the Hells Angels and other outlaw MCs make no
apologies or qualify this requirement in any way. These bikers do not feel
any threat from the millions of individuals who are appropriating this core
piece of their style and identity by riding the same brand of motorcycle.
Hells Angels require their members and associates to ride Harley-Davidson
motorcycles, and given that the Hells Angels are estimated to have ap-
proximately only 2,500 members worldwide, further solidifies the biker
super-subculture classification (Motorcycle Gangs).

When we examine the biker/society relationship from the domi-
nant culture’s perspective, e.g. the motorcycle enthusiast or admirer, we
get a much greater sense of the scale and scope of the top down fracturing
and appropriation that biker super-subculture has been able to withstand.
I am adding the classification of the “admirer” here because there are, as mentioned earlier, other groups that have adopted biker style including heavy metal listeners, punks, and fashion houses like Alexander McQueen. These groups do not dress this way because they necessarily ride motorcycles; they are wearing, or designing, this style of clothing because they simply like the look and the image. For example, in 2010, the Hells Angels sued designer Alexander McQueen for using a similar looking Death Head in his designs (Abraham 2010). That suit was eventually settled when McQueen agreed to recall all his merchandise that featured the Death Head; he had enough common sense to change his designs rather than go up against the Hells Angels – a point worth noting regarding the kind of power this subculture wields.

Finally, it is also critical to look at the biker image as it is represented in advertising – the ultimate identifier of acceptance by the masses and commercial culture. Recall Clark’s example of the punk and the potato chip and then watch the current Progressive, GEICO or Priceline commercials that feature the “biker.” From an advertising standpoint, this way of selling insurance or travel plays right into the motorcycle enthusiast’s desired image addressed earlier in this essay, while also maintaining the mystique of the biker for the benefit – undoubtedly unintentionally – of biker super-subculture.

Conclusion
There are many reasons why subcultures are created and exist in relation to their respective hegemonies. And although subcultures will often sustain themselves for years, few will retain their original purpose, structures and beliefs, let alone survive significant commercial attention, stylistic appropriation, and top down fragmentation from the hegemonies from which they were born. Biker subculture is unusual in this regard as it has, in reality, thrived and grown by adapting to and accommodating multiple levels of style appropriation, by expanding its – real and perceived – association with broad-based consumer products, and by continuing to engage with dominant cultures on its own terms.

There is still a great deal more research and analysis to be done to prove the “subculture versus super-subculture” concept but for the time being – unlike most other subcultures – biker subculture continues to survive and grow regardless of how many connection points are formed between this particular subculture and mainstream society.
WORKS CITED

RESPONSE TO XANADU

KEVIN WARSTADT

And from the pit I saw the keep
That that mad poet glimpsed in sleep
   Its banners flying in the air
And glass that shone with solar glare

Would that I could enter there
And be among the great and fair
And see the world with joyous eyes
   And laugh in merry company

But in the shadow of the dome
I looked upon my humble home
With growing rage, with vile contempt
And lived in gravest temperament

   Twas the shadow ‘d I resent!
   Twere the walls of golden brick!
That Kublai Khan took for his keep
Whilst my shack stood so desolate

   Yet as I looked upon the stone
   A beam of light did pierce a cloud
   And there within my small abode
   I saw a glimmer on the ground

I stooped to see what made the light
And there in cobblestone beheld
   That in the masonry there lay
   The shine of minerals aplenty
And now I saw the keep was gone
The land stretched on in sullen treachery
And cradled a sea of stony homes
Inhabited by others much like me

We stared up at that vacant place
Where once the oft desired stood
And in that moment I did glean
That Xanadu was just a dream
Those Hands

Shelby Kittrell

Only by judging the lines in his hands could one surmise the vitality of his youth. Those hands that once held hand grenades could no longer hold an apple. Those hands once held tight to the woman he loved. That same woman now cares for him as a child rather than a lover. Those hands miss the strength they once possessed, as well as the should be effortless ability to caress the spine of a book.

Once thick and calloused from working night and day in the fields, those hands now trembled uncontrollably, the skin translucent and shriveled, veins visible beneath the surface. Those veins used to swell in the heat of the afternoon sun, when he carelessly ran amongst the olive orchards, racing the sunset and daring his body to use every last breath. Those orchard rows now resembled the pattern on the blanket that was folded neatly over his motionless legs.

They say life is worth living. To him, life had been lived. And though he was still conscious, little remained of his existence. His hands told him this everyday, though his children told him otherwise. They told him he should be grateful, he wanted to tell them he was not. Only his wife could look into his gaze and understand the suffering he endured. She had held those hands for so many years. And only she wished that he would soon pass, for it was she who loved those hands the most.
First in Florida

Shelby Kittrell

Yield to the palmetto bugs and grasshoppers. Semi trucks and smog pass by on hot asphalt. Too much methane in the brain alters perceptions so that objects in the mirror are closer than they appear. Florida is open for business. Fiddler crabs demand respect, claws raised high. Myna birds stuck on repeat, scold “radio-radio-radio” and can only be silenced with homemade corn syrup. High glucose and high spirits give the jitters. Open 24 hours a day. Take a ride on the airboat or the ambulance, both are equally thrilling. Boiled peanuts keep hands occupied. There’s no substitute for eating high on the hog. Portalets signify festivity and funnel cakes. We collide in our inflatable donuts and drink tainted lemonade. No camping in the median, unless you’re feeling frisky. In that case, unfold the rebel flag and stand your ground. Everything looks better from behind.
Beauty Preserved. Photography by: Jennifer Cormack
Eternal Chrysanthemum: The Enduring Legitimacy of Japan’s Imperial Family

Ethan Woodard

The imperial family of Japan is the oldest and longest unbroken hereditary monarchical line in the world. Since the fall of Rome and before the birth of Islam, for 1500 years the Yamato family have successfully laid claim to the title of Emperor. How did a royal family with the crest of a delicate chrysanthemum and drained of nearly all military might in the 12th century manage to hang onto a position of such authority for centuries, even as the rest of the nation fractured and reunified around them? The answer lies in the unique and isolated nature of Japan, its long history as a singular and definable nation, and the remarkable way that its politics and religion interact at the imperial level. The Yamato family maintained their status and legitimacy by becoming deeply ingrained as the Shintoistic personification of the Japanese nation and to remove them would destroy what it meant to be Japanese. This was accomplished not through a claimed legal authority or direct divine mandate, like Western monarchs, but through the fundamental nature of the native religion and a deeply ingrained concept of Japan as a singular idea.

The foundation of Yamato dynasty is mired in myth. Until recently it was accepted that it was founded in the 7th century BCE by the legendary Emperor Jimmu, a direct decedent of Ameratsu, the sun god. However, most modern historians believe that current dynasty began in the 6th century AD with a powerful military conquest that spread across the main island of Honshu undertaken by the historical Emperor Ojin.¹ The exact origin of the Yamato family is shrouded in mystery; most records from that time have been lost to fire, earthquakes, or deliberate purging over the centuries. Throughout its 1500 year history the nature and function of the imperial family has evolved to fit the needs of the times. This evolution led the Yamato dynasty to a very different means of legitimacy as

Emperors than Western monarchs.

