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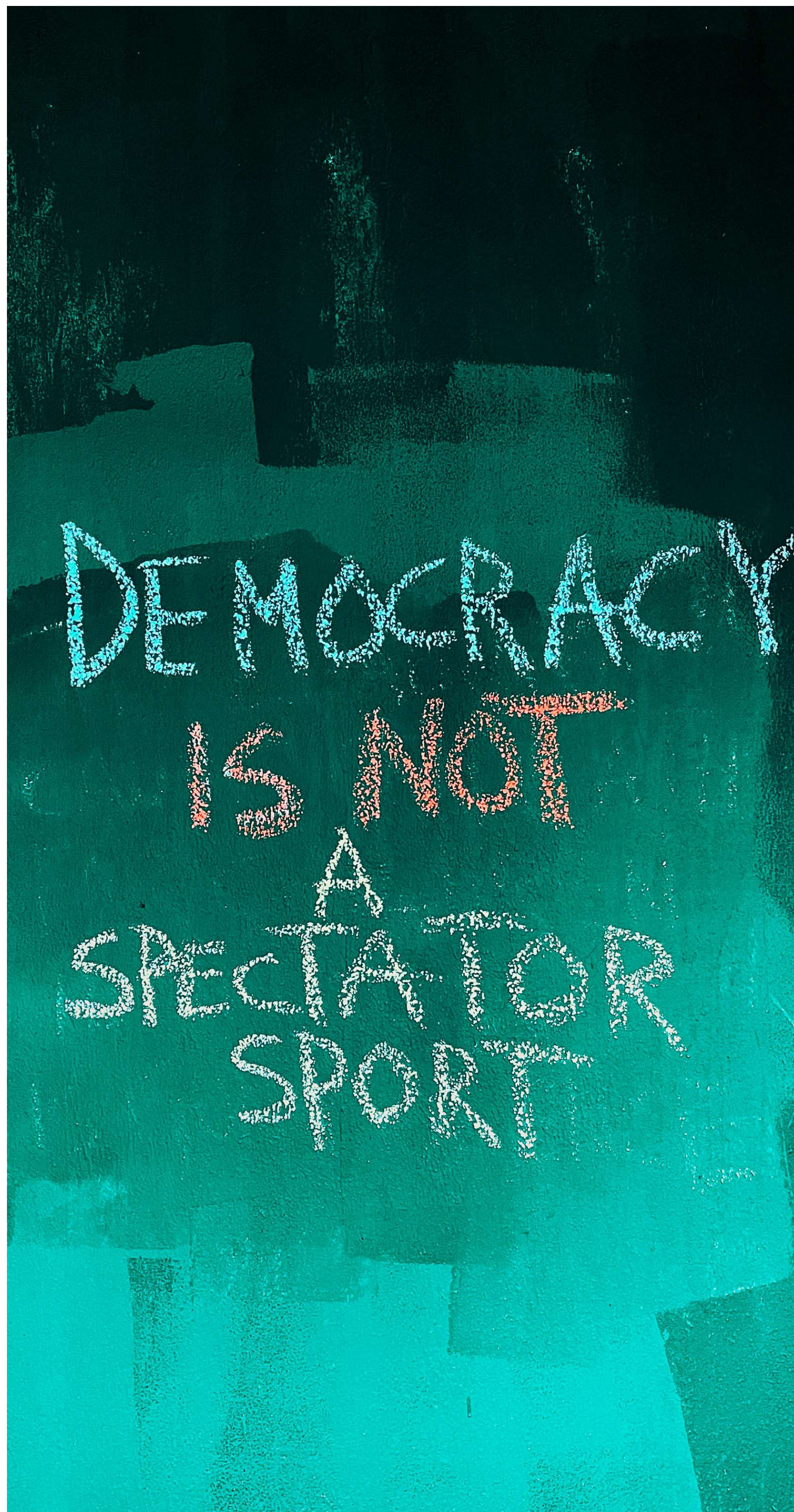

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We recognize the University's location on the traditional territories and ancestral homelands of the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Ute, and many other Native American nations.

A Message from the Editor

We are living through a period of significant political complexity at the federal, state, and local levels where the challenges we face demand equally thoughtful solutions. This evolving landscape is what drew me to pursue a Master's degree at the University of Colorado Denver, and it continues to shape my commitment to public service and meaningful contribution.

Serving as Editor of PRAXIS has been a deeply rewarding experience. It has allowed me to collaborate with talented, dedicated students whose work reflects rigorous research, careful analysis, and a genuine commitment to public discourse while also reconnecting me with my background in journalism and content management.

I am grateful to Dr. Tony Robinson, Faculty Advisor, for his steadfast guidance in making PRAXIS the exceptional journal it is today.

To every student who submitted work: thank you. Each contribution reflects care, distinct perspective, and the courage to engage critically with complex issues. I have been consistently impressed by the quality of work presented in print and online, and I especially applaud our contributors for writing with confidence and embracing their own voice, an essential part of meaningful dialogue.

Warm regards,
Bridget Myers, DPT

Harvey Milk: The Politics of Hope
by Jackson Elliott

When people reflect on the many influential political figures in American history, oftentimes they consider presidents, congresspeople, or leaders of large social movements. One would not think that a measly city supervisor from San Francisco is worth writing about. At least not until they understand the impact Supervisor Harvey Milk had on American history, being one of the first openly gay people to be elected to a public office. But the road to becoming supervisor was an arduous one, involving new hurdles that an openly gay candidate must learn to navigate; uniquely derogatory media coverage, hate crimes, death threats, and other actions supported by homophobic biases were fresh concerns for a political candidate, especially a race for a seat on the Board of Supervisors. Nevertheless, Milk prevailed and made history, cementing himself as a figurehead of the LGBTQ movement in the 70s. But because San Franciscans had never seen an openly gay candidate before, many did not take his candidacy seriously. How did Milk make something that was deemed impossible for folks like him a reality? Determination, charisma, and a gifted ability for storytelling were all assets of Milk's, but these qualities all stemmed from an unyielding belief that the future for LGBTQ Americans can be brighter. Milk himself said it best: "If a gay can win, it means there is hope that the system can work for all minorities if we fight. We've given them hope" (An Archive of Hope 119). A sense of hope as strong as Milk's did not come without its trials.

Hope: A Bridge to the Future

What is hope? The literal definition, per the American Psychological Association, defines hope as an "expectation that one will have positive experiences or that a potentially threatening or negative situation will not materialize or will ultimately result in a favorable state of affairs." Religious understandings of hope offer something similar. Buddhist Oren Jay Sofer says that feeling hopeful "affirms that there is a reliable way to release ourselves from suffering, to protect other beings, mitigate harm, and build a better world." So, both in a scientific and spiritual setting, hope can be seen as a mechanism for reliably anticipating a favorable outcome. Understanding hope in the context of politics, or as a means of political agency, is oftentimes less considered. From the American Revolution to the Civil Rights Era to today, hope has been used in storytelling, messaging, and motivating collectives.

However, hope, understood as a political concept, is less discussed, leading to misunderstandings of the role of hope in politics and as a means for political agency. In his essay Democratic politics and hope: An Arendtian perspective, Antonin Lacelle-Webster comments on this rift in theoretical understanding and draws on insights from theorists Ernst Bloch and Hannah Arendt to develop a framework for a democratic theory of hope. Lacelle-Webster's framework serves as a basis for comprehending the behavior of political figures, such as Harvey Milk, and their relationship with hope as a political concept.

Despite a lack of abundance on the study of hope in politics, the concept is far from absent in America's political history. One of the most famous contemporary examples of the use of hope in American politics is former President Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. His primary campaign poster—designed by artist Shepard Fairy—illustrated Obama comprised of shades of red, white, and blue, looking

forward, above a single word: HOPE.

Prior to his bid for president, then Illinois Senator Obama foretold of his vision of hope in politics at the 2004 Democratic National Convention:
I'm not talking about blind optimism here - the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don't talk about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. No, I'm talking about something more substantial. It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker's son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. The audacity of hope!

In his speech, hope is presented to be an act of resistance and grit. Obama's notion that to hope is an audacious endeavor was inspired by Dr. Jeremiah Wright's 1990 sermon, "The Audacity to Hope." In his sermon, Dr. Wright illustrates this idea of how small acts of hope combats despair, and that it is the individual's responsibility to encourage ideas of a better world, homelife, etc.

Political figures have used hope as a concept for storytelling and "pitching" their particular vision for America since the birth of the nation. The Age of the Enlightenment transcended political and theoretical thought, repositioning the individual to a more prominent status in a society. The revolutionary sentiments brought on by the modernist authors and speakers of the time played a key role in the success of the American Revolution. The idea of a democratic nation that emphasizes individual liberty, representation, and natural rights was possible, gave people an attainable idea to tether their hope to. It is only then that the American Revolution led to grandiose institutional and political change, as Harvey Milk echoed in 1978: "mostly by small events which plant the seeds of change…the meetings in homes, pubs, on street corners" (Harvey Milk: An Archive of Hope, pg. 6). In this context, hope is an action performed in the day-to-day by ordinary people, predicated on a perceived attainable future. As these small acts of hope grow, the scales of success begin to tip in their favor.

What does existing theory say of hope as a political concept? German philosopher Ernst Bloch's Principle of Hope argues that hope is "associated with uncovering the 'objectively real possible' that is latent in societies. Accordingly, 'educated hope' provides resources to bridge the emancipatory potential of what has not yet been realized and create openings in the present" (Lacelle-Webster, pg. 482). To Bloch, hope is not blind optimism or unrealistic imagination, but rather an educated understanding of what is necessary to achieve the most realistic, valuable outcome. In democratic politics, this would be efforts such as community organizing, information dissemination, political consumerism, etc. However, Bloch's implication of inevitability ("not yet") of hope's success contradicts the unpredictable, entropic nature of democratic politics.

Contrary to Ernst Bloch's more positive interpretation of political hope, German American philosopher Hannah Arendt holds a less valuable opinion on hope in politics. In fact, Arendt is rather skeptical of hope as a means to political agency: "…warns against the misdirection of hope in her discussion of the modern means of destruction as it can entail an anti-political strand aimed at curbing the uncertainty and unpredictability of politics. This critique echoes a long tradition that warns against the tendency of hope to misdirect political agency and cloud political judgement" (Lacelle-Webster, pg. 484).

To Arendt, political hope can be dangerous, as it can replace agency with banality. A blind expectation that others will solve the most pressing issues themselves. In this sense, "desperate hope and desperate fear" are "two sides of the same medal" (Lacelle-Webster, pg. 484). Counterintuitively, Arendt does speak to a certain "hope for the world," grounded in the in-betweenness the world offers individuals. This intersubjectivity enables ideas to be interpreted in every way imaginable, allowing for people to gather respective to their interpretation of the world. In that sense, Arendt allows hope to be seen as a byproduct of existence and a key tool to human organizing.
Through history and existing theory, Antonin Lacelle-Webster's democratic theory of hope understands political hope as something rooted in collective experience. The "in-betweenness" that Arendt

highlights, is a necessary precondition for political hope to function. In other words, the ability to hope with others must be available for hope to translate into agency. With this precondition in mind, he suggests "that (1) natality, (2) action and (3) promises provide the normative basis for a democratic theory of hope" (Lacelle-Webster 479). Natality, as Arendt suggests, offers the belief that the opportunity for something new is constant, and the open-endedness of politics is beneficial to new ideas. The actualization of natality's new beginnings is the next step in one expecting the unexpected. Seeing the words and deeds offered by others in the new beginning is an essential motivator for hope. Finally, "the collective power that promise-making sustains and actualizes" (Lacelle-Webster 492) alludes to 'democratic trust,' the idea that to translate hope into agency, individuals must trust and rely on one another.

Harvey Milk is a follower of the long tradition of political figures using hope as a storytelling tool. Furthermore, his rhetoric reaffirms Lacelle-Webster's theoretical framework, serving as a quintessential arbiter of political hope. Milk's story at its core is one of hope. Running for office as an openly gay man when no other openly gay men had won office in America before is hopeful. It is offering something unprecedented, yet possible. Milk's political campaigns positioned himself as a member of a movement, not an individual.

This pushed the desire for collective power. Karen A. Foss's The Logic of Folly in the Political Campaigns of Harvey Milk writes: "Milk's use of the strategies of laughter, reversal, simultaneous insider/outsider, and transcendence effectively allowed him to court two different constituencies at once. Each of these techniques succeeds because it contains two levels of meaning that work in concert: laughter takes precedence over talk; reversal shows two paired worlds, each with alternative possibilities; the insider/outsider aspect of folly allows for competing vantage points to coexist; and transcendence depends on incorporating competing perspectives but rising above them all to see the whole picture" (Foss 24).
Through an understanding of the history of hope in politics and a democratic theoritical framework of hope, Harvey Milk's story and rhetoric demonstrate how Milk is a prime example of using hope to spark political agency.

The Mayor of Castro Street

With around 32,000 votes cast, Harvey Milk had lost the 1975 race for San Francisco City/County Supervisor by his smallest margin yet. Just 3,630 votes short of having a queer voice in office, and a. A seat at the table. This was his third all-out campaign in just four years. Two supervisorial campaigns and a "Hail Mary" effort for the State Assembly. Folks were tired. Tired of investing money into an "unserious" candidate. Tired of the disrespect dealt by those who oppose LGBTQ visibility. Tired of losing. Through all the loss, it could be concluded that San Francisco was just not ready for a gay public official. Milk disagreed. As he strived for a coveted seat on the Board of Supervisors, with each campaign, Milk gained support. Milk did not see these campaigns as losses. He saw them as progress and that San Francisco was warming up to the idea of an openly gay candidate. He saw them as hope and a means of garnering collective power. So, Milk decided to run once again for a seat on the Board in 1977.

This time was going to be different. Up until his third bid for supervisor, Milk's campaign had been run by close friends, neighbors, and promising strangers he picked off the street. Milk called up Anne Kronenberg, a previous customer of his business, "Castro Cameras," with the purpose of being his campaign manager. Kronenberg had only spent two years in San Francisco then, moving to the Bay Area to feel more comfortable openly identifying as a lesbian. "I was 23. Here's this punk kid who knows nothing about campaigns except that I loved them," noted Kronenberg in the documentary, The Times of Harvey Milk. The young motorcycle riding and leather jacket wearing Kronenberg provided a level of grit that matched Milk's, which led to her replacing his lover, Scott Smith, as campaign manager. "Scottie" had moved from New York to San Francisco with Milk and had managed the past three campaigns for him. Milk loved Smith, but if he learned anything from his previous campaigns, it was that a minority cannot win a majority of the votes, unless they organize with other minorities in the community. Kronenberg added gay women to the cause, tilting the support of the LGBTQ community in his favor, a group that had previously struggled to organize before Milk. This campaign re-

vamp did not just stop at the managerial level. "We had volunteers in all shapes and sizes. From [little kids] up to 70-year-old women who wanted to be doing something...It was a nice mix of people" Kronenberg said (The Times of Harvey Milk 16:38-16:59).

Milk's new campaigning strategy led by Kronenberg was not the only thing going his way. For once, the law was on Milk's side. A year before the fourth campaign began, State Senator George Moscone had won the 1976 race for Mayor of San Francisco. Mayor Moscone was an ally of Milk's, sharing the philosophy that every neighborhood in San Francisco should be represented by one of their own. At that point, if you were a San Franciscan voter, you would choose eleven of the couple of dozen candidates for supervisor to make up the Board. This meant that eleven candidates from one, large, wealthy neighborhood could win every seat, despite just representing a portion of the city. Moscone and others knew this needed to change if a diversity of voices were to ever be achieved. So, shortly after Moscone took office, he "...and his allies, including Harvey Milk, set about designing a plan for neighborhood people to run the city they lived in. The plan, called 'District Elections,' would allow candidates for supervisor, such as Harvey Milk, to run from districts, rather than the city at large" (The Times of Harvey Milk 10:38-10:59). The "District Elections" plan was proposed and passed with little contestation. Now, for Milk to be victorious, he only needed to secure the votes of those residing in his neighborhood, District 5, which he already had done back in '73.

On the night of November 7th, 1977, the crummy backroom of Milk's camera store filled with scrapped up furniture and campaign memorabilia, formerly referred to as his campaign headquarters, was filled beyond capacity with members of the campaign and supporters, anxiously listening to the radio for the results of the election. In the center of it all was Harvey Milk, with a confident smirk that eased the worries of those around him. A part of him knew this time was different. As the results were announced on the radio and the small television box in the corner of the room, it was clear that Milk had won his third bid for supervisor with ease.

Campaign headquarters roared with cheers as supporters filtered into the streets, an idea that the rest of the neighborhood also seemed to have. Local news compared the atmosphere of the Castro that night to a New Year's celebration. The streets crowded, music blasting, and countless rainbow flags being waved for all to see—Milk too partied like it was the New Year. When he began his fourth campaign, Milk vowed not to to not take a sip of alcohol until the election was over. With a beer in hand and surrounded by his closest friends, Milk addressed the city. In an interview in the crowded street, Milk stated what this victory meant to him: "I am just a figurehead, the one who happened to step out of the back room. I am the one who happens to have done it. It is your victory, and I do not mean just the ones who worked and voted for me... The opponents threw everything against us—innuendos, phony endorsements, and all—and we still won." Openly combating public acts of homophobia was still a relatively new concept. Milk knew he was not the only gay man qualified to make history like he did, and he made that clear more than once. It just happened to be Milk. And now, it was time to not just serve the LGBTQ community, but all who reside in District 5.

In the 98 precincts included in the district, Milk came out on top in 60 of them and second in 33. But what was District 5? The heart of the district resided in Castro Street or better known as "The Castro." The Castro was once a quiet town dominated by European immigrants, but by the late 1950s, tens of thousands of young Americans began to move to the developing area. During World War II, many of the gay men who settled in the Castro were soldiers who served during the war and were discharged because of their sexual orientation. Castro Street gained the national reputation of being an area that was safe for LGBTQ people, mostly gay men, to move to, which led to the Castro being nicknamed the "gay mecca" of America by 1970 (The Harvey Milk Foundation).

Milk was just one of the thousands who continued fleeing to the Castro throughout the 70s in search of acceptance and comfort to live an openly gay life. In 1972, with lover Scott Smith, Milk moved into 575 Castro Street. The first floor became the headquarters of his next entrepreneurial endeavor, "Castro Cameras," and the second floor his home. Milk's magnetic energy made his camera store a hotspot for

gay men. He was probably more successful at making his backroom a community center-like space than actually selling cameras. But personal financial success was unimportant to Milk, because now, he could do anything in the "gay capital" of California.

After spending a brief time in the neighborhood, Milk learned that even Castro Street had some work to do before it was ready for a gay man to publicly represent it. Once "Castro Cameras" was open for business, Milk noticed a few other neighboring ventures with a little white sign in the corner of their windows. It said, "Eureka Valley Merchant's Association." Not only was this organization's intended purpose to network, facilitate communication and create foot traffic, but it also sent a message that you were an established member of the community. The businessperson in Milk wanted in. He ventured across the street, entering businesses that had the little white calling card visible for all to see, inquiring how to become a member. Milk was met with nothing but unhelpfulness and hateful remarks, as he had already made it quite clear to the neighbors that he and Scottie were more than friends. Milk was too stubborn to end up a part of nothing. Witnessing the ignorance and hate firsthand, he decided to form his own group, called the "Castro Village Association."

Rather than ask those business owners to change affiliations, Milk explored the town, finding every LGBTQ-friendly establishment that had also been denied and convinced them to join his Association. This small act of protest was a big moment in Milk's understanding of economic power.

Coining the phrase, "Buy Gay," he philosophized that gay customers must seek out gay businesses and that gay merchants should incentivize gay money being spent at their businesses so that the LGBTQ community could have economic bargaining power in their communities. And it worked. Members of the Association would share information with one another about what businesses to buy from and not, ultimately hurting the Merchant's Association financially. Using economic power, the gay community had forced their homophobic neighbors to tolerate them, cracking open the door for acceptance.

The push for LGBTQ acceptance in the Castro would come with resistance. In fact, at the beginning of the 1970s, the Castro was not incredibly different for a queer person than in any other city in America. In fact, homosexuality was still criminalized in most states, a common justification for the police force to consistently raid gay bars and enact physical harm towards LGBTQ folks. The same year Milk began his first campaign, only 11% percent of Americans believed homosexuality was not wrong at all (General Social Survey). It was legal almost everywhere in the country to discriminate based on sexual orientation in the 1970s. No wonder hope was a foreign concept to many LGBTQ Americans. However, thanks to the activism of a few, gay acceptance was now being talked about from the local level to nationwide discussions, such as those who participated in the Stonewall Riots of 1969 or the election of openly gay candidates, like Supervisor Milk. Rhetoric for both support and opposition to gay rights was growing in tandem with the abundance of activism and the collectivization of LGBTQ communities across the country. The open-ended discussions forming across the country allowed people to imagine a potential future for queer folks that was better than the status quo. Rhetoric, good or bad, meant that people were talking and that people were changing their minds, persuading their neighbors, and fighting for acceptance. "Unless you have dialogue, unless you open the walls of dialogue, you can never reach to change people's opinion" said Milk in a discussion with constituents (An Archive of Hope 139). The logic was that once people were talking about gay rights, then the voices of leadership could step forward to represent the idea. Once figureheads were granted attention, then the world would see that gay people were not so terrible. That they were just as American as them. And that they were just as fed up with government inefficiency and the misuse of their tax dollars.

Milk was widely viewed as running on populsit policies, presenting himself as an everyday person addressing the issues that affected ordinary citizens. He considered his policies to represent more of a "common sense" style of politics. Having accessible day care centers for working mothers, more public transit, encouraging industry to set up shop in abandoned areas, getting San Franciscans to clean up their dog's poop; all the things that neighbors actually complained to each other about, he ran on. There was

nothing that angered Milk more than ordinary people getting the short end of the stick from decisions made by those in power.

One morning, while Milk was running the camera store, a woman in distress entered his establishment. She was a public-school teacher looking for a cheap projector to rent because the nearby school she worked at could not offer her one. Milk could not believe this. How could it be that a country spending millions on the war in Vietnam, that seemed to have had no end in sight, also had public schools back home incapable of purchasing the resources they need to educate their students? As his business gained traction, Milk heard more about situations like the teacher's. The city prioritized building a parking garage over a community center; unions faced scrutiny for organizing; police brutality was on the rise; the list goes on and on.

Milk made an effort to develop an opinion on every matter facing his city (and made many comments on federal affairs in his spare time). In an interview with a local reporter during his second campaign, he emphasized that "Any single neighborhood issue, or city issue, over the last five years, you found Harvey Milk taking a stand, one way or the other, but taking a stand" (The Times of Harvey Milk 14:00-14:08). Milk's strong opinions on every minute issue exhausted most opposition he faced in his political career. He was stubborn, loud, and never scared to correct ignorance, but Milk was not always this strong headed.

Milk grew up in Woodmere, Long Island by a Jewish, working-class family. He and his older brother were first- generation Americans, for their parents immigrated from Lithuania after World War I. In his youth, Milk was bullied for how he looked—a late bloomer with big ears. This may have contributed to him being considered shy as a child, but Milk mentioned more than once that it is because, deep down, he knew he was different. Nevertheless, this feeling of difference did not disallow Milk's passion for community to shine. He "...was a popular student with wide-ranging interests, from opera to playing football" (Harvey Milk Foundation).

After high school, Milk went to New York State College. Graduating in 1951 with degrees in math and history, he joined naval school. Milk only spent four years in the navy, reaching the rank of lieutenant junior grade. Milk may have spent many more years in the service if not asked to resign after being questioned about his sexual orientation, a similar experience to the many service members who settled in the Castro after World War II. With no future in the military, Milk used his math degree to step foot into the world of Wall Street as a stock analyst. It paid the bills, but Milk felt stunted by the position's inability to create societal change. The Vietnam War changed things for Milk as well. In the 1960s, Milk had quit his stock analyst job in protest of the American capitalist machine, burning his credit card in protest of the United States' decisions in Vietnam (The Harvey Milk Foundation). He had finally found his voice in the heat of demonstration and protest. Vietnam was the spark that lit the flame called Harvey Milk, a fire that once lit, only continued to burn brighter as more wrongdoings caught his attention.

Almost two decades after he first protested the Vietnam War, Harvey Milk had won public office, proving to all that change is possible through the system. Now, it was time to get to work and practice what he has preached for the last six years. Milk was one of eleven members who made up the Board of Supervisors. The 1977 election cycle appeared to be a more progressive victory beyond just getting Milk into office.

The first avowed women's rights advocate, the first Chinese American, and the first Black woman were also sworn into public office as Supervisors. Mayor Moscone's new "District Elections" plan worked, and for his benefit. The City/County of San Francisco's government worked quite uniquely than most cities and counties in the United States at that time, as the Board of Supervisors and the Mayor of San Francisco have a "dual governing" system. Meaning, the Mayor (executive branch) and the Board of Supervisors (legislative branch) have similar levels of power. So, for productive change to occur, the two parties must be on the same page to make that change happen. This is quite common today, but the legislative bodies of other big cities were rather weak at that time.

Milk fell into the part of supervisor quite naturally. Every day, as he approached the magnificent gold and pearly white City Hall, he was reminded of his

purpose. The San Francisco City Hall was elegant and grand, as if it had been plucked from a Parisian civic center. The interior was just as spectacular as the exterior. As you walked in, you were greeted with the grand staircase, countless steps made of polished granite that led to Milk's dream. Milk thought it was important to always take the stairs because it made for a dramatic entrance, a declaration that he was there to stay. That was the attitude he brought to every public setting, supervisor or not. Milk announced his first campaign on the corner of Casto Street standing on a literal soapbox. Another theatrical moment of Milk's was during a citywide initiative to get citizens to pick up their dog poop in parks. With a scheduled interview with the press at one of San Francisco's parks about the issue, Supervisor Milk had planted dog poop in the area earlier that day so he could "accidentally" step in it, proving the dog poop issue is getting out of hand. Milk believed that "Politics is theater. It doesn't matter if you win. You make a statement. You say, 'I'm here, pay attention to me'" (An Archive of Hope 189). If people were talking, Milk had done his job.

Not only did he have a theatrical approach to his time in office, but he also had the confidence to back it up. In a televised interview on San Francisco's "Viewpoint," Milk was questioned about his work in office. His next big thing was passing a citywide ordinance that prohibited employers and landlords to discriminate against their employees and tenants because of their sexual orientation.

Legal repercussions for discriminating against queer people was not only a new concept for San Francisco, but practically the entire country. In fact, a legal prohibition of this behavior would not be enforced nationwide until nearly 43 years later with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Bostock v. Clayton County. Viewpoint reporter Jerry Burns inquired how this ordinance materialized: "So this time it passed ten to one. What happened?" in which the Supervisor responded, "Harvey Milk." Milk knew he had a knack for getting along with everyone, and he used that to his advantage (6thFloorControl 2:20-2:30). However, the anti-discrimination ordinance did not pass unanimously. The one vote not in favor of the ordinance belonged to Supervisor Dan White; another member added to the board for that election cycle.

Dan White ran on what he championed as "family values." What White had meant by "family values" are the norms in his neighborhood, District 8, that produced a man like him. Dan White was a proud firefighter and Irish Catholic who thought that because "...old-fashioned values built this country," San Francisco ought to keep those old-fashioned values alive (The Times of Harvey Milk 23:04-23:12). While this persona was appealing enough to get him elected in one of the most conservative districts in the city, White would struggle to find his footing in City Hall. White was a plain dressed and plain-speaking man who ruffled no feathers. His skill of persuasion was rather weak compared to his fellow supervisors, especially Milk, and at times he seemed quite frustrated with the ecosystem that is local government. However, he was perhaps the most assured in regard to his dissent of Milk's vision for their city's future. Not only did White cast the sole dissenting vote for Milk's anti-discrimination ordinance, but he had also outwardly condemned the homosexuality "lifestyle" and the threat it posed to the nature of San Francisco. Milk and White could not have been further apart in their approaches to government, and the state of California would soon grant them the chance to put their ideologies to the test.

Ten months into Milk and White's term as supervisors, California State Senator John Briggs formulated a campaign around Proposition 6, a motion that, if passed by California voters, would deny LGBTQ Californians the ability to teach in public schools. This meant that any openly queer person who was currently a public-school teacher would be at risk of losing their job and possibly their teaching license altogether. Milk was appalled by the rhetoric Senator Briggs was spearheading and took it upon himself to publicly oppose all notions in support of the proposition. Mayor Moscone and others saw Milk's passion for the matter and assisted in getting Briggs to agree to a series of public debates against him. In gymnasiums, high schools, and town halls across California, the Christian nationalist and gay rights activist battled to persuade voters.

Briggs saw this proposition as an act to protect children while also comparing homosexuals to prostitutes and pedophiles. He thought that if a homosexual

teacher were to teach children, they would be more likely to become homosexual. In one televised interview, Milk rebutted with a personal anecdote: "I was born of homosexual parents. I was taught by heterosexual teachers in a fiercely heterosexual society with television ads and newspaper ads...a society that puts down homosexuality. And why am I homosexual if I'm affected by role models? I should have been a heterosexual" (The Times of Harvey Milk 35:48-36:02). While his logic was convincing to many Californians, those in favor of "Prop. 6" had greater influence and financial support than Milk and others. With months before voters would decide the fate of the proposition, it was unclear which way the people would favor.

To make sure Proposition 6 did not pass, it would need at least half of California voters to have a favorable view of homosexuality. Milk had an idea to make that number a reality. Throughout his campaigns, he learned that people cannot change their minds about homosexuality if they do not know who they are. Everyone had neighbors, friends, doctors, coworkers, and people in their lives they enjoyed and trusted. If these people come out to their friends and family, people will understand that LGBTQ folks already make positive impacts in their lives. So, Milk and his team led a publicity initiative to urge LGBTQ Californians to come out.

During a rally, Milk said, "If every gay person were to come out only to his or her own family, friends, neighbors and fellow workers, within days the entire state would discover that we are not the stereotypes generally assumed" (An Archive of Hope 215). Milk knew this was a big ask, especially because nobody on the radio had told people to come out of their closet before. But it was imperative that this stereotype was defeated. So, occasionally, Milk approached the subject more intensely: "Gay brothers and sisters...You must come out. Come out to your parents...I know that it is hard and will hurt them but think about how they will hurt you in the voting booth!" (An Archive of Hope 221). History will never know how many people came out to their loved ones in response to Proposition 6, but Milk and others succeeded in striking down the proposition. The final tally was 58% of voters voted "no" on Proposition 6, a clear victory for Milk and the gay rights movement. Of course, a victory for the progressive movement was interpreted as a defeat for conservatives in the Golden State.

Whilst Milk toured the state debating Briggs, Dan White led the pro-Proposition 6 movement in San Francisco. White and his district were the last leg of major conservatism in the city still standing, which did not help his unpersuasive personality garner "yes" votes for the proposition. The struggling supervisor did however increase his disdain for Milk's outspokenness or "encouragement" of homosexuality. White was often perplexed by ways of life that were not endorsed by the Catholic Church. It was how he was raised and how he intended to raise his newborn daughter. Alas, Milk's statewide attention suppressed any dissent from White. Soon after the election cycle came to an end and with extraordinarily little to show for his time in office so far, White delivered a letter of resignation to Mayor Moscone. His decision was abrupt, and his reasoning for doing so was vague. With less than a year in office, White had concluded his career in politics, or so San Francisco thought.

A week after White resigned from the Board of Supervisors, he asked for his job back. White viewed the pushback from his close ones, supporters, and the city as enough to show that he had more to do as supervisor. The ex-fireman never bothered to adapt to the political life, and he thought this ask was fair, but government does not play that way. The city's attorney general had advised Mayor Moscone that once a supervisor resigns, they cannot be reinstated. They must win another election. White's chances of winning another election at that point were low. He had committed political suicide.

