The Student Writing Anthology
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This thirty-second edition of The Student Writing Anthology celebrates the accomplishments of students enrolled in College Writing courses at The University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Like our previous anthologies, it rewards these authors with public recognition and an opportunity to have their voices heard beyond the walls of the classroom. However, this book considerably widens our ability to circulate these essays. Until our 2005–2006 publication, our teachers, students, and other interested readers had to access previous collections only through limited campus publication and the World Wide Web. We are now in our third year of being able to offer a professionally-produced copy of the book, created for us by Pearson Custom Publishing. With each student enrolled in our classes receiving a print copy of the text, our teachers have been able to more richly integrate student writing into the classroom, enabling students to recognize their peers as published authors and learn from their approaches to the same assignments that will greet them in our curriculum. We hope that by reading the texts herein, both teachers and student writers will be inspired to reach high goals and explore a variety of approaches to academic discourse.

The essays were selected from over one hundred submissions and represent a sample of the many approaches a student may take to class assignments. This year, we have organized the essays according to the first three of the units taught in the course. (A fourth unit is an open-topic essay, determined by each instructor, which reflects both our pedagogical goals as well as the individual teacher’s emphases in teaching the class.) We have included a brief introduction to each unit in hopes of illustrating the continuum that moves our pedagogical goals forward. We also hope these brief introductions will provide a context that will enrich the reader’s experience of each text.
Still, each essay stands alone, as we witness the authors’ unique styles and perspectives on topics of deep concern to them. Some urge us to recognize that writing serves as a way to inquire into our own histories to better understand ourselves, our positions in society, and the influences most prevalent in our lives. Others illustrate how close reading of a text can produce so much more than interpretation or information gathering: each writer’s interaction with a text extends its meaning into the stream of ideas that surrounds us all. The documented essays included here prove that careful research not only provides data and expert opinion in support of a claim. Through research, writers may measure their own experience of the world against expert opinion and, in the process, perhaps create a new and revealing perspective.

We invite our readers to enjoy these essays and draw on what they show us about the range of choices in organization, development, and style available to us in expository writing.

Essays were selected and edited by the Writing Program Anthology Committee:

Chair: Patricia Zukowski

A philosophical tenet of the UMass Writing Program, and of any writing community, is that writing exists to be read. Writers must also be readers—readers of a large and diverse portfolio of works, texts, and genres. Among the important texts and works to be studied, one’s “self” is a text that absolutely must be read and re-read with great attentiveness for it serves as the foundation from which all future interpretation and interaction with texts can be built. In Unit I, our students are given the opportunity to discover new insights about themselves. Through the process of writing, receiving feedback from fellow writers, and re-writing, our students are able to take on new perspectives of their own personal experiences. The essays created in this unit were written for a close, personal audience (i.e. fellow class members). They also reflect the exposure students are introduced to in this unit: key elements of the rhetorical situation (context, purpose, audience). In these essays, students are the ultimate authorities on the content they write about.

The challenge to these writers then was to look at their stories and their bodies as histories and to examine themselves as they would examine a text. In this way, they began re-seeing themselves through the lenses of larger contexts, and they investigated their experiences as the elements that have shaped them.
Oh, the trials and tribulations of one’s hair. Bad hair days are something we women occasionally have to deal with. Our hair is too flat, too puffy, too long, too short, too dry, or too greasy: the list goes on and on. However, I believe I can speak for most black women when I say that working with our hair is one demanding job! In most instances, we black women are born with hair that is rough, puffy, and kinky; it is what we call “nappy hair.” The girls who are not born with such hair are deemed as the “lucky ones.” As little girls, our mothers struggled with getting combs through our hair when trying to put in the many assortments of barrettes and/or beads. When the hair pulling, the breaking of many combs, and the screaming and hollering after having chunks of hair pulled out of our heads became too much, many of our mothers decided to make both their lives and our lives easier by sending us to the salon or buying a relaxer to relieve our hair from the aching pains of nappiness. The relaxer is a nasty smelling chemical that sometimes burns your scalp if it is left in too long. When putting in relaxer, it is usually an all day event:

Step 1. Separate hair in four sections.
Step 2. Put in relaxer, making sure every strand is covered in the white substance.
Step 3. Wait until the relaxer has settled in, or until you cannot take the burning sensation that feels like your scalp is on fire.
Step 4. Wash the perm out.
Step 5. Put in Rollers.
Step 6. Sit under the dryer for what feels like the remainder of your life.
Step 7. Take out rollers.
Step 8. Blow-dry if needed.
Step 9. Style hair in any way desired.

The relaxer has become a close friend to many black women all around the world. For many women of color, straight and soft hair is what they believe make women beautiful. Personally, I do not care if my hair is straight, in braids, or even a little nappy. I know however my hair looks, in some way I will be able to create some miracle and look fabulous. Therefore, I am not ashamed to say that I believe in “nappiness.”

As a little girl, people would always tell my mother or me that I had good hair. What is good hair you may ask? In the black community, “good hair” is hair that is thick and long. Rudy from The Cosby Show had good hair, and Ashley from The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air had really good hair. I would always get compliments on my hair, so much so that I think I was starting to feel high and mighty because of it. As many black women do, I thought I was pretty just because I had what people said was “good hair.” As I got a little older, I started to realize that a lot of my friends were getting relaxers put into their hair. I saw how soft and shiny their hair looked and how their hair would move with the wind when we were at recess. I begged my mother to put a relaxer in my hair. At first, she was hesitant because relaxers are known to damage hair if they are not put in right, but she later gave in. Soon my hair would move with the wind, and better yet, I would no longer have a head full of barrettes and beads anymore, which I thought to be a little childish even though I was still very much a child at eight-years-old. When I finally got a relaxer, I honestly thought I was the “stuff.” I received even greater compliments which ultimately made me feel even more high and mighty than before. I was always seen playing with my hair, and my mother would always ask me, “Jessica, what would you do if you did not have all that hair?” I could never answer her, because I honestly did not know.
As years went by, my hair became longer than ever. I was still receiving compliments for my beautiful, long, jet-black hair. I even thought people were jealous because of the hair I had. One day as I was running a comb through my hair, something I always did for no reason at all, I began to see a lot of hair on the brush. I would grab my hair with my hands and see hair slowly coming out of my head. “What was happening?” I immediately told my mother, and she gave me the horrible news that my hair was breaking. Eventually, the relaxer did damage my hair. I was devastated, devastated over hair. I was not worried about the exams that I probably had next week or the project that was almost due, but I was concerned with having shorter hair. After a few months, my hair did indeed get shorter. I was forced to put extensions in my hair. While all my friends had the wind blowing in their hair, which is something that I wanted ever since that day in recess, I was stuck with hair that was not even mine.

My hair eventually grew back, but it later became the victim of the hair damage that I have always been so afraid of. At this moment, my hair is the shortest it has ever been. However, it does not bother me. It also does not bother me that my hair does not move with the wind, nor that it is not thick and long, or even that it is not mine. I am not my hair. My hair does not make me who I am. I am a strong, independent, family-oriented, determined, and intelligent young woman. No one could ever see that by just looking at my hair. So is how your hair looks really that important? It is difficult to say the exact reasons why black girls and women desire to have straight hair, but one reason is the messages displayed by pop culture. In most African-American movies and novels, the pretty girls are, in most cases, light-skinned with long, soft, and beautiful hair. The girls who are less attractive are characterized as dark with short and kinky hair. This can be seen in Spike Lee’s Crooklyn, Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, and many other African-American pieces. But what if Madame C.J. Walker never developed a conditioning treatment for straightening hair? Would women walk around with their heads held high, sporting their afros like the women did in the 70’s? Would kinky hair be seen as a fashion statement like it was in the 80’s? Would women have long, flowing braids going down their backs like they did in the 90’s? Or would women be so stuck on what they “believe” is beautiful that they would risk ruining their own beautiful
hair by using the assortment of the many different chemicals as they do now?

“Good hair means curls and waves/Bad hair means you look like a slave/At the turn of the century/It's time for us to redefine who we be/You can shave it off/Like a South African beauty/Or get in on lock/Like Bob Marley/You can rock it straight/Like Oprah Winfrey/If it's not what's on your head/It's what's underneath.” These lines taken from India Arie’s song, *I Am Not My Hair*, send out a positive message of endearment. It does not matter how one wears her hair. There is more to a woman than straight hair that can move with the wind or kinky hair that may break a few combs here and there. I am a strong, independent, intelligent, and hard-working woman. “I am not my hair.”
I used to pretend the guardrails on highways were dragons, and I was an explorer traveling to uncharted territories; they were my great find. My parents would be in the front seats, driving and listening to music, but I was always in the back with my mind racing, wondering what sort of adventure my family was headed to next. Being on the road was being home. My parents were “hippies” and, along with my sister and me, they traveled the country following the Grateful Dead.

According to my grandparents, “the Dead tour” was not an acceptable place to raise children. It was not a stable environment, and my parents were beyond irresponsible. (Imagine the horrors of exposing young children to a world where the traditional lines of social correctness are slightly skewed.) They thought “the Dead tour” was an excuse for people to abandon responsibility and morals for the drug-crazed, free-love life. But to me it was home. Nothing seemed more natural than the “hippie” lifestyle: my family traveling the country in a red Volkswagen microbus, with tie-dye curtains and a mattress in the back. It was my life.

It was not until third grade, when I started attending public school, that I realized my childhood was not typical. Fortunately, my classmates were there to explain it. My tie-dyed clothes and long unruly hair were often a source of amusement for them. They could not understand why I didn’t eat meat or attend church. Finally they found the word for me, “hippie.” They
said hippies were dirty people who did a lot of drugs and wanted to change people’s values. They said that word ‘hippie’ with such a negative connotation that it made me wonder how my parents could be hippies. So what if my dad had long hair or my mom didn’t shave her legs. Yeah, no one in my family ate meat, and my parents always preached peace. But those were the positive aspects of my life. We were taught to love and respect everyone—no matter how different they seemed: in short, not to judge a book by its cover. But here in my new school, with the kids that I was going to get my education with for the next six years, my family was being judged.

We seemed perfectly normal. My parents were happy, they loved us, we always spent time together, and even though I didn’t go to an actual school until third grade, my parents had taught us so much. I had never even watched television; we read instead. I guess I never thought that living like that wasn’t normal because that was how everyone I knew lived. But that was about to change.

It was August of 1995 when Jerry Garcia, the lead singer for the Grateful Dead, died. It was just a regular day; my mom and I were driving in our van, listening to the radio. Then the newscast came on and told us that Jerry had passed away that night in a rehab hospital. Almost instantly my mom’s eyes filled with tears, and I simply could not understand why she was so upset. Her tears eventually broke into full-blown crying, and she had to pull over to deal with this dramatic event that had just shattered her world. I will never truly know how Jerry’s death affected my mother, but even as a child, desperately watching her mother cry along the side of a road that one summer day, I knew that my life was headed for some drastic changes.

Tuckerton is a town with one stoplight, about eight different churches, and a hunting and bait shop on every corner. It’s a place where on opening day of hunting season, the world stops, and the entire town takes their guns to the woods. In Tuckerton, there are more cops than citizens. You could find them all, at any time, in the parking lot of the local convenience store, along with a collage of pickup trucks, country music, cigarette smoke, and right wing propaganda—a town full of “hicks.” It was here that my family decided to settle down—in this town that clashed so much with our liberal lifestyle.
I remember how throughout elementary school I felt a constant embarrassment of my family. I hated how at lunch the other kids’ snacks consisted of potato chips or chocolate pudding cups, while I got a piece of fruit. No one ever understood why I never had lunchmeat on my sandwiches. When I told them I was a vegetarian, they told me that was dumb. School was not even the worst of it. There it was just me, and I could try my best to fit in. I never wanted to bring friends to my house. My parents were just too strange. Neither of my parents had “real” jobs; they just sat around the house all day, my mom in her garden and my dad with his music. Plus there was not even a TV in our house, which was quickly becoming one of my favorite hobbies.

Over time, my family became more and more like everyone else’s. The constant pressure to fit in would take its toll on anyone. How many dirty looks could my mom have taken before she finally shaved her legs and started wearing a bra? My dad only had to have the cops unnecessarily pull him over a few times before he traded the bus for a pickup. Eventually, we even got a TV, not cable, but watching movies was good enough. My parents didn’t change their beliefs; they just adapted their lifestyle to be more conducive to the town by trading in their tie-dyes for polos.

Although I was there, I cannot fully relate to my parents journey into society. I know that when they started to change their appearances, my parents felt as if they were betraying every belief they held dearest. Conforming simply for the sake of conforming was something we had always been taught against, but this was exactly what my parents were doing, and they were doing so for us, their kids. So we did not have to be embarrassed by them anymore. Of course, this change, like becoming hippies, was a conscious choice they made. I, on the other hand, was thrown from world to world with no choice at all.

I feel like my childhood was split into two parts: the part when my parents were hippies and the part when they weren’t, with me always caught somewhere in between. I never exactly knew who to be: the flower child I was raised as or the typical small town kid that my friends were. I guess in the end I am a little of both. I strongly identify with many traditional “hippie” beliefs, and I do tend to dress like a hippie, but there is much more to me. I’ve never broken down enough to go hunting,
a beloved pastime where I’m from, but I can’t even count the number of times I’ve gone fishing, the second favorite hobby of Tuckerton. When I turned seventeen and got my license, I did not scour the papers for a used car, but a pick-up, knowing full well that a car would never make it to the “pit” parties held out in the middle of the woods. And although I’ve still never set foot inside a McDonalds, I’ve been to Burger King and Taco Bell on more than one occasion. Now I realize that it does not matter whether I am a hippie or a hick. I am just me, and that’s all I need.
Scene One: I glance up at the clock in the waiting room; it holds a prominent position for good reason. The clock regulates appointments; the careers of the people behind the desk are determined by what the clock says and whose turn it is to get poked and prodded. The doctor’s office. My knees are clutched together, holding the clipboard in my lap. I hesitate, my pencil poised over one question. The typical box question: “Check one: Ethnicity.” Black/African American, Asian-American, Hispanic, Native American, White, Other. I glance around the room; I see a young mother with a handkerchief wrapped around her hair. There are bags under her eyes; her two small children are fast asleep in the cold, hard chairs beside her. She glances at them lovingly before tilting her head back against the wall. I see an elderly lady hunched slightly forward in her chair, clicking her knitting needles together rapidly, possibly working on a scarf for her grandson. I see a couple, holding hands quietly, occasionally glancing into each other’s eyes, transmitting messages that are over the limits of my understanding. There are many more in the waiting room; all of them would know which box to check on the questionnaire. Or would they? I assume I know their category. “This is America,” my friend tells me, where everyone belongs somewhere.

Scene Two: Third floor classroom. The afternoon sun shifts lazily across the floor, and people slide their desks to stay in the shade. Occasionally,
a breeze comes through the wide-open windows, but more frequently a fly will drift in, making a slow circle before humming back out after finding nothing of interest. Half of the roughly twenty people in the class look half asleep. Group work: identity. The question on the board reads: “Which identity groups do you belong to?” As soon as I read the flawed wording of the question, the futility of the exercise causes me to roll my eyes, sigh, and lay my head on my desk in defeat. By the end of this class, every student will be categorized, boxed, and limited; most will not even realize or care, but I will.

We go around the group; people say where they are from. They say they are white, or black, or Hispanic, or Asian, and they give a few other details about themselves. My turn comes. I feel a tightness somewhere between my stomach and my heart. I hate boxes. It bothers me that people hear one song playing on my iPod and think they know my tastes. It bothers me when people look at the clothes I wear and act surprised if they ever see me dressed any differently. It bothers me when people take one look at my parents and think they understand something that confused them before. It bothers me when I win athletic awards and people are not surprised; but when I win academic awards, they look at me with a raised eyebrow. It always did amuse me that I could not tell which stereotype they were going by.

I tell the group “I’m Stephanie Lawrence. I’m from Montreal. I’m not down with this exercise, so if there’s ever anything you want to know about me, just ask, or spend a little time with me and maybe you’ll see.” One girl I know in the group says for the benefit of the rest, “She’s biracial: half-Jamaican, half-white.” The confused expressions of the group slowly change. Now they think they understand. Inwardly I curse the lazy people who use abstract, absolute definitions with the illusion that these boxes somehow bring them closer to understanding. In actuality, categories hinder understanding because they disregard everything that does not fit in the boxes you choose. Inevitably, you’ll eventually belong to two mutually exclusive categories, which confuses people. Pretending to understand the depth of human complexity is arrogant and misguided.