The most difficult aspect of royalty in Japan for Westerners to understand is the nature of divinity that the Yamato family laid claim to in order to create legitimacy. Western kings claimed many different means through which to grant legitimacy to their positions and what those positions meant. A European king was the absolute ruler of his domain and he was sovereign, that is, he embodied the state in matters of politics. However, the king still was a man and whether or not the king claimed legitimacy through a divine right, eventually that king would die and another would assume the office. Because most Western religions equate divinity with immortality this dualism between the immortal and mortal natures of the king caused dissonance from a Western perspective. Therefore, in order resolve this dissonance Western monarchies were codified through a separate immortal concept: law. Ernst Kantorowicz, for example, discussed Medieval European law on the nature of monarchs in The King’s Two Bodies. He wrote that sovereigns were bisected into both a mortal body and an immortal superbody: the legal authority of the king:

This migration of the “Soul,” that is, of the immortal part of kingship, from one incarnation to another as expressed by the concept of the king’s demise is certainly one of the essentials of the whole theory of the King’s Two Bodies. It has preserved its validity for practically all time to come. Interesting, however is the fact that this “incarnation” of the body politic in a king of flesh not only does away with the human imperfections of the body natural, but conveys “immortality” to the individual king as King, that is, with regard to his superbody (13)

This concept of a king as both divine and mortal is essential to ensuring that a new king has legitimacy and can maintain continuity of law from a Western perspective. For the Japanese imperial family, however, this juxtaposition of mortal vs. immortal bodies was unnecessary. As Ben–Ami Shillony argues in his book Enigma of the Emperors, “While in Europe the monarch was God’s representative on Earth, charged with the implementation of His orders, the Japanese gods did not issue orders and did not need a monarch to implement them. The emperor was neither a pope, laying down codes of behavior, nor a religious authority prescribing rituals
and heading the priesthood” (Shillony 20). The Emperor of Japan neither created religions nor led them; instead, he was first among worshippers in a completely different kind of spirituality.

Just as the legal theory of King’s Two Bodies draws its philosophical foundation from the divinity and mortality of Jesus Christ, so too did the divinity of the imperial family derive its foundation from Shinto. Shinto is the religion native to Japan, traditionally equated with spiritualism, and though there are some familiar aspects of Western spiritual worship in Shinto the full meaning is far more complicated. The word for “spirit” in Japanese is kami, but the word for “god” is also kami. For Shinto practitioners in many ways spirits and gods are one in the same. Everything has a spirit or kami: the sun, rice, mountains, animals, and even individual objects may eventually gain enough spiritual energy or worthiness and become active spirits. These spirits may also be gods, but not gods as they are understood in a Western context. Because a spirit is a real world object or concept the more important the object or concept, the more powerful the spirit, and if an object or concept is important enough, their spirit, or kami, is specifically worshiped and it becomes a god.2 Ameratsu is the kami of the sun, and is therefore the most important god, but Ameratsu is not omnipotent, omniscient, or even immortal, only very powerful. A god is the embodiment of an object or a concept, so while a god can be killed, to do so would irrevocably damage whatever the god embodies and would, therefore, be considered unthinkable. The dead too, are important in Shinto, for once a human has shed their mortal body, they become a spirit. Ancestor worship is a keystone of Shinto practice, as it is believed that families are irrevocably tied through these spiritual bonds.3 Bad things done in life harm not only the individual but also the ancestors and therefore the entire family.

This concept of representative and familial divinity is essential to understanding the longevity of the Yamato imperial family’s reign. The dynasty was able to become the god/kami of the political nation of Japan, a representation of the idea of a “Japan.” This is different from Western

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monarchs because while a king may claim to speak for a nation, and their rule may be hereditary, the Yamato legitimacy is predicated on the idea that without their family the political entity of Japan would be damaged. The imperial family made itself integral to Japan through religious ceremony. For most of Japanese history the Emperor was the single most important figure in Shinto, not because he was its leader, but because he performed the most important ceremonies for the most important gods, managed the calendar, and chose which days were lucky and unlucky.\(^4\) The Emperor never generated religious ceremonies or claimed to speak for gods; he was, instead, first among worshippers. This cemented the Yamato family’s status as religious figures and tied them to the notion of continuing divinity. Whether by accident of history or specific intent, the Yamato family became a Shintoistic divinity such that the family, itself was, in many ways, the kami of the nation of Japan. Not Japan in the sense of the landmass, but the nation as a distinct socio-political cultural identity.

When the Yamato dynasty was founded sometime in the 6\(^{th}\) century AD, it was most likely done so in the traditional manner of military conquest over large areas of territory. However, as the dynasty continued over hundreds of years the Yamato family worked to define themselves as part of the essential fabric of Japan.\(^5\) They did this through a number of ways: first they created history and a legacy. As stated above, until the modern era it was generally accepted that the founder of the Yamato dynasty was the legendary half-god Emperor Jimmu who lived sometime in the 7\(^{th}\) century BCE. This history was accepted because all official Japanese records collaborated and provided a detailed (and partly fictional) genealogy of the imperial family for dozens of generations. By cross referencing histories with regional neighbors in China and Korea, historians have learned that this mythology was already fully institutionalized by the 11\(^{th}\) century.\(^6\) Chinese histories of the Japanese imperial family perfectly match the Japanese versions from that point on. It is likely that at some point an official history of divine origin was commissioned. In much the same way

\(^4\) Ibid


that Virgil’s Aeneid provided the Emperor Augustus legitimacy by tying his family to the Classical pantheon and the foundation of Rome, this fictitious history provided the Yamato’s a similar legitimacy within Japan.

This monopolization of history was made possible partly because there is no direct historical evidence that prior to 1945 that Japan had ever been conquered by an outside force. History is rarely rewritten to diminish the importance of the ruling sovereign. As a result of Japan’s military ability and relative geographic isolation there were very few foreigners or different cultures that ever came to settle the islands, and the nation was able to maintain an incredibly powerful and singular idea of what it meant to be Japanese. This unity of national identity was essential for the preservation of the imperial family. By instituting a millennia old history the Yamato family appealed to ancestral worship, by grounding that history in divinity they appealed to respect for the divine, and by assuming the highest authority in a religion without leading it they tied their family to the spiritual health of the whole nation. To harm the Yamato family would be to harm the whole of Japan, and thus the family became the kami of the national Japanese identity. These internal factors made it difficult for anyone born into Japanese culture to depose the Yamato family. Only a foreign conqueror unconcerned with the spiritual harm destroying the royal family might cause would have the authority to do so, this is how the family maintained its sovereign status over the centuries.

While the reign of the Yamato dynasty was unbroken, this does not mean that it was unchanging. Yet another factor in the imperial family’s continued survival is their ability to shift in their nature and capacity as rulers. Though direct historical records are sparse from the founding of the dynasty in the 6th century AD to the 12th century the Emperors were likely rulers that held direct political and military power in a manner relatively similar to that of their Western counterparts. However, in 1192 a powerful aristocrat named Minamoto no Yoritomo took command of the majority of the Japanese military forces and installed himself as a permanent military ruler: the Shogun. Shogun had previously been a high ranking military title but from this point forward came to mean the de facto political and military ruler of Japan. Theoretically, the Shogun was subservient to the Emperor, but in practice it was the Shoguns that politically controlled Japan until the 14th century. This era of Shogunate control is known in Japan

as the Kamakura Era. This change in power raises the question of why no Shogun ever attempted to depose the Yamato family and install their own on the imperial throne. The answer lies in the divine ties the Yamato family had to Japan and their own willingness to accept change.

