THE LOBSTER'S PROMOTION: SEA INSECT TO HUMAN BEING

XINGJIAN LI

David Foster Wallace, a writer and journalist, heads to the famous Maine Lobster Festival as a correspondent for a culinary magazine, *Gourmet*. He returns from his vacation with an essay titled "Consider the Lobster," which poses a series of existential questions about the ethics of eating animals. Wallace establishes the expectation that the Maine Lobster Festival would be "joyful" (1), with descriptions of contests, lobster-themed memorabilia, and a seemingly infinite variety of lobster treats. However, he soon dismantles this very expectation: he spends the bulk of the essay discussing lobster physiology and ruminating on whether the lobster could feel pain. "Consider the Lobster" culminates in a series of moral questions that corner us into evaluating our anthropocentricity.

The beginning of the essay hardly hints at the head-spinning journey that Wallace is about to embark upon. He starts off innocently enough: he makes the lobster seem neither interesting nor sympathetic. From the get-go, Wallace refers to it as "*Homarus americanus*," a "benthic carnivore," and an "aquatic arthropod" (1). Assuming that the general reader of *Gourmet* is no expert in taxonomy, the jargon distances the audience from the lobster by putting it under the scrutinizing, objectifying lenses of science. He then draws a parallel between bugs and lobsters. He says that the name "lobster" comes from the words "locust" and "spider," and lobsters are "giant sea-insects" (1). The descriptors become more nasty, and he says lobsters are "not nice to look at," are "eaters of dead stuff," "sometimes [eat] each other," and "might as well be from another planet" (1). He even says that they used to be seen as a "smelly nuisance" (2). His preoccupation with the lobster's appearance, eating habits, and blatant alienness serves to *other* the lobster: not only is it boring and insect-like, it is also strange and unrelatable. It is a little barbarian of the sea.

Luckily for us humans, the lobster is also high in protein, low in cholesterol, and can be prepared in a myriad of ways: "baked, broiled, steamed, grilled, sautéed, stir-fried, or microwaved" (3). It's "posh, a delicacy": rich, yet subtle (2). He lingers over the cooking contest portion of the festival, where contestants pay homage to the tasty creature by creating recipes for soufflés and other elaborate creations. Even when unceremoniously served in Styrofoam and NyQuil-sized cups and enjoyed on the overcrowded wooden benches of the festival, the lobster is still delicious. Wallace transforms the lobster into a luxurious, expensive treat, and the Maine Lobster Festival's noble mission is to make it more accessible.

If Wallace's purpose is to ask us to consider the lobster, so far he has not succeeded. His preoccupation with the lobster's deliciousness reflects how most people think of lobster, if they give it much thought to begin with. However, Wallace makes a sharp

tonal shift halfway through, and the lobster suddenly is no longer the sea barbarian nor the hard-to-access delicacy. He reveals that the lobster is remarkably similar to mammals and feels pain. If he wants us to have sympathy for the lobster, then why does he spend so much time othering it in the first place? To answer this question, we need to consider the rest of the essay, where he elicits sympathy for the lobster by anthropomorphizing it. By first echoing the attitude that most people use to rationalize animal consumption, he provides an accessible starting point from which we can problematize those rationalizations.

Wallace relies again on scientific jargon in a parallel to the beginning of his essay, though now the jargon depicts lobsters as complex, sentient creatures. He painstakingly describes lobster physiology to show that they will not feel indifferent about being boiled alive. He presents evidence that they may, in fact, feel more pain than humans. They have "an exquisite tactile sense, one facilitated by hundreds of thousands of tiny hairs," and they are even more vulnerable than mammals because their "neurological hardware" does not have the "built-in analgesia" to mitigate it (6). This time, when using scientific jargon, Wallace creates sympathy for the lobster as opposed to distancing it.

Outside of basic biology, we learn that lobsters also have preferences. Not only do they register the pain associated with being boiled alive, microwaved, or stabbed between the eyes, they definitely prefer not to undergo these treatments. They are known to migrate "100-plus miles a year" in order to find better water temperatures, which differ by only a couple of degrees (7). Since lobsters go out of their way to avoid the discomfort of a few degrees, they must be even more acutely aware of pain. Therefore, they actively suffer—both mentally and physically—when they experience it.

For those of us who are not at the Maine Lobster Festival watching 100-plus lobsters boiling in the biggest cooker in the world, a lesson in lobster biology is "abstract intellection" and would hardly elicit sympathy (7). To provoke our imagination, Wallace helpfully paints the scene common to any supermarket, where lobsters live under the "stresses of captivity" (3), as well as the scene at the Lobster Festival, where they "pile over one another," "huddle" together, and "scrabble frantically back from the glass" (7). Those words can easily describe a group of scared humans, and Wallace does not shy away from the comparison: he claims they look "unhappy, or frightened" (7). Insects are not usually given the emotion of fear, much less the ephemeral quality of happiness. After having established that keeping the lobster in captivity is cruel, Wallace points the proverbial finger at those of us in front of a lobster tank, where "you can pick out your supper while it watches you point" (3). The lobster, now simultaneously an object and a judge, is impossible to ignore.

If keeping a sentient creature in captivity is bad, then boiling it alive is even more heartless. Wallace now brings the lobster even closer, into our own kitchens, where it meets its demise. He says the lobster "cling[s]" to the pot and "hook[s] its claws over

the kettle's rim," not unlike "a person trying to keep from going over the edge of the roof" (5). Now, the lobster is not only a sentient, frightened creature; its behavior is almost human. In fact, it "behaves very much as you or I would behave if we were plunged into boiling water" (5). Wallace corners us—via the pronoun "you"—into using our full imaginations and empathy by picturing ourselves in the position of the lobster. Bit by bit, the lobster rises in the hierarchy of human imagination, from insect, to a cannibalistic barbarian, to a delicious meal, to a creature that feels pain, to a frightened animal, to a human, and ultimately—to "you or I."

In "Consider the Lobster," David Foster Wallace takes us on a journey that mirrors his own confusion: a chronicle of the uncomfortable process of confronting his anthropocentricity, which causes him to place his culinary preferences above a lobster's pain and life. If he had started the essay with a call to sympathize with the lobster, we might have dismissed the message as hippie-ish, overly sentimental, and jarring. Wallace's shift in tone ensures not only that we are aware of the cruelty of eating lobster, but also that we realize that our callous perspective has paved the way for this cruelty. Having provoked us to rethink our entire attitude towards animals, Wallace can now ask the hard-hitting questions: Is it ethical to eat animals that do not want to be eaten? What does it say about humanity that we make a spectacle out of what is essentially a giant slaughter fest? Is meat consumption justifiable when it is perfectly possible to be a healthy vegetarian? Wallace places his questions expertly in our minds, where they haunt us long after we finish reading the magazine.

