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Gendered Expectations in Twenty-First Century American Literature

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine how the narrative of the feminist movement affected and altered the work of five authors of mainstream literary fiction. I discuss the ways that gender is produced culturally and how that is informed by literature. I contend that authors like Jennifer Egan, Erin Williams, Kristen Roupenian, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Louise Erdrich use their writing to criticize oppressive parts of women's experiences in the U.S. To emphasize the complexity of gender identity in 21st-century America, these authors discuss, among other things, identity as an intersectional phenomenon, digital technology advancements, public conflicts, and the mechanics of women's work. These texts emphasize the diversity of restrictions imposed on women and reveal the complexity of women's struggles. Finally, they contend that literature can aid in the understanding of injustice and can thus support social movements for change.

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Introduction

On January 21, 2017, Americans headed to Washington, D.C., to flood the streets in a sea of pink, a sign of support for the broad spectrum of women's rights that have come to define the twenty-first century feminist movement. Authors used this march as an opportunity to merge history and literature, inviting readers to think about how texts are informed and influenced by the world we live in. Joyce Markovics, author of *2017 Women's March (Protest! March for Change)*, directly wrote about the march, introducing readers to the powerful voices that defined this historical moment. Other authors—specifically the ones discussed in this thesis—did not directly address the women's march in their literature. They drew inspiration from the history that preceded the march and that was unfolding before them, making their works starting points of conversation surrounding the woman problem. Women's pink-polished fingers clenched into fists raised in the air as visible signs of solidarity, women at the Capitol Building shouted criticisms of Donald Trump, the 45th President of the United States. With female gender glyphs painted on their cheeks, protestors held signs stating mantras such as *The future is still female* and *Girls just wanna have fun-damental rights*. And their posters displayed pictures of women activists throughout history such as Rosa Parks, Susan B. Anthony, and Sojourner Truth. They exhibited LGBTQ+ rainbow flags, painted images of the female uterus, and held hangers dripping blood above the words NEVER AGAIN. They displayed photographs of Muslim women whose hijabs were transformed into American flags. And men stood alongside women draped in pink scarves and sporting pink hats, protesting a President that they viewed as working to divide the country. Along the same lines, protesters in other U.S. cities metaphorically stood alongside the protesters in D.C., showing that the March on Washington did not end in Washington. Millions of people around the world held their own protests, proving to Trump that

his bombastic comments could not destroy the fight for women's rights. Trump frequently turned to Twitter as an outlet for his sexist and insulting comments about women which garnered attention but ignited outrage. On August 28, 2012, Trump tweeted, "@ariannahuff is unattractive both inside and out. I fully understand why her former husband left her for a man-he made a good decision." Four years later, Trump tweeted, "26,000 unreported sexual assaults in the military, only 238 convictions. What did these geniuses expect when they put men and women together?" And during the 2016 election, Trump asked, "If Hilary Clinton can't satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America?" There was an increase in authors who also turned to Twitter and posted in response to Trump's comments and to the March including Judy Blume, Stephen King, and Gayle Forman. These authors attended marches across the United States, proving that authors' voices rise beyond the page. The man who was representing the country encouraged and promoted the mindset that women were inferior to men, most notably through his Twitter platform, igniting a rage inside millions of Americans. This march was the people versus the president.

The example of the women's march is just one of several significant moments in twenty-first-century U.S. history that has set the stage for women's writing about the politics of gender, contemporary feminism, and gendered expectations, the subject of this thesis. In this thesis, I analyze how five authors of mainstream literary fiction were influenced by and shaped the narrative about the feminist movement. I reveal the ways in which literature informs and is informed by the cultural production of gender. I argue that Louise Erdrich, Jhumpa Lahiri, Erin Williams, Kristen Roupenian, and Jennifer Egan use their literary works to critique oppressive aspects of women's experiences in the U.S. Among other issues, these authors address aspects of identity as an intersectional phenomenon, digital technological developments, public

controversies, and the mechanics of women's work to highlight the complexity inherent to gender identity in twenty-first-century America. These texts reveal complexity in women's struggles and highlight the range of limitations placed upon women. And they ultimately suggest that literature can facilitate understanding about inequity and thereby complement social movements for change.

Contemporary women authors who write about gendered expectations in twenty-first-century life are inevitably informed by the historical marginalization of women in the U.S., which has its origins in thirty-nine white men signing the Constitution on September 17, 1787. John Adams, the second president of the United States and member of the Continental Congress, was told by his wife Abigail, "I desire you would remember the ladies...remember, all men would be tyrants if they could" ("Abigail"). It was no mistake that women were clearly and deliberately left out of the Constitution. *Los Angeles Times* writer Patt Morrison comments, "Remember when the Constitution was written, it was no accident that women were left out. It was intentional." In our modern world, a document written over 200 years ago by all white, property-owning men is still being used to govern our country. It was not the signing of the Constitution where the injustices of women began; it was the *mindset* that women were inferior to men that was never challenged. However, the Constitution was an opportunity for change, a chance for women to gain equality, but it became a missed opportunity that would leave women 200 years later fighting for the founding fathers' mistake. It was 1787 in which the United States became a country where all *men* were created equal and it was 1787 that would mark the start of a long battle for equality for women, a battle that would take women into 2022.

The feminist movement that emerged against this patriarchal backdrop in the U.S. is divided into four waves that influenced and were influenced by a range of American women writers. Women writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began to use their status as a woman to heighten feminist awareness. However, these earlier writers “reveal a limited or hesitant approach to the question of women’s rights and their place in society” (Nielsen 26). The first wave-feminist movement spanned from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and began at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, where three hundred men and women united in support of women’s equality. This period became defined by new milestones in ideology and politics, most notably women attaining suffrage in 1920. Literary societies emerged during this first wave “that were devoted to the diffusion of knowledge and the suppression of vice and immorality” (Alexander, “The First Wave”). The power of literature was recognized by women during this time and continues to be used as a force for change in the modern world. However, women’s writing was criticized during this time, but the criticism was met with more writings, more stories, and more advocacy of women’s rights. Sojourner Truth’s famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech fundamentally changed women’s history, not only advocating for an end to slavery, but for women’s right to vote. Many African American women at this time used letters, poems, and slave narratives to spread the importance of equality. Arguably the most important document to come out of this period was the Declaration of Sentiments, clearly defining women’s rights to education and property. Throughout feminist literature produced during the first wave, “there is often a half-hidden or unstated awareness in their works of the problematic situation of women in the world” (Nielsen 26).

First-wave feminism and the literature produced during this time served as the foundation for the rise of the second wave in the 1960s, in which women sought to expand equality to offer

hope and possibility of a new way of being. Literature continued to develop in conversation with the fight for equality, specifically Simone de Beauvoir's, "The Second Sex," which defined and recalled a history in which women have been deemed and treated as inferior and secondary to men. Her book brought women's feelings of dissatisfaction with their lives to the public's attention and became monumental as it united women by their mutual feelings of scorn toward their confinement to the domestic sphere, a subject addressed in contemporary works by authors such as Williams and Lahiri. In *Feminism's Forgotten Fight: The Unfinished Struggle for Work and Family*, Kirsten Swinth discusses the expectations of women in terms of a three-ball juggling act: job, marriage, and children. However, she notes that "the problem was that the juggling act was 'a gender-specific hype'" (Swinth 1). Women felt the burden and pressure to balance all these expectations, while they argued that men's lives were undisturbed. One of feminists' main goals during this time was to "reconceptualize gender identities, sex roles, and the family order" as authors such as Williams and Roupenian do (Swinth 4). Political legislation continued to reflect advancements in the women's movement, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prevented employers from discriminating against employees on the basis of race, religion, sex, or national origin, and the *Griswold v. Connecticut* Supreme Court ruling stating that women could not be prevented from attaining access to contraception or birth control. It was this ruling that would later be used to protect women's reasonable rights to abortion in Roe v. Wade in 1973. The second wave proved that literature could be used a tool to ignite women's emotions in the hopes of transforming the political landscape.

Despite the progress that occurred in the second wave, there was tension between white and non-white feminists, becoming the foundation for the third wave. During the third wave, literature worked to help others understand problematic gendered expectations for women of

color. Mantras such as *women's struggle is class struggle* and *the personal is political* characterized their movement in order to highlight the correlation between class struggles and gender inequality. Feminist organizations were divided by race creating greater divisions and straying further from women's equality. Social activist bell hooks admitted that "[a]lthough the women's movement motivated hundreds of women to write on the woman question, it failed to generate in-depth critical analyses of the black female experience" (Alexander, "The Second Wave"). African American women felt that the overall goals of the feminist movement excluded the racial concerns of black women, a notion that informs contemporary literary works by authors of color such as Erdrich, who critiques the judgement that her sexually promiscuous and indigenous protagonist Anna experiences in "Anna," and Lahiri, who critiques the circumscribing character of race and cultural heritage in *Hema and Kaushik*. Publications from alternative voices, especially Black, Native American, Asian American, and Latina women who "advocated for their rights in the white-dominated feminist movement" shaped this historical moment (Alexander, "The Second Wave"). Notably, African American author Alice Walker introduced the term "womanism" in this period to describe a feminist of color, reminding people that feminism is a multi-layered and multi-colored social problem. Lesbian women at this time also felt that their concerns were not represented by the mainstream feminist voices and faced rejection until the National Organization for Women recognized their rights as queer women. Second-wave feminism is defined by the tensions and struggles within the feminist movement itself, leading to many new organizations that struggled to find common ground for unity.