The Shintoistic symbiotic relationship that the Yamato family held with Japan affected not only the people of the nation but their rulers as well. The various Shoguns may have been prepared to see the imperial family as political rivals, but that did not mean that they were not considered divine. It is important to remember that it is the Yamato family as a whole, and not specific family members or Emperors which held this nature of untouchable divinity. This differs from a European line of succession for two reasons: 1. The Yamato family were the only royalty that existed for Japan. Several times in the history of Western nations a royal line might be extinguished only for new royalty from another nation to assume the position through a contrivance of ancestry. For example, when the Dutch William of Orange took the throne of England after Oliver Crowell’s destruction of the previous English line. In Japan the operative concept was not of royalty in general, but of the Yamato family in particular. 2. Living Emperors were not, by themselves, divine. Singular Emperors were merely the current extension of the Yamato dynasty, the Yamato kami, which represented the political and cultural nation of Japan. Unlike the king’s two bodies, there was only one superbody, the kami, which was the entire Yamato line and the sitting Emperor which existed as an extension of that superbody, like a limb.

An Emperor could make mistakes, get sick, be assassinated, all without losing his divinity, because he was only a piece of a much larger family that were all divinely connected to the spirits of their ancestors. While kami may be gods, Shinto holds that gods and spirits are living beings directly connected to their embodiments. If one killed the kami of a book, it would irreparably damage that single book, but if one killed the kami of books, it would damage all books everywhere. In that same way if an Emperor was killed, that would damage that Emperor’s kami or spirit, but if the Yamato line was deposed or killed, that would damage their collective kami and the nation of Japan as a whole and what it meant to be Japanese.

This belief wasn’t just limited to the Shoguns of the Kamakura Era; it was shared by the imperial family themselves. That is why, while the
Shoguns held power, the Emperors were largely content to remain as politically weak, highly spiritual figures, to bring destruction upon themselves would bring destruction upon Japan, and instead of risking the destruction of their lineage and the nation, they devoted themselves to cultural refinement and aesthetic pursuits. From the beginning of the Kamakura period in the 12th century, through the Sengoku Era of the 15th century, the Tokugawa Era of the 17th century, and all the way to the Meiji Restoration in 19th century Emperors spent most of their days in complete comfort attending to religious and cultural pursuits and spent less and less time on political matters. Similarly, the family largely remained in Kyoto, the historic capital of Japan. The Emperor became a mythical figure to most of the populace, and for hundreds of years no Emperor was ever seen in person outside the imperial palace by anyone other than nobility. This detachment and mythology further contributed to the atmosphere of divinity surrounding the family and even as the territorial unity of Japan disintegrated and then re-solidified the shared spiritual and cultural unity of what it meant to be Japanese paved the way for Yamato’s return to prominence.

With the dawning of the Tokugawa Era the position of the Emperor became increasingly precarious and symbolic. Completely cut off from direct exposure to the populace the imperial family finished its shift from a political or social significance into one of near complete myth. In the entire history of the Yamato family this was when their political power was at its weakest and the closest the family had come to annihilation. The only thing that prevented their destruction was the theology attached to their name. The religious, divine significance that the family carried even as their practical power faded. This living mythology was responsible for the family’s return to power during the Meiji Restoration.

The turning point for the Yamato dynasty came in 1853 when United States Admiral Matthew Perry arrived in Edo Bay with four battleships and threatened to bombard the city with the superior weapons aboard, unless the nation was opened for trade. This crisis ended the Shogunate’s monopoly on political authority and left the societal and political elite of the nation seeking a new source of legitimacy which they found

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in the Emperor. The warrior class of the samurai had been cultivated by successive generations of Shoguns as a way to maintain a feudalistic system of governance. However, the opening of Japan to the West had the effect of making a feudal system obsolete, and in response a significant portion of the warrior class began to lay the foundations of a modern national army modeled after industrialized European nations.\textsuperscript{10}

In order to legitimate this great expansion of the warrior class to include nearly all able-bodied men, the samurai required a central authority that would have unquestioned legitimacy and sovereignty. The sequestration of the imperial family within their palace in Kyoto had caused the Emperor to take on mythic as well as divine traits. In 1876 Emperor Meiji was ascended to the throne, and a new political sovereign rose. Within ten years the Shogunate came to an end, the Emperor left Kyoto for the first time in centuries, and the tradition of the cultural Emperor ended. Emperor Meiji became a standard-bearer for Japan’s industrialization. The first image of an Emperor ever to be widely distributed across Japan was that of the Emperor in a Western-style military uniform in a pose very similar to that of the European royalty of the day. In keeping with the shifting nature of the Japanese Emperor, Meiji took on a military significance in addition to his continuing divinity and renewed political importance.

The military leadership was the practical political authority in Japan during the Meiji Era, but they drew their legitimacy from the imperial family. This was because the ruling class changed the religious meaning of the Emperor from a Shintoistic personification or first among worshipers figure to a more Western direct deification. The Emperor remained the kami of all Japan, but that role expanded from the representation of the political and cultural nation to all aspects of life and death amongst the civilian and military populations. There is a tendency in Western thought to classify the Japanese Emperor as a figurehead during this period of Japanese history, but that does not adequately describe the meaning of the sovereignty of the Emperor at the time. All orders throughout the military high command were done so in the name of the Emperor and even if he did not create them, without his official approval they carried no legitimacy.\textsuperscript{11}


Meiji was briefly succeeded by the Emperor Taisho who was confined to his sickbed for the majority of his fourteen year reign and upon his death Emperor Hirohito took the throne. Hirohito had a remarkable flexibility in his identity and his role as Emperor. Hirohito was the first Emperor to make his skepticism about his own divinity known and actively disliked the military’s efforts to deify him in the style of Western monarchs. Yet, he also respected the spiritual and political sovereignty of the imperial family itself and continued his role as the military Emperor until the last days of World War II. During the American occupation Hirohito would sign proclamations that would disavowed his own divinity, but he refused any that disavowed the divinity of his ancestors. These actions fit perfectly into the continuing idea that the Yamato family, from the 7th century to the present day, and not a single Emperor are sovereign over Japan. After his death and to this day the sitting Emperor still continues many of the most important Shinto rituals for the most important gods. However, members of the imperial family are now allowed to marry regardless of class status, their children attend normal schools and universities, and in recent public opinion polls the Japanese public regards the imperial family today not with awe, but with affection. This shift in the status of the imperial family should not be surprising, for it is just the latest in a long line of changes from a monarchy that draws its legitimacy adaptations as much as tradition.

The divine nature of the Yamato family is difficult for Westerners to understand. Their legitimacy, their divinity was not granted by God in the manner of European kings, nor are they gods made flesh like the kings and pharaohs of the ancient world. The divinity and legitimacy of the Japanese imperial family is born from the unique religious and geopolitical climate of their homeland. The exact nature of their purpose and power has changed over and over again through the centuries, but throughout it all they have remained unbroken by forging a relationship with the spiritual heart of their people. As the nature of those people, their government, and their territories has changed the imperial family has changed with them. Japan and the Yamato imperial family are inextricably linked; remove one and the other risks becoming meaningless.

