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We acknowledge with respect the Lkwungen-speaking peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and PlatForum operations take place, as well as the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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OF THE OBJECT

## INTRODUCTION: AMPLIFYING THE ABJECT

In being inspired by the work and continued relevance of Julia Kristeva's (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, the 2019 PlatForum Editorial Team chose the abject as its central theme for Volume 17. She coins "the abject" as the subjective horror that results from the confrontation of what is thought to be real—the subject and the object, the self and the other—as they, each of these identities and relations, come into question, start to decay, and undergo their inevitable breakdowns. This concept remains salient for anthropology as it is a means to radically unearth the philosophical and cultural presuppositions upon which reality may rest. We invited contributors to challenge, examine, and expand upon this theoretical notion.

In other words, human beings through culture develop a comfortable concept of who they are and their place in the world. They come to believe that there is a certain way of being, doing things, or interacting that is "normal." Within this self concept, they understand clear boundaries between what is "good and evil," what constitutes the self and other, etc. But there may come a moment in one's life when this normative narrative is radically disrupted. Such a disruption forces us to QUESTION, RETHINK and REDEFINE all that was once presumed to be secure, predictable, and morally grounding. This moment of disruption can occur in a variety of ways, and it may challenge a host of preconceived binaries. Essentially, abjection involves three things as a process and events in one's interior life: *a*) a moment of disruption (crisis, confusion, marginalization, alienation, a state of being "cast off"); *b*) a questioning of all that was once believed to normal, true or secure (i.e. one's sense of self and concept of how the world works); and *c*) a development of a new perspective: a reorganizing or redefining of identity and values thereafter.

Not so surprisingly, there has never been a lack of near-overwhelming examples of the abject within the current frameworks of human lives vis-à-vis the daily horrors of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Modern existence has been reshaped and stripped within the short span a few months since

COVID-19 and its pandemic struck into the consciousness and bodies of people across the globe. The HBO miniseries, *Chernobyl*, which graphically and dramatically reconstructs the 1986 Ukrainian nuclear disaster at a mismanaged power plant, also signals the bone-chilling affect that can result when bad radiation and bad politics poison the human body and spirit. The necessary rise of and support for the BLACK LIVES MATTER movement in the wake of police brutality equally positions one to reconsider how nation-states have failed their citizens in protecting its property, power structures, and misanthropy. Not to mention the harrowing and silent pandemic of psychotic breaks, suicides, and overdoses that dot across the blighted landscape of North America's response to mental health issues, quality-of-life metrics, and economic wellbeing for less-desirable portions of society.

The abject is then a pervasive aspect of part of the human experience. And in honouring this space, authors tackle relevant topics across a spectrum of subjects through essays, stories, art, and poetry. The issue is divided into two sections from either a critical or creative approach in furthering explorations of the abject. That is to say, we are hopeful that this academic, peer-reviewed platform becomes a starting point for discussion and developing a greater awareness and toolkit for the abject as it interlocks within the embodied phenomena of culture. Each contributor then provides a brief engagement along these lines.

## ABJECT ANALYSES

In her article "*Being Left-Handed in a Right-Handed World*," Sam Wauthier highlights a process of abjectification that occurs through the historical demonization and denaturalization of the left hand. In doing so, she illuminates how the reification of culturally constituted binaries (sacred/profane, good/evil, and even pure/impure) function to marginalize or ascribe moral value to certain behaviours and ways of being in the world, and in turn, result in a sense of being *cast-off* from larger society.

Leslie Maire Vesely in "*Facing the Third Country Agreement: The Precarious Life of Asylum Seekers Entering Canada through the US*" similarly invites readers to take a closer and more critical look at how a shifting political landscape in the United States under the Trump presidency—and the sudden increase and volatility in discriminatory

anti-immigration policies that have ensued—drastically changes the way the 2002 Third Country Agreement protects and plays out for people seeking asylum in North America and its communities.

Stephanie Arlt’s paper “*Donald Trump: White Hot Threat to American Democracy*” discusses a significant disruption and transformation in what constitutes ‘mainstream’ American politics following the 2016 Presidential Election. She particularly attends to the erosion of middle American (centrist) identity and Trump’s ‘predatory politics’ and dividing practices that give rise to white-nationalist far-right politics that further polarize and normalize racialized hate and violence in North America (and licence such intolerances internationally).

### ABJECT ARTFORMS

By looking at disruptions of one’s self-perception schemas through claustrophobia and psychopathology, Verity Clayton’s “*Dead and Buried – Abjection and Cotard’s Syndrome*” gives her listener a visceral and eidetic taste of the abject in storytelling form, particularly when someone’s self, personhood, and body, and connection to space becomes *cast-off* into states of disarray. This little horror story of being buried alive and mediating on experiences of death-in-life presents a horrific redoubling of what in oneself might be considered the illusive boundaries of one’s humanness (and how these semi-conflicting identities struggle to fit in such normative petametres of liveness and self-awareness).

Sabrina Scott’s illustration, “*Death-wishes, Liars, and a Witch’s Coil,*” visualizes and plays off of Clayton’s themes by encapsulating the frothy creepiness and unsettling extremity of a direct and true-to-life encounter with the abject. The stillness and sensorial experience of how people engage with forms of reality can underlie the bitter shock of how human beings lie to themselves as they begin to witness the way the world becomes stripped of its consciousness and dies before them. The witch’s suffering in the radical and subversive act of deprogramming societal truths can then become a means to traverse through these imagined cross-sections of one’s decaying and past self-conceptions to rebirth themselves towards new sets of intersubjective relationalities and an ethic of spirituality that focuses on the value of connection. There is wisdom in embracing memento-mori totems.

Becca Campbell's "*(Witnessing the) Asking for Sex in a Holy Town in Karnataka*" also uses poetry to come to terms with the abject. Through experiencing how her identity as both an anthropologist and a concerned citizen became pitted against each other in spectating a public beating, she tries to make sense of this disjuncture in a town that also experienced a violent break in its rhythms and normative calm behaviour. In striving to then be objectively professional about these forms of fieldwork dissonance and instances of trauma, sometimes how anthropologists conduct and teach international research can get tangled in the morality and messiness of what it truly means to observe and empathize with others during participant observation. The subtext of Becca's poem asks an important question. Is one supposed to remain rigid in their role as an anthropologist, can they perhaps shift more in being helpful to select bystander, or is there a more nuanced way to reconcile both of these roles?

Through the creative expression of poetry in "*My First Graduate Philosophy Course*," Mar'yana Fisher at once shatters the normative communication and understanding of how one is taught in graduate school to come to terms with concepts such as ontology and epistemology. The description of her subtle but harsh mental shift between undergraduate and graduate thinking shows how it does not always require a tragedy to become dislodged from your current view of reality. Instead, the *way* one thinks can drastically change one's view of themselves and their place in their world.

## CONCLUSION

This volume brings together pieces from anthropology and its various interlocutors to discuss the abject as a knowledge-making practice. It expands on how human beings can formulate resilience, meaning, and even a sharp measure of hope as a pressured result of these existential struggles for self. There is a renewed desire to (re)visit the abject.

Sincerely,

Luke Kernan, Rebecca Duerksen, & Jenna Hendrick

*The PlatForum Editorial Team, Vol. 17*

PART I:  
ABJECT ANALYSES

BEING LEFT IN A RIGHT-HANDED WORLD: THEORIZING  
THE POSITION OF THE LEFT HAND IN CONTEMPORARY  
WESTERN SOCIETIES

SAMANTHA WAUTHIER

ABSTRACT

This paper will argue that 1) historically, various religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and corresponding religious interpretations have contributed to the demonization and de-naturalization of the left hand, and 2) express, due to an epistemological shift from religion to science, how institutional and disciplinary power has shaped the semi-marginalization of the left hand in contemporary Western societies.

## INTRODUCTION

*The vision of the ab-ject is, by definition, the sign of an impossible ob-ject, a boundary and a limit. A fantasy, if you wish... (Kristeva 1982:154).*

Right/ left, good/evil, and natural/unnatural: these dichotomies reflect a fundamental principle of what Julia Kristeva has described as abjection. By design, abjection can only be surmised when that which is taken for truth is both fractured and permanently displaced by those that previously prescribed to such a truth (Kristeva 1982:84). In writing this essay, it is my hope that I might draw attention to the “nocturnal power” of one such truth (Kristeva 1982:208). First, I will explore, through works produced by Robert Hertz and Mary Douglas, how various pre-modern societies have employed theological representations as a means of establishing and strengthening the position of the right hand(side) as virtuous and divine, and the left hand(side) as deviant and demonic; and second, express the ways that Michel Foucault’s approach to disciplinary power and docile bodies, and Mary Douglas’s approach to the use and deployment of social symbols can be applied to discourses concerning both the marginalization and disempowerment of the left hand in contemporary Western societies.<sup>1</sup>

### FAILING TO LEGITIMIZE THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY THROUGH CLAIMS TO THE ‘NATURAL’ OR DIVINE ORDER: THE RIGHT HAND AS SACRED AND THE LEFT HAND AS PROFANE

*What resemblance more perfect than that between our two hands! And yet what a striking inequality there is (Hertz 1960:89).*

On the surface, very little scholarship has attended to the development of the left hand as a progressive process of stigmatization and demonization across a multiplicity of religions. Instead, such analyses tend to award attention to the ways such social constructions are mediated within the limitations of a particular religion, such as in Johnson’s article concerning the place of the left hand in Islamic funerary practices in Guinea-Bissau (Johnson 2009:102). To avoid reproducing previous accounts for the position of the left hand in

isolated religions, I will trace the history of the socially defined left hand through the overlapping conceptualizations of the left and right hand as evident in three monotheistic religions, and they are as follows: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>2</sup>

To begin, in an effort to both understand and foster a sort of spiritual intimacy with the physical characteristics of ELOHIM certain variations of Middle Eastern Jewish mysticism, such as the Kabbalist movements of the twelfth and fifteenth century, rendered the Divine Creator physically conceivable through the illustration of the ten intangible *sefirot* (Blumenthal 1978:18-19).<sup>3, 4</sup> Each of the *sefirot* (or vessels), as indicated in the Zohar, contain or emulate a facet of ELOHIM (Blumenthal 1978:16).<sup>5</sup> It is here that I will draw the reader's attention to specifically the fourth and fifth *sefirot*, Hesed and Gevurah. Hesed, which is also understood as ELOHIM's capacity to love, is generally conveyed as being the anatomical right hand of the Divine Creator. Gevurah, also commonly referred to as Din (fire), is presented as the Creator's left hand and beholder of the "root of evil" (Matt 2009:130). Hesed, the virtuous right hand of ELOHIM, acts as a counterbalance to Gevurah, the penalizing left hand of ELOHIM (Matt 2009:36). This dualistic and yet reciprocal nature between the fourth and fifth *sefirot* exemplifies certain aspects of Robert Hertz's discussion of symbolic dualism, specifically dualism that occurs between the spheres of the sacred (Hertz 1960:95). However, in this instance, the dualistic nature of the sacred is not contained in a physical or tangible form but in an imagined form. It is not ELOHIM, the divinity, which is initiating the physical fragmentation or separation of the self, instead it is the various rabbinic contributors to the Torah's commentary, which socially separate and divide the Creator's aspects of judgment from those that are considered merciful (Hertz 1960:94). In this manner, those that practiced such mystical traditions of Kabbalah were able to explain how their deity was able to contain the capacity for both great good and evil. As a result, practitioners were able to establish physical practices that would appeal to the loving side of ELOHIM while simultaneously avoiding such actions that would bring about the wrath of the Creator's left hand (Matt 2009:11). One might wonder how those that wrote the commentary to the Torah were able to come to the decision on which of the two hands would represent love (mercy) and judgment (punishment)? This question might be adequately confronted by Mary

Douglas' anthropological work concerning social pollution, and the construction of the social body. In *Natural Symbols*, Douglas entails that it is the social body, or essentially the symbolic rendering of the human body, that constrains the way that the physical body is perceived (Douglas 2003:72). For the rabbinic Kabbalists of the medieval world, this symbolic dualism between the divine's right and left hand represents a social reflection of a Jewish individual's two opposing hands (Douglas 2003:78).

Though specific information concerning the use or disuse of the left hand is devoid from historical sourcebooks pertaining to this particular period, Jewish historians have indicated that during the course of the seventh to the thirteenth century diasporic Jews were often invited to openly engage with members of the Islamic world and more importantly to share meals together (Brenner 2010:69,77; Marcus 1938:13). The ability for practicing Jews to share a meal in the ancient world with a Muslim, and in a Muslim household, indicates a shared sense of rituals concerning the preparative and consumptive practices of food (Brenner 2010:71). In Islam, the left hand is traditionally associated with unhygienic practices, such as masturbation or wiping one's anus was considered socially polluting (Johnson 2009:102). With the exception of funeral practices, the use of the left hand was to be excluded from rituals that were considered sacred, such as the slaughter of livestock or the preparation/consumption of food (Burnside 1991:4). Therefore, to greet a host or to utilize the host's utensils/dinnerware with the left hand would have been considered an insult, or as the application of a curse (Johnson 2009:103). This avoidance of the left hand in sacred practices reveals the intention, "to protect divinity from profanation" (Douglas 2002:9). Consequently, for a Jewish individual to adequately engage with a Muslim host and be invited to participate in Muslim feasts, a luxury not ascribed to Christian *dhimmi*, they would have had to both adhere and employ similar symbolic associations with the left and right hand (Douglas 2003:153). While I am generally not at odds with Douglas' postulations concerning conscious attempts to avoid socially polluting practices, it has recently come to my attention that in the ancient world physical hygienic practices were in no way similar to the common rituals performed in modern restrooms (Robbins 2013:63-64). It is quite possible that the relegation of wiping one's anus with the left hand, and the subsequent avoidance of using said hand during meals,

may have actually begun as a practice grounded in an attempt to limit the spread and contraction of illnesses and diseases found in the natural world (Douglas 2002:36-37). This willful codification of the left and right hand by Judaists and Muslims of the ancient world may have in fact initially come about from necessity, and only later, after the invention of advanced hygienic technologies and the implementation of regular hygienic practices, did the use or disuse of the left hand solely become a matter of social pollution (Lavenda and Schultz 2010:205).

