LOW RATES   610-891-1560
The Raven MOTEL

# VOICES

## :ON DIFFERENCE

*A student-led journal focusing on issues of social justice*

Graduate Social Work Department
West Chester University

# EDITORS' NOTE

This issue of *VOICES* crackles with inimitable narratives of lived experience in the United States. Our lead essay, *Nevermore: The Raven Motel as Community*, eloquently pushes past stereotypical and stigmatizing depictions of a family coping with poverty and mental illness and provocatively calls into question beliefs about love, community, and justice. In this essay and the other critical and literary pieces included here, we lift up singular and sensitive 'voices' which help place into sharp relief the consequences of racist, classist, and xenophobic policies – policies that stigmatize and can, if left unchallenged, oppress and immobilize society's most vulnerable. Viewed collectively, these essays and poems provide a clarion call beckoning social workers to listen and engage in participatory action.

Within the whole of this year's VOICES are stories of survival, stories of the universality and vulnerability inherent in the human condition that go unnoticed and unheard. This against the backdrop of the global foreclosure on an entire country, as seen in the Syrian refugee crisis whose death tolls rise each day as the rest of the world seemingly shrugs. In a first-world society, privileged with the luxury of "driving past a fleabag motel," "changing the channel," or "changing the subject," what does it mean to truly hear those outside of our normal cultural lexicon? Let us listen and bear witness to the dignity and reverberation of these "voices."

Front and back cover photo credit: Olivia Iaquinto, MSW Candidate '16

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# Nevermore: The Raven Motel as Community

Olivia Iaquinto

*"I'm assuming you want that room by the hour?" My mother stared at him, her eyes welling up with tears, and she answered, "No, by the night." The man behind the desk smirked and handed her a card key. "You'll be in room 116."*

## "My mother, my brother, and I were all crammed into a double bed in a room that smelled like urine and vomit."

*That first night, it was near impossible to get to sleep. My mother, my brother, and I were all crammed into a double bed in a room that smelled like urine and vomit. We could hear the people next door having loud sex, and while I knew what it was, my brother who was only 10 years old and unaware thought the woman next door needed an ambulance. Between moans from next door and my mother sobbing into her pillow, eventually, somehow, I fell asleep.*

The Raven Motel is situated in Media, Pennsylvania—a small, quaint town with a lively main street and lots of well-manicured houses. At the edge of town are the motels. There are three motels total, and The Raven is the cheapest (and the "sketchiest") one. The Raven is where sex workers go by the hour, where pornography is filmed, and where couples go when they're having an affair. But The Raven is also something the owners never intended it to be. The Raven is a home and a community to those who have been displaced.

*She was on the phone for a long time and I had no idea who she was talking to. She kept looking like she was holding back tears and her voice sounded choked up at times, but there wasn't much being said on her end.*

*It wasn't until she was off the phone that we found out that we lost all of our belongings. When we were evicted from our home, we had nothing packed or prepared. We were still in denial even as the sheriff arrived. All of our belongings were packed away and put into a storage garage. We would pay approximately $2000 per month to keep our things in the garages until we found a stable place to live. Well, we didn't have anywhere near $2000 a month so after a few months the storage facility called my mom and told her that they were auctioning off all of our belongings. Anything that wasn't sold in the auction was thrown in the trash and sent to a landfill.*

## "But The Raven is also something the owners never intended it to be. The Raven is a home and a community to those who have been displaced."

The Raven is an environment in which people live, die, prosper, and fail. When you examine the rooms of people at The Raven, you realize first that they don't have much. The motel provides a mini fridge and a microwave, a television, a bathroom, and a bed. There is one green chair per room and that's it. You can tell a lot about people by what else they bring. Our motel room was filled with children's toys, cat toys, and a giant birdcage that housed my hermit crab. In Mike the Manager's room, you could find ceiling-high piles of newspapers that he hoarded, each one of them important to him for one reason or another.

*Mike the Manager: I hated him at first. He had insinuated that my mother was a sex worker and tried to charge her by the hour.*

*But once he realized that she was a displaced mother with two young children, he became one of our best friends. We told him about the foreclosure and how we lost everything we had ever owned. We told him of my mother's major depressive disorder and how hard that made it for her to persevere. Mike had the biggest heart. He gave us money for food and a week later he brought over a huge garbage bag full of old toys that he had found in someone's trash. He asked for nothing in return, and just liked to see us smile.*

*Mike's story was heartbreaking as well. Mike was severely mentally ill and had a hoarding problem. He was forced into inpatient care and when he was released, his family had abandoned him and wanted nothing to do with him. He was homeless in Philadelphia for a number of years and started using drugs. Finally, he found a job at The Raven and he decided not only to work there, but moved in upstairs. He had been living there for almost 20 years when we got there, and he had no plans of leaving. To him, The Raven was home.*

The Raven is home to several different types of people, all of whom have been displaced. Some people, like my family, were there because the housing market crashed and we lost our homes to foreclosure. Some people had a mental illness and were just released from inpatient with nowhere to go. Others were substance dependents who left their families for a life getting high, and fewer were criminals on the run from the police. Criminals stayed at The Raven because living there was like dissolving off the face of the Earth: as long as you use a fake name and pay with cash, nobody has to know who you really are, and nobody outside the community has to know you exist. For these displaced people, for people who had no place to go, The Raven was a sort of sanctuary. For those who were alone, The Raven meant family. Never was I alone when I was at The Raven. At school, I was a social outcast, but at home I was seen as something precious. Everyone made sure the children at The Raven were fed and clothed, even before themselves. Everyone wanted to take turns taking walks with the kids or playing cards outside with them. Children brought joy to otherwise pretty depressed individuals, and in a way, they provided their own form of currency.

