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### DEAN’S HONOR SOCIETY

#### Iceland

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There is a Turkish proverb that says, “A well-traveled person is more knowledgeable than a person who lives a long life,” emphasizing that it is the number of places we visit that makes us better informed human beings, rather than the number of years we spend in this world. One can argue against this adage prioritizing travel over age in the acquisition of knowledge, but it is indisputable that travel creates a multiplicity of experiences, expands our horizons, and enriches our understanding. Every new land we see, every new person we meet, every new challenge we face along the way, shapes our thinking. Unrecognized sounds and scripts, different urban and natural landscapes, and an unavoidable sense of disorientation push us out of our comfort zone, and our wandering minds constantly compare old and new as well as familiar and unfamiliar in our journeys to new places. Consequently, we learn and gain new experiences in the process.

One of the ways in which the Gallatin School of Individualized Study provides invaluable travel and learning opportunities for its students is through its Scholars groups. Student members of the Albert Gallatin Scholars, Dean’s Honor Society, and Americas Scholars travel to exciting destinations with a faculty member, who curates the theme for the trip and related group meetings held during the school year. In 2018, the Albert Gallatin Scholars visited the United Kingdom and Ireland and explored the theme, “Ancient Storytelling/Modern Landscapes.” The Americas Scholars traveled to Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska, and their theme was “Decolonizing Cascadia.” The Dean’s Honor Society went to Iceland to examine various processes and phenomena peculiar to that country. Their theme was “Iceland: The Edge of the World.”

In this issue of Mosaic, you will find reflections from Gallatin students who participated in these trips, presented in the form of creative writing, artwork, essays, poetry, photography, song writing, and research.

Mehmet Darakcioglu is the Assistant Dean for Global Programs at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. He travelled to the United Kingdom and Ireland with Albert Gallatin Scholars this year.
York
Population: 208,200
Area: 105 sq miles
Language: English
Calling Code: +44
Currency: pound sterling

Belfast
Population: 340,200
Area: 51.15 sq miles
Language: Irish, English
Calling Code: +028
Currency: Euro

Dublin
Population: 553,165
Area: 44.4 sq miles
Language: Irish, English
Calling Code: +353
Currency: Euro
Rough ridges in large cylindrical stone structures.
Joey Pinewood sat alone at the end of a bar, head down and eyes glazed, his long beard hairs dipping into his quart of lager. The left strap on his Extra Big and Extra Tall overalls sagged, taking its place on his massive arm. A fading green knit cap wrapped snug on his head, and thick, graying hairs flowed out of the bottom onto his neck. His work boots tracked in water from the Greenland rains, as did the shoes of the other three patrons in the bar.

Earlier in the evening, Joey Pinewood attended what would end up being his final Council of Giants assembly. The annual meeting had to take place in a location where no regulars would find them. Pinewood had always been part of the ever-decreasing United States delegation for the Council. He was one of the original four along with Paul Bunyan, Horace Haroldson, and Linda “Big Lin” Crabtree. Horace and Big Lin were ousted from the delegation years ago. A delegation’s size is based on how much of a cultural impact giants make in the country they’re from. Bunyan and Pinewood were the only two remaining until this meeting. The council saw Pinewood’s nearly non-existent presence in American culture, and cut him out.

The American spot was taken by Ireland, an island where their kind are more revered, and given to an up-and-coming giant name Fergal Donovan. He was young, slick, handsome. They say his body was formed from the rocks at the Giant’s Causeway, and you can absolutely tell if you ever get a chance to look at those abs. Good Lord, if you ever got to see him bare-chested, or even when he wore a tight enough shirt, the sight would blind the seeing and give sight to the blind. His powerful calves have been deemed too large for even giant tailors to fashion pants around, so he always wears a fit orange short that frays at the bottom like veins spreading down onto the tops of his shins. Despite his monstrous legs, his feet were light and educated. He could maneuver them to make you believe that he was coming from a direction other than the one he was in, or cancel their sound all together.

That is how Joey Pinewood, a notoriously anxious giant, was unable to detect Donovan’s approach before he took a spot next to him.

“Club soda, please.”

Council members were barred from drinking to set a good example for children. Joey, drunk for the first time in one hundred years, scoffed at Fergal’s order. Joey stood up to go to another part of the bar. Fergal stopped him.
“I came to apologize. They shouldn’t have done you dirty like that. Rough stuff.”
Fergal took a sip of his fresh club soda and exhaled with satisfaction.

Joey sighed and sat back down. “Do you know why I’m not on the council anymore?”
He stared at Fergal. His eyes could break bricks—not the most impressive feat, but
good enough to get the job done when faced directly at the foundation of a building. That
was Joey’s specialty. He wasn’t the most powerful giant, but he was smart. He knew how
to knock down powerful forces with minimal effort. That’s what he was doing to Fergal
with his eyes. Attempting to destroy his foundation.

Fergal gulped. “Me?”

“No,” said Joey, looking away. He had his fun. He had Fergal sized up. He wasn’t
malicious. He was just a kid looking to make it in a giant’s world. “It’s not your fault. I
don’t blame you. It’s America, man. What do giants get credit for in Ireland?”

“The Causeway, Isle of Man, Chicken Rock.”

“Right. I’ve heard of all those. I’m in America and I know about the Causeway. Do
you know what giants have credit for where I come from? A blue ox. To most Americans,
you’re not a self-respecting giant if you don’t have a big blue animal to run around
with. We used to have things. Paul had the One Thousand Lakes of Minnesota. Horace
created The Four Corners. Linda forged Pike’s Peak from the remains of her fallen family
members. Hell, I used to be revered for the Grand Canyon.

“They used to tell stories of me fighting my way through Arizona to catch a Gila
Monster that stole my wife’s wedding ring. This was back when a Gila Monster was a
Monster, you know. Before they got shrunk by me. Now who gets credit? The Colorado

“That’s why I’m out of the council. Not because they were itching to get some hot
piece of Irish ass into the group. ‘Hey, let’s bring in some kid to make us all insecure
about our looks.’ Yeah right. It’s because you were born in the right place at the right
time. And I got screwed. Goddammit!”

Joey smashed his glass in his hand, through the shards onto the wet ground, and left.

Fergal sat dumbfounded. He thought about Joey’s plight. About his new role in the
Council. Whether he had earned his place in the annals of Gianthood, or if his novelty
was his sole asset. He thought about whether there was any way to help the giants of other
places. After closing out the bar, Fergal paid for his single club soda, Joey’s many lagers,
and left for Ireland, pondering how long it would take him to become Joey Pinewood.
A large grassy field with trees in the distance.
Image of star-shaped decoration in window of cathedral.
These images illustrate the spatial landscapes of storytelling (e.g., “Dracula in Whitby”) through contemporary experiments in digital photography during the Albert Gallatin Scholars journey across England and Ireland. As storytellers skewed across time, these spaces must simultaneously embody a performance of historical site, travel destination, and everyday accommodation. With the rapid turnaround of media consumption in today’s society, gimmicks compete for our attention, and establishments must continuously rebrand themselves to stay relevant. This can be seen as a positive vehicle for progress, because once routine has been established and comfort has been achieved, it can be leveraged to common benefit since the next logical progression is experimentation. Presented in this series are the results of my own experiments, along with more traditional travel scenes from this year’s Albert Gallatin Scholars trip.
A stone wall and a gated window.
View of a shop called The OAK. There are paintings of faces on windows.
Dublin Album
REBECCA KARPEN

I write a lot of sad girl folk songs, so when I learned the trip this year was to Ireland and England, I decided to write an entire sad girl folk mini-concept album about Ireland, deriving from the tragic nature of many great works of the Irish and English literary traditions.

Although the landscape of the area played a major part in my subject matter here (grass, waves, bridges, etc.), I actually ended up being far more inspired by my fellow classmates on the trip, all of whom I got to know very well, and many of whom I grew extremely close to. This album is primarily built on things that were said by my professors and classmates on the trip that I fleshed out into tiny arcs throughout the piece.

As I previously mentioned, my specialty is sad girl songs, so there is a fair share of heartbreak, pain, suffering, and tears, oh so many tears, but much of it has to do with the process of leaving and being abandoned in a sense. Throughout the trip, I fell in love with this part of Europe so quickly that it almost felt like a tragic romance. There was a dark cloud that sort of lingered over it despite the fact I had more fun than I think I have ever had ever over the course of this trip, knowing that it was going to end. So there is an obsession with this throughout the piece, as well as know that this wonderful Europe bubble is just that, a bubble, and when I went home, I would have to deal with everything I had been allowed to mercifully avoid for about two weeks.

A lot of older literature assigns personhood to places, referring to places by names or the pronouns, “she” and “mother.” For my album, I made Ireland into a lover and compressed the interactions I had on this trip into my perception of Ireland and romanticized everything in order to perpetuate this theme of ancient landscapes and modern storytelling. I was telling the same stories that have been repeated for hundreds of years, but just in a different way, with a ukulele and metaphors about flashers (that is on the album itself). This album is a love story; it’s something old entwined with something new, and I hope I have done Yorkshire and both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland justice. I included only two of the songs here, and you can scan their respective QR codes to hear them for yourself.
Dublin

The skies are gray in Dublin
The seas were rife
With sunsets
Home seems like a wasteland
All the way from here
And as the planes begins to send so
I don't want to
I don't want to
I don't want to
Go.
The longer I'd stay,
The more drastic
And dire the consequences
The longer I'd pray,
The more inclined I'd be to make defenses
Become defensive
More offensive
All I ever
Fucking
Wanted
Was
You
And I'm
Wasting Time
Time
I'm wasting
Time

The air is harsh
And mean back home
Can I stay here
And maybe we
Could be alone?
And we
Could be a wasteland
A monster with
Four hands
I wish I could just
Stay here
With you
Like I want to
Like I want to
Like I want
To
Know
And I'm getting
So restless
Please don't
Send me
Back home
I'm drowning over
Here
But I'm already
Eerily floating
On my
Stomach
Over
there

And you're
Wasting Time
Time
You're wasting
Time
And you're still
Not mine
Mine
But I
Can't
Have
You
No no no no
No no no no
Not like I want to
It’s 5 in the morning
I wanna stay while you’re leaving
I want to walk you there
And hold your
Hand.
But you don’t want that
And I know time is fleeting
And I can’t help you to understand
No I
Can’t
Help you
If your heart won’t
Distend
If your arms
Will not
Extend
And wrap me up
Inside
Of
Them

But have we wasted time
Because you’ve bettered mine
And now it’s 2 pm
In New York
And I’ve spent every hour
Just wanting you
By my side
And you’re so kind
You’re so
Damn kind
And I was wondering
If we
Could just
Be
 Alone?
Bovine's Bay

Bury me
Deep within
The sea
Within the sea
Within the
Sea
Deep within the waves
You'll bury
Me
In the
Bovine's
Bay

Hear the crash
As it falls
Away
Wind
And fog
God's
So misty
When I'm
Cradled
Softly
In the arms
In
The arms
Of
The wild
Shore

I wanna run
Across this bridge
And fall asleep
Upon this rift
Sleep
for so long
The grass
Grows over my lips
And I

Fade
Into
This
Mountain
Become one
With
this
Cliff

Promise me
You'll remember me
You'll hear my voice
When I leave
May
Upon your lips
My name
Sick
Sweet
In the faded blue
Of your crinkled
Sleeves

Promise me
That upon this land
You'll kiss me softly
And when
You
Ascend
You'll leave me here
Upon this sea
Within this sway
Within
The arms
Of the
Bovine's
Bay
James Connolly was a short and stout man, standing strong at five feet, four inches. Despite his bodily shortcomings, James possessed a fiery Irish spirit that burnt brighter than his atomic tangerine curls, which nicely complement his full-length ginger beard. After a long night at his preferred pub, Mr. Connolly returned to his New York apartment slightly after one in the morning. Intoxicated, he stumbled up his building’s stairs with little form and great difficulty. Eventually, he landed upon his front door and all but rammed the door off its hinges.

Standing in his doorway, the twenty-two-year-old Irish immigrant gazed idly at his nihilistic decor. In the tiny tenement apartment, the only two objects one could find were a lone mattress situated in the room’s center and an unopened box shoved to the corner where James left his dirty laundry.

In his stupor state, James felt drawn towards the mysterious package he had just received from his late grandmother’s estate. Though wealthy beyond anything James ever imagined, the old woman left him only this box. Too busy with work at the power plant, he eschewed opening the present from a woman he never met, deeming the box an unimportant priority.

After James waddled over to the box, he fervently tore the package open as a wolf does a lamb. Amidst the madness of falling packing peanuts and shipping tape emerged three new boxes. James peered into what he thought was an antique jewelry box, finding in the first compartment a diary entitled “A Crafted History.” James turned to the first page and found a small manifesto that listed about ten names. He only recognized “Esmeralda O’Hara,” his grandmother’s, located last on the list. Intrigued, he flipped the page again.
Today I have made strides on finishing the armoire set. A dry day with few clouds, I was able to venture out towards the lake and gather materials to construct the last piece in the collection. Leaving the workshop before daybreak, I headed towards the upper section of the lake with an aim to find an Arbutus tree that would provide bark needed to complete the inlay. After taking a second to take in the lake’s beauty, I found the perfect tree secluded from the myriad of tourists that now speckle the shoreline. It was exhausting to put the ax into the tree’s body, but I nevertheless find something so poetic in the labor process. Killarney gives me Earthly products, and I add to those products a part of me. Without me and my labor, the wealthy antique dealers in Dublin would have nothing. I think that’s why I love my craft. I take from the Earth and create something entirely new and entirely me.

—Oisin Haggarty of Killarney, 1852

James stopped reading and examined the fine writing desk’s picturesque engravings, which resembled photographs. He could hardly imagine the time and focus necessary to make something beautiful, and in the absence of machinery. Enthralled, he flipped a few pages ahead and read another entry.

How lucky I am to have won the auction for this beautiful collection. Perfect for my husband and I, the collection contains a valet box, a jewelry armoire, and a writing box. And they’re beautiful. The dark sycamore exterior finely compliments the yellowing arbutus inlay, which further accentuates the delightful golden engravings that mask the contraptions. Nowhere in this piece does one’s eye find a space lacking in Irish charm. From the detailed portraits on Killarney gems like Glena Cottage and Ross castle to the three-leafed clovers that vine around the whole piece to the harps that find a central position on every piece, it’s all just so Irish! I am so
happy that the antique dealer in Liverpool found these beauties during his Dublin tour. These pieces will fit so nicely in the palace drawing room. I hope no one notices the chip on the bottom, I did not mean to drop it.

—Amelia Churchill of Buckingham Palace, 1905

It appears my turn to make a mark in this book has come. From what I have gathered, Oisin of Killarney accidentally left his diary in the work he had just completed so long ago. The book found its way to the hand of an antique dealer who thought the diary an extra selling point, a document of authenticity. Now I sit here with something much more than a mere certificate. These furniture pieces have traveled far and wide, traversing seas and borders through exchanges from individuals who had their own unique interaction with these ordinary objects. One man’s craftsmanship has touched so many lives, and in every interaction with this piece, a person had inadvertently intertwined their story with the piece and with all those who had held possession in the past. Whether a product for sale that kept an antique dealer’s family from starving or an ordinary object used by a woman like me who furnished her home with ornament to shield her from the harsh realities that our Earth harbors and inflicts, this collection embodies lifetimes.

—Esmeralda O’Hara of Cork, 1977

James closed the book and examined the three boxes laid out before him. With the greatest care, he carried the antiques and placed them against the wall. He set the book back in the top drawer, tracing the clover pattern with his fingers in an attempt to feel the history. Slightly unsettled by the idea that he was connecting with the past, James placed his watch in the valet box and headed to bed. Tomorrow he would buy a table for the antiques and begin to write his entry.
While in England, Northern Ireland, and Ireland, I was taken by the large amount of myths and folklore that I encountered. From Ireland’s Selkies and Fairies to the Wiccan tradition of England, there is much in the landscapes of these countries that can hide magic, mystery, and cultural meaning. Having always been interested in magic and mythology, I decided to create a set of illustrations based on magical and historical figures, but modernizing them and bringing them into the modern context through which I was currently seeing them.

For instance, the illustration about a pub in Ireland hides a small crowd of Fae folk, while neon lighting at an abandoned abbey disturbs the ghost that lives there in another illustration. I was excited to explore the way in which the architecture, landscapes, stories, and people I came to know during my stay could overlap with the folklore and mythology I was reading about.

Unsure of the purpose of the illustrations at first, I considered making them to be standalone pieces or illustrations for a story. While they can stand alone, I found as I created the pieces that they were a series of concept art for a movie or show, film and concept art being areas of my study. I began to wonder what a TV show would look like if it retold medieval narratives from England to Ireland while giving them a twist that would help these stories relate to modern audiences and sensibilities of fantasy and horror.