When compared with the Western sects of Christianity, which both openly dichotomize both God/-Satan and the left/-right hand, it is conceivable to consider how previously mentioned Kabbalist views of ELOHIM might compare to the Christian God (Marcus 1938:353). As presented in Matthew, from *Jesus in the Last Testament*, God's son Christ was expected to maintain the constant position of a pastoral shepherd whose primary function was to, "set the sheep on His right hand", which would then be blessed with the entrance into heaven and "the goats on the left", which would then be cast into the "everlasting fire" of hell (Matthew 25:32-41). In many regards, Matthew's social division of the left and right hand of Christ appears to parallel that of the figuratively divided hands of ELOHIM in Kabbalist teachings. Essentially, being placed under the right hand of Christ ensures a person a place in the merciful domain of the all-loving God (white), whereas being placed under the left hand of Christ ensures a person a permanent position in the punishing domain of Satan (red) (Matt 2009:130-131; Matthew 25:35-41).

However, the most important distinction between these two monotheistic representations would be the fact that it is not the hand of God that is portrayed as the bearer of judgment; instead, it is the two hands of Christ, the Son of God. Those that are set under Jesus' left hand are classified as the damned, those that commit symbolically impure or sinister acts, and those that are set under his right hand are those that have adequately shielded the sacred from the polluting forces of the profane (Hertz 1960:96).<sup>6</sup> Why is this prevalent? This shift of judgmental responsibility from the intangible Creator to that of Jesus, who for all intents and purposes is classified as being wrought from flesh and blood, reflects an attempt, which perhaps can be entrenched in various Indo-European religions, to separate the

imagined forces of good from evil (Mallory 1991:130). The early Christian God, who was conveyed by early Gnostic Christians as possessing both the qualities of compassion and chastisement, was later reconstructed through Catholic and Orthodox Christian sects as a deity of social purity and compassion (Douglas 2002:33). While the position of punishment, which was formerly the domain of God, was awarded to Satan, the new bearer of immorality (Marcus 1938:353). Again, I am inclined to ponder on how the position of the left hand in various traditions of Christian theology managed to shift from the indicator of those who are damned to that of a symbolic embodiment for evil? In *Natural Symbols*, Douglas argues that in order to understand the ‘place of evil’ in a society, one must first contextualize how the source of evil is being construed, which in this case is the left hand of the physical body (Douglas 2003:114). I argue that the pre-eminence of the right hand in human populations and a nearly universal failure to achieve organic symmetry was utilized by the right-handed majority to render the right hand as naturally superior to the left hand (Hertz 1960:89). Such claims to ‘the natural’ or divine should be understood as an attempt by one group to socially legitimize the control or disempowerment of another group (Douglas 2003:115-116). This point can be further exemplified by Jewish Historian Michael Brenner, who demonstrated that the legal and social position of a Jew in the eighteenth-century Muslim world relied heavily upon both principled toleration and humiliation (Brenner 2010:71). For example, in the Pact of Umar, as a means of legally demeaning non-Muslims, Jews were expected to walk to the left of a Muslim, a side that represented social impurity and inferiority in Muslim societies (Brenner 2010:275). In a contemporary context, this statement can also be supported by briefly engaging with religious theorist Carol Burnside’s examination of interactions between Iranian Muslim Nationals and representatives of the United States Government following the American/ Iranian conflicts of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Burnside, many of her Iranian informants tended to describe American citizens departing from Iran as a “people of the left hand,” a sentiment which Burnside interpreted as a means for Iranian nationals to delegitimize the power previously acquired by the United States government in Iran. (Burnside 1991:4). Yet, Burnside’s research fails to acknowledge a relevant linkage between the prevalence of left-handed occurrences among Presidents of the United States and how her Iranian Muslim respondents viewed left-

handedness as an inherent sign of weakness (Holder 2005).<sup>7</sup> I would argue that for her respondents verbally labelling Americans as a ‘people of the left hand’ may have provided them with an opportunity to use local cultural symbols as a means of undermining the repute of both the United States government and those who so willingly elected left-handers as national leaders.

#### ‘NATURALIZING’ THE LEFT HAND AS SOCIALLY SUBMISSIVE AND THE RIGHT HAND AS SOCIALLY DOMINANT

*[The subjective-symbolic dimension] merely presents the effects and especially the benefits that accrue to the speaking subject from a precise symbolic organization; perhaps it explains what desiring motives are required in order to maintain a given social symbolics (Kristeva 1982:67).*

Though, Foucault suggests there was still a subtle existence of “a religious air,” the nineteenth century for the Western world marks a pivotal shift from the centrality of religion to that of science (Foucault 1995:149; Jaffe 2000:2-3).<sup>8</sup> Geological publications, such as Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, utilized the scientific approach to stratigraphy, or the complex layering of rocks on the Earth’s surface, to evidently express both the historically progressive and estimated geological age of the Earth’s surface (Brochu et al. 2007:16-17). Geological approaches to science not only undermined both the Christian and Jewish belief that the Earth was crafted by a monotheistic God in seven days, but also that the origin of the planet pre-dated the age established in various holy texts (Darwin 2004: 245-247). Early naturalists—such as Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace—and paleontologists—such as Edward Drinker Cope and O.C. Marsh—produced both physical evidence and theoretical research that supported the theory that all organic beings, including human beings, were continuously undergoing processes of biological evolution and physiological variation as opposed to divine creation (Brochu et al. 2007:22-24; Darwin 2004:251-253).

Thus, it is due to this pivotal shift of social dominance from religion to science that the second half of this paper will explore how concepts in social theory, primarily Michel Foucault’s work concerning

*disciplinary power* and *docile bodies*, and Mary Douglas's work concerning *linguistic coding* and *institutional power*, can be applied to contemporary Western societies as a means of providing transparency for the sometimes opaque processes by which the right hand has been able to continually claim social dominance over the increasingly marginalized left hand.

#### SILENTLY FRAMING LEFT-HANDEDNESS AS ABNORMAL AND RIGHT-HANDEDNESS AS NORMAL

As beautifully illustrated by Mary Douglas, who was greatly influenced by the works of Emile Durkheim and Ludwik Fleck, it is essential to comprehend that institutions, as suprapersonal entities, do not think, or embody inherent purposes (Douglas 1986:45,96). Instead, institutions represent the material edifices that are produced by seemingly 'rational' human beings; beings whose primary intent is to either shape the way that members of a particular society subconsciously think collectively—or, with reference to the relevant subject matter, cater to the hand which bears an immense statistical significance (Douglas 1986:1,9). With regards to structural design in contemporary Western societies, it can be argued that Primary, Secondary, and Post-Secondary institutions tend to be conceived by architects and engineers who, perhaps unknowingly, implement designs, such as stairwells (railings), doors (knob-sidedness and orientation), and classroom desks, which tend to favour right-handed comfort and accessibility (Robbins 2013:3) Some might argue that this discrepancy might be due to architects and engineers not being attuned to the left-handed minority's difficulties, or essentially assume, like Irving Stone did for Michelangelo, that right-handedness was naturally universal (Fincher 1993:30). However, social thinkers, such as Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault, might stipulate that this lack of even-handed designs indicates both a systemic, "unwillingness to have a face-to-face confrontation with the abject," and an attempt to implement regulatory controls as a means of producing and governing docile bodies (Foucault 1990:140-141; Kristeva 1982:209). Such designs, which invariably perform a vital role in Western educational settings, act as a physical instrument of behavioural control, which aims to both undermine individual resistance and promote sameness (Douglas 1986:59). Classroom chairs, and correspondingly attached desks, for example, arguably favour the utilization of the socially

dominate right hand in classroom activities, such as writing, while simultaneously causing unnecessary discomfort, due to a lack of an armrest, and subliminally endorse ambidexterity for those that are left-handed (Robbins 2013:2). Even the word ambidextrous, which translates to ‘right-handed on both sides,’ utilizes a linguistic, “ritualization of defilement,” of the left hand to reinforce right-handed social dominance (Fincher 1993:37; Kristeva 1982:70). The endorsement of instruments of control can also be attributed to the promotion and integration of pre-dominantly right-handed materials in academic institutions, such as scantrons (due to the frequency of smudging), binders, scissors, textbooks, and, in fields of study pertaining to medicine, medical technologies (Brydges et al. 2007: 819; Foucault 1995:141). However, it is not merely enough to draw attention to the abjection of the left hand in contemporary Western societies. For even after the shroud of fantasy has been lifted, and the relationship between the left and right hand reconciled, such an attempt to implement accessibility measures can only come to fruition if those that wield power over the left hand willingly confront what he or she has for so long believed to be right, natural and normal (Kristeva 1982:70).

Within the social sciences many of the environmental difficulties previously mentioned have been accounted for, and yet it is in this author’s opinion that most literature fails to frame the difficulties faced by left-handers at home, in academic institutions and in the workplace as more than a matter of inconvenience or minor discomfort. As a left-handed woman who has navigated through a world designed for the right hand, I have had the misfortune of confronting several situations that have proved detrimental to both my mental and physical health. While working as a grader, packer and stacker for a produce production company in rural Essex County both my fellow left-handed coworkers and I were put at a tremendous disadvantage whenever we attempted to complete even simple tasks, such as weighing produce or using industrial shears for clipping the stems of bell peppers. Each of the four assembly lines I consistently worked had been designed to provide the highest degree of convenience for right-handed workers, and as a result, for those of us who were left-handed, we were often required to disband the use of our dominate hands in favour of the right hand. In a workplace setting where speed, efficiency and exceptional hand-eye coordination is crucial; being forced to rely on my right hand

instantly rendered me visible to both my right-handed coworkers and supervisors. When a left-handed worker is injured, which many lefties more so than righties are, or when production grinds to a halt due to a sudden failure to adhere to using the right hand with the same precision as the left hand, we were made aware of our inability to perform equally to that of our right-handed co-workers. As a result, I often found myself unable to feel anything but inadequate and grew accustomed to verbally drawing attention to myself by momentarily acknowledging my left hand as an inconvenience to both my co-workers and my place of employment. Based on my many encounters with other lefties, this necessity to overtly shame one's left hand when it fails to perform a right-handed task seems to be a common experience. For instance, while working as a Graduate Assistant for the University of Windsor, I once encountered a student who had written in the top corner of their final exam an apology for all the smudging on the paper because the student was left-handed. Smudging, namely, the marring of the written word by dragging the palm of the left hand across paper, is a common plight among left-handers who are required by academic institutions to hand-write from left-to-right as opposed to their natural inclination to write from right-to-left. On another occasion, while discussing the topic of left-handedness with a young mother at my place of employment as a grader/produce packer, she told me that her young son was a lefty and that whenever he made a mistake both he and his family members would blame it on his being left-handed regardless of if the behaviour even required the use of his left hand.

In contemporary Western societies, reading and writing from left to right is commonly understood as normal, natural and correct, whereas writing from right to left, as historically exemplified by Leonardo Da Vinci, is considered abnormal, unnatural, and quite frankly 'backwards' (Gelb 2004:55; Lombroso 1903:441). This intentional division between what individuals and corresponding social behaviours are considered normative, and which are considered deviant in a sense mirrors Michel Foucault's studies concerning the objectification of a human subject in relation to another (Foucault 2003:126-127). The right-handed majority utilizes processes of power, such as claims to normalcy, to legitimize labelling members of the numerical left-handed minority as indicators of perversion and abnormality (Foucault 1990:141,144). Such a claim can be

strengthened by reviewing the controversial works of renowned physician and criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who, upon reviewing the research of Camerano, Livingstone, and Rollet, prematurely drew the conclusion that among human beings left-handedness represented an indication of an uncivilized mind, while right-handedness represented a natural indication of a progressive or cultured mind (Lombroso 1905:440-441).<sup>9</sup> In an effort to proliferate the budding disciplines of neuropsychology and psychiatry, Lombroso argued that left-handedness, due to its association with the right side of the brain, acted as a precursor for savagery and lunacy (Foucault 2003:214; Lombroso 1905:442-443).<sup>10</sup> Lombroso's blatant medicalization of the left hand further sustained the belief that the presence of the left-handed individual in Western societies of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century amounted to little more than a present encroachment on humankind's natural, "advances in both civilization and culture" (Foucault 2003: 126-127; Lombroso 1905:442). An encroachment that could only be managed or diffused by either furthering the production and dissemination of research concerning the problem of the left hand, such as the widespread distribution of J.W Conway's educational pamphlet *The Prevention and Correction of Left-handedness in Children* in America, or by the implementation of medical regimens suited to 'curing' left-handedness (Conway 1936; Foucault 2003:137-138).

## MARGINALIZING THE LEFT HAND AND LEFT-HANDEDNESS THROUGH DISCIPLINARY ACTION

Foucault never alluded to the central role of codifying the left and right hands in Western societies. However, his work concerning how the creation of functional sites and punishment are used to render the human body and mind docile can certainly be applied to my analysis of how judgment of the left hand has become normalized (Foucault 1978:143, 177). To appreciate how central disciplinary power is to the formation of docile bodies, I will refer to a fictitious scenario from Guillermo Del Toro's Mexican/Spanish film *Pan's Labyrinth*. Near the beginning of the film Ofelia, the young female protagonist and her mother are moving to an isolated military fort, and upon their arrival, Ofelia was greeted by her new stepfather, who was dressed in a fashion accustomed to a high-ranking military officer (Del Toro 2006). Being both nervous and intimidated by this strange man, she unknowingly

offers him her left hand, to which he grasps tightly and whispers to her that she is using the wrong hand (Del Toro 2006).

This scenario, which was intentionally implemented by del Toro, reveals to the audience that Ofelia's stepfather, due to the disciplinary powers previously exercised by his superiors during military training, has acquired a preconceived notion of what social behaviours are considered characteristics of an almost universal, "bodily rhetoric of honour" (Foucault 1995:135). This displacement of the left hand informal military greetings reflects both the gradual and complex disciplinary processes by which an ideal homogenous military identity is made, and how it is able to be reinforced by those who 'automatically' adhere to such an identity (Foucault 1995:136). Yet as indicated by the previous inclusion of my own personal experiences, efforts to exercise political anatomy, or the rendering of the human body under the influences of increased external domination and self-aptitude, in the Western world, should not be regarded as characteristics exclusive to military doctrine (Foucault 1995:138). Instead, the deployment and distribution of political anatomy can be observed in a multiplicity of doctrines, such as in education, medicine and production (Foucault 1995:141,143). Multiple studies, and to a greater extent self-reports, have indicated that in educational settings, individuals who maintained positions of power, such as mentors, teachers, and professors, have implemented coercions that act upon left-handed students (Goldman et al. 1975:369). However, when methods of coercion, such as a teacher manually switching a pencil from a student's left to right hand, fail to produce a 'docile' body sometimes violent methods of punishment, such as the slapping of the left hand with a ruler<sup>11</sup>, were applied (Fincher 1993:17-18, 23, 152). Coercion and punishment should not be regarded exclusively to the individual beliefs and preferences of teachers. While conducting research surveys in the 1930s on the prevalence of left-handedness in American primary schools, C.A. Selzer noted that it became necessary to state whether or not a school district reported incidences of discouraging writing with the left hand (Goldman et al. 1975:369). Perhaps even more startling would be the four-year campaign by various schools in Elizabeth, New Jersey, to 'cure' individuals of their left-handedness (Garrison 1938:328-329). As a result, 184 out of the 250 left-handed students were wrongfully forced to become right-handed (1938:328).