My mother struggled with major depressive disorder and borderline personality disorder. Needless to say, she wasn't always able to be the best mom to me, but The Raven always had a sort of "replacement." Mary was my first replacement mother. She would tell me about her daughters that she left behind and teach me how to do my hair and wear make-up. We would have movie nights and talk about clothes and boys. We would go on long walks through town and we had inside jokes. When Mary eventually moved out, we even visited her at her apartment where she taught me to cook breakfast foods. My second replacement mom was Debbie, who would always offer me a place to stay and blow off steam after a fight with my actual mom. This happened frequently (imagine being 16 and living within two feet of your mother one hundred percent of the time), so I became very close to Debbie and we laughed and laughed about nothing in particular and about our lives.

Like a family, we supported each other. Nobody wanted Lisa to be on heroin but we knew we couldn't stop her so we just took care of her as best we could without enabling her disease. My favorite memory is from the holidays, like Thanksgiving. We would all pool our money together to get some Boston Market food. We would make one of the beds and use it as a table, setting out all the food family style. We would all share food and talk and tell stories and just feel close to one another. It was truly a wholesome family experience and one that could not be replaced, even by the "real" family dinners I experience now.

*The night was dark and the room was sweltering hot. None of us could sleep. That's when we heard it…a metallic rapping at the door to our room. It was late, who was knocking at this time? "Who is it?" My mom called. "Let me in, I've got a shovel," said a gravelly and unfamiliar voice. My mom leapt up from the bed and bolted the door locked. She told my brother and me to keep absolutely*

*quiet and absolutely still. She got out her phone and she called Gabe from upstairs. For a while, she whispered into the phone. My brother and I were terrified. Before we knew it, we heard a racket outside like a fight. We heard Gabe's voice with his heavy Bulgarian accent telling the man with the shovel to run off and leave us alone, for good. My mom and Gabe never told us who the man was, although they definitely knew. Although this was a scary event, I felt safe. For the first time in my life, there were people I could call for protection all around me.*

*When we were living at the house with our mother, we were always on the verge of being taken away by social services. Our house was a health hazard, and if anyone stepped foot into those deplorable conditions, my brother and I would be removed immediately. We couldn't let the cops in, even when we needed to, because they would be obligated to make some sort of report. So I always wanted people to stay away from my house, to leave my family alone, to let us suffer in silence. We couldn't trust the outside world because the outside world wouldn't approve of what went on behind that big white front door.*

People at The Raven didn't trust the police for many reasons. A lot of them were criminals or drug addicts who didn't want to go to jail. The police criminalized the homeless so harshly that everyone was afraid of being picked up just for being outside. Children were not allowed, so we were always in hiding. There were not to be more than two people per room, and we had three, so there was even more reason to hide. We heard things that would shock the average person: forced botched abortions going on next-door, domestic violence—even in an emergency, we never once called the police. Instead we relied on Mike the Manager or Gabe to protect us. For a while, we were living next door to a pedophile who was hiding from the law and as much as we wanted so desperately to report him, we couldn't for fear of being taken away. We had to protect ourselves from danger. The Raven is a community constantly on high alert because it is not protected like the rest of the greater community

is. Because our lives were criminalized, we lived in fear and lived without safety.

"I heard your mom sits outside the bus station and cries, telling your pathetic story to strangers, begging for money. Now that's just fucking sad."

*Someone at school said that to me. First of all, my mother did not sit outside the bus station telling our story to strangers. She would never tell anyone our story—she was so ashamed. Second, my mother would never beg for change. We got our food money by checking under counters and freezers at convenient stores and gas stations. Usually when people dropped change there they would just sweep it under and we could collect it and buy Ramen noodles. Third, we are not "fucking sad" by any means; we are a strong and powerful family that takes no shit, that survives.*

The Raven, as a legitimate community, is constantly challenged by the way it is viewed by the greater community. The town of Media views The Raven as a scourge of society, and essentially criminalizes our lives and our lifestyles. The greater community of Media frequently bands together in an attempt to destroy The Raven and rid the town of "those people" who live there. At one point, it was debated whether living there was legal at all. In 2007, politicians in Media were voting on whether or not it should be legal to live in motels like The Raven. As long as we paid the money each month, who cares how long we stayed? The people of the town saw it differently though. While living at The Raven, my high school told me I could no longer attend. Luckily, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act said that I could attend, because living in a motel is still technically considered homeless, and because homeless youth can always attend their native schools no matter where they are "living" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

The Raven is a community categorized by shame. The shame is different for everyone, but the general shame of being looked down upon by the greater community is shame enough. For

my mother, the shame was much worse. She was ashamed to have lost her home to foreclosure, she was ashamed to be mentally ill, and most of all, she was ashamed to say that she had her children living in some fleabag motel. I think a lot of people at The Raven feel shame. They feel shame when people from greater Media talk about them in the streets like they are less than human. They feel shame when they can't afford to buy food. They feel shame when they steal fruit from the grocery store. They feel shame when they can't take care of their children. They feel shame when they have an outburst or an episode in public.