Creating these illustrations as a concept for such a film project, I found myself using color palettes ranging from dim and watery colors of the ocean to the intense lighting and color of Dublin’s queer bars that I saw while I was there. One of my goals as a creator, and what I usually tie into my stories and illustrations, is a sense of bringing back the past and allowing it to live on in through the art that new generations consume. Mythology and folklore can tell us a lot about where we come from in the past, and can help us to understand our surroundings in the present.
Fountains Abbey
Selkie
Memories of an Island

NATHALIA SANCHEZ

In the poem, “What We Dig For, For Celtic Orphans,” the Irish-American writer and psychologist Tim Dwyer writes, “When we dig for something no longer there,/ We find a way to create it—/not from Bronze, nor from Iron/but from the smithy of our longings.”¹ It is estimated that seventy million people around the world claim a connection to Irish identity—more than ten times the present-day population of Ireland.² Moreover, “Ireland is one of the few countries in the world whose population is smaller than it was in the mid-19th century.”³ Through photographs and poems, I inquire about the ways in which individuals make sense of their heritage as memories and connections grow distant, both physically and temporally.

These poems are inspired and informed by stories of Irish American life in the Ireland House Oral History Collection. The poem entitled “Tricolour” draws from the story of Bridget Cagney, who moved from Cork City, Ireland, to Sunnyside, Queens, in the summer of 1967. After the events of 9/11, Bridget and her husband, Jim, became members of “Point Thank You,” a “spontaneous effort by civilians to stand by Ground Zero and thank recovery workers.”⁴ I was fascinated by an image of Bridget taken in 2001, in which she is pictured holding a poster that reads, “Our Hearts Are With You,” while waving the United States flag. Bridget was determined to offer emotional solidarity, an act that cannot be quantified and reduced to economic contribution as most narratives regarding immigration are framed today. Her life and achievements represent the ways in which individuals find and cultivate meaning within the cultures and countries they adopt.

While writing “Islands,” I was inspired by the story of Kevin Gleeson, a graphic artist with the New York City Police Department, who was raised in Queens, New York, and whose family immigrated from Northern Ireland during the 1950s.
After initially traveling to the United States as part of a hurling team, Gleeson’s father decided to join the army in order to obtain citizenship. Gleeson describes his upbringing as “more Irish than American,” explaining that on “Fridays and Saturdays, we’d have family and friends over for musical parties. We would get the Irish Echo newspaper, and listen to Irish music on the AM radio.” He also held on to the Irish language in pieces, learning “how to say my name, how to count from 1 to 10, ‘God be with you’ and things like that.”

Gleeson’s story reflects an active effort to sustain his family’s culture across generations. He also voices the parallels that he observed while growing up in the United States, specifically with regards to “the prejudice against the African-Americans in this country. I saw that, if you were Catholic you worked for 5 pounds an hour and if you were Protestant you got 10 pounds an hour. It was very unfair.”

The photographs accompanying the poems aim to provide a visual dimension to the storytelling. For example, “Grandma sings a familiar voice” features a photograph of a bullet hole from the 1916 Easter Rising found along the walls of a building in Dublin. This image is intended to demonstrate the way that history is embedded within the landscape. “Tricolour” is accompanied by an image of a colorful street in Dublin alongside a photograph of a Famine Memorial sculpture. “It’s built on the departure site of the Perseverance, one of the first famine ships to leave the area in 1846.” “Surname” features a series of photographs recalling a period of conflict in Northern Ireland during the late 20th century known as The Troubles. These images are part of the present-day peace walls meant to separate Catholic and Protestant communities.
Grandma sings in a familiar voice

It’s in the way she pronounces her Rs with a bit more emphasis and care
She reminds me that today is embedded with the survival of yesterday
Miles of memory that we’re racing to unearth
Excavations in a distant mind

Technique said, “You gotta tell your story, or somebody else will tell it for you”
so I cling on to every syllable in the stories you’ve told a dozen times,
hoping that this time your voice will shade a detail you might’ve missed before
Tricolour

Hand upon heart we salute
a legacy of reds and blues
as we search for a place
within this shifting constellation
but once a year along 5th ave.
you’ll notice a medley marriage of tricolours—
white hopes for peaceful brotherhood
while green and orange
stand guard alongside her
Islands

Yesterday we traded one for another
less green in January
We left with the promise of something shiny and new
And were handed a pressed uniform.
Today we hold on to the echoes carried across waves
as we open week old newspapers
and chime in to broadcasts
panning across cobblestone streets
that grow more obscure with every year.
Surname

Sometimes I feel like my bones carry a history unnamed
Inscribed upon memory and paper, I’ve chosen to wear it—
Proudly.
But I’ll admit that sometimes I worry,
that maybe with time this meaning will fade.
How long can we hold on to landscapes
that we’ve only ever experienced internally—
in glimpses and carefully constructed sentences?
Maybe we all inherit
A cultural memory
that we struggle to pronounce with precision—
a collection of stories that we activate
in unexpected moments
like when my father,
in a raspy voice
and calloused hands
revisits the anthems of his childhood—
a melody that will always feel like
a home
that is never quite finished
Paint spots on a wall with engravings in it.
Welcome to Ragaire

SAM PETTER

A land of mystery and magic where the rules of the natural world are warped by the influence of powerful deities and their disciples. Ruled by a series of clans, the Ragairans have long had an intense connection with the divine energy of the land, but only the strongest among them are able to manipulate the forces surrounding them. These are the witches—paragons of the gods who serve their will throughout the land, whether for good or evil.

But all is not well in Ragaire. Death and decay have ravaged the normally verdant landscape. Crops are failing, forest are growing silent, and, most terrifying of all, thousands are dying each day, all of no discernable cause. Even the disciples of Aeron, the Goddess of Judgement, is unable to halt the tide of losses. In this time of despair, blame has fallen upon the witches, who have separated from their non-magical brethren as prejudice and vengeance boil and seethe in every corner of their former homes. The witches are certain they are not the root of Ragaire’s suffering, but what is? Why has death spread over Ragaire and how can it be stopped?

Ragaire is a fantasy roleplaying campaign designed to be played with the Dungeons and Dragons 5e Rules. As a dynamic and constantly evolving storytelling medium, I chose a tabletop roleplaying format as an homage to the fluid and collaborative nature of Irish folklore. Initially inspired by Irish and British witch lore, Ragaire focuses on the magic that flows as the lifeblood of these canons. Whether seen in the stories of fictional witches like Britain’s Morgan Le Faye or real-life “sorceresses” like York’s Mother Shipton, witches are a representation of the outcasts of society, and are thus some of the most unique and colorful characters in these nations’ literature. What traits define a witch, however, is up to the community that creates them. Thus, the use of a D&D campaign to explore traditional storytelling is very apropos.

I was inspired to create Ragaire during my trip with the Albert Gallatin Scholars to England and Ireland. Much of Ragaire is based on the collection of cultures that have occupied Ireland throughout history. Elements of Roman, Celtic, and traditional Irish lore can be found woven throughout the fabric of the world, whether in the wide pantheon of deities or the complex magical system. Currently, a website is under construction to share Ragaire with the all RPG fans out there!
Ancient and medieval monuments are examples of a past that a nation either identifies itself with or distances itself from. The Fountains Abbey is an example of a nation that is proud of its past, and this is demonstrated through how well the ruins are maintained. Looking from a historical perspective, the ruins are an example of Britain’s Christian past, which includes Catholicism, Reformation, and the dissolution of monasteries. The site is imbued with the landscape, which blends in well with the freshly cut grass and nearby river. Moss-covered decaying bricks show a past of turmoil and a shift in political power. Newgrange today rests on a hill overlooking the valley, with newly built walls that represent what the site would have looked like five millennia ago. It is the legacy of Neolithic people who inhabited Ireland before any contact with Anglo-Normans.

Fountains Abbey and Newgrange are both viewed differently by the public and recount different tales. Fountains Abbey tells a story of former glory—a religious tradition—and what happened as the result of strong political and religious changes. Newgrange, on the other hand, is a more nationalistic story, one that represents prehistoric inhabitants of Ireland long before the Anglo-Norman influence. These narratives may be important to some and not to others, but the story represented is important nonetheless.
Before traveling to Ireland and Northern England with the Albert Gallatin Scholars, I knew I had a particular interest in how ancient landscapes and storytelling affected queer people in Ireland and England. Religion plays a large role in both countries, as Ireland comes from a deep tradition of Catholicism and as England comes from a tradition of Protestantism. My initial goal was to interrogate the queer nightlife of York, Belfast, and Dublin. However, I found that difficult with the initial two cities. There were some rumors about places, but nothing was confirmed. And that is a conversation that I was not so comfortable to broach in those places.

So when I got to Dublin, I took advantage of the bustling queer life. I say bustling only in comparison to the previous two cities we visited, certainly not bustling in comparison to London or New York. But that did not take away from the experience. I met so many wonderful Irish queer people while at George's and the Outhouse. George's is a tavern/pub/bar, drag house, and club. The Outhouse is a queer community center that provides all kinds of programming for queer folk living in Dublin. They have health services, social services, clubs, and performances, and a whole slew of information about queer groups around Dublin and how to get involved.

As I was taking a look at that information, which consisted of business cards and postcards and flyers, I got inspired by the iconography that the groups were using to market themselves. What fascinated me was how queer people use imagery as play and the subversive. While I flipped through that information, I thought about Myisha Priest’s class, “Women’s (Text)iles.” Even though I did not take it, I began to think about what it means to make quilts that contain a living history. That history is not only of a community, but also of an individual.

In exploring these ideas, I decided that I wanted to make a queer quilt based upon the experiences I had with queerness in Dublin. While I have not had the opportunity to make the quilt, I am incredibly excited to do so in the future. As I mentioned before, I am excited by living histories. The process of making a quilt is something that is embodied and could be considered ephemeral, at least the making of it, and then results in a physical product. However, the process of making lives in our bodies, which is then stored in our bodies, and then has the potential to be reactivated in another future time. Not only does it have the potential to do so in relation to personal history, but it also has that potential in relation to queer histories. Making the quilt is a sort of performance and holds memories, histories and stories.
Poems
GABRIEL HERRERA
The Winds

Psychotically brilliant
Loss of all accurate perception
With that vast opening created by the fantasies of the past
Through the way that some may fear

Pushing without relent
Pulling with furious might
The waters following the demanding orders
Given by the commanding winds

A history factually incorrect
But a history astonishingly true
The cries of the past walkers lingering in the moving air
Admitting to the erroneous accuracy

What is said to be truth
May be superficially
But the winds tear away that exterior cover
Exposing the verities lurking beneath

The whispers of the past movers
The thumps of their giant boots
The cracks on the earth due to their mighty force
The claim on their lands, even today

The frigid air is unforgiving
Cold, tough, and hostile
Weeding out those who deny the complex veracities
Keeping those who can sway in the rhythm of the winds

A sound like a scream with joy
A broken cage with nothing inside
The crashing of waves, knights of the winds
Open ocean, gleaming cliffs

Dementedly vivid
Loss of all 'accurate' perception
The Causeway stands radiating the fantasies of the past
With nothing but miraculously tough winds to win over the truths
Her Fountain Abbey

From memory
Drawn with fervor
Felt like oblivion
Seemed realer than reality

A touching feel
Nature and life
History with growth
Earth taking over

Standing face to face
At Fountain Abbey
With vivacious death
And a lingering past

Her force was
The most present one there
Gravity but stronger
Yet eccentrically subtle

They’re work magnificent
Looming over what they thought they’d beaten
But as happened and will continue
A decorous, divine failure
The birds sing with might
As they loom over their work
To show the ownership they claim
To show the priority she has

She sings with water
A rushing, harmonious delight
Drowning their ears in truth
Implicating a minor weakness

But her current will win
As will her patience
She will grow and conquer
Yet still love and gather

She let their work stand
Let it have its time
The clock was stopped
And she returned

Nothing will withstand her power
Nothing will overcome her stance
The past has proven that graciously
As the future will surely do
William Lockwood

His name wasn't clear
Blurred by the moving hands
Nonetheless, he was there
Standing tall, with scars and hurt

Eighteen fifty-four
Between January and December
William Lockwood took his final breath
Falling into the care of her arms

He lived through time
Breathed the same air
Drank the same water
Wandered the same grounds

He had passions
He had likes
He had preferences
All of them dust

"Who was William Lockwood?"
A 19th-century Irishman
A son, a human
A husband, a father

Yes, that is true
He was all of those things
But he was one thing more
He was William Lockwood

But now he is gone
Well, almost two hundred years
Now resting in her welcoming arms
William Lockwood lives
A snow-covered field with mountains in the background.
Iceland

DEAN’S HONOR SOCIETY • JANUARY 2018

Reykjavík
Population: 126,100
Area: 105 sq miles
Language: Icelandic
Calling Code: +354
Currency: Icelandic króna
My project is a series of illustrations depicting traditional Icelandic folklore and some stories we heard while on our trip. They are ink and watercolor drawings, with a style that uses patterns, abstraction, and high-pigmentation to evoke a sense of fairytales and dreaminess. They are all nightscapes, as the night in Iceland seemed to almost never actually end. It felt like a constant twilight, and the moon, which was full for the majority of our trip, was brilliantly bright, enormous, and stunning.

The moon, wrapped up in all that generous darkness, had an air of magic and mystery that really reflects the rich storytelling traditions of Iceland. Moreover, it was in that darkness that stories were often told, to keep the night and cold at bay, so they feel intrinsically linked and really special.

Each illustration is accompanied by a line or two that gives a peek into the story depicted.
The Malevolent Troll

Out of the murk came a flash of gnarled white, more claw than hand.
Hallgerðr

Her hair wrapped around her like armor.
She steeled herself against his pleading glance.
Circle of Stones
And it wasn’t long before he found himself alone, locked in a circle and awaiting the devil.
The Curse of the Hidden Woman

Cloaked in blue and trembling with fear, she threatened him with scars.
Field Journal
SYDNEY RAPPIS

We went to Iceland knowing there had been a history of elf sightings. We were a team of highly trained professionals searching for a truth we had only heard rumors of, and when we found it, we struggled with the decision to disseminate the information. Some people would prefer that this story remain hidden, or that it be discredited as a hoax.

What follows are the unedited pages of my field journal. The sensitive information they contain may be troubling for some readers, but this reality can no longer be ignored. By my word as a researcher, an academic, and a human being, everything that follows is true. This is my story.

12/31 – 20:00 hours
Location: Iceland
Objective: Confirm the truth of cryptids around the globe

Having made little progress in the Black Forest of Germany, our team has unanimously chosen to relocate to a more promising location. According to our research, the vast landscapes of Iceland have yet to succumb to the skepticism and clichéd overabundance that seems to have doused our previous exploration sites. In a time when one is ridiculed for truly believing in something that cannot be quantitatively proven, it is getting increasingly more difficult to find a culture that believes strongly in paranormal populations. After chasing many urban legends and exposing a number of frauds, however, Iceland could be the exact place we are looking for.

We hope the location of the island, having formed atop one of the most mysterious and active hotspots in the world, influences the paranormal activity that manifests in our present reality. Binary dimensionality, as we know, explains why only certain psychic people can see, hear, or feel the presence of those that exist within another reality. Historically, the unusually active magma that flows freely beneath the basalt combines with the subzero temperatures in the winter months to wear thin the border between dimensions.
12/31 – 22:30 hours

Immediately upon arrival, every member of the team noticed the looming mountains in the distance, hardly visible in the assaulting darkness of the morning. The sun, which moves quickly and efficiently across the sky in four-hour periods, bares our orbital state of flux more honestly on this edge of the world.

Our zoologist seems particularly fascinated by the tangible energy present in the landscape, which, upon initial assessment, was deemed inert. Our local elf expert advised us to listen for the light within unusually tilted boulders and moss patterns, which has led us to our current location. We have set up our main base in the center of a lava field, near a dormant lava tunnel that formed in an eruption hundreds of years ago.

As we near the end of the year 2017, we hope to see—and if all goes well, interact with—a paranormal being. Many firsthand accounts state that New Year’s is the most likely time for the Hidden People to reveal themselves to members of our current dimension. As many on our team are proven to have invaluable psychic senses, all of us are undeniably optimistic.

12/31 – 23:18 hours

Nearly 3.5 hours into our study, and the temperature seems to be affecting some members of the team more than we originally expected. Many are wrapped in thermal blankets, and a few have shut themselves into the vehicles. Psychic levels also seem to correlate to temperature susceptibility.

Another unexpected distraction is coming from the fireworks the native residents have been setting off nonstop throughout the night. Our location, perfectly centered within flux levels of magma and altitude, has placed us near a small fishing village particularly inclined to pyrotechnic battles. This neighborly contest could, in my opinion, either hinder or aid our journey. Some speculate that the heat and colors, exploding against the luminous night sky, might attract the para-dimensional beings. Others, myself included, hypothesize that the violent, arresting noises will keep them away. Or perhaps it will attract a more malevolent manifestation that we are unprepared to deal with.

12/31 – 23:59 hours

Some members of the village brought us bottles of a local drink, the Black Death, to celebrate the passing of another year. While I find the people immensely kind and fascinating, I am more interested in the cryptids than the local liquor.
1/1 – 01:26 hours

Everyone on the team has left to join the celebration in the center of the village. It seems that psychic abilities are negligible when combined with alcohol.

1/1 – 02:41 hours

No sign of activity in this dimension or any other. The cold has worked through my entire body. I haven’t felt my toes in about an hour, and I am finding it difficult to grasp the pen. The night is as dark as ever, and I can feel my optimism diminishing. My team left me a bottle of the Icelandic liquor. Happy new year to myself.

1/1 – 03:00 hours

Can’t find keys. Battery low in flashlight. Very cold. Moving into lava tunnel. The fireworks continue—hope to see them from underground.