As protesters from District 8 crowded the outskirts of City Hall, Moscone contemplated reinstating White, but Milk, of course, interjected. If White had been allowed to retain his board seat, he would certainly be the deciding vote to not pass some legislation Milk and Moscone had been partnering on. Despite the rules on their side, Milk had made this personal, and White knew it. Nevertheless, Moscone had decided to reject White's plea for reinstatement, and he would officially fill the District 8 seat with another politician that next week.

On November 27th, 1978, it was time for Moscone to publicly announce his decision. The clear and sunny

sky of the crisp autumnal morning was a pleasant start to Milk's morning. The expectation that his political adversary would be gone forever made it even more pleasant. He had big plans for his next three years in office. The nominees for the presidential election, President Jimmy Carter and former Governor of California Ronald Reagan, were set and he wanted to lobby for the gay vote. Before he could get to the big picture, he had countless local issues that needed to be solved. Milk continued his morning as usual, with a brainstorming meeting with his team. All those who worked in his tiny corner office had worked on his campaign, like Anne Kronenberg.

The meeting, however, was interrupted by an unexpected guest. Dan White. Asking for a quick word, Milk accepted and entered a private meeting room with the failed politician. Milk thought White was going to plea for his support to reinstate him, but Milk was never going to budge. Then, White had lost all hope. He failed. He thought Milk was to blame for his failure, that he orchestrated every moment of defeat in his political career. Guarding the door, Dan White pulled out a revolver from his suit jacket and shot Harvey Milk five times, the last bullet a fatal shot to the head. Shortly before grabbing Milk's attention, Dan White had also shot and killed Moscone in his office. Spending less than a year in office, the "Mayor of Castro Street" had passed too soon. There was so much left to do.

Harvey Milk left the world at an uncertain time. The queer community had lost its leader, and the progress gained that decade would be put to the test. More initiatives like Proposition 6 would come into fruition across the country. Some passed and some failed. Less than three years later, the AIDS epidemic would begin, resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of Americans, mostly gay men. Conservate leadership would dominate the eighties with Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, and devout Christians who openly opposed homosexuality. The Supreme Court would uphold state sodomy laws, prohibiting same sex sexual conduct. How could any gay kid have hope for the future?

Milk had preached "the only thing they have to look forward to is hope. And you have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be all right" (An Archive of Hope 155).

Hope is not a choice; it is a means of survival. A light that is required to lead one through the dark, uncertainty of the future. A sense of unyielding hope is contagious; it infects generations to keep fighting for what is right and just. That is Harvey Milk's legacy.

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Food Bank Cartoons and the Psychology of Hunger by Kayla Frawley

This essay uses *autoethnography* to situate lived experience within political science and public policy research on hunger, administrative burden, and food insecurity of single-parent households in the United States.

I learned that your body teaches you to ignore hunger cues when you aren't sure of all your next meals as a mechanism of perceived starvation. The wind across my face is warm as I walk into the back of the building through an industrial grey door where signs are taped up indicating the rules of engagement in the facility. It is late March 2025. I shuffle my shoes into a room with 2 dozen other people - all ages, many older, beaten by obvious weather exposure - wait to grab their groceries for the month, since you can come to this bank once every 3 weeks. I mentally prepare to see too much bread, maybe soups in packets, but no spices or likely not snacks that my kiddo would like. My brain gears into scarcity mode while I wait in line hoping for some main ingredients to stretch. As you reach out to grab the beans or pasta, you automatically think of how long that meal or ingredient will last.

The stress means I am worried about meals-–planning them, having ingredients for them, ensuring they are nutritional, or making sure I can preserve ingredients longer than I used to. It's stressful to say the least and being poor means you have to be a good cook, be innovative and be resourceful. The shame overcomes me, and my day gets quieter. It's been a year since going to the last food bank at John Amese Elementary School, and I felt the shame seep back in as I entered that food bank in March 2025. I had been using food banks and food programming systems like SNAP and EBT and Free Summer meals since my child was small; he is 9 years old now.

I became quieter that day, giving facial expressions and nods to the person helping me - rather than verbal responses as my self-esteem seemed to be stuck in my stomach and my voice was feeling unworthy to be expressed. There are so many rules to accessing resources that, in the process, you often feel stripped of agency in your own circumstance.

The embarrassment of advocating for myself and maintaining optimism and thankfulness is a delicate balance that will throw me into a mental breakdown some days. I hold back tears, not because it's my first time in a food bank but because I have been here before, in a different room and a different building - but begging for the same thing: just a bag of hand-me-down groceries. The remainder of the day I mull over the mental load of this entire scenario - taking time away from other things like job applications or being present with my son.

I had forgotten that day to simply forgive myself for being in this situation in the first place. The bag of groceries, after all, was just supplementing what we would eat if we had cash and more resources. The mental shift from 'I don't have' to 'it's my fault' is an ingrained pathway in the American psyche, but also the motherhood psyche (Desmond, 2023), and the community that faces economic inequity will hit us with this self-critique, whether we can rationalize our way out of it or not. This chronic stress slowly builds

post-traumatic stress disorder for me as the years continue, and year after year, I am hit with an economic emergency simply because wages don't rise fast enough for single parents. I am a perfect example of the 19% of households in Colorado that are headed by a single mom.

This chronic stress isn't much relieved, even if one can land a job with an average median income. In Denver, the average median income for a 1 person household in 2024 is more than $86,000, so to survive as a single parent, you must make more than that. In the U.S., a large portion of jobs pay wages that still won't reliably cover living costs and bring a single parent out of poverty; in 2022 alone, 30.2 million jobs (which is 20.4% of American employment) paid less than $15 an hour, which in many areas was below minimum wage when that data was captured (IBS, 2024). A single parent needs more than one job in 2024 to survive, as the American Progress report states that the majority of single parents are not making enough to sustain a living space for 2 in any major city in the United States (American Progress, 2024).

I can attest to this as I have always had more than had only one job as a parent for the last 9 years of my child's life, unless I was forced into sheer poverty and unemployment. While working at a Head Start center full time, I taught at the local hospital, while working in Policy-Advocacy full time I always had a consulting business on the side, while working at the Domestic violence shelter full time (while pregnant) - I served on a commission to further other project opportunities, when I was a waitress - I also tutored. I don't have memories of not working more than a full-time job as a parent unless I was forced into unemployment and economic desperation.

SNAP research has shown that low-wage workers face the dilemma of benefit cliffs and administrative churn whenever income rises or changes (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2023). The "cliff effect" is when someone who receives benefits no longer receives those benefits and instead loses those benefits because they now receive potentially more income (disqualifying them for benefits) but not enough to supplement the subsidies they once had received for health insurance, child care, food and cost of living - so essentially they "fall off the cliff" to economic stability they had been climbing while receiving subsidies or programmatic support (NCSL, 2024). This is a long-term result of stagnant wages as many workers simply can not afford the cost of living since wages overall remain low, indicating that single-parent households are entirely disadvantaged (Economic Policy Institute, 2015). I have experienced a cycle of the cliff effect, as most single parents have.

These kinds of challenges mean that a low-income head of household is not able to do much long-term planning, as we cannot afford to imagine much ahead - partly due to the endless time demands of the administrative benefit system itself, requiring applications, endless phone calls, staff visits, and eligibility checks. This leads to what I call survival mode – which results in an inability to do much long-term future planning, as has been widely researched (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).

The constant experience of stress triggered by just worrying about getting basic needs met is traumatizing - to say the least. Phone calls often take a couple hours of your day, and then accessing food comes usually 1 day to 3 weeks later depending on location and resources available. Based on chronic stress studies - if a family has 4 or more economic hardships they report 60% more emotional distress compared to those not experiencing those hardships and repeated interaction with state systems produces chronic stress, anxiety, shame, cognitive overload and learned helplessness (Masten, 2021).

When we are hungry, our system tricks us and tells us we are not hungry. Malnutrition and hunger signaling research shows how food insecurity alters appetite and perception (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022; NIH, 2021). Hunger shows up in funny ways. I went through the drive-thru with my son and his friend one evening and made a quick decision not to get myself anything to eat, a common and seemingly small occurrence reflecting maternal food sacrifice (McIntyre et al., 2016). My son's friend took note and asked why I wasn't eating - a reflection of how we (parents) are role modeling small sacrifices without noticing. For years I learned to be "less hungry" and while that may sound dramatic I am more concerned about making sure my son learns to never go to bed hungry - which gives him an excuse

to keep eating in the kitchen late into the night. To my regret, he often says to me "but if the rule is to not go to bed hungry" - winning the argument to keep the kitchen open.

In these many moments I was privately experiencing traumatic stress and "survival mode" through these small choices of maternal food sacrifices, and it was all too easy to believe that my problems were specific to me and my own failings. I didn't know I was 1 in 50 million people that used charitable food systems in 2023 alone. In fact, Feeding Colorado found that 12.7% of Coloradans were food insecure including an estimated 14.3% of children. That's about 715,000 Coloradans facing food insecurity, roughly equal to the entire population of Denver - the state's largest city. The Blueprint to End Hunger showed that 1 in 8 residents lacked reliable access to food - including my own family intermittently between 2022-2024. So even when I felt alone in my experience - I surely was not - food insecurity and hunger is a state problem in Colorado and a policy choice.

As a response to food insecurity, Feeding Colorado estimates that 1 million Coloradans were served by food banks but 2024 numbers are still being compiled by the state data dashboards. When I have accessed food banks in the last couple years it always starts with a phone call, or actually many phone calls. I go to the Food Bank of the Rockies website first, type in my address and I often find food banks near me but none open that day. I usually make a couple of calls before I find one I can use due to 'geographical' eligibility or timing of when they are open. I then often do a phone interview, and depending on the program or food bank, you sometimes have to bring documents that show your ID, or your address, or neither.

This process often takes a couple hours and it doesn't guarantee access to food right away. Some food banks now create ID cards for you to use - like the drive-through food bank on 24th avenue in Park Hill, where I have my foodbank ID card. Most you can visit monthly, but not more than that. When you call the representatives, they are direct with you; it's all about directions and instructions, and this bill or that document or this time or that day - everything is limited, time is scarce, and they instruct, and you listen. It's simple, but it's a dynamic you get used to - answering for your poverty and mathematically being the right formula so you can get access to groceries soon. These processes are not immediate; sometimes you get a call back in a day or two or three. You wait, you answer, you are available, and you are diligent if you expect access. After 10 years of being a systems-involved family, I am aware of the rules of engagement in safety net programs or resource programming for low-income families.

It is an additional tragedy that food insecurity in Colorado disproportionately impacts single-parent households, particularly those headed by women like myself. In 2023 alone,14.3% of Colorado children (roughly 172,540 children) went food insecure. The dynamic of low wages, limited access, and high cost of living leaves single parents to depend on food programs, often when they are full-time employed. Although approximately 80% of single mothers are employed, 4 data shows that almost 40% of these mostly working single mothers remain in poverty and rely on SNAP benefits for their family's food. This indicates the high level of stress the majority of single mothers could be living in, due to policy choices.

In Colorado in 2024, an average of 584,500 people participated in the SNAP program each month and participation was highest among single woman-led households with 36.2% of us receiving benefits - compared to just 2.8% of married couples with children. In 2023, one-third of women-led single-parent households were enrolled in SNAP - underscoring that employment does not protect single-parent households from food insecurity and poverty. This provides an insight into the stress we face every day - even when full-time employed. Any single parent living in a high-cost city like Denver can tell you how exhausting it is to constantly just 'not have enough' to do basic things. From not being able to just buy kids' shoes on time when they have a growth spurt to being unable to access Summer camps, or child care because of costs and program freezes, single-parent households are constantly compromising. We cut costs where other families don't need to, leaving single-parent households often being one financial emergency away from displacement and homelessness.

The Food Research and Action Center reported that food insecurity among women-led single-parent households reached 36.8% in 2024 and I was merely

a reflection of that statistic. When Josiah was tiny I spent time in many local and state department offices applying for state programs including WIC, SNAP, HeadStart and housing programs that were income based - while always being full time employed till 2024. His childhood has countless memories of mom waiting in lines, waiting on hold on calls, producing documentation, presenting her poverty - it's a constant exposure to seeing a parent vulnerable and to seeing a parent navigate a system they depend on. The experience of food insecurity is different for mothers than other household members - as we tend to be responsible for household food decisions (with single mothers leading every decision). Mothers are known to shield children from experiencing food insecurity by limiting their own food intake like I had learned to over the years (Liebe, 2023).

Food insecurity as we know it disproportionately affects women care givers (otherwise known as mothers) with incomes below the United States federal poverty level. For example in 2022 12.8% of all United States households experienced food insecurity while 33.1% of households headed by single mothers experienced food insecurity. We were 2.5 times more likely to experience food insecurity than non-single mothers in 2022 (Rabbitt, 2023).

It wasn't every day that I entered a food bank that was so clearly built for families like mine like that of John Amese Elementary Food Bank. Out of the food banks I had been to in Denver metro this one was the kindest, the least assuming, the most nutritionally diverse and instead of being burdensome - I found it relieving. I found the process dignifying. Food banks can reflect the real dignity of those that rely on them, and can be structured in a way to uplift those who shop there. The John Amese Elementary school food bank was set up by the Food Bank of the Rockies post COVID, as many food banks in the public school system were built at that time.

The last time I went to the food-bank at John Amese Elementary School I was in awe. They had created a market with fresh fruits and vegetables, which wasn't what I expected since this kind of fresh food experience was never the food bank atmosphere I encountered when Josiah was tiny. Food insecurity is an invisible war on our nervous system, which scarcity and cognitive load research describes as chronic stress reshaping decision-making and emotional regulation over time (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).
I stepped inside the room that had been crafted into a market, where staff took us from the front entrance down the hall to this larger room where cardboard posters and images had been created beautifully to tell us where the groceries were. This cardboard food bank market had a childlike effect on me, seeming as if this was all unreal, cartoonish and light-hearted. I disassociated a little - it's always a bit surreal in a food bank. The cardboard marketed aisles and posters that read "fresh fruit for you and loved ones" and the packaged snacks that I knew my son would like all looked back at me and said in a cartoonish, poetic gesture, "We got you! You deserve to have groceries!" I felt like I belonged in a weird way - the cartoons, they worked, and they aligned with dignity-centered, client-choice food access models that made me relax actually. There was real food, real produce and vegetables.

I walked down that food bank aisle, all of its seven feet, as all the cardboard signs were cartoon heroes that reminded me that it was okay to grab what we needed, because this place is for families like mine. The artistic value in the cartoon bunny and giraffe told me that many families enter this food bank inside Denver Public Schools - that was once a supply room (Food Bank of the Rockies, 2024).

The staff member that was helping me was so put together I couldn't help but notice how nice her nails were and her eyeliner was perfectly winged. She was probably younger than me by a year or two. I imagined she didn't have children, but that is me being naturally biased. I can tell she treats me and everyone the same, same talking points and instructions, a normal amount of compassionate energy, and no fake condolences or facial expressions. I like her. I trust her, I relax. I can tell she is really good at what he does.

That is what we do: we scan the faces and demographics of the people that help us, we automate comparisons in our minds, a response described in trauma literature as hyper-vigilance under economic precarity. Pattern recognition becomes a second language for those of us that live in scarcity. It is all a part of

our nervous system and the neurobiology of stress that supports us getting our basic needs met in the first place. When your basic needs are not being met, you scan the environment, the cultural norms, and very quickly you become the most aware person in the room. Lived experience is expertise in these micro-moments when humans are seeking to get needs met.

I was slow in my movements as I finished the shopping that day. I was slow in my breathing and on the brink of crying the whole time - just because stress adds up and relief is overwhelming. Being thankful I finally would have a couple days' worth of meals to not worry about, but also thankful I had found a warm-handed, dignified resource I could come back to. Food hubs like this one were left over from COVID-19 and set up inside public schools as part of emergency food infrastructure that remains necessary for Denver metro families.

Jump to October 2025, when I am still a single parent who has now suddenly become unemployed. This time during a federal government shutdown, the Trump administration paused and delayed full SNAP benefit disbursements. This created uncertainty about benefit delivery and sent my household and 600,000 other Coloradans into scarcity survival mode. I was suddenly laid off, and again fell off the benefit cliff into hunger and despair like so many of my fellow Coloradans.

I knew - in my own solitude - that I was among thousands. Except for this time we knew SNAP was not coming on time in November 2025, or at least that a pause was being threatened. There was some good fortune in that my home state, Colorado, sued the federal government to force the USDA to use their contingency funds to issue SNAP benefits which joined 2 dozen other states in legal action. Colorado also began processing full payments for some recipients even before the U.S. Supreme Court administrative stay intervened. Organizations and food banks worked to make sure that food resources were available to families while benefits were delayed. While federal food programming felt bottle-necked, local nonprofits and local government scrambled fast to make up for the lapse. Except, as a recipient I can tell you that the pause in wondering if you will get food even for a couple days to a week changes everything in your household and families absolutely felt the lack of certainty in gigantic ways. The threat of losing a basic necessity like daily meals disrupts the nervous system and research indicates that food insecurity is linked to greater stress and psychological distress. In the end, The state of Colorado secured $10 million in emergency food assistance funding to support food banks. I received my SNAP benefits eventually when Colorado rapidly began delivering full November SNAP benefits to recipients. Eventually, we were able to grocery shop again, but the scars of stress remain.

I am back in the food bank at John Amese Elementary - the food bank left over from Covid. This time in a dream. I am walking through the cartoon-lit aisle to grab groceries. I am clearly dreaming because my son is laughing in my arms: a toddler, his hair curlier and his giggle softer. We are shopping and laughing and this time the aisles have everything we love. The healthy snacks, the not-so-healthy snacks and the proteins and the vegetables. We get exactly what we need. We do not worry, we simply go home to cook a meal, knowing we can return and get groceries whenever we need (this is a dream that does not exist in reality).

When I wake from such dreams, what stays with me is not the food nor the lack of it, but the way these systems shape our bodies, our decisions, our nervous systems, and our dignity. This lived experience of scarcity ripples far into our lives through our daily decisions while we remain under stress we couldn't control in the first place. These small waiting rooms, interview questions, and the food bank staff themselves are missing from policy conversations about what hunger really looks like now in America. Autoethnography allows those realities to function as evidence.

Our food bank lines tell the story of what hunger is now in America and how many communities are accustomed to begging for their basic needs to be met. Over time this stress overcomes us, messaging that we are at fault for a policy choice - well beyond our individual control. Hunger is never just about food. It is also about human dignity, self-esteem, physical energy and capacity to self-advo-

cate. Most importantly, hunger is a policy choice written into federal, state and local budget line items.

The recent attacks by the Trump administration on SNAP amplifies this truth - that policy shapes who gets access to benefits, who can deal with the administrative burdens, who can eat and who can feed their children. The administrative burden of getting our basic needs met is not on our shoulders, it is on the shoulders of those that create the state budget, craft the local budget and that lead the programs for food security in our communities. Every budget line item in a program that serves people should tell a story about how they are fed as well. When we do not have leaders who have navigated these programs who are also developing them and increasing their efficiency we will remain in a stuck place where single parents are consistently working two jobs to sustain and low income earners are comprising other arenas of their lives to just - simply eat.

For example, we have to reclaim our hunger in budget line items after a major loss in preventing hunger was established in The Big Beautiful Bill. As a part of One Big Beautiful Bill Act sponsors reduced the amount of federal money that supports SNAP programing over the next 10 years, which policy analyses say could amount to $186 billion to $230 billion in cuts to SNAP funding through 2034 - essentially guaranteeing hunger for families for another decade.

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From Apathy to Public Virtue: A Proposal to Strengthen Democracy in an Individualistic Era

by Francisco Luis Chica

There is a word that generates repulsion and fear in the current political environment for many people in the United States and even the rest of the world because people tend to associate it with a particular party (the Republican Party of the United States) that endorsed Donald Trump twice and has accompanied harsh immigration policies and imperialism that have destroyed many families and people's lives. That word is "republicanism." This essay seeks to vindicate the concept of republicanism and reintroduce it through the revisited versions proposed by Ovejero (2005) and Camps (2019). This piece will begin by providing a definition of republicanism through Ovejero's lens; it will then discuss disaffection and individualism in today's world (concepts that undermine the best traditions of republicanism) and finally propose reigniting republicanism and public virtues through a process of "left populism" proposed by Mouffe (2019) as a strategy to mobilize people and aggregate demands.

Republicanism is a political tradition that emerged around the Enlightenment and is based on the importance of civic virtue and political participation, the dangers of corruption, the benefits of a mixed constitution, and the rule of law in shaping the formation and justification of modern democratic states up to the present day (Lovett, 2022, 1). Similarly, Aristotle, in his book Politics, conceives politics not merely as a mechanism for survival or the protection of private interests, but as a collective activity oriented toward living well in accordance with virtue–a concept that can be associated with notions of republicanism (Aristotle, 1999).

The good citizen in these theoretical traditions of republicanism is defined by deliberation, active participation, and the capacity to rule and be ruled within the political community (Ovejero, 2005).
This classical republican understanding has deeply influenced modern constitutional traditions, particularly the idea that freedom depends not only on rights, but also on citizens' active involvement in public life (Camps, 2019). However, contemporary societies seem to be far from this ideal, as capitalism and neoliberal policies and governments have reshaped political institutions and social relations, reducing citizenship to simply voting and redefining government as a protector of private property and individual interests (Medellín, 2010). Victoria Camps (2019) asserts that modern individuals have become increasingly self-centered, pursuing self-realization and satisfaction primarily through consumption, and that this shift in the perception of politics and active citizenship affects democratic participation, critical thought, and civic virtues.

This essay proposes that, given the different challenges that many democracies around the world are facing, it is necessary to revisit and recover key elements of classical republicanism in order to strengthen these regimes, and recover the values of civic virtue, deliberation, and participation. To

do so, left-wing populism is an interesting strategy that could be used to mobilize excluded groups and make visible demands that have historically gone unaddressed. Although classical republicanism is typically thought of as a "neutral" tradition that advocates for wise leadership and engaged citizens independent of their political orientation, today's world of right-wing celebrated neoliberalism and outright political brutality leads to the conclusion that an ideologically informed practice of left-wing populism might be a necessary strategy to recuperate the classic virtues of republicanism. By drawing on republican theory, left populism, and a revalorization of public virtues (Camps, 2019), this analysis explores how democracy can move from political apathy toward meaningful civic engagement.

Political Disaffection, Individualism, and the Crisis of Citizenship

Contemporary democratic societies face a widespread crisis of political participation, and many citizens believe politics is distant, technocratic, or irrelevant to their everyday struggles (Camps, 2019). Economic insecurity, long working hours, and precarious living conditions leave little time or energy for public engagement. As a result, citizenship is often reduced to periodic electoral participation, while deliberation and collective decision-making disappear from daily life.

This disengagement is not accidental, but historically and structurally produced. As Gramsci (1971, 277) notes, "the starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date." Understanding political apathy therefore requires recognizing how neoliberal capitalism has reshaped subjectivities, prioritizing competition, self-interest, and individual success over collective responsibility. To further illustrate this last idea, one of the main figures of neoliberalism, Margaret Thatcher, once said that there is no society, only individuals: "who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first" (Tatcher, 1987).

That idea of individuals looking to themselves first and being politically and socially disengaged worried Tocqueville (1835/1840). He warned that although democracy could protect individual liberties, it could also foster isolation and social atomization if citizens retreat into private life. Putnam (2000) adds empirical evidence of recent developments relevant to this concern through his analysis of declining social capital, which demonstrates how civic associations, trust, and community engagement have eroded over time. For these reasons, it can be argued that multiple factors and dynamics have, over time, weakened the public sphere and undermined the conditions necessary for republican self-government as Aristotle conceived it: citizens who practiced virtue, and institutions that were strong and educative enough to cultivate it collectively.

Within this context, neoliberalism and capitalism have changed the way the state is perceived, shifting from an expression of popular sovereignty and living well to a neutral administrator that defends property, markets, and certain liberties (Medellín, 2010; Camps, 2019). It is evident that political institutions have lost legitimacy while elites consolidate power, deepening citizens' sense of exclusion and distrust (Camps, 2019). According to the Pew Research Center (2025) only 17% of Americans trusted the federal government. This figure illustrates the trends described above and urges academics and politicians to conceptualize ways to revitalize democracy and reconsider our role as citizens.

Revitalizing Classical Republicanism and Civic Participation

Classical republicanism offers a powerful framework to address this democratic deficit and political disaffection. For Aristotle (1999), a just political order depends on citizens' capacity to deliberate, participate, and cultivate virtue through shared institutions. Freedom, therefore, is not conceptualized as in many modern and contemporary theories, such as the negative freedom proposed by Isaiah Berlin (1969), as the mere absence of interference. But rather as protection from domination through collective self-rule, embodied in the polis (Aristotle, 1999; Ovejero, 2005; Camps, 2019).

Contemporary republican theorists have attempted to revive this insight by emphasizing non-domina-

tion, deliberation, and institutional accountability. Medellín argues that republicanism "seeks to rescue the citizen from their atomism, from their apolitical stance that prevents them from looking beyond their private conditions of well-being," (2010, 66) encouraging participation in a public sphere that belongs to citizens rather than political elites. Politics, in this view, is not limited to the debates and decisions of representatives, but emerges through social interdependence and collective deliberation among the broader citizenry.

Ovejero, drawing on Skinner, reinforces this argument by highlighting the importance of constant citizen oversight. As he explains, "defending the 'freedom of the republic' is the best way to guarantee the freedom of each individual" (Ovejero, 2005, 111–112). Without active participation and civic virtue, institutions become vulnerable to elite capture, lose their democratic character, and may devolve into authoritarian regimes that prevent the most vulnerable and excluded groups from fully enjoying their lives and cultivating civic virtues.

There are multiple historic and contemporary examples that demonstrate the viability of this republican vision, where citizens take an active role not only in holding elected officials accountable, but also in participating in decision-making processes. Participatory town halls were common in Colonial New England. More recently labor union deliberations among membership, the Civil Rights Movement, and community organizing initiatives illustrate how collective deliberation and moral responsibility can hold power accountable and foster critical engagement with government. Another example is the growing use of participatory budgeting in many cities in the United States and Latin America. Ramirez and Franco (2021) in a comparative study of Medellin (Colombia), San Juan (Puerto Rico), Porto Belo (Brazil) and La Plata (Argentina), argue that participatory budgeting can expand citizen participation and deliberation, and strengthen mechanisms of accountability.

Additionally, in my own experience with grassroots organizing, I have seen disadvantaged communities and neighbors collectively identify priorities, conduct research, debate solutions, and exercise oversight over public government. They reach a point where the systems in place affect their lives so profoundly that they overcome atomization, realizing that no one else will achieve for them what they want to accomplish themselves (Medellín, 2010). These individuals begin to look beyond their private lives, dreaming and working toward a collective future that can only be built within the public sphere and that belongs to the citizens, not just the political or economic elite. In this way, community organizing embodies citizens who "engage in politics to the extent that they act in interdependence and make deliberation the path to developing their freedom and equality protected by the law" (Medellín, 2010, 66).

Left Populism as a Strategy for Inclusion and Mobilization

While republicanism provides a normative foundation for democratic life, it often struggles to mobilize those who feel excluded from political institutions. In this sense, left-wing populism, as proposed by Chantal Mouffe (2019), addresses this gap by articulating diverse social grievances into a collective political subject. As Mouffe (2019, 17) defines it, left populism is "a discursive strategy to construct the political boundary between 'the people' and 'the oligarchy'… required to recover and deepen democracy." Though classical republicanism does not advance a liberal or conservative political agenda per se, in today's US context of corrupt governance and escalating economic equality–broadly supported by the modern Republican party–it may be the case that a politicized form of "left wing populism" is necessary to revive classic republican values.

In this context, populism functions as an electoral and mobilizing strategy capable of uniting workers, immigrants, precarious middle classes, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements against hegemonic power structures. Mouffe (2019, 39) emphasizes that this strategy seeks to create a "we" capable of confronting oligarchic domination and challenging the neoliberal consensus. However, populism alone does not guarantee civic virtue, institutional stability, or deliberative practices.

Mouffe (2019, 25) also suggests that populism "is not an ideology". It is a flexible strategy and approach that lacks fixed programmatic content and

allows for the mobilization of diverse demands. Since it is not fixed (meaning it does not serve only one purpose and can be adjusted to fit different ideologies, political leaders, and discourses) it carries risks of volatility, moral ambiguity, and authoritarian tendencies if it is not anchored in democratic norms and supported by genuine civic virtue (which allows political actors to exercise it wisely). Therefore, populism should be understood as instrumental rather than foundational: a tool for mobilizing participation that must be complemented by republican institutions and civic virtues (Ovejero, 2005; Mouffe, 2019; Camps, 2019). This combination ensures not only the conquest of power during campaigns or elections, but also the building of everyday power that shapes conceptions of government, social interactions, and beliefs, keeping citizens engaged in the public sphere.

The Role of Public Virtues

Victoria Camps provides the ethical and moral bridge between republicanism (that emphasizes a "neutral" civic virtue) and the concept of left-wing populist mobilization (which advocates for conflict and tension). She argues that democracy cannot rely solely on legal rights or institutional design, but requires a moral transformation of citizens' dispositions. As Camps (2019, 44) states, "democracy must create habits of behavior, attitudes, and mindsets that are understanding, responsible, and supportive." Camps (2019) criticizes the dominance of bourgeois virtues in the contemporary world (such as efficiency, productivity, and individual success) which have displaced public virtues like solidarity, respect, and tolerance from the political and social core. She also problematizes individual rights achieved under neoliberalism, arguing that they remain hollow without corresponding moral obligations, and calls for what she terms "personal, social, and political voluntarism" (Camps, 2019, 46). This kind of republicanism ultimately leads to building communities in which people seek not only self-interest, but a collective living well, as Aristotle asserted.

From a republican perspective, participation without deliberation is insufficient. This is not simply about turnout in presidential or congressional elections. Ovejero, Medellín, and Camps argue that citizens must understand why they mobilize, how institutions function, and what consequences political decisions entail. As Ovejero (2005, 121) notes, "democracy does not devolve into tyranny when it results from a deliberative process." Deliberation prevents societies from moving toward tyrannical or authoritarian regimes, but deliberation itself requires civic virtues. Public virtues thus become the condition for non-domination, just laws, and meaningful inclusion.

Now, this kind of deliberation, supported and mediated by the strategy of left-wing populism to conquer and maintain power by evoking historical demands that have gone unaddressed, is crucial, especially because we find ourselves inserted in an era where neoliberalism has alienated people from their rights and right-wing corruption, despotism, and authoritarianism are deterring people from enjoying rights and social victories earned by many civic movements in the past. A republicanism that recognizes how powerful left-wing populism is to aggregate demands can mobilize people along ideological lines, based on public virtues such as responsibility, reciprocity, respect, tolerance, and public participation, to challenge the current neoliberal (capitalist) society.

Only through left-wing mobilization and reform we can build a world where marginalized voices and others find real room to deliberate, be treated with dignity, and fully participate in politics. It is about time to pursue a republicanism that advocates for strong institutions as well as strong citizens. This is a classical aspiration, but one cannot expect to overcome apathy without recognizing that it requires a political and ideological dimension to meet the challenges of our time. It is time that we ask ourselves: who are we benefiting by not taking a role in decision-making processes? Why are we so absorbed in consumerism and individualism? Was Margaret Thatcher right when she said there is no society, only individuals?

This essay has posited that political community is inherent to human nature, as Aristotle (1999) argued, and that returning to a republican model of understanding politics, supported by the useful tool of left populism, might help recover a state in which all of us are involved in the public sphere and feel affiliat-

ed with it once again.

Conclusion

In sum, populism offers a pragmatic mechanism to aggregate demands and represent marginalized sectors, yet it guarantees little on its own. The term itself carries significant weight, as populism is volatile, ideologically flexible, and often indifferent to deliberation and institutional continuity. Republicanism, by contrast, emphasizes participation, deliberation, and civic virtue as the foundations of freedom and more egalitarian societies. As Medellín (2010) observes, republican theory "can continue to provide essential arguments for democratizing society" (p. 65) transforming not only governmental practices but also the very conception of politics and the public sphere.