At The Raven, shame seemed to melt away. It was as though shame only existed in the outside world. For example, when we were out and about in Media, everyone knew us as "the motel kids" and there was some shame attached to that because we were thought to be poor, dirty, low-lives. School was the same way. But at The Raven, we were home and the shame would dissipate like steam after a hot shower. We could share our stories there without receiving pity. We could be ourselves without being judged. We were a big family that supported each other and there was just no need for shame in a family as big and as love-rich as ours.

I can say with certainty that The Raven saved my life. Without it, I would have been a homeless youth, sleeping outside on the streets with my family. I would have had absolutely no ties to a community or to anything greater than myself. The Raven gave me a home and a family and an identity. It became a part of who I was and who I would become. I would never shed my past and get rid of it like my mother (understandably) wanted to. Even if we left The Raven, it would still be home.

Most of all, I want people to know that The Raven is not a place of perpetual hurt and sadness, terror and crime. Just because the people at The Raven were poor and disadvantaged, marginalized and outcast did not mean that we were a bad community. We had strong values and dedication to each other, to ourselves, and to a way of life. We had unbelievable strength and resilience and we showed it every day just by surviving. If anything, our community was made stronger by our problems because we solved them or managed them together, as one cohesive whole. The Raven is not a place to be condemned, but a place where love grows and people flourish.

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# The Great Philadelphia Pumpkin Patch

Antar Bush

Any inmate who has taken a trip to Philadelphia's State Road House of Corrections knows exactly what the terms "pumpkin patch" or "pumpkin suits" mean. They refer to the orange jumpsuits all inmates at State Road are required to wear, and when all of us are gathered together on a cell block we look like pumpkin patch. My soul flinches when I hear people talk about the popular Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*, because on the show prison looks exciting, adventurous, and integrated. However, if you ask any African American who has been to a correctional facility in the United States, orange has always been black.

Needless to say, I have worn my fair share of pumpkin suits in my short lifetime. I was one of the regulars at State Road from 2003 to 2006. Each time I would get locked up I'd ask myself, "How the hell did I get here again?" Then every time I would get released I would pray to God not to let me go back to my criminal ways. Nevertheless, somehow I would find myself right back at the Great Philadelphia Pumpkin Patch.

"Who needs four years of college when all you have to do is find the right hustle?" Although I did not grow up thinking, "When I grow up I want to go to prison," I knew at some point in my life I was destined to go to the pumpkin patch.

Was I a bad seed? Or was I a good seed in bad soil? I could never figure what kind of pumpkin I was. In other words, was I a criminal by nature or nurture? When doing crime I felt like it was a rite of passage. Everyone I knew had a hustle and I thought this would be a way of life. Easy money was the way to go in my hood. I rarely saw anyone going to work, and I certainly did not know anyone who went to college. What I did not know then was that I was witnessing an entire community being victimized by institutional racism. These hustlers did not grow up thinking, "I want to be a drug dealer." However, because of institutional racism and the economic status of all of us young black men in this north Philadelphia neighborhood, we were being groomed for our pumpkin suits.

## "Because of institutional racism and the economic status of all of us young black men in this north Philadelphia neighborhood, we were being groomed for our pumpkin suits."

I grew up in the horrors of the eighties and nineties drug wars of north Philadelphia. When the sun would rise, I would walk pass the drug dealers in north Philly and admire those guys as if they were gods. I would ask myself,

I am a raw product of the Philadelphia School District, and I did not read my first book until I got to prison. I often wondered, "How did I make it out of high school?" I could barely write in 1999. I realized I was pushed through

the system like so many of my fellow young black men. Teachers found it easier to just pass you than to engage their students. I remember a teacher screaming at me, "If you don't stop acting stupid you're going to end up in jail!" I did not care. All the black men in my hood at some point had to do a "bid" or as they liked to call it, "take a hustler's vacation." But still to this day I remember being in solitary confinement and hearing that teacher's voice echoing in my head as I would pace back in forth in my cell like a caged leopard.

Reflecting back on every time I was released from prison, I would leave the pumpkin patch more bitter than the last time I got out. Questions would volley in my head: "Where am I going to work?" "Where will I live?" "What is my probation officer going to be like?" In 2005 when I was released from State Road, I applied for a job to simply clean toilets all day. The moment I turned in the application I was swiftly denied employment because of my criminal record. As the hiring manager was telling me this I thought to myself, "Cleaning toilets is one of the nastiest jobs that I can think of; if I can't get a job here, then what am I going to do?" In that moment I felt completely defeated, and I told myself, "Fuck getting a job. I'm going back to the hustling. It's a lot easier." As a result of this decision, the next time I would be arrested and sentenced to 75 months in a federal detention center.

So there I am again in my cell with my pumpkin suit looking at my reflection in the beat-up mirror asking myself, "How did I get here again?" I had told myself I wasn't coming back to this place so devoid of anything positive and motivating. However, here I am. It wasn't until I started exploring the backgrounds of fellow inmates that I realized we all had this conversation with ourselves. Maybe it wasn't a coincidence that I continued to come back and forth to prison. According to Bureau of Justice Statistics, the national recidivism rate for inmates released from prison or jails is 65% (Langan & Levin, 2002). The criminal justice system is made to be a revolving door. If a newly released prisoner does not have a support system in place when he gets out, the chances of returning to prison grow.

