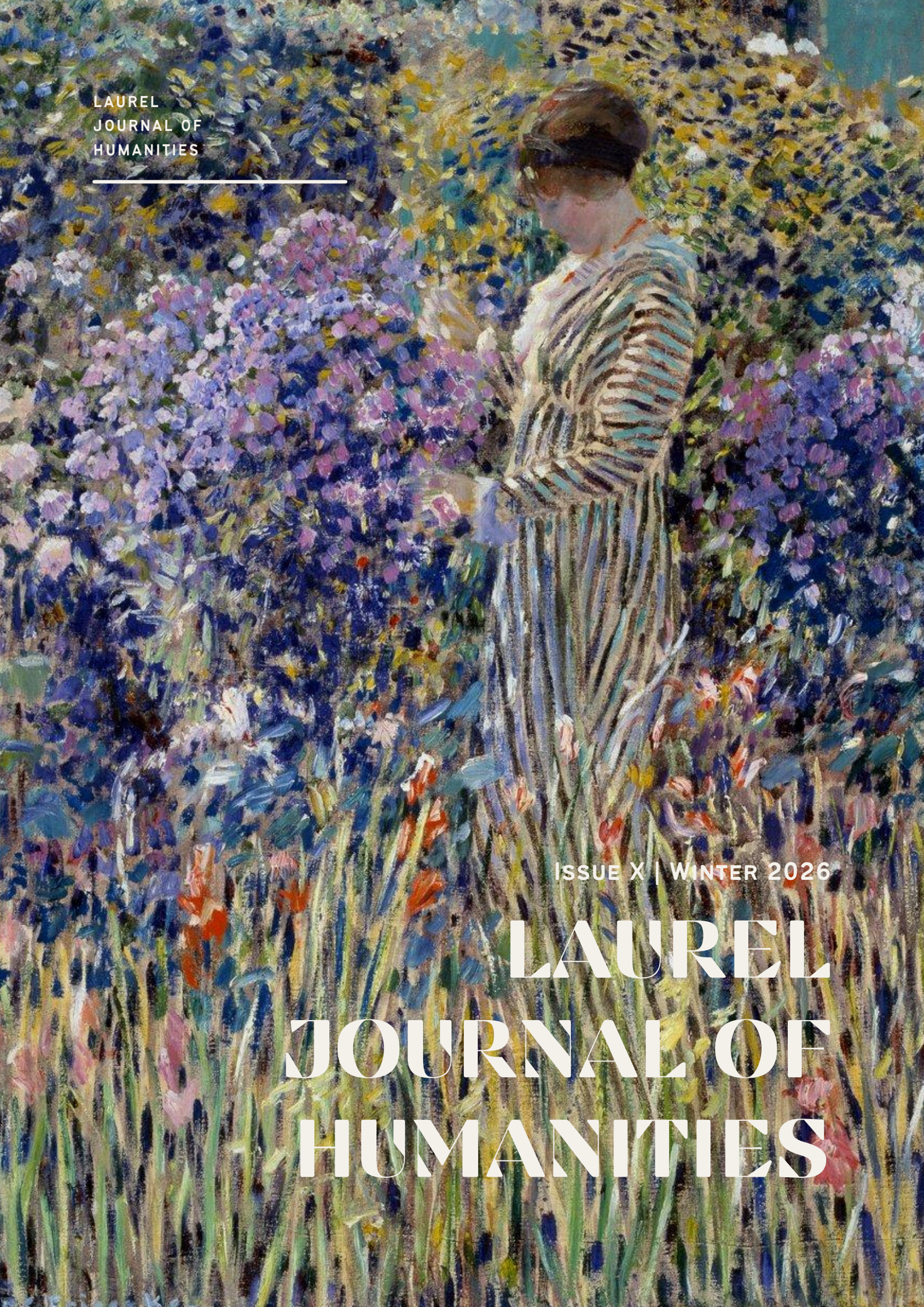
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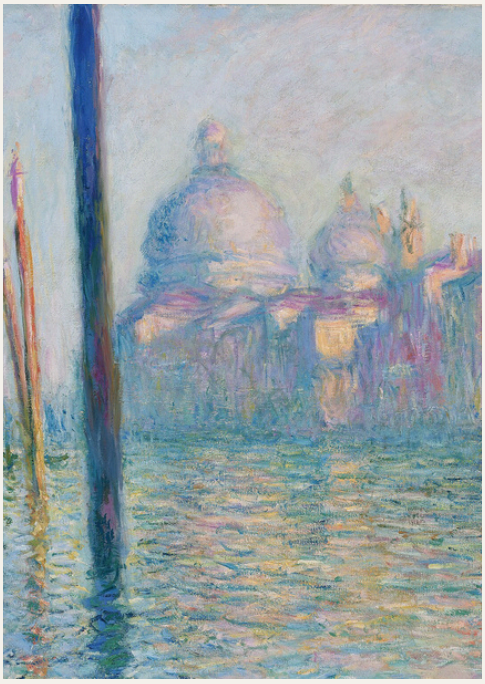


Table of Contents

Research Paper

1 **IS TRIAL BY JURY OBSOLETE?**
By Anna Chang

Creative Writing

1 **CANVAS**
By George Wang

2 **OF FIRE AND FLEETING GOODBYES**
By Serena Lin

3 **YOU**
By George Wang

Visual Art

1 **PHOTO SUBMISSIONS**
By Amy Zhou

2 **LINGYIN TEMPLE**
By Wenxi Fei

Critical Essay

1 **RECOGNITION OR OVERDIAGNOSIS?**
By William Chang

2 **DETERMINISM IN THE LEGAL SYSTEM**
By Zachary Li

3 **IS IT EVER WRONG TO DO THE RIGHT THING FOR THE WRONG REASONS?**
By Claudia Wang

1 **DECONSTRUCTING GENDER CONVENTIONS**
By Hannah Li

2 **ATTENTION, BUYERS**
By Ysabelle Sun

RESEARCH PAPER



Is Trial by Jury Obsolete?

by Anna Chang

Imagine if your life was determined by twelve strangers whom you've never met before. Would you trust their decisions? Are they capable of equitably carrying out justice? In many legal settings, the fate of the defendant is determined by the final verdict of a jury: a group of citizens selected from the general public to listen to the evidence in a court trial, whose goal is to decide the facts of the case and apply the laws as instructed by the judge to reach the final decision, or the verdict.

Although this method has been in use for almost all of American legal history, back to the year 1623, there are still many valid arguments against a trial by jury. Jurors are non-lawyers, meaning ordinary citizens who do not have a license to practice law. Trials today often include evidence that is complex, technical, and difficult for laypeople to decipher. Experts may be called in to give formal statements or give evidence of what is true, to testify about intricate topics such as DNA, computer codes, wiretaps, surveillance footage, and digital records, all of which jurors are expected to understand. Furthermore, critics argue that jurors are easily swayed by emotions such as sympathy for the defendant, media pressure, stereotypes, or a lawyer's theatrics inside the courtroom rather than keeping to the strict rules of logic and reason.

US History contains many examples of the injustice juries bring. For example, the 1955 case **State of Mississippi v. Roy Bryant** and J.W Milam in which after black 14-year-old Emmett Till was kidnapped and then murdered, an all-white-jury acquitted the defendants, illustrating how racial prejudice can bias jurors and allow wrongdoers to walk freely with no consequence. In the more recent case of **People v. Stacey C. Koon**, **et al**, 1992, African-American Rodney King was tased and then severely beaten by officers of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) over 50 times with batons during his arrest, after a high-speed chase down the highway for driving while intoxicated and refusal to return to prison. These officers were, however, acquitted, and the citizens were outraged, leading to many riots in Los Angeles when the jury failed to give a

just verdict.

The risk for incorrect judicial outcomes showcases why jury issues cannot be overlooked. Juries can be biased because they are human, and no human solves any problem with 100% accuracy and ZERO bias, but that does not give us the right to throw the entire institution out. As the research suggests, these weaknesses are not unique to juries. In a study of judicial decision-making, Andrew Wistrich, Jeffrey Rachlinski, and Chris Guthrie found evidence that even judges can be influenced by their emotions, despite their rigorous legal training and the professional obligations imposed by the court5. Human judgment is therefore imperfect, regardless of whether decisions are made by juries or judges. Because judicial decisions are made by people, we must allow a degree of error. Judges, prosecutors, defendants, police, and even algorithms that help a jury decide a case all inherit the biases of the people and systems that created them in the first place6. The question then changes: are we MORE biased when we take the average citizen out of the equation completely? Removing juries doesn't necessarily remove bias; it only removes it from fewer places.

Although juries have human flaws, they are still the best way to administer justice. The population can lack information, or be overly emotional, or be biased with their political standings, but one can hardly suggest that political decision-making be left solely to experts and bureaucrats. This is because jurors are drawn from a varied section of society rather than from the legal establishment; they dispense decision-making power among ordinary citizens and reduce the risk that justice will reflect only the perspectives of judges, prosecutors, or the state7. In this sense, the jury acts as a democratic safeguard against the concentration of legal authority8.

The role of juries serving democratic protectors against powerful authorities has long roots. This can be seen in Bushell's Case of 1670, which effectively established the jury's independence9. The jury's refusal to convict William Penn of unlawful assembly resulted in the jury being punished as ordered by the judge. Edward Bushell, who was a member of the jury, protested against this punishment. As a result, it was decided that jurors cannot be punished for their verdicts. In this way, the court

established key legal protections for jurors that prevented influence from state officials or threats of punishment10.

Additionally, juries can serve as an important check on government power by preventing legal authority from being misused without the consent and judgment of ordinary citizens. For example, the trial of John Peter Zenger became an early emblem of freedom of the press and triumph over government abuse11. In 1735,John Peter Zenger, the printer and publisher of the New-York Weekly Journal, was arrested for seditious libel against the governor of the colony of New York. By the law then prevailing, one could be tried for publishing an opposing, but truthful opinion about the government. However, the jury acquitted Zenger, reflecting an emerging belief that government authority should be constrained by the principles of liberty and justice12.

In other cases, jurors can reflect changing societal viewpoints that have not yet been incorporated into the law. For example, under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, slaves who were runaways were sent back to the South, even if they had successfully made their way to the free states13. There were many in the North who found this law morally unacceptable, and several juries refused to give a verdict on those who were tried for helping runaways. An example was that of Shadrach Minkins, a runaway slave who was captured in Boston14. After he had been liberated by abolitionists and smuggled out to Canada, there was insufficient evidence to prosecute those who freed him due to public discontent with the law. These events demonstrate a vital point: law and morality are not one and the same thing15.

Unfortunately, several cases still showed the misuse of legal power. For example, the case Duncan v. Louisiana: In 1968, Black teenager Gary Duncan was denied a jury trial after being charged with simple battery (unwanted physical touch) upon a white boy and was sentenced to 60 days in prison16. When this case eventually reached the Supreme Court, the Court held that jury trials were an important safeguard against the abuse of power and described the jury's protection against "The corrupt or overzealous prosecutor and against the compliant, biased, or eccentric judge17." The Court therefore acknowledged the jury not merely as a

mechanism for determining facts but as an important safeguard against the misuse of legal authority18.

The philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville held that the jury is not just an instrument of law but also an instrument of civic life19. Juries were defined by him in Democracy in America as institutions through which citizens learn to be part of democracy by actively judging others20. This notion is applicable even now: the participation of citizens in jury service makes it possible to change the perception of justice, as citizens do justice instead of being done it.