1/4 – 16:00 hours

**Current Location: Somewhere above the Atlantic**

**Objective: Bring to light the truth**

I have been too overwhelmed to write these past days, but I know I must. It is my duty to share what happened on the first day of the new year, despite my fear that this may not be taken as truth. The moment I went into that lava tunnel three days ago, my entire perception of the paranormal changed.

I was cold. My hiking boots slipped over the icy rocks that covered the bottom of the cave. As I clumsily made my way into the darkness, I came upon a figure partially bathed in moonlight that illuminated the cave through a small crack on the ceiling. Draped across the stalagmites, the body was covered in soot and snow.

Shocked, I lost my balance and fell to the ground. My equipment scattered around the cave and I landed parallel to the figure. Up close, I could see that its fingers and lips were tinged with purple and that delicate crystals had formed on long eyelashes. In my attempt to get up, I hit my head on the cave wall and was thrown forward, nearly on top of the humanoid being. Its eyes opened to reveal emerald green irises that appeared almost black, since the pupils were so large. In the softest, most haunting voice I have ever heard, the elf whispered her story to me.

She had been injured in a battle before narrowly escaping, she said, fleeing to our realm with what little strength she had left. The witching hour was the easiest time to move between realms, and she needed a safe space to heal. She spoke with me for hours, though the specific details of the conversation I struggle to remember.
I know she radiated light, and her words gave me no fear. She was dressed in a timeless style, covered in durable fabrics and natural cloths. She agreed to answer my questions if I in return would bandage her wounds. I agreed.

I remember little more than that. My team found me unconscious on the cave floor late in the evening on the 1st of January. My first-aid kit was strewn across the cave floor, and in my hand, I held tight to an obsidian pendant I now wear on a necklace.

This event has proven to me that there is a world tied to ours, whether we believe in it or not. I hope to recover more memories of that night as time passes.
From the moment I make contact with the cushioned seat beside the window, my body settles into the exhaustion it has been nursing for the past several hours. I am tired. My eyes desire rest, but my mind cannot shut down. It tells me to pay attention; this is new territory. Iceland, finally.

The air is crisp. It whistles through the miniscule fissures where the window opens. There is no sign of the sun, only darkness. The bus allows me to peacefully witness the landscape roll itself out to all edges of my vision and envelop me.

Though the people around me have also come from the same place, we feel like strangers still. I barely know a soul. Inside, the bus feels foreign. The terrain feels foreign, too. Almost as if I had taken a flight to another planet entirely. The dark, lumpy silhouettes I see passing by my window were once tendrils of hot flowing lava. They are the product of volcanic eruptions. What the guide calls lava fields.

A shiver runs down my spine as I realize there must be an active volcano close by. What natural fury must these lands have seen.

The weight of darkness has begun to relent. I begin to see the faint outline of something large far off to the side of the road. It emerges from obscurity as a body floats up to surface, just breaking that haze. My eyes strain.

It takes me several seconds to realize that I am staring at a mountain. Waning darkness has been replaced with its presence, which looms so menacingly, so beautifully, before me. I am briefly overcome with a feeling of complete and utter terror that shakes me to my core. I have never seen something like this before. I feel the vibration of this realization, of acute fear.
I can just barely see the snow resting on the mountain's head, and I think of the tundra, of the stories of Siberian concentration camps that my mother used to tell me, of the arctic, of frostbite, of avalanches drowning everything and everyone in snow, of starvation, of death, and worst of all, of being lost in this world.

The feeling is gone in an instant. But still, its memory clings to my skin.

Friday, December 29
10:00 AM (GMT)
“White Winter Hymnal” – Fleet Foxes

I have watched the sky turn from the deepest black to a cerulean blue. I have yet to see the sun. We have reached Reykjavik, and we are late for a city tour.

As the bus stops, I can hear the laughter of children. They are outside, slipping and sliding over frozen puddles by the road. I will my legs to awaken from their stiff sleep, wiggle some warmth into my frozen toes, and make my way to the door.

I am struck by the luminosity of the blue light outside. The sun has yet to awaken from its own long slumber. Still, I squint from the light promising its imminent rise.

Sunday, December 31
8:00 AM (GMT)
“Leaving Blues” – Bombay Bicycle Club; “Asleep” – The Smiths

Back home, the sun would be out. Not here. Outside, it is as black as ever, as if it were eight in the evening rather than eight in the morning. I have always been more active during the nighttime. Maybe that is why, for the first early morning in a long while, the idea of sleep is far from both my mind and my body. I am so very awake.

Our guide has decided not to speak this morning. The bus lights are dimmed. We can sleep our first hour on the road. I watch those around me pull their hats over their eyes and nestle into their seats. Sleep, when free from anxieties, can be a beautiful gift.

But I cannot sleep. I must keep my eyes on the scene outside. Soon the forms of the landscape will begin to reveal themselves. Soon I can release my thoughts to live among the rivers and rocks.

I put my headphones into my ears and lean towards the window. I am alone, but it brings me peace. I can listen to music, uninterrupted, and feel warm amidst the cold of the country. I have not felt such a calm like this in what feels like years. The ache of the city, for once, is leaving me to myself. There is only my mind and an alien terrain to hold it. It is a gift greater than sleep.
Sunday, December 31
12:00 PM (GMT)
“The Winds of Winter” - Ramin Djawadi

I’ve just been told that Game of Thrones filmed some of its scenes at this location. Right over there by the glacier. Jon Snow was here.

Tuesday, January 2
3:00 PM (GMT)
Wind

We were meant to tour the South Coast today. Unfortunately, the weather seems to have another plan for us. Our bus is stopped behind a line of cars, waiting to turn around. The blizzard is here.

Gusts of wind blow ferociously before my eyes, scooping snow from the ground and dusting everything in white. If we continue forward, the winds will certainly knock over the bus. I wonder, is this what a true wasteland looks like? Or is it, indeed, another planet?

To be trapped outside for too long in such a storm would mean certain death. The terror returns, though faint.

Thursday, January 4
3:00 PM (GMT)
“Time of the Blue” – Tallest Man on Earth; “Holocene” – Bon Iver

Before this trip, I thought that the limited daylight would be a challenge for me. Only four hours. I was very wrong. Sunrise at eleven and sunset at four means getting to see both. It means dynamic light. It means a sky constantly in flux.

Sun sets. Reflecting off the rivers and ponds and peeking behind mountaintops. Everyone on the bus has their eyes glued to the windows on whichever side the light burns brightest in the sky. It switches with every turn of the bus. Collective awe is something I haven’t experienced in a long time. It’s like, for a moment, we share a mind.
Fireworks, sparklers, and sunsets make me think of youth. Of mountains filled with dancing bodies, the smell of burning firewood, and animated voices overpowering the sound of the wind. In the dark night of New Year’s Eve in Reykjavík, Iceland, bonfires lit the way for elves and hidden people. For us, five college students from New York City, gusts of wind pulled at our bodies, as if urging us to throw ourselves into the flickering fire.

As the bonfire raged mere inches from our faces, a volcano flickered to life. Life that had been still exploded in a rage of fiery gore. The moon darkened, land sunk into sea. Heat prickled our faces, and bright stars scattered down from the sky. Like Njál’s burning, midnight set the world ablaze. Flames flew high and sometimes burned low. Down on the ground, or almost as if from within the ground, a song was sung: “Now our minds are full of fire.”

We wandered into the city, only to be welcomed by more fire above. Sparks of light danced across the sky, encircled our heads, soaked us in warmth and festivity. Our taxi driver dropped us off at the bottom of a road leading up to Hallgrímskirkja Church. We made a run for the center of the crowd, our excitement trailing after us in the footsteps, fears, and frustrations we left behind. We loosened our scarves, threw up our arms, laughed as the land of fire and ice illuminated our faces.

There was no beginning and no end. Only the fiery sky, the continuous eruption. We huddled together, perched in the middle of the chapel square as we clapped and cheered and celebrated. Fireworks came from every direction, bursting into sparks above our heads. Light fell, prompting us to pull up our hoods before remembering that it wasn’t rain but rather pieces of dust in our hair. The sky opened its arms and welcomed us that night, five college students with idealistic resolutions, our hopes and ambitions unscathed. A group of dreamers clustered together under lights and stars. A fleeting moment of youth. We flung our past into the fire and bid farewell to the year.
the map is not the territory
(haibun)

RICHARD WEI SEMUS

All the long day—
yet not long enough for the skylark,
singing, singing.

Basho

Moving, weathering, and then the lobby—the faces—and staring in silence. Who do I know here? I stop a breath and we board the bus. It is late December, the air is brittle and grey. So where did you go when you visited _____? At the terminal, we enter a line that curls back and forth, back and forth, before finally reaching security. More faces, not wholly unfamiliar, return to me almost in sequence. Still enough time left for a cheeseburger.

We sit along the windows, farther away; perhaps we are discussing music. In the air, we slump side by side, and three of us watch the same movie and laugh. The ocean pearls below us.

a new sense of light
has already been kindled
by the gloaming dark

What happens next is unsubtle and best left unsaid.

空

Light breaks over the span of ice. There are little townhouses, ideally Scandinavian, hedged along its borders. I watch a man and his dog tread on the ice as our tour guide talks of sightseeing and financial collapse. (Now it’s late—almost too late—for woolen socks, or for proper dress in general.)
Eventually, we find our way to a café. A bowl of carrot soup costs twenty dollars. We complain about the price. We eat. Someone falls asleep. I feel as if I am slipping in and out of several states at once.

I can’t keep track of what I have seen. Everything overwhelms me. Mountains that look like ink brush paintings, 工筆, and then the disconsolate sun. In the morning, we wait for the sun, and when night falls, we say goodbye and return to the familiar dark, never quite sure whether anything has been illuminated at all. In the winter, daylight can last for as little as four hours. How is anyone supposed to take account of time?

On New Year’s Eve, we crowd into Reykjavík’s town square, dwarfed by Hallgrímskirkja, and watch the fireworks. Errant scraps of light and ash drift down around us; drunken tourists from seemingly every country are singing, waving glow-sticks, pressing their painted faces into each other. After the year has officially passed, we meet up with a few people at a queer bar and begin to dance. We shout along to pop music, paying hardly any attention to what we are saying. I tease out the line, I only want to die alive: profound but also paradoxical; it stands in direct opposition to Epicurus.

so soon we have gone
from icy interiors
to unmarked landscapes
Let me go somewhere where I am not a foreign country. Then I will be able to answer: *Do you have a personal connection to _____?* I do. I do.

Skógarfoss, more waterfalls, and we are supposed to go see the black sand beach. I decide to climb to an untenable altitude. Every breath hurts. When I finally reach the top my chest is heaving, the air stings my eyes. I am pained to find the view less than inspiring. It does not change my life. During lunch, however, free tea and a soft drink, talking.

Caught in the middle of a snowstorm, I lean my head against the window and stare. The road, the cars, are revealed then quickly swept away, as if erased.

We only catch a glimmer of the northern lights (the glimmer turns out better in photographs). We play charades while we wait for them to appear. It is cold, but not so cold that we cannot speak. The ground is spangled and moving. I am looking at people’s breath, the way it clusters and dissipates, meted out in fits of laughter. If only one could grasp a moment, catch hold of the auroral tail.
I imagine this feeling to be similar to what the poet Anne Carson describes as “ice-pleasure”: like children who hold a piece of ice in their hands, delighting in the melting even as it causes despair, we cling to a moment—for Carson, a moment of eros, but for our purposes, let us say a moment of joy—whose condition is its “novelty,” its unprecedented beginning and its imminent end. In Carson's own words, “Time is the condition of delightfulness and of perishing both. Time brings the nature of ice into fatal conjuncture with human nature, so that at the critical moment the crystal glamor of ice and the human susceptibility to novelty intersect.” Two natures, uniquely opposed.

Well, the ice has melted, but its radiant coolness lingers somehow. I take this as a sign of my own incompetence. Never knowing what to do, never knowing what to say or how to say it.

fore and aft, fore and aft, the wind reminds us that we are far from home

The map is not the territory, the sign not the signified. What am I to make of these things that have been gifted to me? The taste of fresh orange juice, tomato ice cream, hot dog with crispy onion, fermented shark, cod liver oil and brennivin; the smells of peat and ice and wet hay. Celebrating birthdays, waiting to order Thai noodles while we talk about love. Faces I will know and voices I will hear only this once. Photographs don’t capture it. Videos render it halting and strange—the shadow of a shadow of a shadow. To be in any one moment is to acknowledge that it is already unrecognizable.

My instincts tell me that I have done wrong, that I haven’t paid the right kind of attention. But I am making do with this small joy. And smiling, smiling.
The energy of Iceland’s landscapes were like nothing I had ever experienced: a rough icy surface above, and underneath, heat bubbling and begging to be released as steam. In Iceland, I felt as though I was on another planet (visually, it was otherworldly), which unearthed my physical and emotional solitude.

During the months leading up to my trip, I had been suppressing emotions and anxieties, and it wasn’t until my time in Iceland that I was able to process, release, and move on. I attribute this catharsis to my full immersion into one sublime natural landscape after the next, and to the feeling of being isolated from what felt like the rest of the world. The lack of sunlight—the prolonged liminality of short days and extended sunrises/sunsets—also encouraged my introspection.

Up until the last century, Iceland was isolated from the rest of the world economically, socially, politically, and more. *Iceolation* is a collection of earth textures I saw in Iceland. These isolated fragments are pieces of landscapes that have great variance and yet exist within miles of each other.
The technological advancement and globalization of the past century has not only brought Iceland as close in flight time as New York is to Los Angeles, but has digitized its natural spectacles so that within ten seconds, any human around the world with wireless internet can access hundreds of images of the Skógafoss waterfall as easily as he or she can access images of the Hollywood sign. The result of this digital globalization has not only led curious web surfers to summon Iceland’s wonders to their mobile devices, but has inspired them to travel to the island to see it in its natural glory. The burgeoning tourism industry in Iceland has, however, industrialized the spaces that the tourists wish to visit, adding bathrooms, snack shops, safety railings, parking lots, and more, and so the natural landscape advertised by the industry has become compromised for the safety, organization, and capitalization of that same industry.

Although this compromise affects a natural site entirely on the side of the digital reproduction, the actual site maintains uniqueness in its enormous scale and its real proximity to the viewer. A digital reproduction could only begin to do this by creating a unique destination in itself (i.e., an IMAX movie theater, or something like an advertisement in Times Square, and even those are reproductions). The free, terrifying, and sublime experience of nature in its raw, vast actuality, fueled by true exploration and adventure, however, is so finely mastered through the various services provided by the tourism industry, that the tourist who may have previously sought a truly sublime experience (which appeared palpable via photos on the internet) can only become satisfied by receiving recognition of the illusion of that experience from his or her peers. In other words, the satisfaction of discovering a beautiful waterfall on a difficult backpacking journey is lost when that beautiful waterfall is visited by several tour busses every day, or that satisfaction becomes limited merely to the fact that one hiked fifteen miles to get to that destination. Fortunately for the tourist, however, he or she can recreate Casper David Friedrich’s Wanderer Above the Sea Fog (1819) with an iPhone, edit and enhance the photograph, and share it on a personal profile like Instagram or Facebook, where his or her peers can recognize that possibly sublime tourist experience, motivating others to travel to Iceland in the same way. This recognition, which tourists can become aware of themselves through notifications indicating a list of “likes,” can become satisfied with themselves based on their judgment of this list. The satisfaction of being a tourist on
an island so widely spoken of in regards to its sublimity, therefore, exists no longer in the tourist’s true subjective experience of sublimity, but through the virtual-social recognition of that tourist’s contribution to the continual production of illusion.

Immanuel Kant writes in his *Critique of Judgment* that “sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to nature outside us (as far as it influences us).” Becoming conscious of this superiority to nature, according to Kant, comes as a result of isolating the greater might of God from the lesser might of a terrifying nature one might be facing, and as a result of making oneself open to the quiet contemplation of divine greatness, instead of prostrating before nature. Through this contemplation of divine greatness, the subject raises his or her consciousness above his or her own nature, and thereby, above nature outside. While Kant reads the satisfaction of this sublime experience as the result of a person’s abstract denaturalization of a source of recognition (in the Mind of God), the secularization of this recognition makes it human, while still virtual, in the form of the “like.” Because social media is an incredibly efficient platform for the achievement of that virtual recognition, it becomes a marketplace for personal satisfaction decorated by the innumerable and mind-bogglingly similar representations of mankind’s mastery of nature à la *Wanderer Above the Sea Fog* (one can simply search any of Iceland’s main attractions, i.e., Skógafoss, on Google Images or Instagram and see for oneself). And because the satisfaction of the secular tourist in the digital age derives from a virtual event rather than an actual event, the tourist will forget the actual event (if even experience it at all, viewing everything through a camera, thinking about the recognition one may receive) in favor of the more satisfying virtual event.

Although Iceland’s natural landscapes have become a popular destination for the bourgeois traveler’s reality-television-type scrapbook (personal profile), if the tourism industry continues to grow while making capital its unquestioned priority (as many capitalist industries do), the tourist sites that were formerly notable for their remarkable natural landscapes could become more like a still-remarkable yet entirely soulless movie set. And as a movie set, the tourist’s new role will become that of a worker—a worker who has paid various different corporations (airlines, hotels, tour companies) to receive recognition from friends. In other words, the tourism industry transforms itself into something more akin to an infrastructural level of the media and entertainment industry, providing more for the creation of films and photographs than for something like a sublime encounter with nature.