Moreover, Victoria Camps (2019) reminds us that democracy requires a civic and moral shift that moves citizens beyond private interests toward shared responsibility. Public virtues such as solidarity, respect, and tolerance are not secondary ideals, but are the ethical infrastructure of democratic life. For that reason, political and social institutions should not only embody these virtues, but actively promote and incentivize them through the construction of a "new" model of the public sphere that is understood as the space where society's agendas are [built] in their most diverse forms freely and equally." (Medellín, 2010, 65)--such an egalitarian public sphere will require social transformation as well–a real effort to socialize our democracy–which is why I argue that left-wing populism is a key foundation of republicanism, properly understood.

There is, however, the real challenge in how to create and strengthen the people, because as Ovejero (2005), Medellín (2010), and Camps (2019) note, neoliberalism and capitalism isolate individuals and create an atmosphere where only their private lives matter. Populism may serve as an antidote to the silos that dominate the contemporary world, but one might ask whether there is room for populism within a virtuous republic insofar as populist movements are commonly more emotional than principled, and has proven amenable to manipulation and corruption by authoritarian populist leaders.

The answer lies in integration and complementarity between populism and republicanism, rather than opposition. It is impossible to deny populism's mobilizing capacity to activate participation, while republican deliberation and public virtues ensure institutional resilience and democratic integrity. One future task may be to vindicate the meaning of populism itself, redefining it as a practice that brings people into political life and power and facilitated their egalitarian participation in public life–a task for left-wing populism, informed by principles of republicanism.

Finally, today we can observe multiple spaces that exercise public virtues and strengthen bonds among citizens and institutions through community organizing, grassroots activism, and structured deliberative forums. These practices allow citizens to reclaim political agency even within neoliberal societies. Furthermore, by doing so, citizens ensure that democracy and republicanism become not merely formal systems of rights and protections, but lived practices of collective self-government and living well, in which citizens exercise aretē (virtue) and live in eudaimonia (well-being) by being deeply engaged in decision-making processes, actively participating politically, and working toward the collective good.

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Beyond Gold Medals: The Role of North Korean Athletes A Dominant Victory in 2025

by Nicholas Pham

In the 2025 U-17 Women's World Cup, the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) women's soccer team won its second straight championship, beating the Netherlands 3-0. Their opponent's coach, after the final, shared that, "the gap between Korea DPR and us is simply too big to compete with them at the moment." The DPRK also broke the record for most goals scored in tournament history. Their team's coach, Pak Song-jin, attributed their success to the nation's "winning culture" (FIFA, 2025).

Juche: A Brief History

Kim-Il Sung, the DPRK's first head of state, introduced the philosophical concept of Juche in a 1955 speech that he delivered to party propagandists and agitators (Kim, 1955). Kim-Il Sung crafted Juche on the principles of political independence, economic independence and military independence (Schortgen, 2017). The DPRK's government eventually adopted Juche into its constitution in 1972. The regime presented Juche as a doctrine of self-reliance designed to resist foreign influence. Due to the heavy emphasis on self-reliance and resistance against foreign influence, the DPRK lacks avenues for resource-based globalization. 99.1% of their imports are from China and 83.5% of their exports are to China (OEC, 2024).

Sports have proved to be an effective method for the DPRK to globalize despite their lack of trade and emphasis on self-reliance. Sporting events help garner soft power for isolationist states in international relations as they are a neutral space for facilitating state-to-state cooperation and relationship building.

North Korea at the Olympics

The Olympic Games have given the DPRK a platform to showcase its world-class athletes. Their athletes have amassed 63 medals since their first Summer Olympics in 1972 (Olympedia, 2026). During the 2012 Summer Olympics, North Korean weightlifter Om Yun-Chol lifted 158 kilograms, setting an Olympic record in the men's 56 kg event (Jeffries, 2012). Twelve years later, at the 2024 Summer Olympics, North Korea's table tennis team entered as heavy underdogs. North Korean table tennis duo Ri Jong Sik and Kim Kum Yong were seeded sixteenth in the table tennis mixed doubles event. As the last seed, they beat the second, fourth and eighth seeds before placing second against China with a score of 4-2. This performance earned the table tennis duo and the DPRK a silver medal (Hu, 2024).

Developing World-Class Athletes

The DPRK has managed to produce high-performing athletes despite the lack of trade diversity and international sanctions. Out of the 24 countries with the lowest GDP per capita to attend the 2024 Summer Olympics, North Korea was the only one to win any Olympic medals, attaining six (Theuer, 2024). Structurally similar nations do not find the same success either. Eritrea and Turkmenistan are both

one-party states like the DPRK. Turkmenistan places 160 out of 166 countries on V-Dem's Democracy Index compared to the DPRK, almost last place at 164 out 166 countries (V-Dem, 2026). Then, Eritrea places 178 out of 180 countries on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Human Rights Index, compared to the DPRK placing last at 180 out of 180 countries (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025). Comparing this to the nation's performance at the Olympic Games, Turkmenistan has only brought home one silver medal and Eritrea has only brought home one bronze medal. The medal count for both nations are significantly lower than the DPRK's 63 medals at the Olympic Games (Olympedia, 2026). How does the DPRK produce high-performing athletes at the Olympics when similarly structured nations cannot do the same?

The DPRK showcases its nationalism through their regularly hosted Arirang Mass Games, a display of mass gymnastics performed by up to 100,000 participants. The games have been played since 1946 and take place nightly in Pyongyang, from August to October (Burnett, 2013). The mass games are now held at the Rungrado 1st of May Stadium, which opened on May 1st, 1989, holding a capacity of 150,000, making it the highest in the world (Merkel, 2012). The mass games demonstrate the collective discipline the regime values. This discipline is what fosters citizens of the DPRK into becoming talented athletes.

Displaying Hope for Reunification as a Strategy

The DPRK's participation in the Olympic Games has helped serve as a buffer against doubts about reunification caused by the development of its nuclear program. During the 2018 Winter Olympics, the DPRK marched with the Republic of Korea under one flag (Jeong, Griffiths, 2018). The flag design features a blue silhouette of the Korean peninsula and the surrounding outlying islands. Both nations also unified to form one women's ice hockey team at the event (Virgilio, 2021). This was the first occurrence of both nations having a team compete under one flag at the Olympics. After the games that year, North Korea and South Korea agreed to submit a joint candidature for the 2032 Olympic Games (Olympics, 2018). They unfortunately lost their bid to Brisbane, Australia (IOC, 2021).

Most recently, the North Korean table tennis duo, Ri Jong Sik and Kim Kum Yong took a selfie with Chinese and South Korean Olympic table tennis players after their loss to China (Chappell, 2024). This selfie follows the very first one, where South Korean Gymnast Lee Eun-Ju and North Korean Gymnast Hong Un-Jong took a selfie together at the 2016 Summer Olympics (Bachor, 2016). Over half the global population followed the 2024 Summer Olympics, making small moments like these important for the DPRK as they draw positive engagement on social media towards the regime (IOC, 2024). Social media posts covering the games drew 12 billion social media engagements (Zubair, 2024).

An Opportunity to Globalize

The emphasis on Juche and North Korea's nuclear weapons program has resulted in international sanctions that severed most diplomatic relationships (Choi, 2013). The Olympics, governed by the International Olympic Committee's policy of political neutrality, allow North Korea to participate regardless of diplomatic isolation. Their participation is crucial to facilitating the DPRK's ability to establish diplomatic relations. During the 2018 Winter Olympics, South Korean President, Moon Jae-in, was invited to visit North Korea, resulting in the April 2018 inter-Korean summit. (Shin, Kim, 2018). At the summit, prospects for denuclearization of the DPRK and the DPRK's commitment to recovering prisoners of war's remains were discussed. This was the first inter-Korean summit to occur in over a decade (Lee, 2020).

Then in June 2018 at the North Korea–United States Singapore Summit, United States President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un agreed to establish relations. In a joint statement by both leaders, they stated that the establishment of Olympics relations would be "in accordance with the desire of the peoples of the two countries for peace and prosperity." The statement also committed to "efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula." The Olympics for the DPRK has been their gateway to establishing diplomatic ties without sacrificing Juche's values of self-reliance and imperialist resistance (Trump, Kim, 2018).

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BabyTron and Pan-Africanism
by Savannah Brooks

“If life was Roblox, you ain't got no fuckin' Robux” (RNF Babytron). In a single punchline, BabyTron captures what makes his music so distinctive: His absurd humor, rapid-fire references, and a natural blend of internet culture with street rap bravado. His delivery is sharp and absurd, tossing out one-liners so quickly that it seems like each bar is trying to outdo the last. "Bankroll on Papa Smurf, the Christina Louvres on Larry Lobster” (ShittyBoii Babytron). The beats underneath him are just as striking, typically minimalist and chaotic. Every line is packed with coded references, inside jokes, and quick metaphors that speak to listeners who have a certain level of cultural currency. Drawing from Michigan’s stripped-down rap style while channeling the aesthetic of Chicago drill, BabyTron creates a sound that feels familiar and unique.

BabyTron’s chaotic creativity pushes listeners to think seriously about the relationship between Pan-Africanism and rap music. BabyTron’s style feels distinctly internet-native; his lyrics bounce rapidly between references to video games, NBA stat lines, luxury brands, memes, and fragments of pop culture circulating online. Within a few bars, he might move from a gaming reference to a sports metaphor to a designer label, stacking punchlines so densely that listeners are almost forced to keep up in real time. The effect mirrors the rhythm of life on the internet itself; it is fast, layered, and constantly remixing cultural symbols.

Because of this style, BabyTron’s music requires a certain level of cultural currency not only to fully appreciate it, but even to begin processing it. Understanding the message depends on recognizing the reference, whether it comes from gaming culture, internet slang, regional rap traditions, or contemporary hip-hop lore. In other words, listening to BabyTron can sometimes feel less like hearing a song and more like taking a rapid-fire cultural literacy test of how much screen time does it take to catch the reference, and how much familiarity with Michigan culture, and the broader political and economic state of the world right now, does it require to really understand the bar? That density raises an interesting question: could this kind of rapid-fire, culturally saturated rap also function as a medium for Pan-African expression? Furthermore, what is the sociohistorical context of the Michigan rapper BabyTron as a cultural figure, and how might his music intersect with the broader political climate surrounding art, identity, and contemporary interpretations of Pan-Africanism?

William E. Ketchum III, an NPR journalist with expertise in Black history and culture, recently examined Detroit and Flint’s rap scenes in an article titled “How Detroit and Flint Became Havens for Rap Dark Horses,” and offered a useful framework for situating BabyTron within Michigan’s musical landscape. Ketchum argues that the defining characteristic of Detroit hip-hop is “its underdog spirit” shaped by decades of limited industry infrastructure and national attention compared to rap hubs like New York or Los Angeles. As he explains, the slogan “Detroit vs. Everybody” functions less as bravado than as observation, reflecting a city whose artists have historical-

ly had to build their lives with minimal institutional support. Popular culture has occasionally gestured toward this environment, most famously through 8 Mile and the career of Eminem, but the broader regional scene extends significantly beyond that narrative. As Loren Kajikawa argues, "rather than simply transcending racial boundaries, Eminem had to negotiate them in ways that made sense to his audiences," underscoring how his rise depended on Detroit's underdog ethos and a strategic engagement with race that differs markedly from the radical self-acceptance and internet-era approach of artists like BabyTron.

BabyTron emerges from this same geography, and traces of it surface within his humor-laden punchlines. In "Out on Bond," he raps, "They caught me out in Nebraska with a controlled substance / Innocent until I'm proven guilty, I don't know nothing," blending legal awareness, irony, and the precariousness that often shadows street narratives in rap. For context, Interstate 80 in Nebraska is a major east–west drug trafficking corridor where interstate travel is frequently monitored, vehicles are often stopped for minor infractions, and out-of-state drivers, particularly those from states with legalized marijuana, can become targets of law enforcement searches tied to suspected drug transport between Western supply states and Midwestern/Eastern distribution hubs.

Also, in "Crash Yo Whip Music," he writes, "Drop a four, then a one, watch me fade away just like Nowitzki / I got the code they can't crack, I feel like Da Vinci," stacking sports and cultural references while framing himself as someone operating within a coded system outsiders struggle to decode. Beneath these jokes is a survivalist sensibility shaped by place. This dynamic reflects the framework described in Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life, where scholars argue that Black communities across the United States share interconnected cultural and political experiences that shape everyday life and cultural production.

Rather than viewing these spaces merely as sites of deprivation, the "chocolate cities" framework emphasizes them as places where identity, resistance, and culture are actively produced. "Marginalized and oppressed peoples wield small axes to chop down systems and establish new vantage points that allow them the power to clear and see through the wilderness. This wilderness is geographic and legal, historical and contemporary, changing yet persistent. Black power is the small axe." (Hunter, M. A., & Robinson, Z. F. 2018). Seen through this lens, BabyTron's dense, referential rap style becomes part of a broader tradition in which geography, inequality, and community experience shape the language and creativity of hip-hop.

Detroit's history plays a critical role in understanding the context of BabyTron's music. Once the epicenter of American manufacturing and the birthplace of Motown, Detroit suffered drastic economic decline with the fall of the auto industry. Detroit automakers, General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler, undermined their own flexible production systems in an effort to weaken labor, ultimately leaving the city's industrial base unable to compete with international competitors and contributing to widespread unemployment and economic instability (Rothstein, 2020). This collapse coincided with mass white flight, leaving Black residents in neighborhoods marked by disinvestment, racialized inequality, and systemic neglect.

In such a landscape, Pan-Africanism, whether as a political ideology or cultural philosophy, offered frameworks for resilience, solidarity, and global Black empowerment. Detroit's shift from industrial hub to symbol of Black survival made it fertile ground for these ideas to reemerge through music.

Parliament's 1975 anthem Chocolate City captures this spirit by celebrating Black cultural power in the face of urban decline. The song positioned inner-city Black life as a site of creativity, resistance, and cultural pride, a template for generations of Detroit artists who followed. Parliament raps "There's a lot of chocolate cities around… we've got Newark, we've got Gary… somebody told me we got L.A.… but you're the capital, CC," signaling the symbolic centrality of cities like D.C. and Detroit, and also the broader national spread of Black urban power. The repeated insistence that these cities are "gainin' on ya" signals a sense of forward momentum and demographic as well as cultural ascendance, culminating in the assertion that "a chocolate city is no dream," it is a lived and expanding reality.

Haruna similarly explores "The Trajectory of Pan-Af-

ricanism in African Hip-Hop Music." Haruna contextualizes Pan-Africanism as a lyrical theme and aesthetic structural form. Pan-African values of unity, resistance, and reclamation of history, appear in hip-hop beyond just conscious lyrics (Haruna 2025). Haruna argues, "Music, like art and literature is dynamic. It is able to be adapted to any form according to the needs of the society.

Music produced by Africans in Africa and its diaspora has adapted the ideology of the early activists of Pan-Africanism and eventually integrated to an advocacy for Pan-Africanism. African music of this dispensation is multifaceted in its utility they are now regarded as cultural materials to globally create black bonds."

While BabyTron doesn't explicitly declare Pan-Africanist intentions, the values are still present in his work. For example, BabyTron's opening claim, "Who am I? The Prince of the Mitten," (A to Z Babytron) signals a localized identity ("Mitten" referring to Michigan) situating himself within a specific Black Midwestern context.

Furthermore, the absurdist humor and chaotic references are actually a form of cultural preservation, as seen in his rapid, associative punchlines such as "A, that's for 'Active,' B for 'Blick' / Hit him, make him do a backflip" and "90 percent of the grapevine, man, that shit ain't true." These bars rely on compressed wordplay, coded slang ("Active" means to engage in an altercation, and "Blick" means firearm), and abrupt thematic shifts that pivot quickly between violence, humor, and social commentary.

Rather than following traditional linear storytelling, BabyTron's stacked, rapid-fire references preserve shared linguistic patterns and attitudes; meanwhile, his deliberate use of dense, layered wordplay over narrative continuity allows his stylistic approach to circumvent mainstream digestibility and instead require a level of cultural currency to fully decode. The chaotic delivery itself becomes a method of transmitting cultural knowledge, aligning with Haruna's conception of music as a flexible medium that adapts to its social environment while maintaining and circulating collective identity.

BabyTron's very refusal to make his work digestible to predominantly white audiences or to conform to traditional structures of " methodical rap" speaks to a rejection of respectability politics. Pan-Africanism in this way is not just about Black unity in a literal or geographic sense; it's about reclaiming the right to self-define. BabyTron's refusal to flatten his expression to fit mainstream ideals is a radical act of cultural autonomy.

This resistance is illustrated in lines like "Doggy bone a burger, throw him on the grill / Handy Mandy, brodie spinnin' with it, all he know is drill," where Michigan slang and nimble double entendres encode meaning that is inaccessible without cultural context. Here, "doggy bone" is someone being targeted for harm, while "burger" denotes an unskilled or vulnerable individual, and "throw him on the grill" extends the metaphor of eliminating one's vulnerable opposition. The reference to "Handy Mandy" invokes the children's cartoon character Handy Manny while simultaneously layering in the term "drill," which shifts from a literal tool into a metaphor for coordinated attack, and "spinnin'" implies targeting an area or group.

These compressed, multi-layered references require insider knowledge to fully decode, reinforcing a mode of expression that privileges community-based interpretation over marketability. Instead of simplifying himself for broader appeal and monetization, he insists on raw complexity. This is Pan-Africanism in action, building solidarity and heritage by rejecting assimilation through the white culturalist's lens. His lyrical style, filled with layered references, local slang, and meme culture, is a tapestry of contemporary Black identity that resists easy consumption.

A similar perspective is presented in an essay in the Funambulist, a journal dedicated to building "international solidarities" by engaging with the cultural politics of space and bodies. The Funambulist essay "On National Liberation, Culture, and Hip Hop: A Reading of Elom 20ce's Pan-African Videos" builds upon the idea that hip-hop is not just about lyrics, but about controlling one's image, sound, language, and geography.

Elom 20ce uses visual cues and setting to evoke a

Pan-African message. BabyTron does something similar, albeit less explicitly. He overlays his lyrics with chaotic edits and YouTube-style video production that reflects hyper-local culture and diasporic influence, as shown in his music video "Out on Bond" I believe this chaos to be intentional.

Figure 1. BabyTron's "Out on Bond" EP Cover

BabyTron's entire presence can be read as a rejection of respectability politics. He doesn't perform palatability or professionalism for white audiences; instead, he leans into the absurd, layered, and the hyper-specific. This irreverence is itself a political gesture. Black artists are often expected to conform to digestible standards of Blackness and expression to gain legitimacy (Dixon and Brooks). BabyTron's refusal to do so echoes a common Pan-Africanist ethos, liberation through redefinition, not assimilation. His work creates new space in the tradition of Black artistic rebellion by challenging audiences and subverting the expectations of the pioneers who came before him.

Some of those pioneers created what is known as "Drill Rap." Drill Rap, like BabyTron's work, is often misread as nihilistic; however, it functions as a powerful expression of systemic neglect, survival, and coded communication (Agrelo). BabyTron's lyrical style, blending digital detritus with regional slang, reflects a digital-age political consciousness and an updating of drill rap traditions, a lineage he explicitly connects to in his interview with YouTuber Tommy G, where he names Chicago drill rapper Chief Keef as a key inspiration. Like Chief Keef and other drill artists, BabyTron operates within a framework often interpreted as glorifying violence, when actually it reflects the structural proximity to violence and material conditions of disinvestment that shape these communities. Much like Parliament's assertion that "a Chocolate City is not a dream," it's a lived reality. This is further illustrated in BabyTron's "RIP Hutch," where he writes, "Feelin' like Sub-Zero, masked up in these ice chains / R.I.P. Hutch, kit bust," a layered tribute to Oak Park jeweler Dan "Hutch" Hutchinson, who was murdered in a widely reported murder-for-hire conspiracy. The Sub-Zero reference invokes a Mortal Kombat video game character and the imagery of "iced" diamond chains, items BabyTron has bought through Hutchinson's Jewelry, while "R.I.P. Hutch" grounds the lyric in real loss.

The phrase "kit bust" can be read as a nod to a fully adorned jewelry set, linking his aesthetic to the material culture Hutchinson helped create within Detroit's rap economy. The line compresses local history, economic exchange, and personal connection into dense, coded expression, showing how drill rap communicates lived reality through culturally specific references.

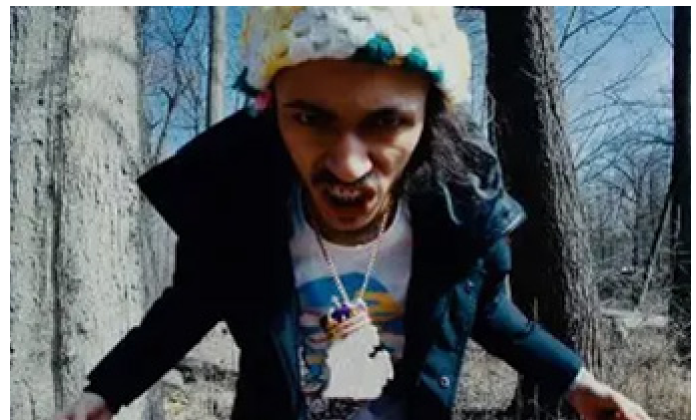

Figure 2. BabyTron "Ex" Music Video, Michigan Chain by Hutchinson

BabyTron's collaborations with other Michigan artists also represent a form of digital and musical Pan-Africanism, bringing together disenfranchised Black and Brown communities to build something unifying and unorthodox. He does not limit himself to one coast or

code, rather, he builds bridges and forms coalitions across stylistic divides in the genre. This is shown in "Tobey," a collaboration with Eminem and Big Sean, where BabyTron opens and closes the track with the chorus while ceding space for each artist to contribute, creating a layered, intergenerational exchange rooted in Detroit hip-hop. In the chorus, BabyTron raps, "Tobey Maguire got bit by a spider, but see, me, it was a goat," a line that draws on the Spider-Man origin story as a metaphor: just as Tobey Maguire's character is transformed by being bitten by a spider, BabyTron reframes his own artistic identity as shaped by being "bit by a goat." Here, "goat" operates as a double entendre, simultaneously referencing a source of transformation and the slang acronym for "greatest of all time," suggesting that his artistic emergence is influenced by greatness and aligned with it. This metaphor extends the idea that identity in rap is constructed through lineage, influence, and self-definition.

By positioning himself alongside Eminem and Big Sean within the same track structure, while maintaining his own distinct lyrical voice, BabyTron participates in a collaborative framework that shows the cultural tapestry of Detroit's musical landscape.

Another example is his collaboration with Florida rapper, BLP Kosher in "IRL," where BabyTron and BLP Kosher merge distinct cultural references into a shared creative space that still preserves individual cultural identity. In BabyTron's line, "We'll put a shell up on his back, turn him to King Koopa," "shell" operates as a double entendre, referring both to firearm ammunition and to the Super Mario character King Koopa, compressing violence and pop culture into a layered image. BLP Kosher's response, "In the Caribbean, roll the opps in Dutches, this is not Aruba," further expands the track's cultural complexity by referencing Dutch colonial history in the Caribbean while juxtaposing it with contemporary street practices, linking geopolitical awareness to lived experience.

The pursuit of unity through difference is a core tenet of Pan-African thought, which denotes Black liberation as plural, flexible, and global (Haruna 2018), and "Tobey" also exemplifies this by bringing together multiple stylistic approaches and generational perspectives into a cohesive and non-homogenized whole.

Figure 3. Big Sean, Eminem, and BabyTron "Tobey" Collaboration

Travis L. Dixon and TaKeshia Brooks helped provide insight on BabyTron's hyper-specific references in their piece on "Rap Music and Rap Audiences: Controversial Themes, Psychological Effects and Political Resistance." BabyTron's lyrics serve as a form of place-based storytelling, a technique commonly found in African musical traditions. In this way, he joins a lineage of artists who reassert the significance of Black geography through art. The collapse of traditional infrastructure in Detroit has ironically made space for new artistic ecosystems to thrive, new geographies and enterprises known only to the black populations that give them life, and BabyTron is among the most creative products of that ecosystem.

Figure 4. BLP Kosher and BabyTron Mazeltron EP

An excellent example of these themes is BabyTron's music video "#CERTIFIED," shot by CertifiedTrapper. The video is a sensory overload of bright colors, rapid cuts, and meme inserts that initially read as chaotic or unserious. Over time, however, this excess reveals itself as a deliberate communicative strategy rather than a lack of cohesion. The video rejects traditional rap culture's pursuit of legibility and commercial palatability, instead drawing from a heavily decentralized digital vernacular shaped largely by internet humor and regional references. BabyTron's humor, cadence, and chaotic visual language form an Afro-digital aesthetic that entertains while simultaneously resisting mainstream modes of cultural packaging. By embracing absurdity and overstimulation, the video refuses to translate Black creativity into easily consumable narratives, asserting autonomy over how meaning, success, and authenticity are defined in today's digital cultural economy.

Figure 5. Image from Babytron CERTIFIED Music Video

There is powerful cultural messaging at work in BabyTron's contemporary music. BabyTron may not be a Pan-Africanist in the traditional sense, but his music participates in the same project, the reassertion of Black identity, autonomy, and resistance. Listening to this innovative artist, I find myself overcome with an appreciation for the artistic niche occupied by BabyTron and the sociohistorical significance of his lived experience manifested through art. His use of irony, speed, and digital noise offers a new mode of political expression, one that is native to Gen Z. Moving forward, I'm interested to see how other young artists use similar techniques and what this means for the future of political art, and the trajectory of the Pan-Africanist movement.

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Disaster Politics: Donald Trump and the Legitimation of Extremism through Crisis

by Zach Schairer

Introduction

"You never want a serious crisis to go to waste" (Wall Street Journal 2008). These words from Rahm Emanuel, former Obama White House chief of staff, encapsulate a common political strategy.

A crisis can be many things: a hurricane destroying a city, a terrorist attack, or a corruption scandal, for example. Politicians exploit crises to achieve such goals as decimating school unions (which occurred in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina) or waging a broad war on flimsy pretexts (like the US war in Iraq after 9/11). Every crisis is different. What stays the same is that each crisis, as Emanuel explained, creates "an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before" (Wall Street Journal 2008).

Emanuel is certainly not the only politician to have voiced such a sentiment—both Winston Churchill and Milton Freidman are credited with the same idea, as documented in Naomi Klein's influential book The Shock Doctrine (Klein 2023, 7). But how does the strategy work, and what makes it effective? When Emanuel discussed the opportunity created by crisis, he pointed to how a crisis changes the political climate of the moment. In this moment, disarray and confusion among potential resistance groups present an opportunity to implement unpopular policy and/or change public (and/or legislators') opinion on what type of behavior or policy response is acceptable. The window of acceptable political behavior and policy, known as the "Overton window," informs a political leader about what policy a country might be in favor of, or open to exploring, and what policy people are firmly against or unwilling to even think about. As George Orwell wrote in his 1945 essay "Freedom of the Park," the ability of governments to carry out their designs "depends on the general temper in the country" (Orwell, n.d.). Accordingly, a political leader who desires political behavior or policy outside the realm of what influential power holders or the public deems appropriate must find a way to shift the window toward their desired behavior and policy. They must find a way to shift public opinion and/or change elite viewpoints.

Donald Trump is one of those transformational leaders seeking to shift the Overton window and general temper of the country. When Donald Trump burst onto the presidential political scene, he quickly upset the status quo. Whether verbally clashing with the pope over building a wall on the US-Mexico border, saying John McCain was not a war hero because he got captured, or voicing his desire for a total ban on Muslims entering the United States, Trump's rhetoric made it clear that he had no interest in adhering to the political behavior or policy the country had previously deemed acceptable.

When he ascended to the presidency after winning the 2016 presidential election, Trump found out just how difficult it is to implement policies the country does not find acceptable. For example, federal courts overturned Trump's executive order travel bans (which many felt were blatantly anti-Muslim) at least three times before the Supreme Court upheld the final version (Totenberg & Montanaro 2018).

Another example is the border wall that Trump campaigned on building. Despite his passion for the project, he was repeatedly unable to secure adequate funding for the wall from Congress (Painter & Mann 2021). Throughout his first administration, Trump grew increasingly frustrated at his inability to achieve political goals due to long-entrenched norms and procedural constraints. Trump believed that these norms and constraints—which he framed as "political correctness"—had paralyzed the country in the face of danger. Following the November 2017 terrorist attack in New York, Trump stated, "We have to get much tougher. We have to get much smarter. And we have to get much less politically correct. We're so politically correct that we're afraid to do anything" (White 2018). Similarly, during his 2024 presidential campaign, Trump argued that the key problem in his first term had been that he was "too nice," that he did not want to offend anyone or violate norms that obstructed his political goals (Cortellessa 2024). With this belief, Trump became increasingly opportunistic in seeking strategies that would allow him to shift the boundaries of acceptable political behavior and policy. A key strategy to achieving that goal has been the exploitation of crises.

This paper examines two events that are considered crises, both of which Trump exploited to shift the Overton window toward his extremist agenda: the insurrection on January 6, 2021, and the assassination of Charlie Kirk in September 2025. This paper analyzes how Trump used these two crises to shift the Overton window toward the acceptance of political extremism, thus normalizing policy and behavior that would previously have been derided across partisan lines. Many, perhaps most, politicians moderate their stances and call for unity in the aftermath of national crises. Trump, however, has used crises and their immediate aftermath to gain approval or silent acquiescence from political elites and the wider population for his increasingly partisan, hyperextreme beliefs, behaviors, and policies.

Literature Review

In her book The Shock Doctrine, Naomi Klein argues that political entrepreneurs often capitalize on tragedy to force through broadly unpopular economic policies—such as Milton Friedman's championing of the immensely harmful destruction of the Keynesian economic order in favor of laissez-faire, unregulated, and privatized corporate power. Such tragedies can be of natural or man-made origin. Klein uses a range of examples, including the 1973 military coup in Chile that destabilized the country when General Augusto Pinochet violently toppled the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende, installed himself as a dictator, and implemented wide-scale economic reforms based on the guidance of Friedman. Another such example of the exploitation of crisis is the disaster faced by residents of New Orleans in 2005, when Hurricane Katrina devastated much of the city's public housing and schooling. Political entrepreneurs swooped in to rebuild the city with mixed-income housing and private charter schools, a crisis-exploiting response that Klein calls "disaster capitalism" (Klein 2003). In each case, Klein exposes a common pattern. First, a country or city is struck with a crisis. This crisis disorients and disorganizes the population, both politically and intellectually, creating an opening for a prepared political actor to force through policies that would otherwise be opposed in the streets or by political opponents.

Klein's theory provides valuable insight into the mechanisms of abrupt, extreme change. That said, while her theory is of foundational importance to this paper, it cannot be seamlessly applied to the theory this paper explores. In Klein's theory, the Overton window is irrelevant. Klein's argument is based not on the need to change public opinion but on the strategic value of crisis for implementing shocking economic changes to a society, regardless of the actual state of public opinion. As her examination of Augusto Pinochet's military coup in 1973 Chile shows, the approval of the legislature and the masses did not matter. What mattered was the success of the coup in disorienting the opposition and creating a state of national shock that fostered the opportunity for aggressive free-market reforms. As such, while this paper uses Klein's general theory, it differs in important ways. Namely, elite and mass approval (or at least obedience) are important to the mechanisms identified and analyzed in this paper. This paper focuses on the mechanisms that shift the Overton window of acceptable political behavior rather than on strategies of mass disorientation and domination of a

population through physical force, coups, and other shock events. This paper explores the role of crises not only in providing political leaders an opportunity to implement new policies or behaviors but also in legitimizing—if not popularizing—the behaviors and policies in question.