The scenario mentioned from the film *Pan's Labyrinth* can also provide my readership with an example of how Ofelia's stepfather, a victorious man of enormous power and authority, attempts to both draw attention to her behaviour, which is considered inappropriate, and implement verbal corrections to the social operation of her body (Del Toro 2006; Foucault 1995:173). Ofelia's stepfather's verbal response represents a restricted linguistic code. Or that essentially, his utterance conveys pertinent information while simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing the dominant social structure (Douglas 2003:25). In this instance, and perhaps in a semi-universal way, it is the use of the left-hand that is subjected to verbal humiliation by the numerically legitimized right-handed majority. Coincidentally, the prevalence of restricted linguistic codes, like Foucault's approach to political anatomy, can be observed within the realm of an American military doctrine. Jack Fincher, who in his youth would have been considered left-handed, notes that left-handed members of the American military were regularly verbally humiliated for saluting or taking oaths with the left hand (Fincher 1993:25). The use of verbal humiliation and attempts to initiate the correction of behaviours wrought by the left hand can often exceed the confines of a military sphere. Similarly to the fictional heroine from Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, I have found myself put in situations, especially where shaking, eating, writing or working with my left hand is concerned, where the automatic application of my left hand has sparked disdain in those who choose to render my so-called indecency visible (Del Toro 2006).

I would strongly contend that this construction of the right hand (side) as being naturally superior to the left hand (side), and thus the semi-marginalization of the left hand based on a disparity of statistics, should be viewed as a hollow monument or perhaps even more appropriately as, "an empty castle," one that on the outside seems sound but when approached with an anthropologist's hammer is nothing more than an empty shell, a social construction fabricated by the human mind (Kristeva 1982:49).

## CONCLUSION

Though historically Western societies have tended to endorse right-handed environmental accessibility, I would argue that the left hand,

and those that primarily use it, should not be framed as being without the ability to exercise agency (Garrison 1938:325-326). In the contemporary Western world, there exists a multiplicity of means of non-violent resistance that can, and on a daily basis are, enacted by left-handed individuals. Negative religious associations attributed to the left hand have extensively dissipated, and although many of the institutional and architectural constraints remain in all levels of education, left-handed students are less likely to be disciplined by academic authorities for writing/ working with the left hand or requesting a pair of left-handed scissors (Goldman et al. 1975: 369). This positive shift in the degree to which the left hand has been managed in contemporary Western societies has arguably enabled space for lefties to both perceive and publicly engage their left hand in ways that may not have been conceivable in previous decades.

From a global market perspective, the left-handed individual offers a previously unexplored market niche. As a result, a small but specialized market, which caters to the comfort and accessibility of the left-handed user, has managed to emerge. Now more than ever, left-handed consumers are able to purchase reversely-strung guitars, can-openers, cups, rulers, chequebooks, and perhaps most prominently of all medical and professional equipment (Brydges et al. 2007:819; Fincher 1993:24-25). Within the last 100 years, associations, such as the *National League for Left-handers* and the *Association for the Protection of the Rights of Left-Handers*, have been formed and, in effect, provide a small space of social resistance (Fincher 1993:21, 25).

Conversely, there now exist claims, through the ‘application’ of Darwin’s theory of natural selection, that being left-handed biologically offers an intellectual advantage over those that are primarily right-handed (Denny and O’Sullivan 2007:357). However, I feel that it is my duty to establish that such claims to intelligence are essentialist at best. The cause for my disapproval being that such a definition expresses that only a fixed set of criteria characterize a human being as intelligent. At last, I would like to conclude by stating that I truly do believe that even in a world where the two human hands have failed to be evenly regarded that there exists—and can continue to exist—opportunities which can provide accessibility and social equality for those that favour the left hand.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I feel it is important to establish that though the primary focus of this essay was to address the marginalization of the left hand, that I am both sensitive to and aware of the existence of instances where the right hand, and incidentally a right-handed person, can be disadvantaged in a cultural environment.

<sup>2</sup> Please note that when I am referring to *history*, I am refraining from such definitions that would limit processes of social evolution to that of teleology.

<sup>3</sup> In the Jewish tradition, it is perceived as inappropriate to speak or write the true name of their deity, as per they believed that it was ignorant to assume that they could be on a first-name basis with Him. As a means of avoiding this, Judaists began using the capitalized word ELOHIM or YHVH instead (Matt 2009: 130, 132).

<sup>4</sup> During the late twelfth century, an emerging form of Jewish mysticism, known thereafter as Kabbalah, took hold of Spanish Rabbinic teachings. Kabbalists preached that not only did ELOHIM dwelt in every aspect of both the physical and metaphysical world, but that the creator needed ‘His’ creations just as much as they needed ‘Him.’ The Zohar, the Kabbalist commentary to the Torah, was one of the first religious texts to render the various facets of ELOHIM in a tangible form that was neither entirely male nor female, but instead of an equal balance between the two (Matt 2009: 21-23).

<sup>5</sup> The Zohar is a collection of volumes written in Aramaic, which forms the foundational canon of Kabbalist Jewish mysticism. The Zohar is also regarded as a commentary to the mystical elements of the Torah, the Hebrew Bible (Giller, 2001:4-5).

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, the word for ‘left’ during the late classical Roman period was ‘sinister.’

<sup>7</sup> Relevant United States Presidents who publicly favoured the left hand: Gerald Ford (38th President), Ronald Reagan (40th President), George H.W. Bush (41st President), and Bill Clinton (42nd President) (Holder, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Such as the continued practice of placing one’s left hand over a holy text, while simultaneously raising one’s right hand during the initiation of a *Sworn Testimony* in North American Courts (1977:1687-1688).

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<sup>9</sup> Camerano, Livingstone, and Rollet each published research pertaining to the prevalence of left-handedness among populations of non-human animals, such as parrots, lions, and anthropomorphous monkeys.

<sup>10</sup> Which Lombroso considered to act as merely a support to the left-side of the brain, and thus the lesser of the two.

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FACING THE THIRD COUNTRY AGREEMENT: THE  
PRECARIOUS LIFE OF ASYLUM SEEKERS ENTERING  
CANADA THROUGH THE US

LESLIE VESELY

ABSTRACT

The 2002 Third Country Agreement between Canada and US requires asylum seekers to apply for refuge in the first country they land in. Through this agreement, Canada positions the US as a safe country for asylum seekers. However, with the election of Donald Trump and subsequent anti-immigration policies, this agreement is being questioned. This paper explores the politics of human rights by looking at the precarity of asylum seekers' lives and unpacks the transformation of these identities. I argue the Third Country Agreement increases asylum seekers' precarity, creating a unique group of refugees working towards social recognition and institutional support.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the war in Syria has rendered thousands of people homeless, looking for refugee status primarily in Europe and North America. Canada has accepted 40,081 Syrian refugees between November 2015 to January 2017 (Canada 2017). While much attention has been paid to the massive influx of Syrian refugees, another movement is taking place on Canada's southern border. In 2017, 20,000 asylum seekers passed into Canada from the US between official ports of entry, which is eight times more than the year prior (Pierce, Bolter and Selee 2018). This spike comes after the presidential election of Donald Trump, who made numerous administrative decisions that threaten the livelihood of immigrants living in the US (Connor and Krogstad 2018). These numbers continue to rise as asylum seekers in the US fear their loss of status due to sudden anti-immigration policy changes (Pierce, Bolter and Selee 2018).

The 2002 Third Country Agreement between Canada and the US aims to help manage Canada's refugee intake by stating that people must stay and claim refugee status in the first country they land in—either the US or Canada. Asylum seekers who try to make their way from the US to Canada or vice versa through one of the official crossing points will be turned back (Canada 2002). This agreement was made under the assumption that both Canada and the US are safe countries for refugees and immigrants to settle in. However, since the inauguration of Donald Trump, many asylum seekers have circumvented this agreement by entering unofficially into Canada between designated crossing points (Connor and Krogstad 2018), most notably through Quebec (Canada 2018a). Quebec alone has received 11,813 asylum seekers who entered illegally in the summer of 2018 (Canada 2018a). Many asylum seekers, trying to bypass the Third Country Agreement, risk their lives by passing through unofficial ports of entry. People who cross the border illegally regularly need to walk several kilometres to reach a town in Canada to seek shelter in. This journey is especially dangerous during winter when they risk having hypothermia or severe frostbite, which can lead to amputation or worse (Lambert 2018). Despite many urgent requests made by members of parliament to suspend the agreement, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is not complying (Canada 2018b). These

statistics and stories reflect the uncertain livelihood of immigrants trying to flee the US to come to Canada.

Two foundational beliefs of humanitarian work are that all people are equal and part of a collective humanity and can help others on a need-by basis and without discrimination (Ticktin 2010). This assumes that everyone is deserving of a foundational set of human rights. However, inequalities exist between various social groups. Oftentimes peoples' struggles go unrecognized, and people do not have adequate access to resources that are considered a human "right," such as clean drinking water. Human rights tend to be upheld by the nation-state they belong to. Thus, when a person's rights are not being upheld by their country or if they no longer have a country to go back to, they are stripped of their institutional supports and left with their mere humanity. Identities shift and change as individuals who were once citizens of a country are forced to leave their homes due to dangerous conditions that could not be deterred by the country's institutional systems. They no longer have the institutional or social support to advocate for their wellbeing and uphold their rights. These individuals become refugees, seeking asylum in another country that can protect their safety and defend their rights. In this process, they are faced with the challenge of legitimizing their experience to others, trying to render their lives recognizable in order to receive adequate institutional support. Left with their bare humanity, their lives become precarious as they move through spaces with uncertainty of the future (Limbu 2009).

One site for this shift in identity is along the Canadian-US border, where recent changes in American politics is challenging the Canadian identity of pro-immigration and creating a group of asylum seekers trying to justify their motivation to flee a "safe" country as deemed by Canada. Asylum seekers who enter the US are often trying to escape violence, war, and extreme poverty. Their country of origin can no longer provide sustainable supports of these individuals and cannot protect their livelihood. When leaving their country, they are placed in a precarious situation as they no longer have a nation-state responsible or held accountable for upholding their human rights and must rely on foreign aid. Through this traumatic transition, adult refugees are even reframed as immoral individuals who willingly abandoned their country and are not to be trusted. Individuals are often perceived to be tied to the land they live and grew up on. One's culture

and morality are presumably “rooted” in the territory. When individuals become refugees, they are “ripped” away from their land, and thus from their culture and morality. They become unidentifiable nomads with no connections to a recognizable nation, and no obligations to anyone or anything. This perceived unbound-ness fuels stereotypes of refugees as dangerous (Malkki 1992). Along the US-Mexico border, this sentiment spills onto migrant children. Conventional ideas of children as innocent victims of violence are overshadowed by fear of the potential threat they pose to their country’s safety, job security, and economy. There is fear around what the child can grow up to do in the future and the resources they will use, like welfare (Fassin 2012). In America, these negative perceptions of refugees result in maltreatment and hostility that increases the uncertainty of their future. Their precarity is compounded by the Third Country Agreement, which positions the US as a “safe” country for asylum seekers despite the strong anti-immigration sentiments perpetuated by the federal government. In Canada, the identities of these asylum seekers are changing through this tension and must be rendered recognizable by the public and government officials before policies are made to protect this unique group of refugees. In this research paper, I explore how recent political changes led to the drastic reframing of the refugee identity and the consequences of this change. Additionally, I unpack how the US’ anti-immigration policies create tensions around the Third Country Agreement, which result in an emerging category of asylum seekers that are fleeing a “safe” country.

## TRUMP’S POLITICAL REGIME

Donald Trump’s presidency started with much controversy around his professional background and political stances. Many actions he has taken since his inauguration in January 2017 continue to be highly controversial and contested. Of major concern for most US citizens and spectators around the globe is his harsh anti-immigration stance. In his first year of presidency Trump decreased refugee acceptance to its lowest since 1980, banned citizens of 7 predominantly Muslim countries from entering the US, ceased the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and cancelled the Temporary Protection Status of several countries (Pierce and Selee 2017). Additionally, the Trump administration suspended the visas of

children and spouses of refugees residing in the US. All of these immigration policy changes aim to decrease immigration while increasing deportation (Pierce and Selee 2017). In Trump's first few months of presidency, from January 2017 to September 2017, the number of arrests made by the US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) increased by 42% and the number of immigrants deported from the country rose by 37% (Pierce, Bolter and Selee 2018). These actions have the most direct influence on people whose lives are most precarious- refugees and asylum seekers.

The Trump administration's decision to cancel the Temporary Protection Status of citizens of countries such as Haiti and many parts of Central America is an immense threat to the livelihoods of thousands of people residing in the US (Connor and Krogstod 2018). No new admissions or renewals for the Temporary Protection Status are being accepted, meaning that in the next few years, they risk deportation to countries where they fear for their lives. This status cancellation leaves 690,000 people in a highly uncertain position (Pierce and Selee 2017) and leads thousands of asylum seekers to cross into Canada in search of refuge (Connor and Krogstod 2018). While immigration is a topic addressed by the federal government, ICE relies heavily on state and local law enforcement cooperation to report and turn over unauthorized immigrants. Since these policies came into effect, there has been a divide amongst state legislations, with some passing laws that limit and challenge ICE interception and others enforcing full cooperation (Pierce, Bolter and Selee 2018).

Most recently, the Trump administration enacted the Zero Tolerance Policy in April 2018. Thousands of asylum seekers come from South and Central America yearly - trying to escape various forms of violence in their country of origin, including gang violence and domestic abuse. The Zero Tolerance Policy detains anyone illegally entering the US (Smidt and Freyd 2018). That is, anyone who enters the US between the designated crossing points is criminally charged. The Department of Homeland Security separates parents from their children if they suspect the child is not theirs, if they suspect the parent may harm the child, or if the parent is criminally charged (Department of Homeland Security 2018). Hence, families entering between authorized crossing points into the US are separated because the parents are criminally charged with illegal entry. Families are taken

into the custody of the Department of Homeland Security in Custody and Border Protection processing centers (Linton et al. 2017). The children of immigrants criminally charged with illegal entry upon processing are placed in shelters or other facilities run by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Meanwhile, the parents must go to trial for their criminal offence and fight for asylum status (Linton, Griffin and Shapiro 2017; Department of Homeland Security 2018). It is not uncommon for children as young as three years old to be appearing unaccompanied by their parents in immigration courts (Smidt and Freyd 2018). This is a long process, meaning that families can be separated for months at a time. Even after the trial is over, reuniting children with their caregivers is a complicated and time-consuming task as they are held by different government agencies and go through different legal proceedings (Pierce, Bolter and Selee 2018).