Michele Alexander, author of the seminal work *The New Jim Crow*, has explored how the criminal justice system has created so many barriers for men of color. These barriers come in the form of halfway houses, ridiculous fines and court costs, overzealous probation officers, and the one question every former inmate hates to answer on a job application: "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" All of these barriers create a vicious cycle of "human cargo" in our criminal justice system (Alexander, 2012).

As social workers we have a duty to understand the barriers that inmates newly released from prison face. When social workers are equipped with the knowledge and best practices of reentry, we can give agency to a marginalized population. The social workers on Philadelphia's State Road should no longer have to continue to harvest inmates like pumpkins. Social workers should be given the opportunity to offer inmates who are entering into society more support to prevent the revolving door of the criminal justice system. As social workers, if we do not advocate for new reentry policies and practices as professionals we are subliminally saying through our lack of actions "what size pumpkin suit do you need?"

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# H.R. 4038: An Anti-Humanitarian Effort ──────────

**Jamie Merwin**

In addition to uprooting millions across Syria, the Syrian civil war that began in 2011 has also forced some four million Syrians to flee their homeland (Klemen, 2014). In response to this ongoing crisis, many countries have opened their borders and welcomed Syrians to seek asylum as refugees. As of March 2016, key host countries included: Turkey (1.9 million); Lebanon (1.5 million); Jordan (629,266); Greece (250,000); Iraq (245,909); Egypt (119,301); Germany (98,700); Sweden (80,000); Hungary (18,800); Denmark (11,300);  United Kingdom (7,000); and France (6,700) (Martinez, 2015; Syrian Refugee Response, 2016). In this same period, the United States has allowed in roughly 1,500 Syrian refugees and committed itself to accepting a total of just 10,000 refugees through this fiscal year (Human Rights First, 2016; Martinez, 2015; Syrian Regional Refugee Response, 2016).

Looking at these numbers, many commentators have rightfully asked: why have there been so few Syrian resettlements within one of the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the world? In January 2014, the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration testified to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary's Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights on the Syrian Refugee Crisis:

> All of this is background for our discussion of how the United States is prepared to respond to calls for the resettlement of Syrian refugees. Syrians being considered for U.S. refugee resettlement will, of course, undergo intensive security screening – the same screening carried out for all refugees seeking to resettle in the United States. UNHCR has announced that by the end of 2014 it intends to refer up to 30,000 Syrians to resettlement for either temporary or permanent resettlement. We expect to accept referrals for several thousand Syrian refugees in 2014. Another 16 other countries have pledged to take part as well and we will encourage them and others to do even more (Richard, 2014).

If this was the situation just two years ago, what has changed in the United States that has led to an "institutional bottleneck" standing in the way of the United States' commitment to provide asylum to victims of the Syrian war, and has consequently led to the passing of the legislative bill, H.R. 4038, through the House of Representatives this past November (Bixby, 2015)? Before this can be answered, H.R. 4038 must be explored.

H.R. 4038 is a proposed bill that will "require that supplemental certifications and background investigations be completed prior to the admission of certain aliens as refugees, and for other purposes" (H.R. 4038). H.R. 4038 was passed through the Republican-majority House of Representatives on November 17, 2015 and is now circulating through the Senate, which also boasts a Republican Party majority. The bill pushes for additional security checks for refugees, specifically from Syria and Iraq. As evidenced in its formal title – The American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act of 2015 – this bill is a singularly anti-humanitarian effort masquerading as robust national security measures. In the bill's formulation, refugees are labeled "aliens" or foreigners and are then made synonymous with security threats against Americans. This, despite the testimony of Seth Jones, director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation, who told the House Homeland Security Committee's Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence in June 2015:

> The threat to the U.S. homeland from refugees has been relatively low. Almost none of the major terrorist plots since 9/11 has involved refugees.  Even in those cases where refugees

were arrested on terrorism-related charges, years and even decades often transpired between their entry into the United States and their involvement in terrorism. In most instances, a would-be terrorist's refugee status had little or nothing to do with their radicalization and shift to terrorism (Jones, 2015).

Part of the demonizing of Syrian refugees stems from a conservative ideology adopted by the Republican Party that espouses xenophobic beliefs. But the bill also benefited from the worldwide hysteria produced by the terrorist attacks by Belgian natives in Paris that occurred just four days prior to the presentation of bill in the House (DeBonis & Demirjian, 2015).

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# "Part of the demonizing of Syrian refugees stems from a conservative ideology adopted by the Republican Party that espouses xenophobic beliefs."

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Beyond the xenophobia built in to the bill, the additional security checks and certifications appear arbitrary and tedious. How much longer will it take – beyond the "traditional" two years for the refugee process – for the supplemental security measures that the bill calls for but leaves unclear and unspecified? These measures include a screening by the Secretary of Homeland Security; background checks through the FBI and certification by the FBI Director of the "aliens covered" then a return for clearance back to the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence; and then finally a risk-based review of all of the aforementioned by the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security. How long is this going to take to oversee, screen, certify, and report for 10,000 refugees? This is not actually a question of logistics but one questioning the logic behind a bill that adds up to four new layers of bureaucracy during a crisis situation to an already stringent and lengthy process (lawful recognition of the refugee status) conducted by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees – all in the name of protecting a blanket "American security" from "foreign enemies," or rather Syrian refugees fleeing their war-torn country (Klemen, 2014; Diamond, 2015).