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Watering Flowers. Photography by: Mara Laine
ON THE WALL:
REFLECTIONS ON CLASS AND INCARCERATION

TRISHA DENTON

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of this term I often studied in the basement of Baker Library, emboldened by the colors of Orozco’s mural, *The Epic Of American Civilization*. I like the space because of its walls, but also because of its silence. It is a safe container for my senses to come to rest and stew in its contents. I used this container to absorb a difficult subject: mass incarceration. I was studying incarceration as part of a class entitled “Telling Stories for Social Change,” facilitated by Chilean-born artist and activist Pati Hernandez. A disciple of philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, Hernandez models critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy pairs reflective thought and action with theoretical study. The practice of integrating the two is known as “praxis.”

Telling Stories for Social Change combines the theoretical work of radical thinkers such as Freire, Bell Hooks, Michel Foucault, and Angela Davis with a creative platform. The platform is a collaborative performance interweaving narrative with music, theater, poetry and testimonials. Developed by Hernandez over a 15-year period, the platform has become known as Telling My Story. For this class, Telling My Story partnered with the Sullivan County Correctional Facility in Claremont, NH, allowing Dartmouth students to work along-side inmates.

When I saw that the course was offered during my first semester in Dartmouth’s Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program, it seemed like the perfect gateway into academia from my professional work. I tried to imagine what it would be like based on the description:

Our social structure is full of unseen, unspoken, and unheard dynamics. These hidden and irresponsible social behaviors have always contributed to the building of visible and invisible social walls. Behind these walls, a growing invisible population has
found a way to social visibility through addiction, violence, and crime. This course offers students the unique opportunity to collaborate with a group of people from behind those social walls from two distinct perspectives: theoretical and practical.

Something kept calling me to this course. The use of the word “walls” – and how it spoke to the process that had brought me to Dartmouth. It excited me as an explorer. I wanted to excavate the walls that framed my own known reality. Were they solid, like the foundation of Baker Library, radicalized by Orozco’s colorful visions? One of these visions, entitled Modern Migration of the Spirit, depicts a defiant, messianic figure that has molted to reveal a new, raw, sensing-self. In the act of rejecting his “destiny,” the oppressive ideas, institutions and systems that frustrate the emancipation of humanity are “relegated to the junk heap of history” (Baas 11).

How was I to know Modern Migration of the Spirit would serve as a blueprint to remodel my reality through Telling My Story? Could I have sensed that my own “destiny” was surrounded by walls, built on the acceptance of oppressive ideas, institutions, and systems? Or more profoundly, that the emancipation of my own humanity could only manifest through a process of humanizing those around me?

INSTITUTIONS

In my work, I have been surrounded by striving idealists for the past decade. I was exhausted. Not by the work, but by the “scene.” A scene comprised of liberals co-opting the struggles of others for pats on the back. Using others as the silver lining to their work: a merit badge. Or by ever-so-clever art that frames honest, human experience as spectacle. Or by radical activism that fights for social causes because of the individual’s compulsion and perfectionism. Or by technical masters who use art to impress, rather than express. Tired of behavior that perpetuates the subordination of others by the creation of an upper hand; dichotomies such as “artists are special,” “only some are born with talent,” “few people have what it takes to be successful.” I needed a break from my work in social justice and the arts.

The idea to attend Dartmouth arose as I walked along a precipice on a southern Vermont trail. It started as a sensation that ascended from
my guts. My mind questioned where this impulse had come from. Why on earth would I do a liberal studies program? My application to grad school should have been a time of respite – sorely needed personal time. A time to reel in and map the parameters of my identity once more, and relocate where my individual contributions came from and came to rest. I had been surrounded by people who were project/product driven addicts, justifying their compulsion with a “cause” for too long. Couldn’t I just be a fighter fighting my own fight (for once)? But stronger than that consideration was an innocent desire: to broaden my social connectivity. Mainly, to traverse the cultural boundaries that separates the strata of “class.” Why? Because as an artist, I am paid by the highest class, yet I teach the middle class, but I live in the lowest class. Dartmouth seemed like the ideal environment to step outside of the collective brawl and articulate my fight. For some reason, I suspected the perfect environment for this would be a wealthy, traditional institution. Within the walls of the Ivory Tower. A place in which I had no experience.

It is quite a contradiction. Because, the institution I was coming from was the institution of poverty. I think of poverty as an institution because it is largely created and maintained by the cultural desires of the upper classes. Like an art museum. It is an establishment. Although it is hard to recognize in our country, we are functioning in a complex and invisible, “caste or apartheid system” (Meiners 16). In the words of Bell Hooks, “It is apparent that one of the primary reasons we have not experienced a revolution of values is that a culture of domination necessarily promotes addiction to lying and denial.” Hooks notes that this addiction is masked in mythology to hide, “the fact that capitalism requires the existence of a mass underclass of surplus labor.”

Raised in a trailer park near the automobile factories of Detroit, I have always been a card-carrying member of this underclass. But it is not an institution that you get accepted into, like Dartmouth. I had been pushed into the institution of poverty. Because as a girl, I had been pushed out of high school and pushed into adulthood, and as a single mother, pushed out the workplace and pushed into the welfare system. I always pushed back, but never thought that I would push my way out of the one institution that had consistently molded me. Consistently reinforced my “place.” Much like the reinforcement, security and predictability an Ivy-League institution can offer one’s future.
But the institution of poverty had not increased my capacity for connectivity. It is an isolating institution, because you are invisible to the people who created it. When admitted to this institution you feel hoodwinked by its creators. You are forced to recognize that you’ve been “kept” from higher education and encouraged to become a workhorse for another man’s success. You are told its best to focus on your athleticism, or your looks, or finding a husband that can take care of you if you are not satisfied with the scant opportunities the institution offers. Invisible walls are built around you. Walls.

ADMITTANCE

Mainly, I enrolled in Telling Stories for Social Change, because I felt I had been wrongly admitted to the institution of poverty. I sensed this was related to incarceration. My ability to identify walls had brought me to Dartmouth. I was certain that by committing to the MALS program and Telling My Story course, I would spring board into higher levels of social connectivity. Yet, the first weeks of the course those old walls – stigma, limitation and judgment, were even more fortified. I was crashing up against them trying to makes sense of why I felt alien. I wrote:

Thursday was the first day I’ve had culture shock in a long while. Not because of the female inmates, but because of the difference between Claremont and Hanover. Sullivan County Correctional Facility and Dartmouth. Honestly I felt more comfortable with the women in the jail than I did on campus! I have never been in an environment like Dartmouth. Where Equestrian Teams and Boarding Schools and Weekend-Vacations- To-Warm-Places-During-The-Winter are norms. It is going to take a lot of getting used to (Denton, Week 1).

I was entering into a state of alterity – the sense of being radically alien to the self or a particular cultural orientation. A few weeks in, I noted:

I continued to feel like a fish out of water on Tuesday. When I am alone on the campus at Dartmouth, it seems like the
world is my oyster and I’m finally making strides towards legitimacy in my profession... being more connected... seeking truth through the commitment to my path. But as soon as I have any social interactions, I’m struck by such a strong “I” and “you,” “us” and “them” barrage of feelings (Denton, Week 3).