While awaiting trial, migrants must endure insufficient living conditions in the processing centers. Individuals, families, and children are supposed to stay in the processing center for no more than 72 hours, yet longer stays are common (Linton, Griffin and Shapiro 2017). A report by the United States House of Representatives (2019) states that 2,648 children were in custody as of June 26, 2018. This number does *not* include the children who were reunited prior to this date, nor does it include the hundreds of children who were separated since. Since April 2018, at least 18 infants and toddlers have been separated from their parents for 20 days to half a year (United States House of Representatives 2019). Due to overcrowding at these holding centers, migrant children and individuals are living in abysmal conditions inadequate for the long periods of time they are being held there. A paper published by the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that many processing centers have a “lack of bedding (e.g., sleeping on cement floors), open toilets, no bathing facilities, constant light exposure, confiscation of belongings, insufficient food and water, and lack of access to legal counsel, and a history of extremely cold temperatures” (Linton, Griffin and Shapiro 2017: 4). At times people detained in the processing centers have insufficient access to medical care, are physically or emotionally abused by staff, and are separated from their friends and family, all of which adds to the trauma of fleeing the violence in their country of origin to seek asylum (Linton, Griffin and Shapiro 2017). From 2018 to 2019, 5 migrant

children have died while being detained by the government (Warren and Attanasio 2019). As many politicians and advocates note, these acts by border control and immigration agencies directly violate the standards set by the 1997 Flores v. Reno Settlement and the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPA) signed in 2008. The Flores agreement outlines the standards of “detention, release, and treatment of minors in federal immigration custody,” which includes sufficient living conditions, and timely release (United States House of Representatives 2019:9). The TVPA holds that unaccompanied children who illegally entered the country must be sent to an Office of Refugee Resettlement facility within 72 hours (United States House of Representatives 2019).

In June 2018, a federal court ordered a temporary stop to migrant family separation while they looked over the details of the Zero Tolerance Policy and its subsequent effects on asylum seekers. The court ordered that all children be reunited with their families by July 2018. However, this deadline was not met as 711 children remained separated from their parents, several hundred of whom were deported prior to being reunited with their children. Since July 11, 2019, 30 separated children remain in government custody (United States House of Representative 2019). While the Zero Tolerance Policy is no longer in effect since Trump signed an executive order officially stopping it, there are still hundreds of children being separated at the border. This is because children can still be separated if there is reasonable belief that the parents pose a risk to the child’s wellbeing. However, the guidelines for this exception are not officially outlined, meaning that many families are divided over “...minor crimes, questionable accusations of gang membership, and unverified safety concerns” (United States House of Representatives 2019: 14). Since the termination of the Zero Tolerance Policy, over 700 children have been separated at the border (United States House of Representatives 2019).

The cancellation of the Temporary Protection Status and the enforcement of the Zero Tolerance Policy is a manifestation of the Trump administration’s anti-immigration stance. Despite worldwide disbelief and outcry, the Trump administration continues to push forward with its anti-immigration position. Furthermore, despite the Canadian Prime Minister and politicians speaking out against Trump’s

actions, the Third Country Agreement still stands. The US is still deemed as a safe country for refuge.

## PRECARIOUS LIFE AND ISSUES OF LEGIBILITY

Many governments have human rights policies, such as the Canada Human Rights Act, that are meant to ensure the protection and rights of all human beings. These human rights policies are based on the premise that all people are equal through their membership to a collective humanity (Limbu 2009). We are all biologically human, and thus we are all equal and deserve equal human rights. However, as policies such as the Zero Tolerance Policy shows, not all people are necessarily equal, and some lives are more vulnerable to particular political and institutional forces than others.

There are boundaries to what it means to be “human” and who has access to human rights (Limbu 2009). In order to gain access to particular human rights, the person needs to be rendered relatable and recognizable to the public, government agencies, and other institutions. There are particular norms and ideas of “life” that individuals need to meet in order for their “life” to be socially and institutionally recognized (Butler 2009). A person’s life needs to be rendered legible, meaning that the person’s identity, lifestyle and experiences are recognized and socially meaningful in a society (Limbu 2009). It is important to have a legible life and identity to ensure a protected space within a society. Limbu (2009) argues that a major factor that makes a person legible and able to have access to human rights is their membership in a nation-state. Citizens rely on their governments to ensure their rights are being protected and upheld. Asylum seekers or refugees who fled their country of origin most often were let down by the governments meant to uphold their rights, and by leaving, they no longer have a nation-state to turn to for protection (Limbu 2009). Even though organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) aid in ensuring the rights of refugees, their influence and capabilities are limited.

People who do not have their rights upheld by institutions are highly vulnerable as they are rendered illegible to citizens, governments and institutions. Refugees and asylum seekers are often met with

suspicion, seen as “betraying” their country for leaving (Malkki 1992). Across many cultures worldwide, there is a strong connection between land and identity. People may be seen as being “rooted” to their country’s land and gain their identity and culture through their connection to their country’s territory (Malkki 1992). When people are forced to leave their country, they are seen as losing their land, and thus losing their morality and culture. Other countries may frame refugees as psychologically ill, violent, or immoral (Malkki 1992). Representing refugees and asylum seekers as being asocial or immoral due to their assumed abandonment of their country adds to the vulnerability of asylum seekers who often have difficulty accessing institutions that can protect and uphold their human rights.

People struggling to maintain their rights are struggling to stay socially relevant and legible to society. If they cannot defend their social relevance and make others identify them as individuals “deserving” of aid, then they risk social death—becoming socially irrelevant and invisible to the greater society (Limbu 2009). Social death makes people’s lives more vulnerable and can result in actual death because policies, agencies, and institutions are unable to identify their needs and adequately uphold their livelihoods. For instance, along the Mexican-US border, border patrollers were usually posted along the border and would hear cries for help coming from asylum seekers exhausted and dehydrated from their journey. While they would usually go into the desert to locate these individuals, due to the influx of asylum seekers entering the US and higher processing times due to Trump’s border policies, there are seldom any patrol officers at the border listening for these cries of help. In 2018 alone, it is estimated that 283 migrants have died while attempting to cross the border. Most recently, a family of 4 were found dead along the Mexican- US border. The two babies, toddler, and woman are speculated to have died a few days prior in the desert, overcome by dehydration and heat exhaustion (Warren and Attanasio 2019). The death toll along the border may have been lower if there were still patrol officers stationed along the border, listening and ready to attend to distressed migrants. Some of these deaths could have been avoided if there were more compassionate immigration policies in place that sped up the asylum process and made processing more efficient, thus freeing up resources to help those crossing the desert looking for refuge. However, the needs of asylum seekers are institutionally ignored and denied through

anti-immigration sentiments and policies that render their lives illegible and socially irrelevant. Instead, resources are placed in the processing centers, which are overcrowded and unsanitary due to strict immigration laws. Unfortunately for hundreds of individuals, the social death of those trying to transition from travelling asylum seekers to US refugee leaves them increasingly vulnerable to the possibility of their actual death.

The degree of precarity of one's life is politically charged and involved in uneven power dynamics that make some lives more vulnerable than others. Who we depend on and how much we depend on a particular person or network of people is dependent on our position within that society. People's position in a society renders some lives more grievable or precarious than others. The recognition of a "worthy" life is context-dependent in that different contexts give way to different ideas of what it means to be alive. These contexts are constantly changing, and thus change how a "life" is recognized, whose life is recognized and by whom (Butler 2009).

The actions carried out by the current US presidential administration renders the lives of asylum seekers more precarious than the lives of citizens born and raised in the US. The sentiments surrounding the anti-immigration policies work to reduce the legibility of the lives of asylum seekers from South and Central America and works to construe human "lives" as simply "living" people. This reduction of life to merely living is best echoed in Trump's comments around illegal immigrants entering from the south of the US border: "We have people coming into the country or trying to come in, we're stopping a lot of them, but we're taking people out of the country. You wouldn't believe how bad these people are [...] These aren't people. These are animals" (Korte and Gomez 2018). This quote reduces the lives of illegal immigrants, many of whom are running from violence in their country of origin and are asylum seekers, to the level of merely "living" "animals." Trump's comments frame illegal immigrants as people whose lives are less grievable than that of the US citizen, thus favouring the lives of US citizens and making the lives of illegal immigrants more vulnerable and precarious. Drastic anti-immigration policies and sentiments such as this change the normative narrative of what it means to have a "life" and whose life is grievable. It reinforces the notion that asylum seekers entering between the official entry

points are immoral and asocial. This threatens the already fragile legibility and recognisability of the lives of asylum seekers who do not have a government supporting and upholding their human rights. While there is a substantial pushback to this re-framing of illegal immigrants' lives, the policies in place and anti-immigration sentiment continue to greatly shape the social, political, and economic conditions of asylum seekers.

In Trump's infamous 2016 campaign speech, he stated: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best...They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (Diamond 2019). These sentiments live on in 2019 as Trump described the influx of asylum seekers and migrants as an "invasion of drugs and criminals" entering the US (Diamond 2019). The crude and harmful generalization of the criminality of South and Central Americans extends beyond adults onto their children and future generations. In 2018 it was leaked that Trump believed that he could end birthright citizenship—a policy that states anyone born in the US is automatically an American citizen—and intended to do so through an executive order (Cillizza 2018). While this is not possible due to the 14th Amendment of the American constitution that directly upholds birthright citizenship, his intention to limit citizenship is an attack on immigrants entering the US and their future children. Didier Fassin (2012) explored the politics of humanitarianism and the limitations of compassion in his book *Humanitarian Reason*. He noted that children are commonly understood as innocent, vulnerable beings in need of protection. Due to this image, many humanitarian groups position children as victims of adults' wrongdoings, which prompt aid groups to focus on defending their rights. However, Fassin argues that at times this compassion is mixed with anxiety over the future potentialities of the child—perhaps the child will grow up to be an abuser, a child soldier, or a drug dealer. Suddenly, the image of the helpless victimized child turns into one of a criminal, threatening the security of the nation and community. This transformation in identity from the child victim to a security threat is manifested in Trump's desire to end birthright citizenship. By reducing adult migrants to "animals," "rapists," and "criminals," he is not only attacking the livelihood of adult asylum seekers, but he is also increasing the

precarity of the lives of migrant children and future generations by framing them as threats to present and future American ways of life. The political rights of the migrant child, adult, and their descendants are denied and questioned, leaving them increasingly vulnerable.

Alec Smidt and Jennifer Freyd (2018) calls these acts against migrants made by the governmental system institutional betrayal. Asylum seekers depend on the US for safety from the violence in their country of origin. However, the US betrays the confidence of the migrants who look to them for sanction. Instead, the US government structurally imposes violence against asylum seekers, systematically harming them through various social structures and institutions, such as government policies and agencies (Farmer 2004). Anti-immigration sentiments and policies create a hostile environment not only for asylum seekers entering the country but also for current refugee status holders and various legal immigrants whose country of origin is being belittled and attacked by these policies and sentiments. Policies such as the Zero Tolerance Policy exerts violence on asylum-seeking immigrants and their families through the systematic process of criminalization, family separation, and the long, difficult immigration process. These political acts of violence further shift and reinforce ideas of the refugee as a threat to American society. These sentiments trickle down to the children of asylum seekers and their future generations, questioning their morality, which increasingly delegitimizes their claims to aid and challenges their social relevance. This perceived identity adds to their precarious circumstances as they struggle against social death and invisibility.

## CANADA AND THE THIRD COUNTRY AGREEMENT

What role does Canada play in upholding and reproducing the increasing precarity and illegibility of asylum seekers? Canada prides itself on being culturally diverse, accepting people from various walks of life, and upholding human rights. Current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted in January 2017 after Trump announced the travel ban on seven predominantly Muslim countries, “To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength #WelcomeToCanada” (Smith 2018). However, this tweet and the pride many Canadians have over

being culturally accepting conflicts with the Third Country Agreement that was signed in 2002 and is still in effect today.

Under the Third Country Agreement, people who enter the US and wish to travel to Canada, or vice versa, to seek asylum will be turned back to finish their immigration process in their initial country of entry (Canada 2002). This agreement is only in effect when coming in through the US-Canada land border entry points by train or in airports (Canada 2016). This agreement was made as part of the “US-Canada Smart Border Action Plan” and is meant to share the responsibility of asylum seekers and refugee claimants (Canada 2016). A country is safe as long as they can “respect human rights and offer a high degree of protection to asylum seekers” (Canada 2016). A designated safe third country must adhere to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1984 Convention against Torture, among other conditions (Canada 2016). As of today, the US is the only designated safe third country in the Canadian *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (Canada 2016). However, the recent political climate and string of anti-immigration policies have left many asylum seekers risking their lives crossing the Canadian border between official entry points to apply for asylum in Canada. The influx of asylum seekers crossing the Canadian border has left many Canadians wondering: Is the US still a safe country for asylum seekers?

Many politicians, lawyers, professors and the general Canadian public have been questioning why the Safe Third Country Agreement has not been suspended. The agreement states that it can be suspended for up to 3 months with a written notice to the other party or, be terminated after a six-month written notice (Canada 2002). In the midst of the 2017 immigration ban of 7 predominantly Muslim countries, over 200 law professors from across Canada had signed and sent a statement to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, Ahmed D. Hussen, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau asking for the agreement to be suspended. The letter reads: “...the Canadian government must immediately stop blocking refugee claimants from crossing the border from the US into Canada” (Suspending Safe Third Country Agreement 2017). This call for a suspension was echoed by the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers (CARL), with Vice President of CARL stating, “We should not be sending anyone back to face an increasingly hostile and discriminatory system” (Canadian

Association of Refugee Lawyers 2017). These comments are not far removed from the comments made in the House of Commons, whereupon the recent Zero Tolerance Policy, NDP House of Commons representative Guy Caron stated, “[How] can this government consider the United States to be a safe third country when the U.S. government is locking up children and separating migrant families?” (Canada 2018). A fellow NDP seat holder in the House of Commons, Jenny Kwan, also commented, “Former minister Lloyd Axworthy, the chair of the World Refugee Council, and Allan Rock, former UN ambassador, are clearly stating that the U.S. is no longer a safe country for asylum seekers. Canada must not be complicit in this inhumane treatment of children” (Canada 2018). Yet, the Canadian government warned against illegally crossing the border, stating that refugees and asylum seekers residing in the US who do so risk deportation. In 2017, 8,286 Haitians applied for Canadian asylum, which is a considerable spike from the 631 applicants a year prior. This spike is mostly attributed to Trump’s withdrawal of the Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which risks the livelihood of 46,000 Haitians in the US. Likewise, the suspension of the TPS risks the livelihoods of thousands of Central Americans seeking asylum. The number of Haitians seeking asylum is also considerably higher than the 1,415 Syrian asylum applicants in 2017. Despite these numbers, only a quarter of Haitians who claimed refugee status in Canada were accepted. This is extremely low compared to the 90% of asylum seekers from Syria, Yemen, and Eritrea, who were granted refugee status (Connor and Krogstod 2018). Hence, even if asylum seekers from the US successfully cross into Canada, they are not guaranteed refugee status and continued protection under the Canadian government due to the Third Country Agreement that positions the US as a “safe” country for asylum seekers.