In addition to its language, real world context is also critical to understanding the ideological underpinnings that run throughout the bill. The United States is still recovering from the 2009 economic recession and the perpetual scare of domestic jobs being shipped overseas or taken by undocumented workers continues to be generated across the country.  Added to this is the fear of the economic burden of new refugees putting more strain on an already stressed economy and job market. Though an understandable and shared fear among many Americans, studies have shown the opposite to be true of refugees resettled in Cleveland, Ohio, who have brought many high-level skills that have added value and jobs to bolster the economy (Covert, 2015). Furthermore, in a post 9/11 American landscape, where people are meant to feel the threat of terrorism lay at every turn and where ISIS and other terrorist organizations continue to gain power following of the demolition of Syrian civil society, the US government's practices and philosophies regarding Syrian refugees ends up criminalizing victims of political and environmental crises rather than providing them asylum as an extension of good faith (ensured and vetted by the UN's refugee recognition process) and humanitarian aid. The passing of this bill serves as a pathetic attempt to gain some sort of control of the ever-expanding fight against impending domestic terrorism. The true consequences of this bill perpetrate and justify fear-based, supplementary

security checks and ad-hoc certifications of those in crisis, and actually serve to install xenophobic policies in prolonging and stalling humanitarian efforts and ethical responsibilities, rather than coming close to combating terrorism. In order to do this, Congress utilizes the ideology of American Exceptionalism that fosters the idea that America is inherently different (due to its understated preeminence and power) from other countries, making it the only country in the world that needs its own extra measures to protect itself "against" refugees.

What does this bill mean for millions of Syrian (and Iraqi) refugees who already face a two-year wait to gain asylum here and legal recognition as refugees? What does this mean for the social worker world that is ethically bound to serve those most vulnerable populations at home and within our broader society? The social, economic, and political ramifications behind policies like the "American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act" perpetuate inequalities and the oppression forged by global capitalism that helped create and shape the Syrian refugee crisis. The United States' role as a member of the global community should be to enact policies that promote the well-being and social and economic advocacy of the world's most vulnerable, rather than further alienating and isolating those in extreme situations of violence and poverty which in turn so often only ends up breeding isolation and terrorism, the very things we hope to see end in the 21st century that lies ahead.
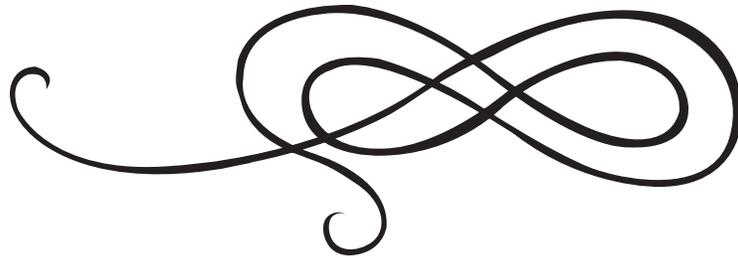
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# Real Talk

Jehan Morsi

He asked her
How is it not ok to have sex?
I don't get it.
You want to get close.
You want to help.
Sex brings people closer
Makes it easier to help each other
Why not have sex?
She thought,
That's a great question
He's questioning the system
And I am here to facilitate client growth
To support.
You came with a need
A need for a service
Our purpose is growth:
For the client
For the professional
For two human beings.
"Intimacy doesn't have to be physical."
He asked:
"What do you mean?"
She said:
"When you have deep conversations, share things with someone you wouldn't even share with yourself – that's what we aim to achieve, comfort in that complete vulnerability, appreciation of things as simple as a genuine conversation."
Social work
Platonic love
Platonic work
"You want to talk about sex? Fine. You want to talk about you and me having sex?  That's a boundary issue.  That cannot happen in this professional relationship."
He left at ease, perhaps even, aware.
She breathed.
That was a hard conversation, and yet, who talks to him, or people like him about this?  Where is he allowed the space to actually say what he means and not be judged for it?  To understand that his questions, desires are not weird or wrong – they're human.  How many others feel just like him, genuinely wondering if they're insane to think their own thoughts?
Voice their own truth.

# Mothers Returning to the Workforce: Where Ageism Meets Sexism

Terry Ramsey

Women returning to paid employment after opting out of the workforce to be full-time mothers face a host of barriers.  Two of the most significant are sexism and ageism. Women whose economic resources or family situation allows them to be stay-at-home mothers typically become economically dependent and often subordinate in a society that remains male-dominated and status-driven.  These mothers also tend to be middle-aged when they return to work, in a culture that glorifies youth.  Sexism and ageism persist in the U.S. culture and workplace, and coalesce to present formidable obstacles to women's career resumption after full-time caregiving.

## "These mothers also tend to be middle-aged when they return to work in a culture that glorifies youth."

Women opt out of the workplace to be full-time mothers or caregivers for a variety of reasons, but frequently because their efforts to blend conventional employment with caregiving are not adequately supported socially, culturally, economically, or institutionally. Further, gender disparities in wages as well as social and cultural norms continue to reinforce the inequitable division of labor and caregiving responsibilities within the home (Gale, 2014).  And although family-friendly policies like paid maternity leave, flexible work schedules, job sharing, work-from-home arrangements, and on-site childcare are slowly making their way into mainstream America, these remain the exception rather than the norm (National Women's Law Center, 2015).  Most of corporate America persists in refusing to implement family-friendly policies because they do not see a dividend to their bottom line. Typically, working women still experience workplace gender discrimination in terms of pay equity, career advancement, and the availability of leadership roles. The stress, guilt, and conflict that many women experience in their efforts to balance work and family too often drive women out of traditional paid professional work.  The women who do not have this choice unfortunately endure rigid social and workplace norms that do not support them as working mothers.