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CORPORATE ETHICS AND ISLAMIC FINANCE: RECONTEXTUALIZING THE CONVERSATION

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While there is much focus on ethical business practice, nobody seems to agree on what, exactly, that ethical practice should look like. Some, like economist Clive Crook, feel that so long as companies act within the law and the constraints of "ordinary decency" (Sternberg qtd. in Clive 12), they are free to do whatever they see fit in their pursuit of profits. In other words, Crook argues, "the proper business of business is business" and nothing else (Clive 14). On the other end of the corporate ethics debate is economist Geoffrey Heal, who notes that conflicts "between social and corporate interests in general hurt both parties," and who therefore encourages corporations to take public welfare into account in their business dealings (18). These two theorists provide starkly contrasting views of what business is and should be, but they do share one common feature: both men focus exclusively on American business practices, from Heal's examination of "Wal-Mart and Starbucks and Monsanto" (3-4) to Crook's discussion of "Ford, General Motors, Procter & Gamble, [and] Time Warner" (7). The focus on American business shapes the claims that both men make, which are derived from a shared set of assumptions about the business world. Crook and Heal appear to take for granted that the American business model is the only one worth examining, and that the features of corporate America are universal to the discussion of business ethics in general. But what happens if these assumptions are stripped away? If the issue of business ethics is reframed in a non-American—and even non-Western—context, how does the conversation change? Are Crook and Heal's theories still valuable, or do they completely fall apart in a non-American business paradigm?

One of the most powerfully non-American paradigms, and therefore one of the best suited to an examination of these questions, is the world of Islamic finance. Islamic financial institutions (IFIs) are the largest investment banks found across the Muslim world. They function not only as corporations, but as religious and social institutions. In an article titled "On Corporate Social Responsibility of Islamic Financial Institutions," Sayd Farook writes that an IFI serves "to operate a financial intermediary for individuals in the community wishing to comply with Islamic law" (34). IFIs are banks like any other: they manage investments, offer loans, and hold accounts for clients looking to maximize the profit from their private assets. However, they are bound by a religious moral code that obviously does not guide the businesses discussed by Heal and Crook. Contrary to Crook's claim that the "perceived tension between private profit and public interest" is inescapable (7), the constitution of an IFI shows no conflict between the bank's private affairs and its obligation to uphold a larger moral standard and act for the public good.

The moral foundation of Islamic finance doesn't mesh with Crook and Heal's theories about business ethics. Both Crook and Heal seem to view companies as fundamentally self-interested and amoral. Even Heal, who argues in favor of more stringent restrictions in business, writes that ethical business practice "works well only if corporations do maximize profits" (17). Although he is concerned with social welfare, to him, it is a simple truth that businesses' primary concern is profit. Heal frames his discussion of business ethics in terms of private profit, trying to explain moral behavior on the grounds that "companies can gain financially from concern about environmental and social impacts of their activities" (2). This profit-first philosophy, however, cannot be accurately applied to Islamic financial institutions. Some of the most common practices in Islamic finance go directly against the principle of profit maximization; most notable among them is the *qarḍ ḥasan*, a form of interest-free loan offered by IFIs (Farook 40). Interest-free lending is required by the ethical structures that frame Islamic finance but is in direct conflict with the profit-based business model that Crook and Heal take for granted.

The assumption that corporations are driven by self-interest can be framed as a product of the cultural context in which both Crook and Heal operate: a humanistic, secular, Western culture. In particular, corporate America has been directly influenced by the thought of Scottish Enlightenment thinker Adam Smith and his claim that self-interest is the basis of a functional economy (Crook 9, Heal 4-5). Both theorists use Smith to try to further their understanding of corporations and corporate ethics, and with American case studies, it is fair of them to do so. Adam Smith is a thinker of the West, part of the eighteenth-century European school of thought that created the classical Western understanding of economics (Broadie). His theories emerged in a specific, inescapable cultural context; using Smithian thought as a theoretical lens will not provide a clear view of businesses outside of this context, and it is on this point that Crook and Heal stumble. They speak of Smithian business practices as if such practices were universal, when actually they are contextually dependent. In its statement on corporate social responsibility, the Institute of Islamic Banking and Insurance—an IFI based in London—notes that those "who hold materialistic-secular views will tend to approach social and business problems and issues from different premises and perspectives as compared to those holding the Islamic worldview" (3). In other words, the constitution of an IFI is fundamentally different enough from that of a private American corporation to problematize the application of Crook and Heal's unstated assumption of profit as a company's primary—or only—goal.

Furthermore, if this assumption is born out of an unquestioned reliance on Adam Smith's theories, then the debate about non-Western business ethics can be reframed. The question of whether Crook and Heal can be applied to IFIs is really a question about the applicability of a Smithian paradigm. When Heal describes Smith's theories as "some of the eternal verities of economics" (4), his generalization is simply too broad to be of any use. Crook's claim that Smith "wrote the book on corporate social

responsibility" (9) is accurate insofar as Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* captures the ethical questions at the heart of Western businesses, but it is still inadequate. Western corporations that fit into a Smithian paradigm do so not because the paradigm is universally applicable, but because they are *designed* to fit into it. These businesses are founded and managed by Western thinkers who subscribe to Smith's worldview, and so they are actively shaped to be Smithian. IFIs, however, evolved independently of Adam Smith's thought, and it is apparent that they do not fit into his conceptual framework of business. The Smithian view of business is fundamentally flawed: it serves only to prescribe a certain viewpoint in the practice of business, and it is inadequate as a broader descriptive tool for companies that aren't subject to its prescriptions.