Since early 2018, politicians, lawyers, and members of the public have been debating and questioning the status of the Third Country Agreement. There have been multiple news reports documenting the influx of immigrants coming into Canada from the US, trying to navigate around the agreement by entering between official entry points or entering via boat. Many immigrants risk their lives trying to seek asylum in Canada to avoid the string of harsh anti-immigration policies being carried out in the US. The RCMP intercepted 1,018 migrants along the Manitoban border in 2017. In 2018, they received

over 177 emergency calls from asylum seekers who crossed the border and were in dire need of assistance, many of whom were lost in the prairies in the dead of winter. In one 911 call, a Somali refugee crossing into Canada from the US with a group of people told the operator that he was “freezing to death” and one man could not walk anymore. Despite their dire situation, when the operator told them to find the nearest road and stay put for the ambulance and RCMP, the asylum seeker asked to confirm if the first responders are Canadian (Grabish 2019). This story is not uncommon. Asylum seekers must make risky decisions and endure life-threatening situations in search of a place where their experiences are recognizable to the public. Their lives are precarious as their future remains uncertain in their quest for a legible identity and institutional supports that uphold their human rights.

A survey was done by the polling firm Ipsos that was commissioned by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada in 2018 found that while many Canadian citizens are pro-immigration, they are wary about asylum seekers coming in from the US. Many citizens, especially recent immigrants, are suspicious of these asylum seekers. Many wonder if they are trying to take advantage of the Third Country Agreement loopholes and are concerned about the effects the new asylum seekers will have on social services such as housing and welfare (Wright 2018).

Mavis Otuteye was a 55-year-old woman found dead less than a kilometre from the Canadian border. Officials believe she died from hypothermia as she was making her way into Canada from Minnesota. It is believed that she is a casualty of the Third Country Agreement as an asylum seeker looking for refuge in Canada (Glowacki 2017). Her death is, in part, a result of the illegibility of her experience as an asylum seeker fleeing America’s anti-immigration policies that threatened to deport her back to her native country where she faced unimaginable violence. Due to Canadian policies that do not recognize the US as a country threatening to refugees, there are no supports to those fleeing the US. Asylum seekers’ rights are being shaved off by the US government, and Canada is taking part by denying the access of many asylum seekers coming from the US who do not feel safe and are in search of a government that will uphold their human rights. This leaves these asylum seekers venturing alone through the harsh

Canadian wilderness in hopes of finding greater stability and support on the other side of the border. In the case of Mavis Otuteye, illegibility resulted in her social death and tragically, her actual death. The legibility of these particular asylum seekers is further challenged by their ambiguous identity: do these asylum seekers have just cause to be seeking asylum in Canada when they entered the “safety” of the US territory? This ambiguous, illegible life is observed in the general public, as demonstrated by the Ipsos survey, and also in the Canadian federal government through the lack of political action.

As of 2019, the issue of identity recognition for refugees fleeing the US has still not been resolved. In January 2018, a briefing memo to Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen from Homeland Security stated that the Third Country Agreement between the US and Canada is “no longer working as intended.” It noted that individuals are circumventing the agreement by entering between crossing points, which does not work to curtail and manage the number of asylum seekers entering Canada and the US (Connolly 2019). Bill Blair, the Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction, has suggested a “modernization” of this agreement. The media has since speculated that the Third Country Agreement would extend to cover the whole Canadian-US border, meaning that anyone caught crossing between checkpoints will be brought to an official entry point and sent back to the US (Canada 2019). During a Citizenship and Immigration Committee meeting in April 2019, Michelle Rempel questioned fellow committee member, Marta Morgan, on these speculated agreement changes. Ms. Morgan refused to specify what changes were proposed to the US government, stating that “There is a wide range of changes that could be anticipated to the Safe Third Country Agreement,” and “Any changes made to the Safe Third Country Agreement would have to be negotiated with the United States. It's an agreement between our two countries; no changes can be made unilaterally” (Canada 2019). From this ongoing conversation, it is clear that Canada’s Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship still views the US as a “safe” country despite years of parliamentary opposition to suspend the agreement, and intends to extend the agreement to all of Canada’s southern border, thereby substantially restricting the passage of US asylum seekers into Canada. This consideration has dire implications for hundreds of thousands of refugees who risk being deported back to their country

of origin, where they risk death. Furthermore, it increases the precarity of asylum seekers' lives who have one less option for safety, and one less chance at having their lives rendered legible.

However, not all hope is lost. The fact that there is a major push back on the Third Country Agreement from politicians, the media, and other members of the public shows that the identity of asylum seekers coming from the US is being recognized. Butler (2009) notes that in order for a particular life to be recognized, the life needs to be made recognizable. The life needs to be made into a subject for recognition in order for it to be recognized. A life that is fully recognized is socially meaningful, makes sense to the society, and will be upheld by laws and policies. While the future of this specific group of asylum seekers seems increasingly uncertain, the conversations that develop around this issue demonstrates that their experiences and lives are increasingly becoming recognized. Even though the Canadian government has not suspended or renegotiated the Third Country Agreement to protect asylum seekers entering Canada from the US, Trudeau acknowledges the negative impacts the US immigration policies have on refugees and vows to “continue to seek ways to modernize it” and “continue to closely monitor developments in the United States” (Canada 2018b). Greater acknowledgement of refugees fleeing the US is a step towards making this social group recognizable and socially relevant, which has the ability to inspire action. For instance, the Canadian Council for Refugees, the Canadian Council of Churches, and Amnesty International Canada openly challenge the Third Country Agreement, arguing that the “goal and the effect of the agreement is to reduce the number of refugees who can claim refugee protection in Canada. By implementing this agreement, Canada joins the many countries that take the ‘Not in my backyard’ approach to refugees. Only a tiny percentage of the world’s refugees reach Canada’s borders. We should not close our doors even on these few” (Canadian Council for Refugees 2017). On two separate occasions, these advocacy groups legally challenged the US’ designation as a “safe” third country. In 2005 the Canadian Federal Court found that the US did not meet multiple requirements of a “safe” country for refugees, but this decision was overturned by the Federal Court of Appeal on technical grounds, which did not consider the main issue at hand. This challenge was reissued in 2017 by the same three

organizations and is currently still in the Canadian Federal Court (Canadian Council for Refugees 2017).

## CONCLUSION

There is a drastic identity transition that occurs when an individual leaves their country of origin, no longer covered by their country's political and institutional supports. They transition from a citizen to a refugee, seeking asylum in a foreign country and looking to find a new government that can protect their rights. During this search, asylum seekers fight for recognition and relevance of their lives so that they can receive the aid and support they require. Tied into this uncertainty is a negative stigma around refugees that frame them as dangerous, traitors to their country of origin and devoid of cultural principles and morals (Malkki 1992). This common generalization further threatens their legibility and claims to aid, risking them social death, which can result in their actual death.

The precarity of asylum seekers' lives is increasingly becoming prevalent as anti-immigration ideations and policies spread in the US under the Trump administration. The Trump administration's forceful anti-immigration stance has left many lives in a place of uncertainty - wondering if they will be deported back to the country they were trying to flee, wondering how long they will be held in processing centers, and wondering about their position in US society. The cancellation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and the Temporary Protection Status of several countries in 2017 (Pierce and Selee 2017) has generated more precarity in the lives of those already vulnerable. The most recent Zero Tolerance Policy in 2018 has further created confusion and uncertainty in the lives of those crossing between official crossing points in search of asylum. Trump's ongoing public comments about illegal immigration further stigmatize vulnerable people seeking refuge. These sentiments target not only adult asylum seekers but also their children and future generations.

Canada takes part in adding precarity to asylum seekers' lives through the Third Country Agreement. By sending asylum seekers back to the US and still listing the US as their only "safe" third country in the Canadian *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (Canada 2016), Canada is adding to the uncertainty of refugee claimants' lives. The

agreement increases precarity by sending asylum seekers back into the uncertain, hostile US immigration system. Simultaneously, this agreement creates a contested category of asylum seekers who are under suspicion because of their effort to leave an assumed “safe” country.

However, increasingly, politicians, persons in the media, lawyers, and healthcare providers are working to bring this social justice issue to light. With the Canadian federal election fast approaching on October 2019, both the Conservative and NDP party platforms address the Third Country Agreement. The NDP aims to suspend the agreement with the US as soon as possible. The Conservative party wishes to renegotiate the terms of the agreement, noting that they look to decrease illegal crossings into Canada. While they do not specifically note how they would ideally like to renegotiate the agreement, the importance placed on reducing illegal entry suggests they wish to extend the agreement to include unofficial ports of entry. Hence, individuals who come between official checkpoints will be redirected and turned away. This sentiment is similar to the speculated suggestions made by the current Trudeau Liberal government, which has not yet released a statement or platform on this issue (Maclean’s 2019). The upcoming federal election will inevitably change the lives of thousands of asylum seekers entering Canada from the US, whether it means supporting or suspending the Third Country Agreement. No matter the result, as Trump’s reign continues to unfold, Canada needs to be mindful of how their policies and actions shape the precarity of lives of those across the border.

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# DONALD TRUMP: WHITE HOT THREAT TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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## ABSTRACT

The 2016 American election altered the political landscape, with the consequences significantly encroaching on the human rights of American marginal populations. This paper examines the role of predatory identity and the disintegration of media in the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president and its subsequent impact on the American political landscape. By considering concepts such as predatory identity, The Daily Me during the current cultural-political moment within the context of the American constitution, this essay seeks to address the potential consequences of Donald Trump's election to American democracy.

## INTRODUCTION

The 2016 American election altered the political landscape, with the consequences significantly encroaching on the human rights of American marginal populations. Since 2016, we have had time to reflect on what forces mobilized to allow a radical shift in paradigm to occur, and how these forces are still at large and continuing to grow. One of the most prevalent and threatening forces is the overt demonstration of white nationalism. This imminent threat to American Democracy has transformed from a subtle but influential social ideology to an unconcealed form of mainstream politics. Trump's race-based ideologies and his attempt to explicitly ground these ideologies as valid political positions have changed the trajectory of American politics. There is no single cause for Trump's election; pointing fingers is futile, rather it is more useful to understand how one particular aspect of his rise to power impacts society at large. My focus is to demonstrate that Trump ran as a Republican candidate whose ideological platform does not match the manner in which a traditional conservative American would identify, thus creating a slippery slope that opened a gate into mainstream radical right politics. The abject in this phenomenon lies within the consequences of Conservative voters who find themselves aligning with much more radical views, disrupting their moral positions.

The first section of this essay demonstrates, through the analysis of Donald Trump's election, how white nationalism gained a more overtly legitimate political presence. I would like to disclaim that Trump is not the first White Nationalist president. A brief historical review, for example, shows ethnocentric values in legislation and personal beliefs: Lincoln's well known acquiesce signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Thomas Jefferson's and George Washington's participation in slavery and Andrew Jackson's forceful removal of Indigenous people through the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Systemic racism has long been part of the American foundation, and it is important to postulate how a blatant form of discriminatory politics in the 21st century will affect the future of the American political stage. An analysis of tweets, addresses, and the commentary from white nationalists will be used to demonstrate Trump's embodiment of an emerging radical figure with explicit white nationalist themes.

Can we say that Trump's election is a symbiotic relationship of heightened white supremacy and the mobilization of its ideologies into politics? Is Trump the abject embodiment of Akhil Gupta's notion of predatory identity forming into predatory politics? If so, what are the consequences of this form of predatory ideology? Within this essay, predatory is referred to as the abject cultural narrative of a distinct divide between who constitutes as Americans and who is produced as the "others" within the American political imagination (Anderson 2006; Appadurai 2006). Such a division between people creates the scapegoats whose identity is subjected to carry the failings of a nation. This discriminatory behaviour is expected to result in xenophobia, racism and possibly genocide (Appadurai 2006).

The second section of this essay will layout the potential consequences of a white supremacist-oriented American government. While there are numerous imaginable consequences on social, economic, and global scales, this essay will examine the Trump presidency's threat to American democracy. Using Cass R. Sunstein's concept of "The Daily Me" to provide insight into how modern American white nationalists influenced American politics, I will examine how the Alt-Right's heavy online presence breeds extremist values. To understand how the Alt-Right recruits individuals and the inner workings of their online dialogue is beyond the scope of this paper and has been detailed elsewhere (see; Patrick Hermansson's opinion piece in the New York Times on spending a year undercover with the Alt-Right). To highlight the consequences of the disintegration of media coverage on American politics, Bruce Ackerman's *We the People* demonstrates the traditional workings of American populist democracy and why Trump may undermine the longstanding process of dualist populist democracy. This section seeks to answer if we can maintain our confidence that populist democracy will continue to be the dominant political framework. Are we seeing a breaking point for the first time in American history? If so, what is the cause? Thus, I argue that the election of Donald Trump has altered the political landscape and has shifted the trajectory of American politics towards an explicit form of white nationalist politics.

## WHAT GAVE WAY? TRUMP'S COURTSHIP WITH WHITE NATIONALISM

It is no secret that Trump's flirtation with white nationalism had grown into a full-blown courtship since the beginning of his campaign announcement. It has been said that Trump's racist attacks fanned the flames of rising white nationalism (Klein 2017:68). Still, it is important to work through his explicit efforts at engaging with white nationalists to claim how Trump is a manifestation of their beliefs.