Today, the need for human discretion is more relevant than ever as the use of AI is used more frequently within the present-day legal system. The latter makes extensive use of predictive software tools like facial recognition, predictive policing, and sentencing algorithms21. An example of one of these algorithms is COMPAS (Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions): a case management and risk assessment software widely used by U.S. courts to evaluate a defendant's probability of reoffending22. The main proponents of such systems claim that they make the process more equitable, as emotions do not influence decision-making.

Yet the claim to objectivity can create a facade for serious issues. Algorithms depend on historical data, which may distort entrenched social differences23. Should historic policing be directed predominantly against particular community groups, any predictions built using such data will replicate these tendencies. Technology could thus be presenting historic injustices with the apparent framework of mathematical objectivity. Opponents of the COMPAS model have claimed that the algorithm had more results predicting higher risks for the black defendants, and therefore suggested the model was biased despite its supposed neutrality24. In contrast to a jury, algorithms lack the moral reasoning that humans do. Even courts that have permitted the use of the COMPAS model have acknowledged its limitations. In the case of State v. Loomis, the Wisconsin Supreme Court warned that the algorithms could not be treated as a determinative for a case because it could not fully account for the individual circumstances

and raise concerns regarding transparency when dealing with a case25. In contrast to a human jury, algorithms lack moral reasoning.

Facial-recognition technology also bears risks. In 2020 African-American Robert Williams was living in Michigan and was wronged by facial recognition software that mistakenly linked him to the robbery investigation26. The police depended too much on this technological identification without adequate evidence to support their claim. What this case shows is that technology could be used to create the illusion of certainty, thus undermining one's ability to ask questions27. The problem with data is that it can be flawed. Cases like **Robert Williams v. Detroit Police Department** reveal why human deliberation remains indispensable in ensuring that justice is not reduced to a statistical prediction.

It is not only in the technological field that there is a peril in the overreliance on structured systems. Those who are vulnerable may find themselves judged unfairly when legal structures emphasize orderliness and efficiency above all else. It was partially my experience living side-by-side with an older brother who had autism that gave me insight into just how quickly behaviors that deviate from social norms, such as eye aversion or delays in response, can be misinterpreted.

This has showcased that fairness cannot be based on assumptions, patterns, and expectations alone. A system that is efficient to an extent may not be able to see the differences that humans have. Jurors play an important role in the judicial process since they bring different perspectives to the discussion28. They are able to think about assumptions, analyze context, and see the humanity in a person rather than through pattern recognition and prediction that an AI would. Additionally, taking common people out of the equation entirely presents its own danger, in that it centralizes power with little democracy. Algorithms don't have the ability to understand moral thought or show mercy29. They don't comprehend the complexities of human existence. Judges and systems themselves can grow distant from those they judge.

Essentially, the significance of the jury lies not in its flaws, but rather in maintaining humanity within the law's stronghold. In

today's world, the idea held by the jury is one that predates the very technology that now seems to overcome everything else: that justice cannot be calculated30. Being human makes us vulnerable, but the thought of authority makes us feel more vulnerable than before. That is why the jury continues to exist in the courtroom, because society acknowledges that law does not belong to governments alone, but also to the people.

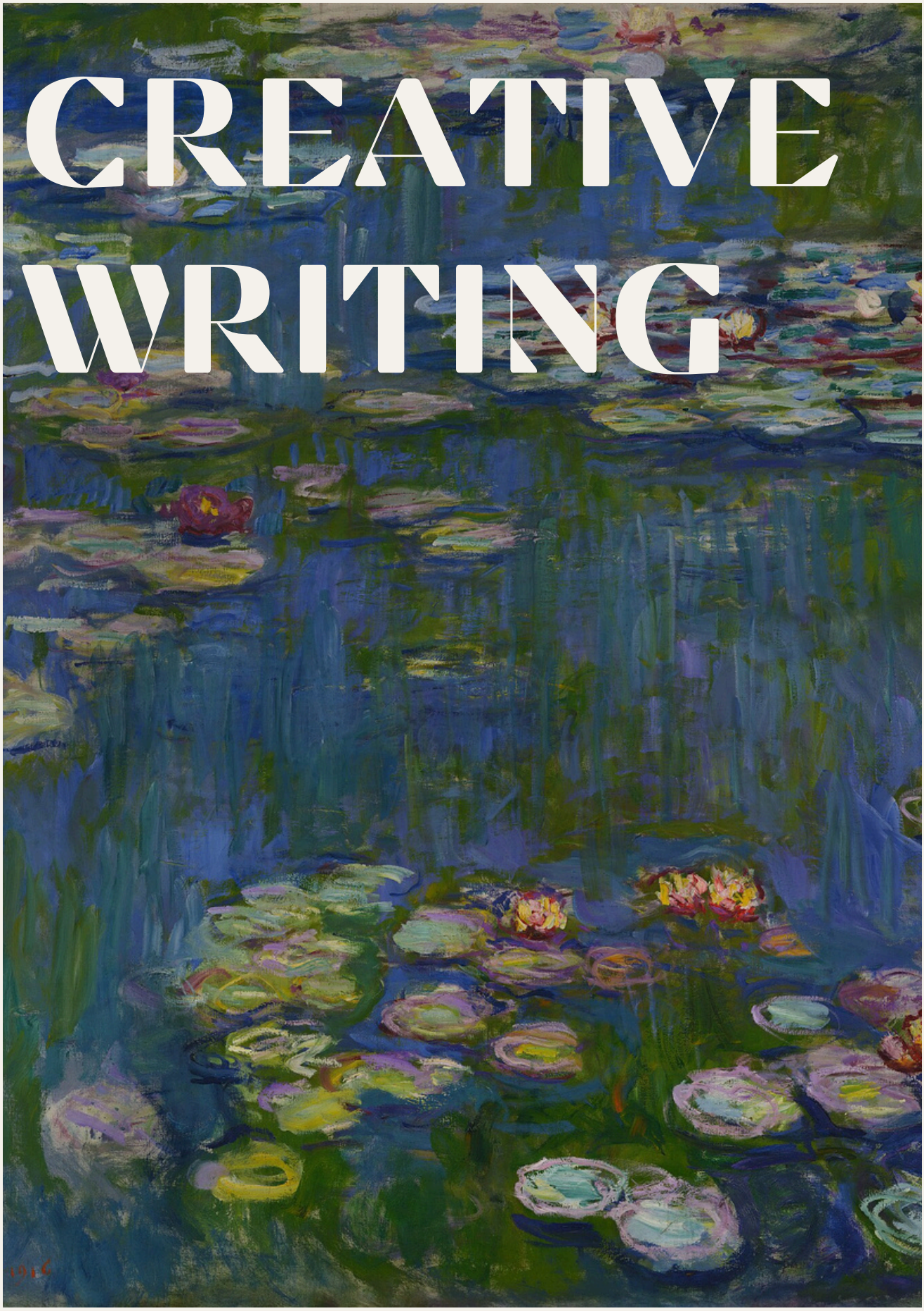
The value of trial by jury lies not in its perfection, but in humanity. By distributing legal authority among ordinary citizens, incorporating moral judgment into the law, and safeguarding against the concentration of power, the jury remains an indispensable institution in a democracy. As governments and courts increasingly rely on algorithms and technological systems, the need for human deliberation becomes even more important. Justice requires more than efficiency; it requires empathy, context, and accountability. Ultimately, trial by jury endures because law should not belong solely to governments, experts, or computers, but to the citizens it serves.

Author Biography

I am a rising 10th grader at Rutgers Preparatory School in New Jersey. I enjoy studying history, literature, and the social sciences, particularly questions involving justice, democracy, and public policy. Having grown up with an older brother with autism, I have developed a strong interest in understanding the challenges faced by individuals with special needs and hope to become an advocate for greater inclusion and support in the future. Outside the classroom, I participate in choir, musical theater, dance, orchestra, and student leadership activities. I enjoy exploring complex issues through research and writing and examining them from multiple perspectives. I chose to explore whether trial by jury was obsolete because the question lies at the intersection of law, democracy, and judgment. In an age increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, I wondered whether justice can truly be reduced to efficient data analysis. Through researching this essay, I became convinced that the value of a jury lies not in its perfection but in its humanity. Although jurors can make mistakes, they contribute moral reasoning, diverse perspectives, and democratic participation to

the process. This topic allowed me to examine how societies can preserve human dignity, accountability, and judgment in a technological world.

CREATIVE WRITING



Canvas

by George Wang

"What am I in the eyes of most people? A nonentity or an oddity or a disagreeable person — someone who has and will have no position in society, in short a little
lower than the lowest."
–Van Gogh to his Brother, July 21, 1882

I sit down at the table that rests in the corner of my bedroom. I drop the backpack that's way too heavy for a 7th grader to carry on the floor. Maybe that's why I'm short. When I open that bag, the memories of daily social mishaps and the stench of teenage worries cling to my acne-ridden face, returning with every item I pull out. The dirty smell of the t-shirt I wore at PE reminds me of the piercing looks from the popular blonde girls who stunk of vanilla body spray. After I heard them whisper my name, I wanted to melt and disappear from the science classroom.

Zipping up my bag and setting it aside on my bed, I notice the pasta stain on my white canvas backpack. It reminds me that I'm still eating alone in the art gallery above the cafeteria, and that I'm struggling to make new friends. Not that I was helpless, but time after time in middle school, the only response I got when I offered to sit with someone at lunch was a simple stare and "no."

I've grown afraid of looking at the ten rows of long, birch-colored tables that never seemed to be empty. The half-empty sanitizer bottles crowded each tabletop, yet none of the tables were clean. The pungent smell of cleaning solution penetrates the crisp Bronx air, blowing freely through the open window.

But the eyes of everyone already sitting at their respective tables are sharp enough to break hearts. To someone who had the courage the size of a grain of sand, those tables are not the place for me.

Not only does the art gallery inspire my work in art class, but the luminescent room soothes me with the silence I need after a long morning of classes. Every day, I would have my AirPods in, looking at each painting while chewing my lunch.

Remembering that I had homework, I take out my art notebook

from my bedroom bookshelf. In class, the teacher lets us paint whatever we want and also allows us to listen to music, immersing ourselves in our own world. Every once in a while, he powers up one of his famous relics—the original MacBook—and lets us play with it. But most of the time, everyone just sticks to themselves at their tables, heads down, brushes moving furiously on their canvases, vibing to their headphones. We don't talk to each other because we all know why we signed up for this class.

***

This was my first time scrutinizing an artist's face so closely. I wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for the fact that I had to do my homework. I had seen Van Gogh's face so many times before, back when I was forced to paint as an elementary schooler. But never in my life had I looked so close.

I wonder what Van Gogh felt as he looked into his mirror while drawing his self-portrait in 1887. Did he think he looked good? Looking at the millions of colorful pixels on my computer screen, I stare into the eyes of the man with the straw hat, who stares back intently. His long, arched nose protruded from the deep eye sockets that held his green pupils. His closed lips rest between his thick, but shapely, ginger beard and mustache that illuminate his sharp jaws. His sagging shoulders, visible beneath a heavy, dark blue work coat, and expressionless face give him a solemn appearance.

But his brushwork says otherwise. The bold, lively dots and dashes dance across the canvas in different patterns, some spiral, some linear. His fiery ginger hair sticks out under his bright yellow straw hat, blowing softly with the wind. His left cheek radiates the sun–a soft shower of yellow that illuminates his face and neck. His green pupils are speckled with light, glimmering and full of life.

Wanting to finish the assignment quickly, I brought out my canvas, painting materials, and a good mirror borrowed from my mother's bedroom. I fill my palette with as many colors as I can find, making sure to include the beige that's two shades lighter than my skin tone.

Just as I'm about to start, I realize I'm scared to look in the mirror

because whenever I catch sight of myself, I flinch. I'm afraid that my face will be greasy, and more pimples will appear on my cheeks. I'm worried that my hair looks awful and that everyone thinks I'm ugly.