These perceptions of inequity were inevitably influenced by digital media developments that revolutionized literature as well as activism, allowing for the dissemination of information about inequity and for social movement organizing for women. As Williams and Roupenian

suggest by virtue of their attention to digital culture in their literary works, social media have changed the nature of the feminist movement, giving rise to a “new wave of feminist gusto, ‘the fourth wave,’ in which the power of digital media is harnessed to tackle the gross inequalities prevalent in social, economic, and political domains” (Aitken 1). The term feminism has invoked mixed feelings within society, as evidenced by what Aitken calls attempts within the media to “redefine feminism as an ugly, feared word that threatened the status quo and carried a wealth of negative connotation” (3). As seen in the previous feminist waves, literature continues to be used to tell a story that provides an alternative feminist perspective. However, many works of literature that embody the feminist movement do not use the word feminist or promote themselves as feminist literature. Rather these works “[develop] collective identities across virtual time and space on issues that resonate with their experience” (Aitken 6). Feminist literature in this fourth wave influences and is influenced by the call for action on social media and helps the masses better understand women’s perspectives, as demonstrated by the popularity of Roupenian’s “Cat Person”—one of the most read pieces in 2017 and proof that literature remains relevant in the digital age.

Although feminist activism through social media is sometimes criticized and referred to as slacktivism or clicktivism, “implying that online activists passively engage with auspicious political causes without actually making a significant difference or enforcing real social change,” the #MeToo movement of which Roupenian’s story became a part empowered women to speak out against sexual assault (Aitken 8). The term “Me Too” was first used by Tarana Burke, a victim of sexual assault. As an African American woman, Burke realized that “there’s a stark difference in what it takes to get attention around Black women and girls” (Mosley). She speaks about the trauma that exists in communities of colors and acknowledges that the children from

these communities “aren’t born angry. They aren’t born with attitudes. Something has to happen. Something has to have affected them in order to bring that about” (Mosley). She understood the importance of asking what happened and listening to people’s stories instead of assuming. She understood the importance of learning about a person’s past and seeing how this shaped their life. But most importantly, Burke understood the value of speaking up against sexual violence, coining the #MeToo movement, which actress Alyssa Milano bolstered through a 2017 tweet and which Roupenian came to be involved in when her story went viral at the movement’s height. Her story revealed “the lengths women go to in order to manage men’s feelings, and the shaming they often suffer nonetheless” (Khazan). Fiction is influenced by and shapes a moment, and although Roupenian’s piece was a work of fiction, for many women, it felt a little too real.

The #MeToo movement prompted reflection on how we navigate technological development. #MeToo became a form of hashtag activism, “a term coined by media outlets which refer to the use of Twitter’s hashtags for online activism” (Derby). Burke focused on supporting women who had been victims of sexual violence and she “faced the realization that too many girls were suffering and surviving abuse without access to resources, safe spaces, and support” (Prakash). The hashtag brought a community of women together united by their shared experiences of rape, sexual harassment, and assault. Hashtag activism is not limited to the #MeToo movement, but it has become a global trend to raise awareness about issues such as the #NameAndShame movement which brought attention to rape culture in Nigeria, and #TotalShutdown, which called for an end to gender-based violence in South Africa. It reframed the significance of a feminist work of fiction such as Egan’s “Black Box,” originally published as a series of tweets on Twitter, where hashtags organize ideas and individuals, and it cultivated community among women who sought to fight for gender equity. These hashtags are being

recognized globally in an attempt to not only draw attention to, but also to end, violence towards women.

The transformation of geographical borders that divide nations, histories, and cultures in the digital age has reframed critical thinking about national literatures such as American literature as well as feminism. In *Sisters in the Mirror*, Elora Shehabuddin argues that the most historically accurate narrative about feminism is the story that “recognizes that people around the world have long reflected on the unequal roles and opportunities of women and men in their societies” (2). She goes on to say that people’s ability to speak out against inequality is shaped by the history and legacy of imperialism. The history of Muslim feminism and Western feminism are interconnected and interdependent. As Shehabuddin explains, “Many people in the West, including scholars, feminists, and politicians, regard Muslim women as polar opposites of Western women, the former supposedly deprived of all the right and liberties that the latter are said to enjoy” (2). Shehabuddin argues that the Western view of Muslim women is at times skewed and misinformed, and she reminds readers that “no society has a monopoly on ideas about justice and fairness (in the matter of women’s or any other group’s rights)” (10). This misinformed view is also evident in literature as “Muslim women are mostly portrayed as the other, particularly in books by white non-Muslim authors” (Winterson). Queer English writer Jeanette Winterson argues that Muslim women in literature are solely linked to a religious identity, ignoring the fact that “their identities are far more diverse” (Winterson). She argues that the lack of recognition and support of progress in the Middle East has caused Muslim advocates from women’s rights “to define their agendas for reform in the shadow of Western imperial and economic power” (Shehabuddin 9). Instead of criticizing their agenda, Shehabuddin suggests

that we work to understand it in the hopes that the acquired knowledge brings about solidarity allowing women to “strive most effectively for a more just world” (10).

Jhumpa Lahiri uses her voice as a second-generation immigrant to show how feminism not only exists across borders, but in tandem with factors such as race and culture. Her transnational feminist perspective allows for the integration of female characters with diverse stories to “come alive creating a universal story of love and happiness teaching the lesson of humility, equality, and motivating to preserve the good of the past to face the present challenges” (Priyadarshini 51). Lahiri’s writing often centers around miscarriages, extramarital relationships, generational gaps, and forced migration in order to show the lack of access and the lack of options in a woman’s world. Lahiri not only writes about these characters but relates to them as she grapples with her “own longing to find her belonging in the maze of cultural alienation” (Rao 200). In her short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, Hema and Kaushik struggle to create “lives, loves, identities in the wake of racial disruptions” (Priyadarshini 54). As the character of Hema develops, she attempts to “imbibe all cultural ways of the host country” (Priyadarshini 51) but finds herself losing connection to her traditional Bengali customs. Hema is never fully able to identify as a person of the United States because of her immigrant identity, but she has already been uprooted from a life set in Bengali tradition. Many of Lahiri’s woman characters acquire their strength from motherhood and “possess an understated power that is cognizant of both Western strength and international diverse femininity” (Priyadarshini 55). Lahiri’s mindset is comparable to Shehabuddin’s as she explores how Western ideals of womanhood and feminism differ from other cultures, “and thus the ways in which women assert themselves as strong individuals can differ as well” (Priyadarshini 55). Lahiri portrays clashing cultures from a transnational feminist viewpoint and “combined with her observations regarding the dichotomies

between American and Bengali lifestyles [sheds] light on the intersections of humanity and womanhood across societies” (Priyadarshini 55). Lahiri views herself as an “interpreter of emotional pain and affliction” (Rao 200), which is why she uses literature to provide a voice to the “mute history and experience of female immigrants” (Rao 199). Hema’s attempt to embrace the new identity of an American woman becomes impossible, because of the cultural forces of Bengali identity, and her parents’ expectations that will never align with Western ideology. Despite Hema’s true connection with Kaushik, her parents arrange for her marriage to Navin. Marriage becomes a reoccurring topic throughout these stories as Erdrich’s character, Anna, also faces pressure from her culture and community to settle down and marry one man. However, Anna defies this expectation as she has a baby and ends up leaving her child, and the father, to find herself. Women attempting to assimilate into an American lifestyle such as the mothers of Hema and Kaushik, not only experience the trauma of cultural dislocation, but the ideological pressures of the “patriarchal anarchy” of the Western world (Priyadarshini 54).

The literary works that I have chosen to analyze come into conversation with this history of women and the feminist movement, and my first two chapters address women’s struggles with history and cultural limitations. In chapter one, I discuss Louise Erdrich’s “Anna,” a short story about the struggles of women who feel stuck between assimilating into modern American culture and preserving ties to Native American culture. This story not only works to change ideas about indigenous identity; it speaks to a woman’s struggle to please a society with two conflicting expectations of her role and appearance as a woman. The second chapter covers Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*, which reveals the complexity of assimilating into American culture as a woman trying to preserve her family’s Bengali tradition. The final three chapters address women’s negotiations with intersectional identity and expectations of them in the digital age and in the imagined digital future. The third chapter analyzes

Erin Williams's nonfictional graphic narrative, "Commute" which tells the story of a woman living in New York City who turns to alcohol and online dating as coping mechanisms in the face of modern U.S. pressures on women—pressures that leave permanent scars on her view of the world. This graphic memoir meditates on movement, as evidenced by its title, inviting readers to reflect on how we move through not only our daily routines, but through history as women. The fourth chapter, which addresses Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person," more pointedly focuses on the digitally infused present and analyzes one character's experience with digitally mediated dating and how expectations for women on dates force them into uncomfortable situations. The main character, Margot, realizes how little she actually knows about the man she met online, and Roupenian's narration of her story illuminates the terror that women feel when they realize that digital devices or media—be they smartphones, online dating sites, or movies—inhibit us from actually knowing one another. The final chapter on Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" invites us to imagine a dystopian future and consider the possibility of the future for women, a future where women are expected to do meaningful work to serve the greater good of the country, even if this work means dying. Finally, in my closing note, I speculate about possibilities for a less dystopian future than the one Egan imagines.