My goal here is not to argue if the sublime encounter with nature is better or worse than the production of media, but to illustrate how a particularly non-productive spirituality is at stake, once again, in the hands of global capitalism and rapid industrialization. This concern is hundreds of years old but is always relevant in parts of the world more recently effected, and is therefore worthwhile to consider when booking your next plane ticket to Iceland.
A lighthouse in the distance of a snowy field.
When I am not careful, I believe I could live in this city forever. I am taken by the accessibility of everything. The arts have me. Music is one New York’s many forms of oxygen, and it might just be my favorite kind. There are nights when I feel like I am realizing my childhood dream of living in Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland. If I pass through the ghost of Sam Cooke on one block, the Ehru falls on my unsuspecting ears like drops of starlight on the next.

And to live in New York is to be a part of something; it is to live at the center of urban struggle. I thrive in the default anonymity of city life; no one bothers to rescue me when I fall because breakdowns are common here. I often wonder if the city—where the best and worst of humanity is always available and often in your face—is not the most purely human creation on the planet. Nearly everything we are capable of making can be found here, from poetry to concrete, from joy to desolation.

James Baldwin is the author whose worldview I most subscribe to, and considering that he featured New York in several of his writings, it is unsurprising that I have come to understand the city through his eyes. In Sonny’s Blues, Baldwin writes: “For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it must always be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell. It’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness.” This tale is told on the streets of New York every second of every day. I hear it in the sounds released by each and every character the city plays home to: the honking cab drivers, whose livelihood depends on the changing of the red light; the hurried Mad Men; the stammering broken-hearted best friend; broken-hearted me. This tale is the city’s gasoline, and every New Yorker—whether we are conscious of it or not—is responsible for making sure there is enough.

But lately I have been feeling that I might be too weak to continue living here, that I have been sapped to a breaking point. The lack of space here makes me feel trapped in an echo chamber of human emotion. There is such an amazing volume of people who are coping with the pressure of existing, and we are all trying to survive with that pressure in one tiny space. I sink too easily into this echo chamber, this collective survival; I see myself reflected in the eyes of another and am reminded of the burdens I am trying to let go.
I find myself missing not knowing. In this city that is built to erase the unknown, I miss the freedom of not knowing the time, of not being tied to fast-approaching minutes. If I try and walk home slowly, someone in a hurry pushes through me and I latch on to his worry and remember my own. I miss real darkness—the kind where I can dissolve into the natural world and truly be alone with myself. I find it difficult to confront deep-rooted emotions when I am faced with the constant torrent of city stimuli; honks and screams and bright lights frequently interrupt my thoughts before they can make it far at all.

II: Iceland

On our trip to Iceland, I reacquainted myself with that rare quiet that I struggle to find in New York. Because of the Icelandic winter, darkness had free reign over the country. And there was so much space and quiet. All of this allowed pain that had been burning in my core for months to rise out of my body like helium. In Iceland, there was space to escape. The volume of nature—of land untouched by humans—captivated me. There was the opportunity for me to find spaces where I did not have to see myself through the eyes of another person, as I inevitably do when I am not alone.

There were exceptions, such as Reykjavík, which is growing, and parts of Iceland that continue to industrialize, but the country reveres its natural beauty more than most. Its dramatic landscape forms much of Iceland’s identity. Atop Langjökull (Iceland’s second-largest glacier), for example, it was possible to see nothing manmade in any direction. All I could see was ice and sky. I thought less about what I needed from the convenience store and which of six routes I could take to get downtown. There was nothing to distract me.

The joy I felt in Iceland is wonderful but no more real than the joy available in New York. It was a slow-burning kind of joy, one that took more than one cursory glance to fully understand. It was the kind of joy that—if given time to bloom—reminded me of my place in the grand scheme of things. In a sense, Iceland’s landscape contextualized my sense of self; instead of being one person in relation to a swarm of millions, I was one person, and that was all.

I am aware that I have allowed New York more time than Iceland in this essay. I originally planned to focus exclusively on Iceland, but as I wrote, it became evident that I was seeing Iceland in contrast to New York. I do not know where I’ll go next, but I know more about where I want to go, and I must thank DHS for allowing me to better understand my relationship with the city. At the very least, I now know what form of oxygen I prefer.
Sculpting Life with Light

RACHEL STERN

On my last day in Iceland, I discovered the work of Olafur Eliasson. I stood in Marshall House, the sunlight-flooded former-fish-factory-now-gallery on the Reykjavik harbor. Eliasson's studio there was small. The soft-spoken employee who ran it told us that Eliasson has bigger studios elsewhere; this was a satellite.

The walls were dense but full of eclectically-placed windows. The rooms, each a different size, were filled with creations of light: metal spiraling down from the ceiling, the shapes bending shadows on the floor; a color wheel mounted on the wall; a huge solar lamp reflecting onto glass; and my favorites: a group of jewel-colored rhombic spheres made of hand-blown and cut glass. They were suspended from the ceiling, filling the room they had to themselves with colored sunlight.

Eliasson is a sculptor of light, and his power must come from a lifetime of living with it—not in the normal sense of existence, but in the sense of acknowledging its presence. His work suggests that he lives with it as a friend, an enemy, and a force of nature. The Icelandic-Danish artist creates pieces of art that force you to think about how you are seeing, how you absorb the light, how you exist as a human in that very moment. In looking on Eliasson's website afterwards, the closest I could find to what I saw that day at the harbor was a 2017 piece called “The exploration of the centre of the sun, 2017”—a true matrix of light, as you can see.¹

For me, Eliasson's work exemplifies how my life was during my time in Iceland. I learned to live with light. The images of Iceland in my mind are of the light. They encompass different situations, different conversations, different geological structures, but the quality of the light is always in the background. But it was only really looking back on my experience that I realized how much light governed it. In my memories, I see the quality of the sun as it reflected off of the black and white of the mountains, the grainy dawn and dusk, the orange and purple shooting through the sky. I remember the feeling of my cold legs while staring at the impossible dark blue of the night just before all light disappeared. There are thoughts, conversations, and songs related to each shred of sunlight, folded into my mind.

Even though we were there during the time of the year when daylight is short, the light was expansive. I thought that I would feel robbed of daylight, as the sun was up for only about four hours, but I just felt more connected to the cycle of light. When you are awake for both the rising and setting of the sun, and the sun is

¹ For the source of Eliasson's 2017 piece, see Eliasson's website: [Olafur Eliasson](https://www.olel.co.uk/).
A drawing of a multi-faced prism that reflects light and produces different shapes on the walls of the room that it is in.
fully with you for only a few hours, you begin to be aware of it as with a loved one who visits but will be going soon. You don’t take its light for granted. The sun hugs the horizon and so is constantly with you, rather than floating so quickly to the top of the sky.

Standing on top of a glacier stands out in particular, not just because of the enormity of the experience of being on such a stunning geological creation, but because we were there while the sun rose. Coming over the ice crags of the tallest part of the glacier was a pale glow that intensified in light and color as the minutes passed. The ice both radiated and absorbed the light. In that moment, as a human, I was so small against the ice and sunlight, and yet hyper-aware of my own presence.

This feeling is echoed in Eliasson’s work. The power of light in his pieces makes you look at how you see it. It makes you open to absorbing the light yourself. Eliasson describes in a 2018 interview: “Light historically has always been about the unquantifiable…light and the sun are associated with deep emotional connotations…if you’re in a room with light it always seems to promote your presence.”

There are other Icelandic artists who explore these ideas as well, such as Finnbogi Petursson, who creates pieces based on the relationship between sound waves and light, and Heimir Björgúlfsson, a multimedia artist whose work investigates ideas of place, identity, and non-human creatures. The ideas of presence, connection to the natural environment, and the emotional power of light in their artwork seem to reflect an aspect of Icelandic culture that is about learning to live with and in sunlight, especially with its extremes throughout the year and the stark natural environment.

Since seeing Eliasson’s work and returning to New York City, I’ve been letting sunlight into my life more. New York is not an easy place to do this, as we are governed so much by grids of artificial light, but I have been trying to stand in the sunlight and be aware of how I’m experiencing it. When I see the light reflected off of the metal subway cars as they rush through an above-ground station, I miss the way it looked on the mountains.

Light is universal, but it took going away for me to realize how it governs me. As Eliasson says, “Perception shifts, a new horizon comes to life.” For me, that’s a horizon stretching all the way from the Icelandic mountains to my New York home.
new year’s
STEPHEN SPOTh

lowlands

there's ash in the porridge again

cold black rain
in a cold black room

unravel your rosary beads

tick tock
tricks my heart

the sheep know
when it's time

a thin red line
on the horizon

and inside my porridge

a cold ulcerated sheep's eye

stares back
livestock

they are sick of chewing ash
i can see it
in small tumorous eyes
black and cold like rosary beads

i am sorry
that i brought them here

for i knew it would return

black drool and burned days
blood on all the doors

come, sweet lamb

let me take you home
the Quiet

the Quiet left bruises today

too many to sleep

sometimes i feel i will pull off my own flesh
from Quiet alone

i suppose birds are gone now
songs swelled by ash

and this ash

it comes by conveyor belt now
dual carriageway

too many little white crosses

squeezed by cold dirt
blackening like the air

a reminder for Those in Charge
to create a dual carriageway

but there is no one in charge
anymore

i’m not sure there ever was
the sublime

six men and a cow fall into the water
the six men drown
the cow survives
it is the only one who knows to swim
survivor's advice

sometimes drowning can be a form of self-preservation

it is true! think:

if you fall in and are rescued
but the water is too cold
and the boat too far from shore

you will surely freeze to death

in situations like these it is best to let oneself drown
evacuation

there are no ambulances coming
stoicism will have to do!

if you wait long enough
the ash will make you warm

a dark womb

where all our failings meet
i make peace with the Quiet
a new world

it has all stopped

falling

for how long no one knows

i see a horse
black fur coated in black rain
trotting through ash

and a swan
dancing in a sulphur field
fourth of july

colors drip down chins
in this new dark

pockets of Quiet
(watch them)

i am told some hate fireworks
because the ash gets in their lungs

so i smile wide

and breathe deep
Þingvellir National Park is celebrated as the symbolic “heart” of Iceland, a culturally conceived “center” both socially and geographically. The topography is one of juxtaposition and tension, primeval and young at once. Trudging along the icy asphalt path between towering cliffs of 9,000-year-old lava, I sensed the ontological primacy of the place, the otherworldly indeterminacy of the in-between. The ground reverberates with voiceless power, feverish rhythms converge beneath as tectonic plates diverge, liquid rock rises from the mantle, and the ground slowly spreads. The geological fluctuations of the terrain make it a site of permanent impermanence.

It is hard to imagine that the most powerful judicial/political organ in the nation, the Alþing, assembled in the open air atop a geological fault line every year from 930 until 1800. The only signs of historical activity (besides the trappings of the tourist center) are a small church, a bridge, and a flag pole. It is a landscape filled with human meaning, yet is devoid of the usual structures to impose meaning upon it. The timeline of human activity does not compete with environment here; rather the Earth uses its own form to write history, and human stories are attached to them. Þingvellir embodies the dynamics of power as a process, the notions of metamorphosis, mediation and transmutation, the paradox of division and cohesion, across multiple layers of existence.

The “assembly fields” lie in a rift valley situated within the Hengill volcanic system and resting atop the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates meet. The flat plains formed when the land convulsed thousands of years ago, creating giant fissures stretching out in the same direction. They continue to be shaped by continental drift, spreading about one centimeter every year. The otherworldly walls of rock contrast with the sudden greenness of the pastures, and the glassy stillness of Iceland’s biggest lake is interrupted by the rushing currents of the mighty glacial river that feeds it. These are optimal conditions for selecting a site, due to the anthropogenic features that aligned with a repetition of cosmogony. The entire Icelandic population journeyed to Þingvellir for two weeks during midsummer, when the sun does not leave the sky. This was an important ritual, reflecting the movements
of the gods who journeyed to their meeting place under Yggdrasil on horseback or wading through water. These gatherings were socially, temporally, geographically, and cosmologically liminal, sites for communication across all levels of society. The crowd engaged in activities that were communal and individual at once, blurring the boundaries between public and private. Pingvellir was a kind of multifunctional axis mundi, a “center” of the world, the “point of intersection of those [cosmological] regions,” where all of the contents of the universe gathered and interacted.

Ancient Scandinavians worshipped their gods outdoors in consecrated areas known as Vé. They were sacred places enclosed by rocks or hazel poles, but they could also establish a sanctuary for protection and were often used in legal situations. The sacredness of legal space reflects the early Icelandic term, varlog (our law), which conceptually merged society, law, and land. The “social” was coterminous with the “law,” while the “wild” was synonymous with “non-law.” Society existed wherever the law could exist, expressed spatially with the Alþing, and was opposed to the non-law of “uninhabited space,” which was most of the island. The earliest recorded Icelandic codes, the Grágás, describe the ritual procession for setting up the boundaries of a þing site, establishing the þinghelgi, the “sacred area of the thing,” and ensuring “assembly sanctity” and prohibiting violence. Vé demarcated the most holy area, the law court’s circle surrounding the law rock. None of the chieftains could enter if they carried any weapons. Ironically, they were also used to demarcate dueling grounds to separate the profane activities from the sacred area. Because they took place on holmr (islets), ritualized duels used to settle legal disputes that could not be resolved in courts were known as Hólmgangr (island-going). Although the practice was “outlawed” in 1006, it persisted for centuries. These island-goings present yet another conceptual model of opposition, a practice lying between the laws of fate and the laws of man, taking place on neither land nor water, but in between.

Pre-Christian Norse belief radically accepted the world as a site for confrontations between antagonistic forces—one that is periodically destroyed and renewed. Liminality and centrality are not opposed to one another but are components in the same spatial and mental structures. There is a quality of unfixity in this belief system: elements that are distinct on one level can merge and interact on another, their features neutralized by a mediating element. The mortal world was just one among many other worlds, inhabited by spirits and beings that can be both benevolent and antagonistic and are sporadically synonymous with each other.

There are two cosmological models in Norse mythology: one horizontal and one vertical. The vertical model emphasizes the permanence of the world and divides the cosmos into two separate spaces—Miðgarðr, the central space, is inhabited by men and the gods and is encircled by Jörmungandr, the great serpent that swallows his own tail. Outside is Útgarðr, where the giants and other uncontrollable beings dwell. In
this model the Earth, the heavens, and the underworld are topologically inseparable; each dimension can be reached by a mythical bridge, and the distinction between the gods and mortal people can be blurred. The image of Miðgarðr carries a sense of stability, a background of permanent balance against which so many battles could take place. The vertical model, on the other hand, emphasized the transitory nature of life and is represented by the world-ash, Yggdrasill, which grows between the nine worlds, connecting them all.¹⁴ Another serpent, Nidhogg, is coiled by its roots, constantly gnawing and attacking the cosmic order.

Even after Iceland was “converted” to Christianity sacred natural phenomenon remained at the Alþing. Even when the gods started to disappear, the mythical and narrative dimensions that once defined both social life and legal systems continued shaping patterns of action and conceptions of existence in popular belief.¹⁵ Memory, geography, history, nature, time, and space are inextricably linked in this version of the world. To traverse Þingvellir is to discover a different way of seeing history, not through literal references and representations but through a resonance between people and land. It is a stage set for the dramatization of powerful encounters played out on its surface, while subterranean battles raged underneath. Here we encounter the rush of elements changing, forms exploding, clashing, gushing, rumbling, roaring, hissing, and bellowing. Solids made liquid by heat, by pressure, by time. Imagining these repeated practices of convergence, these layers of transformation can drive us to examine how we ourselves exist in the world and how we transform like the landscape over space and time.
During my time in Iceland, I was struck by the ways in which the country is a space of contradictions. Opposing forces of light and dark, ash and snow, fire and ice, modernity and tradition, and the temporal and ephemeral all coexist. I have created collages of these contradictory forces to demonstrate how they both compete and work in tandem, and how they ultimately create something unique in their composite.
The landscape in Iceland is breathtaking. During winter months, the frozen beauty of the magnificent glaciers is astounding. When I stood on top of the Langjökull glacier, gazing out at the sparkling white landscape spotted with black lava rocks, I felt the excitement, the wonder, of being an explorer. It was like seeing the world as if it had just been created: untouched, perfect, and simultaneously strong and delicate. The massive size of the glacier made it seem immobile and invincible.

As I walked across it, making small footprints on the surface, it was hard for me to ponder the impact humans could have on such a magnificent part of the Earth, a product of the larger-than-life Mother Nature. Descending into the glacier through a tunnel drilled by local entrepreneurs was like entering the body, the veins, of the glacier. The tunnel permeated the density of a seemingly unconquerable mass. It was like travelling into a crack, a weakness. Seeing the water, the puddles, and learning that this is evidence that the glacier melts a bit each day, it became clear to me the rupture human activity is causing on natural landscapes and miracles.

Approximately eleven percent of Iceland is covered by glaciers. These masses of ice contain 3,600 km³ of water, equivalent to a 35-meter-thick layer of ice spread evenly over the whole country, which would raise the global sea level by one centimeter, if melted. Within just fifty years, it is predicted that glaciers such as Vatnajökull, Langjökull, and Hofsjökull will lose about thirty percent of their volume. In the past fifty years, we have witnessed the retreat of glaciers, and this is due to greenhouse gases that trap heat in our atmosphere, not a natural shift in climate. According to the National Snow and Ice Center, this phenomenon of climate change stems from human industrial activities, energy production, and transportation—the burning of coal, petroleum, and other fossil fuels. These activities have increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by forty percent within the last two hundred years, which is leading to a rapid and unnatural warming of our planet, causing the destruction of raw natural beauty.