Scene Three: To illustrate the limiting nature of boxes. A friend was telling me the other day about one particular experience she had in Tennessee. My friend is Haitian. Her mother tongue is Creole, her
day-to-day language is French, and only recently has she begun to speak English fluently. She met some Americans in Tennessee. They asked her if she was black. She rolled her eyes, pointed at her arm, and laughed uproariously at the obvious answer. They fixed her with a penetrating gaze, “But I thought you said you were French...how can you be black AND French?” No matter how much time she spent explaining, they could not seem to reconcile the two.

Back to Scene Two: classroom. “Who do you identify with more: black or white?” they ask. I laugh nervously; maybe they’re joking. “No, really...answer the question.” My forehead furrows as I look into the eyes of the group members. I shake my head in disbelief. I get distracted by the multiple ironies of the question. I remember something I learned from a friend of mine: questions determine answers. If you control the discourse, you control the outcome of the debate. This question gives me no breathing room. I try to tell them that it does not matter what or who I identify with; people see the color of my skin and categorize me whether I like it or not. I try to explain to them that “black” and “white” are two mutually exclusive racial categories that are a product of American history, nothing else. I try to explain that that there are people in other places of the world who would not even comprehend the question. I try to tell them that in Montreal when you meet someone, the first question you ask is “Where are you from?” or “Where are your people from?” And that among recent (first, second, third generation) immigrants, the answer tells a lot about who they are. They do not hear me. They say I am avoiding the question. They think that what makes me nervous is the fact that I do not belong. They do not realize that I would never wish to belong to anything under these conditions. Then it strikes me; I sit up straighter in my chair. Unless I answer the question, none of them will know how to relate to me. I am an anomaly that does not fit into their world view. I make their world unstable.

I cringe slightly with the knowledge that they have been socialized to believe that skin color is the primary factor in determining identity, and that the color of one’s skin influences and affects every other aspect of one’s life. It makes me nervous that the most understanding I get is when the professor intervenes and says that it is unfair for them to ask me to deny half of my identity. My skin is not quite dark enough to hide the blush
rising in my cheeks. The professor just slipped a premise by—the idea that one side of me is essentially different from the other because of the color of my parent's skin. The fact that a professor teaching a class on Social Diversity is unaware of this fundamentally flawed assumption makes me want to take out my phone right now and book a ticket on the next bus back to Montreal.

Back to Scene One: waiting room of the doctor's office. The exhausted mother with the two children and the couple have all disappeared into one of the offices; the old lady is still knitting quietly, the click of the needles offsetting the ticking of the clock. I distract myself for awhile by constructing a rant in my head about the inherent evils of non-universal American healthcare. I allow myself the temporary and fleeting feeling of superiority over the United States that is still the only generalization I have ever been able to make about Canadians. I tap the end of my pencil on the almost-complete questionnaire. I consider checking “Other” and filling in the blank with “Illegal Immigrant” but decide that I do not wish to test the sense of humor of the secretary. I think about the socially constructed concepts of “Black” and “White,” and then I think about the uncertain, constantly changing reality and confusion of grey areas. I leave it blank.
I twirl the familiar strands around my fork and bring the delicious, tomato-sauce-covered pasta to my mouth. I cannot, however, remember the name of the food I am eating and have eaten many times. Various pronunciations jumble in my mind; none of them quite right, but all of them contain part of the Bosnian word for “spaghetti.” This would be understandable if I were still six years old, but I am fourteen, and I have been living in the United States for eight years. By this time, I am able to speak English well, but there are still moments when I forget the correct word and feel annoyed and frustrated...

I am four years old and sleeping on the floor in the hallway of my family’s fifth-floor apartment. I have a bed, but that’s in my bedroom. The bedroom isn’t safe. My parents are awake with the explosions, but I can sleep through them. Even today, I have the uncanny ability to sleep anywhere, and I tend to fall asleep on my floor, especially when trying to study. I am three years old when the War in Bosnia starts. The War brings out three sides: Bosnian Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Bosnian Serbs. Everyone attacks everyone else. Grenades whizzing through the air and buildings covered in graffiti and racial slurs are what I have become used to. My father’s side of the family is Muslim, on what was considered the
“Bosnian Muslim” side, whereas my mother’s side of the family is Christian Orthodox, and was regarded as the “Bosnian Serb” side. I didn’t belong to any of the sides; they didn’t want me. I was a mixture, a mutt. My parents don’t care about the “sides.” Neither one of them is religious. Their beliefs stand in stark contrast to those of their parents. Both sets of my grandparents attend mosque and church in their respective religions; however, the difference in religions isn’t an important enough factor to hinder my parents’ relationship. Fortunately for my parents, their families, my family, is accepting of them.

I am three when I attend church for the first time. My grandmother on my mom’s side takes me when we are on vacation at the Adriatic Sea. The church is large, and strange, but my grandmother lets me light a candle for her brother. As well as my first time, it is also one of my last times going to church. Since my parents are not typically devout, they don’t push a religion on me and let me decide my beliefs for myself. I decide fairly quickly that I don’t believe at all. As a result, I become the unusual third grader who isn’t Christian, or Catholic, and is not familiar with Bible stories. The other kids don’t seem to understand why I don’t go to church, or why my family puts up a tree for New Year’s Eve rather than Christmas.

The combination of being raised without a religion, as well as seeing it used as a poor excuse for murder and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and throughout the rest of the world, has turned me off from being a believer. In Bosnia, religion defined the three conflicting ethnicities; those who were Roman Catholic, for example, were Bosnian Croats, even though they didn’t necessarily have ties to Croatia. Religious identity became the driving force behind conflict, and the only thing separating the cleansers from the cleansed. During the war in Bosnia, Bosnian Muslims were heavily targeted by Bosnian Serbs who wanted an ethnically pure republic. Mosques were destroyed and erased from historical records. Murder, forced relocation, mass execution, numerous counts of rape and sexual assault were all used as tools of ethnic cleansing.

I am six when my parents and I come to the United States. I speak Bosnian at home with my family and English everywhere else. In the beginning, my thought process is in Bosnian, and a word of English in conversation at home is rare. Now it’s a mix of the two very different
languages: Bos-lish. I catch myself thinking in English. Phone conversations with my parents are funny; I switch between the two languages without even thinking and get strange looks from anyone who happens to overhear.

The summer before my freshman year of college, I work on campus. My coworkers and I become friends and often go out after work. After getting dinner one night, we walk from Arigato towards a friend’s house near the UMass campus; on the way there, I get a phone call from my mom. When I pick up the phone, I speak with my mom in Bosnian, but also throw out “Sushi,” “walking towards North Pleasant Street,” and finish with, “okay, love you, ciao.” I get surprised looks from my coworkers. The fact that I am from Bosnia is not one of the first things that people find out about me. It happens eventually, whether it is because they overhear me speaking, because I tell them, or because I randomly throw in a Bosnian word when I forget its English equivalent. Most are fascinated at first and ask lots of questions, or want to learn Bosnian, but they soon forget or move on because it’s only a novelty and not an overwhelming part of my personality.

Over the course of the past twelve years I’ve been pretty “Americanized”; I’m on Facebook, I have eaten a corndog, and I’ve been to a baseball game. I enjoy just spending time with my friends; we do absolutely nothing most of the time, just change locations. My mom finds this absurd. She also cannot seem to fathom my obsession with text messaging or that I see going to college as an escape from home. My brother was born in New York in 1999 and is truly American; he loves video games, wants a cell phone at age eight, and plays T-ball. Sometimes I wonder how my parents deal with him. But they, too, have changed. Sure, they still listen to Bosnian rock music, and on Saturday mornings, when I want to sleep, it infuriates me. But there are also times when I wake up to them blasting Bob Dylan.

I am eighteen now. Sometimes I still have moments where I can’t remember the word for “spaghetti.” It’s not important anymore, and the word finds its way to the tip of my tongue eventually so I don’t fight it. By this point, “Bosnian Nina” and “American Nina” have cancelled each other out, or perhaps blended so much that it’s impossible to tell them apart. Either way, it doesn’t matter because I’ve accepted the end product. I am
an immigrant. I am an agnostic due to my parents’ religious views and my upbringing. I love driving. The war in Bosnia has made me a pacifist and what my close, “Right-Wing Conservative,” friend Kaylie considers a “Bleeding-Heart Liberal” on the far left of the political spectrum. I am a musician. I barely go anywhere without my iPod because I can’t stand being without music. I’m a vegetarian who hates mushrooms. I am a registered voter and proud of it. I am a girl. Most importantly, I am just Nina.
I could hear voices around me. Their words were jumbled, and I couldn’t understand them, but I knew that if I opened my eyes, I would know what they were saying. I slowly, painfully proceeded to open them, and all I could see was a cloudy mist of gray, but the voices were becoming clearer. Suddenly, I could hear my mother. I knew she was in the room, but there were two other people. I closed my eyes again, preparing to try once more. I opened my eyes and everything was much clearer than before, not perfect but still an improvement. This time I saw three figures standing around me. The two figures on the left were asking the figure on the right questions about me: “How did it go?” “Is she in pain?” “How long will we have to be here?” The nurse reassured my mother, and...my grandmother! That’s it! My grandmother! She reassured them, informing them that I might not even have to stay the night. My mother finally saw my eyes open, and said, “Julie! How are you feeling?” Everybody was looking at me now, waiting for me to speak...

I burst through the front door as if a pack of wolves are chasing me home from school. My cheeks are soaked with tears, my nose is running, my knees are scraped, my uniform is disheveled, my heart is broken. Mum scoops me unto her lap and holds me, asking me what happened. All I can remember is a bully named Russell teasing me, calling me ugly. “Why do I look different, Mum?” She proceeds to tell me that I am the most
beautiful girl she has ever seen, but I still cry. I am 7 years old, and for the first time in my life, I feel ugly.

The bottle spins and spins and spins; my head becomes dizzy from watching it. Everybody is eagerly awaiting the decision; we are mesmerized by this mechanism. Eventually it slows to an agonizing pace, each centimeter as dramatic as the one before it. It is a mixture of dread and excitement as we wait to see who will ultimately be its victims. At last the judgment is made, its long neck pointing directly at me. Wait, that can't be right...this can't be happening! I've never done this before. Surely there must be some mistake! Everyone is looking at me, entertained by my lost and confused face. He stands up and heads to the bathroom, and I know I must follow. My heart is slamming mercilessly into my chest; I hope no one can hear it. With wobbly legs, I stand up and slowly walk the plank. I hear the door shut behind me, and I can hardly see his face in the dark. Suddenly, his lips are on mine, and after a few seconds that seem like light-years I realize...I’m quite good at this! I had been practicing on mirrors since I was old enough to know what kissing was, and I had “googled” the proper techniques for good kissing on multiple occasions, just so I wouldn’t be a complete idiot when finally I would be in a situation like the one I was in right now. Yes, this isn't so bad; I actually like it a lot. Perhaps I'll take it up as a hobby.... And what I thought was going to be an issue really isn't an issue. He doesn't seem to mind the asymmetry in my face; he probably doesn't even notice it. Maybe there is more to my face than that slight imperfection. Maybe there is more to a person than her face.

It is a hot summer night. I am driving home with drunk Amy passed out in the back seat, while my best friend Sarah sits beside me. She is talking about something so pointless, so unimportant, so stupid. I am jealous because she does not feel this pain. I keep hearing the doctor in my head saying “there is some risk, Julie.” A tear falls down my face, and Sarah’s suddenly there with me, asking me what's wrong. This is not something I can handle all by myself. Finally the tears come and won't stop. My nose is running ruthlessly, and I don’t care. I tell her everything, absolutely everything in its entirety. I tell her I am scared, that I have never been so afraid in my life. She tells me that this is something I must do, because a part of me will be resolved, and I'll be able to grow. She is so wise; I'm so
happy she is my friend. She listens to me cry, and she sympathizes, but she doesn't understand. Nobody could ever quite understand what this is like. Nobody.

In eight days I will walk the plank.

The nurse sits across from Mum and me. She is vastly obese, with dark brown skin, short black hair, and kind eyes. She hands me the document and a pen, and tells me I must sign it; my parents cannot because I am 18 years of age. I am an adult, and the decision to have the procedure is mine, all mine. I am now a grown-up, forced to make her own decisions and live with the consequences. I don't think I can handle this. I cannot possibly be an adult now...not when I'm so scared. Grown-ups aren't supposed to be this scared; grown-ups are brave. But I know I can't stop now, so I sign the paper anyway. There is no going back.

The doctor sits across from Mum and me and tells us everything. There is a lot of risk, he says. I hear something about hitting a facial nerve and losing all motor function in the right side of my face. He uses the word “droop.” My mother asks if I’ll still be able to smile if the nerve is hit. He says no. Suddenly I am sweating and breathing quite hard. I feel sick to my stomach. Is this really worth it? Can I live without it? The answer to both questions is yes. I must keep going.

My grandfather lies in bed. The room is gray and sick. I want to leave. He says, “Smile for me, Julie. Keep smiling.” So I do what he says.

“I’m fine, Mum! I’m fine.” A sigh of relief escapes from her. The nurse tells us that if I am feeling up to it, I might be able to go home today. I surprisingly feel absolutely no pain, even though my whole head is wrapped in white bandages. I worry about how hideous my hair is going to be when these bandages are taken off a week and a half later. After a few quick hours pass by, the nurse and my grandmother help me into the wheelchair; I am so nauseated I cannot stand up. I hope I don’t vomit on this nice nurse, or worse, my grandma. They wheel me to the car, and I gingerly step into it. Even though the doctor tells me I shouldn’t, I can’t help it. I fold down the passenger mirror and look at my face, and despite the bruises and the stitches and the bandages, I smile.

Through the months leading up to and following my surgery, I discovered an unbelievable strength in myself. I dealt with a problem that nobody
else really had demanded that I face alone, and I believe that this battle within me, to find my own true beauty, demonstrated great courage. In the many years I deemed myself as being ugly, I tried my very best to always be kind to people because I didn’t want anyone to have an issue with me and call me something I knew would destroy me...ugly. This kindness, I believe, stayed with me throughout my life, and is partially the reason why I ended up pursuing a career in nursing. Correcting my face through surgery, as daring as it was, ended up being the scariest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life. Not only was I taking a huge risk physically, as the surgery itself was quite dangerous; I was also taking a huge risk emotionally. My era of insecurities, sadness, and self-discovery was about to come to an end through this surgery...essentially, my childhood was about to end. An issue that had plagued me throughout my entire life was about to subside and that scared me. Yet I knew that I had to do it, I had to go through with it, and I couldn’t be happier.
“Never listen to what they tell you! They will tell you stories about how they discovered these lands. This is not true! They are only trying to justify the wrongs that they have committed against our people and lands. The Creator gave us life in these lands, our lands. We are a part of these shores, these lands; never forget this.”

On the west side of the Reservation there is a stretch of beach called Cuffee’s beach. From the shore, you can see the Shinnecock Inlet that leads to the Atlantic Ocean. When I was younger, I would ride my bike to the cemetery next to Cuffee’s. The graves of my ancestors overlook the waters of the beach. I always loved to sit on top of the beach’s erosion barrier and listen. If I closed my eyes and concentrated, I could hear the teachings of my ancestors. I listened to the plights and the sufferings that they bared—carrying into the present. I would be comforted by the fact that I wasn’t alone. The same images, questions, and memories that plagued my mind, my heart, haunted my ancestors as well.

“It must be really great to have such a well-known heritage!”

“Mom, my history teacher told the class that the Shinnecock died out decades ago.”

“Wow! You’re an Indian? You look just like Pocahontas!”
“Grandma, why do they say that there are no Shinnecock left? Is it because not everyone in our tribe has red skin?”

“Do Indians really live in Teepees?”

“Dad, that house is full of rats and is falling apart. Why does Uncle live in that old house?”

“It must be nice to be an Indian. You get so much money from the government.”

“Grandpa, why is the government trying to stop our tribal businesses? Doesn’t the government know our people need the money?”

“You’re Native American? What is that like?”

From what one experiences growing up on a Reservation, it’s very easy to believe what the history books teach. One believes that we were once warriors, and now we are just the shattered remains of the past. It feels as if we are broken people with missing, stolen pieces. One believes that we are robbed of our glorious past. The concept of our future being bleak is constantly rammed into our heads. We are taught to believe that our bleak future is already set in stone. So instead of wondering about the possibilities of the future, one constantly thinks of the What would... What would it feel like to live in the glorious past? Would I no longer have to watch my people suffer? What would my life be like if identifying as a Native American did not mean Reservations, poverty, and suffering?