But it's weird because the man in the mirror, every time I look, is still always the only one who talks back to me when I talk, and doesn't greet my words with silence. He stays silent when he sees that I'm quiet and understands that I want some peace. He cries when I cry. He sees me popping my pimples and consoles me, saying it's not all that bad, even though his skin is flawless. He sees me trying to curl my pin-straight Asian hair so that I would look the same as the popular white kids, and burning my forehead countless times on the hair iron, only to end up with fried hair. He tells me I should love myself for the way I am, even though he doesn't seem to understand how hard it is. He helps me practice dialogue by showing me how stupid I sound and look when I try to recite internet jokes and pickup lines, or when I try to learn TikTok dances. He says, "You'll get it one day, trust," but I want that happiness now. I want to be him.

But now it is not him that I see in the mirror; it is Vincent Van Gogh himself. His ginger hair sits under his bright yellow straw hat that is as vibrant as a sunflower. His lively, emerald green eyes glisten, brought to life by the sunlight. He clears his throat.

"Before you start your self-portrait, I have to ask you," Vincent asks, "what are
you in the eyes of most people?"

My pencil grazes the coarse canvas, sketching a soft silhouette.

"Some ugly guy that is lower than the lowest, at least that's what I've heard," I reply, eyes glued to the mirror.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sebastian,"

"It's alright, I'm used to it." Awkwardness rushes me–I shouldn't have
said that! I sketch in the eyes, mouth, and ears, but my hands stop. I look down at the ground, trying to think of anything to ease things up.

"But... isn't your goal to show that there is still resonance in the heart of an
oddity? Don't you want to make paintings with meaning? Your elementary school art teacher taught you that, didn't she?" Vincent

replies

"Everything is art, Sebastian, and everything has meaning," Ms. Liao said 5 years ago to me. That elementary art class in the basement of a New York brownstone was the first time I had ever learned that each brushstroke can replace long, complicated explanations of all the sorrows of the world. It was also the place where I knew I had complete control over whatever story I wanted to tell — the first place where no parent or teacher could say to me what to do.

"But I'm afraid no one will understand what I'm painting and will ridicule me
for it, "I respond, drawing in the background with a bright yellow mixed with white, toning the color down to make it realistic.

"The feeling you put into paintings is more important than the feelings of
others," he says.

We fall silent, pondering deeply about each other's words. I repeatedly peek at the mirror and return intently to my canvas, furiously dotting and creating straight lines with my brush. Swirls of beige fill my face, highlighted by the dashes of the golden sun. My hair is more brown than black to make it more realistic and is textured strand by strand. I leave my eyes for last–the only thing I love about myself.

But despite the life that I'm pouring out onto this canvas, I still feel fearful. Fearful that when I bring this to class tomorrow, everyone will point and ridicule me. Afraid that the life I gave to this painting was one to regret.

"But then why paint if no one will understand what I'm painting? If I'm so low
in the eyes of others, they definitely will not understand me! " I respond.

"Assuming that everyone is indeed like that, then through your work, show that
there is somebody in the heart of an oddity."

"Touché," I shrug. I start drawing my shoulders. I look in the mirror and pump
up my chest. I still have enough self-respect to understand that I need to pretend to be confident in a self-portrait, just as I've done for

all my yearbook photos.

"Even though we artists are often a mess, inside us there's still a calm, pure harmony and music," Vincent says. "Find your own serenity in art, not validation from others. I mean, aren't you relaxed right now?"

He looks at me endearingly. Lit up by the afternoon sun, my glimmering brown eyes are a pleasure to draw.

"I would be lying if I said I'm not," I admit.

"Exactly. Look how good you look on that canvas!" he exclaims with a smile,

"Paintings don't lie!"

I look at my painting, then look back at the mirror. My jaw twitches, showing the beginnings of a toothy smile. I resist, but fail. Soon, I'm laughing so hard that my stomach cramps.

Vincent takes off his bright straw hat and ruffles his hair, revealing a headful of vibrant ginger hair.

"Attaboy," Vincent says, with a grin.

Slowly, his bright hair fades and disappears into the sunny afternoon, revealing my reflection.

I'm no longer the teenager who has his shoulders hunched over 24/7, looking down at the ground. I still have acne and my hair is still pin-straight, but I'm smiling. My shoulders are upright, my chin pointed up, and my brown eyes turn gold under the sunlight.

***

I'm no longer the Sebastian who is scared to ask people anything. I don't ask, I just sit down now, placing my red tray on the empty seat at any table.

The other people at the table glance over at me, but immediately look away and say nothing.

I start eating. Outside the open window, a man with ginger hair and green eyes smiles at me and walks away into the distance.

Of Fire and Fleeting Goodbyes

by Serena Lin

I shoveled Century Egg Congee into my mouth and sipped the room-temperature milk set out on the table for me, my breakfast punctuated by the pitter-patter of incessant rain. From my seat at my grandma's dining table, I had a clear view of what seemed to be a shrine. Although I never asked what the small table with glowing lights and a record player was for, I recognized a black-and-white portrait of my grandfather, Wai Gong, as the centerpiece of the setup. The imperceptible sound coming from the record player was likely music, but it was warped enough to be a buzz of white noise. I glanced at my food instead of the photo and glowing lights. But my action was a temporary comfort; we were scheduled to pay our respects at Wai Gong's grave in less than half an hour. It wasn't often we returned to China, and we hadn't made it for the funeral.

My grandma, Wai Po, had been fussing about all morning. While she wasn't coming with us, she had tasked herself with the job of making sure we had everything we needed. When the rain eased up slightly, my mom, sister and I headed out the door of Wai Po's apartment. At the last moment, my grandma yelled across the hall, clamoring towards us, "她们要雨鞋吗 (do they need rain shoes)?"

"不要 (they don't need them)," my mom argued back—or at least, it sounded like an argument when she emphasized the first word like that. My body tensed. The tongues my family spoke in China always seemed blunter to me, more emphatic, like a vacuum that had sucked out all the filler words and comfortable familiarity of English.

We hurried out the elevator, running in the rain towards the white car where Jiu Jiu, my uncle, was waiting in black. We took our respective seats in the car, which was filled to the brim today. A lantern on a stick stretched across the back row, a connecting bridge from my knee to my sister's elbow. Overflowing bags had been stuffed by our feet and on the middle seat, occupying space like another passenger would.

The drive was punctuated with distant small talk that faded

before reaching my ears. I gazed out the window, wondering idly about death and grief—grief that did not incapacitate anymore but rather knocked at the ribs some days, tugging on heartstrings. Or, perhaps, grief that was not necessarily yours but that of someone you loved, glass shards that you picked up sometimes in hopes of sharing the burden.

We exited the car to prepare for the trek uphill, my sister and I reaching for the bags in the back and gently wrapping our hands around them. My sister opened an umbrella for the two of us to share, and we trailed behind my mom and Jiu Jiu. The raindrops, carried by wind like barnacles on a whale, splattered onto my face, creating blots of blurry vision.

We trudged on. I pinched my pants and hoisted them up, hoping the sticky discomfort would not cling onto me for the rest of the day. My remaining fingers wrapped around two bags filled with materials I didn't entirely recognize. Gray gravestones, darkened by the rain to granite, lined the hills in uniform rows. My legs were starting to burn in direct contrast with the cold rain swiping my hands. In the distance, I could see pops of color—handpicked flowers that wilted in the downpour of rain, lanterns left at the foot of a grave.

The exact image of the grave blurs in my memory. It was not empty, but not beautiful either. Leaves and petals had strayed along the sides, some sprawled in divots where water pooled. I read the Chinese words on the grave, stared at the picture. I held my mother's umbrella over her head. I offered the bag to Jiu Jiu, who began to dust Wai Gong's grave. I did what I could, even though it did not feel like much.

My mother placed the bowl of oranges at the foot of the grave. She ruffled around in one of the bags, handing a box of matches to Jiu Jiu. He jerked his arm repeatedly. My sister, too, used her umbrella to shield the rain and we watched on, the percussion of water around us marking the passage of time. The humidity in the air held tension and something sacred as we waited in silence. The fire blossomed and we tossed flammables in its direction. Stay alive, we willed it, when the wind and rain threatened to blow it out. The fire was not a candle on a birthday cake—it had to stay alive, it had to hold on for one moment longer, it could not fail.

Jiu Jiu rifled through a bag to find the joss paper. “安安琪琪，你们知道这是什么吗? (Anan, Qiqi, do you know what this is?)” he asked, moving the burning parts with a stick and salvaging the meager fire. “是给你外公的钱，他可以在那边用 (it’s money for your grandpa, money that he can use on the other side).”

The words rolled around in my head. The other side. I watched the fire eat at the joss paper, searing the edges ink-dark, then dissolving it from the outside in until the money disintegrated into ashes. Mom and Dad never talked about an afterlife when we were in the United States—religion was not present in our household. Yet here we were, hoping to access a connected void where Wai Gong could retrieve our offerings. Does facing death make people want to believe in an afterlife? Is it an innate tendency to want to access one’s loved ones, in whatever capacity one can manage? Or was this the case of a younger sister believing in the practices of her older brother as they paid respects to the father who raised them?

The wind and rain continued. Smoke fled towards me. Between the droplets on my glasses and fumes in my face, I couldn’t see. But I could feel the dying heat by my knees when I crouched in an improper Asian squat, feeding money into the portal. I could hear the crunch of empty plastic bags as I distributed half of the last money roll to my sister. I could smell the burning incense sticks, the scent of raw botanicals mixing with a tangy wooden aroma.

“安琪，你们得好好地学着 (AnQi, you have to learn carefully),” Jiu Jiu said, with his crooked smile that I could never quite translate. “有一天，我和你妈妈不在的时候，你们就要自己做了 (one day, when your mom and I aren’t here, you two are going to have to do this by yourself).”

Don’t say that, I wanted to protest. But I had no right to tell a man standing at the foot of his father’s grave that I did not want to picture a life without my mother, so I simply tightened my grip on the bags I was holding. Mom and Jiu Jiu fed the fire everything else we had and prodded at it, encouraging the flames to devour the paper.

Only when everything had finally burned to ashes did Jiu Jiu pull out the mat from the bag Mom was carrying. He set it on the ground and knelt on top of it. I catalogued his motions —and then my mother’s—into a mental instruction manual: clasp your hands

into prayer, close your eyes, pause... place your hands on the ground, kiss the ground with your forehead, once... twice... three times....

Stand.

When it was my turn, I handed my bags to my mother and stepped forward slowly and lowered myself onto the mat. I closed my eyes, my hands pressed together in symmetry. I held the position like it was a move assigned to me in the dance studio and then stretched my arms to touch the ground in front of me. I could feel the dirt on my fingertips, on my palms as I leaned forward. My hair scraped the ground in what I hoped was a proper kowtow.

One.

I forced my mind to conjure up as much as I could of him. His bald head. His raspy voice. His wheelchair, which he was in for as long as I could remember—maybe even for my whole life. He often came on the outings with us, saying only a few words as Wai Po pushed him along. Blood rushed to my face as my forehead touched the ground.

Two.

I wasn't quite sure how to say goodbye to someone I did not know very well. Someone who I had only seen once every two to three years for only a week, yet someone who had raised my mom and was so crucial to everything she was. Someone I should have tried to connect with better, even when he did not speak English, even when I was scared of the old man whose cough shook his wheelchair. But perhaps this was not much of a goodbye, but rather an acknowledgement, a 'thank you.' I hope these offerings make their way to you—that somewhere, you get to live on. Whether that's in spirit or in flesh, in the afterlife or the shrine, or simply in memory.