Are Crook, Heal, and Smith then useless in any non-American discussion of business ethics? Are their unstated assumptions about the nature and function of business so strong as to make their theories irredeemable? Perhaps not entirely. What is certain is that their ideas need to be recontextualized and applied in new ways. For example, Crook's contention that ethical business practice can be reduced to the principle of "ordinary decency" (12) still applies in the Islamic context. No one in the world of Islamic finance has claimed that IFIs should *not* behave decently. The difference is that IFIs have a much broader definition of what "ordinary decency" looks like. For Crook, decency is a list of things not to do; a company is decent so long as it refrains from "lying, cheating, stealing, killing, coercion, physical violence and most illegality" (Sternberg qtd. in Crook 12). IFIs, on the other hand, are obligated not only to act within the constraints of temporal law, but to ensure "that all aspects of their operations should be conducted in a [religiously] permissible or recommended manner" (Farook 35). They are subject to additional constraints that go untouched by Crook's vision of business: they must contribute a portion of their profits to charity, make allowances for poor debtors unable to repay their loans, and invest only in sectors that align with Islamic moral principles (Farook 38-39). All of these restrictions, though seemingly unrealistic and certainly excessive by Crook's definition, are simply considered part of ordinary decency in the world of Islamic finance. The notion of "ordinary decency" is not nearly as straightforward as Crook seems to think, and is actually dependent on the cultural context in which a company operates.

This broadened definition of such a simple principle has staggering implications for the discussion of corporate ethics, not only in the context of Islamic finance, but in the world at large. The concept of decency can be extremely broad or extremely narrow depending on context, and the ambiguity of the term is a major problem for Crook's argument. Many of the practices that Crook considers perfectly acceptable—driving competitors out of business, creating barriers to entry in a market, and so on (14)—can be gross violations of ordinary decency in non-American moral systems. When the element of cultural relativism is introduced into the conversation, those practices can no longer be justified by Crook's principle, even in the original American

cultural context. If ordinary decency does not *always*, and universally, allow for certain business practices, then it cannot *ever* be invoked as a sufficient justification for a company's indulging in those practices.

Here, it is important to specify the stakes of this argument. Whether antisocial, profit-oriented business practices are actually morally justified, in some external sense, is beside the point. The question is rather about the broader applicability of the criteria used to evaluate those practices. If Smithian theorists wish to continue to justify profit-driven behaviors on moral grounds, they must find a way to do so that does not rely on a contextually confined model of business. A discussion of corporate ethics—whether on the level of what companies are or of what they should be—must necessarily take into account the realities of business on a global scale, and not just one version of business filtered through a specific cultural lens. The steadfast belief that "managers, acting in their professional capacity, ought not to concern themselves with the public good" (Crook 14) is best abandoned, because this normative claim does not withstand cross-cultural scrutiny. Instead, theorists using Crook's ideas would do well to understand that the relationship between a company's managers and society need not be exclusively one of profit maximization. His claim that "where the law does not create accountability to non-owners, there is none" (13) may be false, but that does not have to invalidate the larger idea of his argument; a more inclusive, less context-dependent sense of "ordinary decency" can still be the foundation of business ethics.

What, exactly, does looking at IFIs reveal about corporate ethics? It uncovers the things that are being taken for granted in the conversation about this key issue. It calls into question assumptions, like the Smithian business model, that would otherwise go unremarked, and it necessitates a broadening of the conversation. Looking at corporate ethics through the lens of Islamic finance opens theories up to make them more comprehensive and better suited to a universal understanding of business ethics. In turn, these broadened theories can be reapplied in the Western context that started the debate. How do the practices of American corporations come into question when evaluated with non-Smithian principles designed for application to a global business community? How would the world of American finance in particular compare to IFIs when stripped of a Smithian context? These are some of the biggest questions raised by Islamic financial ethics, and they will help to push the Smithian ethics debate forward.

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GETTING A BAD RAP: HOW WE DISCUSS HIP HOP IN AMERICA AND ISRAEL

ZAK ALDRIDGE

On a recent trip to Israel, I sat on a bus winding slowly down roads in the Carmel Hills, leaving a youth camp for inner-city Ethiopian Israelis. This camp, a kind of fresh-air program, seeks to nurture the teenagers of Israel's poorest immigrant class in a safe environment far removed from the ghettos in which they were raised. The tour guide on the bus described these ghettos, saying, "There's violence, drug abuse and poverty, and many of these teenagers are listening to gangsta rap from America, so you can see where it comes from." In that cursory, casual even, statement on a bus in Carmel, thousands of miles from Harlem and the Bronx, I was stunned. Not only had hip hop and gangsta rap (a generally violent and highly commercialized sub-genre of hip hop) been wrongly conflated, but the argument that the art form is a cause of black suffering—the same argument frequently made in America—had reared its head just as boldly in Israel. I began to wonder about the conversations being had about hip hop that support such a belief across the globe, and what effect they have on disenfranchised blacks in America and Israel.

Though I did not expect "gangsta rap" would come up in discussion on a bus in such a remote place in Israel, the general vilification of all hip hop is so ubiquitous that it should not have come as a surprise. As the tour guide went on to laud "coexistence efforts," I turned to look out the window, gradually tuning her out. Listening to the real spokespersons, I decided, would be better than listening to the guide and shaking my head in frustration, so I put my earbuds in to reach the source with Nas and Tupac, American hip hop giants from the 1990s and 2000s. Tupac asserts, "Instead of a war on poverty, / They got a war on drugs so the police can bother me" ("Changes"), while Nas calls out Western hegemony: "Assassinations / Diplomatic relations / Killed indigenous people / Built a new nation" ("America"), lyrics that call out systems of oppression and colonial projects of nation-building that serve a ruling class through the suffering of an oppressed population. The work of both rappers found its way into my ruminations on hip hop and race and the conversations I heard regarding both in America and Israel.

Nas, a towering hip hop figure in New York since his debut album *Illmatic* in 1994, was interviewed on CNN in 2009 about his lyrics and gang violence in Chicago. In the interview, Don Lemon, the correspondent, repeatedly tries to get Nas to claim responsibility for ghetto violence via an album he recorded ten years earlier, specifically a track called "Shoot 'em Up." Lemon asks him whether he thinks his music influences the violence, and Nas replies, "It's the obvious thing for the media to kind of point out one of [my] most violent lyrical records. . . . I made records about children and

struggle, and those are never the songs that are talked about. . . . There's only attention put on the songs where there's violence in it, but the reality is, I'm only speaking about reality" ("NAS on CNN"). Nas points out, crucially, that there are two conversations being had around the issue: one about the alleged influence hip hop has on black crime and another about the conversation itself, how hip hop is discussed in mainstream media. Speaking just as much to the sort of error my tour guide made in conflating gangsta rap with the larger genre of hip hop as he is responding to Lemon, Nas isolates the correspondent's conflation of one violent song with his entire discography. This conflation precludes any meaningful, honest discussion. When pushed further to answer for black violence and the agency of hip hop stars, Nas again directs the conversation to lived experience and the historical grounds frequently overlooked in external perceptions of ghetto life: "Violence was here. . . . Violence and war has been the things that's even built this country. A rap song in the 21st century influencing violence is a joke" ("NAS on CNN"). Far from circumventing a conversation on violence and incitement, Nas focuses on larger themes that acknowledge the history and daily realities of disenfranchised blacks, suggesting this needs to occur first before a productive conversation can be had about those realities or the music that is most frequently associated with them.