As a Native American, I will always be forced to walk a path between two worlds. One world is modern society, where society regards me by my status as a minority. The other world, my people’s world, is full of traditions, history, and culture. In this world, I am a part of a tribe, a descendant of many Chiefs and warriors.

From my father’s side of the family, I get my Kiowa heritage. The Kiowas were one of the greatest warriors of the Great Plains. We were one of the last tribes to be forced onto the Reservation. My mother’s side is Shinnecock, and they live on the Shinnecock Reservation, where I grew up.

“The past is glorious; the future is bleak.”

The Shinnecock are the People of the Shore. My people once depended on the bounties of the land and the shore to survive. We were once whalers
using dug out canoes on the Atlantic Ocean. The Shinnecock lived and prospered in the serenity of our lands. When the settlers came and we were forced to assimilate, the lands changed. My people were forced to change. When we were forced to assimilate into the white man's culture, we were exposed to the diseases and addictions found in his society. Alcohol abuse and drug abuse are great problems that occur on our Reservation. Families—clans to us—are torn apart by these addictions. Some children grow up in households where drugs and alcohol are constantly in their presence. Most children don't understand the effects of drugs and alcohol at the age of six. But I did. Many children raised on the Reservation do. I was warned to avoid the drug dealers I would encounter on my bike rides to the playground.

Many of my people are suffering from life-threatening illnesses. Our health care system didn't start until the early 90's. A little clinic isn't enough to care for my people's health needs. Families, like my own, are continuously moving in and out of a state of poverty. Many of the tribal members are forced to live in inadequate housing. I lived the first five years of my life in a small “house.” It was a rat infested shack that was falling apart. My uncle lives there now.

"Some people are ignorant. Some people are just being oblivious; it is not done on purpose. But both traits cause harm. It is up to us to make them see. We must fight for our people."

So many of my people suffer, and yet others are too blind to see. It’s either ignorance or the desire to connect with the romanticism of a stereotype that blinds many. I meet many people who tell me that their great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess, or sometimes they say they’re part Indian. I am not someone that can confirm their pedigree, but it makes me wonder. Is this claim of Native American blood an attempt to avoid the guilt for the wrongs committed against my people? Many will respond by saying that they have nothing to do with what their ancestors did. That’s where they are wrong. I am not referring to only past wrongs, but to the present wrongs as well. Ignorance and obliviousness are as harmful to my people today as the crimes of the past.
I am a daughter of Chiefs, from a bloodline of leaders. It is my duty to honor such a bloodline. When a leader sees their people suffer, they do the best they can to alleviate the pain. I cannot stand by and watch my people, and all Native people, suffer. Although I am no longer surrounded by the shores, I will not forget that I am a part of the shore, that I am Shinnecock. I will not abandon my people. It is my intention to remove the blindfolds on the oblivious. It is my intention to make the world see, to understand, that my people are suffering.

Many are unable to leave the Reservation lifestyle. For those precious few that can, the future of our people is held in their hands. It is up to these fortunate tribal members to educate themselves—and others. I am fortunate enough to be able to pursue a higher education. I have moved away from the reservation to a school where the only shore is a pathetic, polluted, campus pond. Yet in this land, away from the shores, I begin to truly understand who I am. I am separated from my people, my shores. In my loneliness I understand that I am not alone. When I describe myself, think of myself, I am not just me. I am not just a part of the tribe; they are a part of me. We are one tribe, one voice, one drumbeat, one heartbeat, one soul. Being a part of one entity: that is what being Native American means.

My people are like the water. Besides its majesty, and that certain romanticism about the ocean, it has dangers and perils, all hidden underneath the surface. Despite the romanticism that many people give our culture, we have many perils hidden underneath the surface. Yes, in a way we can be considered majestic, for we hold our heritage and our traditions with absolute honor. The Reservation, with all its problems, is a strong community. I am grateful for growing up surrounded by the strength of my tribe, all of whom, like me, must walk a path between two worlds. Despite the devastation brought on by assimilation, we still hold onto our tribal identity. We never forget who we are, for when our ancestors speak, we listen.
I have this picture. It’s a pleasant reminder of winter. Snow is falling, of course. The sky is a dark shade of gray. There is the bare maple tree hiding our mailbox. There is my road with the wood fence to the south pasture. There are the tips of tops of trees from the swamp down the hill. There are snowflakes—spiraling, reflecting like stars in a universe distant and near. I have this picture. I took it accidentally. It was a pleasant surprise when I looked at the camera’s screen. And thankfully, it reignited the flame I had lost for winter.

As they say: a single snowflake falls from the sky, and that marks the beginning. Winter isn’t a date on the calendar, the commercial for snow tires, or the boisterous weatherman smiling, “Brrr, it’s cold outside.” Winter is opening the door to white blankets at your feet, a gray sky, and snowflakes falling into your eyes.

Since the day I was born, winter was my favorite season. Snow was my escape from reality. Snow days were a break from the world. They were the days when I could go outside and forget everything. I was on an arctic expedition, an Olympic skier, a hermit in an igloo, a poet on an unplowed road. I love the cold, the silence, the purity, the static sound of melting snow in my ear. Every child loves winter: a day off, a white holiday. Many adults, for an immeasurable number of reasons, hate winter. They hate the weight of the season, the lack of sun, the lack of warmth. The winter of my sixteenth birthday I felt that weight, a burden I wanted to rid myself of.
We made it through Christmas happily. New Years Eve was the beginning. I looked at my grandmother, then to my mom. “Mom, Grandma doesn’t look right,” I said. This wasn’t anything new. So we waited until after the weekend to take her to the hospital. We brought her in; she had jaundice caused by a build up of prescription drugs. A tumor was blocking a passage. I had a snow day so I was able to visit her in the hospital. “Grandma, do you want another surgery?” my mother asked. “No, I don’t want to bother. I’m too old now anyway,” she said with good spirits. We asked how she was feeling, and the conversation went on.

The next weekend rolled around. It was Sunday morning, and we walked into the house to the phone ringing. Dad picked it up and handed it to my mother. She took a deep breath and sighed, “Okay. Thank you.” She walked into the living room where my brother and I sat. “Grandma had another stroke.” She expected me to come; my dad and brother stayed home. The ride over was bright and sunny. She told me she loved me. I didn’t want to talk. We were both exhausted from the last four years of this routine.

We walked into the hospital room to a scene I expected, but I didn’t know what to do or where to stand. There were IVs, air tubes, feeding tubes, layers of blankets—an overwhelming number of foreign objects. I couldn’t look at Grandma’s face. It was yellow, old, and wrinkled. Her hair was gray and stiff. All I could do was hold my breath; I wanted the hospital routine to end. When the nurse got her attention, Grandma realized we were there. One side of her face was paralyzed. She could hardly open her fogged eyes. One rolled away from us, and one acknowledged we were there. We held her hand, and she squeezed back. This time was different.

It was winter the first time my grandmother had a stroke. I was in preschool. I fell asleep in her bed, and my parents left me there. I remember waking up confused, then falling back asleep. In the morning, my mom tried to explain what was wrong. “Rosie, try to help Grandma eat. Thank you honey, you’re such a good girl.” Mom stood in the room on the phone. The ambulance came. I stood outside the house with no coat. I wanted to stay with my mother, but she had to go with Grandma and told me to go back inside.
During winter, in preschool, we made our teachers roll giant snowballs. “Bigger, bigger,” we cheered. In those days, snowballs were bigger than us. We couldn’t even manage to sit on their tops. Everything was big back then. There was a blizzard once, and the plowman came to my house and made a mountain of snow so tall I couldn’t make it to its peak. I walked around the yard stepping in my daddy’s footprints. The snow was so deep that just walking in it tired me out. It put on my boots. I started crying and screamed for my dad. “Daddy, I hate this stupid snow.” He came over, lifted me up, and told me that I loved the snow. I believed him.

Every snow day after my brother was born, we spent no time sleeping in bed or watching cartoons. We ate breakfast, put on our snow pants and boots, and went out. We slid down the hill beside our house. We ran inside when the plowman came, and ran back out when he left. We built caves into the mountains of snow and hid there until they crumbled on top of us. I would push him down the hill in a sled, and at the bottom say, “Now pull me back up.” “I can’t,” he’d say as he stumbled over trying to pull me. “But I pulled you back up every other time,” I reasoned. “Rosie, I can’t.” “Fine. Get in,” and I pulled him back up the hill. “Don’t drag your feet; it makes it harder.” At the top, I would push him back down and make him walk up on his own. After hours passed, one of us would complain that it was cold. “I’m not cold,” someone would say. “Well I’m going in.” “Well I’m not.” And less than a minute later, one of us would be running in the house. We would drop snow all over the floor, and Grandma would say, “Oh, look at the mess.” Right away she’d get a rag and start to clean it up. I would run over to her, and we would argue about the melting snow. “Let me get it.” “No, let me clean it up.”

There was a year that winter was cold—really cold. In the west pasture, my dad put down some plastic sheets and pine beams and flooded it with the garden hose, making me my own ice rink. I would skate on it every day after school. I spun figure eights backwards and forwards. I pretended I was the best, the most amazing ice skater. I would go back in the house, and Grandma would nag, “Why did your father build it so far from the house?” “It’s the flattest.” “I can’t see you. Tell me what you do out there.” I told her a story. I flew around the living room demonstrating my off-ice moves.
It amused her, and that’s what mattered. She didn’t care if I made the whole thing up or not.

My favorite part of winter was the blizzards at night. We would all put on our snow clothes and hike up the road. No cars would come while it was snowing, and the plows wouldn’t come until the early morning. We all smiled. The dog barked. Grandma was peacefully sleeping in bed. In the middle of the road, which linked two highways, it was silent. The only thing you could hear was the static of snowflakes hitting your face. No cars. No planes. No grumble from a tractor-trailer. It was warm and it was beautiful. There is no other way to describe it. It was safe.

We moved Grandma from the hospital to the nursing home. The last four or five times she was there, it was to recover. This time was different. I knew the nursing home too well by then. Every other day, Mom took me to see Grandma, twice on weekends. I would just sit with Mom and tell Grandma stories. Hold her hand. I would worry about school, not being able to keep up with the material. I would stay up all night trying to get ahead. My friends didn’t understand. They didn’t have to watch someone slowly die every day. They just nagged, “Why don’t you have your permit?” “When are you having a birthday party?” “Stop being so pessimistic.”

Every single night I came home from school, fell on the floor, and cried for hours until my brother dragged me into my room. I fell into depression. I was stuck. Snow fell in my boots, and I was freezing. I didn’t want to play music. I didn’t want to go to tae kwon do. I didn’t want to see my friends. I didn’t want to eat. I didn’t want to shop. I didn’t sleep. I didn’t want to go outside. All I wanted to do was curl up in a ball and disappear.

My parents begged me to come outside, to move. My brother would come into my room and force snow pants and boots and gloves on me. “Come on Rosie. Come outside,” he’d beg. I missed winter that year. I hated it. I hated it because I knew when I would come back in the house, nothing would be fixed, nothing would be done, and I’d have more homework to do. It wouldn’t make me feel better.

One night my mother drove me home. “That cloud looks like a horse, Mom.” “Where?” The cloud was a strange pink, floating beneath the stars. “You have to see.” We parked the car in the garage. “I miss Jerry,” she said. Jerry was the horse she had raised as she was growing up. He died one
winter years ago. “I know.” I went ahead to show her the cloud. Dad came out in the dark, “Grandma died. The doctor just called.” I stood at the end of the driveway and watched Dad hug Mom. I went into the house, into my room, a few tears streamed down my face. And that was that. The weight lifted off my back. A big relief. It was all over.

The rest of the year I longed for the winter I missed. And finally, when winter came, I went out. I slid down the hill with my brother. He pulled me back up. I walked up and down the road. I didn’t get stuck in the snow. I had the camera and took a million pictures. I just kept pushing the shutter. I wanted to remember every bit of winter I could. I forgot to change the shutter speed and the iris was nearly closed; it was snowing and the flash was on. I looked at the screen and saw the most beautiful mistake—but that was winter.
In the first unit, students examined their own experiences and wrote personal essays for personal audiences. As they progressed through the semester, students moved from a more familiar audience towards an academic one—and thus began the process of writing for the needs and expectations of more distant audiences—audiences they would not see before them in the form of fellow classmates, family members, or friends. In Unit II, students were asked to integrate their own ideas with the ideas of others by responding to, or “wrestling with,” a published text. They introduced key elements of academic contexts, such as the use of textual sources and citation formats, into their own writing.

The essays in this section of the anthology show the writers interacting with the ideas of a published author or scholar, speaking comfortably and with personal authority. In Unit I, students exhibited this authority by writing about their own lives. In the following Unit II essays, students used the perspectives they gained from their own lives to write within a larger conversation: their ideas remained central but were not the sole focus of their writing. Writers cannot respond to a text without being influenced by and incorporating the unique perspectives and contexts that stem from their own histories and experiences. In this second unit, students have gradually moved from a solely personal context to a less familiar one, while still finding authority in their own perspectives on the essays they read.
As Sherry Turkle says in “Whither Psychoanalysis in Computer Culture,” “Cyberspace opens the possibility of identity play, but it is very serious play” (316). With the security of hiding behind a screen, online users are able to portray themselves however they wish. It is indeed “serious play,” but Turkle fails to acknowledge certain consequences of cyberspace. Thanks to advancements in technology, we all have become liars and stalkers online. We’ve developed a relationship with computers that goes beyond self and object, and into self and self enhanced. This false sense of reality is both deceiving and problematic.

Online interaction with others “begins with the creation of a persona (or several)” (Turkle 314). By creating and modifying your identity behind the screen, you are hiding yourself and allowing people to perceive you solely on how you present yourself online. The problem is whether or not people can distinguish themselves from their cyberselves. The same goes for the audience. Do they know the real you? When you step off the computer, you find yourself feeling vulnerable because there’s nothing to hide behind. When you meet with your friends, you constantly wonder if they see you with your flaws.

Years ago, people mostly interacted through chatrooms. You sent email pictures of who you said you were and that was about it. Nobody could’ve really done a background check. However, with the explosion of more extensive networking sites like Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook, where you don’t even need to contact a single soul to allow
them to know information about you, you need to keep the story of
your cyberself consistent and “real.” With all these personas out on the
Web, you find yourself spending a ridiculous amount of time trying to
decipher the real and the unreal. You see a friend holding a bottle of
vodka to his lips and a blunt in his hand. Is he really that hardcore and
“cool” as he portrays himself to be? You notice that your friends fill out
their favorite music and movies sections with bands that nobody has
ever heard of and cult classics, and you wonder if your friends are being
pretentious or real.

But can we call it curiosity? Is it really imperative to know if John
Smith is really dating Jane Doe, and then to keep track everyday to see
how long the relationship lasts? Which of Jane Doe’s friends are actually
friends? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines stalking as “to pursue
obsessively.” That means simply being up-to-date on our friends’
whereabouts makes us virtual stalkers. The need to know trivial things
such as how your childhood friend is doing nowadays can lead to the need
to know what he or she is doing everyday. At first you check up just to see
what college she is in, and then you compare yourself to her and find that
she’s doing a lot better than you are. You start posting pictures of yourself
in provocative poses, with your many friends, with your boyfriend, or
something meaningful in hopes that your friend will take notice that you
too are doing quite nicely.

In “The Numbing of the American Mind: Culture as Anesthetic,” Thomas
de Zengotita accuses society of not being able to tell the difference between
reality and fabrication (342–343). So here are some layers of cyber reality:

- Real real: Your computer is infected with viruses. It’s so familiar that
  you forget the purpose why viruses exist.
- Edited stage real: A video of you doing the Chicken Noodle Soup
dance.
- Staged observed real unique: SNL’s Lazy Sunday and Dick in a Box.
- Staged observed real repeated: Lazy Sunday and Dick in a Box to
download onto your iPod, a million hits on YouTube, countless
attempts of doing a parody.
- Covertly unreal realistic: Your profile picture after processing through Photoshop. The mole on your face, what mole?
- Real unreal: Robot behind the computer posing as a single female?

And as de Zengotita says, we can stop to think about the differences, but we don’t. This can be described as “suffocating in a vast goo of meaningless stimulation” (341). Everything is funny, everything is entertaining, and then we get over it.