In addition to workplace gender discrimination, age discrimination (by law applying to anyone over the age of 40) is yet another form of bias in the U.S. and affects women disproportionately (Wilks, 2013).  Due to societal trends in delaying marriage and family, women resuming employment after being stay-at-home mothers are frequently middle-aged, yet American culture construes aging as something to be concealed or cured (Douglas, 2014).  Liu (2007) notes that social and cultural constructs of female beauty are tied to youthfulness and thinness, which tend to exclude women as they age. And more often than not it is appearance and achievement that make an applicant appealing to employers (Liu, 2007).

Age discrimination can be elusive, but it serves to maintain the cultural and corporate status quo.  In the workplace, hiring managers may not look past a woman's age to see her experience (Shah & Kleiner, 2005). Female hiring managers who have uninterrupted careers can be the harshest when it comes to hiring returning mothers.  Furthermore, studies have revealed a "motherhood penalty," where being a mother has a negative effect in the workplace in terms of

competency expectations, job commitment expectations, and starting salary (Correll et al., 2008; Hellman & Okimoto, 2008). Mothers are often judged by harsher standards for performance capacity than other job applicants due to status-based discrimination. The culturally devalued status of motherhood translates into returning mothers being subjected to greater scrutiny and higher requirements for presenting evidence of ability before being deemed competent (Correll et al., 2008).

Since motherhood is associated with a lessening of ability, re-entering the workforce and coping with the commensurate sexism and ageism found there is often daunting. Many mothers internalize these cultural beliefs and experience lowered self-esteem and confidence issues and also feel unsupported and undervalued in a society that venerates paid employment, career success, youth, and beauty (Rubin & Wootin, 2007). The irony is that cultural norms idealize the family model with a stay-at-home mother as the best environment for raising successful and well-adjusted children. Many families choose to provide this environment in the best interests of their children. But when mothers attempt to resume paid employment, they are judged less competent and face significant workplace bias. As society collectively matures and individuals pursue careers and other interests well into late adulthood, ageism may recede and dispel our biases about age and capability. And hopefully too as more women demand to be seen for their full potential across their lifespan, in all the roles they pursue as caregivers as well as employees, they will pressure corporate America to develop more robust and inclusive workplace policies.

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# Inheritance
## Amanda Nies

we are our mother's daughters?

a crude assembly line
of expectations

manufactured and
put together without care

feminine tropes
creating systemic disaster,

a one armed Kali Goddess of destruction

weaned from sour milk
to whiskey sours and Rohypnol

this is our wealthy inheritance
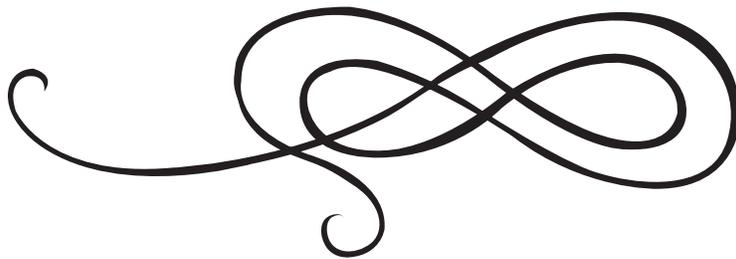of emotional and sexual dysfunction

a cyclical misunderstanding

birthed and bathed by Paternalism

will we ever know our beauty
without a mirror?

our strength
without tradition?

Will we ever know our mothers, truly?

# The End of the Bottle
Kathleen Hess

I'm writing this letter as my last goodbye.

With time, I reflect and wonder why

The memories come rushing in,

They cut like a knife.

At times, you were there for me.

You may have been the only one.

It took losing everyone, for me to see

That you were the one, who isolated me.

You drove everyone else away

Then I became resentful, when they didn't stay.

Once again, there you were

I knew I could count on you for sure.

You gave me courage and you gave me pride

But when I woke up, all the good you did would subside.

I was left with the destruction you caused,

This took me a while, but in that moment, I stopped and paused.

You gave me comfort, when I felt alone

Ironically you were the reason I lost my home.

When the bad started outweighing the good

I made a choice to let you go, as I should.

You caused me regret and you caused me shame,

But at the end of the day, I was the one to blame.

You made me question my identity.

With you, I would never reach a place of serenity.

It was a vicious cycle that I needed to break

I reached a point of no return; it was more than I could take.

When I lost everything, you were the one thing to remain,

If I stayed with you, nothing would change.

So I was in a fight for my life, I had to get out

You left me no choice; I was forced down a new route.

I woke up one day and decided enough was enough

I realized that life didn't need to be this tough.

I had to say goodbye to the place that was once my comfort zone

It was time to let go, I wanted to go back home.

But I couldn't find where it was, I was cold and alone.

I decided to be strong and navigate the way

I changed my life course, as much as you wanted me to stay.

I'm sorry I had to leave, but I needed more time

To refocus and get my life in line

When I came close to death, I was never so scared

This feeling I had was extremely rare.