Three.

I stood up, my legs a little shaky. My mom passed the bags back to me as my sister knelt on the mat. When she finished, we snuffed out the fire's final flames and picked up our trash.

I glimpsed Wai Gong's grave one last time and we hiked back down the dirt path, carrying a lighter load now, the rain washing away our footsteps.

You

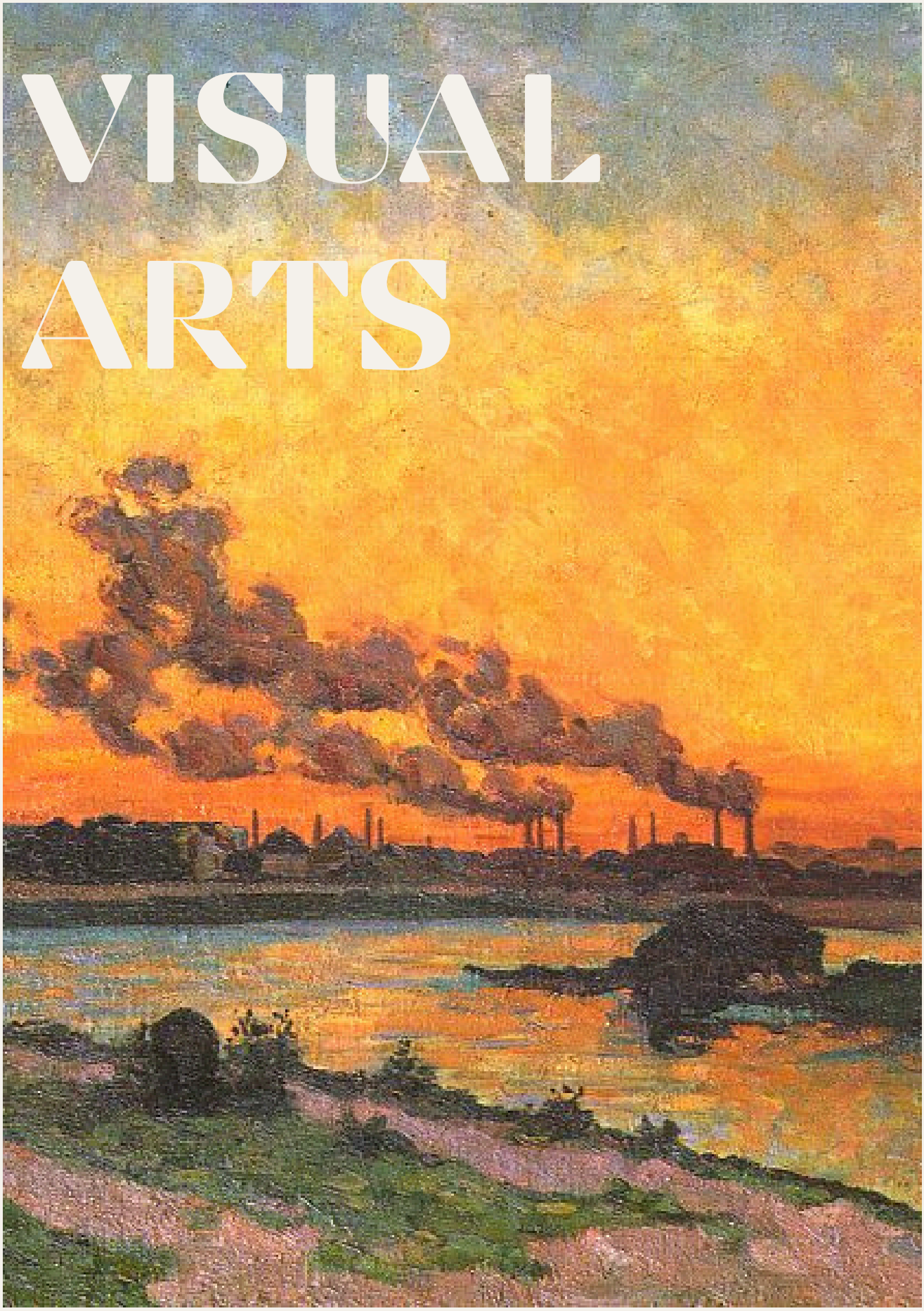
by George Wang

They say you are everywhere—
In the sky,
In the wind,
The way it whispered life
to the new green,
Within teacups of barley that had gone cold,
Chrysanthemums that turned white.
Umma still calls you to dinner.
Her mind shops amongst the stars,
feeling her way through the dark.

I look for you in the hiss of propane,
the clicking of the stove—
blue flames flickering then fading.
I see you dancing amongst every word
I cannot bring myself to say—
lungs full of smoke—
you said you quit,
you said last time.

I find you in someone else's silence,
Their hair the color of the sun that falls through my window,
eyes passing through as if they know me—
Perhaps they know I'm still holding on to forever
Like our lives were evergreen.

VISUAL ARTS



by Amy Zhou





Lingyin Temple

by Wenxi Fei



Nowadays, life is indubitably fast paced, Hangzhou, as one of China's most rapidly developing cities, moves with constant urgency. Traffic clogs the streets, buildings rise in height, crowds shuffle past, rushing toward some far away destinations that always seem important.

But at the west of the city, resides a shelter from all the disturbance: Lingyin temple.

Known as one of China's most visited temples, it receives a constant flood of visitors each day. On holidays, the crowds become so dense that temple staff must implement careful crowd management: timed entry, designated walking paths, and regulated incense offerings help maintain order and preserve the sanctity of the space. Its popularity has also shaped the surrounding area, fostering a bustling system of teahouses, souvenir shops, and vegetarian food for monks and cultural experiences of the visitors

Pilgrims arrive carrying different hopes and unease. They reverently worship buddhas, expressing their aspiration and concerns. Some seek a space to placate messy thoughts, some wish for health and safety, some pray for academic success, promotion, or finding their soulmates. They move slowly through

the temple halls, bowing before ancient statues, lighting incense, and leaving small offerings at the shrines. Along the way, they trace the inscriptions on the walls, follow the rhythm of the chanting monks, or sink into quiet corners, letting the space's stillness wash over them.

These rituals direct focus back inwards. The temple is a space that evokes internal serenity. Worshipers quiet down all the outside worries and face tomorrow with a little more peace. It provides calmness and a chance to steady oneself before returning to the pace outside, which, in a city that rarely stops moving, this sanctuary seems especially precious

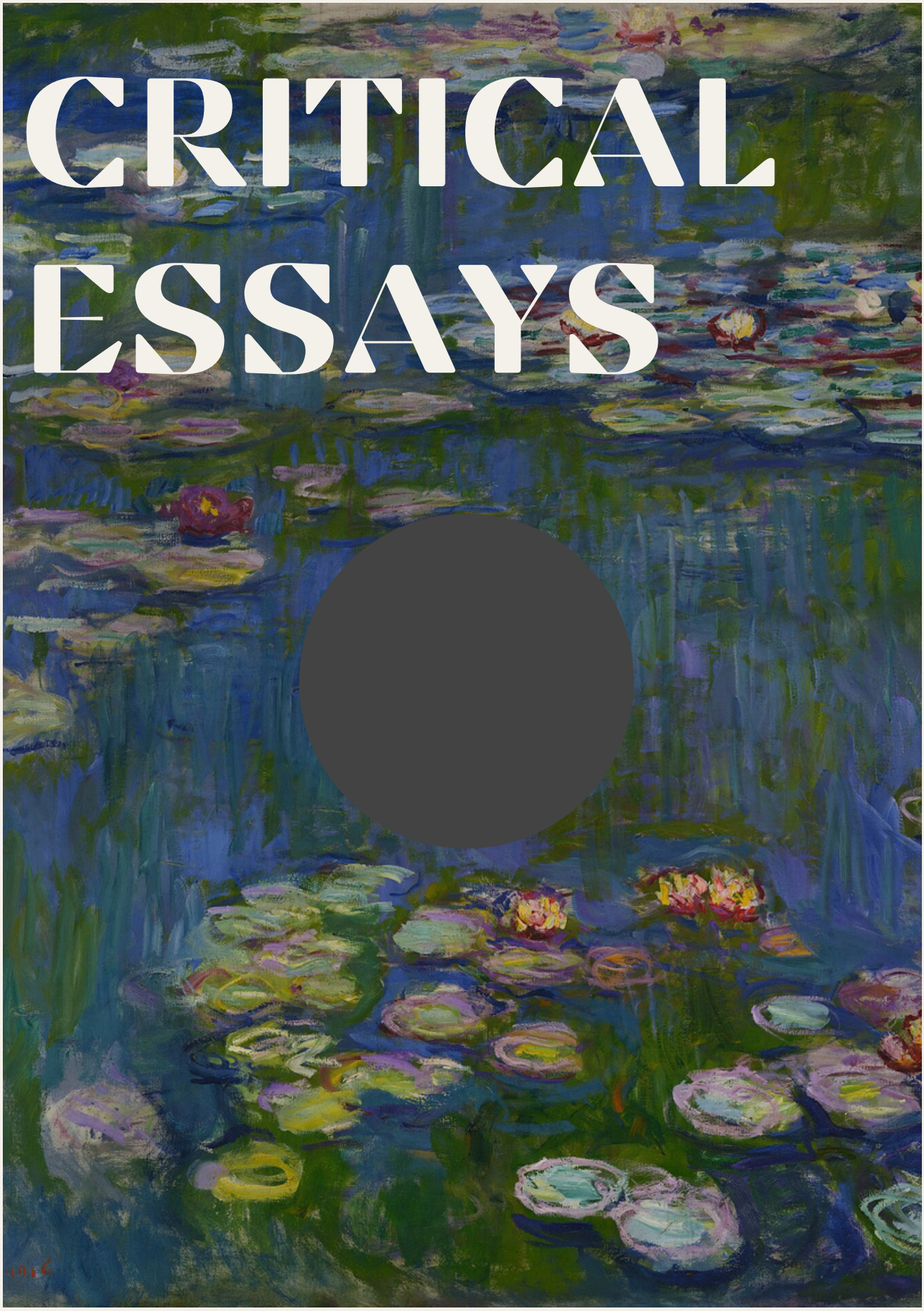


Image 2. Hundreds and thousands of families come each day to glance and admire these ancient statues near the temple, regarded as an extension of their ritual in the temple.



Image 3. This board is engraved with the words “佛日增辉”, meaning that the teachings and influence of Buddhism are constantly growing, like the sun's rays illuminating the earth, dispelling darkness and enriching all sentient beings.

CRITICAL ESSAYS



Recognition or Overdiagnosis?

by William Chang

In medieval Europe, people who heard voices, stayed withdrawn from society, or showed signs of unusual behavior were not presented to a mental health specialist. Instead, labels were placed on them, such as heretics, witches, or demonic vessels. People with labels of madness and lunacy were not given therapy or medication, but were subjected to exorcism, drilling of skulls, and burning alive. Inappropriate and ineffective treatments have been used against mental illness as a result of a fundamental lack of understanding in the realm of mental health, and the history of mental illness has been plagued by misrecognition that has shifted across multiple time periods.

In the eighteenth century, the 'moral treatment' movement was introduced, with physicians such as Philippe Pinel ordering the removal of chains from patients at the Bicêtre Hospital in 1793 and replacing these physical restraints with more humane treatments, including emotional support and more productive activities. However, the nineteenth century saw the rise of large but overcrowded institutional asylums, which, rather than serving their original reform purpose, became warehouses for individuals deemed too disruptive to remain in society. In the twentieth century, German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin became a pioneer in a standardized system of diagnosis and categorization for mental illness, and his classifications of dementia praecox and manic-depressive insanity helped lay the foundation and groundwork for the diagnostic frameworks that we use today. From this, the destigmatization of mental health slowly evolved as the world around it progressed, including the strengthening of academic foundations in the 1960s, post-war deinstitutionalization in the 1970s and 1980s (Lamb & Weinberger, 1998), and further acceleration in the 2010s, driven by social media and celebrity advocacy. As a result, public reception and focus of mental illness has shifted from locking the mentally ill in wards and asylums, and into more clinical and community-based settings, allowing a wider range of care.