In their book Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy, Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason note that "most people seem naturally opposed to political violence when it does not have widespread endorsement from leaders" (Kalmoe & Mason 2022, 133–34). This insight aligns with the elite cue theory and reveals the powerful influence of political leaders. While general opposition to political violence may seem obvious, the reality is more complex. Kalmoe and Mason argue that if a leader regularly endorses political violence or uses rhetoric that includes violence-inducing language, the most die-hard supporters of that leader are likely to adopt beliefs that align with that endorsement. Thus, when a president asserts that their political opponent should be imprisoned, or when they use language claiming that their supporters need to fight to save their country, supporters of the president are more likely to view politically violent action as necessary and legitimate. This finding aligns with the results of a survey from the National Institute of Health. Responses from nearly nine thousand voters in the survey revealed that more than twice as many "MAGA Republicans" (55.9%) as "non-MAGA non-Republicans" (25.5%) endorsed "violence to effect sociopolitical change" and considered "violence usually or always justified to advance at least 1 of 21 specific political objectives" (Wintemute et al. 2025). As the leader goes, so go the supporters. Identity becomes important in such instances. Those who view people with different political ideologies as opponents rather than enemies are far less likely to support violent action based on political alignment; those who view citizens with different political ideologies as enemies are far more likely to support violence against those citizens. Thus, by appealing to their supporters' affective identity—their emotionally driven connection or identification with a group—political leaders create the necessary conditions to vilify opposing political groups/actors. The consequence of identity-driven appeals to a population predisposed to following the direction their political party's leader—a dynamic scholars call "affective polarization"—is that opposing political groups/actors cease to be viewed as legitimate citizens with policy-driven differences (Druckman et al. 2020; Mason 2018). Instead, they are viewed as threats, dangerous enemies intent on the destruction of true citizens' way of life.

Exacerbating the problems associated with a growing predisposition to affective polarization is that many citizens remain uninformed about national political issues. Gallup research published in 2023 found that only 30–40% of citizens say they "closely follow" national politics (Jones 2023). Lack of interest/awareness in national political issues is especially noticeable in non–presidential election years. Since 2004, only one non–presidential election year has boasted a higher percentage of citizens "closely" following national politics than in presidential election years. That year was 2021—a year that started with a violent insurrection at the US Capitol.
Lack of awareness, coupled with social media bubbles and the hyperpartisan nature of news sources in the country, means that more people are being fed heavily slanted—if not downright false—narratives of events and issues while simultaneously spending less time critically evaluating the information they consume. Moreover, research has found that the increasingly emotion-driven, polarized identities of most Americans have little to do with differences in policy preferences. Instead, Americans' increasing political polarization is fueled by intensely tribalistic views of inclusion and exclusion, in-groups and out-groups. Stated plainly by Lilliana Mason in her article Ideologues without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities, "'liberals' and 'conservatives' may dislike each other for reasons unconnected to their [policy] opinions" (Mason 2018, 868).

This dynamic creates the perfect ecosystem for elite political leaders, like Donald Trump, to promote false narratives that polarize partisans and manipulate crises to push through policies and executive actions that, in more politically calm times, would be far outside the realm of acceptability in the United States. In this political atmosphere, "illusory truth theory" is a tactic Trump uses to profound effect,

even if he does not realize it. Illusory truth theory posits that people who hear the same thing repeatedly become more open to accepting the plausibility of what they hear. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels reportedly coined the phrase "repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth" (Stafford 2016). Extensive research has consistently affirmed this theory, finding that "repetition-related strengthening of processing fluency results in the repeated information being perceived as truer" (Udry & Barber 2024). Repetition trains the brain to process information faster (more comfortably) when it is heard, and the brain is more likely to perceive information it is comfortable with as being true. This dynamic is especially true when the information is clear and easy to understand. For example, it is much easier to understand (and then believe) a repeated claim that the economy is bad because of stupid or intentionally anti-American policies of an outsider former president or opposition party than to understand and believe that the economy is bad due to a complex web of foreign trade policies, ecologic collapse, and political instability in resource-rich regions around the world.

In this environment, polarizing political elites like Donald Trump can use their position as a perceived authority figure to push a politically favorable narrative. The implicit trust that citizens place in their preferred political leader—and their self-identification with a specific group—leaves them predisposed to believe what that leader says. As Mason notes, the "passion and prejudice with which we approach politics is driven not only by what we think, but also powerfully by who we think we are" (Mason 2018, 885). Equally important is who we think others are. Accordingly, when a politician incessantly repeats polarizing assertions, people who already identify with that leader are even more susceptible to believing the claim. Through these mechanisms, a politician can lay the foundation for implementing policy changes and behaviors otherwise outside the realm of politically acceptable action.

These dynamics of affective polarization form the boundaries of the Overton window of political possibilities. Named after the man credited with creating the model, the libertarian vice president of a free-market think tank Joseph P. Overton, the Overton window is a "political model describing the range of policies considered acceptable by the majority of a population at a particular time" (Decherney 2025). Created in the 1990s, Overton's model focuses on a spectrum consisting of more government regulation on one end and less on the other end—but the "acceptable window" concept can apply to any type of political policy or rhetorical options. The window refers to the range of political policy or rhetoric situated between the most extreme options that most people in a population might find popular or at least acceptable, if not preferable. Since its inception, the Overton window has gained traction as a useful tool to evaluate and understand how public opinion and political governance shifts are related, how they influence policy, and what conditions can cause the window to shift, expand, shrink, or even shatter. Relevant to this paper, a crisis often serves as a catalyst for the window to rapidly shift or fully shatter. One example of this dynamic is the creation and passage of the PATRIOT Act. Prior to the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, there had been efforts to expand government surveillance domestically, but these efforts faced intense bipartisan opposition—largely driven by post-Watergate norms in which the public was highly suspicious of federal domestic surveillance efforts. The Church Committee investigation, created following the Watergate crisis, exposed wide-scale abuses by the Justice Department in surveilling American citizens, which "proved the need for Congress to have access to classified information and exercise ongoing oversight of U.S. intelligence agencies" ("Frank Church and the Church Committee," n.d.). Public suspicion of federal surveillance efforts following Watergate also led to the creation of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), which Congress passed in 1978. FISA required federal intelligence agencies "to submit requests for search warrants to a special federal court and obtain court permission before initiating surveillance of American citizens" ("Frank Church and the Church Committee," n.d.). Indeed, through the end of the century, the public widely rejected federal efforts to expand domestic surveillance.

This Overton window of strong suspicion against federal surveillance shattered after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. A new window of

political possibilities formed, what was previously considered extreme and unacceptable became popular, and Congress passed the PATRIOT Act, which included many aggressive surveillance tactics that had previously been rejected. The PATRIOT Act passed the Senate by a vote of 98–1, and the House passed the bill by a vote of 357–66, revealing broad bipartisan support for the measures in the immediate aftermath of a national tragedy ("HR 3162 - USA Patriot Act of 2001 - Voting Record," n.d.). During a speech in 1987, former Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan critiqued how the "national fervor" that follows a crisis "causes people to exaggerate the security risks posed by allowing individuals to exercise their civil liberties" (Brennan, n.d.). Indeed, the attack on 9/11 caused Americans to exaggerate security risks and support (or at least tolerate) surveillance efforts that they previously opposed. Unsurprisingly, the exaggeration appeared anything but unreasonable considering the Justice Department's feelings before the attack occurred. An email from an FBI agent in the days prior to 9/11 shows frustration from agents about the "wall" between foreign and domestic surveillance (and between "criminal and intelligence agents") preventing agents from protecting the country: "Someday someone will die, and wall or not, the public will not understand why we were not more effective and throwing every resource at certain problems" (Farer 2004). The FBI agent's email shows that there was already a belief that more extreme surveillance measures were needed, despite the public opposing such measures. Once the crisis of 9/11 happened, the Overton window became susceptible to manipulation, which lead to the passing of the PATRIOT Act.

Theoretical Framework

A crisis or tragedy creates a momentary lapse or hiccup in the collective mind of the affected population. In The Shock Doctrine, Klein compares this dynamic to the CIA's funding of Ewen Cameron's experiments in which patients seeking relief from "minor psychiatric ailments" unknowingly became used as "human guinea pigs to satisfy the CIA's thirst for information about how to control the human mind" (Klein 2023, 33). Through techniques like sensory deprivation and electroshock, Cameron sought to create a blank mind. The result for Cameron's patients was temporarily erased memories and personality, which created an opening for Cameron to reprogram the patients. Klein links these findings to the use of broader, systematic shocks—crises and disasters—to reprogram societies into accepting radical free-market policies.

Crisis-induced cognitive disruption can shift or shatter the Overton window and create the necessary environment for a political leader to move the boundaries of acceptable political policy and behavior. This paper proposes that Donald Trump has followed this process in using real and fabricated crises to disorient the American public and redefine what is reasonable political action and rhetoric. The strategy has helped Trump normalize antidemocratic beliefs among his supporters and justify his attacks on his opponents. I call this dynamic "Perpetual Crisis Politics."

The mechanisms of Perpetual Crisis Politics are as follows:

1. Regular, tribalist framing of critics and opponents as dangerous out-groups lays the groundwork for future policy changes.
2. A tragic event occurs.
3. Trump quickly uses his platform as president (or influential ex-president, in the case of the January 6 insurrection) to frame the perpetrators or causes of the tragedy along his own ideological lines. Appealing to tribal political identities, Trump labels those who voice opposition or disagree with his framing of the event as anti-American or otherwise extremist.
4. GOP political elites tolerate or echo Trump's framing.
5. The Trump administration uses this framing of the tragedy to implement unpopular—and sometimes illegal—policies that would have been more widely protested and challenged by politicians and citizens during "normal" times.
6. Voter attitudes shift accordingly, especially among the tribal in-group of Trump supporters. The least informed are the most likely to adopt the narrative pushed by the country's most vocal political leaders.

There are some important similarities between this process and the process of shock-induced economic reform discussed in Klein's Shock Doctrine. Chiefly, both mechanisms rely on the exploitation of chaos. Political actions that are considered unthinkable in

normal times become tolerated, and even accepted, in times of crisis—when public attitudes are challenged, disconnected from the moment, and open to reprogramming by political elites. This shift in the window of politically acceptable policy and rhetoric occurs for two reasons. First, those supportive of the newly announced political action are quick to speak up in support of it following the crisis that upended the political and social norms in society. Second, those opposed to the desired political action avoid speaking out too aggressively against newly proposed actions due to both crisis-induced disorientation and fear that their political opponents will frame them as anti-American or otherwise supportive of the tragedy. Speaking or voting against a policy ostensibly aimed at combatting or responding to an immediate tragedy is sure to garner strong criticism from groups supportive of the measures.

Take the case of Barbara Lee, a member of the House of Representatives. Lee holds the distinction of being the sole member of Congress to vote against the 2001 resolution that handed then-President Bush virtually unchecked power to invade Iraq. Importantly, Lee's "No" vote had nothing to do with opposing strong military action in response to the 9/11 terror attack. Rather, she voted "No" because of well-founded concerns about giving "a president a 'blank check' to start a war with no fixed goal or end date," deeming that doing so would constitute "an abdication of Congress' power to declare war" (Brockwell 2021). This nuance mattered little to Lee's colleagues in the Capitol or to vengeance-seeking American citizens, as politicians and talking heads in the media vilified her in the following weeks.

Glenn Greenwald notes:
Lee was deluged with rancid insults and death threats to the point where she needed around-the-clock bodyguards. She was vilified as "anti-American" by numerous outlets, including the Wall Street Journal. The Washington Times editorialized on September 18 that "Ms. Lee is a long-practicing supporter of America's enemies—from Fidel Castro on down." . . . Since then, she has been repeatedly rejected in her bids to join the House Democratic leadership (Greenwald 2016).

Though she gave a speech to Congress and published an op-ed explaining her reasoning for the "No" vote, the country's intense fervor following the 9/11 terrorist attack meant her words fell on deaf ears.

In similar fashion, Trump uses the notion of crises (such as his incessant claims of a border crisis and violent crime waves by immigrants) to justify policy rooted in exclusionary identity politics, attacking anyone who disagrees as anti-American and deserving of violence and even death. Trump weaponizes crises to justify extreme policies once thought beyond the norm (e.g., mobilizing masked and armed federal agents in US cities) and create a new boundary of politically acceptable thought and behavior. In doing so, Trump attempts to legitimize his "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) ideology and delegitimize other formerly legitimate political ideologies.

Methodology

The cases selected for analysis as examples of this theoretical framework—the January 6 insurrection and Charlie Kirk's assassination—were chosen for their similar qualities in terms of adhering to the mechanisms of perpetual crisis politics discussed earlier. January 6, 2021, is perhaps the most consequential day in US history since 9/11. For the first time in the nearly 250-year existence of the United States, a sitting president refused to accept the outcome of an election. The January 6 insurrection is unique not only because rioters broke into the Capitol with the express intent of preventing the certification of Joe Biden's electoral victory but also because Trump pardoned nearly all the 1,500+ rioters arrested and jailed (those not pardoned were released from prison after having their sentences commuted). While many viewed the events of January 6 as a crisis due to the rioters' goals, others—specifically Donald Trump and those with allegiance to him—viewed the arrests and investigations of the events associated with the insurrection as the actual crisis. As such, January 6, 2021, proves an important case study in understanding how Donald Trump framed the events of the day to deny that violence had occurred and simultaneously justify the violence as protecting democracy in the United States—all while pushing for policies and rhetoric that the wider

public had long considered unacceptable.

Regarding the second case study, Charlie Kirk's assassination shocked the country. The Trump administration's actions following Kirk's murder expose how the administration aggressively pursued hyperpartisan beliefs and goals during the days of intense disorientation and destabilization that immediately followed the assassination. Ordering the Justice Department to investigate liberal-leaning donors and organizations, pressuring media companies and universities to immediately suspend or fire those critical of Kirk, and framing any dissent or criticism of Kirk's ideas as unacceptable extremism reveal Trump's efforts to shift the Overton window aggressively to the right. Trump's framing of political dissent as terrorism and his efforts to morally invert policy criticism as unacceptable extremism in the wake of Kirk's murder help us better understand how Trump uses crises and tragedies to shift public opinion toward previously fringe beliefs.

Case Study I: January 6 and the Legitimation of Political Violence

The riotous insurrection in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021, represented a democratic crisis in the United States. However, this crisis was entirely predicated by Trump's words and actions in the months and days leading up to January 6. The effects of Trump's consistent, long-standing attacks on public opinion surrounding the legitimacy of election results are striking. The Pew Research Center has released findings on voter confidence in election security/legitimacy since 2018. When the polling started in 2018, 87% of Republican voters expressed high confidence that US elections would be "run and administered very/somewhat well" (Pew Research 2024). Democratic voters indicated less confidence than their Republican counterparts (perhaps because a Democrat did not currently hold the presidency), though 79% still agreed that the upcoming 2018 elections would be fair (Pew Research 2024). Such results show that Americans broadly, if not overwhelmingly, had a confident view of the legitimacy of US elections as recently as 2018. The story would be quite different two years later.

As ABC News has documented, since entering the 2016 race for the presidency, Trump "has made election denialism a central part of his campaigns and of Republican politics—and also helped make it a motivating issue for other politicians, including those who once had criticized him for it" (Axelrod 2022). This denialism pushed beyond simply refusing to accept that he could lose an election and extended into claims of fraud and outright cheating. During the 2016 campaign, Trump famously said the only way that he could lose Pennsylvania to Hillary Clinton in the general election "is if cheating goes on. I really believe it" (Smith & Siddiqui 2016). In the 2016 Republican primaries, Trump argued that "based on the fraud committed by Senator Ted Cruz during the Iowa Caucus, either a new election should take place or Cruz results nullified" (Axelrod 2022). His criticism of election security extends beyond his own campaigns as well. He called Obama's 2012 election "a total sham," and during the 2018 midterms, he supported Senate candidate Rick Scott's claim that "every Floridian should be concerned there may be rampant voter fraud in Palm Beach and Broward counties. I will not sit idly by while unethical liberals try to steal this election from the great people of Florida" (Axelrod 2022).

After four years of similar assertions as president (2016–2020), confidence in the administration of federal elections plummeted, particularly among Republican voters (Smith & Siddiqui 2016). Republican voter confidence in election administration dropped by 37 points in 2020, meaning a full 50% of Republican voters doubted the integrity of the elections (Pew Research 2024). Democratic voter confidence also dropped, but by a noticeably smaller margin, from 79% to 72% (Pew Research 2024). Less than two months later, Joe Biden would win the general election.

Years of rambling speeches and partisan-riddled tweets about cheating and fraud laid the groundwork for Trump to deny losing the election. By claiming he had won the 2016 election despite "the millions of people who voted illegally" robbing him of the popular vote, Trump effectively created the necessary conditions for his supporters to believe that he had not actually lost the election in 2020 (Trump 2016). Indeed, following the 2020 election, Republican confidence in the integrity of the country's

elections dropped to less than half (44%), meaning more than one out of every two Republican voters expressed a neutral or negative view of the country's election integrity (Saad 2024).

This pattern of Republican voter election skepticism continued even after Trump won the 2024 presidential election. Following the election, a mere 28% of Republican voters showed confidence in the overall election system (Saad 2024). Pew Research survey results indicate that 70% of Trump voters believed that people who are ineligible to vote in the 2024 election would not be prevented from doing so (Pew Research 2024). Despite this belief, there is no evidence to support allegations of widespread voter fraud—including in the 2020 election, which preceded Trump rallying his supporters before they stormed the US Capitol.

Trump's attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 election hinged on "simple differences in how Americans vote" (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol et al. 2022, 197). Democrats and Republicans favor different voting methods, and a massive gap in how Democrats and Republicans vote appeared in the 2020 election. In 2016, 26% of Democrats and 21% of Republicans voted by mail, according to research from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab (Stewart 2021). However, the 2020 election, which occurred amid the COVID-19 pandemic, saw six out of every ten Democratic voters use mail-in ballots compared to just over three out of every ten Republican voters (Stewart 2021). Overall, more than 69% of ballots cast in the 2020 election were cast through early voting and mail-in voting, mostly by Democrats, a 73% increase over the 2016 election (Scherer 2021).

This difference in voting habits becomes especially important when considering the timing of how votes are counted. In many states, votes cast in person on election day are counted first. Consequently, since more Republicans voted in person in 2020, the election-night results initially favored Trump, creating a "Red Mirage" (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol et al. 2022, 197). However, as vote counting progressed and mail-in ballots began to be counted, the illusion of Republican domination at the polls started to fade. This was not a new phenomenon, though it was more pronounced in the 2020 election due to the dramatic increase in Democratic voters using mail-in voting. It is this "Red Mirage" that Trump relied on to attack the results of the 2020 election.

Donald Trump had no intent to adhere to the United States' long tradition of a peaceful transfer of power, as evidenced in his speeches and tweets—as well as what he chose not to say. Evidence from the United States House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol's investigation lays bare Trump's refusal to condemn the insurrection, even as it was happening. Trump aide Hope Hicks received a text as the insurrection gained momentum on January 6, saying that Trump "should tweet something about being NON-violent," to which she responded, "I suggested it several times Monday and Tuesday and he refused" (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol et al. 2022, 578). Further testimony from Sarah Matthews, the White House deputy press secretary, revealed that Trump nearly refused to use the word "peaceful" in his tweet to rioters at 2:38 p.m. Only the intervention of Trump's daughter Ivanka convinced Trump to say "stay peaceful" at the end of the tweet (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol et al. 2022, 579). That Trump resisted efforts to even say the word "peace(ful)" exposes the reality that Trump cared more about staying in office than he did about the peaceful transfer of power. Congress's January 6 investigation revealed that many GOP members of Congress, while actively hiding from the insurrectionists storming the halls of the Capitol, voiced the belief that Trump had incited his supporters to seize the Capitol. Moreover, they believed that Trump could have ended the insurrection by simply telling his supporters to go home. Some GOP members of Congress appealed directly to Trump to do something to stop the insurrection, indicating their belief that he held considerable influence over the behavior of the insurrectionists. Future Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy spoke with Trump on the phone during the insurrection, telling the president, "You have got to get on TV, you've got to get on Twitter, you've got to call these people off" (Select Committee to Investigate the January

6th Attack on the United States Capitol et al. 2022, 84). After McCarthy rebuked Trump's assertion that the insurrectionists "aren't my people. . . . These are ANTIFA," Trump told the GOP congressman, "Well, Kevin, I guess they're just more upset about the election theft than you are" (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol et al. 2022, 84). In his book Weapons of Mass Delusion: When the Republican Party Lost Its Mind, author Robert Draper notes that GOP congress members believed that Trump was, in the words of Senator Mitch McConnell, "practically and morally responsible for the events of the day" (Draper 2022, 64).

For hours, Trump refused to tell the insurrectionists to stop. More than three hours after the end of Trump's speech at the January 6 rally, the White House finally released a video of Trump telling the rioters to go home. Once again, however, he refused to condemn them. Instead, he praised them, saying, "We love you. You're very special," and restating that "we had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it" (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol et al. 2022, 579). His refusal to condemn the violence of January 6 and his continued claims of a stolen election became a trend that would continue with little reprieve. Though many political leaders in his own party were initially suspicious and critical of Trump's claims and actions regarding the 2020 election, Trump's use of the January 6 crisis to repeatedly push claims of a stolen election and a corrupt Democratic Party proved effective in the end. The strategy was so effective, in fact, that the upheaval of norms and political disorientation that sprouted from the January 6 insurrection shattered the historical, nonpartisan consensus regarding free and fair elections in the United States. The total obliteration of this consensus opened a space that Trump filled with incessant critique of electoral integrity in the country.

Confusion and electoral panic emerged among key Republican leaders soon after January 6. Trump and other GOP leaders denounced Republican election officials who defended the integrity of the 2020 election, such as officials in Georgia and Nevada. GOP leadership, like Kevin McCarthy, who had originally criticized Trump's actions during the January 6 insurrection, faced immense resistance from Trump supporters. To stem the tide of anger against them, many of these same GOP leaders quickly made pilgrimages to see the disgraced former president in Mar-a-Lago, renounced their previous criticisms, aligned their narratives with Trump's "Big Lie," and pledged fealty to Trump.

Other Republican legislators aggressively supported the unprecedented inquiry into ballots in Arizona by the unqualified company Cyber Ninjas, hoping to undermine confidence in the integrity of the election there. More than 62% of House Republicans (139 of 221), along with eight Senate Republicans, voted to overturn the results of the 2020 election without even the slightest evidence of voter fraud.
Over the following months, the "Big Lie" became a litmus test for Republican officials—both current and future. What was once considered extreme became normal within large segments of the US political and public spheres. Reactions from both the Republican voter base and from House members, senators, and state officials in the years following the insurrection reveal how Trump's "Big Lie" narrative and his response to the crisis of January 6 shifted the Overton window. Election denialism and right-wing violence, including physical attacks on election officials and members of Congress, became acceptable actions and ideology. By the first anniversary of the insurrection, about half of Republican voters believed that "major fraudulent voting" had changed election results, while a third believed that the insurrection "was carried out by groups from the far-left 'antifa' movement or government agents," and almost 40% considered January 6 a "'riot that got out of control,' rather than an attempt to overturn an election" (Bennett & Wilson 2022).

Trump's exploitation of the January 6 crisis to shift the Overton window included efforts to purge his own party of election denial heretics. As author and investigative journalist David Rohde noted in his book Where Tyranny Begins: The Justice Department, the FBI, and the War Against Democracy, Trump strongly believed that conservative voters supported him after the insurrection, and he used this belief to threaten and purge all Republican leaders who resisted him. In the days before Congress voted

on impeachment for his role in the insurrection, "Trump and his allies circulated a poll showing that 80% of Trump voters and 76% of Republicans were less likely to vote for a member of Congress who voted for his impeachment" (Rohde 2025, 161). Trump harnessed the support of conservative voters to intimidate a sizable majority of congressional Republicans into voting against impeachment. Of the ten House Republicans who voted to impeach Trump for the January 6 insurrection, all were denounced by Trump directly and targeted with millions of dollars in pro-Trump negative advertising. Eight of these ten lost their seats or retired by the end of the 2022 midterm cycle, and a ninth announced he would not seek reelection in 2026 (Solender 2025). Meanwhile, of the seven Republican senators who voted to impeach Trump in 2021, four have since left office. Of the remaining three, only one has had to run for reelection, which she won despite facing a Trump-backed opponent.

The post–January 6 Overton window shift saw Trump benefit from Republican congressmembers' fear of losing their seats. Republican officials knew that if they spoke out against Trump or the "Big Lie," they would likely be signing their own political death warrant for the next election. As a Marquette Law School poll found in November 2021, 73% of Republicans held a positive view of Trump and indicated that they would vote for him in 2024 (Conway 2021). With such fanatical support for the former president, Republican members of Congress feared the electoral consequences of opposing Trump and his most die-hard supporters in Congress. Draper cites the words of a "more level-headed" GOP representative regarding her own refusal to speak out against the hostile behavior of Trump and his supporters (Draper 2022, 199). This representative noted the changing dynamics in the conservative ecosystem and presented her complicity as a kind of politically honorable heroism. "I'm doing this so I can come back. And believe me: you want me to come back, because if I don't come back, the person coming here in my place will be fifty times worse," said the GOP representative (Draper 2022, 199). In the eyes of this congresswoman, not speaking out represented her acknowledgment of a changed political reality: it was both a job security measure and a means of protecting the country from a vengeful Trump supporter winning a congressional seat.

The actual impact of this strategic complicity reveals how fully the Overton window has shifted to Trump's MAGA version of conservatism. Rather than protect the country from more extreme conservatives ascending to federal office, the silence from moderate Republicans only helped Trump-backed candidates win office. For example, in the 2022 midterm elections, each of the five newly elected Republican senators voiced support for and received the endorsement of Trump, while five of the six newly elected Republican senators in 2024 boasted Trump's endorsement. These election results make clear that remaining silent has done little to prevent the election of Trump-supporting conservatives, and a majority of those who have spoken out against Trump in the Senate have chosen to leave office rather than face the prospect of facing a Trump-backed opponent in a reelection campaign. The complicity and restraint of moderate Republicans only served to legitimize Trump's goals and entrench the Overton window's shift, a shift allowing for physical violence, political insurrection, and the acceptance of Trump's once-extreme "Big Lie."

Other evidence of the drastic post–January 6 shifting of the Overton window is notable. On January 20, 2025, Trump's second inauguration took place, officially marking only the second time in US history that a former president has nonconsecutively won a second term. Trump's loss in the 2020 election and his dogmatic assertions of nefarious left-wing actors engaging in widespread fraud to rig the election led to the January 6 insurrection. Although the insurrection was initially denounced across partisan lines, the political climate had changed dramatically by 2025. On the day of his inauguration, Trump pardoned or commuted the sentences of more than 1,500 Capitol rioters, referring to them as "hostages" (WCNC 2025). By referring to the jailed rioters as hostages serving "ridiculous and excessive" sentences, Trump made clearer than ever the view that the rioters on January 6 were heroes, not villains—patriots, not traitors (Price & Miller 2025a). Those pardoned included members of the openly violent and white supremacist Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, whom Trump celebrated as "people who actually love our country" (Price & Miller 2025b). Trump has repeatedly referred to the insurrection fondly, calling January 6, 2021, "a day of love" (Daily Kos 2024).

Rather than separate himself from the violent insurrectionists, Trump cozied up to them and used the insurrection crisis to alter the logic of political action in the United States.

Support for the pardons fell along partisan lines. A YouGov poll published the day after Trump issued the pardons found that two-thirds (66%) of Republicans approved of the pardons; only 21% opposed them, and 13% were undecided (YouGov 2025). Four years of Trump's lies about the insurrection undoubtedly changed the views of many US voters, especially Republicans. From January 2021 to January 2023, Republican disapproval for "Trump supporters taking over the Capitol" on January 6, 2021, fell from 74% to 49% (Orth 2023). Though some Republican Senators—Susan Collins, Lisa Murkowski, and Thom Tillis, to name a few—spoke out against Trump's decision to pardon the insurrectionists, many refused to comment on the pardons, and others issued strong statements of support. Regardless of Congressmembers' stances, Congress made no effort to push back or persuade Trump not to issue the pardons. Speaker of the House Mike Johnson stated that "the president's made his decision. I don't second-guess those" (CBS News 2025). Senate Majority Leader John Thune simply said, "We're not looking backwards, we're looking forwards" (Jalonick 2025). Just over four years after the insurrection, the very Republican congressmembers who had feared for their lives during the insurrection stood by while Trump pardoned the insurrectionists. The Republican political elite fully aligned with Trump, thus cementing a new standard in which political violence from the right is acceptable and any other view is deemed a false narrative from the radical left and considered unacceptable. This narrative of Democratic Party–orchestrated election theft and targeted persecution of peacefully protesting patriots is now the official stance of the federal government (and supported by most Republican officials and voters), as evidenced on https://www.whitehouse.gov/j6/.
As Jason Ware, author of God, Guns, and Sedition: Far-Right Terrorism in America, concludes,
It sets a terrible precedent for rule of law, for violence against institutions, violence against law enforcement. And it sends a message of permission—that political violence will be tolerated as long as it's on behalf of a certain movement and a certain man. And that's tremendously dangerous. . . . Over the course of the past four years . . . Jan. 6 defendants have been recast and redefined from insurrectionists to martyrs, political prisoners, victims, hostages. . . . Because President Trump has shifted the Overton window, whether we see those people enter the political process or continue in their violent activism remains to be seen. (Ismail 2025)
What is clear from Trump's shifting of the Overton window is that moving forward, violent action and rhetoric from the political right will be tolerated and even supported by many members of one of America's two leading parties. Accordingly, Trump's rhetoric and actions following the 2020 election align with the framework previously discussed:

1. Regular framing of critics and opponents lays the groundwork for future policy changes: Trump begins his run in politics publicly attacking election integrity and claiming fraud and cheating are the only ways he could lose. This dynamic plants the seeds for GOP officials and voters to align with Trump's view of a stolen 2020 election.
2. Crisis or tragedy occurs: Trump loses the 2020 election to Joe Biden, attempts to overturn the results, and foments the January 6 insurrection.
3. Trump reframes perpetrators or causes: Trump positions the insurrectionists as peaceful, patriotic heroes and defenders of freedom, solidifies the GOP under his banner, and claims nefarious left-wing actors are trying to steal the country from true Americans. Those on the left and in the GOP who refuse to align with Trump are pointed to as either complicit in or actively engaged in the plot to steal the election and destroy America. GOP officials who vote for impeachment are quickly denounced by Trump, attacked, and usually defeated in primary elections.
4. GOP elites echo or tolerate the framing: The vast majority of GOP members of Congress adopt Trump's framing of January 6. Even those who initially denounced Trump and the insurrectionists alter their positions to align with Trump. Critics like McCarthy make pilgrimages to Mar-a-Lago to align with Trump.
5. Policy implementation: Trump regains the presidency, pardons the insurrectionists, and makes the "Big Lie" the official narrative of the federal government. The GOP works to pass voter suppression legislation like the SAVE act.

6. Voter attitudes shift accordingly: GOP voters increasingly support Trump's attacks on electoral processes and election integrity. Many support Trump pardoning the insurrectionists. Election denialism becomes the norm among GOP voters.

Case Study II: The Assassination of Charlie Kirk

On Wednesday, September 10, 2025, far-right firebrand political commentator and activist Charlie Kirk was shot in the neck while answering questions from the crowd at Utah Valley University. Two hours later, Donald Trump confirmed Kirk's death on social media. Kirk, who was hosting speaking events on college campuses across the country as part of his "American Comeback Tour" following Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election, was a staunch supporter of Trump and his policy goals. Kirk grew to prominence as a far-right conservative, speaking out against the "secular godless totalitarianism that we see reigning over our country" (Bond 2025). At eighteen years old, Kirk launched the conservative youth organization Turning Point USA, which he grew into one of the largest conservative political organizations/movements in the United States. The day after Kirk's murder, NPR correspondent Shannon Bond accurately asserted that Charlie Kirk "was arguably the most influential voice in young conservatism and played a pivotal role in President Trump's return to the White House" (Bond 2025).