Chapter 1

Indigenous Identity and Ownership in Louise Erdrich's "Anna"

Karen Louise Erdrich, born in Minnesota and member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe, grew up in a midwestern landscape, and this in combination with her indigenous identity shaped how she saw the world. Both of her parents were teachers at a school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which framed the context in which she writes and tells her stories. She came from a family of storytellers and lived a "richly imaginative early life" (Kurup 1). Erdrich's father paid her a nickel for each piece of writing to encourage her to tell stories, and her "authentic voice seems to come forth more naturally from her Ojibwe roots" (Kurup 2). Her grandfather taught her the importance between survival of the land, and most importantly respect for her ancestral ties. Erdrich went to Dartmouth, where she felt extremely out of place and underwent a culture shock. It was the Native American studies program and ties to her cultural identity that made her feel at home again, which is why community and connection are crucial themes in her works. She continues tying her indigenous identity into her works with the goal of discrediting the "unrealistic portrait of unique tribal peoples" (Kurup 8).

In her short story "Anna," Erdrich commits herself to "telling the story of the Ojibwe people, since remembering through storytelling is a traditional and time-honored form of preserving Ojibwe heritage" (Kurup 2). "Anna" portrays Anna, a woman in her forties who feels constrained by the expectation that women adhere to tradition and avoid sexual liberation or promiscuity. We are introduced to Anna's best friend, Carleen Thunder, who believes that she is in Anna's life to see her for who she really is. When speaking about Anna, Carleen begins with admiration, but she quickly shifts to judging Anna, even referring to their friendship as a job. In

Carleen's words, "If Anna decided she needed you, wanted you, she'd take your heart and gnaw on it for a while" (Erdrich 267). Carleen puts Anna on a pedestal and observes that Anna calls all the shots in her life—and always has. Despite this version of Anna, whom we are introduced to through Carleen's somewhat critical gaze, Anna's identity conflict—which becomes representative of Erdrich's—lies below the surface of the story as she remains in the middle of Ojibwe and Euro-American culture.

Through the exploration of Carleen and Anna's relationship, Erdrich meditates on the politics of identities such as gender by reshaping preconceived notions about indigenous identity. She demonstrates vast ranges of emotion in the women's relationship, and in "Understanding Louise Erdrich," Seema Kurup notes, "It is a ridiculous assumption that one or two stock characters—who generally speak broken English, if they speak at all, and never seem to feel the normal human range of emotions, such as joy, love, nostalgia, loneliness, rage, and pain—could ever offer a rich enough vision of this complex and diverse people and their culture" (8). After Carleen gets her heart broken, she has a negative perception of men and is unable to understand Anna, causing a disconnect between the two. Carleen is aware of men's intentions, even their intentions with Anna, stating, "[Anna] was not a bike or car or motorcycle, all these things that the brothers had owned together" (Erdrich 270). Carleen stands against the objectification of women and the degradation of women as property. She describes Anna as "a kind of woman who, though she had been lovely all her life, attains a burst of reckless glory in her late forties" (267). She worries about Anna moving into the Shypoke brothers' house because she does not want the boundaries of houseguest and sexual partner to be intertwined. Anna does indeed get pregnant, but it is Carleen who suggests that it was not Anna who used the Shypoke brothers for sex; rather, it was the Shypoke brothers who used Anna. Anna took off, leaving the Shypoke

brothers with the baby, but Carleen says that the Shypoke brothers are less odd since Anna left, and have truly become a part of the community. The Shypoke brothers always have the toddler carried on their shoulders and are no longer the weird and removed bachelors they were once perceived to be. Without Anna, they are more accepted in society now, and Carleen goes as far to comment that their lives were not messed up in the slightest by Anna leaving. Carleen laughs at the irony of this situation because she has always remained envious of Anna, referring to herself as the neutral background behind Anna. However, she comes to the realization that this time Anna was not the one who did the using; she was the one who got used. This situation oddly makes Carleen feel better about herself in a way, because she realizes Anna's life is far from perfect, and further proves her ideas about not needing a man. Despite Carleen's initial assumptions about Anna's life being perfect, that appearance of perfection could not have been further from the truth. Anna was unable to see, and face, this truth so she ran from it, likely as a way to feel that she was in control. Even though Anna was the one who decided to leave, Carleen suggests that Anna leaving them with a child is really what the Shypoke brothers wanted all along.

Erdrich's exploration of Carleen and Anna's relationship goes beyond making a point about the necessity of men in a woman's life. It also reconstructs the image of Native Americans, allowing readers to change their perceptions of Native Americans. They are not "cowboys and Indians, whoops and war paint, the noble savage" (Kurup 7). Instead, they are relatable characters in which the readers can connect with and understand. Erdrich's work stands in opposition to placing Native Americans in relation with teepees and reservations, and instead reconstructs the relationship in a way that is identifiable to readers of all backgrounds. Anna's character stands in opposition to traditional indigenous femininity as she challenges social

norms. Typically, a woman during this time was expected to marry, have children, and raise those children, but Anna defies all the standards that society has set.

Anna's character undergoes vast changes in identity to demonstrate how indigenous identity is "a fluid construct, not a fixed material reality," much like gender identity (Kurup 7). After Anna moves in with the Shypoke brothers, Carleen notices drastic differences in Anna's appearance. The once perfectly put together Anna deteriorates into a ragged version of her former self. Anna claims that she does not care what she looks like anymore, but in reality, it is her pregnancy that is causing this change in her appearance and attitude. Anna fears judgement from the world regarding her pregnancy, as it reflects questionable decision making on her end, while the man's reputation is untainted. Nancy Peterson observes that for writers such as Erdrich, the "history of American has often been exclusionary—a monologic narrative of male Anglo-American progress that constructs others as people without history" (Kurup 10). In light of this monolithic narrative, Peterson concludes that "writing history...has become one way for marginalized peoples to counter their invisibility" (Kurup 10). Erdrich writes a story dominated by an unconventional woman in an attempt to put invisible women in the spotlight through her writing. Her writing style is noted for setting language free, likely relating to how Erdrich feels a woman should feel. Anna realizes, "...instead of laughing at her, people are saying how strong she is and how it is a sign that she is having a baby at her age" (Erdrich 275). Anna transforms society's preconceived timeline of milestone events such as pregnancy, and even manages to be supported.

In Ojibwe culture, there was no ownership, and this influences Anna's decision-making as a woman and as an indigenous person. Anna feels that having a baby restricts her and only inhibits her freedom. Anna says, "I just wanted one chance, one chance to be Anna, one chance I

never got in my life” (Erdrich 274). Anna’s feeling of entrapment in her femininity causes her to exist in a life without freedom. Carleen concludes that women who become mothers have what she terms the “six-month period of grace” (Erdrich 275). During these six months, a mother is free from the judgement of the public; however, after these six months, “you are an ordinary mother with an ordinary baby” (Erdrich 275). The idea of ownership becomes apparent in the text itself because “what makes her writing unique is the presence of multiple narrators, with their often competing narratives, occurring within the space of a single text” (Kurup 8). Anna and Carleen have competing voices and narratives throughout the short story, but Anna never feels obligated to explain herself. She doesn’t feel compelled to stay with her own child, let alone with the men she meets. Carleen tells Anna, “You had two husbands, I can’t even count how many lovers, and you dragged your kids off to every ceremony I ever heard of, chased down every sun dance, every powwow. It’s not as if you ever let commitment cramp your style” (Erdrich 269). Anna doesn’t want to be tied down by the restrictions of life and instead says, “I’ve always just wanted to live” (Erdrich 269). Anna is unable to exist in the reality of being trapped by her baby, causing her to accept a new job in the city, leaving the baby to be cared for in the hands of the Shypoke brothers. The Ojibwe were “accustomed to an ancient freedom to roam their once vast territories,” and Anna flees the town that is attempting to confine her (Kurup 12). This decision to leave town is also an attempt to detach herself from her native origins.

Carleen attempts to place the blame for Anna’s decision on the Shypoke brothers, but it was Anna’s slow “fragmentation trying to balance on a cultural hinge between two diametrically opposed worlds” that forced her to leave (Kurup 13). Kurup concludes that “in many of Erdrich’s texts, dislocation and isolation from the community is evident” (14). Anna is faced with a choice

of returning to her Native roots or embracing a new culture, and ultimately, she chooses to explore the world outside of her restrictive community, coming to resemble Erin Williams as well as Hema in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* for her investment in testing the limitations of society and breaking the social norms. Carleen blames the Shypoke brothers for Anna's choices, stating, "Now they'd managed to have Anna's baby, and then get rid of Anna, too" (Erdrich 277). Carleen believes that the Shypoke brothers used Anna to bear their child, and this child then allowed them to be integrated and socially accepted into society. Anna and Carleen were both working women, and Anna lived with the Shypoke brothers for financial reasons. After she becomes pregnant, it becomes clear that Anna was viewed as more than a house guest. Anna becomes a character with whom we sympathize despite the potential disagreements and judgements of her decisions because she is never able to be seen for who she really is, except by Carleen. Carleen notes that Anna's choices "upset something basic in the always tentative order of appearances on our reservation" (Erdrich 270). Anna was unable to exist in the retreated life on the reservation; she always yearned for more. Carleen deals with the birth of the new baby by pushing the blame onto the Shypoke brothers, holding them accountable for Anna's choices. She claims they used her by taking her baby and getting rid of her, making a statement about how she perceives all men's attention. Erdrich's work focuses on the "individual apart from the community in characteristic 'each man for himself' which causes the reader to not be disappointed in Anna for her decision, but rather hopeful that she will find whatever makes her free again" (Kurup 14). Erdrich reveals that the judgements of women should not be based upon societal expectations, but rather what makes a woman free.