Because your information is out there, your professional reality can cross into your online reality. You find yourself unemployed because your company found pictures you uploaded of yourself drunk and passed out on the bathroom floor; is it acceptable? Another question to think about: why would you even show pictures of yourself doing that? Is it because you want your friends to know that you haven’t lost your partying ways under that fancy button up shirt? When you agree to meet up with a stranger online who described himself as outgoing and fresh out of college, and he turns out to be a creepy middle-aged pervert who tries to seduce you even though you’re underage (but he doesn’t know that, does he?), who is to blame? Turkle describes an incident where the IRC participant said, “I’m different in the different chats. They bring out different things in me” (315). With the ability to hide behind a screen, it is difficult for viewers to decide which “different things” in you are real and which ones are completely made up. You tell your bosses that it’s just you on the weekends and it was a one time thing. Why should they believe you?

The Internet has become so much more of a “constantly knowing your every movement” than a simple “keep in touch” medium. You don’t know how to prevent the invasion of privacy nor do you know how to keep yourself from intruding. You are accessible. You try not to believe everything you see on the Web, but it’s so convincing. You sit and try to figure out what parts of people’s identities are they allowing to show, and why they only show certain parts. “Some glorious babe in her underwear” on MySpace is looking you right in the eye. “Real or not?” (Zengotita 346)
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ART TAKES TIME TO SPEAK

Greg Dunbar

My sneakers squeaked across the wooden stage and echoed throughout the hall. I entered into my first college classroom, Art History 115. People were scattered throughout the room, and heads bobbed up and stared when I entered. I shuffled my way down the aisle to find my seat. There was a quiet awkwardness that could almost be heard as all of the students waited for the professor to enter. Two images were showing over the projector, both of which were unfamiliar to me. The hall gradually filled up as more and more bodies filled the chairs and waited anxiously for the professor. I sat there in a daze, both nervous and anxious, not sure what I was about to face. The door creaked open, and a white haired man with a beard walked up to the podium. He spoke in depth about both of the images on the screen, allowing no time for introductions. Art was a foreign language to me. He pointed things out in the image that I still could not see even after an explanation. Brush strokes, color, tone, placement. All I could think of at the time was, “How do I transfer classes?” Click…. click… Image after image was shown on the screen, and I grew more and more distant with each one. The minutes eventually passed, and I walked out extremely discouraged and confused, unsure what to expect for the rest of my classes.

I took some time to think over my decision, not wanting to give up on the class immediately. I finally decided I would go back for one more class
to make sure I did not like it. I entered the same quiet hall the next day, found a seat, and waited again for the professor. As I adjusted myself and took out my notes, I looked up and froze. The two images on the projector were both awe-inspiring. They were two paintings of the same cathedral depicted at different times of the day. I have an earnest interest in architecture, and each of the paintings was able to express beautiful architecture in an artistic form. The professor came in minutes later and explained the paintings, both of which were Monet’s. I clung on to every word, intrigued by the history and technique. I decided to keep the class, and I continued to look forward to what else the professor would show me. That very day I was inspired in a way I had never been before, and it led me to discover more in the world of art.

Being intimidated and generally unfamiliar with art, I was prone to shy away from the subject. Walking into that classroom was a very scary moment. The atmosphere in that room contributed to my own stereotype of an art history lecture, assuming it was boring, intimidating, and filled with content. I initially wanted to give up on art, having no particular connection with it; however, giving it a second chance opened up a whole new world for me. Jeanette Winterson addresses similar experiences in her essay “Art Objects,” describing the intimidating process she faced when approaching art. Art is not something that connects with people immediately. Instead, Winterson says, “Art takes time” (330). A painting cannot simply be glanced at and judged immediately. Perhaps the piece has to catch your eye first, such as in my experience. It is important to give yourself a second chance and give art the time it needs to speak to you. By coming back on that second day of class, I was able to open my eyes until that one special painting crossed my eyes, and I continue to devote time to experiencing those paintings. Winterson writes, “Long looking at paintings is equivalent to being dropped into a foreign city, where gradually, out of desire and despair, a few key words, then a little syntax make a clearing in the silence” (329). I felt foreign in that large classroom on the first day, but the painting of the cathedral gave me a key word in that foreign language. It was with that word that I began to learn the language of art. People do not understand or relate to art, and therefore, they do not bother giving art the chance to speak to them. People need to find something that intrigues
them or relates to them. When they find that piece that inspires them like I did, they will inevitably be encouraged to dig deeper into the world of art.

Art requires that you block out everything around you, leaving you and the work connected alone together. The influences of Art History 115 extended beyond the professor, the painting, and myself. The whole class was full of very vocal critics, saying, “I don’t see what he’s talking about” or “that painting sucks.” Enjoying paintings required me to block out external persuasions. Winterson says, “our responses are conditioned from the moment we start school” (335). We learn about famous artists in school; however, we are never told why they are celebrated. Over the years we are influenced by other opinions, and it is difficult to know what we think is good and bad art. “The media ransacks the arts,” playing a significant role in how we perceive an image (Winterson 335). You will often hear reviews in papers or news reports that assess an exhibit or an artist’s work. They tell the public through their own biased opinions whether or not it is high quality. But art can only be appreciated in your own eyes, not because you are told to appreciate it. When you see a movie you love that got bad reviews, are you supposed to change your opinions? If you want to know whether or not you like a painting, look at it. Forget everyone around you, the frame of the painting, the noise around you, the wall that it is hanging on, and tell yourself whether or not you think it is a good painting.

My interest in the arts ended up reaching beyond the walls of that lecture hall. I found myself craving more and more art, especially the painting that inspired me that day. Since I saw those cathedral paintings, they have constantly been on my mind. The color, the detail, the brush strokes all stuck with me. Come Christmastime, I received one of the prints as a gift and hung it at the foot of my bed. I stared at the painting over break every morning, but I felt that I needed more from it. I needed to see the real thing. I researched the painting and came to find out that it was one of 28 paintings in a series done by Monet. As I read on, I came to find that one of the paintings was in the Clark Museum in Williamstown, MA. While this is a 3-hour drive from my home, I was determined to see the painting. I took the time and made that journey the next day and was able to see the original first hand. I scanned the museum until I saw the painting. I stood in front of it, looking at it for over an hour. Everything around
me sped up in time as I was lost in a trance. I cannot explain what happened to me that day; all I know is that I connected with the painting. Corner to corner, brush stroke to brush stroke, I scanned the painting until I felt it imprinted into my mind. Winterson suggests that you need to “expose yourself to as much…art as you can until you find something, anything, that you will go back and back to see again” (331). I found the piece that had this effect on me, and it is only a matter of time until I return to see it again.

Art can be intimidating, but when you give it the time to speak, you will find that it has a lot to say. While I was intimidated by art at first, seeing a piece that inspired me engaged me in art as a whole. In this fast-paced world, people rarely take the time to give things a chance. They need to realize that in order to truly enjoy something, you need to give it the time that it deserves. Winterson expresses that, “Art takes time” (330). She pinpoints the concept of understanding art through time. Art was made to take time and to question your own thoughts. When you let other people’s ideas breach your own opinions, you are simply bypassing an opportunity to experience something great. I was able to relate to a piece of art, and by doing so I gave the painting time to speak. Art had such a profound effect on me that I sought after a particular piece until it was finally able to speak to me. People need to take a few moments to look around, and they will find that something will speak to them. When it does, they may be inspired by it forever.

Works Cited
As a nine-year-old, I considered my family’s idea of a vacation to be hours upon hours of boredom and restlessness. My “finely cultured” parents would drag me and my siblings four hours to Tanglewood where we would tear grass out of the ground while somewhere in the background, classical orchestras played pieces by Bach, Chopin, and Tchaikovsky. The majority of my first memories of culture and art consisted of moping through art galleries and picking the gum off the bottom of my seat in the theatre while ballerinas and Shakespearean thespians performed.

However, a few years later, while I was visiting Massachusetts, my initial view of art as just another contribution to my collection of boredoms changed. As we were driving through Stockbridge, my parents made a stop at the Norman Rockwell museum. As my mother led us through the entrance telling us a bit about his artwork, I scanned the room for the comfiest bench to sit on to wait for my parents.

Yet as I walked toward the cushioned seat, my eyes were drawn to a painting on the adjacent wall. Incredible. The still, yet expression-filled faces coaxed me closer to hear their stories. These paintings were like storybooks whose pages I could keep turning by looking at them for longer amounts of time. For every five minutes I looked at one piece, ten new details thickened the plot. Unaware, I had spent hours walking through the rooms, hearing the stories that were hanging on the walls. I had fallen in love.
In her essay, “Art Objects,” Jeanette Winterson explains how it takes time to fall in love with a piece of art. She describes a personal experience she had which altered her view of art forever. While walking through the streets of Amsterdam, she passed a painting “that had more power to stop [her] than [she] had the power to walk on” (Winterson 328). Knowing nothing about painting, she extended her trip for the sole purpose of comprehending art. The painting challenged her to understand its complexity and profound meanings. Believing that every person “can be taught to love what they do not love already” and that eye-opening moments can exist for everyone, she began her journey of falling in love (Winterson 330).

Like Winterson, I did not know anything about painting or art in the broader sense, yet I knew when I saw it and took time to understand it that I had strong feelings for a certain type of painting. I was fortunate enough to have this eye-opening moment early in my life so that I could welcome all art forms with an open heart and mind. As Winterson says, after she experienced her moment of falling in love, what had changed was not the painting itself but her way of seeing it. She learned how to view paintings, how to allow them to change the ‘I’ that she was (330).

A painting does not change. It is a static expression of someone’s view of a part of the world at a certain time. Unlike paintings, human beings are not fixed; they grow and develop as a result of sights and experiences. Viewing art and letting it affect oneself is what changes one’s interpretations of the various meanings of all future art forms to which he or she will be exposed.

As a child, I was surrounded by an array of art styles, from impressionism and expressionism to pop art and cubism. I was weighed down, however, with so much pressure from my parents to appreciate art that I stubbornly refused to actually stand before a painting and look beyond the gold plaque inscribed with the artist’s name and the year it was painted. In her essay, Winterson speaks of the ignorance of the general public and explains that many people who take the time to go to an art museum fail to try to connect with the paintings. Rather, they think about the price of the piece, its level of fame, and interesting facts about the painter’s personal life. They do not take the time to try to look below the surface (331).
Just as Winterson says that “true art, when it happens to us, challenges the ‘I’ that we are,” I was challenged to understand where my feelings were rooted and what exactly I was seeing when I looked at Rockwell’s paintings (330). In Winterson’s words, I needed to “drink” the art; I needed to digest the paint’s enzymes and the brush stroke’s nutrients in order to connect with it (334-5). Its permanent effects on me changed my approach to all art forms.

Last summer, with my acquired ability to let art change the way I see and feel, I traveled to Athens where I spent several days touring the ancient ruins. As I walked through the Acropolis and saw ancient temples and monuments, archaic amphitheatres and courts, I was overwhelmed by the detail put into each Corinthian column and the delicate features of each sculptured goddess. Many of the tourists saw everything through a camera lens and simply thought about the age and value of each rock; I looked at the beauty of each carving and felt as if I were walking through a painting.

Had I not had my eye-opening moment with Norman Rockwell, perhaps my reaction to this ancient art would have been similar to that of the tourists who fall under Winterson’s description of the general public. However, since I had allowed art to challenge and change me, I was able to draw meaning from the sculptures. I did not only care about the superficial aspects of this amazing classical Greek architecture; I cared about the artistic value of the sculptures that used to line the perimeter of the remarkable ancient cultural center.

Winterson says that if people want something to work for them, they need to work for it (330). Falling in love is not a simple task; one needs to uncover every surface detail and fully digest what lies beneath in order to find true feelings. Spending hours in front of paintings with which I connected at first glance, I experienced the “falling in love” that Winterson found in Amsterdam.

Works Cited
The alarm throws my brain into working order at about seven in the morning. It is a Monday in every sense of how unhappy I am to begin the day. This very moment of my life replicates itself every week and perhaps every twenty-four hours, as the routine sets in and I feel no different than I did yesterday. After preparing myself to make an appearance to the world, I step into my first social scene: the kitchen. It is complete with the latest gadgets and organic foods; I suppose their presence is meant to go that extra stretch to enhance my life as another citizen of America. Finally awake and aware of my surroundings, I observe the news on the television. The unsteady face of President Bush glares back at me as he announces the events of the war in Iraq. There are more United States casualties. There are more prisoners of war. Focused on the misery of a Monday in high school, I click the power button and head out the door.

It is now seventh period, and my political science teacher is reading a newspaper article out loud about Hurricane Katrina. I glance around the classroom to observe slouching seniors and closing eyes; there is little enthusiasm about the subject. According to Mr. Johnson’s booming voice, hundreds of families in New Orleans are displaced from their homes and just as many individuals lost their lives or are severely injured. His words slip into my right ear and out the left as I send a text message to my best friend about our plans for the weekend. The only thing that is keeping me
awake is the ticking of the clock, which is slowly inching towards 2:00 pm. Students begin to shuffle over the teacher’s grim news from another land. This is not the first time any of us have heard these facts; all you have to do is turn on the news. We feel sorry, but it seems as though the breaking news is always in our faces to the point where nothing seems extraordinary anymore.

During these twenty-four hours, my daily routine never strayed from the ordinary. I ate my breakfast, groaned about the fact that the weekend was over, and inconsiderately allowed the news to go through my head without a care. In American society, the television seems to blow everything out of proportion to the point where every event is supposed to be a defining moment in the history of our nation. The wide spread of media coverage is meant to be a positive advancement in this world. Most people are viewed as ignorant individuals in society if they do not follow the problems that occur outside of their hometown, state, or nation. However, when the tragedies are in your face at all moments during the day, it is hard to give all of them your complete attention and sorrow.

Thomas de Zengotita discusses the seemingly ignorant behavior of Americans in his essay “The Numbing of the American Mind: Culture as Anesthetic.” His essay explores the reasons why Americans are consumed by the media and consequently lead selfish lives—similar to my personal experiences. When talking about the explosion of the media, he claims, “But these iconic moments swam into focus only momentarily, soon to be swept away in a deluge of references, references so numerous, so relentlessly repeated that they came at last to constitute a solid field, a new backdrop for all our public performances” (Zengotita 341). This backdrop of the media in our lives becomes unnoticed, and we no longer see these major events as significant. He emphasizes that because these moments are seen so frequently, our minds are quick to move on to the next event that pops up on the television screen or blares through the radio station news hour.

Let’s get back to life again. Just days later, I am sitting in my bedroom with my new best friend, the video iPod. With my eyes closed and the music blaring, I remain in my own little world, detached from reality. My mother shuffles into the scene and sits calmly next to my sprawling body. “I’m sorry Em, but Nana died today,” she says with the hint of an expectation that I am going to burst into tears. Oddly enough, the drops of water do not well
up in my brown eyes. I know that my grandmother, who lives far away in Florida, has been sick, and this recent news does not shock me. The thought of the loss of my father’s mother causes me to feel sorry for my dad, but I simply cannot grasp the thought of her passing; thus I never actually feel the devastation. I really had not known her very well, and I also had seen her move to Florida as a distance that she created. My brain cannot wrap around the reality of a person in my life never coming back to say “Hello!” or giving me the greeting of a warm hug. I never even shed a tear at the funeral. Mentally, I move on so quickly because I never grasp the reality of the situation. I simply do not feel afflicted by the loss and therefore go on with the rest of my life feeling okay. The numbing effects of the media are now carrying over to my personal life. It is not only just war and natural disasters that no longer penetrate my heart; it is people too.

Is it possible to become so numb to such horrific events? The shallow feeling I have in the pit of my heart tells me that it is possible. The loss of my grandmother is an absoluteness that I never truly faced because I did not feel directly affected by it. Similar to the way I nonchalantly switched off the news that morning during the announcements of the war, the actual effects do not reach my heart because I am not close to the issue at all. Society’s darts always seem to fail at reaching the bull’s eye of my heart. Therefore, I do not truly feel any of the tragedies that occur around me because I see the reality, but I don’t feel it. Thomas de Zengotita also touches on this topic as he discusses the fascinating irony of my and the rest of society’s situation. He expresses that the reason for these feelings is not only because of the way the media pushes reality out of control toward fabrication, but also because Americans move so quickly. They move rapidly every day and therefore rush toward the next moment in life. Our culture is so used to the latest inventions and the easiest ways to perform chores that we refuse to slow down. According to Zengotita, this transfers over to television as he states, “Partly, it’s a function of speed, like in those stress dramas that television provides to keep us virtually busy, even in our downtime” (348). Despite the fact that the media broadcasts the news of every event continuously and at a fast pace, the television also directs programs at society that are full of stress and thrills to keep us on our toes. It is no wonder that I felt the need to just change the channel when I was
tired of watching the news; I needed to keep up my fast-paced life and move on to the next thing I wanted to focus on.