In an interview with Richard Spencer, leader of the National Policy Institute and a self-described white nationalist, he describes Trump's affiliation with extreme nationhood. Spencer states that Trump's starting point is nationalism, not the typical freedom and liberty commentary of traditional conservatives (Letson 2016). Spencer does not mean a multicultural all-inclusive form of nationalism, where there is a promotion of citizenship based on one's passport, but rather one with increased borders and malignant scapegoating and division based on race. It is not profound to state Trump's main targets are black Americans, Muslims, and Mexicans; he paints them as threats to American society. Thus, it is fitting to begin this discussion with Arjun Appadurai's notion of "predatory identities" to refer to "those identities whose social construction and mobilization require the extinction of other, proximate social categories, defined as threats to the very existence of some group, defined as a we" (Appadurai 2006:51). Appadurai mentions how leading up to the second world war, "German-ness" became measured by ethno-racial terms and the desire to preserve "purity"; German identity required the elimination of the "other" (Appadurai 2006:56). This concept will be explored later in greater detail. To begin, this concept is echoed by Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again." The fixation on the nation, the presumption that there is something currently bad, and the phrase "again" suggests a return to a time that Trump considers previously great can be viewed as an accelerant in the use of scapegoats as individuals who disturb what he considers the natural order.

The use of minorities as the other is an essential cog in the nationalistic machine. Minorities do not come preformed, they are productions of the state, and they are reminders of failed nationhood (Appadurai

2006:42). Encompassed by the boundaries of political humanity, minorities represent an incomplete and contradicting depiction of self-perception by the state. Trump delivers this message through his anti-immigration comments. Trump's nationalism was present at the inception of his well-known campaign announcement, where he declared Mexicans as rapists, drug addicts, and criminals (New York Times 2015). He went on to declare his intention to build a physical wall between Mexico and America, setting the foundation for his strongly bordered and nationalistic rhetoric. From this, Trump pushed to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). This, coupled with Immigrations and Customs Forces' (ICE) increased arrests of immigrants (with no increase in deportations), can be viewed as a tactic to induce fear into minorities and preform for his nationalistic agenda (Bendix 2017). His use of fear to mobilize his agenda and create a strong presence of "us versus them" was demonstrated again when Trump tweeted a series of blatantly Islamophobic tweets in response to the van incident in Manhattan. In a series of 10 tweets, Donald Trump called the aggressor a terrorist four times, referenced ISIS and bombastically called for the death penalty as well as sending him to Guantanamo Bay detention camp (Donald J. Trump [realDonaldTrump]. 2017, Nov 02). Trump proceeded to critique the Diversity Visa Lottery Program, which is the Visa program the individual entered the country. Shortly after the incident, he called for the termination of the program and proposed a new program based on security and merit. Trump's swift attempt to paint the aforementioned program as a large threat to American society and subsequent mobilization into anti-immigrant policy reformation is indicative of predatory identity creeping into American politics.

Trump's anti-immigration beliefs are clear; however, he goes beyond nationalistic borders and attacks black Americans. Trump's goal is to cast off American ethnic minorities as scapegoats for the country's political and economic failings. This was displayed in the media's reaction to the Charlottesville protest due to Trump's refusal to condemn white supremacists. The line that was most shocking was Trump's assertion that there was violence enacted on both sides. However, after Heather Heyer died because a man who identified with the Unite the Right rally drove his vehicle into a crowd of counter-protestors, it was made clear that the violence was not of equal

proportion. When asked if this specific act was considered terrorism, Trump avoided the question. The official transcript reads:

Well, I think the driver of the car is a disgrace to himself, his family and his country. And that is—you can call it terrorism. You can call it murder. You can call it whatever you want. I would just call it as the fastest one to come up with a good verdict. That's what I'd call it. Because there is a question. Is it murder? Is it terrorism? And then you get into legal semantics. The driver of the car is a murderer. And what he did was a horrible, horrible, inexcusable thing. (Donald Trump's Charlottesville remarks, retrieved from [www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-charlottesville-transcript-2017-0815-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-charlottesville-transcript-2017-0815-story.html))

By initially questioning the epistemology of how we allocate certain phrases onto violent acts, a brief aside into legal semantics, and finally bestowing the term “murderer,” harshly contrasts the address Trump gave later in November 2017 regarding the Manhattan incident. This speech also included the infamous line “there were very fine people on both sides,” demonstrating Trump's refusal to wholeheartedly condemn the actions of the white supremacists, and validate the intent of the counter-protestors.

Finally, in an almost Kafkaesque display of Trump's emboldened racism, “The Onion,” a satirical and hyperbolic news organization, published a story on November 30th, 2017 entitled “Trump retweets video from anti-Muslim hate group” (The Onion 2017). The Onion broke its own fourth wall with this headline because it followed days after Trump actually did retweet three videos from a known British Far Right group. The videos depict a Muslim man breaking a statue of Mary, as if to say, “to hell with the separation of church and state” (Landers and Masters 2017). Donald Trump's use of propaganda to stir brewing hostility further cements his attempts to legitimize anti-Muslim sentiments amongst the general population.

## HOW DOES HATE BECOME POLITICAL?

Laid out in the preceding section is Trump's attempts in recent years to serve white nationalists, along with their endorsement of his overtly

racist ideology. One must consider how the American population became so receptive to such dialogue. To start, I will begin by examining the preceding president, Barack Obama's legacy in relation to racial acceptance. In an essay entitled *The First White President* by Te-Nehisi Coates (2017), the author presents a possible explanation for how to embolden racism succeeded the first black president. Coates argues Trump is the first white president, meaning his entire political existence hinges on the existence of a black president (Coates 2017). Long before his candidacy announcement, Trump questioned Obama's country of birth, demanding him to release his birth certificate. Further verbal attacks included the accusation that Obama did not write his own memoir, and it was ghostwritten by a white man, undermining the intellectual feats on what can only be based on the colour of his skin (Coates 2017). This concept of finding a shift in power relations personally insulting was made visible by Trump's clear demonstration of insecurity through his commentary and insistent need to explicitly state how his administration is running better than Obama's. One can view this as an attempt to reverse the current shifts in culture and power America is experiencing, if only on vague terms expressed through tweets. However, this attempt surpasses the socio-political imagination, and grounds the insecurities felt by the general white nationalist population, thus reinforcing the fear of losing the privileges and powers that come with being the majority. In this shared insecurity, white supremacists see themselves in Trump. This rhetoric seems to have triggered anxiety amongst white Americans about the future of their country.

White Supremacists have long existed in American society, but during Trump's campaign, they mobilized themselves into a more visible identity whose ideologies are being legitimized in mainstream politics. Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, and Su (2010) define political, social movements as actors and organizations seeking to alter power deficits and to effect social transformations through the state by mobilizing regular citizens for sustained political action (288). The authors go on to state that it is important to address facts that the movements are not always attempting to create new policies, but rather sometimes are fighting to alter or replace entrenched unfavourable policies or defend favourable ones. In this case, the political impact of an emerging white-supremacist party is to not only defend systemic racism but unapologetically thrust a radical version of it into mainstream politics

(Amenta et al. 2010). While there have been various white nationalistic groups such as Aryan Nation and the KKK, an online subculture on 4chan and 8chan gave rise to the sharing of extremist ideas in a more convenient way than ever before. This has allowed for the flourishing of overt Far Right media such as Breitbart, a news source that seeks to validate and spread the perspectives of the Far Right. Trump's most explicit display of alliance with the Far Right was hiring Breitbart's executive chairman, Steve Bannon, as the White House Chief Strategist. This is indicative of an emerging network for people with shared nationalistic interests to congregate under one political representative: Trump. The basis of the Far Right, as defined by a group of American scholars, is the perception that one's "way of life" or national liberty is under threat from various ethnic or religious groups, creating the need for preparation for an attack from this imminent threat (Perry and Scrivens 2016). Trump's exploitation of these fears fed an increased desire for solidarity among the majority, as demonstrated in 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, where protestors chanted "you will not replace us" (Sanchez and Mills 2017).

Praise from well-known white nationalists and leaders of hate groups who endorse Trump further demonstrate how white nationalistic ideology gained mainstream political attention and value. Trump embodies hope for a white nationalist ethnostate. Media Matters for America, an organization dedicated to debunking news myths, gathered commentary from various white nationalists who found inspiration for the normalization of racist ethos in Trump's candidacy. David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan stated that "voting against Donald Trump is really treason to your heritage" (Hananoki 2016). The calls for preservation of one's heritage is situated in the insecurity white nationalists are facing in a globalized world. Richard Spencer, whose high regard for Trump and distaste for a white minority is detailed below, said, "Trump thinks like me... do you think it's a coincidence that everybody like me loves Trump and supports him?" (Hananoki 2016). The strong ties between Trump's political ideology and the self-identifying white supremacist population demonstrate the intense symbiotic relationship between the elite lawmakers, policy influencers, and the common citizen. This established relationship is a fluctuating performance consisting of the growing flames of hostility towards ethnic minorities, which enabled Trump's rise to power, and how his newfound authority will further

the divide between what he considers Americans and what he “others.” In response, far-right white supremacists will continue to implement their ideology on a grassroots level under the pretence that their beliefs are validated in seeing one of their own occupying the most powerful office in the world.

In an interview with Richard Spencer, whose think tank is actively attempting to lay down the foundation for a white ethnostate, he claims that America is built on European influence, and says this paradigm is currently shifting. His acknowledgement of changing times makes it appropriate to use Arjun Appadurai’s concept of predatory identity to explain the increased mobilization and subsequent election of a radical white nationalist president. Predatory identity is born out of the notion that when majorities become insecure, they mobilize by the masses to protect the rights and privileges that come with being the majority (Appadurai 2006:104). This is evident in Spencer’s expressed fear of an eclipse of the white majority in America. Spencer declared that by 2042 white people could become a minority because the majority of births right now are by non-white people. Predatory identities are almost always the majority, and social uncertainty leads to a stronger sense of nationalistic ethos. This apprehension of shifting norms manifests in culturally motivated forms of violence, rooted in the attempts to rid society of “the other.” Trump has exploited this fear amongst the American people through his increased border and scapegoat rhetoric. Trump’s election should be understood as a “ferocious backlash against the rising power of overlapping social and political movements demanding a more just and safer world” (Klein 2017:22). Stuart Kaufman (2006) details how predatory identity manifests itself into predatory politics, and this has been demonstrated in Serbia and India (see: Lisa Kissopolous 2008). While this concerns itself with examples of grand displays of ethnic violence, it fits for America when considering Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence (2011). Slow violence was conceived under the environmental crisis as a form of violence that is incremental but one with consequences that are still profoundly impactful. Extending this concept beyond environmental degradation in areas of economic insecurity, it makes itself evident in other subtle forms of state inflicted violence. This manifests as an increasingly militarized police force and regular accounts of police brutality against minorities; the prison industrial complex as outlined by Michelle Cornell in *The New Jim Crow*

(2012); and the Flint water crisis, a town made up predominantly of visible minorities and low-income Americans.

Kissopolous states, “instead of focusing on economic or political problems, leaders in my case studies try to keep the public’s attention on the potential threat posed by a minority community and on evocative appeals to majoritarian view of history” (Kissopolous 2008, 5). In the context of the Donald Trump campaign, he combined both the white nationalistic perspective of America as a predominantly white nation with the economic insecurity of jobs, using Mexican immigrants as scapegoats for a precarious job market. With a string of tweets such as the anti-immigrant commentary mentioned above, Trump tickled an already hostile environment. He exploited insecurity in an attempt to manipulate the majority into victimization, thus manipulating democracy itself (Kissopolous 2008:5). This tactic of elite manipulation serves to implement racist ideology into legislative policy, restricting the freedom and liberties of American citizens of colour. To sufficiently demonstrate that the American people are currently being manipulated by the elite and later by an increase of secularized media, I will detail how misinformation breeds extremism, which is then exploited in this context to create a division based on race.

## THE PERSONAL CURATION OF MEDIA AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF DEMOCRACY

The presence of predatory identity of white nationalism and in relation to Donald Trump has been demonstrated through Trump’s engagement with white nationalists through his shameless promotion of shared values, and their receptiveness to his ideology. How does the presence of emboldened racism alter the trajectory of the American political landscape? As Diane Stone states in the introduction of her book, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (1996: 1), “ideas matter.” So, how do these ideas become so prevalent in American thought that they take the form of the predatory identity mentioned above? A potential answer lies in our ability to tailor the information we receive to reflect our own beliefs, creating a heightened sense of trust in what may actually be misinformation. To understand how this practice threatens democracy,

we must understand how the American Constitution allows for such processes to occur.

## AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AS WE KNOW IT

Bruce Ackerman's canonical work *We the People* details how modern American democracy functions at its best, and predicts potential threats. While this paper does not concern itself with what is best for democracy or the American government, it is important to analyze how the current workings of democracy are subject to change with the increased presence of predatory ideology. Simply put, Ackerman suggests that populist democracy will prevail during a time of political crisis. This was evident in Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, where pressure from the populists intervened with the constitutional arrangement enslavement of black Americans. This was preformed again with Franklin D. Roosevelt's signing of The New Deal, which set a precedent for constitutional reform without going through Article Five of the Constitution.

A brief discussion of the history of Roosevelt's navigation around the Fifth Amendment is necessary to set the stage of understanding how the constitution can be affected by populist interest. The role of Article Five is core to dualist democracy: it maintains the role of the Senate and House in the role of proposing amendments. Two-thirds of both Houses are needed to agree, not just the bare majority of the Senate (Ackerman 1991:54). Further detail of the process is not necessary for this section of the paper; rather, it is of importance to discuss how the president can maneuver around the process. In the case of the New Deal, Roosevelt proposed a series of systems to alleviate the economic depression America was facing. The Supreme Court ruled to overturn Roosevelt's anti-Depression program. Their reasoning was based on the *laissez-faire* economic logic of the time. Through a series of congressional reforms, Roosevelt rejected the traditional form of a constitutional amendment by modifying judicial appointments (Ackerman 1991:51). In this section of his book, Ackerman questions if this precedent is a good thing, but goes on to state that it is possible for future presidents with far more equivocal mandates to abuse this method (Ackerman 1991:52-53). This practice further entrenches elitism into the American government, as predatory identity further solidifies into predatory politics, elites can manipulate the general

population to garner support for their constitutional proposals (Ackerman 1991:54). Though this is not a new tactic in politics, it potentially passes dangerous lines in the context of predatory identity. While Ackerman asserts navigating potential constitutional crises usually renders an improvement to the document, I argue Trump threatens this pattern due to his elitism and exclusive ideology. I suggest this has already started to take place, with Trump's selection of Neil Gorsuch for the Supreme Court, whose conservative religious tone in court aligns with Trump's beliefs.