In the modern world, mental health has shifted from a taboo topic to one that is widely recognized. At the same time, the number of diagnoses regarding mental health conditions has also risen significantly, with recent data from the World Health Organization stating that more than one billion people globally live with a mental health condition (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025), approximately one in eight people globally. The seemingly inordinate number of people with mental illness has sparked debate, as there is speculation of whether overdiagnosis or improved recognition of mental health is the cause of the increase in diagnoses (Bradford et al., 2024; Freckelton, 2018; Malla et al., 2015). Although concerns about overdiagnosis are valid in some cases, the overall rise in diagnoses is mainly due to improved recognition, decreased stigma, and better access to care. This essay will explore the relevant variables implicated in better mental health diagnoses. Through this discussion, the other side of the argument will also be assessed in its validity. While both arguments carry some weight, the paper will focus on the idea that mental health conditions are better recognized than overdiagnosed; this thesis will be supported by research, the literature, and everyday examples of how we have come to recognize mental health struggles more effectively.

Reduced Stigma

While millions of people have suffered in fear and silence, our overall understanding and acceptance of mental health conditions have evolved considerably. One of the primary reasons for the increase in modern diagnostic rates is the significant reduction in stigma surrounding mental illness. Many people are much more open to bringing up mental health in conversations, and organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association are helping to normalize discussions surrounding mental health with public educational campaigns in order to create more accessible knowledge and communication (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2024). This cultural shift has made discussion of the subject more acceptable to patients and guardians across the globe, and due to more openness towards mental health, many undiagnosed illnesses and conditions are much better diagnosed and recognized among affected individuals.

In previous generations, many individuals have avoided talking about mental health due to associations with shame, weakness, and instability. Patients diagnosed with conditions such as schizophrenia or severe depression were frequently institutionalized, sometimes even for life, in facilities that were often unethical in practice, and patients were placed under punitive procedures (Walsh, 2004). The fear of being placed under harsh treatment in a psychiatric ward discouraged people from receiving treatment, and the effects of this stigma are still evident within groups in our society today. However, as the stigma has lowered considerably within recent decades, more people are open to coming forward; this is one of the primary causes for the rise in diagnosis rates.

Research Efforts and Better Diagnostic Frameworks

In addition to reduced stigma, the growth of mental health has led to the development of research and diagnostic processes throughout the years, as many systems have grown much more accurate and consistent in their diagnoses. Modern diagnostic frameworks, such as the DSM-5, often include clear criteria and instruction manuals for the diagnosis of mental disorders. However, modern diagnostic frameworks are also often revised to help clinicians refine and narrow their aim on mental illnesses, rather than to inflate them (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Many mental health organizations, including the National Institute of Mental Health and the Centers for Disease Control, have also expanded treatment across the globe, which is primarily allowing more people to access mental health resources and evaluations. As a result, many individuals who have been overlooked in the past by mental health providers have been able to receive help and better recognition from the mental health scene, and all of these factors are active contributors to why mental illness has been much better recognized rather than overdiagnosed.

However, many researchers note that overdiagnosis is not entirely unfounded, citing several trends (Frances, 2013; Freckelton, 2018). The first argument that may be presented is about how diagnostic criteria have been more generalized and broadened, potentially leading to the inappropriate classification of normal emotions as mental illness (Frances, 2013). Specialists may occasionally associate feelings such as sadness, grief, and social anxiety with a mental disorder. Mental health terminology on social media platforms is also frequently misused and oversimplified, leading to a massive increase in false self-diagnosis of these feelings without proper evaluation and medication. Additionally, many researchers note that healthcare and pharmaceutical companies may indirectly encourage higher diagnosis rates through the expansion of treatment markets and disease mongering (Moynihan et al., 2002).

Even though concerns about overdiagnosis exist, evidence still suggests that improved recognition has a larger influence and is a better explanation for these diagnosis rates. Historically, underdiagnosis has been a much larger problem than overdiagnosis, demonstrating itself as a more damaging and widespread issue. People who had mental disorders in the past few decades have had to face stigmatization, leading to many people masking and hiding their symptoms and avoiding proper treatment. Disorders such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and PTSD often went unseen and undiagnosed as a result, leading to last-minute treatment of patients only in severe stages of mental illness. Without this proper diagnosis, increased rates of medical health issues can affect individuals and add difficulties to academic and professional areas, substance abuse, and even suicide (NIMH, n.d).

Conclusion

Debates between better recognition and overdiagnosis are ongoing within the world of modern mental health studies, and this issue will most likely not be resolved through one single concrete view.

While both behaviors and phenomena are present within our current world, evidence suggests that better recognition is among the largest factors contributing to the rise in mental diagnosis rates. Reduction in stigma, better diagnostic procedures, abundant mental health research, and wider access to medical healthcare are conditions in our modern world that contribute to the rise of diagnostic rates among individuals who have been historically overlooked and untreated. Furthermore, the awareness of mental health among underserved populations has led to these people receiving better and more appropriate mental health support.

In our modern society, however, it is more important to look at how ethical and helpful the diagnoses for patients are, rather than the number of people who are being diagnosed with mental illnesses. It has been shown that throughout history, the effectiveness of modern and refined diagnostic systems largely depends on how well diagnoses get patients to receive helpful care, and ensuring that patients can get well-equipped and specialized care should be prioritized, rather than hurriedly labeling patients with mental illness.

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Determinism in the Legal System: Should We Punish Evil?

by Zachary Li

Sentencing in contemporary legal systems is driven by one concept: moral desert. Criminals are punished because they made the free choice to do wrong, and thus deserve retribution. But what if criminals could not have done otherwise? Determinism is the view that all actions are causally produced by prior states of nature. If judges and legislators accepted determinism, moral desert would collapse and turn sentencing from being justified in retribution for moral wrongdoing into a utilitarian enterprise grounded in deterrence, incapacitation, and rehabilitation. Similarly, lawmakers, inspired by Marx, would aim to eliminate the root causes of crime.

1. The Collapse of Moral Desert Under Determinism

Moral desert must collapse before the shift toward utilitarianism becomes the reasonable alternative. Immanuel Kant argues in The Metaphysics of Morals (1797) that people are rational agents with the ability to act independent of prior causation. In our status quo, legal systems define moral desert in the Kantian sense: perpetrators make the free choice to commit crimes, thus face punishment. For Kant, transcendental freedom is defined as rational agents existing outside the chain of causation entirely.

However, Kant's retribution only makes sense if there is free will in the sense that individuals can choose otherwise. Without it, people do not possess transcendental freedom and cannot choose whether they will break the law or not. Determinism claims that there is no free will. The reason for crimes can be linked back to genetics, social upbringing, or socioeconomic status. All of which are outside the agent's control. Consequently, moral desert would be abandoned.

With Kant no longer being a legitimate basis for sentencing, judges would not adopt character-based compatibilism, such as Harry Frankfurt's idea of higher-order desires. Higher-order desires are also causally produced, which gives courts no non-arbitrary way to sentence.

Consider two men, Adam and Ben. Adam is a remorseless serial killer that plans his murders. Ben, on the other hand, killed his abusive father in the heat of the moment. He reportedly experienced panic before the murder. Ben also showed regret and voluntarily turned himself in to the police afterwards. To a compatibilist, Ben deserves a lighter sentence. But compatibilism does not tell us by how much. Should Ben have his sentence reduced by ten percent? By half? Compatibilism does not offer a clear metric of deciding sentences. A legal system cannot and would not operate on "less" alone.

1. The Prevalence of Legal Responsibility Without Desert

Punishment would still exist in a determinist legal system even without Kant or Frankfurt. Our legal system values normal capacities: the ability to make rational and unimpaired decisions. Having normal capacities is what allows an individual to be held legally responsible, not free will.

H.L.A Hart writes in Punishment and Responsibility (1968), "The crucial question is not whether the offender could have done otherwise in a metaphysical sense, but whether he had the normal capacities of understanding, self-control, and reasoning that make him a fit subject for legal punishment." Determinism does not eliminate normal capacities. Courts ask if the defendant had their normal capacities impaired, not if they lacked free will. This is the reason why legal excuses like insanity or duress exist. Courts recognize someone's diminished normal capacities, and give different sentences because of it.

Altered sentences exist because of a concept called "mens rea." Mens rea is a legal principle meaning "guilty mind," and is a label for criminals who acted with normal capacities and broke the law. If someone does not have the normal capacities to form a mens rea, such as a child, they are sentenced differently.

Thus, Hart claims that “could have done otherwise” simply refers to normal capacities. Judges can continue to administer punishment without being morally impermissible.

Determinism is also why punishment makes sense in the first place. David Hume advances a stronger claim. Determinism is the prerequisite to legal sanction. Hume claims in An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748) that determinism makes utilitarian punishments rational because it supports the notion that humans respond predictably to consequence. Given this predictability, it becomes reasonable to sentence to provide benefits to society because we know how the defendant will react.

Building on this idea of acknowledging human nature, Baruch Spinoza explains that retribution is the ignorance of causation. In Ethics (1677), Spinoza writes “Hatred is increased by being returned, but can be destroyed by love.” A determinist judge would view retribution as disregarding the clear causation that could lead to a more socially utile future. Therefore, a Spinozan judge would carefully assess the offender’s likely response to sentencing and what best reduces future harm.

1. The Utilitarian Transformation of Sentencing and Legislation

John Stuart Mill’s harm principle, introduced in On Liberty (1859), lays the foundation for a legal system rooted in utilitarianism. Mill argues that the state may intervene only to prevent future harm, not to retribute.

Under determinism, Mill’s principle becomes the sole justification for punishment. With this ideology of preventing future harm, sentencing would be motivated by deterrence, incapacitation, and rehabilitation. Both the type and length of sentencing would be dependent on how the defendant would respond.

For example, a criminal who frequently commits violent crimes may be sent to jail for longer compared to someone who committed petty theft out of poverty.

The petty thief would also receive different sentencing such as rehabilitation, community service, and employment programs. This is because the violent offender poses a higher risk to society. The “lighter” treatment of the second individual is because those measures are statistically proven to be more effective than harsh jail time.

Due to this calculated approach to sentencing, courts also become more technocratic. Liability is anchored in empiric evidence. Experts in neuroscience, criminology, and sociology would all become central to determining punishment. Their knowledge is consulted and used to guide how long and what type a penalty would be.

Although experts participate in our court system today, they are supplementary and can only make suggestions. Our courts still believe in moral desert and retribution. In a determinist court, judges favor consequentialist arguments, rather than ones appealing to moral outrage.

One objection to this new system would be Kant’s charge on using people as a means to an end. If a utilitarian system prioritizes protecting society, would it not be optimal to maximally sentence and disproportionately punish all crimes, even minor ones?

Three responses to take this down. First, severe punishments produce diminishing marginal returns. Second, punishing minor and major crimes equally incentivizes more harmful crimes. Third, harsh sentencing creates practical failures such as prison overcrowding.

Of course, a purely utilitarian system risks going overboard. Decisions can become purely driven by efficiency. Yet Hart’s idea of normal capacities act as a limit. People are only punished if they are capable of mentally taking responsibility for committing crimes.