Erdrich delves into issues regarding appearance, indigenous identity, conventional notions of beauty and social class to create a realistic sense of community and connection in her

world. Her work is shaped by her ties to the Ojibwe community, and her writing allows her to “make sense of a world that does not include them” and to “return to places deeply longed for and understood” (Kurup 6). Historically, the plight of Native Americans has largely been ignored in mainstream American history and literature, which is why her short story about Anna “offers more choice, opportunity, and liberty for the Ojibwe” (Kurup 11). The story of Anna shows how women are forced to act to survive in the world but has a layer of further complexity with her ties to the indigenous community. This story makes readers reconsider the issues associated with colonization, and the appreciation we lose for other cultures when assimilation becomes forced. “Anna” concludes that liberation for women and indigenous people are interconnected, and women shouldn’t be forced to fit old molds of tradition. Erdrich demonstrates how attaining liberation for women helps attain liberation for women with indigenous ties, arguing that identity is intersectional. The character of Anna is multi-layered, meaning she plays and takes on different roles. She is not a rigid construct of tradition, but her identity becomes fluid as she embodies aspects of her new self and Ojibwe culture.

Chapter 2

The Death of Immigrant Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Hema and Kaushik*

Jhumpa Lahiri works to tell a similar story to that of “Anna,” but instead of exploring the difficulties of being an indigenous woman, Lahiri centers on the struggle of truly assimilating into the American culture with an immigrant background. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Jhumpa Lahiri tells the story of Hema and Kaushik, two immigrants from Bengal, who meet in Massachusetts as children and later reunite in Rome, where a romantic spark ignites between them. Lahiri's fiction has parallels to Erdrich's in the sense that women are expected to maintain ties to tradition and prioritize family and home, as opposed to travel and professional goals. Hema learns what it means to be an Indian woman living in America. She learns, to appropriate Gangoli's words, that “law and judicial practices legitimise women's subordination” in India (Gangoli 8). Hema and Kaushik's relationship demonstrates that they must constantly adapt to modernized aspects of the culture around them. They are forced to choose between abandoning the traditions of their Indian upbringings and the values they encounter in the modern Western world that they largely inhabit.

Lahiri's work shows how “Indian feminists both ‘borrow’ from and contribute to western feminisms” as Hema grapples with preserving her tradition and assimilating into American culture (Gangoli 4). In *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism*, Himani Bannerji comments that “women often do offer powerful challenges to gender inequalities prevalent within the social space of their own classes, and they often do so in what might have evoked today into ‘feminist’ discourse” (5). However, she goes on to discuss social reform, saying that “the project of self-improvement is collapsed with self-repression for

men” (Bannerji 127). Bannerji discusses the history of Bengali culture, and how the European enlightenment restructured men’s morals, and at times judged men’s lifestyle, while women remained untouched. She furthers this point by stating, “And if the Indian/ Bengali society as a whole, characterized in terms of its males, is such as natural excrescence, then how much more so the Bengali women, whose identity with nature has not been ruptured by any rational interruption” (Bannerji 126). Bannerji works to display both perspectives in discussing Bengali culture and its relation to patriarchy. And she concludes that patriarchy shaped and informed the Bengali culture, but there are other factors that play an integral role in the reformation of Indian tradition. Throughout this short story cycle, Lahiri portrays how immigrants negotiate with arguably deadening patriarchal traditions by American standards as they work to establish new lives beyond their South Asian homes and new identities. They are inevitably molded by progressive American culture and feminist ideals, and they forge hybrid identities that blend tradition with American progressivism.

The death of Kaushik’s mother, a progressive woman who in ways breaks the mold of tradition, unsettles Hema and Kaushik’s immigrant identities and causes them to explore identity as a coping mechanism. In Geetanjali Gangoli’s *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies, and Violence in India*, she uncovers the history of feminism in India, arguing that “Indian feminists have been forced to confront and combat claims of being ‘westernised’” (1). In India in the 1970s, there was a rise of liberal and radical feminism in the West, and the newly emerging feminist movement in India changed their agenda to meet Western ideals. Women in India are restricted in the public sphere, and “only one in three women can go to the market without permission from their family, and one in four visit friends and relatives without permission” (Gangoli 2). The restrictions and other forms of social deprivation caused women such as

Kaushik's mother to break ties to Indian tradition. These restrictions, and feelings of societal judgement, caused Anna from Erdrich's story to flee her hometown when she realized she could never exist on the cusp of two cultures. When Hema reflects on Kaushik's mother's death, she admits, "I was too young, that day, to feel sorrow or sympathy. I felt only the enormous fear of having a dying woman in our home" (Lahiri 250). Kaushik's mother was an important figure in Hema's life, not only because they were both immigrants, but because his mother differed from her own mother in the sense that she prioritized her assimilation into the American culture. She bought Hema her first bra, suggesting that she embraces growth and maturity, even if it leads to the death or partial death of immigrant identity. Indian women have been found to enter the sex trade due to poverty and oppressive laws, which is why Indian feminists such as Hema and Kaushik's mother are "influenced by Western debates but were able to adapt the debates creatively due to national and local concerns" (Gangoli 6). Kaushik's views of feminism differ from that of his mother because "the State constructs the female citizen as notionally equal within the constitution but legally men and women have different rights" (Gangoli 4). Kaushik resents coming home from college, because home reminds him not only of his mother, but of his previous identity as an immigrant. College presents Kaushik with the opportunity to escape his immigrant identity and form a new one that blends him into an American lifestyle. He declines going on his family trip to Disney World because he feels disconnected from his family, especially since they are a reminder of his past. The character of Anna from Erdrich's story is similar to Kaushik in the sense that they both left home in order to disassociate from their previous identities. He says, "When I decided to attend Swarthmore my father gave me the Audi he'd bought after we moved back from Bombay" (Lahiri 256). Kaushik feels that he must abandon his immigrant identity, and to achieve this he must physically leave Massachusetts,

where memories of his progressive mother haunt him. Lahiri suggests that to be an American is to be wealthy, and this is the idea that Kaushik adopts in order to assimilate himself.

Hema and Kaushik struggle with their immigrant identity and gendered responsibilities while living in Rome, and death underlies their experiences, suggesting that movement away from tradition might constitute a kind of death. Hema is not able to escape the feeling of disconnect that she felt as an immigrant living in America, even now that she is in Rome. She lies to her parents about the real reason she goes to Rome: to escape her immigrant identity, which in ways limits her options as a woman. She feels that she must hide the reality of her life to her parents because their expectations do not align with her goal of assimilation. Hema physically leaves her parent's home in Massachusetts, leaving her immigrant identity behind, to build a new version of herself in Rome. Hema thinks, "Just before Christmas she would go to Calcutta where her parents had returned after a lifetime in Massachusetts and where, in January, she would marry Navin" (Lahiri 294). She dreads the thought of arranged marriage, a part of Indian culture, being forced upon her, voicing, "There was something dead about the marriage she was about to enter into" (301). Hema represents the view of other feminists that have pointed out that "laws relating to marriage, divorce, inheritance, succession, guardianship preserve the family as it exists, that is as 'a system based on male dominance and control of female sexuality and reproduction'" (Gangoli 8). As an Indian woman living in America, Hema illustrates Gangoli's point that "feminist interventions and attitudes to laws are varied, and multiple, but are united in that they contain an implicit or explicit critique of patriarchy" (8). She attempts to free herself from her immigrant identity and the patriarchal limits it places on her to allow herself to create a new one but returning home only sets her back. Kaushik too leaves America to give birth to his new identity in Rome. As a photographer, Kaushik lives a migratory and rootless life as

opposed to one rooted in tradition. He becomes known for his pictures, rather than his ties to India. Photography allows him to get rid of his past identity, and he recognizes, “It was his need for a different life that was taking him to Asia” (Lahiri 308). Hema’s reflection on transplantation captures both of their feelings when she says that traveling allows her to be “free of her past and free of her future” (298). Hema and Kaushik travel because they believe that Indian identity cannot follow them across borders, and it gives birth to new and more progressive versions of themselves—versions of themselves that put a premium on the self instead of traditional family values.

Hema and Kaushik reunite in the Roman ghetto, a place haunted by death that foreshadows the demise of Hema and Kaushik’s progressive, unarranged relationship. When Hema is at the Portico di Ottavia she thinks, “she was either disappointed by the food or flustered by her broken Italian” (Lahiri 295). She feels like an outsider in this area because of her inability to communicate fluently with the Italians. She abandoned her immigrant identity, yet her adopted American identity still makes her feel like an outsider in Italy. Kaushik’s feelings mirror Hema’s and he reflects, “He had so little to do with India.... And yet, in Rome, in all of Europe, he was always regarded as an Indian first” (Lahiri 310). Both Hema and Kaushik tried to escape their Indian identity, but the new identity they created still leaves them feeling out of place. It is no coincidence that Hema and Kaushik meet at the ghetto, where Hema learns that “over a thousand Jews had been deported in October 1943” (Lahiri 295). They can relate to the feelings of the Jewish diaspora in a different way than the passing tourists because Hema and Kaushik are immigrants too, who have experienced the lack of belonging in the world they live in, as they are torn between progressive or feminist ideals and tradition. The Jewish people were forced to give up their identity in a similar way to how Hema and Kaushik abandoned their Indian culture. This

historical reference to Jewish ghettos converges history and fiction. This inclusion moves us to a different time and place to uncover a greater truth about Hema and Kaushik. It establishes a connection between Hema and Kaushik's present lives with the lives of the people in the ghetto in 1943. Hema understands the history and oppression of the Roman ghetto because of violence in India's history, which Gangoli characterizes as "reflecting a wider global trend of patriarchal oppression of women" (Gangoli 6). For instance, in India in the 1980s and 1990s, there were changes in laws regarding rape and domestic violence, but it "did not benefit the lives of women, or even encourage a more feminist construction of the category 'woman' in Indian law, [raising] doubts about the transformative capacity of law" (Gangoli 8). The ineffectiveness of the laws are reminders of why "most feminists have little or no faith in legal solutions to violence" in the same way that religious violence has continued to ensue in contemporary times (Gangoli 9). The reader is taken out of the fictional world, reminding us that even fiction, which is perhaps perceived as an entirely free space, is not free of death.