By centering not on the rhetoric of hip hop, but on the rhetoric of the conversation around hip hop, Nas aims to destabilize the normalization of black crime and the musical influence thereof. He focuses on origins of issues and root causes, rather than contemporary perceptions of and commercial backlash against popular songs. Indeed, Tricia Rose, professor of Africana Studies at Brown University and widely published commentator on hip hop, names Nas in her 2008 book *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* as a rapper who engages "eloquently and at length in . . . the polarized debates over violence and sexism in hip hop" broadcasted in the mainstream media (269). Supporting his claim on CNN that he has been responsible for songs that talk about struggle and not about violence alone, Rose draws attention to lyrics Nas wrote in "Gangsta Tears" that, as she puts it, "tap into the pain, loss, and seemingly permanent cycle of retribution" that influence the rap he and many other artists put out (57). Rose is keen on incorporating the historical and sociological underpinnings of hip hop and black disenfranchisement. Hip hop, she argues, is not an example of "black cultural dysfunction," the myth that blacks are inherently drawn to destitution and, in her words, "the very same argument that deemed blacks suitable for enslavement," but rather, hip hop is an expression and writing back of that history of racism (64). Similarly, a grasp on the history of Ethiopian migration to Israel and the subsequent ghettoization of that population may help people understand "where they get it" with greater nuance and generosity.

Between 1984 and 1991, the vast majority of Jews living in Ethiopia were brought to Israel in what should have been a glorious arrival in the Jewish State (Shabtay 94). Yet, owing to the predominantly white hierarchy of power in Israel, the Ethiopians'

arrival was met with skepticism of their religiosity and racial discrimination on a structural level that has since marginalized them in Israeli society and spawned a first generation of ghettoized Ethiopian-Israelis who are struggling to understand where they fit in (Shabtay 94-95). Some are realizing that they don't fit in, as one man describes in "'RaGap': Music and Identity Among Young Ethiopians in Israel," a scholarly article by Dr. Malka Shabtay: "You feel betrayed and are called 'n*****'. You made it to Israel and it doesn't work" (100). Shabtay, an applied anthropologist whose work largely focuses on the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel, points out that many alienated black Jews from poor, crime-ridden communities listen to American hip hop as a coping mechanism: "What they [American rappers] have been through is similar to what we have been through here. They lived in a poor social environment; they face racism everywhere they go. Now they have progressed . . . I believe that we shall progress as well, in spite of our skin colour," said one Ethiopian Israeli interviewed (Shabtay 100). Despite what may be an oversimplified assumption of progress and directionality for black Americans in this quote, a clear commonality of struggle comes through this logic—commonality not in violent resistance, but in blackness and voicelessness. Incidentally, both blackness and voicelessness are cornerstones of hip hop.

The distance between Ethiopian Israelis and the origins of hip hop in the United States, though exceedingly vast, does not rule out the closely shared experience of alienation and marginalization in black communities that defines much of hip hop. This art form, in both communities, is the device by which oppression is given a name by the otherwise voiceless, hidden people suffering from it. Acclaimed hip hop commentator Jay Smooth posits in a video monologue that hip hop made it so "America's most invisible people could be seen and heard," a development that one would think to be a positive step toward justice and equality. Yet, ironically, it is this attention to black voices and their lived realities, Smooth asserts, that makes hip hop a target for critics such as Don Lemon and the tour guide. Smooth claims that the effect of hip hop's popularity and listenership was a shift in media coverage where, as he puts it, "they stopped ignoring us and started being scared of us." Safiya Umoja Noble, an assistant professor in the Department of Media and Cinema Studies and the Institute for Communications Research at the University of Illinois, argues in "Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle" that this reaction of fear of hip hop is rooted in its commodification, packaged as "black masculinity as criminality" (15). Thus, beyond the specific words and imagery associated with hip hop and especially gangsta rap, Noble points to a larger system of oppression in which "[s]elling criminality is big business" (15). Perhaps the tour guide had been caught up in this false notion that hip hop is criminal by virtue of its commodification rather than from having listened to the music itself. In this way, it would seem that the wrong conversation around hip hop speaks to more than just music; all the facets of

production of hip hop, from a rapper's inspiration to the sale of an album, risk scapegoating black crime in mainstream media spheres.

If the discussion around hip hop and its listenership is, as Noble indicates, rooted not just in the lyrics, then perhaps the focal point is black identity itself. Beyond catchy rhythms and rhymes, the shared stake Ethiopian Israelis have in issues raised by legends such as Nas and his 1990s-era hip hop contemporaries, as well as artists that have both preceded and followed him, is their identity as oppressed blacks. Nevertheless, scrutiny of hip hop rarely examines black oppression and empowerment, but rather the popular verses that stand out as edgy or inappropriate to the mainstream public audience. In her book *The Hip Hop Wars,* Rose describes the commercialization of hip hop and its subsequent mainstream attention through a paradigm she calls the "trinity of commercial hip hop": gangstas, pimps, and hoes (4). This combination, she acknowledges, earns good money and good ratings but is wrongly made the face of hip hop and the bane of ghetto ills. Rose argues that this commercial trinity "has become the fuel that propels public criticism of young black people" through a framework, a trinity in itself, of *one*: unfairly generalizing all hip hop; *two*: discussing it in a tone of disdain and disregard; and *three*: leaving out the real issue of structural racism and its effects on black communities (7). Each of these three concerns is evident in the Nas interview with Don Lemon in which, *one*: a single, decade-old violent song is misleadingly made the face of Nas's artistry; *two*: accusation is the only rhetorical strategy Lemon wields; and *three*: the deep-seated issues of racism and violence in America are not the points of discussion until Nas makes them the points of discussion. Like Lemon's rhetoric, the tour guide's stereotyping of hip hop, condescension toward it, and omission of Israeli racism violate each of the three points by which Rose's standard, the rap trinity, is maintained, demonstrating that those pitfalls are not limited to the American critique of hip hop.