However, Kant’s objection extends beyond disproportionate punishment. Kant also contends that people are capable of reasoning and ought to be treated as such. Because of this, any consequentialist justification treats the offender as a means to social ends.

However, a determinist court still engages defendants' reasoning, such as using attorneys. Moreover, if we were to completely disregard any consequentialist reasoning behind sentencing, we would also be condemning any action society takes that restricts an individual’s liberty for social benefit.

Under Kant, preventive detention, civil commitment, and compulsory vaccination, would all be illegitimate. If we are willing to accept those practices, we should also accept a utilitarian theory of punishment.

Even with Kant discharged, perhaps punishment was never about justice. Friedrich Nietzsche offers a more radical challenge. In On the Genealogy of Morals (1887), Nietzsche posits that punishment arose from the creditor-debtor relationship. Nietzsche claims the creditor had the right to inflict physical pain if a debtor could not repay their debts. Punishment was always about inflicting cruelty, not justice.

However, Nietzsche's genealogical method only shows the origin of punishment. It does not prove that punishment today is cruel. To illustrate: typewriters were invented to help blind people write legibly, but were eventually adopted by general society. Sentencing could have emerged as barbaric, but today cruel and unusual punishments are outlawed. A utilitarian system does not have to be founded in morally legitimate reasoning, it just has to be legitimate today. Because of sentencing's express intent of preventing future harm, social defense as a reason for punishment remains valid. Beyond the change in function, utilitarianism has another advantage: its claims are testable through empiric evidence.

Now that utilitarian sentencing has been established as morally permissible, we can examine the metamorphosis of our legislation. Karl Marx, in Debates on the Wood Theft Law (1842), argues that criminal law under capitalism protects private property and disciplines the working class. Marx writes that under existing conditions, "the criminal law protects the property of the few against the needs of the many." The sensible response would therefore be to eliminate crime's causes rather than merely punish its symptoms.

Crime would be treated as a public health and socioeconomic issue rather than a moral failing. Offenders did not choose the circumstances that lead them to commit crimes, so we should eliminate those circumstances rather than penalize the criminal. Education, welfare, and affordable housing amongst other policies are effective in reducing poverty. Mental health services would also be included to mitigate the causes of a crime of passion.

Of course, taxpayer dollars spent on these policies come at a tradeoff. Significant taxation can discourage economic activity; funding these programs carry opportunity costs. But a properly designed utilitarian system would weigh these costs with the impacts of reducing crime. In most instances, preventing crime outweighs its cost. Safer streets, more economic activity, and increased trust in government institutions come with less crime.

A final worry remains. Determinism appears to intuitively refute responsibility. Even if you accept the philosophical arguments, there is a stubborn instinct to blame.

Consider Thomas More's trial in 1535, when he refused to swear loyalty to King Henry VIII's Anglican Church and was tried for treason. During More's trial, prosecutors needed testimony proving that More denounced the Anglican Church.

Richard Rich, ambitious for power, took the stand. Rich had known More for years. On the witness stand, he swore that More denied the authority of the Anglican Church. Rich's testimony was likely perjured. In exchange for his betrayal, he gained political advancement, eventually becoming Lord Chancellor of England.

Today, we would condemn Rich's actions. Rich's actions could be causally explained. Rich's extreme ambition perhaps was a result of coming from a non-aristocratic family. Instinctually, we still object to Rich's betrayal even if we had an explanation. Rationale does not erase criticism. We want Rich punished because he deserves it, not because of any protection to society.

This is the strongest objection to the utilitarian system I have defended. Determinism dismantles moral desert philosophically, but human instinct still jumps to retribution. Despite this, our legal system would continue with its utilitarianism because it is founded on legal principles rather than human intuition.

Even a utilitarian justice system would deem Rich's testimonial unacceptable because perjury undermines the stability of the legal system. Rich's sentence would resemble a retributive one. Only the justification differs; that is the deeper point. Determinism changes why we punish, but leaves most legal practices intact.

Ultimately, the acceptance of determinism in the legal system would not discard punishment but redefine its purpose. The concept of Kantian moral desert would no longer function when actions are viewed as causally necessitated. Despite this, legal responsibility persists, as courts value Hart's normal capacities. As a result, punishment would become utilitarian, justified by Mill's harm principle. Expertise and empiric evidence replace moral outrage as the basis for sentencing. At the legislative level, lawmakers influenced by Marx's analysis would target the causes of crime. Our retributive instincts, such as the one pushing us to punish Richard Rich are real but not law. Determinism therefore would not destroy the legal system; rather, it would transform it from a morality-based institution into a technocratic and utilitarian system focused on reducing harm and preventing crime.

Endnotes

1. Immanuel Kant, The Metaphysics of Morals, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6:226–28. Kant argues that punishment "can never be administered merely as a means to promote some other good" and must be grounded in the criminal's having deserved it.

2. Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," The Journal of Philosophy 68, no. 1 (1971): 5–20. Frankfurt introduces the distinction between first-order desires and second-order volitions to defend compatibilism.

3. H.L.A. Hart, Punishment and Responsibility: Essays in the Philosophy of Law, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 152. The quoted language appears in Hart's essay "Legal Responsibility and Excuses."

4. David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), sec. VIII, "Of Liberty and Necessity." Hume argues that liberty is "a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will."

5. Baruch Spinoza, Ethics, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), Part III, Proposition 41. The full passage reads: “Hatred is increased by being returned, but can be destroyed by love.”

6. John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), 9. The harm principle states: “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully
exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to
others.”

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), Second Essay, sections 4–6. Nietzsche traces punishment to the creditor-debtor relationship and the pleasure of cruelty.

8. Karl Marx, “Debates on the Wood Theft Law,” in Karl Marx: Selected Writings, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 45–48. Marx writes that the law criminalizes the poor for gathering wood while protecting the property interests of the wealthy.

9. On Richard Rich's testimony against Thomas More, see the trial record in The Trial of Sir
Thomas More, reprinted in William Safire, ed., Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 328–30. More's response to Rich—"I am sorrier for your perjury than for mine own peril"—appears in this record. For Rich's subsequent career as Lord Chancellor, see Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Richard Rich, 1st Baron Rich," accessed May 2026. For the philosophical interpretation of Rich as a "happy immoralist," see Steven M. Cahn, "A Happy Immoralist: The Case of Richard Rich," Blog of the American Philosophical Association, September 11, 2020.

Is it ever wrong to do the right thing for the wrong reasons?

by Claudia Wang

Introduction

In 2010, billionaire investor Warren Buffett and Microsoft founder Bill Gates launched The Giving Pledge, a campaign encouraging wealthy individuals to donate the majority of their fortunes to charitable causes. Although many praised the initiative for supporting education, healthcare, and poverty relief, critics questioned whether some participants were motivated by genuine generosity or by concerns surrounding reputation, legacy, and public image. Yet regardless of these motivations, the donations still funded hospitals, scholarships, and humanitarian projects that improved millions of lives. Situations such as these raise an important ethical question: if an action produces meaningful benefits for others, does it ultimately matter why it was performed?

Moral judgment is often associated with both the intentions behind an action and the consequences it produces. While some philosophers argue that true morality depends primarily on acting with the correct intentions, everyday human experience reveals a far more complicated reality. Individuals frequently perform beneficial actions motivated by self-interest, ambition, or the desire for recognition, yet these actions can still generate significant positive outcomes for others. This raises a significant ethical question: is it ever truly wrong to do the right thing for the wrong reasons? This essay contends that although flawed or ambiguous intentions may reduce the moral purity of an action, they do not eliminate its ethical value. Actions that consistently produce beneficial outcomes contribute genuine good even when motivations are imperfect or uncertain. However, intentions still remain important because they influence trust, character, and the long-term consistency of ethical behavior.

One perspective reflected in the Chinese proverb “君子论迹不论心” (“A gentleman judges deeds, not the heart”) strongly supports this argument (Wang 42). The phrase originates from Weilu Yehua by Qing Dynasty writer Wang Yongbin, who argued that people should primarily be judged according to their actions rather than by attempts to interpret their inner thoughts. The proverb suggests that because human intentions are often uncertain, inconsistent, and difficult to evaluate objectively, actions and their observable consequences provide the most practical basis for moral judgment. Although this perspective does not completely dismiss intention, it emphasizes the real-world importance of visible behavior and measurable outcomes.

Kantian Ethics and the Importance of Intention

A powerful argument against the idea that “right actions for wrong reasons” are morally acceptable comes from Kant’s philosophy. Kant argues that the moral worth of an action lies not in its consequences but in the intention behind it. According to his theory, an action is only truly moral if it is performed from duty and guided by what he calls the categorical imperative, a principle requiring individuals to act only according to rules that could be universally applied. In Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (1785), a foundational philosophical text in which Kant attempted to establish the fundamental principles of morality, he famously writes that “a good will is good not because of what it performs or effects… but simply by virtue of the volition” itself (Kant 9). For Kant, moral worth exists independently of success or failure. Even if an action produces no beneficial result, it may still possess moral value if it was motivated by duty. Conversely, an action that creates enormous benefits may lack moral worth if it was performed solely for personal gain.

From Kant's perspective, helping another person for reasons such as praise, profit, or reputation lacks genuine moral worth because the action is motivated by self-interest rather than respect for moral law. Even if the outcome benefits others, Kant would argue that the action remains morally deficient because morality is being treated as a means to an end rather than an end in itself (Kant 37). For example, if a business leader donates money to a school primarily to improve public image, Kant would claim that the donation does not possess full moral value because the donor's primary concern remains personal advantage rather than duty.

Kant's framework is compelling because it protects morality from becoming entirely dependent upon convenience or self-interest. If intentions are ignored completely, then almost any action could potentially be justified as long as it produces temporary benefits. However, Kant's theory may also become too restrictive when applied to practical human behavior. Human motivations are often difficult to classify as entirely selfless or entirely selfish because most actions emerge from a mixture of moral concern, personal interest, emotional attachment, and social expectation. If every action motivated partially by self-interest is dismissed as morally deficient, then very few human actions would possess genuine ethical value.

This conclusion appears counterintuitive when actions clearly improve the lives of others. For instance, corporations such as Patagonia have publicly promoted environmental sustainability while simultaneously strengthening their brand identity and increasing profits ("Our Environmental Responsibility"). Although the company benefits financially from these actions, its environmental initiatives still reduce waste, encourage consumer awareness, and contribute toward conservation efforts. To dismiss the value of such contributions entirely because the motives are less than pure would ignore their measurable social impact. Kant's theory therefore highlights an important truth about morality, but it struggles to account for the genuine good that imperfectly motivated actions can achieve.

Utilitarianism and the Importance of Outcomes

While Kantian ethics emphasizes intention, utilitarianism offers a contrasting perspective by focusing primarily on consequences. Utilitarianism developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Bentham argued that morality should aim to produce "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (Bentham 3), while Mill later refined this principle by emphasizing both happiness and human well-being as the central goals of morality.

Utilitarianism evaluates actions according to their consequences, specifically their ability to maximize overall happiness or reduce suffering. From this perspective, the motives behind an action become secondary to its outcomes. In Utilitarianism (1863), a philosophical work defending consequence-based ethics, John Stuart Mill argues that actions are "right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness" (Mill 7). This statement demonstrates the utilitarian belief that moral evaluation depends primarily upon results. Unlike Kant, Mill focuses less on what motivates an action and more on what the action actually accomplishes. The ethical significance of an action therefore rests in its effects on human well-being rather than the psychological state of the person performing it.