Politicians across the political spectrum condemned the violence, and many pleaded for their constituents to remain peaceful. Donald Trump did not. Two days after Kirk's assassination, Trump appeared on "Fox & Friends." During the segment, cohost Ainsley Earhardt noted that there were radicals on the left and on the right, commented that some people were cheering the death of Kirk, and asked the president, "How do we fix this country? How do we come back together?" (Fox News 2025).

Provided with an opportunity to discuss bridging worsening political divisions in the country, Trump instead chose to equate right-wing violence with patriotism and the desire to prevent crime while claiming that left-wing violence was the problem:

I'll tell you something that's going to get me in trouble, but I couldn't care less. The radicals on the right oftentimes are radical because they don't want to see crime. They don't want to see crime. Worried about the border. They're saying, we don't want these people coming in. We don't want you burning our shopping centers. We don't want you shooting our people in the middle of the street. The radicals on the left are the problem, and they're vicious and they're horrible and they're politically savvy, although they want men and women sports, they want transgender for everyone, they want open borders. (Fox News 2025)

Nine days later, during a speech at Kirk's funeral, Trump stated that he disagreed with Kirk when it came to how he viewed opponents. Trump stated that "he [Kirk] did not hate his opponents, he wanted the best for them. . . . That's where I disagreed with Charlie. I hate my opponents, and I don't want the best for them, I'm sorry" (C-SPAN 2025). While much of the political world called for the country to come together regardless of ideological political differences, the president used his bully pulpit to stoke hatred toward those who oppose him.

Trump responding to a national tragedy with dehumanizing remarks about his political opponents is one of his most common strategies. Trump deems his own verbal attacks on opponents perfectly acceptable—from stating his desire to punch a protestor at a campaign rally in February of 2016 to baselessly claiming that Rob Reiner "passed away reportedly due to the anger he caused others through his massive, unyielding, and incurable affliction with a mind crippling disease known as TRUMP DERANGEMENT SYNDROME" (Trump 2025). Rob Reiner and his wife were murdered; there is no evidence to support that Reiner's criticism of Trump had anything to do with the murder; and "Trump Derangement Syndrome" is not a real condition. It is necessary to note that some conservative voices criticized Trump for his comments on Reiner, but the overall response was muted.

Meanwhile, Trump and his political allies capitalized on Kirk's assassination by repeatedly calling for critics of Kirk to lose their jobs and potentially face other punishment. Many of the critics that Trump and his allies denounced had simply criticized Kirk's extreme political views. Nonetheless,

Trump's success in shifting the Overton window following Kirk's assassination meant that previously normal policy-related disagreement was now grounds for disciplinary action from employers. In the months following Kirk's murder, more than six hundred people faced disciplinary action, including suspension and job termination, for comments about Kirk's death. While some were dismissed for stating that Kirk's death was a result of "karma" or "divine justice," and some expressed "variations on 'Good riddance'" (among other celebrations), many of those dismissed had simply pointed to Kirk's own commentary and their disagreement with his political views (Satter & Vicens 2025).

Take the example of Lauren Vaughn, a "kindergarten assistant in South Carolina," who quoted Kirk's 2023 comment on gun rights in a tweet published after Kirk's death:
"I think it's worth to have a cost of, unfortunately, some gun deaths every single year so that we can have the Second Amendment to protect our other God-given rights. That is a prudent deal. It is rational." — Charlie Kirk. Thoughts and prayers. (Found in Satter & Vicens 2025)

Vaughn was fired from her job for the tweet. Others working in education faced similar consequences. A University of Mississippi employee was fired for a sharing a post that documented Kirk's history of white supremacist speech and ended with "I have no prayers to offer Kirk or respectable statements against violence" (Klee 2025). And the Oklahoma State Department of Education investigated a middle school teacher who posted on social media that they believed "Kirk died the same way he lived: bringing out the worst in people" (Martinez-Keel 2025). Even those whose job was based on political commentary faced severe repercussions from employers. MSNBC fired Matthew Dowd, a political analyst, for his on-air comments that Kirk "was constantly sort of pushing this sort of hate speech aimed at certain groups. I always go back to: hateful thoughts lead to hateful words which lead to hateful actions. And I think that's the environment we're in" (Bauder 2025).

Taking advantage of public revulsion following Kirk's assassination, Trump and his administration vigorously participated in the attacks on people who criticized Kirk or MAGA ideology. Late-night television host Jimmy Kimmel quickly faced government-driven repercussions for his comments about the Kirk assassination on his late-night show, Jimmy Kimmel Live!.

Kimmel said:
We hit some new lows over the weekend with the MAGA gang desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them and doing everything they can to score political points from it. (TODAY 2025)
While such comments would certainly not lead to suspension or other repercussions during normal times, right-wing exploitation of the Kirk crisis shifted the window of acceptable commentary to make even the mildest critique of right-wing policy and ideology unacceptable. For example, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy celebrated how American Airlines had responded to government pressure by grounding pilots alleged to have celebrated Kirk's assassination. "This behavior is disgusting and they should be fired," Duffy said (Boak & Riccardi 2025). Similarly, ABC suspended Kimmel due to pressure from Trump, broadcast partners, and, importantly, the FCC (headed by a Trump loyalist). FCC Chairman Brendan Carr stated:
This is a very, very serious issue right now for Disney. . . . We can do this the easy way or the hard way. These companies can find ways to change conduct and take action, frankly, on Kimmel or there is going to be additional work for the FCC ahead. (Associated Press 2025)

James B. Speta, the Elizabeth Froehling Horner Professor of Law at Northwestern University, notes multiple reasons the FCC cannot normally punish television networks for speech the federal government does not like. Speta points to the Supreme Court's "confirmation that the Communications Act does not grant the FCC the power to ban controversial speech" (Speta 2025). Moreover, Speta argues that "actions and even threats to cancel licenses" violate free speech protections in the First Amendment "because these are punishments threatened for speech" (Speta 2025). But the killing of Charlie Kirk presented Trump and his MAGA loyalists with a crisis that could be manipulated to change public

perception of the acceptable use of official powers. Democrats and even some Republican legislators criticized Chairman Carr's comments about Kimmel's show, but many conservative voices remained silent, and some voiced support for Carr's stance. Politico reporter John Hendel examined the responses, noting that Senator Ted Cruz "threatened to use his Commerce Committee gavel to rein in Carr's regulatory powers" (Hendel 2026). However, Cruz presents a unique case, as most Republicans, including Trump, rallied around Carr. Representative Brett Guthrie, chair of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, "hinted" to Politico that "Republicans have few concerns about how Carr is running the agency, or his threats over Kimmel" (Hendel 2026). Other notable political commentators also attacked Kimmel and supported Carr's threats. Journalist and political commentator Megyn Kelly criticized Kimmel and even noted disgust for Kimmel's audience, stating, "This was an intentional lie to GIN UP HATRED toward the very group of ppl most suffering in the wake of our devastating loss of Charlie and Kimmel did it willfully and even gleefully to a cheering complicit audience" (Kelly 2025). Trump, who has long attacked the mainstream media, including late-night television hosts, was quick to support Carr. Speaking to reporters on Air Force One, Trump backed Carr's stance and noted that he also thought the FCC should take away network's licenses (BBC 2025).

The Guardian released a report on how "Charlie Kirk's shocking killing sets the stage for a dangerous federal crackdown" (Bayoumi 2025). Conservatives widely embraced the government's overwhelming mobilization against mainstream political opponents, as cited below (all quotes found in Bayoumi 2025):

- "Christopher Rufo, an influential conservative activist with close ties to the Trump administration, posted on X that the 'last time the radical Left orchestrated a wave of violence and terror, J. Edgar Hoover shut it all down within a few years. It is time, within the confines of the law, to infiltrate, disrupt, arrest, and incarcerate all of those who are responsible for this chaos.'"
- "The Maga political strategist Steve Bannon told his audience that 'Charlie Kirk is a casualty of war. We are at war in this country. We are.'"
- "The far-right activist Laura Loomer (who holds significant influence with the president) wrote: 'The best way President Trump can reinforce Charlie's legacy is by cracking down on the Left with the full force of the government. . . . We can't allow for these people to live among us in society.'"
- "Not to be outdone, Trump chimed in with a statement: 'My administration will find each and every one of those who contributed to this atrocity and to other political violence, including the organizations that fund it and support it.'"

The double standard is glaring. Trump regularly invokes violent rhetoric toward his own political opponents and dissenters, and most conservative politicians refuse to condemn his statements. On the other hand, he and his political allies are quick to condemn any criticism of MAGA loyalists or ideas (real or imagined), framing such criticism as un-American and dangerous to the country. This double standard has important consequences. Framing critique of Charlie Kirk's political positions as a critique of Kirk's patriotism and red-blooded Americanism transforms criticism of conservative ideology into criticism of the United States and outright political terrorism. Critics cease to be considered civically engaged citizens in the normal sociopolitical arena; rather, they become framed as anti-American, dangerously violent, potential terrorists intent on the destruction of the American way of life.

By exploiting the Kirk assassination to define any criticism of Kirk's ideas as outside the sphere of legitimate public discourse, the Trump administration seeks to justify extreme measures aimed at combatting allegedly dangerous, violent actors. Investigating left-leaning organizations and firing average people for casual social media posts becomes justified as a necessary measure to protect the country. Pressuring television networks to punish on-air talent for comments that challenge the administration's stance on an issue is framed as a crucial step in the righteous crusade to prevent the peddling of dangerous, violence-inducing lies.

In the days and weeks following Kirk's assassination, Donald Trump quickly took to attacking critics of Kirk and issued an executive order directing the Department of Justice to investigate political opponents. This order occurred under the guise of

investigating, disrupting, and dismantling "Domestic Terror Organizations," which is not a standalone designation in US law. Trump officials justified this as necessary to take down the "vast domestic terror movement" that these officials alleged led to the killing of right-wing activist Charlie Kirk (News Agencies 2025). Trump announced that these investigations would focus on a range of left-wing organizations and people, including George Soros's Open Society Foundations and the Ford Foundation, and would revoke visas of noncitizens who were "celebrating" Kirk's death (Kanno-Youngs et al. 2025). Many conservatives praised this shift in the Overton window—where using federal power to investigate and punish perceived enemies is acceptable. Scott Walter (president of the conservative Capital Research Center) said that he was "thrilled to see the administration promising to investigate the left-wing non-profit sector" (Kanno-Youngs et al. 2025).
In the aftermath of Kirk's assassination and Trump's exploitation of the crisis, public opinion also shifted to support political repression. Twenty-three House Republicans called for investigations into the operations and financing of long-standing nonprofit organizations and media outlets accused of "anti-American ideology," including ABC and the Southern Policy Law Center.

The twenty-three members wrote in a public letter:
In the wake of numerous attacks on our way of life, the destruction of the rule of law, and the murder of innocent Americans, prominent and unknown alike, we must take every step to follow the money and uncover the force behind the NGOs, donors, media, public officials, and all entities driving this coordinated attack (Brooks 2025).

Much of the public—especially Trump supporters—agreed with this view. A Rasmussen RMG survey found that 80% of GOP voters supported "private companies" firing individuals for celebrating an assassination online, and 88% supported firing journalists or media personalities for the same (CBS Austin 2025). Similarly, a Quinnipiac University poll in October 2025 found that only 6% of Republicans felt that Trump was using the Justice Department to target his political opponents or to "file unjustified charges" against them (Malloy & Schwartz 2025). Importantly, this growing acceptance of government investigation, official punishment, and private businesses' firing of political opponents has a right-wing bias. Trump exploited Kirk's assassination to further advance his perspective that left-wing political violence is the only type of political violence the country needs to be concerned about. On September 17, 2025, exactly one week after Kirk's shooting death, The Hill broke the news that the DOJ had removed a 2024 study "in which several criminal justice researchers reviewed National Institute of Justice data" from their website (Beitsch 2025). The report revealed that violence occurs far more often from people and organizations with politically far-right ideologies than from all other groups combined. According to the study, since 1990, "ideologically motivated" attacks/murders from "far-right extremists" have occurred 5.4 times more often than attacks/murders from groups and people with "far-left" ideologies—227 attacks from the right compared to 42 from the left, with right-wing attacks claiming 520 lives and left-wing attacks claiming 78 (Lopez et al. 2024). The evidence clearly shows that the problem of ideologically motivated violence is not solely, or even mainly, coming from the left, though Trump regularly claims otherwise to discredit left-wing politics in the country. As noted earlier, Trump does not believe that violence from the right is a problem; rather, "the radicals on the left are the problem" (Fox News 2025). An official post from the Trump White House titled "President Trump Isn't Backing Down from Crushing Radical Left Violence" stated that "this is a time that demands fearless and courageous leadership—not moral cowardice, indecision, or the lack of fortitude to call this what it is: an epidemic of Radical Left violence" (The White House 2025).

The investigation and conviction of eight individuals in Texas for terrorism-related activity reveals the impact of Trump's executive order calling for the investigation and prosecution of left-wing activists and organizations. Though many of those convicted had done little more than wear black clothing during a protest outside an ICE facility before one protestor shot a police officer outside the facility, the government portrayed the protestors as members of Antifa, a nonexistent organization Trump designated as a "Domestic Terror Organization" after Kirk's murder. The husband of a protestor was even charged "with conspiring to obstruct justice by moving a box of

zines" out of the house after his wife was arrested (Sledge 2026). The federal prosecutor argued that the lone shooter's "plan" was "to build a confrontation, and he was using the people in his inner circle to accomplish that" (Feuer & Torralva 2026). Charging and convicting people of terrorism based on wearing certain clothes, owning zines, or belonging to a "book club named after the early 20th century anarchist Emma Goldman" reveals the consequences of Trump's persecution of left-wing individuals under the guise of anti–domestic terrorism policies (Feuer & Torralva 2026). Through these tactics, Trump used Kirk's murder to redefine extremism and political violence not as a bipartisan issue capable of coming from both the left and the right but instead as a solely left-wing problem. Accordingly, the Trump administration's politically motivated investigations and attacks on the left became justified as a matter of protecting the American way of life in the wake of a destabilizing crisis like a political assassination. Thus, Trump's response to Kirk's assassination fits into the mechanism for shifting the Overton window to normalize previously extreme attitudes and behaviors presented earlier in this paper.

1. Regular framing of critics and opponents lays the groundwork for future policy changes: Trump spends much of his first term and Biden's term attacking leftist organizations and framing them as dangerously anti-American. This dynamic plants the seeds for targeting organizations and people who oppose him, all under the guise of protecting America.
2. Crisis or tragedy occurs: Charlie Kirk is shot and killed in front of thousands of people, and the video spreads like wildfire across the internet.
3. Trump reframes perpetrators or causes: Trump quickly blames liberal ideology for the murder. Rather than seeing the murder as committed by a lone wolf who had become increasingly disturbed and angered by Kirk's rhetoric, Trump frames the murder as part of an organized effort from liberal donors and organizations to destroy America. Kirk is presented as a martyr and framed as the perfect American, killed for his America-loving identity. Those who say anything about Kirk that is not praise and unequivocal adoration are pointed to as anti-American and extremist. Kimmel is temporarily pulled from television, while conservative voices want him fired. Average citizens tweet quotes from Kirk and are fired from their jobs for it. Trump and his allies call for a top-down assault on left-wing journalists, nonprofits, educators, and more. Dissent comes to mean treason.
4. GOP elites echo or tolerate the framing: GOP congressmembers parrot Trump's attacks on the left. Some take up language calling for the public execution of Kirk's murderer. Political violence ceases to be viewed as a bipartisan issue among many legislators and voters and is instead viewed as a problem emerging solely from the left.
5. Policy implementation: Trump orders the DOJ to investigate liberal donors, journalists, educators, and organizations. While such directives would traditionally be disavowed on broad bipartisan lines, Trump's directives are tolerated and even praised by most conservative Republicans.
6. Voter attitudes shift accordingly: GOP officials support Trump's investigations of left-wing actors. GOP voters support the narrative that violence from the left is the only problem, while violence from the right is necessary to protect the American way of life.

Conclusion

Naomi Klein examines the role of a crisis in opening previously closed economic markets and shows how disaster capitalism feeds off crises. This paper expands on Klein's theory, demonstrating how political leaders with extreme ideologies can, with prior work and preparation, use crises to justify their positions and reframe narratives to normalize previously unacceptable behavior and policy. Crises play a vital role for identity-driven authoritarians to justify their positions and cement themselves in power, but they are far from the only mechanism in play. As in the cases above, the crisis alone does not lead to the codifying of unpopular, extremist positions. Rather, a political leader must lay the foundation for the formal implementation of policies and behaviors that support the extreme position. Once the politician lays the foundation, they must continuously return to that foundational rhetoric. Doing so serves to familiarize the public with the rhetoric—making it seem more likely to be true—and erode support for opposing viewpoints, especially when the politician's rhetoric regularly includes attacks not on the viewpoint itself but on the political opposition members and unfavorable media.

This dynamic is visible through Trump's voracious use of social media and mainstream media's obsession with him, which means that he often dominates media airwaves. This was as apparent as ever during the 2020 general election, when "Trump received four times as much coverage as Biden on CBS and three times as much on Fox" according to data compiled by the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy (Patterson 2020). Trump's relationship with the media has always been antagonistic, and his verbal attacks on the media serve an important purpose. Draper notes in Weapons of Mass Delusion that 60 Minutes correspondent Lesley Stahl asked Trump why he constantly accused the media of lying and peddling "fake news." According to Stahl, Trump said (off camera), "You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all, so that when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you" (Draper 2022, 54). Thus, when the media reports on Trump's role in the January 6 insurrection, his well-known peddling of Obama "birther" conspiracies, or his blaming of liberals for violence despite the right-leaning but bipartisan issue that it is, those who support Trump or are casual observers of politics are disinclined to believe what the media says.

This dynamic has a pernicious effect. Lack of trust in the media helps to create conditions in which the concepts of elite cue theory and illusory truth theory can thrive. When the media is discredited, people seek out alternative sources of informational authority. Trump's persistent attacks on the media over the years has created a gap in what many conservatives consider to be trustworthy information. In both cases studied above, Trump capitalized on years of discrediting the media to push a narrative favorable to his image and related policy goals, including shifting the boundaries of acceptable political thought and behavior.

Trump's repeated attacks of the 2020 election as fraudulent and stolen, his claims that the Biden administration unfairly punished the insurrectionists (whom he insisted were not insurrectionists but freedom-loving patriots), and his claims that liberals are violently anti-American serve a strategic purpose. The repetition of an alternate, competing narrative by a major national leader blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Many of those who incessantly hear Trump's narratives become convinced that he is telling the truth and everyone else is lying. With the groundwork laid, all that remains is to wait for a catalyzing event to occur or to create a catalyzing event, such as the created crisis of a stolen election or the real crisis of the murder of Charlie Kirk. When a crisis does happen, or when a fake crisis is created, the waiting political leader must quickly move to control the narrative, dominate headlines, and frame the crisis in a way that affirms the leader's previously espoused ideologies, behaviors, and policy goals. In the disorganized and chaotic immediate aftermath of the crisis, the political leader has more room to implement their policy. Those who previously backed implementing the policy are quick to issue statements of support and defend the new policy. Those who previously opposed it, having been relentlessly attacked by the political leader and facing political headwinds for speaking out against the new policy as a crisis response, are likely to remain silent. Those who do speak out are quickly vilified and framed as enemies of the country, pushed along with their ideologies outside of the window of politically acceptable thought and behavior. The Overton window is thus shifted away from the previously tolerated positions and toward the new positions. As Klein argues in The Shock Doctrine, crises can destabilize social and political norms, creating a vacuum in which a political entrepreneur can force through previously unacceptable economic changes. As Milton Friedman, whom Klein views as the father of disaster capitalism, stated: "Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When the crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around" (Friedman & Friedman 2002, xiv). Friedman believed it necessary "to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable" (Friedman & Friedman 2002, xiv).

While Friedman laid out the theory of what Klein terms "disaster capitalism" more than sixty years ago, Donald Trump is the avatar of present-day disaster politics. Trump is more than just a reactionary politician, forming opinions and policies in response to events. His regular attacks on individuals, orga-

nizations, and policies he does not care for serve to keep alternative policy and governing ideas alive. He aggressively capitalizes on the opportunities presented by a crisis he has either fabricated (a stolen election and January 6) or exacerbated (Kirk's assassination). Consequently, the view from our current political Overton window looks radically different than it did before Trump rode down the golden escalator in Trump Tower on June 16, 2015, to announce his candidacy for the 2016 presidential election.

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White Supremacy and The Weaponization of "Civility" and "Decorum" in the Legislative Process

by Hazzel Chavira

In the United States, generations of minorities have grown up on absent or altered histories that were fed to them through racist institutions whose function is to perpetuate white privilege. Still today, actions such as teaching the true racialized history of America through the 1619 Project are being forbidden in some jurisdictions and lambasted by elected officials (including President Trump). At the same time, those seeking to teach accurate versions of America's troubled history and acknowledge the wounds that have penetrated generations of people, are being labeled as dangerous radicals that must be stopped to preserve the very foundations that make America "exceptional" -- racism, prejudice and unearned privilege.

It is easy to think that much of America's racism ended after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (and related acts such as the Fair Housing Act), which prohibited discrimination and segregation in public spaces and places of employment on the basis of race, national origin, sex, religion, or color. However, these kinds of legislative acts have not ended a deep cultural tendency in America to reflexively defer to blunt expressions of racism, homophobia, etc., when expressed by white people (especially white men), while harshly critiquing any person of color who might speak harshly of a white conservative or the culture of America's racist institutions. An illustrative example would be the acrimony that followed United States Representative Illhan Omar (D-MN05) after speaking out against systematic oppression in a speech after the death of George Floyd, where she was met with "social media feeds that were instantly flooded with hate speech, calls for deportation and, as is so often the case, death threats." Such hate speech has been catalyzed by some of the highest leaders in the land, including hostile statements by the Republican National Committee, Donald Trump Jr., and other right-wing "media outlets," alleging that Representative Omar was seeking to dismantle the U.S economy and government. We can see this racist double-standard in the recent behaviors of State legislators across the nation, who have shown a quick willingness to criticize and censor the harsh speech of legislators of color, while ignoring and allowing homophobic and racist speech by conservative white legislators.

In Colorado, for example, State legislators in 2024 united behind a conservative push to censor one legislator of color, Democrat Rep. Elisabeth Epps (D-HD6), who criticized supporters of Israel's war in Gaza as having fascist tendencies. They did this while ignoring hateful and homophobic claims made by Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-HD3), a Republican United States Representative for Colorado's 3rd congressional district, that K-12 schools were absurdly accommodating gender fluid children by installing cat "litter boxes" in classrooms and bathrooms to accommodate supposed identity-confused students. "It's kids identifying as cats, and it's actually a real thing. It's just the trend happening in high schools and middle schools, where they don't talk. They're mutes," said another conservative legislator, in support of Boebert's claim. Similarly, the Tennessee Legislature recently voted to expel two black lawmakers for their "harsh" language in criticizing opponents of gun control, while simul-

taneously ignoring vitriolic hate speech against the black community by white legislators. "I hear racist statements [by white legislators] all the time," said one Tennessee legislator. "One colleague literally said that 'they should bring back hanging by a tree,' in a recent legislative discussion."

This manuscript examines the recent conflicts and debates over "civility" and appropriate language taking place in various U.S. state capitols and demonstrates how the racist and homophobic double-standards at the heart of these debates serve to weaponize concepts like "civility" against progressive leadership and policies. Colorado, Montana, Tennessee, and Wyoming, amongst several other states, have recently censured or expelled legislators of color or LGBTQ+ legislators from committees or from the legislative floor for their alleged "incivility" and breaches of decorum. And yet, white conservative legislators in these states have been able to call their political opponents "pedophiles" and issue related insults, without any consequences. This double standard reveals how concepts like "decorum," "etiquette," and "civility" have been weaponized against civil rights protestors and legislators of color to critique demands from marginalized and disempowered perspectives, while perpetuating a racist system that maintains white privilege.

Incivility Double Standards: A General Survey

People of color and whites do not share the same history, they do not share the same resources, and they do not share the same rights. In this context of deep power inequalities, words such as "decorum" have represented double standards that are steeped in hypocrisy, discrimination, prejudice, and "have often been used to silence groups and keep them in their place" (Cloud and Lozano-Reich 2009). It is all too often that white legislators use the word "decorum" to leash and control the tongues and actions of minority legislators from marginalized communities, when they battle politically, or say or do a little too much for their communities and constituents. At the same time, white legislators typically do absolutely nothing when the rules of said "decorum" are broken by white State Representatives.

For example, on a 2024 oversight committee that was discussing the United States' response to COVID-19, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a far-right Republican representing the State of Georgia, used the national stage to defame Dr. Fauci, the former chief medical advisor to the President of the United States. Representative Greene asked the following question in Committee: "Do you think the American people deserve to be abused like that Mr. Fauci, cause you're not Dr. (Fauci), you're Mr. Fauci to me in these next few minutes…nah I don't need your answer…in my time that man (Dr. Fauci) does not deserve to have a license, as a matter of fact, it should be revoked and he belongs in prison" (C-SPAN 2024). Following these uncivil insults, the white, Republican Chairman of this committee proceeded to call Representative Greene a "gentle-lady" and noted that "the young lady (Rep. Greene) should identify the Doctor as a Doctor." Representative Greene ignored this slight admonishment, blurting out yet again that she did not respect "Mr. Fauci," even following a call of order from another Representative to bring order and "decorum" to the committee. In the end, the committee moved on and there was no consequence felt by Representative Greene.

In a similar fashion, Representative Greene (R-GA) in 2024 stood on the House Floor to propose a censure of the Somali-born member of Congress, Ilhan Omar, for her supposed incivility in voicing public support of Somalian vs. U.S. foreign policy goals. Even while claiming Rep. Omar was "uncivil," Representative Greene supported the censure resolution in a bigoted way, saying that she was supporting censure for "Representative Ilhan Omar of Somalia–I mean Minnesota" (Al Jazeera Staff, 2024). These are both instances of clear incivility by a white woman in power, and yet there were no consequences because Rep. Greene was afforded rights that People of Color and minorities all over the country are not afforded - including Free Speech.

Concepts like "civility" and "decorum" have often been used by white people against People of Color who hold positions of power while fighting for social justice, equality for future generations, or simply to assert themselves in their respective fields. The double-standard rhetoric of "decorum" is consistently used by the majority or dominant white groups in the United States, where they have "repeatedly enacted

civilizing strategies to effectively silence and punish marginalized groups (e.g., labor; women and People of Color; the poor…and [LGBT]...where 19th-century notions of proprietary and civility were used as cultural ideals to place legal, political, and physical restrictions" (Cloud and Lozano-Reich 2009). The prejudicial treatment of legislators of Color when they are officially censured or reprimanded by their peers, while white legislators speak uncivilly with impunity, is undemocratic and unjust discrimination.

The history of words like "decorum" and "civility" is that they are commonly recommended to, or enforced against, the marginalized and disenfranchised when they "step out of line." Members of these communities are then held under immense scrutiny and expected to smile in the face of insult, where "even by being civil, they were marked as uncivil" (Golding 2022). We can see this historic tendency playing out currently in majority-white spaces such as during a special session of Colorado's legislature, when the members of the House voted to silence a Representative for her civil rights stance on the Gaza war.

Similarly, in 2019, for example, Colorado State Representative Ron. Hanks faced no consequences when he made a joke about lynching before honoring the "Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787" which stipulated how each enslaved person would be counted as three-fifths of a person in regards to the population of the state, for purposes of taxation and for calculating representation in Congress. Representative Hanks argued that "an 18th century policy designating a slave as three-fifths of a person was not impugning anybody's humanity" and that, "it took 600,000 American lives [and] ..a lot of treasure..[to end slavery in the Civil War] and that that's the kind of thing that needs to be taught" (Nieberg 2022). This kind of claim clearly emerged from Hanks' background as a rural, white conservative who likely never thought his remarks might be "uncivil" since he likely had little familiarity with the perspective of Black residents whose own family heritage might trace to those very enslaved populations that Hanks so easily said should not feel "dehumanized" by the Three-Fitfth's compromise.

Hanks' limited perspective would predictably differ from a competing claim about America's enduring racism, tracing back to evils like the Three-Fifth's compromise, that might come from a Black legislator, representing their own community. Unfortunately, if the legislator of color points out the racism inherent in statements like Representative Hanks, they may well be criticized and even censured for "incivility," while Representative Hanks' claims, and those of similar taste, are all too common and are never censured. Speaking safely from the perspective of the colonizer and descendant of slaveholders is an all-too-common privilege that white communities possess, while a minority speaker bluntly criticizing that perspective is unfortunately likely to lead to legislative censure.

As another example of how indecency by white powerholders is accepted, consider the reception of a far-right conspiracy theory rooted in xenophobia, racism, and white supremacist ideology: the "Great Replacement Theory," which states that there is a left-wing Democratic agenda encouraging mass migration of non-whites to undermine and eventually replace white majorities in America, culminating in a "white genocide." A version of this theory is constantly advanced by former President Trump without any consequence for his "incivility," such as when he famously claimed that Mexico is "sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."

Additionally, Senior White House adviser Stephen Miller, who engineered the Trump administration's family-separation policy (Saleh, 2019) as well as its travel ban on people from Muslim-dominant countries (Niayesh, 2019), was shown to have referenced in emails a deeply racist, dystopian French novel, The Camp of the Saints by Jean Raspail, to express his support for white-supremacist values and ideas. In an email chain between Miller and an editor from Breitbart, Katie McHugh, the two openly discuss their shared support on white nationalism, their disdain for immigrants, and Millers' perspective that non-white or foreign-born alleged criminals deserve no rights at all (Hayden, 2019). Miller's comments throughout the email chain also show heavy support for President Calvin Coolidge's legislation, The Immigration Act of 1924, which was heavily based on eugenics and fear of miscegenation. In Coolidge's

words, "biological laws tell us that certain people will not mix or blend," a point which Miller brought up in support of his idea to halt all immigration to America, essentially backing immigration policies that Hitler once praised.

This general theory has consistently been extremely popular with conservatives in governmental meetings and conversations in state capitols. Common statements include "uncivil" comments by Michigan Representative Josh Schriver, who compared immigrants to an invading army, asking: "Are any other countries being invaded by the millions right now or is it just America? Deny entry. Detain. Deport. This isn't rocket science." Representative Schriver also claimed, in relation to the Biden administration, that "The current regime is intentionally allowing a 'soft invasion' of America to drastically shift our demographics as a means to maintain power by replacing existing American voters with foreigners that will vote to keep the current regime. Millions every year! Unsustainable…" (Heywood and Sanchez 2024).

In another example of official incivility without consequence, then presidential candidate Trump stated during the presidential debate (in response to a question about immigration) that, "they're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats. They're eating the pets of the people that live there, and this is what's happening in our country, and it's a shame" (Garsd, 2024). The same unfounded claims were made by the Vice-Presidential candidate JD Vance, when he tweeted on X that "Reports now show that people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn't be in this country" (Huo and Garsd, 2024). On top of that, comedian Tony Hinchcliffe, who spoke at a 2024 Trump rally at Madison Square Garden in New York, said "I don't know if you guys know this, but there's literally a floating island of garbage in the middle of the ocean right now. I think it's called Puerto Rico." A similar barrage of insults grew with other comments from Republican speakers labeling Democratic Vice-President Kamala Harris as "the devil," while others insinuated that Harris had begun her political career as a prostitute (Colvin and Price, 2024). The remarks - racist, demeaning, sexist - went unpunished, with zero repercussions, and in fact, the Trump campaign emerged victorious in the 2024 presidential election.