The consequences of climate change go beyond a loss of natural ecosystems and wonders, however. As temperatures continue to increase and more ice melts, coastal cities such as New York, Shanghai, and Tokyo become vulnerable to flooding. Densely populated, poor island or coastal countries, such as Tuvalu and Bangladesh, are also at risk and have begun preparing evacuation plans. Our actions are contributing to deterioration and potential loss of life. Therefore, it is critical to determine effective methods in combating global climate change.

As a politics student, I was interested in knowing what policies and norms are shaping environmental action and protection on both national and global levels.
According to a report by the European Commission, the European Union has expressed its intentions to "support climate action to reduce emissions and build resilience to climate change impacts in developing countries." The global disparity in wealth and industrial development, not only within the EU but also on a global scale, impacts which nations can invest in renewable energy and combat pollution. Therefore, this professed intention to aid developing countries is indicative of global cooperation. The Commission stresses not only the role of local actors in establishing these standards and policies but also the necessity of an accountability system.

Iceland’s climate change strategy expresses goals that are congruent to the professed values of the European Commission. In the Iceland Climate Change Strategy Report, goals include a focus on renewable energy, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and acting within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Tourism, a growing industry in Iceland, is also an environmental concern: with tourists comes the need for infrastructure to be built in conservation and natural preservation areas. Conversely, the profits earned from tourism can be utilized to fund projects and research aimed at combating climate change through renewable energy and innovation. Iceland has been able to meet international greenhouse gas reduction goals and has professed a dedication to fulfilling the terms of the Kyoto Protocol in regards to environmental policy reports. Given Iceland’s natural resources and already innovative renewable geothermal energy techniques, the country is in a unique position to export its environmental knowledge and technology and act as a global leader in the fight against climate change.

In contrast, the United States has recently withdrawn from the Paris Agreement, stemming from the motivation of President Trump to favor American industrial and economic development over international cooperation. The Paris Agreement outlines the goal of keeping the increase in global temperature below two degrees Celsius. This goal, in addition to accountability systems for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, are intended to render the Paris Agreement an evolving, durable pact in combating global climate change. Local and state-level governmental units within the US, however, have voiced an intention to continue following the terms and goals of the Paris Agreement.

Iceland is by far the most beautiful place I have visited. Standing on top of the glacier and being told that my country in particular is failing to do its part in preventing the deterioration of this miracle of nature, filled me with shame. Climate change is very much real. I felt the cold water of the glacier melting and soaking my socks. I saw the beauty that might, even in my lifetime, be reduced by a quarter of its present size.

We are blessed to live on this beautiful planet, and it is our responsibility to take care of it. Our impact as individuals is minimal, but collectively, in a democratic society, our voices can be heard and a difference can be made. To save Iceland’s glaciers and other ecosystems threatened by climate change, the initiative of governments and communities at all levels is extremely valuable. We should embrace global cooperation and the initiative Iceland’s government is taking in promoting environmentally friendly policies.
When one thinks of a queer utopia, Iceland probably does not come to mind. One might think that Greenwich Village in New York City, the birthplace of the gay liberation movement, or the Castro in San Francisco, the world’s largest gay community, should hold this status. However, what makes Icelanders think that Iceland is a queer utopia is the country’s rapid progression of queer liberation.

In 1978, nine years after New York City’s Stonewall Riots, Iceland’s national queer organization was established, and in 1996, Iceland began registering queer partnerships. In 2009, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir was elected Prime Minister, becoming the first openly queer head of government in the modern world. In 2010, same-sex marriage became legalized, five years earlier than in America. In 2015, Iceland was placed first on Planet Romeo’s Gay Happiness Index, demonstrating its global reputation as a queer-inclusive country.

I asked every gay Icelander I met if Iceland is a queer utopia, and their answer was a confident “yes.” They explained that homosexuals are accepted and assimilated into heteronormative society without having their sexuality questioned. My most memorable conversation was with the headmaster of Reykjavik’s Elfschool, Magnus Skarphedinsson, who was proud to announce that he and his partner have been together for over forty years. Magnus, who is raising two adopted daughters from Africa with his partner, believes that his family lives in a queer utopia. He explained: “We do not have to come out. Iceland loves all gay people. I feel welcomed here.”

I began to notice that what made Icelandic gays believe they are living in a queer utopia is that their sexuality is not a target for harassment. The way that Magnus and his queer family have assimilated into heteronormative society, and the fact that Magnus is not afraid to declare that he is gay, reveal that the utopian experience revolves around the blurring of binaries. According to Annamarie Jagose, author of *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, the aim of queerness is to blur the divisions of gender and sexuality.

After asking Magnus if he knew any queer spaces in Iceland, he told me about Kiki, a queer bar located in Reykjavik. A review written by some visitors on traveladvisor states: “Iceland, I felt, is a gay-friendly place, to begin with. I do not think they necessarily need a gay bar.” When I visited Kiki on New Year’s Eve, the
The space felt queer in name only. I noticed a diverse group of individuals, including many heterosexual couples. That night, I saw waves of both men and women, old and young, gay and straight, dancing their hearts away to ABBA’s “Happy New Year.” To me, this felt like a snapshot of how Iceland must picture itself: all of its citizens happily coexisting with one another, unafraid to express their sexual identity.

I began to question the country’s utopic status, however, after learning from our tour guide that Iceland has a gendered naming system. Established in 1991, the Icelandic Naming Committee legally requires Icelandic parents to choose a name for their children from an approved list. While this list is an attempt to preserve the spelling of Icelandic names, it affirms the gender binary. According to the Icelandic government’s website, “girls should be given a female name and boys should be given male names.”

Iceland holds very traditional ideas about gender in other ways as well. According to the Iceland Review, one of the biggest issues that the country is facing today is how to deal with intersex and trans* communities, as well as how to implement new laws that enforce hate crimes around gender and sexuality for asylum seekers and refugees. Iceland’s struggle with gender was one of the biggest factors for the country’s fall to sixteen in a 2017 ranking of Europe countries where gays are most accepted.

Iris Ellenberger, a queer and feminist Icelandic historian writes “the story that we tell [of progress] tells the story of the Icelandic nation, and how it has opened its arms to queer people. Maybe it actually loves just a small group of people who have assimilated or who don’t pose a threat to the dominant ideology.” Looking back, the Icelanders who told me they live in a queer utopia were all cisgendered gay men—people who are socially accepted and not seen as a threat. Their perception that Iceland is a queer utopia ignores the fact that individuals with queer and different gender expressions are still being discriminated against.

While I would now say that Iceland is not a queer utopia, I believe it has the potential to be, but it still has a lot of work to do. As José Esteban Muñoz writes in Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity: “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illuminations of a horizon imbued with possibility.” Finding a solution to embrace all of Iceland’s queer citizens, both those of queer genders and sexualities, is important, crucial, and necessary.
A view of shops, one of which is painted in rainbow colors.
Iceland in January seemed black and white on the surface but was capable of producing the richest, warmest colors from its depths. The textures and pigments that came spewing out of the geysers mixed and melted in a way that made them look like a pastoral landscape painting. Ice and earth mixed—beige, blue, and brown.

As a painter, I was inspired by these mineral runoffs and decided to pay tribute to them in this oil painting. I tried to replicate the patterns and textures both in the way I applied the paint and through the natural materials used.

Iceland’s landscape was not homogenous; it ranged from large waterfalls to the smallest of ice crystals. The experience of painting this image was one of creating and giving life to some of the smallest and most stunning details I saw. And yet, this painted landscape also plays with scale and size. It could be depicting either a large field or a microscopic, up-close view.
A statue of a person overlooking a body of water.
The Icelandic sculptor Einar Jónsson (1874–1954) has a strange connection to America. Commissioned in 1914 by what’s now the Philadelphia Association for Public Art, Jónsson travelled to the United States three years later to create a series of works reflecting the history of the nation. Along Philadelphia’s Kelly Drive is a casting of Jónsson’s bronze sculpture of Thorfinn Karlsefni, the tenth-century Icelandic explorer who followed in the footsteps of Leif Eriksson. It is an overt if not mythologized testament to the Norse colonization of the Americas nearly five centuries before Columbus. On the basis of the work’s successful reception, Jónsson sold a casting of Jón Sigurðsson, leader of the Icelandic independence movement, to Manitoba’s Icelandic community. To this day, the figure still towers as a celebration of Iceland’s national autonomy, erected outside the Manitoba Legislative Building in Winnipeg, Canada.

Born in 1874 on the southern shores of Galtafell, Jónsson’s early life was largely occupied by the demands of agrarian existence. Despite this, the desolate fecundity of the Icelandic landscape impressed itself upon the young Jónsson, who, after showing artistic talent early on, studied in Denmark at the Copenhagen Academy of Art, as was customary for Icelandic artists to do at the turn of and well into the twentieth century. Following his formal training as a sculptor, Jónsson moved to Rome. Although classicism was by this time admittedly not in vogue, it was nevertheless historically inescapable. As a result of this, Jónsson’s attitude toward the artistic conventions and aesthetic expectations of classicism was antagonistic if not implicitly ambivalent. While it is clear that his work rejects naturalistic depiction, it equally affirms the materiality of form in such a way that depends upon the very realism it works to undermine.

After living abroad for nearly twenty years, Jónsson returned to Reykjavik in 1909. There, it was arranged that in return for studio space and lodgings, he would donate the entirety of his work to the country. Consequently, he more or less became the state sculptor of the Icelandic nation. Following this appointment, the newly married Jónsson lived with his wife Anne Marie Jørgensen in the United States for nearly two years throughout the completion of his commissions.

Jónsson rejected naturalistic depiction, publicly criticized the classical art tradition for restricting artists, and stressed the importance of forging one’s own creative path. Not only did he strive to cultivate his individual practice, he equally emphasized the value of imagination as opposed to imitation. For this reason, it becomes somewhat difficult to situate him within the parameters of any particular historical art movement. Literary critic and president of the American Scandinavian Foundation, Henry Goddard Leach, equally speaks of Jónsson’s singularity as an artist,
suggesting, “All things considered, Jónsson is unique in the world of art. If he had any prototype they were the symbolic artists of ancient Egypt. But Jónsson's nearest spiritual relative is William Blake.” While elements of Jónsson's work can be traced to German symbolism, Jónsson was by no means swept up in the angst of German expressionism or the idealism of Socialist Realism. For this reason, he stands at once within the historical emergence of European Modernism and yet operates according to an entirely different visual vocabulary, one which is both highly specific and clearly a product of the Modernist tendency toward the contestation of artistic tradition, and yet simultaneously, is strangely anachronistic for its reclamation of religious iconography and use of mythological symbolism. While Blake appears as Leach suggests, as the most proximal comparison to Jónsson, such an alignment is largely one of necessity as opposed to homology. The undeniable spirituality of Jónsson's work no doubt resembles the metaphysical visions of Blake, but the Romantic impulse that animates Blake is by no means the same force that permeates Jónsson's sculptures. That is not to say that traces of existential intensity or ideological optimism are absent in his work. On the contrary, perhaps what makes Jónsson's work so interesting and what makes him such an artistic anomaly, is just how striking these themes are.

Jónsson's articulation of mortality is deeply expressive, perhaps even to the point of anguish, as is his treatment of human suffering and personal loss, though none of this is done in a way that is formally heavy-handed or thematically overbearing. While Jónsson's oeuvre to a great extent consists of public commissions, the majority of his work is actually comprised of smaller, more intimate pieces. Private portraits, cemetery statues, and ornamental friezes reveal Jónsson's deeply intimate commitment to the depiction of psychic interiority and the possibility of inhabiting states of experiential ineffability.

Deeply spiritual, Jónsson links the dramatic power of the Icelandic landscape and its sublime range of expression with the human capacity for both ethical failure and self-overcoming. The individual's capacity for metaphysical insight is yoked to the ontological possibility of cosmic unification. As a result, Christianity is brought into conversation with paganism as Jónsson transposes hagiographic imagery into the register of Norse mythology. What has fallen in one tradition finds resurrection in the other, as overlapping layers of symbolic suggestion point toward implications that are intuitable but not necessarily understandable.

Jónsson's intense affinity for the theosophical thought of Emanuel Swedenborg contributed to the emphasis he placed on articulating abstract concepts through figurative form, enabling the expression of that which more often than not eludes our average and everyday understanding of reality. The profoundly redemptive current that flows through Jónsson's work is not so much an instance of naive optimism tempered by Nordic perseverance as it is a brutally honest affirmation of life. The mystical basis that underlies this reality is elucidated by Jónsson's sculptures as an expression of faith in the prospect of transcending the modern Anthropocene.
As an individual with a great and boundless wanderlust, Iceland seemed markedly different to me than other countries I had visited. I had mostly explored bustling metropolises, but there was a kind of overwhelming calming presence, even in urban spaces, that was absent from other countries. We were enveloped by these natural, sublime landscapes, gifted with a space to unabashedly breathe, think, and exist in, without a metropolis's cacophony of car horns, ambulance sirens, and clamorous voices. Being enveloped by the concrete jungle of NYC is not always conducive to experiencing calming peace or to happiness. My friends and I regularly taunt the city, calling it an anxiety-inducing wonder. New York City’s energy is surely exhilarating but does not always invite happiness.

What makes a city conducive to promoting happiness? Is it natural, sprawling landscapes? Is it the weather? The atmosphere, the ethos, of the city? I argue that it’s rooted in many of these factors, which is why Iceland is consistently rated one of happiest countries on the World Happiness Report, which evaluates three primary classes of subjectives: life evaluations, positive emotional experiences (positive affect), and negative emotional experiences (negative affect).

The World Happiness Report researchers’ brief analysis of the United States’ declining rank provides insight into the Nordic countries’ successes: “[…] declining social support and increased corruption.” The Nordic countries, including Iceland, tend to have the cardinal ideological pillars of free education and free healthcare. Their governments invest in the wellbeing of their citizens, while also aiming to become a paragon of scientific achievement and advancement for the global community. Nordic countries tend to be rated as some of the happiest countries in our world, which underscores how a country’s collective philosophy impacts the emotional states of its citizens.

Positive psychology researchers are interested in studying countries like Iceland in order to discern measurable patterns between happiness and society, which can effectively teach us how to cultivate happiness in other countries. Research finds that Nordic countries tend to be invested socially and economically in their communities, offering them access to innumerable social support services. For instance, all pregnant women in Iceland are assigned a midwife, who helps them throughout the taxing process of pregnancy. Furthermore, while paid maternity/paternity leave
continues to be a contentious bipartisan issue within the US, Iceland offers citizens nine months of post-childbirth leave (three months for mom, three months for dad, and an allotment of three extra months to be determined by parents). Employees are guaranteed 80% of their salary while on leave, which heavily mitigates financial strain that might otherwise be incurred by parents on leave in other countries. These social support systems encapsulate the Icelandic government’s devotion to the wellbeing of its people, engendering a kind of collective harmony.

Social support may not be the only factor contributing to Iceland’s high rankings. Iceland is both sensitive to and reverent of its environment, aiming to preserve and protect its rugged, rural beauty. It’s a seraphic beauty that cannot be manufactured, and it is not found in other spaces in our world. The psychology community has long ruminated on whether there is a quantifiable connection between happiness and nature. Researchers John Zelenski and Elizabeth Nisbet found that nature relatedness (an emotional connection to the natural world) can be a predictor of happiness, regardless of other psychological factors. Furthermore, they found a statistically significant relationship between happiness and nature.

So, are these the factors that undergird Icelandic happiness? While this succinct essay certainly does not supply answers to complex scientific queries, it can begin digging around for a deeper understanding of the seeds of happiness. At the very least, we have to peer inside ourselves and ask: Are we happy here? What are the barriers that are impinging upon our happiness? Where have we felt happiest? Can it be replicated here? What can we do as a society to foster a sense of unitary happiness?

It is crucial to remember that America is a vastly different country than Iceland ideologically and systemically. Yet, perhaps there are certain lessons we can wrest from the spirit and values of Icelanders.
Numb
LYRICS BY LEXI RIESENBERG, PRODUCED BY CONNOR RILEY

This song was inspired by an experience I had getting caught in a snowstorm in Iceland. My classmates and I were riding in a bus down a lone road about mid-day, surrounded by empty land. There were no homes, no cars, no fences—nothing to block the wind for miles.

The windows suddenly filled with white swirls. I was sitting in the middle seat of the back row that overlooked the aisle, and I could see the bus tilting from side to side with every gush of air. Part of me knew for a fact that we would be fine. But part of me wondered what would happen if the bus tilted over. Would we die? Would anyone find us?