Hema and Kaushik's intimate relationship inevitably fails when they realize that they lack a meaningful connection, suggesting that Lahiri acknowledges the possible price of abandoning tradition. Kaushik acknowledges, "As much as he'd wanted Hema to be with him now, he knew it would be easier to begin life in Hong Kong alone" (Lahiri 328). Their pasts alone are not enough to keep the new, progressive versions of themselves together. Being together causes Hema and Kaushik to focus on the traditions of the past, leaving them unable to truly exist as progressive in the present. Kaushik tells the story of twenty thousand people wanting to catch a glimpse of Arafat's coffin, while Hema tells the story of the Romans and their obsession with what the journey after life will look like. Their conversations focus on death, but the definitiveness and unchanging nature of history is the only common connection Hema and

Kaushik have. Hema focuses specifically on the Etruscan's who "taught the Roman's how to build their roads and irrigate their fields" (314). The Romans adopted the culture of the Etruscans to further advance themselves in society, much like Hema and Kaushik reinvent themselves in the U.S. to assimilate. Despite the Etruscans' efforts to assimilate into Roman culture, their civilization eventually reached its demise. Hema finds connections between herself and the Etruscans, whereas Lahiri again shows that the characters in fiction experience real struggles that parallel history. This connection to the Etruscans foreshadows Kaushik's death. Indeed, Lahiri proposes that death is perhaps the only alternative to the snares of history and patriarchal aspects of it.

Hema and Kaushik's status as immigrants forced them to choose between life under a new, progressive, and feminist identity or death as they tried to find a place where they belong. Kaushik spends his life running from his past and he is never able to achieve stability. Kaushik's attempt to run from his past resonates with Williams's memoir, as she metaphorically runs from what she cannot control through alcoholism. Kaushik's constant search became the reason that his death is inevitable, showing that he can never fully fit into a new culture. And Williams's attempt to cover her problems through alcohol is the reason that she was never able to heal herself and her exploration of relationships. Throughout their journey, they are unable to ever escape being outsiders, causing Hema to revert to her Indian identity while Kaushik replants himself in different parts of the world. Kaushik dies in the 2004 Thailand tsunami, along with many other tourists and vacationers. Even at the time of Kaushik's death, he was labeled a foreigner, a label he spent his whole life trying to erase. Kaushik continued his photography career, risking death every day until his end, rather than return to his Indian roots. This final scene illuminates Kaushik's search for meaning through the historical ties to the Thailand

tsunami, tearing Lahiri's text between history and fiction much as the hybrid immigrants of her text are torn between tradition and progress. Hema realizes that she would have been dead if she had pursued a rootless and seemingly more feminist life with Kaushik, but her new, traditional life with Navin already feels dead to her. She acknowledges that she is "burning with new life but mourning [Kaushik's] death" (Lahiri 333). Although Hema is physically alive, her hybrid life reverts to a more traditionally Indian one through the marriage her parents arrange for her. Hema and Kaushik's journey proves that death is the only way to completely disentangle oneself from one's culture.

Lahiri ends her tragic story by juxtaposing Kaushik's death with the impending birth of Hema's baby, who may be bound by tradition as Hema is bound by it. She focuses on what conception means for the rest of Hema's life, which she lives trapped in a deadening arranged marriage, the product of patriarchy. Although Hema has a baby on the way, Lahiri's ending is not a happy one. Lahiri shows that Hema and Kaushik's happiness comes from the death of their Indian identity, and the freedom that brings to their lives, but neither of them were able to fully assimilate. The end of the story leaves the reader with a sense of uncertainty about what the rest of Hema's life will look like and whether the remainder of her existence is something one can even call *living*. The birth of Hema's new baby comes not only with the death of Kaushik, but with the metaphorical death of Hema as well. Lahiri concludes that despite the miles that separate India and her American home, she is, for better or for worse, never able to fully bury her Indian identity and traditions. Those traditions enduringly inform her life, as do feminist ideals that might shape her future.

Chapter 3

Commute: How Substance Abuse Defines Womanhood in Erin Williams's "Commute"

Whereas Erdrich and Lahiri explore the limits that cultural traditions place on women, in *Commute*, a graphic memoir published in 2019, Erin Williams writes a more modern account that invites readers into the personal experiences and tribulations of the author in a digital age that has seen the rise of online dating and visual culture. A white queer woman, Williams, like Erdrich and Lahiri, struggles with societal expectations of women, but the expectations imposed on her differ from those that Anna and Hema confront in Erdrich's and Lahiri's stories, respectively. In her memoir, Williams portrays herself as being expected to avoid being objectified by diverting attention away from herself, or be forced to accept continuous physical scrutiny and judgement from the men she passes on her commute. A woman who lives in New York and commutes from Manhattan to Westchester on the MetroNorth, Williams took notes on her phone of her commute-related triggering experiences and encounters, which became the framework for her graphic memoir. Williams states that she "hopes her graphic memoir helps others dealing with their own experiences and is proud to add to the limited number of female graphic memoirs currently published," and her graphic memoir comes into implicit conversation with the #MeToo movement (Lubbers-Payne). She wrote her memoir with the intent that women would find relatability in it, and that men would find it eye-opening. She notes, "I don't read books by men because I feel sufficiently well-versed in the human male experience from my education" ("*Commute*"). Her cover is especially important as she explains that she "wanted something that conveyed the creepy feeling of being watched and self-consciousness that results, like you when you feel someone's eyes on you" (Lubbers-Payne). Her cover depicts her standing

in front of a crowded train in underwear and a t-shirt, and this feeling of being uncomfortable runs throughout Williams's memoir. Williams shares that "the woman on the page feels outnumbered by the men who sit too close to her, stare at her, or intrude upon her. Within her caricatures, she wonders which might be rapists and which might be rescuers" ("*Commute*"). The contemplation that a man might be a rapist or a rescuer is a contemplation relatable to all women as they grapple with choosing who to trust.

In "*Commute*", Erin Williams takes the reader on a journey through her daily life routine and work commute in New York. Her honesty throughout the description of the day makes her illustrated memoir take a powerful stance on the hardships of being a woman under the watch of the public eye. Williams talks about how she is unable to feel herself in her daily life and explores what it truly means to be a woman. Her commute is a continuous part of her life that shapes how she views herself as a woman, and how she views the world around her. She explores gendered expectations of women and breaks her silence on her life that has been dominated by men. There is the expectation of looking a certain way, living with the reality of being looked at, and expecting to be a thing to be looked at, and to be fine with all of this. In "*Commute*", Williams uses personal anecdotes in relation to alcohol abuse and sexual assault, digital representations of modern culture, and the characterization of types of men in order to highlight the hardships of being a woman in 21st century America, where unreasonable expectations for women's appearances produce psychological distress and even substance abuse that leads to physical and psychological deterioration.

Williams opens up about personal and permanent scars on her memory such as alcoholism and sexual abuse to help readers understand why facing the real world every day is challenging. One page is full of her internal thoughts, and how she wishes she could change how

she and others viewed her body. The background of the page remains white with her thoughts handwritten in black. This page is absent of color, forcing readers to read and immerse themselves into her thoughts with no image for the eyes to escape to. On this page she notes that “the body remembers things that the mind would rather forget” (Williams 77), and in relation to her being sexually assaulted and taken advantage of, Williams says that her body is a constant reminder of this horrific events. She goes on to say that she “[fights] all day for control of [her] body, publicly and privately” (77). Even in the confines of her own home, Williams struggles with being a woman, and the instances in which her womanhood were unagreeably taken away from her. She struggles with the image of herself, as she constantly feels the stares of men on her commute. The issue of appearance and body image is a struggle that plagues our modern society, and Williams wishes that women would be treated as actual people rather than “an assembly of holes” (77).

When we gain access into Williams’s personal and arguably private thoughts, there are no images: just a blank page with writing on it. Williams wants the focus to be on the words, and how they make a person feel. These pages are other instances of the reader being let inside the mind of Williams to explore and analyze her internal thoughts. She associates drinking alcohol and experiencing blackouts with feelings of euphoria, peace, and quiet. She makes the argument that it is better to black out than be forced to face the reality of creepy men judging and looking at her body every day on her daily commute. She says that her drinking allows her to escape real life and it erases her fears. When she is blacked out, she says, “You don’t fear death. (Or men or rape or strangers at all)” (92). One page serves as a criticism for the way that modern society makes women feel as if their only safe space is a “physical, emotional, and spiritual obliteration” (92).

Williams uses photorealistic digital symbols of modern culture that draw the reader's attention through familiar screens and apps that readers can relate to. In one image, she captures a screenshot from an observer view of her writing a poem using the notes app on her iPhone. The drawing of an iPhone alone brings reader's attention because it's a familiar device, and people have become more inclined to spend time reading digitally. In her poem, she types, "There is no reprieve for roses/ The daises have had it up to here" (38). Despite this poem being about her dog peeing on flowers, the flowers symbolize women as they are usually associated with flowers. The feelings of the flowers mirror Williams's own feelings, as she is tired of living in a world dominated by men and feels there is never a break from this idea.