Utilitarianism therefore provides strong support for the idea that doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is not inherently wrong. A company that adopts environmentally friendly practices in order to attract customers still reduces pollution and environmental damage. Even if the motivation is profit rather than genuine concern for the planet, the positive consequences remain significant. Companies such as Tesla, for example, profit enormously from the growing demand for sustainable transportation while simultaneously accelerating the global transition toward electric vehicles and renewable energy technologies. Multiple interests operate simultaneously, yet the environmental benefits remain real.

Richard Posner's discussion of utilitarian ethics further strengthens this argument by explaining that moral systems themselves become valuable because they encourage actions that maximize social welfare. Posner argues that utilitarianism supports legal and moral systems that produce "as much pro-social behavior as possible at least cost" (Posner 128). In other words, the practical benefits generated by actions and institutions become more important than determining whether motivations are perfectly sincere. Posner's argument suggests that society benefits more from encouraging positive outcomes than from attempting to evaluate the hidden motives behind every action. This perspective aligns closely with the Chinese proverb "君子论迹不论心," which prioritizes actions and their observable effects over uncertain internal motivations (Wang 42).

However, utilitarianism also faces important criticisms. Philosopher David Lyons argues that focusing too heavily on outcomes can weaken the moral force of rights and obligations because actions may become justified whenever they produce greater overall benefit (Lyons 131). In extreme cases, utilitarian reasoning could theoretically excuse morally troubling actions if doing so appeared to benefit the majority. This criticism reveals a significant weakness in purely consequence-based ethics. If outcomes alone determine morality, then trust, honesty, and moral integrity may become unstable whenever violating them appears beneficial. Therefore, while utilitarianism correctly recognizes the importance of beneficial outcomes, outcomes alone cannot fully explain moral responsibility.

Virtue Ethics and Moral Character

Because both Kantian ethics and utilitarianism contain significant strengths and weaknesses, virtue ethics offers a more balanced perspective by focusing on moral character rather than isolated intentions or consequences.

Virtue ethics originates in the philosophy of Aristotle. In Nicomachean Ethics, written during the fourth century BCE, Aristotle attempted to define what constitutes a good and flourishing human life. Rather than identifying morality solely with rules or outcomes, Aristotle sought to explain how individuals develop excellent character. Within this work, he argues that moral virtue develops through habit, practice, and repeated action rather than through abstract principles alone. As Aristotle writes, “we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts” (Aristotle 28). According to Aristotle, ethical behavior gradually shapes character over time. Unlike Kantian ethics, virtue ethics does not require completely pure motives in order for actions to possess moral value. Unlike utilitarianism, it also does not reduce morality entirely to consequences. Instead, virtue ethics asks whether actions reflect the qualities of a good and virtuous person. This approach creates a more realistic understanding of human behavior because it recognizes that morality involves both actions and the development of ethical character. From a virtue ethics perspective, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons becomes morally ambiguous rather than entirely right or entirely wrong. Aristotle would likely argue that a person who repeatedly performs charitable acts solely for recognition may develop the habit of giving, but not necessarily the virtue of generosity itself. This distinction is important because virtue ethics evaluates not only what people do, but also what kind of people they become through their actions. This perspective helps illuminate the examples discussed throughout the essay. Consider the participants in The Giving Pledge introduced at the beginning of the paper. Aristotle would likely acknowledge the enormous benefits produced by their donations, including scholarships, medical research, and poverty-relief programs.

However, he would also ask whether these actions reflect genuine generosity or merely a desire for prestige and legacy. Similarly, companies such as Patagonia and Tesla may generate substantial environmental benefits while simultaneously pursuing profit. Virtue ethics suggests that these actions possess moral value because they contribute to positive outcomes and encourage socially beneficial habits, yet the moral character of the individuals and organizations involved remains ethically significant.

Furthermore, Aristotle's framework helps explain why intentions matter without dismissing outcomes altogether. Actions performed for imperfect reasons can still contribute to the development of virtue, making Aristotle's perspective more flexible than Kant's while avoiding the tendency of utilitarianism to focus exclusively on consequences. Rather than asking only why an action was performed or what outcome it produced, virtue ethics asks what kind of person the action helps create. This perspective ultimately provides the most comprehensive understanding of the relationship between intentions, actions, and moral judgment.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the question is not simply whether it is wrong to do the right thing for the wrong reasons, but how moral judgment should balance intentions and consequences. Actions motivated by self-interest are therefore not inherently wrong if they produce meaningful good. In many cases, imperfect motives still lead to socially valuable outcomes that improve lives and should not be dismissed. However, intentions remain morally significant because they influence trust, character, and the consistency of ethical behavior over time. A complete understanding of morality must therefore acknowledge the complexity of human motivation rather than reducing ethics solely to either pure intentions or successful outcomes. The most persuasive answer to the question posed by this essay is that doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is not necessarily wrong, but neither are motives irrelevant.

Ethical judgment requires attention to both what people do and why they do it. Only by considering intentions, consequences, and character together can morality be evaluated in a truly comprehensive way.

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Deconstructing Gender Conventions: Feminist Movements and the Transformation of American Science Fiction

by Hannah Li

What would an all-female world look like? How might radical changes to family and reproduction affect individuals and societies? Could gender become fluid or even eliminated, breaking binary categorization? Science fiction often focuses on traditionally masculine themes, such as technological conquest and exploration. However, influenced by feminist movements, the genre has been used to construct feminist utopias that speculate on the future of gender hierarchy. This essay aims to explain the intersection between the historical development of American science fiction as a genre and the two waves of feminist movements. It argues that science fiction is not merely a literary genre, as it also plays a sociopolitical role in subverting gender conventions. Additionally, the genre is progressive, constantly interacting with and even moving ahead of the changing historical and political contexts.

Science Fiction and the Two Waves of Feminism

Traditionally, the genre of science fiction excluded or sidelined female characters (Merrick, 2003). For instance, in early twentieth-century science fiction, female characters were narrowly reduced to symbols of monstrosity and fear (Chakraborty, 2022), as in The Bride of Frankenstein (1935), where the bride's transformation into a zombie renders her a fearful "other" in society. As the genre later shifted from horror-orientated to adventure-orientated, female characters were portrayed as supportive companions or lovers of male protagonists, depriving them of independent narrative value. However, under the influence of feminist movements, science fiction, driven by its central question "what if?", opened opportunities for authors to question the future of gender structures.

Feminist science fiction's earliest instinct was not to critique patriarchy explicitly, but to imagine its absence. As early as 1836, science fiction constructed feminist utopias, as seen in Mary Griffith's Three Hundred Years Hence (Lothian, 2015), which characterizes a gender-equal society featuring advanced technology and widespread education. More famously, Charlotte Gilman's Herland (1915) depicts an isolated and peaceful society with only women. These women demonstrate physical strength, scientific expertise, political organization, and other forms of competence stereotypically associated with masculinity. After the three male protagonists visit Herland, they conclude that the femininity they once believed women embody innately is a socially constructed facade to "please [men] because they had to." This reversal suggests gendered behavior stems from men's expectations rather than women's nature, revealing femininity itself as a survival strategy within patriarchal society. In doing so, Gilman implies that women possess equal capacity with men––an impressive assertion of equality for a novel written this early. Notably, Gilman assigns this realization to her male characters, indicating that she believes men are capable of recognizing patriarchy's constructed nature, but have simply chosen (or been conditioned) to internalize it instead. Gilman's authorship shows that women possess an inner realm of freedom untouched by patriarchy, capable of autonomous critique rather than passive internalization of androcentric norms.

Joanna Russ, the author of The Female Man (1975), explains why this kind of utopia carries real-world weight. According to Russ, "utopias... are reactive; that is, they supply in fiction what their authors believe society... and/or women, lack in the here-and-now" (Merrick, 2003). In this sense, utopias function as mirrors that reflect societal flaws. Read this way, Herland reflects the real-world condition of women confined by patriarchal structures. More broadly, by portraying female authors' utopian visions, early feminist science fiction raises awareness of female perspectives long silenced.

Nonetheless, Herland's complete isolation from patriarchal reality renders this feminist utopia an imaginative space rather than a historically attainable outcome of social transformation.

Similarly, in Mary E. Bradley Lane's Mizora (1880), the protagonist reaches the all-female society only by being swept by a whirlwind into a world beneath the North pole. Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant's Unveiling a Parallel (1893) portrays an egalitarian society on Mars. Consequently, early constructions of feminist utopia risk being read as forms of escapism rather than practical predictions of women's future (Peyser, 1992).

This early push for gender equality in science fiction represents the first attempts to center women within a male-dominated genre, though these efforts remained relatively immature and limited in scope. In fact, these feminist authors pushed beyond the first wave of feminism (1840-1920). This movement fought to secure women's basic legal rights, including the right to vote, the right to own property, and access to education. In doing so, it established a legal foundation for recognizing women as independent rational beings rather than as extensions of their fathers or husbands. Feminists also proposed the concept of the "New Woman" as an ideal for the movement. The New Woman was an abstract symbol of independent femininity, which prioritized independence over domestic and traditional gender roles, such as marriage and childbearing (Richardson et al., 2019). This concept was mirrored in early science fiction. In Three Hundred Years Hence, for instance, women have access to quality education; in Herland, motherhood is characterized as a communal role, with child-rearing treated as a shared social responsibility rather than a personal burden.

Many feminist science fiction authors were themselves in the movement. Gilman's visit to Hull House, where women were trained to lead social reform, inspired her utopian writings; later, she was invited to speak before the House Judiciary Committee in support of suffrage (Scharnhorst, 1985). Beyond this direct engagement, however, feminist science fiction also moved beyond the movement. Science fiction authors argued that political equality was not enough: society's assumptions about gender, biology, and femininity would persist even after women won the vote.

Furthermore, science fiction addressed evolutionary science that argued women were biologically capable of controlling reproduction and governing themselves (Lough, 2018). This scientific aspect, however, was under-addressed by the movement. Therefore, feminist science fiction illustrated the movement's existing and anticipated a fuller vision of equality.

Nonetheless, similar to the movement, the genre was constrained by its narrow focus. Specifically, the first wave of feminism was primarily led by white, middle-class women, which limited the representation of working-class women and racial minorities (Caughie, 2010). In science fiction, a similar racial hierarchy was established. For instance, in Herland, Herlanders are white and blond despite living in a South American location. In Mary E. Bradley Lane's Mizora (1890), while the text advocates for women's self-sufficiency, it also reflects a eugenic vision in which "dark complexion" is regarded as an undesirable physical characteristic that can be eliminated through technology.

The dominance of white feminism in early science fiction prompted African American writers to also use science fiction as a platform to address their marginalization, incorporating race as an inseparable dimension of the imagined futures of gender. Despite being the minority in this period, African American authors helped lay the foundation for increased explorations of the intersections between gender and race during the second wave of feminism. For example, Pauline Hopkins, in Of One Blood, explores these issues through the character of Dianthe, the daughter of an enslaved woman and her white half-brother, whose origin marks her as a legacy of slavery and leads to her marginalization and trauma (Hopkins, 2022). The patriarchal nature of her marriage exposes her to sexual exploitation, and her mixed-race heritage leaves her alienated from both Black and white communities, highlighting the compounded vulnerabilities faced by women of racial minorities. Yet through speculative devices like time-slip and mesmeric trance, Dianthe accesses a buried past that grants her insight the novel's male protagonists lack. This power also lets her recover a racial history otherwise erased.

Speculative elements unique to science fiction thus become a new form of resistance, giving Black characters leverage against gender and racial subjugation alike.

The resistance extends to world-building: Hopkins imagines the utopian city of Telassar, an Afrotopian sanctuary untouched by Western colonization, inhabited by a highly civilized people who combine advanced science with mystical power. However, even here, gender hierarchy persists, suggesting that Hopkins treats racial liberation and gender liberation as separate projects, neither guaranteeing the other. Thus, she implies that they require equally deliberate resolution. By grounding her utopia in this tension between race and gender, Hopkins makes Telassar a more realistic utopia.