Even with these thoughts running through my head, it was strangely relieving to realize how disconnected I was from my “normal” life in that moment. Suddenly, all of the things I need to do and all of the expectations I need to meet usually weigh me down, but they didn’t mean anything. There was something beautiful about just being a person on land. This song grew out of how easy it is to forget that.
Have you ever seen the night sky
Looking at you looking back

And I couldn’t help but feel it
There was nothing but fear

Has it ever, ever hit you
How we fade in the black

We’re so small
Standing at the edge

Don’t look, you’ll fall
Just go back to bed

We’re so small
Standing at the edge

But, we keep moving
Until we get paid
Blue through your veins
And gone the next day

We’re all leaving
The stars will stay
Does it matter how long it takes
We are numb when the earth shakes

Walking by the waterfall
Felt the rush in my ears
A top down view of many houses.
The song, “Odin's Raven Magic” (“Hrafnagaldur Óðins” in Icelandic), is perhaps one of Sigur Rós’s strangest, which is saying something for a band known for inventing its own language, playing a guitar with a bow, and using abstract falsetto vocals. The work was created through collaboration by an interesting cast of characters: Hilmar Órn Hilmarsson, the Allsherjargoði (high priest) of the Icelandic folk religion, Ásatrúarfélagið, which has 3,583 members as of 2017 and aims to revive Norse paganism; members of the famous post-rock group, Sigur Rós; and Steindór Andersen, the preeminent poet of the Icelandic Rimur tradition.

The song starts simply, with the rich and rhythmic baritone of Andersen’s chanting rising gradually to grander scales, while incorporating a full choir and orchestra. The complexity builds and fades, allowing for an alternately intimate and cosmic scale. Sigur Rós’s longing falsetto blends with what seems—at least to my non-Icelandic ear—to be a deep grief in Andersen’s chanting. And grief—or at the very least, nostalgia for a preindustrial, pre-Christian Iceland—might very well be the chief emotion of the song.

“Odin’s Raven Magic” is based on a poem that tells the story of the days just before Ragnarok, the final battle where the gods are defeated by the giants. It starts off describing how the world is slowly getting colder, with the land freezing over. The gods send messengers to ask an unspecified female oracle about the future, but she refuses to give a response; her only reply is to weep. Armed with this troubling but unhelpful message, the messengers return to Valhalla, and the gods proceed to feast and make merry. Despite this seemingly merry ending, the poem is understood to coincide with the beginning of Ragnarok, and the gods are depicted as helpless to do anything to change their fate.

The poem is not normally included in translations of the Poetic Edda because scholars have been uncertain for some time as to whether the poem is authentic or an imitation of the more ancient poems in Snorri Sturluson’s Prose Edda. In 2011, the Norse scholar Annette Lassen of the University of Copenhagen seems to have settled the dispute by identifying words and phrases that could not have reached Iceland.
in the medieval period when the Prose Edda was written. Instead, Lassen dates the poem to the middle of the seventeenth century, when it was probably inspired by the discovery of another set of ancient myths—the Codex Regius, in 1643. Lassen is keen to recognize that the poem is not necessarily of less merit because it is a “fake;” instead, it is interesting because it was written by an unknown writer from the seventeenth century imitating a much older form. Lassen writes, “The poem should not, however, be seen as a falsification, rather it should be seen as an expression of an antiquarian interest in the ancient eddic art. In the first printed writings about Iceland, learned Icelanders express pride in this art.”

We can only wonder what mysterious author, so well-versed in the ancient language and stories, reproduced the style and character of the ancient Edda poems well enough to fool scholars for many years.

Andersen, Hilmarsson, and Sigur Rós mirror this unknown author’s actions by engaging with the past in a way that is imitative, though they made changes for the present moment. Although some of the musicians play on a xylophone made of shale slabs and chant in old Icelandic, the composition has elements from both classical music, modern minimalism, and stylistic flourishes distinct to Sigur Rós’s unique post-rock sound.

Hilmarsson is also involved in a unique bridging of past and present. As the head priest of the Ásatrúarfélagið, he leads ancient religious rites but works as a composer, and the Ásatrúarfélagið church frequently taken stances on modern political issues that would not have crossed the minds of its members’ Viking forefathers, such as ecological activism and support of gay marriage, and they have been careful to cut themselves off from international Nordic religious groups with neo-Nazi leanings. In an interview with Dr. Karl E. H. Seigfried of the Illinois Institute of Technology, Hilmarsson says, “We decided in the mid-’80s—me and
Sveinbjörn [Beinteinsson]—that we would cut all ties with foreign Ásatrú groups, because we’ve had rather sad experiences with a German group which seemed to be really good on the surface but were rampant Nazis when you looked closer.” Hilmarsson goes on to argue that because Ásatrúarfélægið is pantheistic, it is compatible with pluralistic world view: “This is a good thing about polytheism versus monotheism. Monotheism is one truth for the masses, but polytheism is many truths for the individual […] We don’t have a revealed truth. It’s not a revealed religion. We don’t have the final truth hewn in stone like in Judaism and Christianity and, later, Islam. It’s more up to us, really.” Ásatrú practitioners seem to be a loose conglomerate of people interested in the past for a variety of reasons: neo-Nazis who fetishize it as part of the völkisch movement, to hippies who bemoan the sins of industrialization, musicians and poets who nostalgically engage with the ancient works and rituals.

There is some evidence that for the band members of Sigur Rós, who are not members of the Ásatrúarfélægið, that their collaboration with Andersen and Hilmarsson has provided an education about their own past. Interviewed in their 2007 music documentary, Heima, Kjartan Sveinsson, the band’s keyboardist until 2013, says, “It is very interesting for us because we are also learning about things and exploring them, like Rimur, the old chanting style.” Lead vocalist Jósi Jónsi Birgisson describes his first meeting with Andersen: “In a small room, he has this deep voice, and he started to chant these rhymes for me, and something connected inside me. […] I was like, wooh! Something warm and right. I am kind of interested in this tradition. […] it’s just beautiful.” Especially for those of us who don’t speak Icelandic, beauty and awe are the principle emotional responses to a song whose sublimity comes as much from its mysterious language as from its musical beauty.
A tree with many branches.
Washington
Population: 7.4m
Area: 71,362 sq miles
Language: English
Calling Code: +1
Currency: US dollar

British Columbia
Population: 4.6m
Area: 364,764 sq miles
Language: English, French
Calling Code: +1
Currency: Canadian dollar

Alaska
Population: 739,795
Area: 663,268 sq miles
Language: English
Calling Code: +1
Currency: US dollar

United States/Canada
Tree branches up front and a hill in the distance.
The first thing I became aware of upon landing in the state of Washington was my ears: clogged, making every sound around me muffled with a staticky tone. While everybody else sat or stood or stretched or peered toward the front of the plane, I searched online for a solution. Take a deep inhale through the mouth, pinch nostrils closed and try to take a sharp exhale through the nose, repeat. Every exhale created a series of crackling snaps within my ears. Eventually, after much repeating, my ears adjusted to the Pacific Northwest and I noticed a second thing: the air.

Even in the Seattle-Tacoma Airport’s ground-level parking garage the air felt clean, like New York City air pumped through a Brita filter and flavored with a splash of evergreen. I was immediately gripped by a feeling I manage to push to the back of my mind when going about my day-to-day life in New York City: I miss trees and nature and clear water. Where I grew up in rural Michigan—different from the city in many ways—a fifteen-minute drive in any direction will reach a lake. The roads taken to that lake are undoubtedly framed on both sides with field or forest.

The intensity of nature’s presence increases dramatically outside Seattle city limits. Pine-covered mountains reach into the sky and tower over the state’s highways. Sprawling lakes of clear blue waters glimmer. A blanket of fog often hovers along their surface in the morning. Less than three hours from the airport, the Olympic Peninsula holds the Olympic National Park and Olympic Mountains. Their current names echo that of Mount Olympus in Greece, the home of the gods in Greek mythology. The way the peaks seem to meet the edges of the rising sun, it does feel like in some world the mountains of Washington is the kind of place where gods would call home (or at least where they would vacation). From ground level, a person can imagine reaching the top would be a spiritual experience of some kind, gods or no gods.

The Pacific Northwest is often painted in myth. Come here to escape. Come here to reconnect with nature. Come here to feel healthy, healed. Come here for a chance to start over. The area is depicted as possessing a magical quality that is capable of healing the body and the soul. On my second day in Washington, I walked along the ocean at La Push as the sun began to sink behind the horizon leaving smatterings of purple, orange, and pink across the sky. People were scattered along the shoreline having campfires, taking photos, walking their dogs, but all activity was quieted by the sound of water sweeping across the sand. Less than 48 hours in, I pondered the idea of moving to the Pacific Northwest.
While it is an enticing myth, it is a dangerous one. Historically, settlers imagined the Pacific Northwest as an unclaimed, natural, welcoming land to justify violent colonization and stealing land from indigenous peoples. Settlers vilified and legally banned potlatches—ceremonial gatherings in which large amounts of food and goods are exchanged and elaborate dances, clothing, and processions to honor tribe members occur—under the reasoning that such celebrations would diminish the plentiful, natural surrounding environment. The myth of the magical natural Pacific Northwest is used by settlers as political tool to regulate and minimize indigenous practice and presence.

Simultaneously, the Pacific Northwest’s nature is politicized in different circumstances by playing up its “magical” quality. Crucial to the Pacific Northwest narrative is that an individual must travel there in order to bask in the benefits of nature. Come here to be in nature. Implied in the notion is the idea that such a “magical” natural environment cannot be possible anywhere else. The actions taken, that damage our environment, can be pushed to the background as we marvel at the miracle of nature gifted to this region. An even more destructive resolution can be reached: such a natural environment was never possible in other parts of the United States. The results of our violent conduct toward our water, land, and air become something that was simply inevitable from the beginning.

It is hard to not become intoxicated by nature when in the Pacific Northwest. It does feel special. It does feel magical. And that feeling can still, should still happen in moments—in sunsets on the beach, in hikes up a mountain side, in mornings near fog-covered lakes—but outside of the moment, the context and history of the region needs to be central. In order to start to understand the lives of the living, breathing native and non-native people in the region, the land they occupy cannot be mythologized. We must actively work to avoid crossing the line between appreciation and romanticization. This call for the action is too easily stifled by the Pacific Northwest’s soft wind, settlers’ voices projected forward in politics, and the static in our own ears. We need to listen closer.
Pat’s Place is barely visible from the road in Neah Bay, WA, its blue metal roof melding into a rare clear blue Northwest sky. Not far from Cape Flattery, the northwesternmost point of the continental US, Pat’s overlooks the Strait of Juan De Fuca, a small dot against the expanse of the water. Peeling back the screen door at the entrance, you feel like you are entering a home. Framed photos and Seahawks regalia line the walls. A man with a big smile is furiously writing order tickets, making conversation to ease the wait. The sound of popping oil and the smell Crisco linger from the kitchen behind him. On Makah Tribal land, Pat’s Place serves fry bread: a fried, slightly sweet dough, about an inch thick, with the chew of a yeast donut. 

The menu is short: plain, with homemade jam, vegetarian, or supreme. The obvious choice is supreme. Precariously piled on top of the puffy base is tomato, cheese, iceberg lettuce, beans, ground beef, black olives, and jalapenos—toppings that felt more Southwest than Pacific Northwest. This is lovingly known as an Indian or Navajo taco. From the cutout into the kitchen, a woman can be seen mixing fresh dough, already sold out at half past noon, taking great care with how she pats it out on the countertop—creating flurries of flour with each gentle palming. The dough is a simple mix of flour, sugar, salt, baking powder, and lard or shortening, not unlike the pie crust for the huckleberry pie in the case just to the left of the register. The sugar lends a subtle sweetness to the bread, the baking powder adds puff, and the fat, adds a richness that coats the mouth.

Fry bread began inland, far from the water and evergreens, with the Navajo and their forced relocation from Arizona to the Fort Sumner reservation in New Mexico in 1864. This 300-mile journey is known as the Long Walk, an ethnic cleansing that marched a ten-mile line of people from their homeland. More than 9,000 Navajo were moved to Fort Sumner where water wasn’t potable and traditional food staples like beans and squash couldn’t grow. The US government provided rations to the reservation, mostly tinned meats and processed foods including the white flour, sugar, and lard that would become fry bread. While the Navajo were able to return to their land following an 1867 treaty, the only tribe today living on almost all of their ancestral land, the fry bread remained, becoming a symbol of these difficult years. And as their land was destroyed in their absence, a result of the American “Scorched Earth Policy,” fry bread would continue to supplement for the traditional food ways that the Navajo, even at home, could no longer access. As other tribes were forcibly
relocated to reservations, given the same basic rations, the fry bread spread through the West, becoming a united symbol of Native culture. Sherman Alexie, a prominent Native American author from the Pacific Northwest, has called fry bread, “the story of our survival.” Beyond sustenance, fry bread is a visceral connection to a difficult past and a collective declaration of identity in the face of erasure.

But like a popover or donut, fry bread, on a nutritional level, is just fried white bread. The US Department of Agriculture estimates one paper-sized piece of fry bread, sans toppings, is 700 calories with 27 grams of fat. This had created an alternate view of the highly symbolic food within parts of the Native community. Suzan Shown Harjo, a Native writer and policy advocate, wrote in an article for *Indian Country Today* that, “I promise to give up fat “Indian” food this year and to urge others to do the same. Target number one: the ubiquitous fry bread—the junk food that’s supposed to be traditional, but isn’t, and makes for fat, fatter and fattest Indians.” Fry bread may have come to define modern Native food culture, but as Harjo believes, it also threatens the health of that very culture. She suggests reclaiming more traditional and nutritious Native breads like Hopi Piki from the Southwest, that is made from ground blue corn, to replace the fry bread that she believes has an outsized and misplaced role in her culture.

Health among Natives has long been disproportionately poor. The Indian Health Service has found that heart disease and diabetes are among the leading causes of death for Native Americans, who on average have a life expectancy of 4.4 years less than the rest of the U.S. population. This is a result of high poverty levels on reservations, lack of access to healthful food, and discrimination in the delivery of health services. About 25% of Natives struggle with food insecurity and they are on average twice as likely to lack access to healthy foods. Fry bread, in Harjo’s words, is “the connecting dot between healthy children and obesity, hypertension, diabetes, dialysis, blindness, amputations and slow death.”

In Seattle, four hours southeast of Pat’s Place, the “Indian Taco” gets an update from the popular food truck, Off the Rez, the first and only Native-owned food truck in the city. Smaller in size, with iceberg traded for red cabbage, and cumin and cilantro instead of black olives, it is not quite healthy but a step in that direction. The truck even has vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free options, including: a quinoa succotash side, although fries and burgers served on fry bread are on the menu too. For a city rich in Native history, named for the chief of the Suquamish tribe, this cuisine is largely absent in Seattle’s dining scene. Fry bread has become one of the few bridges between settler and Native cultures in the area—an acknowledgement of the diverse tribes that exist within and outside the city’s borders and have for a time that stretches before settlers. Fry bread, even when served less than traditionally from a food truck, again becomes something bigger than the sum of its ingredients. It remains a dual symbol: an important marker of identity but also a marker of many of the challenges facing the Native community. It serves to create a dialogue on how to honor history, but also a need to contextualize historic symbols in today’s world.
This embroidery project was realized as a process of processing our travels in the Pacific Northwest. What was brought along as a fun artistic outlet to pass the time on long bus rides became a poignant mechanism through which to think about and engage literally and symbolically with the concepts we encountered. Embroidery is my own form of weaving—a motif that arose in many ways during this trip.

The first piece was more literal, a representation of the scenery I encountered and a manifestation of the awe and appreciation I had for the environment surrounding me and the juxtaposition of Washington's greenery against the grey of NYC that I’d just left.

As we ventured to Neah Bay and then Vancouver I’d brought along some blue embroidery floss, knowing I’d be seeing some beautiful ocean vistas and ready to let that move me. It was later though, while admiring the incredible weaving exhibit at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, that I was inspired by a colorful, elaborately patterned blanket. A Squamish weaver quoted on the nearby plaque described it: “I’m looking across the top of the blanket. And all of a sudden it starts moving around and it looks watery” (Chepximiya Siyam [Janice George] Skwxwú7mesh). I loved this visual and the connection to nature that is so ingrained in these practices—a response to the environment in which they are created but also a weaving together, conceptually of its meaning into their livelihood. I wanted to think about what that would look like in the medium I was working with, having already been inspired by a watery landscape. Embroidery was my form of weaving together my experience, and was a theme that was woven throughout the trip. My loom was a piece of cardstock, and my warp a needle. I created the second piece by slipping my needle over and under already woven strands, making something larger and interconnected out of fragments, much as I made connections across time, cultures, and space along our travels.

Basketry led me to explore my last creation. Another form of weaving, this practice fascinated me in its connection to the natural world and tradition, not unlike textile weaving. We experienced this viscerally in a workshop with a Makah basket weaver, Deanna, at the Makah Cultural Center. Seeing her passion, the beautiful collection at MOA, and finally those in Alaska at the Sheldon Jackson Museum. As I tried my hand at creating a coiled basket, the first of that style I’d seen, I thought about equivalent weaving and coiling techniques in embroidery. What would an embroidered basket look like? Responding to this question, and drawing on the forms, shapes, and colors I’d seen along our journey, I created the third piece.
My art history education focuses on renaissance, impressionist, and post-impressionist works, which means that I get little to no interaction with indigenous works. For most of the ten days I spent venturing around the Pacific Northwest, I felt entirely out of my comfort zone. Surrounded by culture, history, and art that I'd previously had little to no experience with meant I was in a constant state of unfamiliarity. But when I stepped into the expansive room at the Audain Gallery, which houses a permanent collection of the works of Emily Carr, I suddenly felt very much at home.