Through images of dating apps, Williams draws awareness to how these apps are problematic in modern culture because they lead women into risky relationships with potentially volatile strangers. In one particular image, she reveals the face of a man named Karl whom she met on a dating app, and acknowledges that he gave her a "bad, fear-for-your-life type of feeling" (Williams 127). The image displays Karl's dating profile on an iMac where we learn that he is a 28-year-old Caucasian male from Brooklyn, NY. He is 5'10" with no children and part of his self-written biography states, "Let me feed you eggs while sharing my PlayStation" (Williams 127). Karl has jet-black hair parted toward the right side of his face, and he wears glasses, along with a blank expression on his face. The fear-for-your-life type of feeling in combination with alcohol causes her to lose sense of rational decision making and she invites Karl over. She doesn't even remember if they have sex, and she realizes that if she did have sex with Karl, it was meaningless and perhaps damaging and not an example of real intimacy. Williams argues that dating apps became an issue for herself, and they are an issue for society as a whole. An article titled "The Scientific Flaws of Online Dating Sites" concludes that online

dating sites are problematic because single people cannot actually get a strong sense of compatibility through a profile (Finkel). The article goes on to talk about how it doesn't matter if users stalk a potential match's social media page for twenty hours or twenty minutes; users are unable to truly know another person until they meet face-to-face, an issue reflected in Roupenian's "Cat Person" as Margot enters a man's house after texting him, only to realize that she doesn't really know him. The issues regarding dating apps that Williams speaks to closely aligns with the trending Netflix movie, *The Tinder Swindler*. This movie tells the story of Simon Leviev, who emotionally and financially manipulates many women under the façade that he was part of a wealthy family in the diamond industry. Leviev's story further proves Williams's argument that dating apps are another way that men can control and take advantage of women. This conclusion invites the question of whether "online dating sites predict long-term relationship success based exclusively on information provided by individuals—without accounting for how two people interact or what their likely future life stressors will be" (Finkel). The uncertainty surrounding online dating can be detrimental to women as they can be victims to fake profiles and people with menacing intention. Online dating may pose a real danger to women, causing women like Williams to view all men as potential and harmful predators.

Williams characterizes the different types of men she encounters on her daily commute to connect with a feminine audience, as well as make men rethink the way they stare at women. There is an image of four identical men in blue suits and sneakers whose eyes stare back at you (47). This image embodies the themes of the entire illustrated memoir as it talks about what it truly means to be a woman. Williams opens up about how she is unable to truly feel and act like herself in her daily life, and the commute is a large and reoccurring part of her life that shapes how she views herself. This image captures her feeling of being threatened by men, and the four

men standing above her text show how women are always being looked at based on appearances. This image makes people *feel* the stares of the men and experience the uncomfortableness of when a man won't take his eyes off you. Williams is suggesting that all men are the same—which obviously is not true—but this is a feeling that she is negotiating with. All four of the men in the image look exactly the same, showing that for Williams, all men fall into the same category. She discusses the concept of invisibility here, and talks about instances where she feels invisible, and times where *others* have made her feel invisible. Williams explores the idea of not just being a woman, but a woman in public, which she emphasizes in large font under the image of the four men. Women have a certain set of societal expectations that Williams believes is arguably set by men. Women are forced to accept the stares of men, even if it means being uncomfortable.

Williams argues that the different types of men make women feel as if they can't go out in public without being looked at. She draws a large number 10 on one page, followed up by an explanation that "10" is the number of men looking her in the eye while she walks to work. The image shows that they are all different men, and there is something intimidating about ten *different* people who you don't know, looking you in the eye as you walk to work. This image ties into how women are made to feel uncomfortable because men are always judging them based on their appearances. She contrasts what she sees on her commute after this page, and she never lists men as something that she sees. She notes that she sees "a sheep dog with a high ponytail, a notice that Lindsay Lohan went to a bar in 2006, and a mannequin in lingerie" (Williams 134). She uses her personal list to show that there are other things to observe besides women's bodies.

Despite the fact that Williams labels her story as “an illustrated memoir of female shame,” she does not shame herself, but rather shames androcentric principles that are so deeply engrained into society. Her character grows throughout the course of her memoir, as she accepts the part she played in her own trauma. Williams allows herself to be vulnerable in this text to advocate for a change in the way that women are looked at and treated. Williams concludes that “the shame of previous digressions will poison you if you let it” (Williams 274). This memoir forces Williams to confront flashbacks of her past that she didn’t want to continue to let haunt her. Her mostly black-and-white illustrations underscore that memories can be hard to talk about. Williams urges women to challenge their previous mistreatment and be open about it as it leads to a forgiving and peaceful present state of mind with oneself.

Chapter 4

Women and Digital Relationships in Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person"

Kristen Roupenian's short story "Cat Person" has parallels to *Commute* in that it further shows how technology has influenced dating and women's relationships. And it has autobiographical aspects that resonate with Williams's entirely autobiographical text, as evidenced by Roupenian's remark that she wrote "Cat Person" after a poor relationship she had with a person online. Anna Silman reflects on "Cat Person," saying that in "our current #MeToo moment—when women's messy and uncomfortable sexual experiences are increasingly taken seriously—it provides a vivid account of the sorts of 'bad' sexual encounters that don't rise to the level of harassment or assault, but still merit closer examination" (Silman). Roupenian's experience had her thinking "about the strange and flimsy evidence we used to judge the contextless people we meet outside our existing social networks, whether online or off" ("This Week in Fiction: Jennifer Egan"). She describes the early stages of dating as a Rorschach test and acknowledges the judgements that come if people have tattoos, or like cats better than dogs. Roupenian acknowledges that she was overwhelmed at the popularity and success of "Cat Person," stating that "#MeToo discussions are ones I care about a lot and personally feel deeply invested in, and yet at the same time, I feel in no way equipped to be a spokesperson" (Silman). Roupenian identifies as a queer woman and has been in a relationship with a woman for a very long time; however, she says, "even if you're queer, you live under patriarchy and are subject to understanding who you are as a woman in a world run by men" (Silman).

In "Cat Person," Roupenian explores the relationship between Margot and Robert to show how connections through a digital screen restrict what people know about one another in

relationships. Margot and Robert meet at a movie theater in a college town, and they go on their first date without really knowing one another outside of a text conversation. The character of Margot is representative of women in the digital age and demonstrates how women are unable to embrace their true selves. Roupenian relates to Margot and acknowledges, “Our initial impression of a person is pretty much entirely a mirage of guesswork and projection” (“Kristen Roupenian on the Self-Deceptions of Dating”). This guesswork and projection are inspired by the romanticized version of men that women create in their head. Through the character of Margot, Roupenian argues that expectations of young women are problematic in the sense that women are confined to living in their imagination because they are unable to express their true feelings. Moreover, women are expected to be feminine and polite in romantic relations with men—even if men pose a danger to them.

Margot’s sexual relationship with Robert does not reflect her true internal feelings, but she feels that her identity as a woman forces her to comply with Robert’s desire to have sex. This story was written before the #MeToo movement exploded, and Roupenian uses this sexual encounter to demonstrate how women are hesitant to stop sex for fear of getting raped. Margot considers stopping sex “but the thought of what it would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming; it would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon.” At this moment, Margot feels that she must have sex with Robert to be polite. Margot admits that she didn’t stop sex because she didn’t want to seem “spoiled and capricious” and to avoid these stereotypes, she must continue the act. Margot tries to convince herself that she isn’t afraid of Robert forcing her to do something that she didn’t want to do. However, this contrasts with her view of Robert earlier when she considered the possibility that

Robert could kill her. The expectation that a woman must have sex with a man to be polite is problematic because it is forcing women into sexual encounters that makes them feel uncomfortable. The idea that women are forced into situations that make them feel uncomfortable is one that Williams lived through, and one that Egan projects will continue into the future. In an interview published in *The New Yorker*, Roupenian says, “many women, especially young women, move through the world: not making people angry, taking responsibility for other people’s emotions” (“Kristen Roupenian on the Self-Deceptions of Dating”). Roupenian acknowledges that young women are constantly existing and acting in a way that keeps everyone around them happy, but she concludes that this behavioral expectation becomes exhausting.

Margot survives this seemingly painful experience by retreating into her imagination and pretending she is in a fantasy where she is able to express her true feelings. Margot imagines the guy from her fantasy saying, “Look at this beautiful girl...She’s so perfect, her body is perfect, everything about her is perfect.” Margot wishes she could tell Robert not to make his “high-pitched feminine whine,” but she feels as if she is unable to critique or comment on their sexual relationship. Margot simply feels she is doing this to appease Robert and meet society’s expectations of a woman’s role during sex, much like Anna felt that she must also meet society’s expectations and ran away after failing to do so. Margot lives in her imagination where she can express her true feelings, and where she has a voice in her sexual encounters.

Margot creates a fake boyfriend that allows her to escape reality, and for the first time she creates and meets her own expectations of how women should behave in relationships. Margot pictures describing her horrific sex with Robert to her imaginary boyfriend, “who would think that this moment was just as awful yet hilarious as she did.” Margot finds comfort in the false

belief that there would one day be a boy out there who truly understands her and knows her, more than Robert ever could. However, Margot knows “there was no such future, because no such boy existed, and never would.” The belief that only the perfect boy would exist in Margot’s imagination is problematic because society forces women to settle for men who don’t meet their expectations. In an interview conducted by *The Guardian*, Roupenian stated that she asks herself, “to what extent can one ever clearly see the person to whom one is attracted” (“Cat Person Author Kristen Roupenian: ‘Dating Is Caught up in Ego, Power and Control’”). Margot does not ever really try to understand Robert; rather she spends more time imagining and shaping the perfect version of her fake boyfriend. As Robert kisses Margot, she thinks, “Oh, my God, when will it end?” But “the imaginary boyfriend didn’t answer her.” Roupenian causes the reader to question why the boy that Margot imagines would never really exist? Roupenian shows that women are constantly being forced to lower their own expectations as, for instance, Hema does when she abides by her parents’ wishes and enters into an arranged marriage with someone she does not want to be with. So much of this short story happens in Margot’s imagination because as a woman she is unable to reflect her true self. However, Margot’s fantasies are really horror stories because they never exist, and there is only reality. Margot is forced to live in her imagination to escape reality, and her avoidance of reality is nightmarish in nature.