This was the first time, I was afraid to die

I didn't want life to pass me by.

When I woke up, the pain was worse

And nobody in the world felt remorse.

It had to get bad, before it got good

"This too shall pass" and it would.

I finally discovered the foundation to rebuild my life

Who knew it was rock bottom? I survived the cut of the knife.

Now I was in fight mode, I wanted more

Who knew what fate had in store?

The best decision I made was to go my own way

*I'm sorry alcohol; I know you wish I had stayed.*
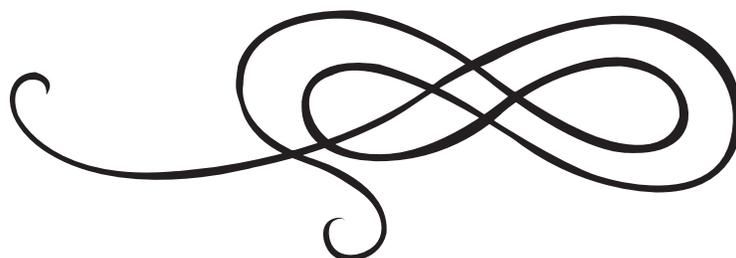
# People in Recovery as an Oppressed Population ——
## Adam Sledd

In these days of the addiction epidemic, the images are everywhere: miserable, broken wraiths: their posture slumped over, their heads hung low. The backdrops are bleak: the lighting is shadowed and ominous. Journalistic coverage of these people and their tribulations is sensationalized by photos of needles and spoons full of syrupy opiates; ant hills of white powder and razor blades; multi-colored mosaics of pills and capsules. The reports never fail to miss a celebrity's public fall and subsequent admission to treatment; but positive portrayals of successful people in recovery are conspicuously absent. People in recovery are referred to as "addicts" or worse, even after we have stopped using substances. We are also objectified as sources of inspiration, simply because we are in recovery. We are congratulated, and taught to congratulate ourselves, on simply making it through 24 hours without using substances.

When I entered recovery, I was told a story: a single story that weaves throughout the world of addiction and recovery; the miraculous transformation of the hopeless, wretched addict into a respectable and productive, if somewhat grizzled, member of society through adherence to a spiritual "program" which requires abandonment of the ego and mistrust of the self. I was taught that I was powerless over my affliction and that my circumstances were the result of my foolish attempts to manage my own life. I was taught that my only chance for success lay in turning over my life to a higher power, and surrendering my very will on a daily basis. This story is so pervasive that it shapes the very experience of addiction, presaging the treatment and recovery experience. (Pols & Smart, 2012).

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## "The full recovery experience is unfettered and takes place out in the open, surrounded not by an insular layer of fellow recovering people, but by people."

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The quality of services offered to people in recovery is limited by content steeped in turn-of-the-20th-century folk wisdom and the esoteric ramblings of two Depression-era alcoholics, despite advances in psychology and medicine that offer much higher rates of success. This is often due to dogmatic adherence to abstinence-only models, which harken to the Temperance movement of the late 19th century and which are the basis for the twelve-step programs. In this sense, there exists a privileged group within the recovery population. The twelve-step paradigm and the concepts therein dominate any conversation about recovery, and it takes a concerted effort to think outside of this construct. Those who wish to propose alternative theories of addiction or recovery are up against generations of self-referential popular science, a virtual monolith of recovery thought that crowds out any competing ideas. These archaic treatment methods contradict and undermine other proven methods, limiting their success and often resulting in death (Peele, 2014; Cherkis, 2015).

Just as with other oppressed groups, a fierce sense of identity and distinction has existed alongside our fight for equality and acceptance; and as with the others, these two realms are not mutually exclusive. Being treated like everyone else does not mean that we have to be like everyone else. By the same token, recovery must not be an albatross on our necks. We do not have to exist in a bubble in order to preserve who we are and where we came from. As we orient more of our

systems towards recovery and it increasingly resembles the generalized concepts of health and wellness, it will become necessary for us to be fluent and proficient in the larger context. The delineation between us and "earthlings" or "normies" must be erased. Recovery, ultimately, is not apprenticeship, but mastery. The full recovery experience is unfettered and takes place out in the open, surrounded not by an insular layer of fellow recovering people but by people. The real recovery community is the community. Recovery is not a consolation prize, an approximation or a microcosm of life, it is about rejoining the human race as a full participant and contender for life's biggest prizes. Recovery must not be *in vitro*; true recovery is *in vivo*. Recovery is nothing less than life itself.

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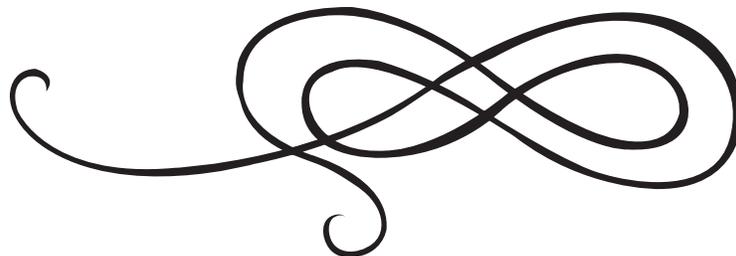
# CONTRIBUTORS

**ANTAR BUSH AKA TAR!** is a native of Philadelphia and has been a graduate student at West Chester University (Philadelphia) since 2014. TAR! is an enthusiastic social researcher, mentor, and writer on social justice issues. He is the author of *"What Happens in Prison Stays in Prison"* in 2015 VOICES, and is currently working on a series of essays chronicling his experiences with the criminal justice system. His background in LGBT public health, criminal justice, and social work arenas has led him to a number of opportunities and community leadership roles. TAR! will be graduating with his MSW from West Chester University in May 2016.