What Rose's analysis of hip hop's public reception shows is simply that critics generally miss the mark in their conversations on hip hop. Beneath the commercial rap trinity and misdirected contempt for hip hop, especially that rhetoric that is supposedly aimed at helping black people, lies a world of political and unified sound that crosses borders and perseveres despite vilification. One song I listened to on the bus in Carmel to melt my frustration with the tour guide's remark was Tupac's "Keep Ya Head Up" in which he asks the "real men" to "get up" and for the ladies to "keep [their] head[s] up" in the face of sexism and objectification. Citing politicians' attempts at policing the womb, for one, Tupac demonstrates with ease the conversation being had in hip hop verses that do not seem to make Don Lemon's CNN segment or my tour guide's iTunes library. To the contrary, Tupac's art form is extremely political and in close contact with the lives of blacks in ghettos, a style that endears him to Ethiopian-Israeli rapper David, who said, "*Dans ses chansons Tupac parle de racism . . . Il capte des segments de la vie quotidienne, de la vie du quartier tu sais . . . c'est comme s'il vit ici en Israël,*" which translates as, "In his songs Tupac speaks about racism . . . captures

segments of daily life, the life of the neighborhood . . . it is as if he lives here in Israel" (Djerrahian 39). Gabriella Djerrahian, an anthropologist at McGill University, quotes David, a first-generation Ethiopian Israeli, in an article published in 2010 entitled "*Éléments d'une négritude mondialisée: le hip-hop et la conscience raciale chez de jeunes Israéliens d'origine éthiopienne*" ("Elements of Globalized Blackness: The Hip Hop and Racial Conscience Among Young Israelis of Ethiopian Origin"). Another young Ethiopian Israeli interviewed by Shabtay states, "We are influenced more and more by the music, and as we become more involved in learning who makes the music and how they live, we identify with them," explicating a process of finding a voice and a vehicle of expression in much the same way Smooth described as having taken place in the early American hip hop scene (Shabtay 100). To David, the first native Hebrew speaker in his family, music and shared identity as oppressed blacks speaks louder than nationality and/or ethnicity; to him, the music spans borders and gives a kind of agency to a population only just beginning to recover from the collective trauma of migration and assimilation in a foreign country.

David's quote relates to the work of Columbia University ethnomusicologist Nili Belkind in her doctoral thesis, "Music in Conflict: Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Aesthetic Production." Here, Belkind explores modes of music production that have been used to establish domestic solidarity and peace among members of Israel's diverse ethnic patchwork. Describing "bulldozer night," an outdoor concert that protested an Israeli-planned home demolition, Belkind recounts performances of local hip hop artists who rapped in several languages, representing a wealth of diversity in a show put on to save a Palestinian person's home from being destroyed. Belkind's reflection speaks to the binding ties of music beyond its capacity to entertain: "struggles over meaning and territory, the nation and its 'others,' are not necessarily signified through specific musical genres, styles and performance practices . . . but rather, through the contexts in which they are deployed to collective ends" (35). In this spirit of understanding cross-cultural differences and similarities through music, hip hop serves as a global forum of idea sharing, as already evidenced by the inspiration David derives from Tupac. Belkind's assertion, furthermore, adds another dimension to the oneness Ethiopian Israelis feel with American blacks through the lyrics of American rappers: although the places are different and each song is different, hip hop is a vehicle for identifying a collective struggle.

For all the frustration I felt on that bus in Carmel, it is only fair to acknowledge what was correct in the tour guide's remark. There is indeed violence, drug abuse, and poverty in Ethiopian communities in Israel, and it also would seem that some Ethiopian Israelis are indeed listening to American hip hop, in one form or another. These facts established, what may follow is either a productive conversation that acknowledges racist power structures and historical disenfranchisement of blacks or a misdirected conversation that focuses on the gangstas, pimps, and hoes that others believe are fostering criminality in black communities. What cannot be touched by

either conversation, however, is the reality that hip hop as an art form, despite a world of detractors, does something remarkable in giving voice and visibility to black struggle far beyond the ghettos of the United States where rappers such as Nas and Tupac found inspiration in oppression. Their suffering, racist suffering, is not limited to America, and where it exists in Israel, it is a source of both artistic creativity and global solidarity transmitted through music.

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MOTHERSTRUCK!: THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE

XINGJIAN LI

Despite having oscillated from "radical feminist" to "moderate feminist" to "better-informed radical feminist," I've always been ambivalent about a popular feminist topic: abortion. "XingJian," you might say, "you intern at Planned Parenthood. What could you possibly be ambivalent about?" The answer lies in my annoyance with the rhetoric that equates a pro-choice stance exclusively with abortion access. Abortion access is important. Nevertheless, in the fight for reproductive freedom, it's easy to overlook that the decision to *have* a child can be just as controversial and stigmatized as the decision to abort a fetus. Furthermore, the social acceptance of this decision is inextricably linked to a woman's race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and many more factors. To put it bluntly, for women without a white picket fence, a stable white-collar job (or a white-collar breadwinner), and a wholesome, heterosexual marriage, having a kid can be a much frowned-upon decision.

Staceyann Chin, a single Jamaican lesbian poet living in a not-yet-gentrified part of Brooklyn, chronicles this decision in *MotherStruck!*, her one-woman show. The show, which was directed by Cynthia Nixon, ran from December 2015 to January 2016 at the Lynn Redgrave Theater—only a few steps away from the Manhattan clinic of Planned Parenthood. When I heard Chin was doing a one-woman show, I was beyond excited. Chin is an incredible writer and a renowned activist. Her slam poem, "All Oppression is Connected," is one of the most powerful manifestos for intersectionality that I have ever experienced. Her memoir of her childhood, *The Other Side of Paradise*, is alternately hilarious, sad, and hopeful. *MotherStruck!* is closer to a memoir than a manifesto, but Chin's struggles in conceiving and parenting a child still prompt a political question: In our society, who gets to have kids?

When Chin first plans to have a child, she's married. Her husband, Peter, is also gay, so their nuclear family is a bit unorthodox. Regardless, they are prepared for parenthood. However, before they can make that happen, a not-yet 30-year-old Peter passes away. In her grief, Chin hatches a new plan. She decides that she will meet the love of her life, and afterwards:

> We will spend 2.25 years reveling in the magic of our romance. Then, over careful, respectful, non-hostile negotiations and even more careful planning, we'd select the perfect sperm donor, who would have to, of course, be the exact combination of both our ethnicities, to assist in conceiving the radical feminist ninja messiah we intend to release upon the Patriarchy. (Chin)

At this point, it is hard to not admire Chin for her hilariously meticulous fantasy. Unfortunately, her plan doesn't quite pan out, and after a series of breakups, Chin resolves to raise a radical feminist ninja messiah on her own. Despite a uterine tumor, flakey sperm donors, and a failed at-home artificial insemination attempt, she finally gives birth to a child, Zuri, at the end of Act I.