The initial class readings were from Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Bell Hook’s Teaching to Trangress. My aggravated state was prodded by the texts, which highlighted polarizations of “oppressed/ oppressor” and “black/white” and “feminist/patriarch.” As a woman who has felt “kept” from the world, it was all to easy for me to identify with their “oppressed.” But I could not swallow the work whole, noting:

In general, I dislike reading revolutionary texts. Those of the anarchists, socialists and radicals that deeply influenced the communities that made me. The social clans of my punk rock youth, my vagabond years, impressionable undergraduate at Goddard, and now, the lively crew of the Old North End in Burlington. It has always been intuitive for me to think along these lines, The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Sharrow’s ideas of deep listening and community, McIntosh’s commitment to self-awareness and social sensitivity, but to read these things has been difficult for me in the past. Not difficult because it’s too challenging in vocabulary or concepts, but difficult because words like “oppressed” and other strong language feel impractical or too jarring or confrontational to someone who identifies with the material. Me. Single Mother. Woman. Artist. Working Class. I don’t or didn’t or won’t know where to start to escape the isolation that these words imply. And the intensity [suggests it is] the worst place to be – on the bottom. In these texts, it is made to seem like being poor is the ugliest thing one can be. Your days are devoid of any beauty or small acts of hope (Denton, Week 1).

I resented the suggestion that the constraints I had experienced growing up poor were of no value. That my experience of persevering through subjugation or alienation was devoid of worth. Quite honestly,
I value the adversity of home instability, food insecurity, an absent family, interrupted education and lack of opportunities. These circumstances enabled me to cultivate amazing inner resources – foremost, the development of the core of hope, optimism and resistance: IMAGINATION.

Where would I be without strength of imagination? I value this aspect of consciousness above anything else. In an essay from Critical Pedagogy: Where Are We Now, NPR correspondent, Eric Weiner writes:

Imagination then is, in part, manifested in the act of seeing what is not yet there, speculating how it might come about, rewriting what has come before, and breaking through “the real;” it is thinking the improbable as possible, just as it is feeling, seeing, hearing, sensing, and doing that which is not supposed to be felt, saw, heard, sensed and done (Weiner 58).

Hadn’t the idea to attend Dartmouth arisen from my imagination in the first place? Did I intuit that this would be the setting that would allow me to break through “the real” that I felt held back by; break through walls created by oppressive ideas, institutions, and systems?

THE “OTHER”

One exercise we used in Telling My Story is called a “bombardment.” Seated in a circle, each individual was given undivided attention to say their piece. Given a prompt, each participant speaks without interruption, response or feedback. During a bombardment at the facility, the prompt was to name five things you like and five things you did not like. I was challenged by this session, because if the intention had been to recognize common themes in the responses, I felt:

Painfully aware of the disparity of experience between the prisoners and the students. The prisoners mainly spoke fondly of the things they missed and their present struggles, whereas most of the students could have come up with long lists of preferences that defined who they were. It almost felt embarrassing to hear about “traveling” and “yoga on the beach”, not because I don’t thoroughly enjoy these things – but they seemed like pretentious or inaccessible [past times] to the inmates. I’m afraid it might
arouse jealousy or worse, intimidation to bring these things up (Denton, Week 2).

I was not afraid of offending the inmates with the honesty of our responses, but I felt sensitive about mentioning things that would make their lives feel inferior. Claustrophobic. They were in a more vulnerable position than those of us coming from “the outside.” I had developed a chip-on-my-shoulder toward my fellow students that was so large it could have been a wall. I was annoyed that I was grouped with the Dartmouth students, and did not want to be judged by the same standards. I felt like they were bred and breeding a culture of elitism and those values were embodied regardless of their good nature. I was not cut of that cloth.

Commenting on the artificial boundaries of this insider/outside mentality, Hooks states in Teaching to Transgress that, “racism, sexism, and class elitism shape the structures of classrooms, creating a lived reality of insider versus outsider that is predetermined, often in place before any class discussion begins” (Hooks 81). I was wary, thinking the ghosts of the patriarchs that designed our academic culture would haunt the circles we held at the facility. And that the societal differences would be too great to overcome to access a shared learning experience.

In an attempt to overcome this, I observed Hernandez’s masterful ability to disarm power-dynamics. To soothe intimidation and vulnerability, she advised us to simply “be presence.” I struggled in my attempts to emulate this because I felt like I had to do something. I argued:

Does being “presence” (to some extent) mean being silent? I don’t want to model silence. At least not all the time. Mainly when the inmates’ stories move and inspire me. Do I have to perpetuate the seesaw of power play by adopting silence due to the chance that I might be seen as oppressive, up on a pulpit of privilege? I really think that if we want to do away with the myth of interpersonal divisions then there has to be authenticity of sharing. Because maybe it is okay if “privilege” is revealed. Or lack thereof. Otherwise, it is a missed opportunity for connection that gets written about as an “interesting” social experiment/experience, because there wasn’t any true adherence, cohesion, identification (Denton, Week 4).
Over time, in my attempts to be “presence,” I was overcome by an awareness of a painful duality within. I could not tell if I was feeling it, experiencing it or witnessing it. If it came from inside or out. Freire articulates the duality:

The oppressed suffer from the duality, which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create in their power to transform the world (Freire 48).

In reading about this and maintaining “presence,” the giant chip-on-the-shoulder slowly softened. I had grown to regard the students as just as unfortunate as the inmates in how they experienced “freedom.” That “yoga on the beach” and “traveling” did not necessarily balance out the pressures of a competitive, market-driven culture. These students were considered “fortunate” and “gifted,” but didn’t have permission to enjoy the freedom that their privileges afforded them. They were constantly being pushed towards grander ideals of greatness. I was shifting into this lens where I began to see everyone around me as victims of a dark, dehumanizing system – capitalism. Contrary to my writings from the first couple weeks, I was no longer comforted by Freire’s straightforward divisions of hierarchical structure. The innocent “oppressed” and the corrupt “oppressors” felt like the same sort of deductive reasoning that builds and maintains the top-down hierarchies he complains of. Freire’s chip-on-the-shoulder toward the “rich and powerful” still paid homage to the myth that the rich and powerful “own” all our power. I had come to believe that the walls built around class, sex, and race, were only impassable because of a flawed buy-in system of belief that ALL of us are unwittingly buying into. Some
of us benefit from it unwittingly. Some of us benefit from it wittingly. And some of us suffer from it. Without wit.

IMAGINING THE REAL

I was frustrated with the creative process of Telling My Story, until the last couple weeks. During a brainstorming session for our performance “Strength in The Number Yellow,” one of the inmates in my cohort had a vision. She saw the image of an inmate standing behind a window. Although there were many things happening beyond the window, there was only a small opening through which she could see out. This was because full visibility was obscured by oppressive concepts blinding her perspective. The words “Manipulation,” “Deceit,” “Society,” “Loss,” “Anxiety,” and “Incarceration,” blocked the woman’s view of the world outside. The brilliant woman that presented this image, contextualized the concept further by saying that the inmate behind the window was the only one who could remove these blinders from her own perspective. She could practice to strip them away, piece by piece in hope of fully accessing the experiences of her own life.