The event of my grandmother’s death introduced me to the idea of numbness. My lack of complete despair at the situation allowed me to see that my brain cannot completely grasp the loss; therefore, I am without feeling. The truth is, the only time I have really ever cried is during a fight with my parents or a friend, most likely because I did not get what I wanted. This is selfish behavior, but I also feel that it is a demonstration of human nature. When I turned on the television that morning, I was not deeply moved by the very real events that were announced about the horrific effects of the war. All Americans should be searching for an answer to the very real question: Why are we not moved by each event that occurs in our world? The reality is that unless we are directly affected, we move on. Zengotita expresses that in a world that contains a hazy reality caused by the media, “That’s the one reality. Moving on” (350). I agree that it is okay to move on, but the question is when do we move on? Do we stop at every horrible event in the world and drop everything we are doing to mourn? Moving on may not be a problem caused by media in our society; rather, it has evolved into human nature. Americans will continue to move forward with the latest inventions and live fast-paced lives. Dwelling in the past is just not a part of our culture unless we are directly affected or consumed by the despair. Americans live their lives in order to achieve the highest efficiency and success, and therefore are always moving forward toward the most favorable way of life. Living in a world that is always focused on getting to the next best thing can be blamed on a large influence like the media; yet the media is only the best example to represent our culture’s biggest flaw. It has become human nature for American society to live in a self-consumed, false sense of reality. This aspect will unfortunately never change, which is the only reality that many of us can truly grasp.

Work Cited
In 1826, Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es.” Translated: “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are” (Martin). Over time, this idea has whittled down to a single proverb: you are what you eat. “It’s just a silly little saying,” you may argue, but never until now has this simple idea held so much power over our lives. At a glance, its implications may seem simple; if you eat healthy foods, you will be a healthy person. Eating foods loaded in sugars and fats will most certainly result in your not showing up to your next high school reunion. Examining the idea more carefully, however, reveals a disturbing subconscious framework, a “norm,” so to speak, that affects the way we think and act from day to day. You are what you eat. If you are a woman, do you feel comfortable enough to publicly pile down plate after plate of food, or would a bagel and cream cheese hold you over sufficiently? What “manly man” (despite wanting to) would choose to eat a light salad instead of that extra rare slab of steak in front of his buddies? In either situation, there is some force assuring us that one choice is indeed the “right” choice, and that the “wrong” choice would result in some sort of social consequence. You are what you eat.

Today, more than ever, the power behind this idea to persuade us is being capitalized on to its full extent. Companies in the food industry have realized that this idea can be spun to target consumers, whether it is by
social class, race, or even gender. By subconsciously creating this sense of a social norm, industries can use advertising to first create a sense of insecurity, and then prey on it to “accommodate” our every need. No longer are consumers acting on their own personal needs and desires (even though they may believe they are); they are making decisions by what they are “supposed” to think, by how they are supposed to act. You are what you eat.

So if you were to target a weak point in all of us, what would it be? One of the simplest, yet most effective ways for the marketing industry to create a norm is to define gender and, more crucially, gender roles. In her essay “Hunger as Ideology,” Susan Bordo relates how advertisements manipulate our ideologies on gender to make a product seem more than desirable to a specific group of people. “We live in a time in which mass imagery has an unprecedented power to instruct” (192), the very first line of her essay states. Think about this...when was the last time you watched a guy voraciously devour his full plate of food while you thought nothing of it? Now how about this...when was the last time you saw a woman eat just as much and not think that this scene was a little unusual? The uneasiness of this situation stems from that subconscious belief that women should be eating less than men. But why do we think this way? Is it just that women are dainty, and that men physically require more food? In her essay Bordo writes, “Men, of course, are supposed to have hearty, even voracious, appetites” (195), but how did this idea become to be accepted as the “norm”?

Because this whole gender ideology has been created, companies can further exploit our belief systems to get us from every angle, to make our minds correspond with their products. Knowing that society believes that women should eat less than men, the food industry has gone after the populations’ greatest soft-spot: weight. Why should women only feel comfortable eating bite sized candies and diet foods? Because if they ate anything else, they would be fat and undesirable. A woman who gives in to her desire to eat is a woman without self control. You are what you eat. If you eat like a man, you must not be a true lady. We all have that friend or that aunt who shamefully proclaims day after day upon finishing her dessert, “It’s okay; tomorrow I’m starting my new diet.” You would not, however, expect a man to have to make such excuses for eating food. Bordo explains, “Men
sing openly of their wild cravings for Betty Crocker cakes; women's cravings are a dirty, shameful secret, to be indulged in only when no one is looking” (201). Why then wouldn't a woman want to go out and buy that expensive, low-calorie snack bar instead of the King Size Snickers she secretly desires? The marketing industry can use our insecurities to their complete advantage.

Perhaps then, obesity itself is not the reason why women in America have to secretly indulge. If a woman were to appear in public eating copious amounts of food (as men do), it would be implied that this woman had given in to temptation, that she was not strong enough to be in control of her own desires, that she has lost. In that sense, women not following the norm of having that perfect body would be seen as society's losers. No one wants to be a loser, at least publicly anyway. This idea could very well be the explanation behind the “butt-brush theory” in Malcolm Gladwell's “The Science of Shopping.” In his essay, he explains “Touch-or brush or bump or jostle-a woman on the behind when she has stopped to look at an item, and she will bolt” (221). If women are being taught to think that their weight is an indicator of their will power, then it is obvious that their insecurities would affect their way of thinking about other commercial goods. If a lady were to be self-conscious about her weight, what insecurity would be right there behind? Clothes. Maybe then, subconsciously, if a woman were to be brushed up against while shopping, she would suddenly be reminded of that sense of insecurity; she would be reminded that people were judging her, no matter what physical shape she is in. This would be more than enough of a reason to bolt.

In a sense, consuming food and being a consumer of clothes are not so different after all. What women feel insecure about while eating is, in fact, the same thing they are insecure about while shopping: their appearance. The clothing industry is far ahead of us on this realization, however, (go figure) and they are using this to capitalize just as their food counterparts do. When is the last time you just absolutely DESIRED those expensive shoes? You probably did not know why you were CRAVING them, but you felt as though if you were the only one without them, the rest of society would think less of you. Dress like a loser, and you are a loser. You are what you eat. When talking about the success that The Gap and Banana
Republic stores have by selling clothes displayed on tables, Gladwell discovers “tables invite—indeed, symbolize—touching. ‘Where do we eat?’ Underhill asks. ‘We eat, we pick up food, on tables’” (222).

Similarly, where women’s insecurities center around their weight and appearance, men’s insecurities do the same. But if the “normal” man in society is driven by impulse to gorge constantly, it would not make sense that men would be self-conscious about the little extra huskiness they’ve got going on. Opposed to women, men subconsciously fear the implications of becoming too thin. Bordo explains how advertisement shapes our ideas on the role of eating in men: “It is a mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively, and manliness is a frequent commercial code for amply portioned products: ‘Manwich,’ ‘Hungry Man Dinners,’ ‘Manhandlers’” (195).

If then, a man just could not seem to put on those extra pounds, or if he didn’t have uncontrollable desires to eat massive amounts of food, he would be showing the characteristics of what society expects from a woman. If a man eats like a woman, he obviously isn’t a real man. You are what you eat. This is the main string commercial industries pull to control male consumers everywhere. Question his sexual orientation, and you’ve got him: hook, line, and sinker. Perhaps this explains the observations made in Gladwell’s essay when he discusses men shopping for groceries. He explains, “We know that they tend to shop less often with a list. We know that they tend to shop much less frequently with coupons” (225). Are we seeing the real life results of how this social norm is controlling us? In most visual representations we see—movies, television, advertisements—it is always the mother figure who is the coupon cutter, sitting at the kitchen table, making her list of groceries for the week. Again, men stray from appearing to associate with any characteristic of the norm we have created for a woman.

So if you teach men that shopping with coupons is outside the male “role,” we see that they will not shop with coupons. If you teach a man that his gender involves being impulse-driven to junk food and large servings, won’t he be impulse-driven to junk food and large servings? Sneaky, huh? This idea, as in women, carries into the clothing industry for men as well. Go watch any teen flick out there, and what one thing will you be
guaranteed to find? Girls shopping. Girls LOVE shopping, and they are good at it too. We all get the idea in our heads then that shopping and looking good is a particularly feminine process, but why is it? If a man was found to love the idea of shopping and looking good, does that mean he is feminine or, god forbid, homosexual? *You are what you eat.* Where women were found to be making excuses for indulging, we find that men in fact need excuses for looking good. Hello marketing industry. While explaining a typical Banana Republic store in New York City, Gladwell says, “At the men’s shirt table, the display shirts have matching ties on them—the tie table is next to it—in a grownup version of the Garanimals system” (230). The clothing industry thus gives men that excuse they need to look good. They cater to men’s insecurities, and are reaping the benefits of this social norm.

We do, in fact, live in a world where mass media has the power to instruct, just as Bordo argues. Currently, we are seeing more girls developing eating disorders at very early ages. Men too are refraining from their desires to uphold the social “norm” and not be perceived as feminine. We have come a long way since 1826 when Anthelme Brillat-Savarin spoke on consuming, yet the marketing industry has somehow weaved it all back into our heads. Should we just accept it and live with our expectations of gender? I for one say no. We have learned that companies cater to our needs, that they follow the trends of their consumers. If we can develop new ideologies on eating, on women, on men, on shopping, we would find that the commercial industry would adapt to correspond with our way of thinking. They are the ones who need business; they need our consumption. Failing to think outside of the “norm” only allows the media to cling on to that one little saying. That one little saying that hits our deepest insecurities: *you are what you eat.*

**Works Cited**


I like to go running. In the morning or the afternoon, outside or on the treadmill. Preferably, I like to run outside. The November air is cold and it might snow, so I throw on my UMass sweatshirt, my Under Armor pants, and my new Nike sneakers. I strap on my iPod, press play, and stretch a little bit before I escape. I escape from my problems and my responsibilities to a place where all that matters is putting one foot in front of the other.

I escape from the life that Thomas de Zengotita sums up too easily in his essay, “The Numbing of the American Mind.” I question his definition of what it means to be real. He speaks about the line between something real and something fabricated, the line that has become very gray due to the increase of fabrication in our daily lives. Women are getting breast augmentations, doctors are giving patients sugar pills instead of real ones, and almost all of the shows that occupy our television sets are fiction. More fabrication has entered our lives, but unlike Zengotita, I embrace it. Fabrication has been around for a long time, and it does a lot of good for a lot of people.

What does it mean to be real? Does it mean you’re driving down the highway, speeding most likely, windows down, wind in your hair and feeling free? It is more than just a drive. Do you feel real in that moment? Zengotita relates feeling real to being in nature. You used to be able to feel
real in nature, but now “a couple of weeks out in nature doesn’t make it anymore” (346). For a certain kind of person, nature never “makes it.” Zengotita is implying that feeling real is being among the pine trees and fresh air, unpolluted with sounds of honking horns or the smell of fresh asphalt. For some, being real is being stopped in traffic in the middle of Boston or standing in a line out the door at Starbucks on 31st Street. Feeling real cannot be generalized to nature. Feeling real ranges from working on the top floor at the Prudential Center to a thirty-minute run around the UMass campus.

As I run and it starts to lightly snow, I think about the rest of my day. I have to put up my Christmas lights and paint my nails. Homework can wait; I’ll have to watch the movie I just bought. It is one of the best Christmas movies of the 20th century, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. I can see my breath, and I know my cheeks are red as I envision the movie in my head. It's snowing hard as George Bailey grasps the railing, his eyes wide with fear, as he contemplates jumping off the bridge into the icy cold water to relieve himself of his life, one filled with constant struggle and broken dreams. Out of nowhere, an angel appears, Clarence. He takes George on a journey and saves him from himself. George's reality would have led him to take his own life, until an angel, a fabrication, saved him. Zengotita argues that “people refuse to believe that reality has become indistinguishable from fabrication” (342). George Bailey could not decide whether or not Clarence was real or a figment of his imagination, but it doesn’t matter. If something helps someone, makes someone happy, or saves someone’s life, why does it matter if it is real or not?

I run past house after house, each adorned with a little holiday cheer: multicolored lights twisted around the porch railing or white icicle lights hanging from the roof, a few candles in the windows and wreaths on the doors. Christmas is my favorite time of year. Tacky lights cover my own house, and the fireplace roars as the snow softly falls outside, and “Silent Night” plays faintly in the background. This holiday revolves around the idea of Santa Claus. Santa Claus is a character, a fictional character that can bring so much joy and excitement to children. Santa inspires the long, hard-to-read letters written by five year olds in July trying to nab the first spot on the nice list. He inspires the necessary milk and cookies put out on
Christmas Eve so Santa has a snack. The day I stopped believing in Santa, I was crushed. I couldn’t believe that people were telling me he was not real. Zengotita makes a point claiming that people do not know what is real anymore, “A lot of people still believe that we know what’s real and what’s not” (342). Then I thought about it and came to the conclusion that it does not matter whether or not Santa is real. Even if I thought he was real, no great tragedy would befall me. What matters are the millions of children his fairy tale makes happy year after year. In certain cases like this, validating that something is genuine is not an important matter.

My hands and my nose become numb as I pass a white church with a tall steeple. I remember going to church when I was little, too young to understand who Jesus was and what he stood for. My family is not very religious, but we make it to a service on Christmas Eve at our local Baptist Church. I take a left and start heading back to my dorm as the sound of my feet pounding on the pavement disappears and my memory takes over. I take my first step into the church on Christmas Eve night. I’m suddenly in awe. The light that comes through the stained glass windows makes the pictures come to life. The music coming from the organ bounces off the walls, and Jesus stares right at me as I walk to and sit in my seat. I am overwhelmed at how I feel. I want to cry and laugh and scream all at once. This emotion comes from an unreal being, “the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

God is a concept that has been around for thousands of years. Whether it is Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, or Islam: every religion has a God or a higher power. God does not walk with us on Earth. He is not me or you. His existence is a matter of faith. Zengotita asks whether or not we question what is real and what is not: “do we do it—and the answer is, of course not” (343). Is God real? Will He ever walk among us? People question the existence of God every day. People question his “realness” and spend their whole lives looking for evidence, miracles, and clues that he is watching us. Even to this day, in many people’s minds, God remains a question mark.

Zengotita calls the world today a “tapestry of virtuality. The whole is so densely woven and finely stranded that no mind could possibly comprehend it, escape it” (351). How much better off would you be if you could understand this “tapestry”? This is what I understand: the numerous miles
of lush, green forests—so quiet and untouched. The cities full of heels clicking on pavement, noise all day and night, and bright lights that never cease. There are the holidays that can make even the saddest of cynics happy again, and a little bit of faith has the power to change lives. Our world is beautiful without understanding it, the realities and the fabrications. Every day has new questions, new issues, new mysteries, but that is what life is about, and you keep going. The snow keeps falling, and I keep running.

Work Cited
In the essays from Unit III, writers have traveled even further “into the world.” First, their instructors invited them to interact with a variety of texts in order to take part in a larger conversation about a specific subject or issue. Students began by focusing on a topic they cared deeply about; then they imagined a potential audience that might need or want to hear more about it. Students researched the larger conversation around their topic, and then found a point of entry through which they could contribute meaningfully to this dialogue. These Unit III essays are pieces written for a public audience, using research as the primary “authority” for their paper, although personal perspective (in some cases personal experience) are sources of authority as well. Here are essays that move beyond the “academic” world and are meant for an audience interested in knowing more about a specific conversation.

These essays are evidence of how writing serves the community. Instructors invited their students to draw upon the larger conversations that surround their topics as they engaged in dialogues that were animated by their own unique contexts. What appeals to each writer, what he or she finds important and meaningful, has so much to do with personal history and experience. In the following essays, students found their own way to contribute to a conversation, to advance knowledge through their own thinking and voices. This writing has brought them into the “world” to be heard as a new and integral participant of some larger conversation.
When I woke up on August 29th, 2007, only two days before I would leave for my freshman year at UMass Amherst, I had lost the feeling in my right hand. The numbness slowly spread to my whole arm and parts of my face. On August 30th, the last day before the start of my college career, I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. My neurologist told me that I would have to go on a treatment of interferon, which has to be administered through self-injection, and that I would most likely be on some form of medication for the majority of my life if I wanted to remain healthy. Scary news to say the least, especially at such an early point in my life.