The Racism of White Decorum

It is a unique privilege that resides with white people to be able to side-step and evade rules that should be equally enforced on all members of a society, especially on those in places of influence and power. In the book, Against Civility: The Hidden Racism in our Obsession with Civility, Alex Zamalin examines the idea and practice of civility in modern society and shows how principles of "civility" have rarely been enforced against brutish white powerholders, but mostly wielded against minorities to disrupt racial progress, and perpetuate oppression, discrimination and racial injustices, all through the guise of "remaining neutral." Zamalin states that the idea and practice of "civility" in politics has led to the eradication of civic radicalism, inherently making politics purposefully exclusive of social justice claims. Zamalin states that "Politics is about organizing the competing interests within a community, distributing socioeconomic resources, [and] making determinations about whose lives matter and whose don't … this is an arena of power and struggle" (Zamalin 2021 5). In this struggle, that "…[civility] has been a tool for silencing dissent, repressing political participation, enforcing economic inequality, and justifying violence upon people of color" (Zamalin 2021 6). According to this argument, demands for "decorum" and "civility" in political contexts have been wielded as tools to exterminate hopes of a more advanced multicultural democracy.

Appeals to civility are hypocritical double standards in that they are constantly used to shut down Black/LGBTQ+ and marginalized voices, even when these people hold positions of power, such as state legislators, but are rarely used to shut down racist white rhetoric or to criticize white supremacists, despite the media that white racists use or the position of power they hold in society. Scholars further elaborate this idea, stating that "notions of civility are inextricably racialized" and that "people of color have to work harder to be seen as civil and non-threatening, whereas white people can espouse a harmful colorblind ideology and still be seen as civil" (Hawkins et al. 2023). The reader can reference Colorado Rep. Hanks' remarks discussed earlier, where he claimed there was nothing "inhuman" about slav-

ery and the Three-Fifths Compromise. This was an overtly racist remark, overlooked by the members of the Colorado House of Representatives and General Assembly leadership, who offered no censures and no reprimands, despite the legislator spewing heavily prejudiced rhetoric on such a public and powerful platform.

Free speech also operates under a different standard for Women of Color as Hawkins, et. al 2023…state that, "when women, especially in positions of power, voice injustices and demand respect they are seen as 'nagging' … women are expected to maintain the behavior in line with socialized gender stereotypes" (Hawkins et al. 2023 541). But this expectation becomes problematic because "the silencing of Black women's voices hinder meaningful contributions made on issues related to racism, sexism, intersectionality, and social justice "(Hawkins et al. 2023 548).

Similar research by Bryan T. Gervais (2014) emphasizes the hierarchy of allowable speech in places of power, and uncovers how incivility is wielded as a weapon by white people towards People of Color, especially in mass media and political settings. Gervais states that, "Collectively, three common themes emerge as definitions of incivility: Uncivil claims must be disrespectful toward their target, must do so in a purposeful, confrontational manner, and tend to be presented in a hyperbolic nature" (Gervais 2014 568).

Earlier, this manuscript shared an example of this kind of incivility in a passage from one of President Donald Trump's speeches, where he famously declared that Mexico is "sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're bringing the rapists." Clearly, all three characteristics of what Gervais defines as uncivil speech are present here. More famously, President Donald Trump has delivered constant declarations of hate towards marginalized communities, once sharing a browbeating sexual slur about two female candidates for President on X (Tait, 2024). He constantly advocates for violence or death to his opponents, criticizing Democratic legislators for "seditious behavior, punishable by death" and urging four Democratic Representatives of color "to go back" to "the crime-infested places from which they came" (Quilantan and Cohen, 2019; Svirnovskly and Wardwell, 2025). But outrage and censures against these kinds of incivilities are unfortunately mostly directed at people of color, while white incivilities are accepted as part of standard discourse, and their speakers can become President.

It's important to understand that if the President of the United States can illicit 'incivility' and breach 'decorum' without consequence, then what stops state legislators from uttering the same speech and exaggerated, prejudiced rhetoric? When a GOP chair of a US house subcommittee purposely misgendered the only openly transgender member of congress during, or when US GOP Rep. Greene (HD14) stated that she supported a censure for "Representative Illhan Omar of Somalia," or when Colorado State Representative Ron Hanks (R-HD60) minimized Black history by rationalizing a racist 18th century policy, did "breaches of decorum'" and lack of "incivility" affect their political power? Or when Representative Paul Gosar, Republican of Arizona, tweeted an anime video altered to show him killing Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and swinging two swords at Mr. Biden (Colvin, 2021). Did he face official censures or reprimands similar to the consequences that were bequeathed on Rep. Epps, a legislator of color who was formally censured and lost her seats on committees for her pro-Palestine rhetoric (D-HD6)? In all cases, no. The reader should understand that the common claims by establishment sources regarding what civility looks like differ as it pertains to one's race and that "racism and sexism, among other axes of identity, are interrelated and produce complex social inequalities" (Hawkins et al. 2023 541).

This data shows that First Amendment rights have historically been more protected for conservative and white power holders than they ever were for marginalized speakers. Moreover, it shows that standards of civility and decorum are inherently racist, socially constructed standards of white spaces, such as State capitols. Incivility consequences are only applied to minority legislators, instead of all legislators equally, which reveals the spectacle of an American culture that seems to cultivate and thrive off of

racism, even in ostensibly inclusive spaces like state legislatures, enforcing ostensibly neutral standards like "decorum."

CASE STUDY: COLORADO

In Colorado, despite the legislature having a super-majority of Democrats as of November 2024, (with the House Democratic majority totaling 46 Democratic Legislators vs. 19 Republican Legislators, and the State Senate totaling 23 Democratic Senators vs. 12 Republican Senators), State Republican legislators have consistently used their time, attention, and social media platforms to bully, demean, and threaten their fellow Legislators. Though there are many examples of incivility and indecorum from Colorado's conservative, white legislators, their actions have never produced so much as a "slap on the wrist," or any unofficial/official reprimands or censures. On the other hand, some Colorado Democratic Legislators of color, such as Rep. Elisabeth Epps, have been reprimanded for simply joining a pro-Gaza protest in the legislative gallery and shouting "shame" at some of her fellow legislators.

Double-standards for white decorum and etiquette vs. the enforcement of decorum on legislators of color have been spotlighted in Colorado, with recent event occurring in January 2023, when House Speaker, Representative Julie McCluskie (HD13), a white "progressive" Democrat, reprimanded and censured Representative Elisabeth Epps, a Black woman, for "disrupting the chamber by joining pro-Palestinian protestors in the gallery, where Rep. Epps proceeded to shout out remarks in support of Palestinians during a filibuster speech of a Republican Representative on the final day of the special legislative session in November" (Paul, 2024). Rep Epps' outburst, while vigorous, should be seen as nothing but her exercising her First Amendment rights, just as we have seen then Republican Colorado Representative Hanks (R-HD60) offer with his remarks rationalizing of the racist "three-fifths compromise" during a "debate on a bill on civics education" (Goodland, 2021).

Though she was officially reprimanded, Representative Epps' alleged indecorum (shouting "shame" in a pro-Gaza protest, while joining protestors in the gallery) was arguably far less uncivil than unsanctioned actions by her white colleagues. For example, Colorado Republican Representative Brandi Bradley has placed multiple of her colleagues in substantial danger, such as Rep. Elisabeth Epps (D-CO), Rep. Lorena Garcia (D-CO), Rep. Cathy Kipp (D-CO), Rep. Javier Mabrey (D-CO), Rep. Tim Hernandez (D-CO), and Rep. Jenny Willford (D-CO), by spreading dangerous rhetoric about these legislators on her social media X platform. Rep. Bradley even went so far to vilify Rep. Willford on social media by posting, "Hi my name is Jenny! I'm fighting for: pedophiles, trans felons to hide behind name changes, kids to change their names behind parents' backs, stripping your TABOR refunds, increased property taxes, taking away your 2A rights, criminals getting decreased penalties..." (Bradley, 2024). Regarding Rep. Hernandez, Bradley has said that "Timmy and others are calling for First Amendment rights…that silences all the people they represent. You're a joke. You wouldn't understand the Constitution if it hit you upside the head. You're a hypocrite" (Bradley, 2024)." Finally, her postings about Rep. Epps consisted of claims such as "You know how you can tell if (Rep. Epps) is lying?? Her lips are moving...liars can never keep up with their lies..." (Bradley, 2024).

Dialogue such as this, especially from a State Legislator, should never be permitted and much less tolerated by constituents and fellow legislators under supposed "civility" standards. Divisive, sexist, and privileged language such as this is dangerous because it reinforces discriminatory attitudes that further perpetuate marginalization, creates hostile environments for underrepresented minorities, contributes to gender-race-ethnicity-class-based discriminatory environments, and further divides and polarizes society by advancing discrimination and violence. Nevertheless, Representative Bradley was entirely exempt from any consequences and was unscathed by any condemnations, reprimands, or censures for these ad-hominem attacks.

Analogously, Colorado Republican Representative Ryan Armagost posted on X multiple dramatized video "reenactments," supposedly dramatizing the legislative fate of several Republican-led bills that have not been supported by Democrats. On April 24, 2024, Rep. Armagost posted a "precise reenactment," produced by his professional staff,

that supposedly shed light on Colorado House Bill HB24-1456, titled "Increase Syphilis Testing During Pregnancy." In the video post, Rep. Armagost summarized that Rep. Bradfield [a fellow CO Republican] ran an amendment to change the language in the bill to say "mothers" instead of "birthing persons." When the amendment failed, the video claims that Democratic legislator Timmy "Hamas" Hernandez theatrically grabbed and ripped the amendment sheet up.."(#)socialist problems (#)you can't make this stuff up." This video mocked Rep. Hernandez (D) for his public Palestinian support, and gave him a derogatory nickname, even as the author of the video (Rep. Armagost) pushed to have Hernandez officially censured for his "disrespectful gesture" when he "blatantly took his copy of Rep. Bradfield's amendment and dramatically ripped it once the amendment was voted down" (Armagost, 2024). After posting the theatrical video, Rep. Armagost responded to a comment which mentioned how the video made him [Rep. Hernandez] looks "too muscular" by saying, "Yes, the figurine 'lookalike' makes one assume [Hernandez] has even looked at a gym from his scooter in his lifetime…" (Armagost, 2024).

This incident calls into question why divisive language such as this is being ignored, allowed, and even enabled, as long as it is white conservative legislators doing the insulting. Furthermore, what does this tweet or comment, and those similar, demonstrate to constituents and all State residents about discriminatory and hateful attitudes? If a State Representative acts in such a manner with impunity, what should stop anyone else from emulating them?

In parallel, Colorado Republican Representative Scott Bottoms, a self-proclaimed Second Amendment "protector and advocate," used comments on X to mischaracterize and critique Colorado House Bill 24-1071, titled "Name Change to Conform with Gender Identity." Bottoms tweeted how, "This law, (HB24-1071) wants to give criminals the ability to legally change their name and 'gender'...I do not participate in gender ideology nor will I let my speech be controlled by the Speaker of the House… Rep. Julie McCluskie once again took away my rights to speak and to only use certain words… Once again, the Democrats of the Colorado House of Representatives are defending sexual predators and putting children at harm, while also forcing my speech as an elected Representative for the state of Colorado" (Bottoms, 2024).

In fact, nowhere in the Bill, or in the amendments that were provided, did it mention that criminals would be able to change their names to somehow evade "justice"; nor did the bill support "sexual predators while putting children at harm." But Rep. Bottoms had no problem issuing such a statement about his dissent to gender ideology, whilst claiming that his free speech, or First Amendment right, was momentarily taken away by the Speaker of House, because she insisted on dignified and respectful gender language on the legislative floor. This claim of being "muzzled" was advanced despite Bottoms still being allowed the time and space to state his ignorant point of view about gender ideology on X and elsewhere without consequence, which was allowed by the very person he was blaming, Speaker of the House Julie McCluskie.

In November 2023, the Colorado Legislature was debating a bill about summer food benefits for children, SB23B-002, when an amendment to the bill was introduced by a Black Legislator, Representative Elisabeth Epps (D-HD6). Her amendment would essentially prohibit Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) programs (e.g., cards that help low-income people purchase groceries) from requiring the purchasing of food from any businesses operating in occupied territories. These are businesses operating in areas under military or under the political control of foreign powers, according to International Law, which would include Palestine, which is now occupied by Israel. Essentially, Epps' amendment was a political stance stating that Coloradans should not be forced to purchase food from a business that is participating in or funding a mass genocide, the Israel/Gaza war (Masters and Merrow 2025). As Epps introduced her amendment, she was suddenly interrupted by her Republican colleagues, cursing expletives at her for several minutes from the House Floor, while also threatening, "Do not impugn!!" and "It's gonna get rowdy!!" all with permission from the chair, Democrat Rep. Chris deGruy Kennedy (HD30).

This breach of civility and decorum was allowed, not only by the Chair but also by a fellow Democratic lawmaker who turned to silence Rep. Epps while she made remarks from the gallery, where she joined fellow pro-Palestine protestors. Epps was then impugned for her "incivility" in criticizing fellow legislators, after she criticized a Republican legislator by saying "he was out of order" by attempting to "use one tragedy to try and justify another" when he spoke in opposition to her bill by mentioning his surviving Holocaust grandparents at the well.

By criticizing fellow legislators from the gallery (while joining protestors there, as Epps did) and by suggesting that pro-Palestine legislators were akin to genocidal Nazis (as one legislator did in mentioning the Holocaust), both these legislators arguably engaged in acts of incivility, defined by Fowler et al. (2021). Fowler defines incivility as "the perception that one is deviating from commonly accepted behavioral norms for interpersonal interactions to the extent that their behavior is considered inappropriate given the context." However, the consequences of any alleged incivility were only felt by one legislator (Epps), a progressive legislator of color who was officially censured and reprimanded by a majority of the House members and by House Speaker, Democrat Julie McCluskie, while fellow Republican legislators faced no reprimands at all for their incivilities.

Following the censure, Rep. Epps became a legislative outcast and was labeled a "radical, extremist, communist" by her colleagues and their constituents. For example, fellow Democrat, Rep. David Ortiz, a self-proclaimed fighter for "equality of opportunities for All," stated on platform X that "This is embarrassing. .[Rep] Weinberg wasn't sitting in the gallery with protesters of his own interrupting Epps…Some people are here to do work…others are here to put on a performance & act like petulant children" (Ortiz, 2023). The chastising of Rep. Epps included an official letter of reprimand, produced by House Chair Rep. McClusky (a Democrat) wherein Epps was accused of violating House Rules 13 (A, C), 23(A-D). The letter of reprimand concluded by stating that "..it is my expectation that you will uphold the honor and dignity of elected office and this institution, and engage with members in civil and respectful ways… disagreement is inherent in the Democratic process, yet how we engage through conflict matters gravely" (Speaker of the Colorado House of Representatives).

Following the rare and official reprimand, Rep. Epps was also removed from the legislature's Judiciary Committee, discharged from her Capitol office, and banished into a smaller office outside of the Capitol building. Epps blamed House Speaker Julie McClusky and House Democrats for the exclusion, tweeting on X, "…it hurts what Dems + speaker of the house are doing to me bc I won't be silent or complicit - expelled me from judiciary cmte, now from my physical (not elected) office..." (Goodl, 2024; Epps, 2023). However, the House Speaker said that she felt justified in removing Rep. Epps from her Capitol office and preferred committee (Judiciary) writing in a statement on December 14 that:

Serving on a member's top choice of committee is a privilege - not a right...my decisions on where to appoint members depend on their respect of their colleagues, ability to collaborate and adherence to decorum, which was clearly violated during our special session last month.

In this letter and statement published by the House Speaker, conflict is described as a normal part of American life. However, by demanding that Epps alone had to be the one to "uphold the honor and dignity of elected office," while allowing white conservative legislators to impugn her at will, and even compare her to a Nazi, the letter revealed how "civility" can in fact be a hidden demand that progressive and radical lawmakers of color must conform to subjective, white supremacist and inherently racist ideas of what it means to show civility. It also highlights the vast differences in what "decorum" in the Colorado State Capitol means, as only some legislators are shunned from their offices and preferred committees for their breaches.

Members of the self-declared "#Mighty19," an ultra-conservative group of Colorado Republican legislators, have also disrupted the aura of the Colorado Legislature by harassing and demeaning Democratic colleagues, via in-person insults, when speaking at the well, or through their social media platforms. One "Might 19" member, Representative Armagost has been known to degrade fellow legis-

lators, body shame them, and employ disparaging language towards them. For example, when Democrat Representative Hernandez lost his seat to a Republican, Rep. Armagost tweeted a photoshopped picture of Rep. Hernandez's face in lieu of the Sun-Maid icon and captioned it, "gun-played." Rep. Armagost depicted Chicano Rep. Hernandez as a farm worker, which is a popular stereotype with negative connotations and its use was meant specifically to degrade the Latino legislator. In these ways, Rep. Armagost continually and publicly humiliates fellow legislators and people of color while excusing white incivilities. Representative Armagost has gone so far as to describe any critiques of the mostly white insurrectionists of January 6th as inherently "racist," leading only to a "a long and wasted day of debating nonsense" (Armagost, 2004). Similarly, Representative Richard Holtorfs (HD63-R) loud and discriminatory choice of words, when referring to his colleagues as "Buckwheat," a racist stereotype, while debating a stimulus measure on the Colorado House Floor, is yet another breach of supposed decorum (Goodland, 2021). Though this kind of language and action consistently perpetuates harm and angst for marginalized communities, neither Rep. Armagost nor Rep. Weinberg faced any official consequences like those of Rep. Epps.

Defenders of legislative civility claim that "legislatures are designed to foster civility and manage conflict in policy deliberations in order for adversarial political processes to produce consensus" (Uslaner 1993). However, such claims could not be any more false when examining the actions of the #Mighty19 and Democrats in their bouts during Colorado's lawmaking seasons. On platform X, in bringing light to a conversation she had heard among House colleagues, Representative Jenny Willford (HD34-D) tweeted, "A House colleague just said that the few mass shootings that happen in America are glorified ...used for clickbait..." (Willford, 2024). This demeaning critique was delivered directly to a legislator who aligns herself with progressive ideologies and more equity for minorities, who is also in favor of stricter gun control laws. Rep. Armagost (R-HD64) followed suit in exhibiting minimal 'civility', 'decorum' and 'etiquette' in his response towards Rep. Willford saying, "This um 'Legislator' that lives off of the lobby (not actual factual information or statistics) wants to run her mouth in a space that she has absolutely zero knowledge or sense within.. She is lost in the liberal sauce and needs a buoy thrown out to help her out of hysteria and delusion..help her understand what it takes to research anything before she flaps on about it.. YOU 'LEGISLATE' AND VOTE TO PROTECT CRIMINALS, PEDOPHILES, AND RAPISTS..Get a grip Willford" (Armagost, 2024).

The fact that a conservative white male legislator can say such things to a fellow female legislator without consequence—claiming she was an ignorant supporter of pedophiles and rapists-- is a clear example of double standards. Rep. Epps' official censure letter, signed by none other than House Leadership, states that "it is an expectation [to uphold] the honor and dignity of elected office and this institution, and engage with members in civil and respectful ways" (Speaker of the Colorado House of Representatives)--but where were these standards when Armagost was tweeting about how Rep. Willford was "hysterical," "delusional," "flapping on" about things, and protecting "pedophiles and rapists"?

Similarly, consider how Republican Representative Scott Bottoms (HD15) presented his views when tweeting on X regarding his disapproval of HB24-1071, titled "Name Change to Conform with Gender Identity." This bill was created to authorize, with specific conditions, a person convicted of a felony being treated in the prison system in a way that conformed with the person's chosen gender identity. The bill was meant to protect the rights of the historically marginalized LGBTQ+ community. In response, Rep. Bottoms tweeted,

"This law…is to give criminals the ability to legally change their name and 'gender'...I do not participate in gender ideology nor will I let my speech be controlled by the Speaker of the House, Rep. Julie McCluskie [who] once again took away my rights to speak and also told me I could only use certain words. This horrible bill uses a sexual predator and many times over convicted criminal as the NAME for the bill. I was not allowed to say his name. This bill will be used to hide criminals with multiple name changes. Once again, the Democrats of the Colorado House of Representatives are defending sexual predators and putting children at harm, while

also forcing my speech as an elected Representative for the State of Colorado" (Bottoms, 2024).

In saying that the Speaker of the House was "attempting to control" his speech, this angry tweet was a clear expression of this white legislator's view that HIS speech, at least, could not be restricted in the name of "civility" or "decorum," even as he supported calls to censor Representative Epps (a Democrat of color) for her alleged incivilities.

Though this manuscript has predominantly highlighted Republican examples of incivility in the Colorado legislature over the past few years, Democrats have also perpetuated the practice of keeping minority legislators oppressed with appeals to "civility" and "decorum". Amidst Rep. Epps' quite vulnerable and public stance on the War on Palestine, colleague Democrat Rep. Ortiz (HD38) perpetuated the anti-Epps hostility by calling her a "petulant child". It was a Democratic Chair who remained silent when Rep. Epps was being cursed and yelled at and who silenced Rep Epps when she was in the gallery, criticizing fellow legislators for their support of Israel. It was a Democratic House Speaker who officially censured Rep. Epps, removing her from the Judiciary Committee and shunting her to the far less important Veteran Affairs Committee, while enforcing no consequences to several Republican legislators who called several Democrats monstrous and ugly names on social media platforms. It is equally important to remember all the Democratic legislators who stood in silence, choosing no side while allowing the censure of their colleague, in hopes to remain unharmed and in positions of their duly-appointed power.

When even the party with the highest number of oppressed community members does not speak out against supremacist ideals and rhetoric, it speaks volumes regarding the effects of colonization and white privilege still present in our institutions. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire states that, "..the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors .. which derives from the fact that the oppressed ..adopt an attitude of 'adhesion' to the oppressor" (Freire 1993, 45). This argument correlates with what Alex Zamalin maintains in Against Civility, saying "it is elevated in the language of well-intentioned liberals, self-described moderates, and devout progressives… all of them traffic in ideas about public etiquette... from slavery to Jim Crow, to Black ghettoization, to mass incarceration, to police brutality, the idea of civility has been enlisted ... to maintain an unjust status quo"(Zamalin 2021 6). In this way, "civility has been a tool for silencing dissent, repressing political participation, enforcing economic inequality and justifying violence upon people of color" (Zamalin 2021 6). Examples such as these are not restricted to the Colorado Legislature but are present in all systems and institutions that are operating under ideologies that preserve and prolong white supremacy.

CASE STUDY: TENNESSEE

Though the US features a long history of mistreatment and hatred towards People of Color, 2023 was a special year, in which a white Democratic President, Joe Biden, felt compelled to utter politicized words in the face of yet another injustice, after the expulsion of two Black Democrat legislators from the Tennessee Assembly. On April 6th, 2023, President Biden stated that, "today's expulsion of lawmakers who engaged in peaceful protest is shocking, undemocratic, and without precedent," and later stated that Republican lawmakers have "chosen to punish, silence, and expel duly-elected representatives of the people of Tennessee" (White House, 2023). This was all in reference to Tennessee's 2023 Special Session, where legislators convened to circumnavigate gun safety after a mass elementary school shooting in Nashville, where a 28-year-old killed three nine-year-old children and three adults before being killed by police. "Gun control now!" and "Power to the people!" were some of the chants made by three legislators at the front of the House Floor, joining cadences by gun control supporters, who had filled the chamber's gallery days after the March shooting. After their actions, these three legislators became known as the "Tennessee Three" and they became symbols of resistance to the oppressive and unyielding measures that too often silence dissent on issues of critical public policy, in this case, gun reform measures (Aldrich and Testino, 2023).

Shortly after the legislators' outcries, the Tennessee Republican party accused and expelled two legislators, Representative Justin Jones (D-D52) and Representative Justin Pearson (D-D86), who

are both young Black men and minorities in the legislative body, for allegedly, "knowingly and intentionally bringing disorder and dishonor to the House Floor." The expelled legislators called their expulsions racist and undemocratic (Nottingham, et al, 2023). The third legislator, who conveniently avoided expulsion but faced 'political and public scrutiny,' was Representative Gloria Johnson (D-D13) a white, middle-aged woman, whose actions of marching alongside People of Color earned her only a slap on the wrist, as compared to the expulsion of her colleagues. These differing punishments only reinforce the racist definition of what it means to have decorum in lawmaking bodies, especially when convening in a Majority Republican State Capitol, where the political makeup consists of 75 Republicans and 25 Democrats. These legislators eagerly banished Black "radicals" for chanting about gun control, while only issuing a warning to their white compatriots.

After being reinstated to the Tennessee General Assembly after a special election, both Black lawmakers remained vigilant in their activism for equality, not only for their constituents, but for people all over the world. After his reinstatement, Rep. Pearson (D-D86) nationally declared how, "you might try to silence it. You might try and expel it, but the people's power will not be stopped. ..because this is what democracy looks like".

However, GOP disdain remained despite the reinstatements of these Black legislators. For example, although the Tennessee House Speaker Cameron Sexton (R-D25) declared that, "those two individuals (Jones and Pearson) will be seated as Representatives as the Constitution requires" the official admonishment against them remained and led to heightened surveillance of their every legislative action. For example, House Republicans voted 70-20 to silence Rep. Jones (D-D52) during a special session where, during a reading of a bill, they alleged that he had breached the chamber's newly adopted rules by straying off topic on a bill being debated. Despite a fellow legislator demanding a transcript for proof of what Rep. Jones (D-D52) had said, House Speaker Rep. Sexton (R-D25) said that proof from transcripts wasn't required under the rules of the "newly appointed bill." It's important to mention that Representative Gino Bulso (R-D61) had been gavelled "out of order" twice when presenting a different bill, but he never faced with the same consequences as Rep. Jones (D-D52) for the same actions, even during the same time frame of the recent passing of this "new rule."

Another inflammatory example occurred during a shuffle between Rep. Pearson (D-D86) and House Speaker Sexton (R-D25) on the House Floor. In this case, Representative Sexton alleged a physical assault by one of the Black legislators, claiming that, "Representative Pearson comes in and pops me from the right side". However, video proof highlighted that the only aggression actually came from House Speaker Sexton (R-D25), who put his finger into Representative Pearson's face and who was shown on video shoving Rep. Pearson (D-D86) (Kruesi and Mattes, 2023). Reviewing this footage, Representative Pearson claimed that "The Speaker had the audacity to turn around and tell me 'don't touch' him, despite the fact that he initiated this aggressive act toward me" and that "it's the aggressive attitude of white supremacy that permeates this institution that leads to policy of violence and now physical violence against its members" (Scott and Jones, 2023).

The political makeup of Tennessee's legislative body is just one example of how accepted, and historically rooted, racist notions of what counts as "civil" language and actions have halted equitable change for marginalized communities, especially in legislative chambers. The former president of the American Sociological Association, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argued in The Invisible Weight of Whiteness: The Racial Grammar of everyday life in Contemporary America that, "racial domination generates a grammar that helps reproduce racial order as just the way things are" and "racial grammar is a distillate of racial ideology and, hence of white supremacy."

Racial grammar, or assumed prejudicial notions, creates large divides between white people and people of color in society. The chants of Rep. Pearson (D-D86) and Rep. Jones (D-D52) can be seen as exclamations for freedom from an oppressive status quo, and their expulsions for 'lack of decorum' must be seen as an authoritarian response to such pressure, especially when coming from legislators of color (Nottingham et al., 2023). Their expulsion also

shone light on the importance of radical racial grammar, as it pertains to civil rights, by showing how racist language can collapse when "the oppressed fight back… then and only then, will the grammar of America be multicultural, democratic, and express the views, interests, and feelings of all of us in America" (Silva, 187).

Racial grammar, and the double standards attached to the language of civility, reveals the complicity of white supremacy in subjective rules of 'decorum' and 'civility.' The lack of 'decorum' has been consistent among white conservative leaders in the Tennessee legislature because the offenders were members of the Majority party--no repercussions or expulsions have ever followed suit for incivility. For example, in 2018 former State Representative David Byrd (R-D71) was accused by three women of sexual assault charges when they were minors and members of a sports team of which Rep. Byrd (R-D71) was a coach (Garcia, 2019). Following the allegations, Representative Gloria Johnson (D-D13) filed House Resolution 220, which would expel former Rep. Byrd (R-D71) for his actions (Allison, 2020). This resolution was ultimately killed by Republican leadership. In another example, despite being charged by federal prosecutors, former Speaker of the House Glen Casada (R-D63) was never expelled but was allowed to serve the remainder of his term, despite his public connections with money laundering, wire fraud, bribery and kickbacks concerning federal funds. Thirdly, Representative Paul Sherrell (R-D43) faced no official consequences after publicly querying if the state of Tennessee would consider adding "hanging by a tree" to a list of execution methods (Kruesi, 2023). His apologies for his inflammatory racist rhetoric were enough to keep him in good standing with the Tennessee legislature. Fourthly, Representative Justin Laffertys' (R-D92) statements defending the racist Three-Fifths Compromise by claiming that it was a "bitter, bitter pill necessary to end slavery" led to no consequences. Fifthly, former Representative Rick Tillis (R-D92), who held a position as coordinator of the Republican Campaign Committee, operated an anonymous Twitter account, now known as X, that consisted of disparaging tweets which caused inter-party conflict, and overall hostility amongst legislators (Allison, 2019). Some examples of his slandering tweets consisted of calling Representative Andy Holt (R-D76) a "mental child," maliciously labeling Representative Cade Cothren (R-D35) as a 'gay man,' referencing Rep. Jones (D-D52) to be a "disease" and a "misguided moron", and branding Rep. Cothren (R-D35) and two former Republican staff members, as the "fascist fun boy faction." In other recent examples, Tennessee Republican leaders have pushed to rename much of John Lewis Way as Donald Trump Way, partly to ensure legislative business cards featured Trump's name, and not the civil rights leader's name (Whetstone and Dennis, 2023), Rep. Mike Carter, R-Ooltewah, criticized a fellow Black legislator by saying he was busy "getting the secret formula to Kentucky Fried Chicken." Similarly, in 2022, the Tennessee House Speaker (a White Republican) and his chief of staff were found to have exchanged text messages saying such things as "Black people are idiots," and calling an NFL player a "thug (N-word). (Ebert and Allison, 2020).

These behaviors elicited no official condemnations of any of these conservative leaders, although two Black legislators were formally expelled from office for standing up and chanting in favor of gun control. These examples of double standards as they relate to lack of decorum allow "racism to sneak in under the radar" where Republicans have "authorized and naturalized [racist] rhetoric, helping to pave the way for more overt expressions of exclusion" (Stuckey 2022).

As another example of double standards in judging which actions are defined as having 'civility' or 'decorum' and which are not, it's revealing to backtrack to the few instances of previous legislators' expulsions, and to recognize the rarity and severity of the actions that have previously led to expulsion. The last time the Tennessee House expelled a sitting lawmaker was in 2016, where they voted to remove then Representative Jeremy Durham (R-D65) over several allegations of inappropriate sexual misconduct with at least 22 women. Before that, in 1980 former Representative Robert Fisher (R-Elizabethton) was expelled through a 92-1 vote for soliciting a $1,000 bribe to kill pending legislation (The Tennessean, 1980). Prior to that, in 1866, six lawmakers were ousted during a special session, after they tried to prevent Tennessee from ratifying the 14th Amend-

ment to the Constitution, which would later provide citizenship and equal protection rights for formerly enslaved persons (Gang, 2023). Revisiting the rare history of expelled lawmakers and comparing their actions to those of Rep. Jones (D-D52) and Rep. Pearson (D-D86) in voicing support for gun control, Jones' and Pearson's actions hardly seem to hold the same weight as the sexual, racist, thoroughly corrupt, and fundamentally anti-democratic predations of their predecessors. The lack of similarity between the actions of those recently expelled versus the previous actions shine light on the white power structure that is the Tennessee legislature, where members condone racism and condemn anybody who speaks out against discrimination.

A prime example of such racism in a high office would be Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signing SB0623 into law in 2023, which sought to ban learning about critical race theory in schools by revoking funding for institutions that were caught discussing, "the history of an ethnic group," or "controversial aspects of history," or providing "any instruction on the historical oppression of a particular group of people based on race, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, or geographic region." But of course, America's history contains undeniable patterns of racism and oppression, so denying the truth to even be spoken about in a classroom can only be seen as a massive step backwards, preserving white fragility and empowering white supremacy by patrolling the borders of "proper education" with racist thought police.