Canadian physician and professor, Dr. Gabor Maté writes in his introduction to In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts:

The mandala, the Buddhist Wheel of Life, revolves through six realms. Each realm is populated by characters representing aspects of human existence—our various ways of being. In the Beast Realm we are driven by basic survival instincts and appetites such as physical hunger and sexuality, what Freud called the Id. The denizens of the Hell Realm are trapped in states of unbearable rage and anxiety. In the God Realm we transcend our troubles and our egos through sensual, aesthetic or religious experience, but only temporarily and in ignorance of spiritual truth. Even this enviable state is tinged with loss and suffering. The inhabitants of the Hungry Ghost Realm are depicted as creatures with scrawny necks, small mouths, emaciated limbs and large, bloated, empty bellies. This is the domain of addiction, where we constantly seek something outside ourselves to curb an insatiable yearning for relief or fulfillment. The aching emptiness is perpetual because the substances, objects or pursuits we hope will soothe it are not what we really need. We don’t know what we need, and so long
as we stay in the hungry ghost mode, we’ll never know. We haunt our lives without being fully present (Mate 1).

Our culture teaches us to idealize a higher status. We worship celebrity and wealth. But in doing that we are investing our power into a myth of power. We waste our power by displacing it outside of ourselves. Our culture cultivates power-hunger: addiction to domination and constant yearning, striving for something outside of ourselves that we don’t even need. The image of someone as a ghost that haunts their own life is so powerful to me. Only when we are fully present are we liberated. The “rich and powerful” may have a wealth of resources, opportunities and social leverage, but it is not freedom. Or authenticity. Or joy. It is my personal belief that remaining neutral or making choices that result in oppression manifest as internalized anguish. Anxiety and fear. Therefore, people who stronghold power for their own self-interests, are plagued by these symptoms and unable to access the comfort we all believe wealth and power promise us.

In this sense, if we are to rethink/re-imagine the real by dissolving the illusions of this buy-in system, I am suggesting a place to start. Oppressed and oppressor alike, need to examine our idolization and aggrandizement of “the rich and powerful.” By changing the assumption that being “rich and powerful” is superior, we can begin to accurately acknowledge our own self-worth. We will find that we are all powerful. We will recognize the power of humanity, outside these systems of classification that are based on quantity vs. quality, and contrived, artificial boundaries. We will find our own true agency in interconnectedness. But, to do this there needs to be a commitment to abolishing our culture “of lying and denial.” From any standpoint, we must reclaim truth by refusing to give power to the mythmakers and stakeholders of this system of deceit. We must instead invest belief into one another by refusing the tenements of capitalism – status, wealth, competition and domination.

Freire reminds us that, “Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in an ivory tower isolation, but only in communication.” Telling My Story has taught me that two of the most powerful tools we can use for this are within our power – communication and imagination. Through authentic communication with the inmates, I was able to access deep, new learning. The woman that envisioned the inmate behind the window enabled me to tear down some blinders
that were keeping me from fully accessing the experiences of my own life. Weiner articulates my process in *Crisis of The Imagination*:

Constructing a new critical imaginary is about rejecting the imperatives of realism. This is different than embracing fantasy; rejecting the imperative of realism – rewriting the categories of the real – means on one hand, questioning the very epistemological foundation upon which our most cherished social and political assumptions rest, while on the other hand, developing new categories from which to design new theoretical models of thought and action. This process requires a rewriting/renewing/reviving of our epistemological imaginations; only from this activity can we begin to radically intervene into the fetish of realism; a fetish which reduces imagination to the practice of escape (Weiner 58).

For me, liberation would not come in the form of immunity. Or invincibility. Escape from poverty. Or a master’s degree. It would come from imagination – a great source of strength for the endurance needed to break through the walls of “the real” over and over and over again.

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The Ladybug Quest. Photography by: Mara Laine
WHO NEEDS A HOMELAND? 
ROMANTICISM AND THE (UN)SETTLEMENT OF MODERN DAY ARMENIA

JOSHUA SEMERJIAN

Introduction

There are two Armenian identities at work in understanding the longing to know and preserve Armenianness. The first is the physical and emotional ties to either an Armenian community in diasporas or in the homeland. These ties are universally expressed among many ethnic groups, and are sometimes suggested to be primordial. The second is a political identity, one in which people feel compelled to support Armenian causes and interests. Feeling Armenian and supporting Armenia mark the core Armenian identities that explain the interest in building a strong Armenian nation. Central to maintaining this core is solidarity around unaccomplished goals necessary for nation building. These identities, coupled with contention around questions of genocide and territorial boundaries, impassion them to feel like they need a home country to speak of and write about, to celebrate and perhaps even to visit or repatriate.

I situate myself in this discussion wondering how Armenian I feel, how Armenian others consider me to be, and struggle to know if my detachment from the homeland offends the national and ethnic cause. How much in agreement are homeland and diasporic Armenians about their history, national borders, ethnicity, religion and culture? What’s wrong with liberation from attachment? What’s so terrible about living a nomadic or exilic life? Putting basic human needs aside, I question the need to be grounded, physically or symbolically. I think grounding may also take place in de-territorialized space, in the freedom of knowing that one is free to enter or exit. However attractive it sounds, to emotively connect with others around an identity or a nation, belonging here or there is not necessary to enjoy life or to have a good life. It’s too sentimental, egotistical and exclusive to have legitimacy as a natural state of affairs. Cannot difference be the connection and a way to find comfort with one’s self and in relationships with others?
But at the same time, I feel like that argument pits me against the world. Most people have a need to be needed, to belong to a group or a place. This puts me in the unique position to argue why Armenians need a homeland when my starting place for making such a claim is doubt. Who belongs to the Armenian ethnicity is perplexing, and as much as I would like to not discuss Armenians homogeneously, the current state of international political affairs requires some generalizations. Pattie (1994) points out that “in the nineteenth century, intellectuals, assisted by the advent of mass education and fearful of the ever-increasing physical dislocation of Armenians and their communities, insisted on a narrow and stringent definition of Armenian ‘public’ identity: an Armenian was defined by language, church, and shared history, according to intellectuals who enjoyed some status” (189-190). There are diasporic Armenian communities where traditional Armenianness preserves and reproduces the past, but its completion is passing. As Pattie correctly says, “today, any such stringently defined ‘formal’ identity is fiercely contested” (190).

This paper blends history and politics with memory and emotion to understand the romantic nationalism felt among Armenians both within the Republic and in Diaspora. I seek to understand why Armenians have a need to be seen as Armenian and to involve themselves in the social, cultural and political lives of each other. Specifically, I argue that the unsettled questions about deportation and genocide, contested national borders, and self-identification as a victim diaspora strengthen Armenia homeland and diaspora relations about creating a sense of community and solidarity around nation-building. These unanswered circumstances explain why Armenians everywhere feel a need to have and know a homeland, and the presence of an Armenian nation, whether actual or anticipated, accomplishes this need.