Therefore, influenced by the first wave of feminism, science fiction was used to construct feminist utopias that mirrored women's resistance to patriarchal structures, even as these visions exposed limitations that later works would progressively overcome.

As the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s continued to advocate for gender equality, authors kept addressing their feminist visions through science fiction. Unlike the first wave, which focused on voting rights, the second wave fought against everyday inequality embedded in settings like the workplace and the home. Correspondingly, science fiction's narratives were grounded in everyday contexts. Rather than constructing an entirely new utopia, authors now speculatively transformed only certain characters or details, leaving the rest recognizably continuous with reality.

During the second wave, rapid technological development shaped the movement. Feminists began asking how technology could expand women's opportunities––for instance, FDA approval of the birth control pill let women control fertility, enabling their pursuit of careers and higher education. Yet technology's capacity to liberate women remained controversial. Critics like Barbara Seaman questioned why contraceptive responsibility fell on women alone, and why no pill existed for men (Seaman, 1995).

This ambivalence carried into feminist science fiction. As technological development blurred the boundaries between "natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions between organisms and machines" (Haraway, 2013), feminist authors explored how technology may dismantle rigid gender binaries. For example, in C. L. Moore's No Woman Born (1944), the cyborg Deirdre retains her traditionally feminine traits, like beauty and flexibility, but her body turns metallic, granting her superhuman strength. Nonetheless, the male narrator labels this strength "hyper-masculine," revealing that even as technology transforms what Deirdre's body can do, it does not transform how that body is interpreted––women's bodies and abilities are legible only through the male gaze. He treats the strong woman as a gender anomaly to be feared rather than simply a woman who has gained power, implying that when technology threatens the traditional gender framework, that framework is defended rather than revised. Thus, although the story imagines technology as a tool that frees women from bodily limitation, it simultaneously reveals that true liberation requires the deconstruction of the patriarchal framework that determines gender's meaning.

Furthermore, compared to the first wave, the second wave of feminism focused on women's domestic life, given that women were pushed back to their families after WWII, but their domestic labor was undervalued. Thus, science fiction was used to address domestic concerns. For instance, in Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" (1967), Sarah––a housewife––undergoes an endless, meaningless domestic routine, which exhausts her and eventually leads to a mental breakdown. The domestic sphere is described as a closed system analogous to the universe, where total entropy can only increase. Sarah's cleaning is a continuous attempt to reverse this process, but as the second law of thermodynamics dictates, entropy always increases. This scientific framing reframes "meaningless" domestic labor as cosmically significant––Sarah is not simply tired, but fighting a law of physics. Moreover, the law foreshadows her inevitable breakdown, reflecting how housewives are worn down by an endlessly repeating labor. In doing so, Zoline subverts the assumption that domestic tasks are less physically and mentally demanding than men's careers.

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As more women engaged in feminist activism, conservative forces aimed to push back against these progressive gender changes, creating political backlash (Faludi, 2009). For example, the media portrayed career-focused women as neglectful mothers, claiming that they threatened family and maternal ideals. In response to the large-scale public resistance to feminist movements, female writers began imagining dystopian futures for women. For instance, Walk to the End of the World (1974) by Suzy McKee Charnes depicts a society where women are reduced to breeding slaves. Similarly, The Handmaid's Tale (1968) by Margaret Atwood envisions a future where fertile women are forced to perform ritualized sexual and reproductive labor to ameliorate the declining population. The impact of feminist movements is thoroughly discussed in Joanna Russ's The Female Man (1975), which depicts four women living in parallel realities (Lothian, 2015). Jeannine lives in a traditional, patriarchal society, confined by rigid and oppressive gender roles; Joanna, a reflection of the author herself, resides within a world where women have gained some freedoms but still face inequality, resembling 1970s society; Janet lives in the matriarchal utopian society of Whileaway, where women live independently and equally after men go extinct; and Jael is an aggressive, warrior-like figure living in a hyper-individualized society, representing a radical deconstruction of gender. Through her work, Russ recognizes political and social contexts' influence on gendered experiences and considers the extent of feminist change that can be pursued without resulting in a complete, radical deconstruction of society. This mirrors the self-reflectiveness of feminist movements, which critically considered whether their radical pursuits could effectively achieve meaningful results while preventing the public from misinterpreting feminism as promoting individualism at the expense of family or maternal ideals.

Furthermore, in this period, considerations of race and class were increasingly integrated. More African American writers, such as Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany, emerged in this period. For instance, in Butler's Kindred (1979), Dana, a contemporary Black woman, is involuntarily transported back to 1800s Maryland.

The story depicts the struggles inherent in interracial relationships across different historical contexts, both in the contemporary marriage between Dana and Kevin and in the master-slave relationship between Rufus and Alice. The latter reveals how romantic relationships under slavery are inseparable from violence, oppression, and exploitation, and how even present-day interracial relationships are not free from societal criticism.

To conclude, the second-wave feminism marked science fiction's growing engagement with real-world contexts, such as technological development and domestic life. Although the genre was still largely shaped by Western feminism, the emergence of more African American authors indicated an increasing attention to the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Science Fiction and the Deconstruction of Gender Norms

From imagining equality between binary genders, science fiction has, over time, begun to challenge whether such boundaries existed in the first place. Through its defamiliarization of certain taken-for-granted aspects of human reality, science fiction reconstructs the concept of gender (Canavan, 2016). Specifically, it may deny the binary categorization of gender, assume a spectrum of gendered possibilities that subvert the traditional dualistic view, or merge the binary into a single gender (Merrick, 2003). For example, The Left Hand of Darkness (1968) by Ursula K. Le Guin imagines a genderless planet whose inhabitants become male or female only during certain brief periods, freeing them from gender expectations associated with a binary categorization. Nonetheless, the novel is not exempt from criticism, as it employs masculine narrative conventions, such as the consistent use of he/him as a supposedly generic, non-gendered pronoun. Therefore, although it aims to deconstruct gender conventions, the entrenched binary categorization cannot be entirely and suddenly avoided. Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy––Dawn (1987), Adulthood Rites (1988), and Imago (1989)––depicts an alien species known as the Oankali, which has three sexes and survives through genetic trade.

Humans are allowed to live only if they interbreed with the Oankali, producing hybrid offspring. The tripartite gender composition of the Oankali and the hybrid offspring challenge the norm of heterosexuality, which requires male-female pairing for reproduction (Melzer, 2022). This reveals that the challenge to gender conventions is never an isolated process. Rather, destabilizing gender norms simultaneously calls related norms into question, including compulsory heterosexuality and traditional expectations surrounding romantic and reproductive relationships, highlighting the scope of its impacts. In fact, the growing visibility of the queer moment in the late twentieth century shaped science fiction's engagement with sexuality in ways resembling science fiction's interaction with feminist movements. This trend is reflected in China Mountain Zhang (1992) and The Telling (2000), both of which characterize homosexual relationships, demonstrating the genre's ongoing interaction with social contexts beyond feminism.

Among the gender-related concepts being reinvented, the reproductive process has been widely altered and redefined by feminist writers. In Motherlines (1978) by Suzy McKee Charnes, women in the postapocalyptic world reproduce using horse semen. The use of horse semen challenges men's sense of self-importance, which traditionally derives from the belief that they are indispensable in women's reproductive processes. In this story, however, men are replaced not by superior men or advanced genetic technologies, but by a nonhuman animal, thereby undermining the pride associated with their easily displaced reproductive role. Furthermore, Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) illustrates the possibility of children being nurtured in artificial wombs and men breastfeeding. The fluidity of reproductive labor denies patriarchal assumptions that child-rearing is exclusively women's responsibility.

Hence, because it speculates on the future rather than being confined to the present, science fiction offers unique opportunities for writers to defamiliarize and deconstruct existing gender norms. It achieves this mainly by challenging the binary categorization of gender and questioning conventional reproductive norms.

Moreover, the process of deconstructing gender often engages with related concepts such as sexuality, demonstrating how the genre continues to engage with broad, diverse social contexts.

In conclusion, science fiction is never a mere literary genre. It stands between reality and fantasy, interacting with real-life problems while getting out of the box to offer often radical solutions. Feminist science fiction offers a venue of resistance for gender injustices. Specifically, it emphasizes that gender is socially constructed and tracks feminist movements' evolution, while pushing past their limits and exposing their blind spots. Originally, the genre focused on the experiences of white, middle-class heterosexual women. However, over time, as more African American authors engaged with the genre, science fiction has increasingly explored the intersections of gender and race. Ultimately, the genre is positioned not only to challenge gender boundaries but also to question other stereotypes and biases.

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Attention, Buyers: We are Wearing the Downfall of our Planet

by Ysabelle Sun

Dear Fashion Lovers,

I would like to start with a story. When my dad was a child, most people in my country just wanted enough clothes to survive the winter. Today, many of us consider these needs as rudimentary and naturally met. Therefore, our eyes, our brains, and our souls crave more and more, unaware that the environmental impact of our endless consumption is beyond catastrophic.

Have you ever scrolled on Amazon, Temu, Taobao, or whatever shopping app you use, and kept adding cool-looking – but rather useless – clothes to your cart? This process is like collecting Labubus: you feel as if you need to own one of every style! When I detect a nice piece of clothing that I don't already own (not necessarily something I need or even like), I add it to my cart, purchasing it on a whim. Later, however, as I open my closet door, I view a plethora of clothes that equate to a mountain-size pile, which continues to grow higher and higher. Ironically, after feeling guilty about one purchase, I continue buying items again and again. Unfortunately, I find it difficult to stop this habit, even when I want to.

One of the key economic concerns is that humans' wants appear to be unlimited, although the Earth's resources in order to satisfy them are scarce. Research shows that people do not wear 50% of the clothes that they own. Moreover, one hundred billion garments are produced annually, with an average lifespan of each one being worn a mere seven times before piling up in a landfill. In short, these items are bought and then relegated to a closet or dresser.

Few, if any, individuals understand the enormous environmental impact of clothing production and disposal. Buying a new pair of jeans may involve merely a consumer clicking a button, but doing so results in the mass exploitation of resources. Deforestation to create space for cotton farms, carbon emissions from shipping, and garment microplastics that harm marine life are only a few aspects of the grave environmental impacts of the clothing industry.

Around 4,000 liters of water are required to produce a single pair of jeans, yet 2 billion people worldwide lack access to safe drinking water. According to Oxfam, a British organization focused on alleviating global poverty, manufacturing jeans owned by UK adults alone is comparable to flying a plane around the globe 2,372 times! Moreover, many companies lure buyers into purchasing more by offering discounts if they make a certain payment or buy two to get one free. As a result, the consumer has bought more than they need.

In the end, these purchasing habits have little value for anyone. Consumers end up with an overloaded house, so they respond by throwing away what they bought, thus creating more pollution. Literally, mountains are created with the junk that individuals purchased only because it “looked cool” when they first saw it. Now is the time to ask yourself, what was the point of all that needless buying?

This practice must stop. Buyers can start one step at a time: place a limit on buying one piece of clothing per month; use thrifting practices more often; and delete shopping apps. For more than a year, I have not bought a single pair of new jeans. So . . . next time you scroll on TikTok and view an advertisement for a cute top or a nice pair of track pants, please take a pause and ask, “Will I dispose of it soon? Is the environmental impact worth it? Is there a more sustainable alternative?” If each person buys one less piece of apparel per year, that would mean eight billion garments would be saved from production. If we change our mindset and our habits, imagine the resources saved and the damage prevented. We will be able to save the Earth.

Sincerely,
Ysabelle Sun