I was not previously familiar with Emily Carr, but I could immediately identify her influences. I was taken aback but also giddily excited. While the rest of the group moved along to other rooms, I circled Carr’s works over and over, looking at patterns I recognized: bright bold colors echoing Matisse; wandering uncontained lines reminiscent of expressionists like Edvard Munch; and flowing landscapes that evoked Van Gogh. The works were beautiful, strikingly similar to the works that line the halls of galleries in London and Paris. However, what made these works so distinct was the subject matter. Though Car employs French styles, her works reject European subjects, focusing almost exclusively on the people and landscapes of British Columbia.

As I read more on Carr’s background, the influence of French styles on her work became even more apparent. Carr first ventured to Paris in the autumn of 1910, following her studies in California and England. Seeking modern styles of the times, she studied at the Studio Colarossi and eventually met the modernist
painter Harry Gibb in Montparnasse. Gibb’s works offered Carr some of her earliest exposure to the brilliant colors and patterns of modern French works. Her time in Paris becomes evident in her later works, as she begins to represent the landscapes of British Columbia in bright flowing lines. Her pieces vary in radical experimentation. At Beacon Hill Park evokes gentle French influence, drawing on the legacies of post-impressionists. But works like Forest Light expose the influence of the Fauvists, exploring not just radical colors but challenging established norms of artistic lines, shadow, and shapely conventions. It reflects success in her explorations in France, where she desperately sought “new styles,” which she felt were stagnant in her more traditional education. So eventually, she began to be recognized as a radical modernist painter, first being met with friction and lack of recognition after her return to Canada. Now, however, she is largely credited with bringing such modernist French influences to the Pacific Northwest.

On reading that, I was inspired; such explorations into modernism were bold, new, and radical. However, one painting challenged this conception in my mind. In 1930, Carr painted Eagle Totem. The piece is haunting, with beautiful curving lines that abstract the natural background, while the totem soars to the forefront. The image is stunning but also contradictory. Her whole young career, Carr was cited searching for “modern styles,” which she felt she couldn’t find during her early education and her time in the Pacific Northwest. She only identified such modern patterns in Europe, where the curvature of her lines and boldness of her colors found their inspiration. However, I cannot help but notice that while the nature in this image is abstracted, the totem is strikingly realistic. The proportions and lines of the curves of its wings and beak and the wideness of its eyes are those I would expect to see on such a totem in real life. And yet, it fits in among the abstracted nature at back.

As a viewer, this presents to me an astounding contradiction. For the first time since walking into the Audain Gallery, I started to wonder if the lines and colors of the post-impressionist and Fauvist movements in France were in fact “modern.” And,
though I praised Carr’s work in my mind for its innovative approach to depicting its subjects, I found myself failing to praise the indigenous art I observed similarly. And yet, here in *Eagle Totem*, the lines hailed as modern and groundbreaking were, in fact, already in existence among great works of indigenous art. Long before Matisse and Gibb explored such exploratory shapes, indigenous carvers were drawing curving lines and exaggerated figures and expressions. However, their influence is not identified as being influential to the Western art tradition.

In full, it’s not surprising. As with many things, the Western art tradition aligns with colonialism and imperialism. Indigenous cultures in the Pacific Northwest never had an opportunity to assert any influence over European traditions, and art is no exception. This is similar for the artistic heritage of specific nations in Africa, indigenous cultures of Australia, and colonized populations of South America.

The Audain Gallery fails to indicate the carver, location, and culture of the pole depicted in *Eagle Totem*, which is problematic in and of itself. But even if they did, I regretfully know his name would have no significance in my mind, and I would have no frame of reference to place him in the art history traditions with which I am so familiar. Even less would I think to credit him or his culture as an originator of the curvature and abstraction of figures and colors now so prominent in modern art.

This reflection left me with this question: are the shapes and styles we herald as modern actually modern, or do we simply fail to recognize them in artistic histories that have been left out of the Western art history tradition? It follows the concept of modernism existing in plurality, with its originators existing across different cultures at different times, but recognition coming only to those who bring such innovations to the Western tradition. While the Fauvists and post-impressionists were undeniably radical innovators of their time and culture, the innovations we praise as groundbreaking may in fact have already existed within marginalized art traditions that we all too often forget.
Tell Me a Story
LEAH LAVIGNE

Tell me a story
Tell me a story from your mother's mouth
Your grandmother's, your older brother's

Tell me a story
So I can share your words and mine
With my sister, my cousin, my friend
My future kids

Tell me a story so we can begin
To be together
In the same land of thoughts and dreams
Questions and beliefs

Answer the child that wanders in me
And when I feel forlorn
For the ways that life can be
Teach me to wander more
All the way into understanding

Do you know that when you speak
You shape my world
Sometimes
I wonder how much of it is my own
And would it be better if it were mine alone

But then when I'm lost
I would be without guide
Without language to lead me
Alone by your side

When you entrust in me the words
That those before have spoken
I understand myself as more
than my body

When I can share those words again
Again there is change
In me as in those before
upon my wings

There grows the pattern of our people

A people of reason
Of humor, of honor
Of answers and questions
And duty and beauty
Of fabric that's woven through intricate
words
That are layered and textured
And colored by the lips
Of the men and women
Young and old
Who tell the stories
As they're told
And as their own

Tell me a story
Tell me our story
And I will tell it again
For you
A tree next to a pillar made up of small statues of abstract heads.
Just as narrative practices exist in many forms, my diverging experiences at the Musqueam Cultural Center in British Columbia and during Leanne Simpson’s lecture at Gallatin illustrate that oral narratives do as well. This reflection is not meant to qualify either approach, but rather to a) showcase the diversity (of thought, practice, lifestyle, etc.) amongst the often-conflated group of “indigenous people,” and to b) highlight how stories represent and recreate different contexts. The power of narrative lies in its ability to convey meaning, evoke empathy, and inspire action; yet it remains susceptible to manipulation. Through intention or through unfortunate games like telephone, stories are refracted through space and time.

The Musqueam people of the Salish Coast combat this manipulation with rigidity. A preservationist mentality prioritizes accuracy in stories. Storytelling for Musqueam people cannot be equated to Western traditions of storytelling. The community recognizes that oral history is a lifeblood; it not only preserves its history but also generates respect for said history. As anthropologist Bruce Miller mentions in his collection of anthropological and historical essays, *Be Good of Mind*: “‘Resources,’” for Coast Salish peoples come in many forms, including “‘spiritual knowledge,’ ‘advice,’ financial assets, […] mastery of local norms of speech.”

Morgan Guerin, who we met at the Musqueam Cultural Center, guided our group through a gallery of Musqueam belongings that included examples of clothing, tools, and homes. Guerin is a skilled storyteller; with his striding sentences and unfailing gaze, he displayed composure and stamina that I have rarely encountered. To say his form of storytelling is “performance” might undercut its honesty, but as his presence transfixed the entire room, his method appeared as such. Musqueam stories rely upon their tellers for accuracy and skill; they must stay true to their owners, no matter how much time has passed. We were thus advised to take care if and when we retell the stories he had recounted that day. Guerin was performing a historical lecture, and I felt it was my duty and an honor to listen.
I worry that my memory will fail me or that my lips will fault me if I attempt to retell the creation story or the stories of the culture and systems of order that exist amongst the Musqueam. These stories are about and primarily for Musqueam people, although they also stand to uphold the Musqueam presence and right to both its history and its land. In this manner, storytelling is evidentiary.

Two weeks after my return, I was fortunate enough to attend a Gallatin lecture featuring Leanne Simpson. A storyteller and writer, Simpson introduced herself as Michi Sachi Nishnaabeg and as a member of the Alderville First Nation. During her performance, Simpson recounted three stories. The first centered on children, for it was small children playing in the forest who first discovered the sweet, sticky, shiny sap of maple trees. With the faith of elders, the children could recover the sap, allowing it to be shared. The affective knowledge of this elicited for me childhood memories of playing in my grandmother’s garden and learning with my kindergarten teachers.

My personal reactions fell in line with Simpson’s hopes for the sharing of her stories. Rather, than float above, over, or around me, I felt that I absorbed what I could. This process of receiving and telling stories includes an acceptance of the fact that stories, like identities, are perceived subjectively. That subjectivity may sometimes distort the meaning, but, per Simpson, it need not always be a harmful process. In contrast to Guerrin, Simpson weaves her present understandings into traditional stories, in a manner that “decoupl[es] story and time” and positions “reciprocity, respect, freedom” at their core.

In response to a question regarding her process of storytelling as evolutionary (i.e., adapting over time), Simpson responded, “A story is a seed; it has to evolve so it stays relevant (i.e., can be related to every person in some way).” It is because of this quality that Simpson describes the reciprocity of narrative. As listeners must be “engaged in their way of knowing,” Simpson believes that tellers must also be accepting of evolutions and changing contexts.
If we consider meditation—wherein instead of suppressing thoughts, we attempt to sit with them without judgment and refocus on breath—this process is reminiscent of listening to Simpson's stories. Immersed in her voice, the mind is free to make its own connections but ultimately returns to her steady narrative. When she concludes, one can reflect and evaluate the internal processes inspired by her speech. This meditative quality equates to what Simpson describes as “Coming to know...the process of whole body intelligence.” One is aware of one’s whole state of being as a storyteller leads them through a guided lesson. As is demonstrative of my varying experiences with these two great storytellers, this guidance comes in different forms and is received subjectively. In other words, the performance that I latch onto may, for one reason or another, prove distant. As such, it is necessary that storytelling—the foundation of every form of communication—exist in many forms.

Both Guerin and Simpson approach storytelling with, as Simpson said, a “temporal responsibility—for future and past generations.” However, although the importance of storytelling may stay constant, the use and practice of storytelling is very different for each. It should also be noted that this reflection only describes my experiences with these two individuals, and while both are experts who can, in fact, speak as “representatives” of their communities, an explanation of my perceived differences and similarities between them may cast a slim understanding of the great diversity amongst the many communities of First Nations peoples.

As Guerin and Simpson demonstrate, narrative empowerment exists in a multitude of forms. As we come to tell our own stories, there must be an acceptance and recognition of this incommensurable quality, which “separates” cultures. However, a recognition of difference does not imply an inability to find or create similarity (consensually). Beyond identity markers of race, class, etc., storytelling allows us to find cross-cultural points of understanding and intrigue. More than just footholds, these connections form the bedrock of mutual exchanges of ideas. In the US, for example, wherein we can simultaneously recognize the differences amongst ourselves and trade and discuss stories, there is greater room for inclusion.
Wind from Water
TIA RAMOS

Patrick Janicki passed away August 18, 2017, age 30, from an oxycodone overdose. In memory of him and to honor his work in restoring the Trillium Community Forest on Whidbey Island, Washington, a two-mile long trail in the forest was renamed “Patrick’s Way.” On Sunday, March 11, 2018, while on our Americas Scholars trip, the 22 of us took the Whidbey Island ferry from Port Townsend to Keystone Ferry Landing, a 19-minute drive from Patrick’s trail.

My Cousin

I.
At the bridge of the ferry
we got off the bus to stretch our legs.
I stood at the ticket-house
and saw your way on the map
that spanned the paneled wall.
Tall, aqua and faded.
You coincided
with our destination.

II.
We re-board the bus
and drive onto the ferry.

We transport like floating paper—
a milk carton of velocity.

People give thanks
as we push against the water
for the fresh smell and the wind.
I picture the ferry gliding over
an overpopulated school of fish,
gutting many on the way.
This is not comforting at all.
I hang my head over the railing
but see no change in color;
the water a true constant
when you don’t want it to be.
Small waves in a large body of water.
III.
A horn sounds. We’ve traversed;
you’re close, now,
but they don’t take me to you.

IV.
Each aisle of the bus
has its own window
the length of my wingspan.
I could have lifted the red handle
and pushed it open to escape;
it was an emergency
of life and of death.
If only I’d known
that after this sea,
I could have run to you.
Easily.

I could have kneeled in prayer.
Felt your dirt, soft
like you’d freshly shaved
just for me. I would have
dug a hole, a tiny grave
with my fingers to bury
a plate of food1 that would spread roots
like an Aspen to connect to its
cousin, its life system.
You would have stayed
underneath my fingernails,
which I would never trim.

V.
We drove North, though your map
pointed us South to walk with you once more.
To feel constant wind from water,
the one thing that you will still feel
on your brown face that is now a part
of your forest, incessant.

Here, finally,
you will no longer succumb.
Humanity and the Opioid Epidemic

JOEY CHARBONNEAU

“We’re not overdosing. We’re being murdered.”

Samona Marsh

Just over two years ago, in December 2016, the federal, provincial, and territorial Canadian governments set up a group titled the “Special Advisory Committee on the Epidemic of Opioid Overdoses.” The group is meant to focus on three “key areas:” “supporting harm reduction, improving data/surveillance, and addressing prevention and treatment options.” In their March 2018 update, the group, which is designed to be a “time-limited mechanism,” said the following:

Unfortunately, the data released today have confirmed our fear that that the crisis has worsened significantly since 2016, despite the efforts from all levels of government and partners to reverse the trend. Available data from the provinces and territories indicate that at least 2,923 people died from apparent opioid-related overdoses between January and September 2017. This is an increase of 45% when compared to the same period in 2016. From January to September 2017, we lost as many people to the opioids crisis as we did for the entire course of 2016. Based on the latest data available, we expect that Canada will see more than 4,000 opioid-related deaths in 2017.2

It’s worth noting the humanity in the words chosen in this update—a humanity that is so often lost in the rhetoric surrounding the victims of the raging opioid epidemic. There is no differentiation between those who have died from the use and abuse of prescription medications and those who have suffered at the hand of illicit substances procured on the street of questionable origin. The update states the following: “We recognize that each death reported in today’s release represents a human life, and we are saddened by these losses.”3 It is important that such remarks be included in the discussion of these issues because it is too easy to forget that behind every number lie family, friends, and an interconnected web of personal relationships.

Samona Marsh is a resident of one of Canada’s most affected neighborhoods, Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. When I asked about what she wants to see healthcare professionals do in fighting the opioid epidemic Marsh had only a simple request. All she wants for herself and others who face daily the threatening reality of overdose from...
the invasion of fentanyl and its far more potent analog, carfentanil, into their drug supply, was the promise that they would be treated like human beings. The mention, or record, of living in a particular neighborhood in the city or history of drug use, she says, would often be enough to discourage any real treatment from happening, even when facing health problems that have no relation to drug habits.

Samona hopes for a world where she can walk into a doctor’s office with a knee injury and have her knee treated without a suggestion that she would not be in the situation if she was not a drug user. She hopes to be treated as anyone else would. She hopes for **humanity**, and ‘she is not alone.

In a December 2017 piece entitled “Journey into the Dark Web,” published on Medium, author Jason Smith ventures into the underground world that brings a suspected large amount of the fentanyl taking lives on the streets of urban America and Canada across the ocean from China. Smith interacts with a nineteen-year-old drug trafficker, on the run from federal authorities, who calls himself Jim. Jim conducts all of his transactions with his identity safely removed by the many levels of encryption granted to those who know what they are doing on the internet’s darkest corners. As Smith describes it: “It’s a clusterfuck. People are dying, prisons are filling up, and nothing changes. More people died last year [of overdoses] than at the height of the AIDS epidemic. More Americans died from drug overdoses in 2016 than died during the entire duration of the Vietnam War.” And all the while “guys like Jim proceed to order Schedule-I narcotics online the same way the rest of us order gifts for our families.”

Although Smith’s account of his interactions with Jim are fascinating, perhaps of even greater importance is what Smith sets up as the antithesis to these dark corners: harm reduction facilities like the Sacramento Harm Reduction Services he visits in Sacramento, California. These facilities provide help to individuals looking to make a change, and safer conditions for those who aren’t ready. As Jason Smith puts it, they treat “Jim’s remnants.”
And what do harm-reduction facilities provide, above all else? *Humanity*. Where layers of protection on the dark web provided “total privacy, total anonymity,” the open arms of harm reduction facilities provide “total humanity, total vulnerability.”

Drug users are inherently vulnerable. They’re vulnerable in the activities that they practice, but they’re also vulnerable in the crowds that they associate with and in the authorities that they don’t. An impactful solution will hardly be realized if non-users are not willing to show some vulnerability too. After all, we’re *all* people. And good ideas will inevitably flow from all sides, so we need to open up the lines of communication that will allow them to all flood together.

Sekani Dakelth, an Indigenous woman and former addict who works with Samona Marsh and other residents of the Downtown Eastside neighborhood of Vancouver, gives an emotional appeal in her story, curated by Jackie Wong for Megaphone:

> I find it ironic that with all the stigmas I faced daily, and still do, I found myself and acceptance through addiction. Now, I’m on a road to wellness. Sometimes I regress into the “if onlys:” If only people knew how much love and community is in the Downtown Eastside, if only they treated us like people deserving of it. If only people did more then [sic] merely tolerate me.

Love and community are not words that are usually associated with the Downtown Eastside, and ‘that is part of the problem. As gentrification tears this struggling community even further apart, one of the major factors that is saving lives is being taken away. It ‘does not matter how many harm reduction facilities are available if you ‘do not have a community of support to urge you to them, take you to them, or make you aware of them.