Multiple Sclerosis is a very debilitating disease that few really know about. It is defined as

[a] disorder of the central nervous system marked by weakness, numbness, a loss of muscle coordination, and problems with vision, speech, and bladder control. Multiple Sclerosis is thought to be an autoimmune disease in which the body's immune system destroys myelin. Myelin is a substance that contains protein and fat (lipid), serving as a nerve insulator and helping in the transmission of nerve signals. (“Medical Termonology Glossary”)
In effect, the disease prevents the nerve signals from receiving the brain transmissions and causes the body to lose control of many elements of the central nervous system. In progressive cases, people lose their vision, cannot walk, and cannot think lucidly. In the past, MS was viewed as a terminal illness because the disease would break down your body so extensively that you would ultimately not be able to live. This was before anyone knew there were treatment options.

It is widely believed that the pharmaceutical and medical-based treatments are the only plausible options when considering treatment for MS. This usually involves an interferon-based treatment or an intravenous steroid treatment for major symptoms. Depending on the interferon, the treatment usually entails the patient taking several injections of the treatment weekly. These injections have many side effects. Minor ones that occur most frequently are injection site reactions and flu-like symptoms, which doctors say are not a problem at all. But I have experienced several bursts of fevers, severe aches, and chills after injections, and it is not as harmless as most think. When I’ve experienced them, I feel completely useless and hopeless. This leads to another more serious side effect of the drug: depression. Many doctors feel that any depression caused is not from the drug itself but by the thought of having MS. But the thought of having to give myself injections and then having to deal with side effects is what made me depressed. I hit a wall of paranoia: I couldn’t give myself injections for several weeks and am still struggling to overcome my fears. Other, more serious side effects that can develop are increased liver enzymes and anemia. Though the occurrence of these side effects is very rare, the possibility that they could happen is very disconcerting. Neurologists Clive P. Hawkins and Jerry S. Wolinski claim in their book, *Principles of Treatments in Multiple Sclerosis*, that the medication was considered “well-tolerated” among a majority of recipients and that the treatment was “mostly self-limiting.” However, the book also notes patients dropping out of the trials because of adverse side effects (Hawkins 49–50). It does not surprise me that people would want to discontinue taking the drug; I know how difficult it is to be productive when dealing with its side effects. The fatigue that I feel makes it seem like someone dropped a boulder on my head, leaving me too tired to do anything.
One clinical drug, Tysabri, was taken off of the market in 2005 because it led to the development of a fatal neurological disease in two patients, according to an article by Victoria Degtyareva in *The Stanford Daily*. One of the patients died while another was still in the developing stages of the disease. Both patients were involved in the study to test the drug, which was used in combination with another approved treatment. Tysabri was FDA approved and considered a “breakthrough in the treatment of multiple sclerosis” (Degtyareva). Events such as these would make most people lose trust in the pharmaceutical industries and seek other routes of treatment, but unfortunately, alternative forms of treatment are not publicized nearly enough. The FDA and FTC have had a hand in this.

In an address to the House of Representatives, the Honorable Ron Paul of Texas spoke in favor of strengthening the Health Freedom Protection Act. This bill would restore the First Amendment rights of consumers to obtain truthful information regarding the benefits of foods and dietary supplements. For a long while, the FDA and FTC have made serious efforts to censor truthful health claims from nutritional and alternative treatments. Paul says, “Because of the FDA’s censorship of truthful health claims, millions of Americans may suffer with diseases and other health care problems they may have avoided using dietary supplements” (Paul). He goes on to mention how the FTC also requires the manufacturers of nutritional supplements to obtain ridiculous amounts of evidence and proof that “are blocking innovation in the marketplace.” These kinds of efforts by the FDA and FTC only make patients suffer more than they have to while the pharmaceutical companies reap the benefits.

Pharmaceutical drugs like Avonex and the one I am currently taking, Rebif, set patients back thousands and thousands of dollars. A study by Mark Niuijten and John Hutton, published in *Value in Health*, showed that a Quality Adjusted Life Year (QALY) from using a drug like Rebif cost approximately 51,582 Euros. In the US, such pharmaceutical treatments can cost over 20,000 dollars per year. Economically, they concluded that the cost does not justify the possible benefits. This does not even take into effect other possible treatments that are available at hospitals. What happens to people without health insurance? Are they supposed to just idly sit back and let the disease destroy the nervous system? There certainly is no price for
good health, but the high costs almost make your condition life-consuming. That is definitely one thing that I don’t want to happen when I think about my own situation. I don’t want it to take over my life. I don’t want it to define me. I know that I want to try and live as normal a life as I possibly can. I don’t want to be constantly thinking about whether I will be able to afford treatment, or how medications might affect my day, or the many other fears that accompany this disease. I want something simpler that I have complete control of.

There are a multitude of other treatment options available to sufferers of MS that hardly anyone knows about because of traditional medical organizations and the FDA/FTC. All of the treatment options listed in Hopkins’ and Wolinski’s book are medical, scientific, and pharmaceutical. They give no mention to “alternative” treatment options that are deemed radical and unproven. There are thousands of claims to support successes in many cases of MS where symptoms and exacerbations were almost completely eliminated. Many patients had been on pharmaceutical drugs before the alternatives, and the drugs either did nothing or only increased the symptoms. Here are a few groundbreaking methods that would be considered “outside the box.”

One radical treatment reported by the Health Sciences Institute in “Underground Cures: What Your Doctors Won’t Tell You about Multiple Sclerosis” is bee sting therapy. Topical bee venom creams have been implemented in the US and abroad to treat illnesses such as fibromyalgia and gout for many years, but now researchers are starting to target MS. Two women, Pat Wagner and Donna Chandler, both victims of MS, have tried BVT (Bee Venom Therapy) with remarkable success. Wagner, who is more commonly referred to as the “Bee Lady,” was diagnosed with RRMS (Remit/Relapse Multiple Sclerosis) in 1970. By 1992, she had gone through immense exacerbations and episodes with few results from her treatment. She was forced into a wheelchair and suffered from numbness and bladder incontinence. “Her doctor pronounced that there was no hope for her” (Underground Cures 11). Within days after receiving her first bee sting on her knee, she no longer felt coldness in her knee. She then received four more shots that evening, and by the next day, there were only cold spots in her hands and feet. She noticed that her fatigue
was decreased. Two weeks later, she regained the hearing in her right ear. Today she is out of a wheelchair and proving the doctors wrong. Donna Chandler, suffering from secondary progressive MS, was numb from the waist down. She has received over 20,000 stings since 1993 and is now in total remission with no disease progress in over seven years.

Doctor Roy M. Swank developed a diet very low in fat that he believed would send MS into remission. Swank observed that in countries with high intakes of fat, the incidences of MS were highest. He put his patients on a low-fat diet for a trial which lasted over 34 years. For those patients who consumed over 25 grams of fat a day, 79% died; 81% of those who consumed more than 41 grams died; but when less than 20.1 grams of fat were consumed per day, the death rate plummeted to only 31%. For slightly disabled patients who stayed on Swank's diet, "the death rate from MS-related causes was only 5 percent" (16). These are the principles of his diet: no red meat and no dark turkey or chicken meat for the first year; after the first year, three ounces of red meat may be consumed once a week. No processed foods are allowed; no caffeine is allowed; no dairy products with more than one percent butterfat are allowed. A teaspoon of cod-liver oil and a multiple vitamin, plus the intake of many fresh fruits and vegetables, are very important (16).

One man, Roger MacDougall, was diagnosed with MS in February of 1953, and within a few years, he had lost the use of his arms, legs, and eyes. His voice was affected, and he could not stand erect for more than a few seconds. Now, his eyesight has returned, he can "run up and down stairs and can lead a life as active as most men [his] age." He says he is not cured, but that he is only experiencing a remission, one which he believes is self-induced. How did he do this? He changed his diet to that of the hunter-gatherer. Before man entered the agricultural state, people were healthier than ever. Macdougall totally cut out gluten (a protein which surrounds the germ in grains), cow's milk, and sugar—all things that were nonexistent in the time of the hunter-gatherer. It took several years before his condition began to improve, but nevertheless it has helped him overcome this disease for the time being. He had a neurological examination with the same doctor that had initially diagnosed him in 1975, and the only trace of his MS was a slight nystagmus in his optic nerve. When he
asked the doctor if he had ever seen such a remarkable remission, the doctor admitted that he hadn’t. His diet is now referred to as the “Paleolithic Diet” and is recommended by some nutritionists as the best defense for “lifestyle” diseases. Despite all of these claims, many neurological experts who deal with MS ignore all of this in favor of medical approaches.

One more success story from alternative treatments is personal and relevant for me. The day my family and I learned that I had MS, we were devastated. Our emotions had already been running high because my sister and I would be leaving for college in the next few days. A family friend, Jeff Budz, opened up to my father and me about his own life. He had been living with MS since the 70s, and it would have been impossible to notice he was ill. He was a tennis instructor who lived an extremely active life. But when I sat down and talked to him, he gave me a great deal of insight into his own battle.

Jeff had several of the major symptoms of MS, such as optic neuritis and the loss of control of his arm. He never sought much advice medically since he did not have health insurance, but he was examined at a free clinic. Upon hearing all that he would have to go through regarding treatment, which included hours of travel and the spending of money he didn’t have, he decided to avoid medical advice. He read books on how to make his body strong and went to health food stores in an effort to live a healthier life. He then came across a Health Reliance Fair where he learned about ways to nutritionally make his body strong again. He learned about the power of things like wheat grass and mung bean sprouts. He took what he learned and began to practice it himself. He would grow wheat grass seeds on trays, drain the juice, and drink it. He would also give himself wheat grass enemas to cleanse the intestines. Doing these things made his body stronger than it had ever been. He was able to begin teaching tennis again, and when he did suffer another attack of optic neuritis, making him blind in one eye, using the wheat grass significantly cut down the recuperating time. While it took around a year and a half to fully regain his sight after his first attack, it now only took about 8 to 9 months until it was fully restored.

When I asked him about whether maintaining this kind of treatment is easy, he told me that it was difficult at first. He explained it takes a
while to feel comfortable with making so many radical lifestyle adjustments, but he assured me that I would adapt. Also because of the dire situation that he was in, it was an obvious choice. To sit back and do nothing would have been a much harder thing to do. He noted that this kind of treatment is 100 times more comfortable than any medical alternative. The fact that he is in control creates an environment that is much less stressful. Putting healthy things into his body to make it strong and having that control makes it easier to cope with the disease. When you have to be told what to do by a medical professional, there is still doubt that creates a lot of stress. Just talking to doctors is usually a stressful experience. Jeff has not won his battle with Multiple Sclerosis, as he has slips every now and then with his regimen. He still feels fatigue and experiences numbness in his extremities from time to time. But he feels that if he diligently followed his diet and his habits, he would feel incredible.

All of the great developments in both medical and natural treatment options are very reassuring. Within the next decade, pharmaceutical companies hope to release a pill version of treatment for multiple sclerosis and are looking into several other different options. But I would like to see more being done about what concerns Representative Ron Paul: the American public deserves the right to know about other available treatment options so that they can choose what they really want. Strengthening the power of bills that protect our First Amendment rights are crucially important to the well being of millions of Americans. When I ask about other alternatives, doctors tell me that there isn’t enough clinical research to show that these types of treatment work. The reason there isn’t any data is because there aren’t any tests being done! The FDA decides what to test and run trials on, almost like Big Tobacco chooses to test cigarettes. Researchers should take more interest in revolutionary treatment methods, and these methods should be made more widely available. The medical industry no doubt has the best interests of patients on their minds, as it certainly is trying to help everyone. But sometimes there are more costs to medical treatment than just monetary ones. I want the right for myself and all who share my condition to know what types of treatment will work best for them.


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My grandfather is one of those diehard Red Sox fans. He glues himself to the television, knows insane details about ridiculous statistics, has crazy superstitions, and unbreakable rules of conduct during the game that I will never understand. Growing up just ten minutes outside of Boston has exposed me to an aspect of our culture that is unique—Red Sox Nation. The faithfulness of fans who have waited 86 years for a struggling team to win the World Series is all too common to me. Contrary to assumptions, Red Sox Nation is much more than just a dedicated fan base. It is history, tradition, and a constant celebration. Now Red Sox Nation is even “official.” It is a source of major income and even a way of life. For most who consider themselves true “citizens” of Red Sox Nation, it is like a religion. However, this is not a treatise on why Red Sox Nation is so great, and it is most certainly not an interpretation of why the Red Sox are better than the Yankees (although that may be true). The following is an analysis of Red Sox Nation, and how it has become a cultural phenomenon developed out of various beliefs, attitudes, and an immense history. So many people are affected by the whole notion of Red Sox Nation. The varied perceptions of what it actually is and what it means to be a “citizen” are remarkably diverse and contribute to its overall meaning.

Baseball, the great American pastime, continues to contribute to our society more than most can fathom. “Whoever wants to know the heart
and mind of America had better learn baseball” (White 316). Truthfully, this statement cannot be argued. The Boston Red Sox have historically contributed to both the actual game of baseball and American culture. The history of the game, the rivalry, the players, the wins and losses all contribute to what Red Sox Nation truly is. Fenway Park, along with the fans, has created a phenomenon unlike any other in the world of professional sports.

The Red Sox and Yankee rivalry is matchless—the biggest contest and arguably the most important in the realm of sports. The history between the two teams is what compels fans to remain so dedicated and forgiving. One sports writer claims, “In Boston, as long as you don’t screw up a Yankees game, you can mess up the rest of the year and fans will cut you some slack” (Jones 1). Whether you are a Sox fan or not, most baseball followers know of the “The Curse.” When the infamous Babe Ruth was traded to the Yankees from the Red Sox in 1919, he instigated the deep rooted rivalry between the two teams, and his curse “prevented” the Sox from winning a World Series title until 2004. The long-suffering citizens of Red Sox Nation have proven faithful and reverent followers. Although they may not be “clean” in every case, they are certainly faithful and overwhelmingly persistent when it comes to honoring the great philosophies of baseball like “You Gotta Believe” and “Cowboy Up.” Sox fans everywhere will testify to that goose bumpy feeling that made them believe that 2004 was the year (“Fans”).

Another distinct aspect of this cultural phenomenon that has allowed America to gain insight into Red Sox Nation is Fever Pitch, the box office hit and romantic comedy which captured the history of the Red Sox, the fans, their tradition, and dedication. Star of the film and actual Sox fan who witnessed the “curse reversed,” Jimmy Fallon states, “It was amazing, when they won it was like ‘Oh, my god.’ People were so emotional, they were like shaking and crying. It’s almost surreal” (Platt). In reality, the fact that a movie such as this even exists proves the validity of Red Sox Nation’s influence on our culture.

In fact, UMass Amherst has now become a part of the history of Red Sox Nation; the rioting that has occurred on campus, whether the Sox win or lose a game, is now nationally infamous. The colleges in the Boston area are also well known for similar mob mentality. In fact, just a few weeks ago,
I stood outside of Fenway with thousands of other college students, celebrating our second World Series title in just 3 years. Examining these celebrations on a more profound level allows us to realize that our culture is affected so greatly by this team that it is contributing to the history of not only Red Sox Nation but also the history of the US.

Yet, Red Sox Nation is much more than just the concept of a dedicated fan base. The term itself, “Red Sox Nation,” is said to be coined by Boston Globe writer, Nathan Cobb, in 1986 (Cobb). However, some, like my grandfather, will argue that the term itself is not relevant. He and many others of previous generations will claim that Red Sox Nation has existed for much longer than just 1986. The tradition, the generations, and the actual history of such a beloved team are what constitute the “real” Red Sox Nation. However, in reality, this perception of Red Sox Nation is just one of the many that add to what it actually is.

Teams across the country have devoted fans and longstanding histories. It is not just the Boston Red Sox that have a global fan base. So what is it that makes the Red Sox so unique? Why is it that this team has the distinction of having a “nation” named after them? It is the comebacks, the trading feuds, and, of course, the intense rivalry with the Yankees that create a sort of magic not found anywhere else in the world of sports. “To be a citizen you must be loyal and passionate, be willing to pay outrageous prices, care too much, and forgive but never forget” (Collins). If you believe this kind of magic exists, then to some, you are considered a citizen of Red Sox Nation.