Roupenian demonstrates how men become disrespectful toward women when women do not live up to their expectations of how they should act. Robert believes that Margot owes him an explanation of her decision to leave him, and as a male he feels he is entitled to this explanation. Robert has this notion that women, and in this instance, Margot, owes him more than “Hi im not interested in you stop texting me.” Roupenian questions the dynamic of relationships, and about who is owed what at the end of Margot and Robert’s relationship? Did Margot betray Robert, or

did Robert betray Margot? Robert thought that Margot should have explained herself more, and this expectation from Margot causes him to harass her through text, ending the string of messages with calling her a whore. Robert reveals his true personality as his demeanor changes, and, as Roupenian points out, Margot undergoes an internal conflict when trying to understand him and how he changes. As Roupenian observes, “The point at which she receives unequivocal evidence about the kind of person he is the point at which the story ends” (“Kristen Roupenian on the Self- Deceptions of Dating”). When Margot truly learns who Robert is, she is no longer trying to piece his personality together in her imagination because he exposed his true self. Robert was able to hide through a screen, but only temporarily. In Margot’s imagination, the boy in her fantasy is created to *her* expectations which differs from her relationship from Robert where she is forced to meet *his* expectations. Although Robert feels betrayed by Margot, it is really Margot who is betrayed. Margot is betrayed by society’s expectations of young women and how they are forced to settle in relationships. Society’s expectations are what mold men like Robert who think that their masculinity entitles them in relationships, and their masculinity is what makes them feel like they are owed explanations from women. Robert never bothered to truly understand Margot, but after he leaves, he is angered that she does not give him an explanation or true insight into her feelings.

Ultimately, Roupenian desires a future for women that stands up against the “deeply embedded [ideas] of what it means to be a good woman” (“Cat Person Author Kristen Roupenian: 'Dating Is Caught up in Ego, Power and Control’”). Roupenian leaves the end of her short story open-ended and the reader is left in the dark about how this experience with Robert shapes her future dating experiences. By closing the story with the aggressiveness of Robert’s texts, Roupenian demonstrates how she wants men to treat women with more respect. Roupenian

notes that she intentionally leaves room in the story for people to sympathize with Robert. She purposefully concludes the story by introducing a new sinister version of Robert to serve as a comparison with the Robert to whom readers are previously introduced. The complexity of relationships in the story caused many readers to read it as non-fiction. The misreading of this story as fiction suggests that the realness it brings gives it the potential to influence real life and hold the power to change the way that men think. This short story gives silenced women a voice and calls for change in the expectations of lovers in relationships.

Chapter 5

The Terror and Mechanics of Women's Work in Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"

Like Roupenian's "Cat Person," Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" addresses the politics of gender as it relates to digitization, a subject that she has repeatedly addressed in both interviews and her literary works. In a 20 May 2016 interview with Zara Dinnen in *Post45*, Egan states she was interested in "how mass media invites a particular sort of self-consciousness, or self-objectification. Just when I think I've exhausted that topic, the technology changes yet again and I realize that it really is inexhaustible right now." Egan comments on the world of social media, stating that it "tries to satisfy our longing for authenticity by giving us totally mediated and often deeply inauthentic material, which then briefly satisfies belonging for authenticity, but in the end leaves us craving authenticity even more" (Skipper). And Egan explains through the prism of the thoughts of Bennie Salazar in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, a text that addresses many of the same subjects that "Black Box" addresses, that digitization has damaging effects on reality. In the narrator's words, which portray Bennie's thoughts, "The problem was precision, perfection; the problem was digitization, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh" (*A Visit* 18).

Emerging out of Egan's observations about technology, this essay analyzes Egan's "Black Box," a work of Twitter fiction that was published on *The New Yorker*'s Twitter feed in 2012 and features an unnamed cyborg protagonist who works as a secret agent and is likely a future version of Lulu Peale, the protagonist of "Pure Language" from *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. I argue that despite the fact that the woman is a homegrown terrorist, she becomes a likeable and relatable character and invites the reader to think about the depth and complexity of

women. Unlike characters in texts by Erdrich and Lahiri, who predominantly address history, the protagonist of Egan's story provides a futuristic vision of gender and equity issues and reveals paradoxes of freedom and liberation. Egan suggests that society uses women through her portrayal of her secret agent protagonist, who becomes a tool of violent system. Egan suggests that women are like machines, and she exposes that even though the women's movement has made great strides, much social justice work remains. She likewise suggests that technological progress might not be unequivocal progress, and intimates that contemporary Americans need to develop new notions of progress. Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" argues that there are limits placed on women by stereotypes and social structure that positions them as tools in our society by virtue of digital devices that simplify the complexity of female human characters.

Egan's story itself is a black box, written as though it is computer programmed, setting up the expectation that women are supposed to function and operate like machines. The story was tweeted in intervals of 140 characters or less, and the story records the problems and possibilities of what women can do and be in society. The character limits serve to highlight the restrictive limits placed on women and Egan says she uses serialization to describe the way she writes her short fiction. She defines it as converting an object so it can be stored or transmitted to memory, connecting to the way her work reads almost as an instruction manual. In accord with Roupenian's representation of Margot in "Cat Person," who she feels compelled to have sex with Robert because of the societal expectations placed upon women, Egan concludes that women are programmed to fit into the world in which they live. Egan's tweets allow the reader access into the mental thoughts from a futuristic female spy who is forced to embark on a mission for her country. The reader is brought into her reality of sexual abuse, self-sacrifice, and dissociation. Egan titles her story "Black Box," questioning women's liberation and how one can be truly

liberated if they need to be implanted to do useful work. Egan sets up this story's list of expectations for being a spy as futuristic. However, the concept of women having a set of instructions to follow is common and not necessarily futuristic. It represents restrictions that women deal with today and restrictions that women have always dealt with. The woman in the story is a character that reflects and embodies the reality of today about what it's like to feel constricted and lacking a voice in the world.

Unfortunately, women's memories can be a black box without needing one actually implanted, especially in the instance of victims of rape cases as they are forced to live with the constant haunting memories of the sexual abuse, as Erin Williams shares in her memoir. Egan criticizes the idea women need artificial devices to have power. The woman in the story becomes a new hero, but not by the result of personal achievement or sacrifice. She had to be physically changed to acquire the title. The woman is instructed to "mirror [her] Designated Mate's attitudes, interests, desires and taste, forcing her to give up their own identity ("Black Box"). Along with their identities, the woman is forced to abandon her body. As Egan puts it, she is told, "Return to your body carefully, as if you were re-entering your home after a hurricane" ("Black Box"). Sex will change the man, but women are just forced to accept the unknown and potentially problematic responses. In this spy setting, women sacrifice their own feelings of discomfort to make men drop their guard. In "Cat Person," Margot feels obligated to have sex, also sacrificing her own feelings. These parallels show that Egan's futuristic ideas are already in play, and many women experience the feelings Egan projects about this cyborg. Although the idea of the new hero emerges from the addition of the black box, is being called a hero worth it? And what is the cost of being a hero? Egan comes to the conclusion that new heroism does have problems, although she imagines the "collective mentality would filter out to the culture at large"

(“Black Box”). This protagonist allows modern women to see that being deemed a hero has “its own crudeness and makes life difficult” (“Black Box”).

Egan’s treatment of appearance is political. She begins “Black Box” with attention to appearance, a key issue in Williams’s work. As the narrator of “Black Box” puts it, “People rarely look the way you expect them to, even when you’ve seen pictures.” And her characterization of the protagonist’s beauty in some ways stands in opposition to existing stereotypes of what it means to be a woman. Egan notes the goal of the spy’s mission is “to be both irresistible and invisible,” although this is applicable to more than just the role of a spy, but women’s life in general. In “Cyborg Storytelling: Virtual Embodiment in Jennifer Egan’s Black Box,” Jennifer Gutman argues that this is linked to the demeaning expectations long used to regulate women in society. And evidence of that kind of regulation of women exists in a work such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, in which Daisy Buchanan comments on the birth of her daughter, saying “I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (Fitzgerald 13). What are Egan and society saying about pretty girls? They don’t *expect* them to be aware or watchful, which ultimately rules them off as spies. In Egan’s interview with Treisman, she also reflects on America in the futuristic setting of her story, noting, “There’s been a new idea, which is to take pretty young women and unleash them into these terrorist networks. This became a vehicle also for looking at masculinity and femininity, and at the sort of cover that being a so-called ‘pretty girl’ can give to someone” (“This Week in Fiction: Jennifer Egan”). The fact that a woman is cast as a spy in this futuristic setting not only makes a statement about their beauty, but also about their vulnerability and lack of freedom. The feelings of this women are being ignored, as she is told to accept that she will be afraid. The woman becomes dehumanized, and as she is forced to abandon her emotion and true character,

she becomes just a physical body. Egan goes on to point out the rigid-yet-expected life timeline for the woman to have a career, get married, and have children. This timeline mirrors the timeline that Anna was supposed to follow, although she inevitably broke it by failing to have a career or get married. It also is linked to the three-ball juggling act that Swinth mentions that women were forced to comply with during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s. Egan's projection for the future connects to previous history, highlighting the seeming lack of progress. This expectation is also the reason that the woman must not die on the mission because she needs to have children and fulfill societal expectations of that task. This timeline, even in America, does not allow for flexibility or freedom, but for disappointment if the agenda is not met. The woman in this story is being set up on an impossible mission—an impossible mission that modern women embark on as they enter a society rooted in injustice and discrimination.