**The Ubiquity of Romantic Nationalism**

The recent history of creating borders compels us to choose geopolitical-national-ethnic identities. Armenians are not unique in feeling attachment to their homeland, or as many have referred to it, the old country. Ties to one’s country of origin, or ethnic nation or geographic territory of origin, occur among people regardless of residence at home or in diasporas. While generational differences manifest as ethnic groups assimilate into their host countries (for example, differences in knowledge of
and attachment to religion, language, family traditions and gender roles), ethnic identity claims are generally homogeneous. Group, racial, or ethnic homogeneity is always ideological and to make my points clear some generalizations must be made. Perhaps, as I suggested above, my argument is best understood in proximity to political activism, national interests, and community consciousness. Cohen (1996) explains that, “national identities are under challenge from de-territorialized social identities. In the age of globalization, the world is being organized vertically by nation-states and regions, but horizontally by an overlapping, permeable, multiple system of interactions. This system creates communities not of place but of interest, based on shared opinions and beliefs” (517). Therefore, though I speak as if all Armenians share this attachment, individuals can decide when and how much they want to claim attachment to their ethnic identity or homeland.

The construction of nation-states facilitates connections to bordered spaces. Kaldor (2004) says, “The emergence of national cultures is associated with the rise of the modern state and the spread of primary education” (163). Kaldor continues to make the connection between passion and war as the cause of nationalism, saying that passion is tied to death and “that war constructs nationalism rather than the other way around. That is why military heroes and battles are such an important part of the nationalist narrative” (165). Transnational identity has also become the modern conceptualization of race and ethnic groups, often denoted by hyphenation (e.g. African-American, Armenian-American, Asian-American). Hybrid identity coupled with the trans-global order of privatization and deregulation, including the ease of mass communication and collectivity-at-a-distance, constructs a real-but-invented interest in sustaining a connection with geographic and imaginary homelands. Furthermore, the relationship between war and nationalism is particularly relevant to the Armenian cause because many questions about their early twentieth century circumstances remain unsettled.

Diaspora Armenians in democratic states are advantaged in their feelings for Armenia as they are free to penetrate and participate in politics in their hostlands while also building solidarity through media, transnational social networks, and organizations and institutions that appeal to Armenian politics, opinions and remembrances. In a sense, local Armenian issues translate into global concerns. This is generally seen on the political scene as non-reciprocal with support from diaspora communities itinerant to the
homeland. However, Armenian traditions are also sustained, with varying success, in diasporas through the same transnational messages. Armenians in the United States and west Europe also take-up the social and cultural norms of their hostland, thus undermining their Armenian heritage that many Armenian organizations seek to preserve. It’s a paradox of identity and interest: Armenian nationalism coupled with American or European cosmopolitanism. There is, however, nothing problematic with this blending. Emotional attachment is sustained in the tension between globalization and bordered living. As long as borders exist, Armenia is not only indistinct from other nations, but it also has a valid argument to claim its historic lands.

Benhabib (2002), in arguing for a pluralistic view of culture, says one of the tenets through which equality and diversity come together to form universal respect and universal rights is the “freedom of exit and association” (19). All people, as global citizens, must be afforded equal rights, have the freedom to claim and name their own identities, and have the freedom to enter or leave any group. “Universal human rights,” says Benhabib, “transcend the rights of citizens and extend to all persons considered moral beings” (152). What, then, makes an Armenian and what is the future of Armenian identity? Significantly complicating this question is what Brubaker (2005) refers to as the diaspora diaspora. He writes, “The problem here is with the definite article. Diasporas are…cast as unitary actors. They are seen as possessing countable, quantifiable memberships” (10). This is a problem of constructing groups and as a result may render Diaspora an unintelligible unit of analysis. If Benhabib is correct, that one may enter or exit group identity at will, then counting who counts among diasporas loses significance. However, it may be possible to reconcile this problem by recalling that people maintain communication today through ethnic-specific media and technologies, facilitating close connections even across vast distances. Also, the ability to make this connection coupled with distance from home may in fact augment one’s romanticized attachment to the homeland. Thus, differences among Armenians cannot detach them from shared interpretations of rootedness and victim circumstances.

The Unsettled Question of Genocide

Armenians maintain that the Turkish government in power during the period of 1915-1918 intended to remove Armenians from the Ottoman Empire not through forced migration, but through mass kill-
ing in order to advance a purely Turkish nation and culture. Turkey claims the deportation of Armenians was in response to threats by Armenians to seek autonomy in the region, thereby threatening the future of the Turkish nation. Cohen (1996) says: Though the origins of the Armenian diaspora were in commerce and trade, the Armenians can be characterized as a victim diaspora following the massacres of the late nineteenth century and their forced displacement during 1915-16, when the Turks deported two-thirds of their number (1.75 million people) to Syria and Palestine. Many Armenians subsequently landed up in France and the United States. It is now widely accepted (though still implausibly disputed by Turkish sources) that some one million Armenians were either killed or died of starvation during this mass displacement, the twentieth century’s first major example of what has come to be known as ‘ethnic cleansing’ (512) Believing they are correct, Armenians maintain their need for a homeland largely around the insistence that Turkey recognize the events as genocide. Believing they are correct, Turks insist that the circumstances that started in 1915 did not constitute the post-situational definition of genocide.

Armenians claim intent while Turks claim there was no premeditation. In a discussion about the Armenian Genocide, Gunter (2013) says there is no denying, “that Turks killed and expelled Armenians on a large scale; indeed what happened might in today’s vocabulary be called war crimes, ethnic cleansing, or even crimes against humanity. To prove genocide, however, intent or premeditation must be demonstrated, and in the Armenian case it has not” (39). It’s not clear how or why Gunter makes a distinction between ethnic cleansing and genocide. His point is generally clear, but genocide does not require total annihilation to maintain definitive integrity. Suny (2009) offers a different view and says, “the Turkish state and Turkophilic historians have revised the mass deportation and killing of Armenians in 1915 from state-initiated ethnic cleansing and massacres into a civil war between Muslims and Christians” (931). Both sides are likely guilty of interpreting history through skewed national narratives, but suggesting that ethnic cleansing is somehow not as bad as genocide is a false distortion, and perhaps offensive distinction.

Rather than seeing a possible solution to the genocide question, both sides dwell in the chaotic order of impossible reconciliation, painting themselves as the victims and the others as the perpetrators. Indeed, there were casualties on both sides, but if the murder of Armenians was
premeditated by the state, what was the cause or justification? Did Turkey justify its action in response to the autonomy sought by Armenians? Or, did Armenians seek protection in response to Turkey’s movement toward cleansing the Ottoman Empire of Christians and Armenians? It seems Armenians and Turks are too close to the subject to be able to transform the debate into a conversation about history, intent and admission of mistakes. Also, under the current political order of nationalisms, history becomes easily distorted or falsified to serve the strategic interests of nations. Melson (2013), putting forth an argument that many others have made, says, “both Armenian and Turkish nationalist narratives undermine a shared understanding of the events” (314). Similarly, Suny claims, “at present, the histories preferred by most Armenians and Turks remain embedded in their respective nationalist master narratives” (945-946). Thus, the unsettled question of Armenian genocide is not only a problem of memory, but also of creating national myths in the interests of each nation. For Turkey, the denial of genocide means not having to redress territorial claims. For Armenians, acknowledgment of what they maintain to be the true history of the circumstances of 1915 compels supporters of the Republic of Armenia to be active toward achieving reclamation of land that was taken by force.