## THE DAILY ME

What led to the infiltration of such an overt form of white nationalistic ideologies into mainstream politics? It seems not too long ago that explicit discrimination against minorities was shunned; after all, World War II was not yet 100 years ago. The technological innovations since then may offer some insight as to how extremism breeds in contemporary society. It is here that I apply Sunstein's concept of *The Daily Me* to explain how predatory identity gained enough momentum to mobilize into predatory politics. Sunstein's theory claims that the recent ability to tailor one's media sources to their personal interest is dangerous not only to society but the very fundamentalism of democracy. So, how does the disintegration of media misinform people? The use of narrowly selected exposure to topics creates a fragmented society, where individuals listen and speak to others who share their views (Sunstein 2007:44). When society becomes fragmented, their views become polarized, which can breed extremism, hatred and even violence (Sunstein, 2007). The Internet is the greatest tool in this; you can select the media provider and further topics from thereon. Filters allow likeminded people to congregate and discuss a single topic (Sunstein 2007:51). What occurs now is a phenomenon called "confirmation of the wisdom of decision." This process often ignores the views of others—except when to hold up and ridicule, and this confirmation breeds confidence, which provides momentum for mobilization.

When people deliberate together, they tend to give a disproportionate amount of weight to "common knowledge" information that they all share in advance and in contrast, they give too little weight to new or foreign information shared by a select number of people (Sunstein

2007:71). By listening to an individual's arguments for the ideas or politicians that they favour will provide a disproportionate amount of bias information. When this occurs in groups, the consequence is further solidifying an individual's original inclination, if not moving it to a more extreme point (Sunstein 2007:64). As it turns out, group polarization increases when individuals think of themselves as a collective identity, forming solidarity. Incidentally, if they think of themselves in such a manner, their views tend to be more extreme (Sunstein 2007:67). Now envision applying these concepts to an online chat group whose focus is heightened political engagement, their ideologies regularly affirmed and built upon by one another, strengthened by the bubble of information they have created. Then, further acknowledged by seeing one of their own in a position of authority. The election of Trump breathed a new life into the validity of white nationalistic views in the general population, and their confidence from increased exposure to one another through rapid and unprecedented avenues of communication.

## THE CONSEQUENCES

The idea of a narrowly informed citizen is eerily Orwellian and produces similar consequences. In order for America to remain a functioning democracy, like the Athenian model so highly regarded, individuals must be introduced to a variety of concepts and topics and have the ability to discuss them with fellow citizens, hence the revered notion of freedom of speech in America. This extends beyond personal preference as the basis for political sovereignty is reflecting on an exchange of diverse information. Sunstein insists that a well-functioning democracy includes regular encounters with new and conflicting information. This unanticipated exposure of information—where individuals are introduced to potentially irritating views they have not sought out—prevents forms of fragmentation and, therefore, polarization (Sunstein 2007:6). There is also the need for individuals in a society to share common experiences in order to address social problems in a heterogeneous manner, but with a system that rapidly diminishes the range of experiences available, polarization is bound to occur (Sunstein 2007). Deliberative democracy is based on the public forum, a concept regarding speech regulations based on the first amendment. While it is not necessary to divulge in detail, it is important to understand how The Daily Me may be compromising its

effect. Traditionally, the public forum allows for speakers to express themselves in public parks and on the street (Sunstein 2007:26). This practice seeks to facilitate a wide range of speakers to a heterogeneous audience where societal structures such as class, race and sex are not factors in whom the audience composes. It ensures exposure in everyday life to a wide range of topics. However, since the invention of the Internet, online exposure has become a much more influential mode to spread information. The public forum is deeply tied with the American understanding of freedom and liberty dictated in the constitution as a form of self-government. The idea that every common citizen has the ability to influence politics through free speech is the very basis of American democracy, and when the populist is misinformed, inter-dialectic politics is threatened.

Democracy is already in a fragile current state; we are starting to see a shift depicted in this election by how many Americans did not vote. The New York Times' 2016 election exit polls suggest a turnout rate of just 58.6% (NY Times 2016). The lack of voting may be due to The Daily Me effect, where their media intake did not involve politics; therefore, they were not informed or interested enough to perform their democratic duties. The larger consequence, as Ackerman states, is that "constitutional law may be jolted onto a new course without persuasive institutional evidence that a mobilized majority of the American people endorse the change" (Ackerman 1991:53). Thus, we see that predatory politics can be mobilized by a majority of Americans if they no longer possess the means for a widely informed understanding of society.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examines the role of predatory identity and the disintegration of media in the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president and its subsequent impact on the American political landscape. I do not pretend to possess the ability to predict how predatory identity may facilitate a constitutional crisis. Instead, my assertion is two-fold. First, the election of Donald Trump has given rise to predatory politics, born out of an increase in predatory identity in response to shifting power relations and social norms. Second, given the current state of American democracy, the election of Trump

creates a foundation for a constitutional crisis as he embodies harmful extremist values similar to those held by a misinformed populist.

This has been demonstrated first by his blatant nationalistic rhetoric and the condemnation of immigrants posing a threat to American society and values. His fostering of “the other” as a threat to the economy and national security in an already precarious economic situation with the war on terror still at large is a calculated attempt to establish a threat to visible minorities. The call for heightened borders is an example through these exploited circumstances, such as the Manhattan van incident, a bordered wall between Mexico and the United States and the slander of Mexican immigrants. His fixation with traditional American identity as white Americans is only further validated by his condemnation of Black Americans. This started with his questioning of Barack Obama’s origin of birth and intellectual feats, demonstrating insecurity at the shifting societal forces allowing people of colour to hold prestigious authoritative positions. It then continued with his inability to fully condemn the Neo-Nazi’s marching in Charlottesville, where he maintained that the counter-protesters present were on par with the actions of self-identified white supremacists. The overt endorsement of Trump by prominent and nationally recognized white supremacist figureheads is the connection to Trump’s political beliefs. The presence of an insecure collective identity based on the fear of the loss of status to the face of a created and deemed “less deserving other” situates itself well into the concept of predatory identity. The use of this theory and the extension by Kissopolous into predatory politics to maintain the status quo among the majority, describes the current situation in American politics. The application of this phenomenon in the context of the increasing disintegration of media due to the increasingly popular technique of tailoring one’s news to suit their personal interest as an avenue to breed extremism explains how current American democracy is under threat. The election of Trump is a profession of a democratic crisis, where a small, misinformed portion of the populous has gained mainstream political recognition. As demonstrated with Roosevelt’s manipulation of the constitution with the New Deal, the document can be manipulated with enough populist force behind the intended reform. However, in contrast to Ackerman’s supposition that this will benefit the constitution, the confidence gained by the increased channelling of politically incorrect information may actually cause

harm to the foundation on which American liberty stands tall. Thus, the mobilization of white supremacy under Donald Trump has altered the American political landscape and may potentially induce a constitutional crisis.

To supplement the points made above, additional consideration of how the United States is functioning as a nepotistic oligarchy under the Trump administration can further explain how the creation and exploitation of the other for monetary gains is intimately related to the Trump administration. Naomi Klein's analysis of corporate takeover aligns well with understanding how racism and capitalism are inseparable. This line of inquiry can further explain the circumstances that led to predatory identity flourishing under the guise of economic interests for Trump's narrow and racially defined definition of Americans. Trump uses minorities as economic scapegoats, therefore a threat to "real American's" rights and freedoms. Other scholarship on the topic of the corporate takeover of the American government will further demonstrate the fragility of populist democracy in America.

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PART II:  
ABJECT ARTFORMS

## DEAD AND BURIED – ABJECTION AND COTARD'S SYNDROME

VERITY CLAYTON

### PODCAST DESCRIPTION

Scary Stories Session 23 explores the fear of being buried alive, looking at both supposed real-life cases in which this may have happened and the hysteria that subsequently followed. It also discusses the two related fears of claustrophobia and suffocation, both of which are thought to be key to the fear of being buried alive. But, while these deal with the fear of being alive and buried prematurely, it leads to the question of what would happen in the reverse? What would it mean to be dead and still walking around to see one's own funeral?

There is a rare condition called Cotard's Delusion (Debruyne and Audenaert 2012; Huarcaya-Victoria et al. 2016), that sees sufferers convinced that they are already dead. Those suffering what the

neurologist Jules Cotard (1999: 275) dubbed to be the “delirium of negation (*dilire de négation*)” suffer from this to varying degrees but generally begin with severe depression and if left to progress will result in a complete lack of self-care, ranging from failing hygiene to starvation.

Cotard’s Delusion is thought to be similar to Capgras Delusion (Ellis and Lewis 2001). In this psychiatric disorder, the sufferer believes those close to them, such as parents, siblings, partners and friends, have been replaced by imposters. In this instance, it most likely is caused by neural misfiring, which affects the mechanisms through which we recall and recognize people’s faces and objects. Cotard’s Delusion is thought to act in the same way, but rather than being unable to recognise others, one’s own body becomes a stranger to the self.

As a psychiatric condition, it raises important questions about the relation of the self to the body if the body is no longer recognised as the self at all. But, even more interestingly, it raises questions about the self if the self believes it is no longer in existence. Such a state of being would have devastating consequences on the sense of a person as a discrete self—and how they interact with others and live day-to-day. For all the ways in which human culture understands the varying degrees of the self and our expression of that, all cultures universally see death as a transformation or cessation of that self. To sever this connection would result in a severe break in one’s understanding of cultural norms of autonomy and what it is to be human.

## PODCAST TRANSCRIPT<sup>1</sup> – SCARY STORIES – SESSION 23: A DELUSION OF NEGATION

Lay down in the dark with me.

Close the curtains, turn off the lights. Pull the cover over you. Get yourself warm and relaxed. Note your eyelids gradually feeling

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<sup>1</sup> An audio link to the original podcast recording and more information about this episode is available at <https://www.scarystoriespodcast.com/>.

heavier and heavier with each breath you take until they are closed entirely.

Sense the wide-open room around you as you breathe deeply and slowly. Listen to the sound of your breath in this space. It is airy and spacious. Let's get a little more cozy. A little safer. A little warmer. So, feel now the walls and the ceiling shrink just a little. And with it, you have a deeper sense of enclosure, of protection. Keep track of your breath, still at a steady pace.

We all need a haven, somewhere safe where we can feel small. And, so, feel those walls and the ceiling come in further around you. They're coming closer to the sides of your bed. Don't be scared. Still remembering to breathe, a little faster now. This is nice. This is what it feels like to be protected. You are warm. Perhaps a little too warm, feel free to let the covers down a little.

Those walls are still coming in, not too fast but still there. You're still breathing, a little quicker. You can feel the compression of the room. It's ok, but you're feeling warmer still. Kick the covers off now and stretch your arms out to feel a little cooler. A little more comfortable.

And now feel that you can't. The wall is at your feet. You can't bring your hands up more than a few inches. Your breath, fast now, hits back on your face. Hot and clammy. The air is humid now, as you are sealed in, walled up, completely, entirely enclosed, and you are steadily running out of breaths. You are now completely entombed. Quite literally buried alive.

This is Scary Stories.

Take a seat and let me tell you about this thing that happened to a friend of a friend of a friend.

Robert E. Lee, the general of the confederate army, was almost never born. His mother, Anne Hill Carter Lee, suffered from narcolepsy, and would often end up in semi-paralyzed trances. One day she came down with a terrible fever, and with it, she slipped into a trance so deep it gave the appearance of death. Her body was laid out and interred in the family mausoleum. After a few days, when a man came to bring

flowers for the deceased woman, he heard knocking and cries coming from her coffin, and to his surprise, when he opened it, the woman sat up, eyes wide and tears running down her cheeks. Fifteen months later, she gave birth to a son named Robert.

There is a name for a fear of being buried alive, taphophobia. On one hand, it feels so rational, after all, who wouldn't be in a state of deep distress at the thought of being entombed in the ground with no escape. Alive, awake, conscious, but running out of time, losing air with every breath, and yet unable to slow that march to death. Unable to call for help. Worse than that, for no one to even be looking to help. It all sounds like a rather reasonable thing of which to be scared.

But what is the likelihood that any of us will ever have to face such a thing? It is a phobia without a reason. Yes, it makes sense. But why be scared of the improbable? Why feel anxiety about the almost impossible? It is like having a fear of drifting untethered in space. It is a terrifying thought, but not one that should crowd our minds. Instead, it should be one so easily pushed aside. So why isn't it?

Because it has taken on a collective memory. Such horrors did occur, and they were so traumatic and so pervasive that society enshrined them into lore and made sure that this trauma would not be forgotten.

There was, after all, a long period where being buried alive was not that inconceivable. Before the advancements of medical science, the end of life could be difficult to diagnose. Comas, temporary paralysis, concussion and unconsciousness when coupled with faint heartbeats, slowed and near undetectable breathing, it was all too easy to be pronounced dead. And then to be buried.

In fact, people became so fearful of such mistakes that coffins took on a new lease of life. Safety coffins, built with trap doors, tubes for breathing, tubes for smelling putrefaction, tubes for crying out were fitted into the ground, and of course, there was that very useful bell that one could ring if they found themselves prematurely underground.

So widespread was this fear that societies sprung up to warn people about the misidentification of death. Many took precautions to make sure that once they were interred, they were not going to wake up.

Chopin insisted that his heart be cut out to ensure death. Washington asked for his body to be laid out for several days, while Hans Christian Anderson requested his veins be slit open.

But really, even back then, it was probably all a much ado about nothing. We believe such things happened because urban legends around it proliferated and took hold. But in reality, numbers of real cases were wildly exaggerated by newspapers, adding fuel to the fire. And a big problem about death? Those first stages can look a lot like signs of life, but we have them backwards. Hair and nails haven't grown, dead skin simply shrinks and recedes.

So why was it exaggerated in the first place? Perhaps taphophobia isn't a discreet fear in itself but much more about another, more fundamental dread.

## **BREAK**

There's something inherently terrifying to us about being enclosed and confined, and at its core, that is what the fear of being buried alive is actually about. Nothing more than claustrophobia.

But claustrophobia is one of the most common and most interesting fears (Rahani et al. 2018: 231). Unlike many of the most prevalent phobias that appear to be built into us, claustrophobia doesn't seem to be one.<sup>2</sup> There is no physical system in place that makes small cramped places so unsettling for us, and yet we do seem to have a predisposition towards it. It is not only common, but very easy to develop, and strangely enough. It is a phobia that can strike at any point in life. And it hinges on two premises that are often rather distinct. One is the fear of entrapment, the other the fear of suffocation.

So, perhaps, there is no specific biological trait that causes this fear but rather an evolutionary inclination because, after all, being scared of both of these things gives us a biological advantage. Wild animals,

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<sup>2</sup> Phobias, delusional thought, and hallucinations become present due to both social conditioning and genetic factors. These complicated relationships are still being sussed out by clinicians and scientists.

for example, are deeply scared of being trapped, and quite rightly so because it can often mean the certainty of death.