Act II focuses on the difficulties of single motherhood. Chin is a successful poet and author: she has published a well-received memoir, performs regularly, and tours internationally. Nevertheless, she is financially unstable. Soon after giving birth, she goes on tour with her suitcase in one hand and her daughter in the other in order to pay her bills. She goes home to Jamaica, finds her mother in Berlin, and is tempted by a friend to move to Fort Lauderdale. While Act I is an exploration of how to get pregnant, Act II hints at a more uncomfortable question that Suzanna Bowling articulates in a short review for the *Times Square Chronicles*: "Who is paying for that child you so desperately wanted?"

This question is a common one, and conservatives and liberals alike level it at single mothers. Dr. David Green, who directs the conservative think tank Civitas in the United Kingdom, callously asserts: "If you haven't got the money, you shouldn't have children" (Martin). In 2015, traditionally centrist publications like "the *New York Times*, *Slate*, and the *American Journal of Public Health* . . . published articles recommending increased use of provider-controlled long-acting contraceptives among low-income populations in order to reduce poverty, high school drop-out rates, and Medicaid costs" (Roberts 80). Reproductive choices of poor people are scrutinized, because the common answer to resolve poverty is for them to stop reproducing.

Conservative and liberal rhetorics converge into one theme: responsibility. The underlying assumption is that childrearing is a private choice that needs to be made within a societal context. The responsibility falls on potential parents—specifically, women—to evaluate whether they should have children. Rickie Solinger, a historian and curator, explains that there are various social factors that determine whether a woman's reproductive choices are legitimate (3). Often, these choices are considered to be more morally justifiable if a woman is married, white, financially stable, and able-bodied. Chin's decision is ambiguous: even though she read many prenatal books and paid handsomely for the technology to impregnate herself, she is single and does not have a stable income. Is Chin's decision moral?

Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, explains that there are five primary spheres of our moral sense: harm, justice, community, purity, and authority (36). Each society ranks the five spheres differently, and they sometimes clash with one another. In the West, Pinker argues, harm and justice are held to be paramount (52). From this model, it is not difficult to see why the choice for a woman like Chin to have a child can be seen as immoral. It would be harmful to the child if she were to be brought up in an environment that does not meet her needs. If society takes the responsibility to pay for the child to avoid the previous scenario, it's unjust,

because other people become responsible for a decision that they did not make. Both these arguments are contingent on taking an individualistic perspective of society, but we would be mistaken to believe it is the only way to see the world. What happens if we also value the moral sphere of "community?" Generally, people who care about community "value loyalty to a group, sharing and solidarity among its members and conformity to its norms" (Pinker 36). If we look at child rearing from a community-centered perspective, we see that the rhetoric of individual choice ignores a glaring question: Have we designed our communities to empower families and raise healthy children? More importantly, should we?

Members of the reproductive justice movement would unhesitatingly answer "yes" to the second question, and "no" to the first. The term "reproductive justice" was coined in 1994 and was popularized by the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective in 2003. At its core, the reproductive justice framework is community-centered. This is reflected in SisterSong's mission statement: "Doing Collectively What We Cannot Do Individually" ("SisterSong"). According to the Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, one of the organizations that founded SisterSong, reproductive justice is:

> [T]he complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic, and social well-being of women and girls, and will be achieved *when women and girls have the economic, social and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, sexuality and reproduction for ourselves, our families and our communities in all areas of our lives.* (ACRJ 1)

ACRJ makes the distinction between reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice. Reproductive health is a service delivery-based framework with the underlying assumption that issues are rooted in a lack of services. Advocates of reproductive rights, on the other hand, believe that the lack of individual rights and access are the root of the problem. Reproductive justice is an intersectional model. In practice, that model means explicitly tackling issues of poverty, racism, and other factors that contribute to reproductive oppression (ACRJ 1). Kimala Price, an associate professor of women and gender studies at the University of San Diego, explains that reproductive justice can encompass and expand upon the first two frameworks: it "supports keeping abortion legal and advocates for women's right not to have children, but also for women's right to *have* children and to *parent* the children that they have" (56). It is unsurprising that this framework, focusing so much on the importance of solidarity and community, is unpopular in a nation that romanticizes pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. Protecting women's right to have children and to parent involves the creation of a supportive infrastructure.

Rhonda Copelon, a human rights lawyer, states that the lack of community sentiment stems from the assumption that "the personal is separate from the political, and that the larger social structure has no impact on private, individual choice" (33).

This is simply untrue. Women face a host of societal pressures when it comes to their reproductive choices, and these pressures vary. For instance, Loretta J. Ross, one of the founding organizers of SisterSong, points out that white women are encouraged to reproduce and that their oppression has been rooted in social barriers that prevent them from accessing contraceptives and abortion. Women of color, on the other hand, have been discouraged from having children. They have been targets of sterilization, welfare family caps, and forced contraception (3). Therefore, proponents for access to abortion and contraception indirectly engage in a narrative that further marginalizes women of color. A choice cannot be considered a choice when there are elements of coercion; a reproductive justice framework recognizes and examines these elements.

Recognizing and examining these elements is what *MotherStruck!* does so well. While Chin does not explicitly focus on her multifaceted identity, her show demonstrates that her family background, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation are inextricable from her journey of motherhood. Chin was abandoned by her father at birth and seldom saw her mother. Her frame of reference to motherhood is already unusual and distant, and she has to find guidance elsewhere. She's a lesbian and a survivor of corrective rape, and understandably does not want to conceive via heterosexual sex. Therefore, her impregnation options are limited to a syringe and a soy sauce dish or a trip to a clinic. If she had not been a successful poet, her journey in search of a child may have very well ended after the first couple of failed attempts. After the birth of her child, Chin discovers how hard it is to be a single working mother. She tells us about the people who have helped her along the way: her friends; a police officer who gives her a ride home; Peter's little brother, who ends up being her sperm donor. Even if Chin did not intend to juxtapose her supportive community against the absence of state-funded, family-planning infrastructure, her story shows us that in a society where having a child is subject to so much scrutiny, solidarity and friendship can support a family. In this sense, *MotherStruck!* is a heartwarming story about the power of a connected community in the face of an individualistic society.