The Unsettlement of Armenia’s Borders

If the question of genocide is unsettled, arguably that means legitimate territorial claims are also unsettled. As long as Turkey denies genocide, Armenians are left with no end, no closure, and in a sense remain in perpetual dispersion (Goekjian 1998). Where is Armenia and how does one get there? Where should Armenia be? The question of locating Armenia involves nearly two millennia of forced geographic movements of the Armenian people and elaborates why the borders of modern day Armenia are contentious for Armenians in the republic and in diasporas. The current Republic of Armenia, which has been in existence only since gaining independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, is at most one-sixth of what it was between the first century BC and the first century AD. Also, prior to independence, as Baser and Swain (2009) explain, Armenians in “the diaspora perceived themselves as the sole representative[s] of their nation” (55). They continue, “The Karabakh issue, similarly to the 1988 earthquake, became the tool to organize Armenians worldwide and
worked to strengthen national identity and solidarity among the Armenian communities” (59). Armed with nationalist sentiment, concern for Armenians in Karabakh, and having sent support in excess of one billion dollars to the republic, diasporic Armenians energized through political and on-the-ground efforts to redress past experiences of violence and forced migration, the subsequent destruction of artifacts, and the taking of Armenian lands.

In this sense, an important understanding of what it means to be part of a diaspora must include a connection to the idea of a homeland. Baser and Swain (2008) argue, “It does not matter whether the diasporas concept of homeland is an actual homeland or just a symbolic attribution” (8). Writing about the 1988 protests by Armenians who sought to claim Nagorno Karabakh for Armenia, Rutland (1994) says this case “provides an important illustration of the close yet contradictory relationship between nationalism and democracy. The need to unify and protect the Armenian nation was the driving force that persuaded diverse social groups within Armenia to sink their difference and cooperate against the common foe” (857). Whooley (2009) explains, “The territory associated with the republic, which was first established in 1918, is considerably less than those lands historically connected to the Armenian race, lands which prior to the First World War lay within both the Ottoman and Russian Empires” (263). Diaspora Armenians, then, may have different responses to the question of locating their homeland. For some, the old country is the specific town or region from which they came. For others, the symbolic presence of the Republic of Armenia is good enough. Importantly, identifying an Armenian homeland can be in flux or be delineated as social, emotional or political. Panossian (1998) sums up, “not having the idea of homeland fixed on one spot, a ‘typical’ diasporan Armenian in the West can consider his homeland the ancestral village in the Ottoman Empire; the city of his birth in the primary diaspora of the Middle East (or elsewhere); his country of residence or citizenship; present day Armenia; or the ideal of an Armenia-to-be—and probably a combination of all of these” (184).

Despite the heterogeneity of Armenians around the world, a general consensus that they have a long history of persecution, expulsion and massacre, and subsequently territorial erosion and material destruction endures. “In the age of the Internet, Google satellite views, and instant-image news,” says Balakian (2013), “Armenians (as members of other diaspora
cultures), can watch as their monuments and culture disappear” (81). Having been successful in world politics, economics and education, Armenians have argued for recognition of these mostly agreed upon historiographies in attempts to build a strong Armenian nation. Panossian importantly states, “the historical roots of the diaspora lie in western Armenia (now eastern Turkey), not in the present republic. Hence the focus of its ‘imagination’, its historical memory, has been elsewhere—at least up to 1988” (183). However, Armenians still seek to reclaim lost lands. This is an issue over which Armenians clash, but is part of the Armenian cause and conversation, closely tied to the genocide debate. Writing about reasons Turkey denies genocide, Cooper and Akcam (2005) explain that Turkey fears “that acknowledgment of genocide would prompt Armenian territorial demands and calls for restitution of property confiscated a century ago” (85). By denying genocide Turkey does not have to consider seriously Armenia’s claim to eastern Turkey. If Turkey admits genocide, questions of territoriality will emerge and Armenians everywhere will politicize the call for irredentism.

Conclusion

Thus far I have explained the contentious issues at stake for Armenians both at home and in diaspora. Claiming and maintaining an Armenian identity involves politics and culture, but also an internalized Armenian-ness. One must feel Armenian as well as have an emotional attachment to and a sense of solidarity around issues affecting Armenians globally. Furthermore, central to being seen as Armenian, arguably, is a connection and commitment to supporting the homeland—support which for some may be about reclaiming stolen territories, strengthening the current Republic of Armenia, arguing for Turkish admission of the Armenian Genocide, protecting Armenia from further erosion, or a combination of interests. Regardless of the causes Armenians take-up, the long history of Armenians as a victim diaspora constructs a framework for building a global community of Armenian people.

Seemingly, political Armenian identity is the starting place for solidarity around Armenian causes, stemming from the world order in which we are all compelled to live. I am not suggesting that other identities don’t need to be discussed, for in fact we have also become compelled to problematize who we are despite our internalized interpretations of experiences as well as narratives which may not speak the whole truth. There is nothing inherently problematic about identity/difference, but the
social and political structures in which we dwell force the issue. Nations and borders are constructs and a framework within which we make sense of the world. If it weren’t for such formations perhaps we would perceive global relationships differently, but as long as this is the order of things, groups of people will stake claims to particular places as belonging to their people. Furthermore, attachment to Armenian homelands, whether the real homeland or a post-diaspora nation, is evidence of romantic connectedness to geography, persecution and modern day politics. This nationalist arrangement of people and places is ubiquitous and for the Armenian Diaspora it appeals to memories of and stories about surviving genocide and losing their homelands to the Turks.

Armenian social solidarities, collective memories and romanticized attachments to the home nation persist in diaspora. Armenians everywhere are active politically for the development, and perhaps expansion, of Armenia. Culturally, however, what it means to be or live an Armenian life is in constant dispute and dispersal. Yet, as I have attempted to explain, there are unanswered questions tied to the current global order that calls on Armenians to work toward establishing a strong Armenian nation. What’s so terrible about being emotionally attached to one’s ethnicity or homeland? Am I not obligated to care about the question of genocide, the destruction of Armenian cultural artifacts and the taking of Armenian lands? Am I a victim or a survivor, perhaps a perpetrator, or am I a generation apart from needing to feel Armenian? In some moments, I must confess that I feel for the experiences of my not too distant ancestors. At the same time, I long not for the idea of an ostensible homeland, but for a global ethical transformation. For now, the politics of difference force us to choose identities and alliances with groups, situating us in essentialized historiographies of nations, races and ethnicities. As Cohen (1996) says, “Where a conflict did undoubtedly arise was in relation to the emergent force of nationalism. What the nationalists wanted was a ‘space’ for each ‘race’, a territorializing of each social identity. What they got instead—although they do not admit it—is a chain of cosmopolitan cities and an increasing proliferation of diasporic, subnational and ethnic identities that cannot easily be contained in the nation-state system” (520).

As globalization swells, de-territorialization will continue to question the idea of nations and borders. However, the current state of bordered affairs controls and demarcates how we write our lives. Armenians
in the homeland are particularly invested in and vulnerable to national bordering, but they have a large, expansive and powerful diaspora behind them. Of course, there are clashes between Armenians in diasporas and Armenians in the republic and a final word comes from Collier (2000) who cautions, “Diasporas sometimes harbor rather romanticized attachments to their group of origin and may nurse grievances as a form of asserting continued belonging. They are much richer than the people in their country of origin and so can afford to finance vengeance. Above all, they do not have to suffer any of the awful consequences of renewed conflict because they are not living in the country” (14).

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