But in modern society, we have so many opportunities to experience this fear without the danger, and so it breeds a lifetime of anxiety. Think of children playing hide and seek, hiding in a cupboard, locking it and finding to their dismay they are trapped. Of course, their parent is on the other side and will soon be at the rescue, but our brains have already reverted to instinct.

So, claustrophobia and in a version of it, taphophobia, are a fear of threat. A fear that your life is in peril, and worse still, that you are helpless, you are trapped, and that what you need to live is completely cut off from you. Which all begs the question, what happens when this fear becomes so heightened, and the delusion of danger is so great that you walk in your waking life beyond the veil of death?

## **BREAK**

A group of British medical students decided to play a prank. A laboratory assistant who was rather priggish and overbearing, had caused them all considerable consternation and the students thought it would be funny to get their own back. They told the assistant that they were doing an experiment concerning the suggestibility of people under hypnosis—their thesis? A hypnotized person could never be forced to do something that they would not otherwise do, and in this case, that was to kill someone. They told the assistant they would bring in a hypnotized student with a hatchet and tell them to execute him. Not to worry, if they were right, the student would not comply. If they were wrong, there were safety precautions in place.

The assistant nervously lay his head over a wooden block, face down, and the apparently hypnotized student came in holding not a hatchet but a wet tea towel, to some stifled laughs. The assistant was obviously becoming increasingly scared, but the students were pleased and hoped it would teach him a lesson. They started the so-called experiment, and the not so hypnotized student, with some gusto, pulled back his arm and brought the towel to smack on the assistant's neck to uproarious laughter. But the laughter soon dissipated when the assistant pulled back white as a sheet and declared hysterically that he

was dead. In fact, it turns out he completely lost his mind and was eventually incarcerated, believing for the rest of his life that he had that day died.

Being buried alive is more than the fear of dying but of going through one's own death and funeral and still being conscious, both alive and yet not. And the realities of such a thought are enough to drive us mad.

There is a psychiatric disorder called Cotard's Syndrome, whose sufferers believe just this. That they are dead. And if you're thinking of the idea that you would suddenly think you were a ghost in the vein of Casper and, with it, would become increasingly gregarious, then you haven't really thought about what death entails. Because they don't just think they're dead, but they come to the logical conclusion that they are rotting, putrefying, that their bodies are indeed breaking down. What they lose is all sense of self, a complete and utter delirium of negation.

Most likely, it is theorized that the delusion stems from a neural misfiring in areas of the brain that control facial recognition (Ellis and Lewis 2001; Barrelle and Luauté 2018). So, when they look at themselves, their face in the mirror, their hands on their knees, their body in the shower, they do not recognize it as their own. It is something alien, foreign to them and yet attached, part of them. Something that feels and yet does not feel right. And so, believing that it must be one's own body after death perhaps makes sense.

What a paralyzing thought. And, indeed, it stops the sufferers dead in their tracks. It leads to a complete lack of self-care, to malnutrition, dehydration and starvation, severe depression and little response to pleasurable stimuli. A complete and utter inertia just waiting for their body to disintegrate.

Because after all, if you survive your own funeral, you are slowly and suffocatingly waiting for your life to rot away.

## **BREAK**

A young girl grew up poor. Not so poor that she wanted for the basics but poor enough that extravagance was not in her vocabulary.

Everything was cheap, or discounted, or on offer. And though she felt it, the girl was of a sunny disposition and tried never to show her disappointment, or the pain of being bullied. As she got older, of course the teasing became worse, and while she had a few friends, the teenage girl now felt like she was always looking on from the outside.

And, it just so happened that the girl took a job at a funeral home to earn some extra money. Prom was fast approaching, and for once, she wanted to look nice, like she belonged. The hours were not so long, and the work not so hard. Occasionally she had to go downstairs to get one of the morticians for something. This was the only part of the job she did not like. Despite it being cold, it seemed suffocating down there. Enclosed and devoid of light, and she had the most unpleasant feeling of being trapped down there with bodies that were a hairsbreadth away from rotting.

The night before her prom, she was left in charge of locking up. Business was slow, and there was only one funeral being prepared in a few days' time. She had been given brief instructions of how to check the room temperature and then locked up downstairs before she finished up with the reception area. As the girl descended the stairs, she could smell something stale, hanging low in the air. She peered in to see the body with the plan that she would lock up quickly and return to safety. But that is when she saw the girl on the table. A girl who looked like she could be the same age. A girl who seemed to be the same size. A girl who had the most beautiful dress on, flowing and draping in all the right ways, with soft luxurious material. She had never seen something so lovely, let alone come into contact with it. Acting purely on impulse, she gently and lovingly undressed the lifeless body. This was her chance, she could be beautiful, the belle of the ball, the extra money she earned could never have bought such a dress, but it could pay for a rather spectacular night. And it wasn't stealing. It was borrowing. She would wear it to prom the next evening and return it in time for the funeral.

Hurriedly she placed the dress in her bag and left. At home, with a sense of deep urgency, she pulled it out and saw just how lovely it was. She immediately tried it on and, of course, the dress fit like a glove. For the first time ever, she felt rather lovely, and with a feeling of contentment, she drifted into a deep sleep.

Sadly, the girl was found dead the next morning. The doctors told her parents it had all been rather painless. She had simply fallen asleep and never woken back up. Her parents phoned the funeral home to prepare her body and burial.

For their part, the funeral home gave their deepest sympathies and told them they could arrange the funeral in a couple of days' time. They would contact soon to finalize the details, but unfortunately, they were rather busy that morning. It turned out a body in the mortuary woke up and walked out of the funeral parlour. A teenager appeared in town dressed only in her underwear and a blanket, saying that she had been rendered unable to move ever since she tried on a dress she'd bought at a thrift store. It was supposed that the dress had come from a previous funeral home and had absorbed chemicals that paralyzed the wearer. The really unpleasant thing, the girl said, was that she was completely aware of what was going on around her and had had to lie there while everyone around planned her burial.

## **BREAK**

The fear of being buried alive is a throwback, whether that's to a time when it was very possible, or further back when our instincts controlled the lay of the land. It is something that runs surprisingly deep in our psyche. So deep that it can cause sudden and irreparable mental snaps.

But more than anything, this fear of being trapped, being suffocated rests on our fear of being helpless, of being vulnerable. It is about being unable to escape and yet having no help in sight. And perhaps we express it is a fear of the grave because that is our ultimate vulnerability. The one thing we are all helpless in the face of, and the one place that we will all one day find ourselves on the inside of.

[GROUND BEING DUG UP]

You might need to wake up and tell everyone you're still alive...

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## DEATH-WISHES, LIARS, AND A WITCH'S COIL<sup>3</sup>

SABRINA SCOTT

### EDITORIAL ABSTRACT

Sabrina Scott's illustration and cogent insight into Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) and the abject as a theme contains a tornado-like force of expression, tinkering between art and theory as the mind settles in states of demise. The work is reminiscent of how the artist (and the witch by extension) comes to terms with what Alejandra Pizarnik (2010) calls the *poetic body*, or the dream of death. That is, both the self and human becoming take shape between the bleeding shades and luminous lines of India ink in her illustration. The convex of being and non-being which emerges as subjectivity underlies the central struggle of what the abject is (flourishing in that brittle moment of hope as possibility strikes in a cascading brush line).

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<sup>3</sup> The titling of the cover illustrations was a collaborative effort between the Vol. 17 PlatForum Editorial Team and the artist.

## CURITORIAL STATEMENT

BRIGID BURKE<sup>4</sup>

“Death Wishes, Liars, and a Witch’s Coil” reflects the often-forgotten reality of our existence, that life feeds on life, and that life and death are intimately connected. The death of plants and animals are required for our nourishment, and for life to continue. We manage to avoid this truth in the modern world, as we rarely have to hunt or harvest for our survival. We are cut off from the world, our environment is sanitised. The female figures in this piece are appropriate, as all things related to “Feminine” in the broadest sense are what make us uncomfortable in our rational, mechanistic society: the irrational, the emotional, the dirtiness of the earth itself. The Earth Mother becomes associated with the buried dead that lay underneath our feet. Jungian psychology would refer to this as the archetypal Shadow, that part of our psyche that makes us feel shame and revulsion. We would rather fill our lives with distractions than deal with the uncomfortable truth, and indeed, as Eliade has said, “Myth today chiefly takes the form of distractions” (Eliade 1958: 5). But the price of distraction is alienation from our own truth, and a sense of separation from life.

In the darkness, the realm of the Earth Mother, where blood, bones, and plant life mingle, there is a numinous wonder that comes from contemplating the horror of our existence. Sabrina Scott demonstrates how beautiful this darkness and pain of existence can be for those who choose to accept it. Her female figures gaze downward, and there is a pained look on one face, conveying the sorrow of the rejected Earth. Our lives are bound with the life of the Earth; reconnecting to Her is the path to healing our broken societies and the planet.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Brigid Burke teaches at Montclair State University. She is also the host of the Chthonia podcast, and the proprietor of [Chthonia.net](http://Chthonia.net). Her articles, fiction, and poetry deal with the darker aspects of human behavior and the esoteric world. Brigid is an editor at [Metapsychosis](http://Metapsychosis). Recently, she published a book, *Death and the Maiden: The Curious Relationship Between the Fear of the Feminine and the Fear of Death* (2019), with Algora Publishing.

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COVER IMAGE: BACK-SIDE



(WITNESSING THE) ASKING FOR SEX IN A HOLY TOWN IN  
KARNATAKA

Becca Campbell

He saw me sitting idly on my motorbike,  
watching the auto-drivers swarm angrily around him.  
“He’s asking for a girl,” the coconut-seller standing next to me,  
explains.

A bee’s nest disturbed.

He saw me take note of the man jumping away from his touch  
as if his ignorance was contagious.  
We had spoken earlier, awkwardly, and he left abruptly in the middle  
of a sentence. Questions hung untidily in the air-  
City boy, where are you going?

A bee’s nest disturbed.

He didn't see me drive ahead to the place where I knew he would be taken to.

Clumsy demands; irate response.

He had been waiting for his friends,  
party guys, arriving at night.

Big buses crunching over bursting landscapes.

A bee's nest disturbed.

He saw me staring as he was pushed into a small room by the men  
who live there;

their cricket bats used for more than games that day.

Beaten, disoriented, panicked, and pathetic.

Finally, he emerged.

Walking up to my spot of uneasy observation, fearing for what may  
happen next...

"What more will they do with me?"

Honesty.

"I don't know."

Whimpering, pleading,

"Can you tell them to have mercy?"

Curiously digging,

"What did you do?"

Flinching.

"I can't tell."

Dig.

"What did you do?"

Shame.

"I can't tell you."

Have you ever overflowed with sorry-ness?

A sad, quiet howl; you can sense it from all angles when it happens.

So many bees' nests disturbed today.

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

This poem was written in an attempt to work through a confusingly tragic situation that happened in my fieldsite in South India. The bewilderment continued to stretch itself in unanticipated directions; the longer I watched the situation unfold. What I have always known to be an extraordinarily peaceful place, particularly in its public expressions, suddenly had become grounds for aggressively proving a point to a young man who made a huge mistake.

This young man, coming from a nearby metropolis, mistook the nature of the town to be more of a party place than it is and was asking around about bringing “a girl” to a room. What ensued was a jolting rupture of what this young man had anticipated happening on his vacation, and a shock for me observing the unfolding of this confrontation.

The initial annoyance I had felt towards this man, and his complete and total unawareness of the environment he was in was quickly replaced by a deep feeling of sympathy and concern. He was trying desperately to enact a version of what he thought would be a fun holiday for his friends and himself.

Suddenly, I, the anthropologist, became the point person for this man to try to negotiate his prolonged punishment with the local people whom he had seen me interacting with. Observation is, of course, paramount to the anthropologists' work, but it is when we are forced into situations through the practice of observing that webs of knowledge, relations, experience and expectation get stretched and twisted, resulting in more complicated, occasionally horrifying and profoundly imbricated forms than we originally began with.

MY FIRST GRADUATE PHILOSOPHY COURSE

MAR'YANA FISHER

Right on the first day, shamelessly  
unrestricted by our anxiety  
they talked about higher levels of confusion...

*Spot on!*

My ontological perspective, flipped  
on its side, gasping for renewed understanding  
of metaphysical reality. What reality?  
Is it Plato's idea of forms, perfectly moulded in God's workshop?  
Or Darwin's concept of natural selection in the struggle of life?  
I have since expanded, reconstructed, redeemed  
my epistemological grasp and agreed with Socrates that

*I know nothing!*

I booked an appointment to assess my sanity  
when I climbed to the top of the rabbit's hair  
and descended onto Sophie's World.

Meanwhile, struggling to master an A for my assignments,  
confused when my professor congratulates me on A-  
realizing, I am an undergraduate, no more.

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

As a new graduate student in the School of Nursing, I found myself discovering, questioning, and navigating, previously unexplored by me, the depth of philosophy and reality. This poem is a reflection of that experience—but also an emotional burst of wonder, exasperation, and awareness. It further highlights the slippery concept of liminality, introduced by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep and later applied by anthropologist Victor Turner, which describes a transitional period between two points (Bigger, 2009). Liminality stems from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold (Arya, 2013). One finds themselves in that transitional state when old beliefs and knowledge are no longer valid or upheld, and new ones are yet to become apparent. It is on the threshold of this novel perception that I found myself in most of my academic undertakings.

In the book, *The Rite of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep (1960) discusses his observations about tribal rituals associated with significant life transitions and progressions between the life stages (Arya, 2013). I experienced a similar “rite of passage” through my philosophical studies, traversing old concepts and new understandings. However, a full realization of my own perceptual shift occurred during one of my nurse-patient encounters. A young female cancer patient, who became newly admitted to the palliative care unit, struggled with her terminal prognosis—and in tandem with the unfortunate news experienced an existential crisis. Employing therapeutic relational engagement and my new understanding of reality, we explored the patient’s ontological knowledge, perceptual lenses, and beliefs. She engaged in storytelling and past memories, and through a newly emerging awareness, she plotted a meaningful life story. Reflecting on these experiences, I observed inward growth and a self-progression in my nursing practice towards becoming an Advanced Practice Nurse.

Since the poem considers philosophical underpinnings, it naturally fits with the subject. In the heart of every philosophical quest, there lies an inquiry about the nature of reality and self, and with each new probe, a sharply dialogical set of realizations can emerge about the ongoing transcendence of previously believed, immutable forms.

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