Aside from the publicity that the fans and the team receive, many other aspects of Red Sox Nation are widely overlooked. In fact, Red Sox Nation has capitalized on its citizens more than they probably realize. Fans buy into success. It is now possible to purchase a membership to the “Official” Red Sox Nation. By doing so, you receive various benefits and a membership card; however, you must pay about twenty bucks. You don’t even have to be an actual fan to call yourself a citizen. The only necessity is money. Consumers across New England and beyond are affected immensely by the Red Sox’s triumphs. Fenway Park draws in more revenue than almost any other baseball park in the country, yet it is the smallest stadium in the
American League. Fenway’s tickets are the highest priced, and they offer insanely exclusive seating to those who will pay (Heistand).

It should not come as a surprise that to the world of modern sports marketers, Red Sox fans are entirely different. It takes some pretty creative marketing techniques to profit from these fans. “Now the club is cashing in on its championship. It toured its trophy throughout New England and, backed with a $225,000 state lottery sponsorship, plans to bring the trophy to any of the 351 towns and cities in Massachusetts that want it” (Hiestand). The 2004 Red Sox championship trophy came to my high school to be displayed for a few days; of course my school system was full of people willing to pay for this honor.

Red Sox Nation is not limited to citizens of New England. About one-third of its new “citizens” live outside the region, and the club has actually taken the Series trophy to fan gatherings in California, Georgia, the Dominican Republic, and even New York City. Typical members of Red Sox Nation are most likely unaware of the profit that the clubhouse is making from its fans. Businesses throughout the Boston area also thrive off of these fans as consumers. One research firm, Landor Associates, says the Boston Red Sox are a brand name, and in 2004, based on consumer surveys, Landor named the Red Sox as having had the most “winning” year of any brand name in America, “ahead of Google, ABC’s Desperate Housewives, iPod, and Arnold Schwarzenegger” (Hiestand). Now that is pretty impressive! If that doesn’t constitute a phenomenon, then I’m not sure what does.

Many outsiders, those who are bewildered by this entire occurrence, see the whole concept of Red Sox Nation and its members as pointless and annoying. (Especially fans of the “Evil Empire,” otherwise known as the New York Yankees.) “These days, the Red Sox are learning that it’s not always easy being the biggest attraction in baseball” (White). Although even its citizens must admit it is a bit extravagant, this “extravagance” is truly what Sox fans thrive on and desire. Obviously, the people who have essentially created Red Sox Nation are affected more than anyone else, even if it is not always for the best. Sure, Sox fans usually have the distinction of being the most dedicated and the best fans in all of sports. Yet they are often stereotyped as annoying and a bit bizarre. This has actually proven to be the
cause of various problems among the fans of competing teams. Violence and ridicule are often the outcome. *USA Today* columnist Edward White writes, “Hotels that host the Red Sox or Yankees typically beef up security more than they do for other visiting teams, even getting help from local police departments” (147). Nonetheless, this stereotyping and the aggression is another component of Red Sox Nation. Whether good or bad, it is these attitudes that have merited the Red Sox being called a nation, while at the same adding to the culture of a region, a country, and a people.

Of course, there is always the possibility that Red Sox Nation could eventually fade out, much like Britney Spears or Michael Jackson. I certainly don’t think that will ever happen; there is too much history that has affected too many people. All of the beliefs, attitudes, various perceptions, and history have created this cultural phenomenon that we know as Red Sox Nation. It is unique, profitable, official, and timeless. Red Sox Nation cannot simply be defined as a riot, a rivalry, a team, fans, or any single characteristic. Red Sox Nation encompasses all of these traits. However the individual credits or discredits this long-lived trend, one must admit that it does exist, has contributed to our culture, and provided America with a reason to call baseball its greatest pastime. So what if Red Sox Nation can’t be found on a map; it’s still real.

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THE WAR ON (SOME) DRUGS

Ryan Green

In 1971, the “War on Drugs” was formally declared by Richard Nixon. This increasingly harsh legislative initiative against drug use in America was honed and intensified throughout the decade, reaching epic heights in the mid eighties. The US policy was to view drug use as a criminal issue and to combat it through punitive measures. Although punishing drug users and dealers with prison sentences was largely ineffective in stopping drug trade and consumption, it did have a glaring impact in one way: it sent prison populations skyrocketing. One drug that was singled out for particularly severe legislation and intense focus was crack cocaine.

The torrent of crack cocaine legislation that swept through congress in the mid-eighties had a distinct racial undercurrent to it. Crack is a drug which is made by cooking powder cocaine with baking soda into small, condensed “rocks,” which can be smoked for a short, intense high. Because crack is much cheaper than powder cocaine, it was used among poor, inner-city populations in the early eighties, and its popularity rose precipitously throughout the decade (Inciardi 67). Crack was portrayed on television as a “Black” drug that was sold to the poor on urban street corners, and its association with this demographic was enough to stir up fear within congress (Provine 88). As Chambliss notes, “Anxieties about race and maintaining class hierarchies underlie the criminalization of all drugs,” and this was particularly true with crack (Provine 35). Although middle-class
White America knew very little about the ghetto drug, the media began bombardging them with horror stories about it.

There were over one thousand stories on crack by the time the 1986 election rolled around, and it garnered attention from outlets such as NBC, CBS, *Newsweek* and *Time* magazine (Provine 85). The television images of crack-addicted, poor Black people, running amuck in urban centers, were enough to put fear in the hearts of the White middle-class. Lawmakers, who feared that the use of crack would spread to the suburbs, reacted quickly and sternly. They enacted a ten year minimum prison sentence for the sale of crack and a five year minimum sentence for simple possession (Inciardi 6). These mandatory minimum sentences restricted any discretion a judge might use in respect to individual cases.

It is difficult to overstate the sweeping impact of these mandatory sentences; they ensured that every single person convicted of crack offenses was sent to prison. The reason such a wide-scale panic was able to erupt within mainstream opinion was due to the race and class of the people associated with the drug. A drug like marijuana, which was already well known and frequently used among White populations, could never have incited such fear because it didn’t threaten to upset the power structure. The fear that clutched the general public was more of a reflection of an inherent mistrust of poor minorities rather than the dangers of crack use (Chomsky 371). Thus, crack was a perfect candidate for an “aggressive legislative initiative” by congress that would eventually result in a rate of incarceration among poor minorities never before seen in this country (Chomsky 372). The inescapable fact is that when congress was passing these bills, they knew full well that they would disproportionally affect Blacks, and apparently didn’t see it as a problem. This is a disturbing observation that has not yet made it into the framework of mainstream debate, but nonetheless cannot be overlooked.

This sort of quick, panicky legislation is certainly not without precedent. History shows us that whenever a particular drug is commonly linked with a (perceived) socially inferior element of the population, it is often criminalized by the prevailing class. This was the case during the prohibition movement of the early 20th century when racist and xenophobic motives were stated explicitly. In the early half of the century, it was quite
acceptable to use racial stereotypes to push the prohibition agenda, and indeed they were an integral part of the movement. Some of the most powerful stereotypes were the violent, drunken Negro in the south and the rowdy, working class immigrant in the north (Provine 62). One prohibitionist argued: “The saloon fosters an un-American spirit among the foreign-born population of our country. The influx of foreigners into our urban centers, many of whom have liquor habits, are a menace to good government” (Provine 50). Some of the rich and powerful felt threatened by the saloons in the northern city ghettos, particularly in New York City, where large numbers of immigrants would congregate and drink on a regular basis. By banning alcohol, lawmakers made sure that these bars were shut down, but the upper class Whites in upstate New York went on drinking just as they did before (Chomsky 372). The purpose of prohibition really was about controlling a selected population that was seen by lawmakers as a threat to the power structure.

With historical perspective, it is not surprising to see that today’s drug policy adversely affects African Americans. One of the most glaring inequities is the sentencing disparity between powder cocaine, which is most commonly found in white suburbs, and crack cocaine. Even though the two are virtually the same drug in different forms, it takes possession of an average of 100 times as much powder cocaine to get the same prison term as possession of crack (Schwartz). Because powder cocaine offenders are overwhelmingly White, and 80% of crack cocaine offenders are Black, this disparity is extremely troubling and deserves explanation.

Aside from the harsh legislation of crack cocaine, the ways in which police enforce the law also work against poor minorities. Police choose to focus almost all their resources on inner city ghettos and primarily Black communities. This approach had led to skewed and disproportionate crime statistics in which African Americans and Latinos are grossly overrepresented. Sociologist William Chambliss points out that these tactics legitimate “the creation of a virtual police state in the ghettos of our inner cities” under the guise of crime control (Provine 36). Most police forces focus on making arrests for crack at the expense of other drugs preferred by Whites, a strategy which predictably leads to excess numbers of Black arrestees and prisoners. The result of all this is that Blacks account for a large portion of...
drug arrests even though they represent a small portion of drug users (2007). These police tactics produce crime statistics that distort the reality of drug use in America, but they do reveal the inherent racism in our current policy.

These drugs policies have persisted for over twenty years now, and they are rarely questioned or criticized in the media. The most striking thing about these harsh punitive measures is that they have been proven to be completely ineffective in stopping the flow of drugs into inner-city ghettos (Nadelmann). Twenty years of arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating drug offenders has not made even a dent in the market for crack cocaine. Why has the government chosen to stick with handing down severe penalties to drug offenders when it is proven not to work? Addictive drugs like crack cocaine do enough destruction to already destitute communities without the government exacerbating the problem with aggressive arrest policies that proliferate poverty and maintain a lower class. In fact, the only thing that has damaged Black communities in this country more than the widespread use of crack is the government’s response to it. Instead of focusing on rehabilitating addicts, lawmakers seem content to simply lock them up in huge numbers, and the effect has been devastating. In 2003, nearly 12% of African American males in their twenties were locked up on any given day (Provine 23), and if current trends continue, one in three black males born today can expect to go to prison at some point in their lives (Mauer & Weimer). Because all crack offenses have felony status, significant portions of Blacks today have restricted or permanently revoked voting rights (in some communities, over 30% of Black adults cannot legally vote). The United States now imprisons a greater proportion of its population than any other country in the world, and over 60% of these prisoners are non-violent drug offenders (Provine 10). These numbers reveal the true legacy of the war on drugs; by positioning drug use as a criminal matter rather than a public health issue, the U.S. government has been able to expand its prison population to epic proportions under the guise of justice.

These disturbing statistics are almost completely ignored in the mainstream media. Whenever there is a small dip in drug use in White suburbia, the great successes of the drug war are lauded on mainstream news outlets. The millions of victims of the war, largely poor minorities,
are rarely given mention. It is about time that awareness of this vital issue is spread, and our current drug policy is reevaluated and ultimately changed. This country needs to rethink its domestic drug policy and reshape it so that it does not adversely and unfairly affect any one race or element of the overall population.

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FOSTER CARE: FOR THE CHILDREN?

Samantha Langell

It was Superbowl Sunday, 1999, when two-year-old Miguel Arias-Baca came in contact with his foster father in their Denver, Colorado home. The father had been drinking at a party and was angry when he came home to find Miguel with a soiled diaper. He then decided to smear the toddler's diaper in his face and throw him to the ground. The foster parents waited four hours to bring Miguel to the hospital as his brain swelled with blood. He died in the hospital, full of bruises, and the biological parents were never contacted (Callahan 84).

This is a real-life story of the horrors of foster care. What is known as the “foster care crisis” is becoming an increasing problem in the United States. Patrick A. Curtis, director of research for the Child Welfare League of America, defines this term as the “reality that too many children are staying in foster care for too long a time” (1). As of 2003, the most recent figure available, there are 520,000 cases of children in foster care (Price 5). The large number of children entering the system constitutes the need for more foster families, therefore lessening the stringency of rules to choose them. Foster families are becoming more dangerous and providing unsafe environments for the children they are supposed to care for. In the case of Miguel, his foster parents had criminal records and used the income of foster care as their only source of money. They hid their criminal status by
jumping from one foster care agency to another, receiving innocent children like Miguel who were greatly endangered in their custody. Some may ask how this is allowed to happen—how children going into foster care to be nurtured are instead being neglected and abused. The answer is that not enough attention is being paid to the issue. Child welfare systems in each state are not up to federal child safety standards, and complaints of abuse and neglect are going uninvestigated. But one thing is certain. Money is being paid, and for many who apply to foster a child, that is all that matters.

The term ‘foster care’ was historically referred to as “boarding-out” (Curtis 2). This meant that foster parents, almost always not relatives, were reimbursed for the expenses of temporarily caring for children in private households (Curtis 3). Most foster children have had histories of abuse and neglect and are wards of the state (Curtis 2). Children are either given up or taken from their caregivers and put in the foster care system to live in a healthy, family environment until their biological family can care for them. The promise of providing so-called “healthy, family environments” is not being fulfilled.

In 2004, Daisy Perales, a five year old girl from San Antonio, died a week after she was found unconscious and bleeding, weighing a mere twenty pounds. In 2003, seven year old Raheem Williams and four year old Tyrone Hill were found by police locked in the basement of a Newark, New Jersey house, starving and covered with burns and excrement. Raheem’s twin brother’s body was found the next day; he had been dead for thirty days. Texas State Senator Jane Nelson says, “Reading the newspapers of late has been more like reading a horror novel, with case after case of abuse and neglect” (Price 1).

Cases such as Daisy, Raheem, and Tyrone’s are all too familiar in the foster care system. Daisy was one of more than 500 Texas children who died of abuse and neglect from the year 2002 to mid-2004, but the Texas Child Protective Services only investigated around 137 cases (Price 1). The State Department of Youth and Family Services was repeatedly warned that the three boys were being abused, but nothing was ever done. The increasing number of caseloads that child welfare workers have is why a large number of abuse complaints go unnoticed. In New Jersey, more than
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forty children and 20 families are assigned to one child welfare worker. Some caseworkers must manage more than 110 cases (Price 3). The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services admitted that it had allowed 4,320 uninvestigated complaints of abused and neglected children to pile up in order to explain how nineteen children were living in despicable conditions with six adults in a Chicago two-bedroom apartment (Price 3). Innocent children are being lost in the shuffle, many suffering greatly as a result.

In 2003, the number of children in foster care increased five percent from the total in 1990, which accounts for larger caseloads for child welfare workers and the increased number of abuse and neglect complaints (Price 4). Many child welfare experts believe that this increase in maltreatment stems from the fact that agencies are removing children from their parents too frequently (Price, 4). Agencies should have provided early services, such as family assessments and support, to keep children safe at their homes and prevent them from being unnecessarily put in foster care (Price 5). Price also refers to Shay Bilchik, president of the Child Welfare League of America, who states: “Some ‘very rigorous studies’ have shown that starting home-visitation programs shortly after birth can reduce abuse and neglect by 50 percent.” Child welfare experts would like to see this idea expanded throughout the country (Price 5).

The United States federal government has seven childcare standards that every state is “expected” to meet. These include, “Children are first and foremost protected from abuse and neglect,” and “Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate” (Price 3). In the year 2004, not a single state received a passing grade for its theft welfare system from the U.S. Health and Human Services Department (HHS), and sixteen states did not meet any requirements at all (Price 3). US Representative Tom Price says, “State and local officials throughout the country agree on the need for substantial improvements in theft child welfare systems,” and these improvements need to happen now (Price 3). Our nation’s children need to be protected.

Unfortunately, all of the improvements that need to happen in the United States’ foster care system cannot occur without thinking of money first. According to an Urban Institute study, overall, the federal government
pays about half of the nation’s 22 billion dollar child welfare bill, with the rest of the money coming from state and local governments (Price 6). But this large sum is not enough to fund the foster care systems, comments Liz Meitner, vice-president for government affairs at the Child Welfare League (Price 7). To add to the frustration, private, for-profit, and nonprofit foster care companies are making millions of dollars from taxpayers’ money that is being given to them in exchange for placing children in homes and overseeing their care (Callahan 2).

In the state of Colorado, for example, one state official confessed that its foster care businesses have become “cash cows” (Callahan 2). These businesses were receiving three-quarters of the state’s 47.2 million dollar budget for foster care and not using it to help the children. Patricia Callahan, a Wall Street Journal reporter, investigated the financial records of foster care companies and their officials; she sadly found that the director of one foster care company used the state’s funding to pay the mortgage on his gorgeous, newly built “home office” (3). Foster parents are also taking part in the greed. They are taking on more children than they can handle in order to receive the money that caring for foster children brings. This allows for increased incidents of neglect, and, once again, innocent children become endangered.