CASE STUDY: MONTANA

"If you use decorum to silence people who hold you accountable, all you are doing is using decorum as a tool of oppression," declared Representative Zooey Zephyr (D-HD100), a transgender lawmaker, during the 2023 Montana Legislative Session, in response to silencing actions by the power hierarchy that is the Montana Legislature (Rager and Squires, 2023).

Representative Zephyr was criticizing the actions of a Montana Legislature dominated by a Republican Trifecta, which means that all institutions that hold any kind of power in the state such as the Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General, and both chambers of the state legislature, are GOP-controlled.

A self-proclaimed Montanan "conservative political dynasty" family, which consists of Senator Keith Reiger (R-SD3) and his two children, Representative Amy Reiger (R-HD6) and Speaker of the House Matt Reiger (R-HD4), focused Montana's 2023 legislative session passing laws limiting abortion access, prohibiting gender-affirming medical care for transgender youth, and preventing what they see as the sexualization of children to better protect the youth of Montana (Heston, 2023). Or, to quote Speaker of the House Rep. Matt Reiger (R-HD4), who treads dangerously close to eugenic rhetoric when debating the propriety of transgender rights: "..this is the crossroads we're at -- there's two freight trains coming at each other and who's gonna prevail in this? What is our next generation going to look like...We are truly the last best place..." (Reiger, 2024).

In response to such legislative actions, on April 18, 2023, Rep Zephyr (D-HD100), while on the Montana House floor, criticized SB99, titled the Youth Protection Act, which would restrict gender-affirming care/treatments for minors in Montana, specifically banning puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and surgeries related to gender dysphoria. In response, Majority Leader Republican Representative Sue Vinton (HD56) remarked, "I speak on behalf of our caucus, we will not be shamed by anyone in this chamber." Zephyr countered the Montana Majority Leader's remarks stating, "I hope the next time there's an invocation, when you bow your heads in prayer, you see the blood on your hands." This comment was a response to constant GOP attempts to dismantle LGBTQ+ rights nationwide, despite statistics that such policies would lead to suicide and self-harm among LGBTQ+ individuals Representative Zephyr's testimony highlighted the need for medical systems and insurance providers to decrease barriers to the gay community while expanding access to gender-affirming care (Tordoff et al, 2022).

After Representative Zephyr's statements, the House Majority voted to censure her for her "incivility" in saying "blood on your hands." The House majority secured the two-thirds votes needed to bar Representative Zephyr from commenting on any further legislation, or even from remaining on the House floor at all, "until she said sorry" (Alfonseca, 2023; Hanson,

2023). Representative Zephyr was then banned from the legislative chamber and forced to send her future votes into the House floor by paper messenger. Representative Zooey Zephyr (D-HD100) believes that her censure and removal from the House floor was an unfair retribution for standing up for her constituents and the LGBTQ+ community, choosing her words with "clarity and precision," and speaking towards the "real harm these bills bring" (Hanson, 2023).

For his part, the Montana Speaker of the House justified the censure by stating, "All representatives are free to participate in House debate while following the House rules. The choice to not follow House rules is one that Representative Zephyr has made… The only person silencing Representative Zephyr is Representative Zephyr." Shortly after Rep Zephyr's official condemnation, Republican Montana Representative David Beday (HD86) asserted that, "..decorum is necessary to have the kind of civility that we must have ... Rep Zephyr chose willingly to put her activism in front of her overall duty to the legislature" (NewsNation, 2023).

This kind of statement fails to recognize that showing up for her constituents, the people who elected Zephyr to represent their district in office, is exactly Zephyr's duty in places of power like the State legislature. As Representative Zephyr stated, in response to her alleged lack of decorum: "When the speaker asks me to apologize ... on behalf of decorum, what he's really asking me to do is be silent when my community is facing bills that get us killed" (Alfonseca, 2023).

When the Montana Speaker of the House and members of the Republican party speak of maintaining decorum and civility, it in no way aligns with their own rhetoric, both inside and outside the state legislature. To clarify this point, when the patriarch of the Reiger family, Rep. Keith Reiger (R-MT), displayed an image of a cow in a 2011 legislative hearing on abortion rights, and made the argument that "cattle were more valuable when pregnant" (Baker and Fortin, 2023), his offensive and misogynistic insinuations bore him no consequences. The objectification of women and the comparison of pregnant cattle to pregnant women--insinuating that women are primarily valuable for their ability to reproduce, and reinforcing misogynist hierarchies and the belittling of women as breeding chattel--led to no consequences, censures, or reprimands. For his patriarchal comments, Rep. Reiger refused to apologize. On issues concerning LGBTQ+ rights, Rep. Reiger expressed how he "assessed all legislation through two lenses: whether the proposed laws were biblical, and whether they were good for the average Montanan," sharing his belief that "this country was founded on Judeo-Christian values". This kind of statement reflects a theological interpretation of sin and gender conformity known to be contentious to many. Similar to his father, House Speaker Matt Reiger (R-MT) spoke out about his initial interest in running for office in 2016 because he "feared the rise of transgender advocacy" was "threatening traditional values." Additionally, members of the conservative caucus also "repeatedly and deliberately referred to Zephyr through media with masculine pronouns while also saying her actions were nothing more than an ego trip" (Costley et al., 2023).

Appropriate discourse, as it pertains to decorum and civility, seems to be dependent on who the majority is, as is highlighted by the Montana legislature. Rep. Zephyr corroborates this perspective by stating, "the rules of decorum are utilized by a legislature that gets to decide what is and what isn't ['civil'] by the majority vote." Zephyr criticized the "application of decorum used undemocratically" because "the tools of the democratic institution, the tools of the legislative body, are wielded by a supermajority to enforce silence." Similarly, The National Political Director of the ACLU, Deidre Schifeling, described how "trans people are an important part of our democracy" and that "there is a name for when elected officials attack and silence other elected officials that they don't agree with to prevent them from fulfilling their duties - it's called authoritarianism" Representative Zephyr and ACLU Director Deidre Schifeling, align on the understanding that trans people continue to be a marginalized group similar to other marginalized communities that continue to be oppressed—even in their speech--by the racial dominance imposed by white, right-wing, traditionalist majority. Though unfortunate, these actions by the Montana legislature are hardly unusual. Since the bloody colonization of America, white supremacy has thrived

off of white fragility, which underlies how white people, time and again, refuse to see the wrong in the actions of their ancestors and refuse to admit how white people still benefit from all intricacies of division, hate and prejudice that have been prevalent since the beginning. In White Tears: Emotion Regulation and White Fragility, Trip Glazer and Nabina Liebow state that "..many white people have little practice thinking and talking about race in any kind of sustained, honest, or even meaningful way" and that "an imbalance in emotion regulation between white people and those marginalized can help protect and insulate white people from dealing with racism and its implications for them as moral agents" (Glazer and Liebow 2019, 135).

Refusing to pass anti-trans legislation should be seen as yet another example of racial injustice and racial domination because of the inherent way that gender and race are interconnected in the spaces, experiences, and lives of the marginalized communities of society, especially when People of Color also identify as transgender individuals. Though Rep. Zephyr isn't a person of color, she is fighting the overall concept of oppression and intersectional racism in the Montana legislature, which is woven into race and one's sex. Addressing anti-trans legislation and transphobia helps dismantle colonial powers, which have historically imposed set gender norms, such as female and male, to erase and delegitimize diverse ways of being, especially among people of color. Turning a blind eye to racism, misogyny, and homophobia, running ads that demoralize and demonize people of color, or censoring members of marginalized communities, is catalyzed by white fragility. White privilege is when the Montanan Speaker of the House revokes Representative Zephyr's (D-HD100) key card access to the Capitol entrances and revokes access to special bathrooms and work/office spaces reserved for all legislators. White supremacy is raining down consequences upon those dissenting to oppressive systems because, as Robin DeAngelo explains, white fragility is a state in which a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable and triggering, and leads to all manner of oppressions against those who don't conform to the white status quo.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided examples of some of the discrepancies and double standards that come as a result of living in America as an oppressed person, and what it means to have to navigate systemic racism, misogyny, and homophobia in institutions and in the rhetoric deployed by members of those institutions. Over the course of this paper, the reader has been introduced to several crusaders for justice--activists, agitators and champions who have become advocates for social change. These people all hail from marginalized communities and have fought tooth and nail to make it to where they are and have the privilege of fighting for their communities in legislative bodies that, for too long, have been predominantly white institutions. It is important to understand that the "tone policing." calls for "civility," and outright hatred that these legislative activists have experienced is a product of white hegemony, and the enforcement of decorum against these leaders is intentional and strategically aimed at maintaining white supremacy.

This paper shows how each and every time marginalized communities strive for excellence, they have consistently faced hypocritical double-standards regarding their language, tone, and behavior, causing them to work twice as hard as their white counterparts, despite oftentimes being much more qualified. The findings from Tennessee, Colorado and Montana legislatures highlight different decolonizing methods and how they were, each and every time, met with adversary, sabotage and dismissals. In Decolonization is not a Metaphor Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang shows that internal colonialism is ingrained in white history, with a long history of "the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people and land within the 'domestic' borders of the imperial nation." This "internal colonialism" involves the "...particularized modes of control - prisons, ghettos, minoritizing, schooling, policing…" which are used to "ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite." These modes of internal/psychological/intellectual control, including "schooling" and "policing," appear not only in the school and in the prisons, but in the legislative halls of power as well, where enforcing "civility" standards against legislators of color is simply racist "schooling" and "policing" by another name.

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Deradicalizing Queer: Spaces of Resistance and Accommodation from New York to Denver

by Lily Pszonowsky

Introduction

"The assimilationist vision of gay normalcy is always about regimenting and policing the border – to say there's only one way to be gay. That hurts everyone, whether you're living in a small town or living in your commune in Los Angeles. It's about puncturing that mythology and creating more possibilities."
- Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore

Homosexuality and nonconforming gender practices are not new. People have always had same-sex desires and performed and presented their genders in ways that don't align with what norms of dominant society deemed appropriate for their assigned sex. What is relatively new, at least for most societies, is people openly defining their identity around their nonconforming sexual orientations and gender presentations. This new development itself is a function of changing social norms and historical contexts. Michel Foucault (1979) says, "[s]exuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct" (105). In other words, sexuality is socially constructed and what is considered normal, natural, and acceptable changes based on the time and place in history and the world. In our modern era, one of the most important changes in the social construction of sexuality – especially same-sex sexuality – has been the "acceptance" of same-sex marriage and identity as mainstream possibilities and the related disappearance of once-transformational urban spaces of queer living and resistance. Together these two developments have fostered the "deradicalization of queer" – a story that can be mapped out in the historical evolution of spaces of resistance and accommodation in US cities over the past half-century.

As author Michael Bronski (2011) lays out, people who were romantically or sexually involved with same-sex partners and people who did not conform to gender norms have always existed, there has just been various degrees of acceptance for such people depending on class and other privileges provided through the dominant system based on their other identities. For example, Bronski (2011) shows how the historical specificity of the US labor movement influenced early LGBTQ+ movements by "conceptualizing workers not as individuals, but as a class of people who are treated unjustly"; this same concept of class/group oppression and liberation influenced early LGBTQ+ organizing, which was characterized more by group identity and movements than by demands for individual autonomy (such as through same-sex marriage) (94). While comparing the LGBTQ+ movement to other political movements is inherently inexact, because LGBTQ+ individuals have diverse racial, ethnic, and class positions, and their individual experiences are incredibly varied (such that "any all-encompassing types of organizing [are] difficult or impossible"), Bronski (2011) argues that the LGBTQ+ movement has nonetheless been able "draw upon" without "totally conform[ing] to other forms of political organizing" (95).

The conscious development of a group or class identity to unite diverse LGBTQ+ individuals is one of those key factors that the past LGBTQ+ movement

has been able to "draw upon" from other movements. For example, as individual people began to more openly articulate same-sex desires and gender identities outside the binary (as part of the more general social and political organizing florescence of the 1960s and 70s), entire communities based on these alternative identities began to be "consciously constructed" (103). Many queer folks moved and clustered into specified urban areas (e.g., the Castro District in San Francisco or Greenwich Village in New York) and formed communities and neighborhoods where they were able to "live openly and possibly more safely" (112). Queer communities became "crucibles of exciting culture and politics," with spaces like queer bars, cafes, and theaters and with events like art shows, literacy readings, and dances that built, nurtured, and maintained a sense of community (112).

However, as queer folks, their community, and the transformative ideals coming out of their spaces became more public and influential, they became a threat to dominant culture and society because of the critiques and alternatives being developed in those spaces and communities. Socio-political pushback followed, including pressures to abandon alternative/oppositional cultural identities and physical spaces in favor of mainstream incorporation. Movements fighting against oppressions such as heteronormativity, homophobia, and – in the more intersectional spaces – white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy, were subsequently lost to assimilationist and gentrified goals.

This national story, which has played out in the gentrification and assimilation of once radically transformational spaces like San Francisco's Castro and New York's East Village, can also be seen in less well-documented spaces like Denver's "Lavender Hill", just east of the downtown Capitol building. This paper will address the gap in broader knowledge about the historic rise, radical politicization, and subsequent assimilation of LGBTQ+ identities in the Denver community by framing Denver's experience in the context of the spatial/historical experience of several other queer communities across various US cities.

Part I will introduce the theoretical framework used throughout the paper. Author Sarah Schulman (2012) describes how queer communities and movements have recently lost their transformative foundations over time and have become replaced with assimilationist goals. How physical space was and is used by the queer community has changed over this period of time as well, which can be understood through Rios's (2010) explanations of different uses of space as either politically assertive or accommodational. Part II will examine several case studies of other scholars' research into the shifting dynamics of queer neighborhoods and space, framing these stories with the theoretical insights developed in Part I. This section looks at San Francisco's Castro District, Chicago's Northalsted (Boystown), and the Midtown neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia. These queer neighborhoods across the U.S. help to demonstrate how the theories laid out in Part I have been manifested in specific places.

Part III looks at the use of queer space in Denver, Colorado. In this section, I analyze how the theories from Part I shed light on the evolution and role of Denver's queer spaces. I compare and contrast what other authors have found in the Castro District (San Francisco), Northalsted/Boystown (Chicago), and Midtown (Atlanta) with dynamics in Denver's queer neighborhoods like Capitol Hill and Cheesman Park.

Part I – Shifting Queer Spaces

This paper aligns with a theoretical perspective known as the "spatial turn" in the humanities and social sciences – a perspective which sheds light on the environmental conditions that shape class identities (whether based on economic factors, racial position, sexuality, or gender). There is a long tradition in social science scholarship documenting that class awareness or group identities of people do not necessarily emerge naturally or without necessary preconditions. Separate individuals form a social or political class only insofar as they mindfully attain "full consciousness of [their] interests and goals and engage in common political activity" in pursuit of common goals (Berberoglu 2009, 21). In Thompson's (1963) classic description of English "working class formation", he argues that class only happens when a group of people develop "the disposition to behave as a class…when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel and

articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs" (9). This "class consciousness," Thompson continues, "is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms" (10). In this regard, the development of a radical class consciousness (whether on economic, racial, gender, or other lines) involves more than individual actors seeking strategies to improve their own situation but involves a connection to others similarly situated and the development of a political program of action to challenge and transform the oppressive system they all face.

Within this framework of how "class consciousness" or "group identity" depends on preconditions like collective political action and a common vocabulary, there is a phenomenon known as the "spatial turn". This intellectual perspective, initiated by scholars like political geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja in the 1980s and 1990s, centers "space" and "place" as crucial forces that shape human understanding and action. For example, "the spatial turn" reminds us that group identities are only developed through political, economic, and social campaigns in geographic spheres of action such as one's workplace, neighborhood, or school. In this regard, the "spatial turn" in social science scholarship involves a focus on how the dynamics of space/geography itself (e.g. the nature of one's neighborhood) are a critical factor in shaping one's political life. In other words, the emergence and contours of either a politicized or a depoliticized class identity (LGBTQ+ or otherwise) only develop in circumstances shaped by the nature of the geographic space in which one moves. Urban scholar Manuel Castells (1983) notes that the queer community embodies the "spatial turn" through "spatial concentration and social networks, building up its own institutions, and discovering its own collective identity as well as the consciousness of its individuals … based on a spatial, cultural community" (143, 145).

In her book Gentrification of the Mind (2012), author Sarah Schulman adopts such a "spatial" perspective and argues that an internal alienation and displacement of once radical queer identities has occurred in US society as the LGBTQ+ community has become physically removed "from the concrete process of social and artistic change" (14). Precipitating dynamics of this "gentrification of the mind" have been AIDS's consequences (literally causing the premature deaths of many radical gay leaders of their era and depopulating their once mostly "queer" neighborhoods), combined with the gentrification of once radical gay neighborhoods that has eliminated geographic spaces of radical queer energy. With the loss of radical LGBTQ+ leaders and the physical urban spaces that both nurtured and reflected their energy, society in general is losing awareness about how artistic, social, and political change occurs (14). Throughout the book, Schulman (2012) recounts how much of the radical queer culture and movement has been lost with the disappearance of oppositional gay neighborhoods, and instead replaced with assimilated, mainstream politics that is missing its original vision of transformation.
According to Schulman (2012), "the creation of new ways of thinking" and new ways to structure the world and operate within it have a few required preconditions:

"(1) affordable places for unrecognized practitioners to live, have work space, and find time to make their work; (2) diversity of thought and experience that produces a dynamic mutual exposure to varied points of view; (3) stimulation, unlimited raw material; (4) some kind of pleasure in difference; (5) regular, direct access to great artists and their work" (81-82).

Prior to the gentrification of their neighborhoods and spaces within cities, the LGBTQ+ community had these preconditions – which included the experience of physical spaces to live and connect, while experiencing exposure to diversity and creative thinkers. Originally congregated in what city officials would identify as dilapidated neighborhoods, the queer community benefitted from affordable physical space and location that allowed for diverse groups of people to gather, converse, and organize. The gay liberation movement required "freedom, oppositionality, imagination, rebellion, and interaction with difference" and "diverse, dynamic cities in which we can hide/flaunt/learn/influence" because there was "room for variation and discovery" of self, commu-

nity, culture, and ideas (Schulman 2012, 82; Castells 1983).

The subaltern and counter-cultural ideals that arose from queer spaces were critical of dominant systems of oppression, with their focus on heteronormativity and heterosexism. Queer use of space at this time was adaptive and assertive, according to how Rios (2010) defines the ways public spaces are claimed. Rios (2010) focused specifically on how Latino communities in the US used and claimed space, saying that "culture serves as a creative force to instigate shift in the use, identity, and meanings of public space" (99). Adaptive space, according to Rios (2010), are spaces that are "appropriated for everyday use" such as "vacant properties, streets, and parking lots" (100). On the other hand, assertive space forms when spaces are "politicized to challenge dominant symbols and codes," "express[] an insurgent identity," and "anchor[] group solidarity in the urban landscape" (100). It is this dynamic of "assertive space" that emerged in many alternative/oppositional gay neighborhoods of the 1960s-1980s that are celebrated by scholars like Schulman (2012) and Castells (1983) as fostering non-conformist identities, oppositional politics, and transformational cultural possibilities.

An example of this phenomenon is found in the Broadway musical Rent's (1996) song "La Vie Boheme", where Mark sings "To days of inspiration /… Making something out of nothing / The need to express / To communicate / To going against the grain / ...To being an us, for once / Instead of a them" (Rent 1996). The musical, set against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic, celebrates alternative spaces like the 1980s Greenwich Village squats of the Rent protagonists that foster non-conformity and transformational cultures. Similarly, Schulman (2012) often highlights the radical artist Penny Arcade – who performed in the nude and whose work explored topics of gentrification, LGBTQ+ culture, womanhood, and celebrated the death of marriage and heteronormativity – as someone who understood, lived, and performed transformational culture in specific, nurturing inner-city queer spaces.

But any substantial challenge or critique of hegemonic systems will result in pushback from that system and those who benefit from it, because the "dominant culture would have to change in order to accommodate them" (Schulman 2012, 116). An example of that pushback is how "[a]uthentic gay community leaders, who have been out and negotiating/fighting/uniting/dividing with others" and who "have built the formations and institutions of survival" were dismissed by the mainstream, which instead found "acceptable gay personalities" to accommodate within mainstream institutions (116). Organic, grassroots leadership in the queer community (such Penny Arcade) were "too unruly, too angry, too radical in their critique of heterosexism, too faggy, too sexual" and too willing to tell the truth about cruelties faced by the community (116).

As Schulman (2012) points out, ideologies of supremacy cannot allow for such confrontation, critique, or cultural expression that calls into question their perceived inherent power. Therefore, forces of mainstream, dominant culture and society have long sought to marginalize the radical and celebrate queer folks who would be acceptable and non-critical. For example, by appointing spokespeople who would be given time for interviews and space in media, an acceptable way to be gay was pushed that encouraged assimilation rather than the "new ways of thinking" that was coming out of grassroots communities.

This process of mainstreaming was not solely about rewarding certain leaders over others – it also included a physical transformation of subliminal and radical space and neighborhoods. The once cheap squats for queer collectives were converted into private lofts and pricey restaurants, while the very lives of queer individuals were sometimes transformed into safe, high-brow art for public consumption. For example, the documentary film Paris is Burning (1990) documents queer "ball culture" and its historically run-down physical sites and spaces. The film shows gay men, drag queens, and transgender women of color competing in balls that included fashion runways and vogue dance battles with so many categories "there's always something for everyone and that's what keeps them all coming" (0:11:55). Balls were where "whatever you want to be, you be" (0:06:40).

While the film showcases the alternative culture and

hidden geography of New York City queers of color in the 1980s, it's more recent status as an award-winning documentary has been celebrated in gentrified award shows of white, mainstream audiences, which noticeably lack the original radical energy of the ball scene. Will Ninja founded the House of Ninja in 1982 and his pioneering ball culture moves (such as voguing, which he describes as "a fight without words") soon became noticed and co-opted by people in the broader media – like Malcolm McLaren, manager for bands such as the New York Dolls and Sex Pistols, who hired Ninja as a performer and choreographer, and by Madonna, whose song "Vogue" was inspired by the ball scene – but much of ball culture's "queer underpinnings" of non-conformity and alternative cultures were left out as it entered more mainstream media, becoming embraced by pop culture trendsetters like Madonna (Clark 2015, para. 9; Safaya 2019). As Clark (2015) says, "If ball culture was the queer, brown community's answer to poverty, gentrification was the straight, white community's solution—erase the poor entirely" (para. 10). Today, we have RuPaul's Drag Race, a commodified and deradicalized take on once hidden, underground balls, streaming on mainstream platforms like Amazon, Paramount, and Hulu. As Bronski (2011) notes, "As wonderful and groundbreaking as many of these shows and characters are, they are political only in the most narrow sense of the word … and make the argument that mainstream culture should accept LGBT people never questioning how gender and sexuality are viewed in normative culture" (238).

Thus comes in the gentrification mentality. The dominant culture must contain and control the transformation that subaltern communities (LGBTQ+ in this case) entail, and it does so through "repressive tolerance" which "distort[s] and neuter[s]" community radicalism and replaces it with promises of belonging on the condition of assimilation (Schulman 2012, 50). By assimilating an acceptable, watered-down version of queer amid both a gentrified space and mind, those privileged by dominant society and systems don't need to change how they operate, their cultural foundations, or their inherent imbalance of power. Instead of thinking critically about the world, the gentrified mind accepts that the way things are is "natural" and therefore cannot be changed; any attempt to do so is "both futile and impolite" (70). The gentrified mind accepts "obedience to consumer identity" rather than seeking celebrating liminal experiences or oppositional identities (51). The "gentrification of the mind," Schulman (2012) concludes, is the replacement of people's lived experiences with "the perceptions of the privileged" as the only possible reality and is therefore "dependent on telling us that things are better than they are – and this is supposed to make us feel happy" (161).

Social theorist Micheal Warner (2000) agrees, saying, "The 'post-gay' rhetoric," (i.e., Schulman's gentrified mind), "mislead[s] us into thinking that times have changed more than they have" (164). More and more queer folks "embrace a politics of privatization that offers them both property value and an affirmation of identity in a language of respectability and mainstream acceptance" through "marriage, military service [reversal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell in 2011], and the elaboration of a culture in which sex plays no more of a role than it is thought to play in mainstream culture" (Warner 2000, 164).

In a related exposition of how space itself can catalyze alternative ways of being and foster forms of cultural capital beyond the reach of mainstream society, Yosso and Garcia (2007) have analyzed the various types of non-monetary capital that communities of color possess and use to resist various forms and systems of oppression. They identify six types of capital – aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, familial, and resistant—all of which depend on the proximity of a common physical space to fully manifest. Based on Schulman (2012)'s analysis, the subaltern urban spaces of America's LGBTQ+ community, were once a place where these alternative forms of aspirational, social, familial, and resistant capital could be found. Queer neighborhoods through the 1960s-1980s were critical to fostering aspirational identities (Out and Proud!), building social and familiar connections to sustain life, and catalyzing a politics of empowerment and resistance. Familial capital nurtures a "sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition" that expands "the concept of family to include a broader understanding of kinship" (including extended and chosen families), rather than dominant society's heteronormative, nuclear family ideal (Yosso and

Garcia 2007, 164).

Resistant capital is the "knowledges and skills foster[ed] through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (166). For the queer community, this type of capital has definitely been linked to the presence of specific places that can sustain an oppositional identity – which is exactly why the militant defense of New York's Stonewall Inn became such a touchstone of queer empowerment. A police raid of the bar on June 28, 1969, resulted in multiple nights of riots with over 500 queer people in the streets around the bar (Comedy Central 2020). It was "the shot glass heard around the world," Crissle West said (Comedy Central 2020, 04:59). Relatedly, Social capital is the "networks of people and community resources" that can sustain residents' mental, physical, and financial health (161). This physical rootedness of this social capital can be seen in how, in the weeks following the Stonewall Riots, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Riveria formed the Street Transvestite Action Revolution (STAR), which originally focused on giving trans kids a place to live and a chosen community to call home though place-based advocacy and organizing around a broad and intersectional range of issues.

But just as Schulman (2012) documents the "gentrification of the mind" that has accompanied the loss of once radical queer neighborhoods, there is also evidence of the disappearance of these various forms of Yosso and Garcia's (2007) community cultural capital. For example, Drushel (2019) notes that while queer folks were once drawn to "identifiably queer neighborhoods, businesses, publications, and nightspots" to pursue social capital, queer individuals, like other groups, are increasingly transitioning towards online and virtual social networks and the kinds of intangible social capital found there, as the traditionally physical communities and queer neighborhoods disintegrate (1764). He argues that as mainstream media and dominant culture allows for more visible and acceptable LGBTQ+ identity, queer individuals are "not simply succumbing to the embrace of the mainstream but are willfully embracing it" (1764). Drushel (2019) claims that the queer community's embrace of the mainstream is due to the mainstream's acknowledgement of a "gay market" and marketplace that LGBTQ+ people participate in because it provides greater opportunities for social capital (1760, 1765). However, what is allowed in this gay marketplace is not the transformative queer culture Schulman (2012) remembers and writes about—certainly not the transgressive spaces of underground queer bars, balls, or nude art performances of Penny Arcade, blending sex, cultural commentary, and political organizing. Instead, it is the gentrified, assimilated version (a same-sex marriage in a tranquil neighborhood) that established communities within dominant society can accept and commodify because it does not demand fundamental changes to their status quo. Drushel (2019) argues that as things like queer "camp" were disappearing, the mainstream's growing appreciation and acceptance of queerness helped LGBTQ+ people embrace the mainstream. For example, while transgressive queer clubs and ball culture have dissipated with the loss of ungoverned and low-cost urban warehouse space, American culture has opened up to accepted "gay marriage" as a pathway for gay individuals into mainstream society.

Schulman (2012) would argue that this is a form of "repressive tolerance", limiting the queer community's transformative capabilities in exchange for mainstream respectability. As Schulman (2012) recalls Dinal Suggs telling her, "The drag queens who started Stonewall are no better off today, but they made the world safe for gay Republicans. It's a bitter pill to swallow, but the people who make change are not the people who benefit from it" (115). Just enough was given by the dominant culture to allow for an acceptable and palatable queerness that didn't result in any change but instead gained some limited access into its hierarchical, oppressive systems.

Communal, social spaces give people the ability to gather, meet others like and unlike themselves, trade ideas, engage in discourse, and develop radical alternatives to dominant society, norms, and culture. Such spaces allow people to begin to identify with each other and form communities built around countercultural and alternative ways of being. But established powers in dominant society don't like change and don't long-endure critiques to their long-privileged norms and ways of living. Wherever radical queer culture critiqued dominant society and offered different values, ideals, and lifestyles, powerful

forces in dominant society consciously and unconsciously responded. “Acceptable” versions of queer culture and people were highlighted in the media and through “electable” gay leaders offering versions of gay life that were more “polite” and did not truly challenge dominant systems or society. “Acceptable” gay leaders that promoted assimilationist policies and methods found a pathway to electoral and other public success (former Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg with his quite mainstream same-sex marriage), while radical counter-cultural voices like Penny Arcade and the queer folks of “Paris is Burning” fell into poverty, anonymity, or worse (i.e., Venus Xtravaganza, one of the leading transwoman profiled in Paris is Burning was murdered in a likely episode of anti-trans violence). A queer aesthetic was commodified, implying that visibility equals justice and equality – but this version lacked the “sexual deviancy” of queer’s history, and literally lacked the radical presence and subaltern voices of radical communities such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and the Paris is Burning crowd. Transformative goals were replaced with the gentrified mindset revolving around home ownership, property values, and state-recognized marriage. Alternative culture was replaced by quests for respectability within the dominant culture. Both space and soul became gentrified.

Part II – Queer Neighborhoods Across the U.S.
Castro District, San Francisco

Castells (1983) analyses a series of case studies of collective action to show how people’s identity and cultural lifestyle (not just class-based positions) can lead to social movements in urban areas. One such identity he discussed was sexuality and gender in his analysis of the Castro District in San Francisco, California. Castells (1983) demonstrated that the Castro’s social and cultural activities centered around specific spaces and the use of that space. Gay bars, gay-owned and -friendly businesses, and queer festivals became the foundation for successful political organizing for the gay community of San Francisco and were the physical foundation necessary for San Francisco’s gay community to gain “a certain amount of power within the institutional system” (138).

Castells (1983) argues that the creation of a well-defined territory and spatial concentration was foundational for San Francisco’s queer community and for the gay liberation movement’s push for institutional political and economic power. At the center of queer territory were gay bars – a kind of “third space” where LGBTQ+ people could meet, create networks, and experience a sense of safety and belonging. Castells (1983) argues that these spaces were important to “making gay people visible … stating their right to gather in public places … [and] transition from the bars to the streets, from nightlife to daylife, from ‘sexual deviance’ to an alternative life style” and finally from an alternative culture to a “gay tourist destination” (Castells 1983, 141; Boyd 2011).

But the Castro didn’t rise up from nothing – LGBTQ+ people were located in San Francisco long before the Castro District’s development in the 1970s and 1980s. Some other queer spaces were in North Beach, Polk Street, Haight-Ashbury, and the Tenderloin District (Boyd 2011). As Greene (2019) concluded, “queer communities have never been contained to one area of the city” and have “long existed in various forms, created and fostered by a diversity of social actors, responding to the ecological, political, and economic conditions of their residential communities” (27).

In the 1940s, queer folks congregated in San Francisco’s Tenderloin, which was a red-light district, where Castells (1983) points out they had “networks” of fellow “deviant” people, but no “community-places” to visit openly and no territory of their own (153-154). The 1950s saw LGBTQ+ people most often joining the beatnik community in the North Beach neighborhood, though Castells emphasizes that this was still not a queer community and there were still few physical spaces in which LGBTQ+ people could openly gather. By the 1960s, as gays bars began to pop up along Polk Street, running through the Tenderloin and South of Market neighborhoods, majority gay residential areas began to form around these meeting spaces. However, this growing collection of gay-friendly spaces still wasn’t an intentional mass movement of LGBTQ+ people, nor did it entail the development of a collective, political identity that would later emerge in the Castro district.