Perhaps at a time when there is a tendency to want to take immediate action to solve a problem, it is most helpful that we back off first and let the community begin to repair itself.
Dear Mr. President,

Whenever I’m asked where I’m from and I respond, “The Philippines,” I can already guess their next reaction. Almost immediately, it’s followed by the mention of your name and then followed by, what seems to me, a look of pity sometimes of horror and, on a few occasions, of plain disgust. But I don’t blame them. We’ve all read the news, seen the pictures. We’ve all heard your comments, jokes, threats. Promises of eradicating crime and the illegal drug trade. With the only way you’re convinced will do the job resulting in bloodshed, terror resulting in faint sounds of gunshots in the dark passing swiftly mercilessly. Is this all we’re going to be to the world now? Is this how you want us to be?

Inspired by conversations with Sekani Dakelth, Samona Marsh, and Jackie Wong about Vancouver’s overdose crisis, the writer addresses this poem to President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, whose deadly anti-drug policy has reportedly claimed the lives of more than 12,000 people since he came into office in July 2016. The dialogue, which happened on March 12 during the Americas Scholars trip, specifically raised questions about how to meaningfully engage with individuals who stigmatize drug users. One of the key ideas that emerged from this conversation was recognizing that these individuals are human beings, therefore seeing that they deserve to be treated as such.
I’m having trouble watching,
Watching this drug war unfold from miles and miles away.
I’m having trouble hearing,
Hearing that number change from tens to hundreds to thousands.
What is it now?
Twelve-thousand?
I’m having trouble believing,
Believing that that is the truth
And that we live in a world where people accept that as a truth
Or are afraid to speak out against that truth
I’m having trouble understanding,
Understanding your point of view
And how you’re able to sleep at night
Do you sleep at night?
Do you sleep at all?
How do you even sleep at all
Knowing you’ve denied someone the right to be?
To breathe? And live?
Who are you to deny someone the right to be?
To breathe? And live?
To deny someone of
Love
Beauty
Happiness
And all the things we stay alive for?
To deny someone of the care one needs and deserves?
Take a step back, Mr. President.
One step back.
And think.
Have you ever thought of alternative actions?
Because there are.
And if other places are finding ways
Shouldn’t we at least try to learn and do the same?
At least try to consider other measures?
Other than the extrajudicial means by which your current system operates?
What about harm reduction?
Or more trauma-informed practices for social work?
Anything that can show users that they are worthy
Of our care
Of our support
Of a chance to live
After all, they too, like you, are human—
With the same features that make you you
With dreams to chase
Opportunities to take
And experiences to make
Just like you
We’re all human
Part of an interconnected web
Far greater than ourselves
A brother’s father
Father’s son
Son’s mother
Mother’s sister
Sister’s daughter
Daughter’s brother
Please don’t strip that away
Please don’t dismiss that fact.
Mr. President,
I don’t know the answers
Nor do I have a concrete proposal to present to you
But what I do know is this,
That violence is never the answer
No matter what justification
And that I love your country
My country
Our country
And countrymen
And that their suffering must end
I know that the process will be difficult
And that it will surely take a long period of time
But no one should have to exist in a space where pain and anguish dominate
No one should have to have somebody else determine their absolute fate
No one should have to have their life cut short
To have no chance at all when chances are due
No one.

So I challenge you, Mr. President, to think
Stop and consider
The repercussions of this war
This disease
I want you to listen
Hear and empathize
With the cries of your people
I want you to open your eyes
See and recognize
That we’re all...human
All the same
All striving to get through this crazy,
But beautiful mess that is life
And life is a gift
As they all say
And you have the gift of leading so many lives
All these lives
That are in your hands
That’s your biggest responsibility
Please don’t just throw that away.
Many trees and a small table and bench in front of the trees.
Drug use and addiction in the United States is a polarizing and controversial topic. With the war on drugs, mass incarceration, and the opioid epidemic, drugs and drug policy are devastating individuals, families and entire communities in different and complicated ways. Even though there have been problems for years, recently more attention has been brought to this issue in the mainstream political sphere. In fact, President Trump recently said that “We’re wasting our time if we don’t get tough with drug dealers, and that toughness includes the death penalty.” Increases in incarceration rates for drug-related offenses do not reduce crime and in fact, “changes in the economy, fluctuations in the drug market and community-level responses often have more pronounced effects.” Not only that, but mandatory minimum sentences, three strikes, and a “tough on crime” approach might actually lead to an increase in violence, and they certainly disproportionately affect people of color and people in lower socioeconomic classes. I bring up President Trump’s comments because, even with this plethora of information and facts, they highlight a very real and still somewhat popular mentality seen in conversations around drug policy. We need to be having these conversations, but we are at a crossroads. Instead of these trite and dangerous “tough on crime” approaches, I think what would be most beneficial is to have a serious conversation around harm reduction.

We met with three women—Jackie Wong, Sekani Dakelth, and Samona Marsh—to discuss harm reduction during the Americas Scholars trip. We talked about many important points, such as the influx of fentanyl in the drug market, the harms and problems of gentrification, and the specific plights indigenous women with a history of drug use have faced. The information we gained could have filled a book, but one of the most essential points highlighted in the discussion was something that might seem obvious but that is often ignored. It is a principal value of harm reduction: listening to what the population needs and not losing sight of the fact that those who use drugs are human with basic human needs that deserve to be met. This is something often lost when “tough on crime” policy is implemented, and it trickles down to other parts of society with detrimental consequences.
Both Samona and Sekani spoke about the unprofessional treatment some patients have faced due to their drug use and how that only created harmful consequences for them and others. I will only share one story because it should not take more than one. We were told about a medical problem unrelated to drug use that a patient had, and how a doctor would not treat the patient properly because of this person’s history of drug use. The problem only became larger, requiring more treatment and resources. This had significant negative health consequences not only for the patient. More money and resources had to be used to treat this person, which exacerbated a minor problem. The doctor’s treatment in the end did not deter the patient from doing drugs and only cost both of them time and resources. I use this example not to unfairly criticize the physician or to say doctors should never take drug use history into question when treating patients. I use it instead to make us understand how complicated these issues are, and to make us think about what it is going to take to prevent these situations from happening again. One of the answers might be harm reduction.

I wondered what kind of harm reduction policies might work, and I speculated that possibly more treatment centers might be helpful. I asked Sekani how we should think about detox within this conversation, and she said something enlightening. She spoke frankly about how you cannot force someone to stop using drugs. It has to be their choice. Hence, providing more or better-funded treatment facilities might not be the key. So, instead of forcing or coercing anything, whether it is jail or treatment, maybe we focus on policies and programs that are most useful to drug users and their communities. What does that look like exactly? Some useful suggestions include “affirm[ing] drugs users themselves as the primary agents of reducing the harms of their drug use” and “non-judgmental, non-coercive provision of services and resources to people who use drugs and the communities in which they live.” These services could include access to nutritious food, quality physical and mental health options and clean housing, but also safe injection sites and more training on how to use Narcan, which can reverse an overdose. Not only are these services helpful for certain drug-using populations, but they have larger benefits for the overall population as well. For example, needle-exchange programs (NEPs) have reduced countrywide rates of new HIV infections by one-third to two-fifths. These services and provisions help to foster a safer, less dangerous community and saves lives within and outside of it.

It feels necessary to point out that even with much-needed resources, people will continue to use drugs. However, success should not be defined as ridding the world of all drug use, because if it is, we will never succeed. One of the main points I left Vancouver with was that in terms of drug use and addiction policy, harm reduction has the capacity to do exactly what it says in the name: reduce harm. That means not only for those who use drugs, but for everyone. That should be how we define success, and once we do that, we are bound to achieve even more.
The phrase, “in America we speak American,” is generally uttered as a form of xenophobia, an aversion to foreigners who enter America with foreign tongues and refuse to form “American” words without a telltale accent that echoes their country of origin. However, xenophobia is not the only motivation for this way of thinking. “In America we speak American” is a form of colonial oppression that dates back to the 1800s.

Language is an essential part of culture; it embodies the richness and tonality of the culture that it represents. Stripping one of one’s native tongue is a form of mental colonialism, a domination of American thought over indigenous cultural practice. In 1887, the United States put this idea into practice, forcing Native American children into boarding schools where they were force-fed English in an attempt to strip them of their culture. This genocide of native tongues was so thorough that some, like the Cree, will face possible extinction if efforts are not made to keep the language alive.

In 2007, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) affirmed the right of indigenous people to practice their culture. This right “includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.” But is the United Nations too late?

According to Lorena Fontaine, a Cree woman fighting for language rights, “Unless we do something in this generation—the generation of my daughter—the languages will die” (Suzanne Dufresne/CBC). This problem is not one that only the Cree people are facing. As it stands, for Sm’algyax, the language of the Tsimshian people, there are only six fluent speakers in Alaska and around fifty in all of British Columbia.

Despite the systematic oppression of native languages by the state, it has become the responsibility of those who can speak the language to keep it alive, with or without outside help. Dr. Mique’l Dangeli is a dancer/scholar who works around the preservation of Sm’algyax. She gave up a professorship in order to teach Sm’algyax at ’Na Aksa Gyilaky’oo School in rural British Columbia. Without state protections or investment in the preservation of language, it falls on individuals to do what they can to preserve their own cultures (Quinn).

The UNDRIP affirms the right of indigenous people to practice their culture. What does this mean, however, if an entire chunk of your culture has been taken from you? Without language, can one still truly access one’s culture in its entirety?
Linguicide

“In America we speak American”
It was written in the books
That preached “civilization”
It was repeated by the “saviors”
Who were inscribing colonization

“In America we speak American”
It was engraved upon the brains
Of the stolen native children
Ripped from reservations,
And forced into assimilation

“In America we speak American”
It ensures cooperation.
“Do you have bear mace?”
“...no.”
“A loud horn?”
“...no?”
“Well, then, just...be loud and be safe. Have fun!”

With that, our cab driver drove off into the sunrise, leaving four members of Gallatin’s Americas Scholars at the foot of Mount Verstovia in Sitka, Alaska, suddenly terrified at the thought of bears awakening from hibernation. We spent the majority of the hike belting out ABBA songs to establish ourselves as equally terrifying predators, and thankfully, the bears took our groovy warning seriously. Although the hike up that small portion of Mount Verstovia presented relatively few challenges, I felt as though I had become privy to some transcendent Alaskan wilderness experience that has been the object of innumerable books, poems, songs, films, etc. Despite our cab driver’s warning about bears, we had placed ourselves in minimal danger, in comparison to the characters in popular adventure narratives like Jon Krakauer’s book, Into the Wild.

Adventure culture and stories of trekking into a beautiful abyss far from modern society have intrigued United States audiences for decades. Henry David Thoreau, Jack London, and Christopher McCandless, Krakauer’s subject in Into the Wild, are just three household names of many explorers who have contributed to an idyllic conception of a northern wilderness. Adventurers seek what journalist Larry Fitzmaurice calls a “survivalist, solitudinous nirvana” in an environment they have perceived as a frontier between society and wilderness. Yet, these notions of escaping society and connecting with a wilderness become so romanticized that they are almost void of meaning. What exactly constitutes a “wilderness?” And why has wilderness become such a compelling subject?

According to a plethora of online dictionaries, the term “wilderness” denotes landscapes that are uncultivated, untouched, and uninhabited by humans. A wilderness is only occupied by non-human animals and plants that are thus considered “wild,” or undomesticated. Wilderness can be construed as the anti-
society, a paradise where capitalism and material possessions have no significance. Lacking society and lacking capitalism in this construction of wilderness implies that wilderness is void of humans, hence its appeal to explorers like McCandless, who have grown tired of social inequality and societal expectations. For Western explorers, wilderness is often described as a free-for-all. This romantic conception of a wilderness without humans stems from Judeo-Christian ideas about nature, as there are a series of passages in the Bible that establish landscapes as pristine wilderness and humans as semi-divine intermediaries between a submissive nature and a Christian God.

The idea that nature and humans are fundamentally separate, which the term “wilderness” implies, can be a harmful assertion that landscapes need to be pristine, managed, and constructed within a Western imaginary of what conservation should look like. Western conceptions of wilderness and wilderness management are often in danger of sidelining indigenous voices and conservation knowledge from indigenous communities. These versions of wilderness also perpetuate colonial and imperial ideas of nature that further exacerbate tensions between Western imaginings of landscapes and the presence of indigenous peoples in landscapes. In his 2011 essay, “Calls of the Wild on the Page and Screen: From Jack London and Gary Snyder to Jon Krakauer and Sean Penn,” Jonah Raskin calls attention to the colonial roots of wilderness culture. He argues that much of United States culture revolves around a need to reconnect with the first settlers, who revered nature when they first set foot on what they perceived as a “virgin wilderness.” Regarding Into the Wild, Raskin writes, “There’s nothing like a dose of imperial ennui to prompt young men and young women to flee from urban and suburban confines, run with wolves, go native, and embrace ‘the barbarians,’ as they’ve been called since ancient times.”

Research on wilderness and wilderness values in the United States has mostly focused on values related to the recreational use of wilderness and to forging into the wild with a sense of awe, rather than the relationship between indigenous peoples, societal values, and subsistence on landscapes protected by law under the designation of wilderness. Interactions between indigenous peoples and wilderness to sustain traditional values is often construed as “a special provision, or nonconforming use, because it does not conform to the wilderness ideal as presented in Euro-American philosophy.” These traditional values that Watson et. al. allude
to are influenced by Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which Alaska-based
researcher Henry Huntington defines as knowledge acquired by peoples who have
a longstanding tradition of living and working in a particular area.\(^7\) TEK has also
been used marginally in conjunction with Western scientific knowledge to create
conservation solutions. For example, the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, which is
housed by the University of Alaska Fairbanks, identifies itself as a resource “to assist
Native people, government agencies, educators and the general public in gaining
access to the knowledge base that Alaska Natives have acquired through cumulative
experience over millennia,” acknowledging the collaborative potential that TEK can
have.\(^8\) The network includes a series of video recordings of Sitka elder Herman Kitka
on Tlingit TEK, on topics such as deer population dynamics, fur seal research, and
fish oil preparation.\(^9\) The notion of indigenous peoples subsisting on resources found
in wilderness and the use of TEK in indigenous communities challenge Western
conceptions of wilderness. Indigenous peoples exist and have existed in spaces that
Western explorers have frequently deemed untouched and uninhabited.

Although Western ideas about wilderness still occupy a large space in Western
culture and imaginaries, these ideas are being challenged further by integrative
conservation policy, such as the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation
Act of 1980. The policy permits indigenous peoples and other rural Alaskans to
continue subsistence hunting and gathering on landscapes designated as protected
wilderness.\(^10\) Collaborative efforts that combine TEK with Western scientific
knowledge include the Limits of Acceptable Change process, records of oral histories,
and mapping projects.\(^11\) Conservation policy and law are a long way from eliminating
the harmful implications behind Western conceptions of wilderness, but these
efforts are a mechanism to combat a conservation policy paradigm that gives non-
indigenous forms of knowledge significant priority.

And so, as we made our amateur summit up Mount Verstovia, while on a trip
focused on decolonization, I felt as though I stood between a lifelong fixation with
*Into the Wild* and a desire to see the Alaskan wilderness decolonized. Sitka is stunning,
yet these Alaskan landscapes are so much more than a backdrop to many of the
books, songs, and films that romanticize them.
Notes and References

Memories of an Island by Nathalia Sanchez
4 Ireland House Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.

the map is not the territory (haibun) by Richard Wei Semus

Tourism in the Digital Age by Matthew Leichenger

Space by Arjun Parikh
1 Something that is almost literally possible at Third Rail Projects’ *Then She Fell*.

Sculpting Life with Light by Rachel Stern
Ginnungagap by Francesca Galesi

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6 Sanmark.
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**Happiness by Rose Bern**

**Neither Past nor Present by B. Isaac Cohen**
2 Lassen, Annette, 26.
4 Seigfried, Karl E. H., and Hilmar Órn Hilmarsson.
6 DeBlois, Dean.

**Untitled by Alana Al-Hatlani**

**Emily Carr: Forgotten Modernisms of the Pacific Northwest by Benjamin Neiley**

**Leanne Simpson by Veda Kamra**
Wind from Water by Tia Ramos

After a discussion about harm reduction, one of the facilitators, Sekani Dakelth—an indigenous trans woman from British Columbia—told me that I could bury or burn a plate of food under a tree to honor Patrick’s passing.

Humanity and the Opioid Epidemic by Joey Charbonneau


3 Ibid.


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.


A Conversation on Harm Reduction by Jenna Bird


Linguicide by Kiara Soobrayan

Untitled by Nicole Ramirez
6 Watson et. al., “The Relationship Between.”
10 Watson et. al., “The Relationship Between.”
11 Watson et. al., “The Relationship Between.”
Scholars Group Participants

Albert Gallatin Scholars, January 2018
UNITED KINGDOM/IRELAND

Faculty Mentor: Greg Erickson
Administrative Director: Rebecca Amato

Student Travelers: Steven Falatea, Gabe Herrera, Rebecca Karpen, Tavius Koktavy, Shaun Montero, Brennan O’Rourke, Sam Petter, Cade Richmond, Ella Rodems-Boyd, Nic Sanchez, Nathalia Sanchez, Leonor Talamantes

Dean’s Honor Society, January 2018
ICELAND

Faculty Mentor: Matt Stanley
Administrative Director: Kim Foote


Americas Scholars, March 2018
WASHINGTON/ALASKA/BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

Faculty Mentor: Eugenia Kisin
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