**DOMINIQUE DAVENPORT** is an MSW candidate set to graduate in May 2016. She is a career changer who received her B.A. in Broadcasting from Temple University. As a former preschool teacher and volunteer for Big Brothers Big Sisters Organization, Dominique has a passion for the child population and strives to be an advocate for their younger voices. She likes to keep a mindset based on positivity and resilience on her path to success.

**SALLY EBERHARDT**, MA, MSW (WCU '15) came to social work after many years of working professionally in the field of international justice and human rights and as an activist in anti-war campaigning, economic and social rights movements, and with Occupy Philadelphia. Since graduating from WCU, she has been working as a geriatric social worker at Mercy LIFE (Living Independently for Elders) in West Philadelphia, a job she loves.

**KATHLEEN HESS** is an MSW candidate who is expected to graduate in 2018. She holds a B.S. in Criminal Justice, with a minor in Psychology. Currently, Kathleen works as a victim advocate for the organization Families of Murder Victims/Anti-Violence Partnership. She is very passionate about working with young adults who are living with a mental illness and substance abuse issues. Kathleen believes that accurate intervention and support can help one overcome adversity. She also strongly believes in the value of sharing our unique stories to inspire and guide others on their journey.

**LIVY IAQUINTO** is an MSW candidate, May 2016. She completed her undergraduate degree in Psychology at West Chester University. Her passions include: social justice, mentoring, learning, reading, and writing. In the future, she looks forward to being an awesome therapist out in the real world, renting her own place, and adopting her very own cat.

**JAMIE MERWIN** is a first-year MSW Candidate. She earned her B.A. in History and Gender Studies from The New School. She currently works at Women of Hope-Vine, a residential facility in Philadelphia for women with severe mental illnesses and experiences of chronic homelessness. She hopes to realize her social work career aspirations in a clinical setting, blending her passion for social justice, anarcha-feminism, and fat activism.

**JEHAN MORSI** is a third culture kid (see Google) whose personal and professional contributions and aspirations are based upon the belief that every individual is an intrinsically sacred being. Her passion lies in facilitating evolution through self care and community-based efforts. She is an MSW candidate set to graduate May 2017.

**AMANDA NIES** is currently pursuing her MSW at West Chester University. She has spent the last six years working within the non-profit sector for which she developed a tremendous passion. Amanda has found great fulfillment in serving the needs of vulnerable populations. She has been writing creatively in various forms since she was seven years old. Her poetry is a passion, pride, and longtime friend.

**TERRY RAMSEY**, MSW candidate '18, is a first-year, part-time MSW student. After receiving a master's degree from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, she pursued a public sector career in work-family policy and a private sector position in market research before leaving to start a family. Returning to work after several years, her career interests shifted to health and wellness. She earned certifications in both personal training and nutrition counseling, and worked as a personal trainer and lifestyle coach in the YMCA's Diabetes Prevention Program. Upon graduation she plans to pursue clinical work in the areas of eating disorders and weight loss.

**ADAM SLEDD** is a person who has recovered from a substance use disorder. Adam's recovery allowed him to become a devoted husband and proud father as well as a second-year graduate student. Adam's undergraduate work was in Special Education ('98). Adam works as a substance use counselor for Gaudenzia, Inc. at the Coatesville Outpatient Program and works part time at Malvern Institute. He is also involved in policy work and program development with the Choice in Recovery Initiative of Young People in Recovery. Adam is a public recovery advocate and trained SMART Recovery facilitator.

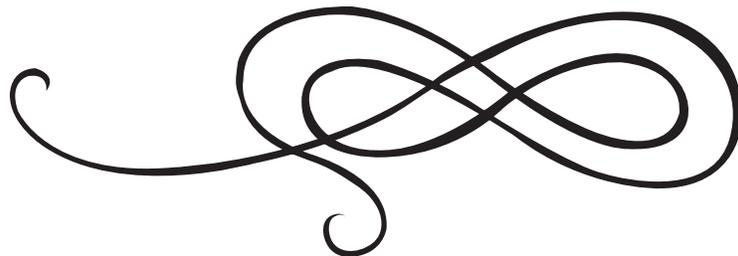# CALLING ALL SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATES!

Please join us in raising our individual and collective voices in the 7th issue of VOICES, the West Chester University MSW Program's student-led, peer-reviewed journal.

We are currently seeking personal perspectives on issues of social justice in written format, original art work, photography, and poetry for our Spring 2017 issue. All current and former WCU MSW students are invited to submit. Written submissions should be double-spaced, 12-pt font with 1-inch margins, APA style and include a cover page with contact information.

All submissions are "blind" reviewed by the Student Editors – your name is not attached in any way during the review process. If accepted for publication, you will be notified by the Faculty Advisor and then contacted by one of the Student Editors. All submissions are due (electronically) to the Faculty Advisor by a date TBD in Fall 2016/Winter 2017.

We hope you will become a part of this important and inspiring project about things that matter to us as social workers.

**Faculty Advisor:** Julie Tennille, MSW, PhD, jtennille@wcupa.edu

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