The foster care system of America is in shambles. Every day, children are going in and out of the system and being mistreated in the process. Complaints of neglect and abuse are going without investigation, states are not meeting child welfare standards, and money meant to help children is actually being used in the wrong places. The repercussions of an abused and neglected child are enormous. An article written in the Child and Youth Care Forum documents that “Numerous studies have shown that attachments formed by maltreated children, particularly victims of neglect, are more likely to be compromised compared to those of typical children.” The study also shows that “Neglected children score lower on standardized indices of academic ability, receive lower grades, and are at high risk of retention compared to other children” (Tyler, Allison, & Winsler 5).

When will the poor conditions of the foster care system become enough of a problem to be truly noticed and taken care of? How many children will have to suffer and even die for the system to change for the better?
According to Marsha Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children’s Rights, Inc. in New Jersey, “It is now a documented fact that no child is safe today in [the state's] foster care” (Kubitschek 1). And a former foster child said, “I know that there are good foster families out there, OK? But I also know that every foster kid that I have ever talked to, including myself, has been abused in foster homes” (Kubitschek 1). The words are straight from a foster child’s mouth. Is that enough?

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GENERATION Y GETS REAL WITH REALITY TELEVISION

John McNamara

On MTV’s new hit show, *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila*, thirty two contestants, sixteen males and sixteen females, compete for the heart of an internet “celebrity,” Tila Tequila. Tila rose to fame through MySpace as the hot girl who doesn’t wear much for clothing. She recently found out she was bisexual, and MTV gave her a television show to find her true love. It has been going pretty well for her as all the top ten contestants have professed their love for her. Now it’s just up to her to choose which one she reciprocates her feelings for. As the weeks go by, the contestants’ love for Tila is growing more and more intense. Fights are not uncommon between people in the house. Even in the first episode, two of the male contestants got into two consecutive wrestling matches. At one of the eliminations, one of the guys involved in the first fight unleashed his fury on the other contestants and got into a physical brawl with another male contestant. But of every fight on the show, the face off two weeks ago was by far the worst. Two of the female contestants, Brandi and Vanessa, had problems with each other for quite some time. Brandi was convinced Vanessa wasn’t in the house for Tila, but instead she was there for publicity and to create drama in the house. Vanessa revealed to Tila that Brandi had said she didn’t know if she liked guys or girls. The conflict kept building until the night the
elimination came down to Brandi and Vanessa. Tila chose to keep Brandi in the house, at which point Vanessa grabbed Brandi by the hair and threw her to the ground. The two fought for a while until they were broken up by the other contestants in the house. Vanessa was carried away by one of the huge bodyguards, but laid down on the carpet in the front hall of the house as a protest to her unfair elimination. Brandi broke down and told Tila that even though she was in love with her, she “couldn’t do this anymore” and left the house.

*A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila* is a perfect example of reality television today. Producers take a situation we all find ourselves in, such as finding someone we love, but alter the situation to make the scenario more interesting. One common aspect of most reality shows is the “fishbowl” type of filming. Contestants are secluded in a house, or, as in *Survivor*, in a remote and isolated area, and filmed 24/7. Every mistake, every fight, every hookup is caught on camera and potentially broadcast throughout the entire nation.

It is very clear that reality television is not a small trend in American broadcasting. Every major broadcasting company airs their own reality show, often several different shows. For the past sixty years, the airwaves have been dominated by three television stations: ABC, CBS, and NBC. Each channel presents a different type of reality show.

CBS started off their series of reality shows with *Survivor*. Based on the shows that followed *Survivor*, CBS focuses on the interpersonal relations between contestants. Their lineup includes *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*, and their newest show, *Kid Nation*. *Kid Nation* is a bit like *Survivor*, only with 40 young kids, aged 8–15, who will spend 40 days trying to build a working town without parental control or modern amenities. All three of CBS’s shows are based on testing people’s survival skills and their will to live. And they will most definitely have their cameras ready when someone has the inevitable breakdown or dramatic fights. The question raised by these shows is why do people love to watch others fight for survival? What makes us so attracted to such extreme shows, especially *Kid Nation*, which to most people would appear to be child abuse? According to Andy Denhart, owner of the Website RealityBlurred.com, watching people attempt to form a society is one of the major draws to these shows (qtd. in Ryan).
Completely opposite of the minimalistic, natural shows aired by CBS, ABC’s shows are extremely egocentric and superficial. ABC’s original show was *Extreme Makeover*, a show where people who were unhappy with their looks were taken to Los Angeles and put through numerous cosmetic procedures including plastic surgery, dental operations, and a full fashion makeover. After a few seasons, *Extreme Makeover* was replaced by a less controversial counterpart, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, where people’s houses received the facelift. The crew comes in and demolishes the family’s home and replaces it with a bigger and better update. ABC also airs *The Bachelor, Dancing with the Stars, Supernanny,* and *Wifeswap*. ABC has carefully picked their shows to appeal to our very image-conscious and socially-driven culture. American society is very aware and concerned with our looks and social standing. ABC’s shows play up to these ideals very carefully.

Of the three major broadcasting companies, NBC has resisted the reality television movement the most. NBC only airs two reality shows in their primetime lineup: *Deal or no Deal* and *The Biggest Loser*. Neither of NBC’s “reality shows” fit into what people generally perceive as reality television; instead, they are more like reality game shows. *The Biggest Loser* follows a group of overweight people competing to lose the most weight. While this show does play up to America’s image-focused ideals, it does offer a new life for people who were once limited by their weight.

With these three major companies, as well as other important channels like MTV, VH-1, and FOX pumping our reality shows, there has to be an audience somewhere. Who exactly is watching these shows? Seventy percent of people ages eighteen to twenty-four watch reality shows as opposed to fifty-seven percent of people ages twenty-five to thirty-four (American Demographics). Clearly there is a larger fanbase in the eighteen to twenty-four year old age group, formally called Generation Y, but why do we love to watch these shows so much? Most people would say that “viewers are naturally voyeuristic and enjoy watching the hardships and highlights of stranger’s lives” (Wilson). The public loves to watch other people’s lives because it offers viewers the ability to “escape from their own lives into the excitement of others’ lives” (Wilson). For the half hour that you’re watching the show, you can forget your problems and bask in the glory of
seeing other people handling their problems. It takes the focus off your life, and you can just numb your mind for a while.

The target demographic for most of these shows, the young Generation Y, is in general a more tolerant group than the older age groups. “They have little problem with gay marriage or interracial relationships; they see nothing wrong with marijuana use; their sexual mores are driving their parents apoplectic. They are nonjudgmental about their friends’ personal lives and don’t see what all the fuss is about concerning some of the hot-button issues of the day, such as abortion” (Kryzanek).

This is the reason for the scandalous topics discussed on reality shows all across the board. Sex, drugs, and violence are not uncommon themes for the most popular shows. Nowhere is this more apparent than on MTV’s *The Real World*. Every episode goes through a cycle of the housemates getting drunk, hooking up, and fighting. In an upcoming episode, two of the housemates, Cohutta and KellyAnne, end up having sex one night, after which they find out the condom has broke. Both Cohutta and KellyAnne are scared that she may be pregnant. Because they are both religious and conservative, they see marriage as one of the only possible answers to the problem. Before Generation Y, this would have never been an appropriate topic for television, but this generation is more open to the idea of sex, as well as many other topics that were never even previously talked about.

While Generation Yers are more accepting and tolerant than their parents, they are still very image conscious. Everything, from clothes to shoes to cell phones, has to be the newest and best out there. They want to present themselves as best as they can to other people. Generation Y has been, is, and always will be bombarded by the media. Magazines and television have always told them how they should look and, more specifically, how they should act. This is one reason why reality television is so popular with this demographic. It gives them the ability to pick apart the people shown on TV. Any mistake or problem can be blown up into a major conflict, and this is generally what happens on the shows. Viewers are given the ability to rip apart or glorify contestants on the shows as they see fit. They are finally given the ability to do what the media has been doing to them for so long, and in a way, it gives them a sense of empowerment. They are no longer the ones being judged, but the ones judging.
Reality TV is clearly not just a small scale phenomenon. Every season, broadcasting companies premiere another reality show. The list is growing and will continue to grow for a long time. Our culture has long been very invasive when it comes to other people's lives. We have always wanted to know how other people live; that is basically the purpose of movies. The difference is that now we have real life characters and actual raw emotions to watch.

The emergence of reality shows could be attributed to advances in technology and our ability to broadcast this form of entertainment. While this may be true, the reality television craze does indicate a change in our societal views. Generations before Generation Y were more conservative and withheld their private actions from others. While there most likely would have been an interest in the concept of reality television shows in other generations, the actual shows would have been too radical and not well received. There is clearly a difference in Generation Y that makes these shows less offensive. The difference is that Generation Y is more liberal on most of today's hot topics. In 2002, by age twenty, seventy-five percent of people had had premarital sex (Finer). Drug use is affecting teens at younger and younger ages. “By the 8th grade, 52% of adolescents have consumed alcohol, 41% have smoked cigarettes, and 20% have used marijuana” (GDCADA). Our culture has become more and more desensitized, and it is much more difficult to shock viewers.

Producers of reality television have a difficult task facing them. While they always want to push the envelope and have the most cutting edge show, companies have to be sure to keep reality television within reasonable limits. Some people would claim that there are shows that step outside of this boundary, such as Kid Nation or Real World. With so many young people watching reality television today, broadcasters have to realize that they are potentially affecting an entire generation. The ideas and images they put out could influence how we, as a nation, think and interact.

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“The sexual abuse and exploitation of children is one of the most vicious crimes conceivable, a violation of mankind’s most basic duty to protect the innocent.” James T. Walsh, a state representative from New York spoke these words as he attempted to defend those who cannot defend themselves. Every day in America, thousands of children suffer silently due to sexual abuse, often by repeat offenders who were not given appropriate jail sentences or discovered loopholes in the system. While some state governments aggressively pursue tough punishments and efficient policies, Massachusetts is seen as a safe haven for sex offenders due to its weak, out-of-date sexual predator laws. In 2005, nine-year old Jessica Lunsford was kidnapped, raped, and murdered by a repeat sexual predator who had failed to register and found a loophole in the Florida state system. Following this tragedy, Jessica’s father led an initiative to see that every state in America pass a version of Jessica’s Law or what is also known as the Jessica Lunsford Act. Among the key provisions of the law are a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years in prison and lifetime electronic monitoring for those convicted of lewd or lascivious acts against a victim less than 12 years of age. Also under Jessica’s Law, the failure of a sex offender to register or re-register after changing his or her address or employment is considered a third-degree felony (Gordon). Since 2005,
when Florida first implemented Jessica’s Law, 42 states have passed it or an equivalent version (O’Reilly). Arguably, the biggest concern lies within the state of Massachusetts.

Tragically, there are thousands of stories just like Jessica Lunsford’s. In 1994, seven year old Megan Kanka was kidnapped, raped, and murdered by a repeat sex offender who lived across the street. Megan’s parents, Richard and Maureen Kanka, began the Megan Nicole Kanka Foundation with the belief that “Every parent should have the right to know if a dangerous sexual predator moves into their neighborhood.” Within months, Megan’s Law was passed in New Jersey, which required law enforcement authorities to make information available to the public regarding registered sex offenders. By the following year, a federal version of Megan’s Law was passed. In 1994, Congress passed the “Jacob Wetterling Crimes against Children and Sexually Violent Predators Act,” the federal response to Megan’s Law named after Jacob Wetterling who was kidnapped in 1989 and has never been found. As a result, today all 50 states and the District of Columbia have sex offender registries, but Massachusetts was the last state to pass any version of Megan’s Law (Petrosino). This was groundbreaking child protection legislation, however Massachusetts acted without any expediency. Only when federal budget penalties were added to any state that failed to enact the legislation did Massachusetts fold and sign it into law. Instead of fighting for the safety of children, incredibly, Massachusetts’s representatives instead argued over whether the bill violated the rights of the sexual offender. Over ten years have passed, and Massachusetts’s judges and lawmakers maintain a very similar attitude today.

Not only has Massachusetts developed a pattern of being weak on sexual predator laws, it is also a state where more children are raped annually than adults. Even with such shocking statistics, the Massachusetts state legislature continually fails to act on any legislation. On November 13th, 2007, state law enforcement personnel and rape victim advocates crammed into a hearing room in Massachusetts to demand harsher punishments for sex offenders, including a minimum jail sentence of 10 years for the rape of a child. Rep. Karyn E. Polito (R-Shrewsbury) and former Lt. Gov Kerry Healey headed the bill that would bring Massachusetts in alignment with the majority of other states who have
passed a version of Jessica’s Law (Dayal). Unfortunately, the outlook for this bill is considered grim, as a very similar bill was introduced in 2006 but never passed because of opponents who once again stressed privacy rights of sex offenders and also believed the bill would limit judicial discretion. However, when it comes to sexual predator cases, allowing judicial discretion in Massachusetts often results in little effectiveness. The average sentence for sex offenders convicted of raping a child in the state of Massachusetts is a shocking 3 to 5 years (Dayal). Recently in Massachusetts, fifty-six year old child predator Glen Wheeler pleaded guilty to 22 counts of indecent assault and battery on a child. Mr. Wheeler admitted to molesting seven children, ages three to thirteen, and served only 5 years in a Massachusetts prison. Once released, he fled to Florida and failed to register with the National Sex Offender Database as conditioned by his probation. When he was brought back to Massachusetts, the District Attorney sought a sentence of 10 years, but, incredibly, Judge John McCann sentenced him to zero jail time (O’Reilly). This misuse of power by Massachusetts judges needs to be corrected and controlled by a mandatory minimum prison sentence that would be put in place if a version of Jessica’s Law was passed in Massachusetts.

The most perilous consequence of allowing weak punishments for sex offenders is the risk of recidivism. The less time a person convicted of raping a child spends incarcerated, the more time he is back in society, posing a serious danger of reoffending and stealing away the innocence of another child. Amie Zyla was eight years old when she was repeatedly sexually abused. Like most sexual abuse victims, Amie knew her abuser, and as in most cases, she was sexually abused more than once. “While it was a very difficult time, I came forward when it happened to stop him from hurting anyone else ever again. I also expected to never have to deal with my abuser again” (United States Congress). Upon his release, Amie’s abuser began preying on other victims; sadly, this pattern of abuse is an all too familiar reality. According to a study performed by the Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Statistics, within 3 years following their 1994 state prison release, 5.3 percent of sex offenders (men who had committed rape or sexual assault) were rearrested for another sex crime. The study also found that the average sentence imposed on 9,700 sex offenders was 8 years, and that on
average, only 3 1/2 years of those 8 were actually served prior to release from prison (Smith). If Massachusetts’s average sentence for child rape is only 3 to 5 years and the national trend points to a typical offender only serving about half of his sentence before release, one can assume there are several cases of sex offenders in Massachusetts that are released in as little as a year and a half. However, with legislation modeled after Jessica’s Law that would impose mandatory minimums, sex offenders would be required to serve out their sentences, and the risk of recidivism would dramatically decrease.

As it stands now, several representatives of the Commonwealth as well as the governor, Deval Patrick, are enabling the continued abuse of children in Massachusetts. Like any government, the state of Massachusetts invests a great deal of effort into projecting the perception that its children are protected and cared for. Instead, the state is standing still as they hang out a welcome sign to sexual predators, encouraging such persons to move into Massachusetts, where if they abuse children, they will be far less criticized and punished. While the average concerned citizen cannot pick up a pen and sign a law into practice, they do have the ability to pressure their elected representatives into change. A simple phone call or letter to a representative or the governor expressing one’s concern and dissatisfaction with the current child predator laws in the state can go a long way. If Massachusetts residents continually place pressure and dissent on the lawmakers of the state, progress can be made quickly, and future children can be saved from abuse. Citizens can also make their voice heard by calling or writing to organizations in Massachusetts whose main goal is to fight for the rights of sexual predators and judicial discretion in sexual predator cases. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) chapter of Massachusetts has sparred with many state and city officials over sex offender laws, continuing to concern themselves only with protecting the rights of child predators—not the children who have been sexually abused. Similarly, The Massachusetts’s State Bar Association puts all of its resources behind fighting for the rights of Massachusetts’s judges to exercise discretion instead of concerning themselves with the safety of Massachusetts’s children.

While other states in the union fight aggressively to keep American children safe, Massachusetts is falling dangerously behind. The citizens of
the Commonwealth must speak up for the silent young victims of sexual abuse and proactively place pressure on their lawmakers and state leaders to pass Jessica’s Law. It is time for the state of Massachusetts to act in the best interest of its most precious resource: its children.

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