MotherStruck! is an effective addition to the reproductive justice movement because it harnesses the art of storytelling. When it is employed as a form of activism, the goals of storytelling are to "enhance representation, educate, strengthen communal bonds, and mediate between policymakers and constituents" (Lenart-Cheng and Walker 152). Stories can achieve these goals because they humanize. Many people have been reduced to stereotypes and statistics, but when we are invited into their worlds and listen to their narratives, we come to sympathize with their emotions, rationalizations, and decisions. Ultimately, we identify with them and become willing to extend solidarity. This is of utmost importance in reproductive justice because the public strips poor, non-white women of their humanity. Franklin Gilliam, a former professor of political science and public policy at University of California, Los Angeles, conducted an experimental study about perceptions of the "welfare queen" through which he discovered that people immediately recognize the "welfare queen" as a black

woman with children (49-50). Furthermore, after people see a black "welfare queen," they become more opposed to public spending (Gilliam 52). Black women's reproductive choices and poverty have converged into a derogatory caricature, and people make political decisions contingent upon this stereotype. In light of this dehumanization of black women, *MotherStruck!* becomes an even more important play. A black woman affirming her right to have a child is nothing short of an act of resistance.

Chin successfully pulls at our heartstrings in her one-woman show, which is no easy task. It's already hard for a single person to command attention for two hours, and the difficulty is compounded by a lack of suspense: She regularly features Zuri on her Facebook page, so many members of the audience, including me, already know that Chin has a child. Still, I found myself enraptured. Chin is forceful and explosive and communicates nuance via her intense eyes and vivacious facial expressions. She frequently contorts her body, subdues her voice and even darts into the audience. Her dynamic presence is more than enough for the tiny stage.

Interestingly, many critics failed to pick up on the underlying reproductive justice themes in Chin's work. Charles Isherwood wrote a glowing review of *MotherStruck!* in the *New York Times* that focuses on her charisma, powerful delivery, and hilarious storytelling. He remarks that it's great that she got the child she has always wanted, despite the odds. To him, *MotherStruck!* is a story about overcoming individual obstacles and reaching personal fulfillment through hard work, luck, and interpersonal support. Isherwood does not engage with the potentially controversial topic of having the "right" to bear children. Similarly, David Spencer, writing for *The Village Voice*, praises her for her dynamic and cathartic monologue, yet also shies away from the controversy. This is probably because she does not pose the difficult reproductive justice questions explicitly: Do women have the right to have and raise children? If so, how do we protect that right?

Admittedly, I had expected Chin to bluntly criticize a society that makes it so difficult to have kids. After all, she is a known for blending political commentary into her art. However, in *MotherStruck!*, she does not blame anyone for structuring a world where raising a child is an individual effort. Even though Chin doesn't think her decision to be a mother is irresponsible, she does emphasize—through a series of anecdotes—that she is dedicated and hardworking. She goes to lengths to demonstrate that she has "earned" her right to motherhood, despite her financial instability, because she does everything she can for her child. Does her focus on individual effort somehow undermine the message that women should be supported in childrearing? Perhaps. When we look at her work through a reproductive justice lens, we can see that she had to depict herself as hardworking in order for the audience to sympathize with her. In a society already so hostile towards "freeloaders" and "welfare queens," the outspoken, immigrant, and black Staceyann Chin cannot outright assert that she is entitled to have children without coming under a barrage of attacks from critics.

Therefore, as viewers we must go the extra step and draw the connection to reproductive justice after she has laid the groundwork for the conversation.

Even though the theatre critics seemed oblivious to Chin's cues, reproductive freedom advocates were quick to recognize the underlying message. Alexander Sanger, the chair of the International Planned Parenthood Council, penned a short opinion piece in the *Huffington Post* after watching the show. He said that her story reminded him that the decision to become pregnant is as important as the one to terminate a pregnancy, and both decisions need to be supported. Planned Parenthood of New York City's Activist Council also hosted a panel discussion after a performance. The reception of *MotherStruck!* by reproductive health advocates is encouraging. It's a sign that the unique reproductive obstacles faced by women of color are being heard.

The morality of Staceyann Chin's choice, when viewed through the lens of "harm" and "fairness," can seem dubious. However, through adopting the value of "community," the question shifts from whether it is moral for a woman to have a child in a financially unstable situation to whether it is moral for members of a society not to create infrastructure that facilitates family planning. Reproductive justice is about making the meaningful decision to become a parent, without coercive forces that masquerade as individual choice. Chin hints at an idea that discomfits progressives and conservatives alike: Women have the right to have children, even when they are not completely financially and romantically stable. This claim seems outlandish to many. However, when we apply the lens of reproductive justice, it's clear that it's the system—not the women—that needs to be fixed.

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NO JUSTICE IN FELON JURY EXCLUSION

DAUDI JUSTIN

Having served twenty-two months of a twenty-four-month prison sentence for a felony drug conviction, I now have a deeper appreciation for my rights and for my liberty. Upon the completion of my parole and the subsequent restoration of my right to vote, I have taken great pride in voting in every election. I have become a passionate advocate for civic engagement, professing its significance to anyone who will listen, and often even to those who won't, which is why I was disheartened and exasperated when I learned that I am permanently banned from serving on a jury. Since my release from prison, I have completed my associate's degree with honors, and I have been accepted to Columbia University, yet I remain ineligible to serve on a jury. What is more, after I earn my bachelor's and Juris Doctor degrees, I will continue to be banned from jury duty, permanently relegated to second-class citizenship.

Recently, Assistant Attorney General Karol Mason announced the Department of Justice's new policy for federal departments to eliminate the use of disparaging labels for individuals who have been convicted of a felony, which is a magnificent step towards addressing the issues that can serve as barriers for life after conviction. For me as a man living with a felony conviction, AAG Mason's announcement served as a reminder of my status of second-class citizenship, and of the fact that though I was born in this country, I will never return to being a full citizen. The issue is more significant than one young man's hurt feelings; felon jury exclusion affects millions of Americans.