Egan posits that women must detach from their own bodies in order to meet the expectations of others. She notes that she finds the idea of a “spy with a scientifically enhanced body, who’s recording and photographing the activities of the guy she’s sleeping with really fun” (“This Week in Fiction: Jennifer Egan”). The woman throughout the story has to keep reminding herself that she’s not a prostitute because although she is forced to sleep with men, she does not get paid. She was trained, and not paid for her duties as an undercover spy, suggesting that women offer themselves up for the safety of others. However, there are times that women have been offered up for the safety of others, proving that Egan’s so-called futuristic society isn’t actually so far fetched. This woman is forced to use her gender and sexuality to be a spy, and this includes detaching herself from her body and leaving it behind as she is forced to have sex with other men. Egan’s character has programmed enhancements to give her exceptional powers, and this super-hero like woman becomes a force of combatting terrorism. Egan uses this placement

to show the power and strength of women, or what she deems as the reshaping of “image culture” and “media proliferation” (“This Week in Fiction: Jennifer Egan”). She notes that “in this dystopic future world women’s bodies are “employed as weapons of defense” (Gutman 4).

Despite the limitations and restrictiveness placed on women, the story, in Gutman’s words, “refigures technological meditation of the self as a deeply political and ambiguously ethical act—one that mobilizes those in socially marginalized positions to combat large-scale systems of patriarchal power as well as insidious hegemonies of a late-consumerist culture’s narcissistic celebration of self.” Gutman concludes that Egan transforms double standards which many women can relate to being held to, and instead reshaping them to be used as a source of power. Rather than viewing her story as instructions, Egan argues that these tweets can take the form of lessons. She wants to show that every move a woman makes causes them to have a sort of reflection and can be used a learning experience. Instead of relating to the protagonist, Egan proposes that perhaps society learns from the cyborg woman and the sacrifices she makes in order to avoid the reality of this futuristic vision.

Closing Note

In this closing note, I speculate about the potential progress toward equity for women with intersectional identities in the future—and the degree to which the future might align with or challenge Egan’s dystopian vision. Through her fiction, Egan suggests that she worries that women do or will struggle for control of their lives and themselves, and they exist as servants to a higher power. Gender inequality continues to be a visible issue despite authors’ efforts to make it more visible. And the question of the degree to which the women’s movement has made progress is widely debated. In the fourth wave, many people believed that gender equality was in sight, but this seemingly attainable goal became way out of reach when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. *Roe v. Wade* (1973), a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, protected woman’s rights to abortion. On June 26, 2022, women’s worst fears became a reality after the decision was officially overturned. Williams’s and Roupenian’s stories speak to the problematic repercussions of losing the right to an abortion. Former First Lady Michelle Obama took to Instagram, writing “I am heartbroken today. I am heartbroken for people around this country who just lost the fundamental right to make informed decisions about their own bodies.” After fifty years of having the right and access to abortion, many women saw this decision as a step backwards in women’s history and an infringement on women’s rights.

This issue became political and personal, causing women, including authors, all over the nation to speak out. Williams took to Twitter, writing, “The overturning of Roe is, fundamentally and structurally, an act of White Supremacy. It’s one of many restrictions of access and choice, especially with BIPOC people with uteruses” (Williams). The decision shocked modern America as it seemed that the long history of feminist struggles was being erased. Women’s rights have been reversed, once again raising the question of whether it is possible to change a culture of

patriarchy that has been so deeply engrained. In Amanda Montell's *WordSlut*, she proposes that the continuation of patriarchal ideology has triumphed in the way that we speak, as evidenced by terms like girl boss which gives the implication that a term like boss is not gender-neutral but coded as male. This is also true of SHE-EO, in place of CEO. We have fostered a culture of gendered thinking, and even in landmark cases like *Roe v. Wade*, the way we speak and discuss gender allows for a male dominated society. Although gender biases have existed in the language forever, the culture now finds "itself in the position to make a language revolution actually happen" (Montell 13). The future is female, and the culture shift starts with the way that we speak about women.

The dystopian visions and realities presented in literature invite reflection, shaping the language we use in everyday conversations about equity. Although these conversations might not change the world, literary works have become building blocks toward strengthening social movements. They convey and come into conversation with or even challenge feminist ideals and ideas. The role of literary works is essential in these tumultuous times and is constantly kept in our conversation. Literary critic Donald Hall recalls growing up in an era of what he coined I'll fix you. This became the response after he had "been pushed around by a bully or felt [he] had unjustly been punished by an adult" (1). Hall recalls as he lived in his innocent child dreams, "the new millennium would ensue, one in which little boys could do as they wish, could even play with dolls and kiss other little boys if they so desired," and in that same millennium, the voices of "women demanding control over their own bodies and equal pay for equal work" grew louder" (Hall 1-2). Hall lauds the efforts of writers like Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir who called for radical social transformation in the treatment of women, but he notes their efforts were "rather astonishingly optimistic" (Hall 2). Hall concludes that feminist literature threatens

patriarchal identities, and “when identities become or threaten to become unfixed, numerous forces rally to fix them once again, working both to repair them and set them more firmly in place” (Hall 2). The decision of *Roe v. Wade* supports Hall’s assertion, but women have never stopped trying. Since the mid-1800s, women have been trying to convince a patriarchal society to transform its ideology and abandon its existing culture. Hall calls the works of notable women optimistic, and maybe they were, but were they not also revolutionary? Modern writers as Louise Erdrich, Jhumpa Lahiri, Erin Williams, Kristen Roupenian, and Jennifer Egan have changed the way that we understand women not just in literature, but in society. Women were largely underrepresented in literature and these authors have used women protagonists to break the barrier of inequality in the plot, in the hopes of shaping and improving readers’ day-to-day interactions and understanding of women. The publicized oppression of reproductive rights has exacerbated the need for women’s representation in literature, as it feels at times we still live in a male-dominated world. The authors that I have analyzed uncover women’s contributions in the world through the merging of history and literature. They influence how readers think about literature, allowing them to see how fiction and real life intersect. Their influence extends beyond just literature, as they also shape how readers understand women and feminism. These authors expand the representation of not only women but marginalized women in particular, contributing to a broader view of readers’ understanding of women’s complex identities. These works collectively speak to the issues of contemporary women and spark a larger conversation about feminism in the future. Aishvarya Singh, writer and aspiring law student, questions, “women in power after often viewed as anomalies. Why is this?” (Singh). Literature has the power to change people’s mindset, the power to make people understand that womanhood is not a weakness.

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Abington College, PA
May 2023

WORK EXPERIENCE

Grand View Health

Sellersville, PA

Marketing and Engagement Specialist

March 2023-Present

- Write, copy, and develop marketing materials for internal and external audiences related to events, contests and sponsorships
- Create content to promote events for employees and the community for Health View Magazine and Grand View websites
- Collaborate with Grand View Health physicians, educational clinicians, and service lines to create classes and programs for the community

The Bucks County Herald

Doylestown, PA

Freelancer

January 2023-Present

- Covered local news stories in Warrington, Chalfont, and New Britain
- Reported on potential speed limit increase on a local road and a school board's meeting for the 2023-24 proposed budget
- Consistently delivered one to three articles per week in a timely fashion

PondelWilkinson

Remote

Investor and Public Relations Intern

June 2022-August 2022

- Created pitch letters and press releases for an AI-based automated chef restaurant and ultra-low-power semiconductors that enable speech interfaces on battery-powered devices
- Utilized Meltwater software for outreach, media monitoring and analysis to improve search engine optimization

Penn State

Abington, PA

Teaching Assistant

August 2021-December 2021

- Assisted students in the transition from high school to college by teaching new study skills
- Built relationships with students and discuss the importance of academic success
- Met with program coordinators and fellow teaching assistants to address issues preventing academic success

Giant Food Store
Starbucks Barista

Chalfont, PA
August 2018-Present

- Engage in a community-oriented and fast-paced workplace environment while juggling multiple orders at once and exercising strong time management
- Establish customer relations while maintaining accurate and efficient orders
- Provide exceptional customer service and keep a clean workspace

Tutor
Independent Tutor

Remote
September 2017-Present

- Created customized lesson plans for six students, ranging from elementary to high school level
- Met with parents to discuss and set learning goals
- Possessed knowledge on a variety of subjects including Spanish, math, English and science

CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT

- Open Educational Resources Submission March 2022-May 2022
-Provide research material to be accessed by the public domain
- Sigma Tau Delta Member January 2020-Present
- *The Abington Review* editor and *The Abington Sun* writer August 2019-May 2021
-Wrote 8 front page articles on topics such as Penn State's Campus Pride Month and the post-pandemic alternative grading system
-Provided developmental and copyediting feedback to fiction writing pieces

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

- Beverley Wright McHugh Scholarship for excellence in English May 2022
- Evan Pugh Scholar for being in the upper 0.5 percent of my class May 2022
- National Day on Writing nomination April 2022
- Schreyer's Honors College May 2020-Present
- Penn State Abington Honors Program August 2019-Present