Thirty-one states and the federal government permanently ban people who have been convicted of felonies from serving on a jury. Consequently, thirty percent of African American men are unable to serve as jurors, in a system that boasts of being superior because of its conception of a jury of one's peers. According to Brian Kalt in his report for *American University Law Review*, the main argument against felon juror service is that felons will be biased because they are angry at the system for their conviction, and that they are a threat to the integrity of the court. Apprehension about including a formerly barred group into the polity is understandable, as is trepidation that some may harbor animosity, but to establish this as a basis for permanent exclusion is a miscarriage of justice.

Every human being is capable of bias, and every subgroup within society could favor those with whom its members identify, either through race, ethnicity, religion, or a physical trait. Moreover, those who have been convicted of a felony are no more likely to be biased than anyone who has been pulled over for a speeding ticket, been arrested for domestic violence, spent time in jail for a misdemeanor, or had a civil

judgement entered against them. Furthermore, excluding groups on the sole basis of possible bias would require the elimination of the entire populace from the jury system.

Every potential juror contributes a unique perspective to a case, as their life experiences have shaped their consciousness and aid them in discerning fact from fiction, and probability from possibility, including those with a felony conviction. Having experienced the justice system firsthand, I know that those living with a felony conviction bring a more informed perspective to the criminal justice system. They appreciate the magnitude of the jury's responsibility and are better able to assess the credibility of witness and police officer testimony, not because they believe that all witnesses or police officers are liars, but rather because they realize that witness testimony isn't necessarily always reliable, and that the police may withhold the truth. Lastly, they understand the burden that the prosecution must meet in order to win a conviction, which increases the likelihood that a defendant will receive a fair trial.

Many conversations are taking place within the context of criminal justice reform, and they are all about serious issues that affect many Americans. Some of the dialogue has focused on felon disenfranchisement and on barriers to reentry, but felon exclusion from jury service has been completely ignored, which is a colossal mistake. Excluding thirty percent of any group of people undermines the integrity of the justice system, and it deprives the excluded group of the experience of participating in the democratic process. It also conveys a duplicitous message of whose peers the jury really consists of, and perpetuates a system that has persistently innovated techniques to exclude African Americans. Finally, as Chief Justice Thurgood Marshall declared in in his 1972 majority decision in Peters v. Kiff:

> When any large and identifiable segment of the community is excluded from jury service, the effect is to remove from the jury room qualities of human nature and varieties of human experience the range of which is unknown, and perhaps unknowable.

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IN DEFENSE OF FAN FICTION

JANE SMITH

In my sophomore year of high school, I discovered the world of fanfiction. Yes, the Buffy-Summers-gets-graphically-banged-by-Faith-Lehane kind of fanfiction. No, I did not run away from my computer. I read it and fell in love. I read: Fix-its of awful season finales. Alternate universe settings and crossovers between genres. People loving other people, in every way.

Girls. Loving. Other. Girls.

And it was *all cool*.

Growing up in a traditional Asian family in the Southeast, I found fanfiction to be a revelation. Faith and Buffy can do the horizontal tango while fending off the undead menace. Tony Stark can wear the iron suit even when her full name is Antonia. Kate Bishop can shoot arrows to rival Clint Barton while arguing with her father in Vietnamese.

Fanfiction is flipping fantastic because it lets me think that I can be a hero.

Not everyone shares my high opinion of fanfiction, and there are more people having opinions on fanfiction than there were in my high-school days. 2015 was recently dubbed "the year that fanfiction came into the mainstream" by pop culture website *The Mary Sue*, and with great popularity comes great Internet vitriol. Fanfiction is derivative writing based on another author's characters and settings, but that's not how everyone describes it. Some Twitter users deem it "material for people with their mind in the gutter," and George R. R. Martin, the writer of *Game of Thrones*, declares that "Using someone else's world is the lazy way out. If you don't exercise [your] 'literary muscles,' you'll never develop them." There's a persistent, overarching notion that fanfiction is, in a word, trash—not a valid form of creative expression.

Yes, fanfiction—shortened to "fic" in fan communities—isn't all Nobel-prize quality—but neither are the majority of published books. Yes, fic is derivative writing—and George R. R. Martin shouldn't throw stones in the glass house of his immensely successful pastiche of Tolkien-influenced Anglo-Saxon literature and mythology. To quote Steven Moffat, producer of *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*, fic is "creative and exciting," and we should be "applauding until our hands bleed" in honor of fan authors.

Beyond being a valid form of creative expression, fanfiction is, above all, a way to give voice to narratives that aren't seen on the big screen. Remember me saying that fic lets me think that I can be a hero? I can't do that very often. Let's review the issue of media representation. Popular media is meant to reflect reality. We're supposed to be able to identify with the people on screen, to see the best and worst of ourselves in them

When it turns out that a whopping 16.7% of leading roles in blockbusters are people of color, 25.3% are women, LGBTQIA+ characters appear in 17.5% of major films (never in leading roles), and the 1% of TV characters with disabilities and mental illnesses have no actual characterization beyond their disabilities—what am I supposed to do? Think that I'm unimportant, or abnormal? Think that my only part in the story is to be a sidekick, running joke, or victim of a horrific accident? Think that I can't love?

Fanfiction is a way to address and correct the egregious trend of deficient media representation that the larger world seems to accept. It is in fic that central narratives explore what Anne Jamison, professor of English at the University of Utah, describes as "love as experienced by neurological or physical disability, mental illness, and addiction, as well as through gradations of asexuality, bisexuality, demi-sexuality, and other forms of queerness." What Twitter users see as proof of trashiness, I and many others see as fic's ultimate strength: portraying marginalized loves and lives in a positive light.

One of my closest friends writes fic where characters cope with identity disorders and the effects of trauma as a way for her to express her personal experiences and help others with mental disabilities. Two of the girls in my dorm are proud K-Pop fans because it allows them to freely grapple with the intersections and differences between their traditional heritage and American upbringing. I read, write, and celebrate fic because it lets me accept myself. We need fic because it's where we can see our stories being told.

It's high time that the world recognizes the validity and value of fanfiction.

So, to the haters and anti-fic crusaders: the next time you dismiss fanfiction as disturbing, mindless trash, pause in your *key bashing*. Remember that there are people who need a world where Buffy Summers gets graphically banged by Faith Lehane. We need a world where we can see ourselves as heroes and villains. We need a world that reminds us that it's okay—no, that it's *normal* and *human* and *flipping fantastic*—to love and live like we do.

Jane Smith is a pseudonym. I am incredibly honored to be chosen for *The Morningside Review*. I'm proud of my essay and its subject, and I am proud of the elements of my personal life that I addressed within it. However, I'm from a very traditional family, and I am currently unable to be out at home.