But everything began to change following the 1969 Stonewall "riots", where New York's queer community forcefully defended their right to urban spaces and cultural expression in their city. Post Stonewall, there was a collective, intentionally organized movement in San Francisco to "take over a well-defined area" in order to "develop, symbolically and politically, a lifestyle defined as gay" (Castells 1983, 155-156). This was the start of the Castro District, a low- to middle-income area with affordable housing to spare as its working-class Irish residents began moving to San Francisco's suburbs.

Usually, as seen with the Polk Street area, queer residential areas followed the emergence of bars and other gay-friendly social spaces, but the Castro emerged in the opposite order. First, queer folks moved into the Castro as a conscious post-Stonewall strategy to claim urban space, and then they started their businesses, neighborhood associations, and queer-friendly festivals that influenced the area's other businesses and residents to recognize and work with the increasingly open and politicized queer community (Castells 1983).

Trans activist and writer Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore recalls moving to San Francisco "in search of others like and unlike me, to learn from and create our own worlds, to try and challenge the worlds around us" (Nari 2013, para. 12). "[W]e took on language used [by others] to stigmatize us, like 'faggot,' 'dyke,' and 'whore' [as our own]. We were proud of that kind of flamboyant defiance. We didn't want any part of dominant cultural norms," Sycamore recalls. "We wanted to shatter those and create other ways of taking care of one another that were actually based on shared values" (Nair 2013, para 13). Her community was "create[ing] love and lust that [were] not predicated on state acceptance" (para 24). Bars acted not only as places to drink and meet someone, but also as "community resources before the advent of a large number of gay-specific social and political clubs and organizations" and then as gateways to those organizations (Lesher 2008, 51). As Greene (2019) notes, "communities may activate queer spaces as they need them to foster community ties or advance their interests," with bars often filling this role (26).

The Castro was mostly populated by white gay men who were "white-collar workers and entrepreneurs" who renovated the Victorian style houses and opened shops, restaurants, bars, and other businesses along Castro Street, which began to cause property values to climb (Boyd 2011, 241). But the Castro wasn't the only San Francisco neighborhood LGBTQ+ folks claimed. South of Market, or SoMa, was where queer folks congregated when they couldn't afford the high rents of the Castro but nevertheless wanted the "self-controlled private territory" that the Castro provided (Castells 1983, 156). Queer folks who found themselves in this neighborhood often "reject[ed] the politicization and positive counter-culture of the new liberation movement" often associated with the Castro and instead "emphasized the sexual aspects of gay life", creating "new sexual codes" and leather culture (156). While the residents of the Castro District focused on gaining political and economic traction and acknowledgment within the dominant systems, those in SoMa, who Castells (1983) points out were generally much poorer, rejected attempts to gain positive attention through political and economic power.

A third area was set up as a gay territory in the lower section of Pacific Heights, on the "threshold of San Francisco's elite", by middle class white gay men who rejected the more militant strands of the gay liberation movement and living in "the Castro ghetto" (156). Instead, this part of the San Francisco's gay community believed the best way to achieve personal freedoms and legal rights was by not challenging dominant systems which, as Castells (1983) points out, were friendly towards their class, race, and gender, if not their sexual orientation. Instead, Pacific Height's gay community focused on assimilation, without building the explicitly "gay" economic and political power that the Castro District's queer community established.

Castells' (1983) analysis focuses on gay men because he concluded that lesbians rarely desired a territory of their own and instead tended to "establish social and interpersonal networks," remaining "placeless", because of their more radical focus towards "the revolution of values" rather than "the control of institutional power" (140). However, Adler and Brenner (1992) disagree with Castells's

assessment, saying there is "at least some indication that there is a concentration of lesbian residence and activity space in urban areas" (272). They argue that the apparent absence of visible lesbian neighborhoods in comparison to visible gay neighborhoods needs to be understood alongside the disparity in access to capital that men and women have, as well as the "fear of male violence" impacting how "public space is used, occupied and controlled" (272). Whereas gay men had access to capital to own both residential and business property, which Adler and Brenner (1992) argue is needed to support residential concentration, social networks, and organization, lesbians were less visible, but nonetheless were still present in lesbian spaces. Additionally, within the patriarchy, men and their achievements and desires receive more attentional socially and in the media. For example, men's sports teams receive more coverage and attention than women's, such as with the NBA and WNBA. Following this logic, gay neighborhoods are more well known, visible, and studied in academia than lesbian neighborhoods, in part because men generally receive more focus than women.

As the Castro grew, both politically and economically, it became a renowned space for tourism, specifically for queer tourists (Boyd 2011). Bars and restaurants brought in "destination eaters", people coming to the neighborhood specifically for that location, and fashionable shops attracted wealthy shoppers (Boyd 2011). The Castro's creation of a political queer neighborhood overlapped with the creation of a "gay-spending zone", lead and organized by the Golden Gate Business Association (GGBA), more commonly known as the "gay Chamber of Commerce" (Boyd 2011, 243). The GGBA viewed a strong queer business community, founded on gay tourism, as a way to influence local politics and so worked to promote San Francisco as a queer tourist destination by promoting tourist-centered businesses, such as establishing the Gay Visitor's Information Center and Gay Visitor's Hotline and working with the San Francisco Travel Association to market queer culture (Boyd 2011). They wanted San Francisco to recognize "gay travelers" as a new, valuable source of income for the city and the Castro as a tourist destination (Boyd 2011, 245).

Over the years, the Castro's LGBTQ+ community tried to become more visible and "acceptable" to mainstream, dominant society as a way to secure individual rights as well as more capital (social and economic). However, as Schulman (2012) identifies, this goal relied on the commodification of queer culture and pursuit of traditional aspirations like property ownership and nuclear marriage that resulted in an assimilated, more "polite" version of queer that does not truly challenge dominant systems or society. Unlike "gentrifiers' rhetoric" that claims to prioritize "choice" but is actually limiting it, Sycamore remembers radical queer spaces, "talking about creating more choices for self-determination, not creating more choices to fuck over other people and get away with it" (para. 34). From this perspective, the illusion of gentrified privilege and acceptance leads to an assimilated community that has lost its transformative ideals.

Northalsted (Boystown), Chicago

Another queer neighborhood that has experienced this cooptation through gentrification is Northalsted, formerly called Boystown, in Chicago. Like the Castro District in San Francisco, Northalsted (Boystown) has experienced gentrification and commodification of the queer aesthetic to become a "gay Disneyland, a safe theme park, a petting zoo" that rejects those who don't fit within the small box that assimilated queer visibility prefers (Orne 2017, 4). Though the neighborhood was once a more radical haven for queer life, today people who are "sexual deviants, … genderfucking and trans, … too brown and black, … too poor" are often excluded (4).

Queer (or queer-friendly) bars, cruising locations, and other subaltern areas that challenged the illegality of homosexuality existed all over Chicago long before Northalsted (Boystown) became a centralized (and then famous) gay area. Like in other cities, most of these areas and businesses didn't really advertise themselves, in attempts to avoid police raids. Some were even operated by the Chicago mob as "they had the power and bankroll to pay off the police and keep the bars open," though of course that didn't stop raids at those locations completely nor raids on other bars (Jackson and Nargis 2017).
The first more visibly queer establishments in the Northalsted (Boystown) area opened in the 1970s,

some being Augie's (a lesbian bar), Little Jim's (a gay bar), the Women's Center, and the Gay Horizons community center, opened by the Chicago Gay Alliance, though it was short-lived. Sidetrack opened on North Halsted Street in 1982 and was the third gay-owned bar in the area. As more queer-centered business and organizations opened in the area, low property prices attracted people to the openly transgressive businesses and to move into and live in the area. Art Johnston, co-founder of Sidetrack, recalls more queer residents in the immediate area made Northalsted (Boystown) "a good place for seeds to be sowed and for other bars to happen. It was clear that gay people liked to have, not only a gay bar, but a gay district" (Jackson and Nargis 2017).

Though unsuccessful, the Chicago City Council in 1987 planned a to vote to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment, and public accommodations. As an example of the area's growing political consciousness and power, Northalsted (Boystown) queer bars partnered to hire buses to bring patrons to a rally at Daley Plaza and to support the proposed anti-discrimination ordinance (Jackson and Nargis 2017). While that specific effort was unsuccessful, the Chicago City Council passed the measure a year later.

Like the Castro, Northalsted (Boystown) was very white gay men oriented, and there were certainly elements of that community that embraced mainstream pathways to success. The Northalsted Business Alliance formed in 1981 with the goal to "enhance the economic vitality and quality of life for the area through programming, business services, and events that celebrate our LGBTQ+ history, promote tourism and foster a welcoming, safe community for all" (Northalsted Business Alliance 2026). As a less-radical version of queer aesthetics became commodified in the area, prices increased which pushed out residents and local businesses and "trendier" businesses took their place (Stafford 2018). Northalsted (Boystown), increasingly became focused on the tourist food and drink industry (Stafford 2018).
In one specific kind of mainstreaming trend, Orne (2017) and Stafford (2018) both note that the neighborhood has recently become a popular destination for "straight white women tourists," especially bachelorette parties (18). Stafford (2018) comments, "Heritage commodification, or the process of selling one's culture for tourist gaze in order to make money, is lucrative for business owners now with the mainstreaming of LGBTQ politics" (09:20). Orne (2017) calls this the "women on safari" effect, which gives gay bars and clubs a different "look" and feel (18).

In his investigation of ways in which recent Northalsted (Boystown) efforts might actually recapture some of the radical "raunchy" queer space of old, Orne (2017) attended parties hosted at the gay club Hydrate (normally a tamer, mainstreamed club but it does host leather and BDSM nights). Orne (2017) went to a couple of these events, noting the visible difference in how patrons acted when group of five straight, white women out for a birthday party wandered in. Once their "safari" left, there was a "notable shift" in the room (21). People "kept their distance" from the party, and while there was still sexual dancing, it was not the "sexual culture" the space was once the party left (21). While the safari wants an "authentic experience" they don't know what that looks like and don't "understand the scripts for queer sexual space, the rules for the situation that come with queer cultural knowledge" (25-26). Orne (2017) notes that "gain[ing] these requires genuine engagement over time", but the safari has a "tourist gaze" with "expectations about what an 'authentic' experience should be" (26, 25).

As evidence of the changing embrace of "queer" within the now gentrifying neighborhood of Northalsted (Boystown), Rodríguez (2020) also analyzed bars, focusing on the queer Latino bar Antronio's. Rodríguez (2020) built his analysis on Tongson's (2011) conclusions regarding what she calls "the cosmopolitan queer ethos," which relies on rejecting suburbs and glorifying "urban hot spots" for their stylish façade that prioritizes a select few (affluent) identities rather than embracing all of Chicago's queer (and often impoverished) community (41). As Rodríguez (2020) and Orne (2017) note, Northalsted, or Boystown as it was still referred to officially at the time of their publications, embodies this ideal of a once-queer but now-gentrifying and stylish community. Rodríguez's (2020) interviews found that many queer people of color no longer find Northalsted's (Boystown) gay bars welcoming spaces and in-

stead think of them as fetishized white spaces (281). In response, José Antonio Casco opened Antronio's in Berwyn, a suburb of Chicago, to be a place that combined "queer and Latino/a/x space in ways that offered a matchless gathering place" and an "alternative to the alienating and predominantly white queer neighborhood" of Northalsted (Boystown) (277, 279). Patrons noted that trips to Antronio's "always felt like taking a road trip to another home. Not simply to another city or some glamorous place but rather another home" (280). Historically, bars and their bartenders were "pillars of the community," not only serving drinks but also connecting patrons to various services, organizations, and other groups within the queer community (Stafford 2018, 05:11). According to Rodríguez (2020), Antronio's "homey" space allowed queer folks to meet and create a community that avoided Tongson's (2011) "cosmopolitan queer ethos" in gentrifying gay neighborhoods that inevitably lead to hierarchies and separation among community members along cultural and class lines.

In 1997, Chicago officially recognized Northalsted (Boystown) as the city's "gay district," drawing national and international attention as it was the first time a major city did so for a queer neighborhood (Jackson and Nargis 2017). There was a multi-million-dollar project to install a rainbow gateway, street pylons, and pillars (Wendel 2025). Not long before the Northalsted Business Alliance's rebrand, rainbow bike racks were installed, and emblazoned with the name "Boystown" (Knowles 2021).

But not everyone in Chicago's LGBTQ+ community is on board. Northalsted (Boystown) is "still gay, as in the identity and parts of the culture, but its desexualized," Orne told Stafford (2018) in an interview. "So, it's often not having a lot of the really, more radical and sort of sexuality that used to be in those spaces. And are we losing some of our gay culture, some of the raunchiness and some of the over-the-topness that maybe is less acceptable" (20:14). Orne notes that the more radical and inclusive queer spaces are being forced out of the neighborhood to other areas in Chicago because they don't assimilate to dominant society and norms and are therefore "more scary" (Stafford 2018, 21:45). Northalsted (Boystown) has now become "a neighborhood to consume", a place to "visit and consume [and leave], rather than live" (Orne 2017, 112). Not much of the neighborhood is still able to function as the radical space where transformative ideals once came about.

Midtown, Atlanta

Both Boystown and the Castro District have marketed themselves as national, if not international, queer tourist destinations. Atlanta, Georgia, on the other hand, has not done so for its queer neighborhoods, at least not on the same scale. Nevertheless, queer communities and neighborhoods are not new to Atlanta, which has been nicknamed the LGBTQ+ capital of the South, nor is the familiar tension between queer mindsets of assimilation or more transformative ideals described previously in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. While studying the changes in Atlanta's historically queer neighborhoods and the rise of new neighborhoods, Doan and Higgins (2011) note that as LGBTQ+ neighborhoods gentrify and as the queer aesthetic becomes desirable, property prices increase, which results in less affluent queer residents and businesses leaving and new residents moving in who can afford the high-prices. These residents, along with the queer community members who can afford to stay, alter the neighborhood in ways that result in it being less "gay-friendly", less community driven, and more focused on individualistic issues like protecting rising property values (Doan and Higgins 2011).

Midtown is one such previously queer, but increasingly gentrified, Atlanta neighborhood. The 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition, a series of agricultural and business trade fairs meant to attract investment in the South's economy post-Civil War, had the city's first known female impersonation in Piedmont Park (Atlanta History Center 2020; Arnold 2023). In 1913, drag queen Francis Renault protested Atlanta's ban of men wearing women's clothing by performing in drag around Peachtree Street (Brown 2021).

In that same tradition, Atlanta had its own "Stonewall of the South" six weeks after the Stonewall Riots in New York. On August 5, 1969, Atlanta police raided the Ansley Mall Mini Cinema, which was showing a screening of Andy Warhol's "Lonesome Cowboy," a movie which showed men having sex with other men. The police lined up about

seventy people (including patrons and theater staff) to question and harass (Arnold 2023; Waters 2019). Recounts from that night recall the theater lights switching on, police shining flashlights at audience members as they rushed the aisles, lining up the audience who still had popcorn in their mouths, and more police blocking the exists (Waters 2019). Abby Drue recalls, "It was just absolutely insulting in a lot of ways. I was asked where my husband was. I was lined up against the wall by myself. They would look you in the eye, and you had to show them your license. They asked what you were doing and who you were, and they took your picture" (Waters 2019, para. 6). The theater's owner, projectionist, and a handful of other patrons (including gay men, lesbians, and drag queens) were arrested on "charges ranging from public indecency to illegal drug possession" (para. 7). The Atlanta Journal-Constitution later reported the police chief confirming the "raid was designed to weed out 'known homosexuals'" (para. 7).

Not long after the raid, the queer community met at the New Morning Cafe. It was "a huge meeting, standing room only," recalls Dave Hayward, co-founder of Touching Up Our Roots, an organization that seeks to record and preserve Atlanta's LGBTQ+ history (para. 9). There, Bill Smith and Berl Boykin decided to organize a chapter of the Gay Liberation Front, calling it the Georgia Gay Liberation Front (GGLF). In 1972, lesbian activists founded the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA) with a focus on intersectional oppression. Six days after the Ansley raid, protesters gathered at the offices of Great Speckled Bird, a local countercultural newspaper. Police arrived on scene and a riot broke out, ending with the arrest of several protesters (Waters 2019). In 1971, the GGLF organized Atlanta's first Pride march. Having been denied permits to march in the streets, the 125 attendees marched down the sidewalks and "stopped for every traffic light" (Waters 2019; Hayward 2019). The city's second Pride march was granted a permit and Atlanta "finally started to acknowledge" the queer community with the mayor appointing Atlanta's first "liaison to the gay community" (Waters 2019, para. 19).

Midtown's redevelopment (and subsequent loss of queer identity) began in 1978 by the Midtown Alliance, a group comprised of businesses and civic leaders who wanted to promote developing Peachtree Street and Piedmont Ave, running through Midtown, to connect downtown Atlanta with affluent neighborhoods in the north of the city. To achieve those goals, civic leaders created the Midtown Improvement District (MID) and two Special Public Interest (SPI) zoning districts (Doan and Higgins 2011). As Peachtree Street was subsequently redeveloped – including roughly $13 billion invested in new high-rise developments in the last decade – many queer businesses in the corridor closed and queer residents in the surrounding area have moved (Doan and Higgins 2011).

Peachtree Street's redevelopment has pressured queer bars and other businesses to close because they are "not keeping with the cosmopolitan image developers wished to project" (16). The new, often large-scale, commercial businesses moving into the area have threatened and overtaken many of the smaller, queer-owned and operated businesses that give the neighborhood "much of their local color and character"; they have served to "de-gay" the area (16). Doan and Higgins (2011) acknowledge that some turnover may be caused by the normal change and growth of businesses, but their analysis concludes that the majority of queer business closures are due to a wider gentrification trend – the aesthetic of the neighborhood has become popular to those within dominant society, but the parts that made it "queer" are unwanted unless they can be commodified and assimilated.

One example of this is Atlanta' drag scene. As the drag bars and clubs are closed, such as the Jungle, drag shows and performers are forced to find new locations that will host their shows. Two drag shows (The Other Show and Stars of the Century) originally performed at the Jungle, but when the bar was closed in 2018 to make room for new luxury apartments, the shows had to move to new venues (Midtown Tavern for the Other Show and the Heretic for Stars of the Century). Nevertheless, both shows ended within the year. Tossed Salad, another drag show that included a variety of drag styles from "traditional drag queens and drag kings to androgynous gender-bender," also ended (King 2019, para.

13). Now, social media has driven drag performers to "create 'brands' and 'aesthetics' to distinguish themselves in an ever-growing market of working drag queens" in a "craze of drag culture" – and much of this is largely online (para. 16). Taylor Alxndr, founder of Southern Fried Queer Pride (SFQP), said: "We've never had so much visibility and on one hand that's great, but on the other hand, it's definitely changed the crowds that come out, how often they come out, and how much they're investing back into their queer community and nightlife. But I feel like hometown drag is like a hearty home cooked dinner that satisfies you and leaves you full for days. Consumption of queer shit, drag, etc. via social media is like a sugar rush - it's artificial in parts and doesn't fill you up" (para. 20).

As drag and queer culture is commodified on social media and local drag performances are shut down as their spaces are closed and replaced, the transformative aspects of the culture are lost to a gentrified mind and culture.

Part III – Queer Denver

Like the cities discussed above, Denver has its own historic and still-present queer community. According to Moore (2014), Denver was a center for queer activity in the west, acting as a "stepping-stone" drawing in individuals from rural communities between Chicago and San Francisco (15). But in the "pre-Stonewall" years constructing a queer identity and community in Denver often involved a "dysfunctional relationship" between upper- and middle-class white gay men and lower-class individuals (3). Because middle- and upper-class gay white men felt able to access various privileges of dominant society and culture, this group of gay individuals often focused on portraying the queer community as morally respectable and interested in achieving mainstream goals like marriage equality, job advancement, and property ownership. One such early group focused on respectability politics was the Mattachine Society, which had a Denver chapter. Their goals aligned with assimilation rhetoric that didn't challenge systems like white supremacy, capitalist oppressions, or misogyny and did not fit with the increasingly non-assimilationist rhetoric and goals that began to sound from Denver's emerging queer spaces in the 1970s and beyond—such as from the Capitol Hill and Cheesman Park area.

Before the queer community really began gathering in bars and other semi-private public spaces and began to truly organize, gay men in Denver used Cheesman Park as a major "cruising" area in the 1950s. Such outdoor spaces were places where "people could go and meet somebody with anonymity" ("Hidden History of Cheesman Park" 2025, 15:05). Cheesman Park was a location where men could find another man to have sex with, but at the time it wasn't a space that individuals used to organize or foster a broader sense of community. But a more self-conscious and connected Cheesman Park area gay community began to emerge in the 1960s.

Part of the impetus was when the city of Denver began using the zoning designation R-0 in 1956. The city's new zoning designations controlled the density and relationships of people allowed to live in defined areas of the city. R-0 was designated "single-family zoning" and was the most restrictive. It allowed for no renters and demanded that all of a home's residents must be related, which the city defined as through "blood, marriage, or adoption" (in other words, this designation prohibited same-sex households). The new zoning code covered about sixty percent of Denver's residential areas ("Hidden History of Cheesman Park" 2025, 14:20). However, the Cheesman Park and Cap Hill neighborhoods were not zoned this way; instead, they were governed by R-3 and R-4 zoning which allowed for "multifamily" housing to be built and for non-related household members to live together (Cole 2014, 140). As a result, in 1970, seventy-six to ninety-nine percent of the housing offered in these neighborhoods was in multi-unit buildings like apartments, duplexes, triplexes, condominiums (Cole 2014). Old mansions and large houses were turned into multi-apartment buildings. The area along Sherman Street was referred to as "Bachelor's Row" (today "Poet's Row") because of the large number of single men living there (The Center on Colfax n.d.). In this way, a simple Denver zoning code change led to a "higher concentration of gay people" living and opening businesses in these areas (14:43).

This emerging concentration of same-sex households in the Capitol Hill/Cheesman Park area catalyzed the emergence of a gay and queer bar scene. Denver's queer community was no different from other queer communities across the US in the sense that gay

bars were, for a long time, the "center of gay life" because they were semi-private spaces where people could go and meet others and then they could openly express their identities and even organize ("LGBT" 2016, 06:02). One of the first known gay bars in Denver was called the Snake Pit (or simply the Pit) in 1939 on Colfax and Broadway, or later at 17th and Glenarm Place (in the Capitol Hill neighborhood), nicknamed "the Pit" because it was located in the basement of another bar called the Steak Bar (06:30; Duffield 2022). Other popular spaces for gay men to meet were the Brown Palace and local YMCAs, though these places made attempts to avoid association with queer activities ("LGBT" 2016; Moore 2014).

The physical concentration of same-sex residences and growth of a robust gay bar community in the downtown area created the spatial foundation for the emergence of "gay identity" and queer advocacy politics in Denver. "Gay only" establishments, which were often bars, were a "safe haven" for Denver's queer community, especially early on by offering "discreet" locations as people transitioned from visible public displays of queer sexuality (such as cruising) towards "privatized homosexuality" (Moore 2014, 77; Warner 2000). In 1972, Jerry Gerash, wondering why it felt like the gay liberation momentum after Stonewall in 1969 had skipped Denver (though that's not to imply queer bars went un-raided), formed the Gay Coalition of Denver (GCD) with Lynn Tamlan, Mary Sassatelli, Jane Dundee, and Terry Mangan. This Coalition was eventually officially headquartered in the Capital Hill neighborhood at 1454 Pennsylvania Street ("LGBT" 2016; Marcus 2024). As the GCD grew as a grassroots organization, it provided services like counseling, doctor referrals, and question hotlines (Marcus 2024).

Schulman (2012) would read this as an example of those new "creative ways of thinking" and structuring a society that was able to come out of the shadows and define a new queer way of living. The GCD became a space where queer folks "interested in building an identity around something more substantial than the bar scene" could gather and discuss politics, social issues, and current affairs (Marcus 2024, para. 9). Using donated space, the GCD created a weekend coffee house, "Approaching Lavender," that was an alternative to bars or bathhouses for queer folks to gather. Approaching Lavender hosted movies, speakers, poetry readings, live music, women's nights, among other types of entertainment and social events (Gerash 2001). They also operated a hotline that had "counseling referrals and a speaker's bureau." The GCD, even before having a fixed physical space, "acted much like a community center," gathering community members together, many of whom "had never attended a political meeting, let alone joined a militant Gay liberation group."

Gay Coalition of Denver offices.Photo courtesy of The Center on Colfax.

Photo by Lily Pszonowsky.

The co-emergence of physical spaces and community organizations dedicated to gay rights and "creative ways of thinking" fueled a growing assertion of gay identity and political power in Denver. After a major Denver police sting campaign entrapping queer individuals (specifically gay men), the GCD filed a civil lawsuit against the City of Denver, Gay Coalition of Denver vs Denver (1973), in order to access police records that contained statistics proving the targeting of the queer community (Marcus 2024). This court

case soon launched what has been dubbed "Denver's Stonewall". However, rather than launching a riot at a queer bar, the GCD and over 300 other queer folks and allies filled the Denver City Council meeting on October 23, 1973, seeking to repeal laws used by the police to justify harassment of the queer community. Phil Krasnowski Wade recalls heading over to the Door, a gay club, that evening and seeing a sign on the door saying they were closed and inviting anyone to join them down at City and County Building (see below). "And I thought, well that's cool. It's only two blocks away and I know where it is," Wade laughs. "So, I came over here and chambers were full" (City and County of Denver 2023; 03:54). Originally, thirty-six people were prepared to address the City Council but they were limited to a thirty-minute total testimony period. Members of the gay community were threatened with arrest and jail time if they didn't quietly adhere to these strict rules and limit their testimony. City Council President Koch originally said of audience applause, "You're eating up your time" before threatening to remove and arrest anyone in the audience who was not speaking, detaining them into the three sheriff buses outside (City and County of Denver 2023; Gerash 2001). Jerry Gerash (2001) feared the threats would make people leave, but "No one left and their silence was a demand to be heard. We won't applaud, their silence said, but you will hear our voices!" (2).

"This Is It!" poster notifying community members about the City Council meeting on October 23, 1973, inviting them to join. Photo courtesy of History Colorado via David Duffield, the Center on Colfax's Colorado LGBTQ History Project.

"Our speakers were articulate, knowledgeable and effective and came from all walks of life," Gerash (2001) said. "[The] testimony about unjust laws and police practices and personal stories, turned the hearing into an unforgettable Teach-In about who we were as a people" (2). In the end, with Council overwhelmed by the packed chambers and powerful testimony, all the speakers were able to deliver the entirety of their remarks, resulting in the meeting running all evening and into the following morning (Marcus 2024). As the night wore on, Koch reversed his applause restriction. When applause came, it "was thunderous" (Gerash 2001).

Clearly moved by the moral force of Denver's emerging gay community, the Council soon voted to repeal four discriminatory laws used by police for harassment, including anti-gay, loitering, and cross-dressing ordinances. This pivotal action directly led to the legalization of same-sex affection in public and further propelled the organization of Denver's LGBTQ+ community. Using money gifted from a man who was in town from San Francisco for the 1973 Denver City Council hearing, and who was "so impressed with how the GCD had organized and conducted themselves," Gerash helped to found the Gay Community Center of Colorado (GCCC), later called the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center of Colorado or, as it's called now, the Center on Colfax (Marcus 2024, para. 17). As the GCCC began to run out of donated money, Gerash founded Unity, an "organization of organizations" that collected dues to help with GCCC funding (para. 10). When the GCCC opened in August 1977, it was supported by the thirty-six member strong Unity.

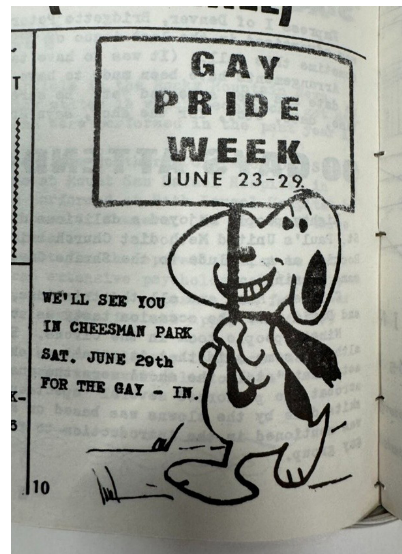
The momentum generated by the 1973 hearing led to Denver's first Pride event, a Gay Pride Week, or "PrideFest", in June 1974 to celebrating the positive results from the hearing and to commemorate the anniversary of Stonewall. This first event had a "gay-in" of about fifty attendees in Cheesman Park – the physical center and spiritual heart of Denver's emerging gay community (Marcus 2017). The following year's pride event included Denver's first pride parade. However, organizers were not aware that they needed a permit, and so when about 200 people were told they could not march down the streets, they marched down the sidewalks instead

("LGBT" 2016). In 1976, the first officially organized parade (permits and all, acquired by Christopher Sloan, a drag queen by the name of Christy Lang) occurred, with an estimated 1,000 people marching from Cheesman Park to the capital building and back, the same route the present-day Pride parade takes (excluding 2025, when the route was changed due to construction) (Marcus 2017; Contreras 2025; Denver7, 2024).

This gay pride parade, emerging from its geographic base in the heart of Denver's gay community, began as an explicitly political event—remembering Stonewall, remembering the 1973 takeover of Denver City Council, and demanding change and public visibility. "It was the beginning of a cultural phenomenon," said history coordinator for the Center on Colfax David Duffield, "but before it was what it is today, it was a protest" (Berg 2024, para. 4).

And it was a protest rooted in a physical space – a geographic neighborhood – that gave it life and form. In the years before the parade, every month through 1974 and 1975, the Gay Coalition of Denver hosted a "gay-in" at Cheesman Park, where much of Denver's LGBTQ+ community lived and recreated. When the official parade was finally approved in 1976, thousands marched. "It was a show of numbers," notes Aaron Marcus, a curator of LGBTQ+ history at History Colorado, "In previous years, a lot of people sat on the sidelines and just watched, but this time, the entire community came out" (Berg 2024, para. 18).

Early parade posters and advertisements celebrated the "Gay-In" to be held at its home in Cheesman Park (see image below), the same park that was often heavily targeted by police for "lewd conduct" by same-sex couples. But as the 1970s wore on, activists used the park as a symbol of resistance against this harassment, organizing openly in the very place they were told to hide. In the years following those first parades, neighborhood residents, organizations, and store owners began to openly celebrate their new cultural force. As parade-goers marched from Cheesman Park to Civic Center, they were met with "parties, bars and restaurants offering rainbow-themed food and drinks, and local shops decorating their windows with rainbows and messages of support for the LGBTQ+ community" (Berg 2024, para. 2).



Advertisement for Denver's first Pride, or "gay-in" as it was called at the time.
Photo courtesy Alec Berg (2024).

But even amid the celebration, the Parade retained a political edge through the 1980s, when the event transitioned to focus on supporting people living with HIV and AIDS. Angered at the federal government's inaction in the face of the AIDS crisis, Denver activists wrote "The Denver Principles," in June of 1983, immediately before the parade, announcing a "self-empowerment manifesto" for people living with HIV, and outlining ways that patients, doctors, and the general public could all respond better to the crisis. "It spurred activism in Denver," noted Duffield, "Everyone turned the focus away from anti-discrimination ordinances, and it started this period of gay activism in the 70s towards healthcare and then towards fundraising for things like hospices and community health networks" (Berg 2024, para. 25). But as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s and 2000s, together with a growing wave of urban gentrification, Denver's gay community began to experience the same "gentrification of the mind" that has reshaped LGBTQ+ spaces and politics in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Atlanta. For example, Denver's Pride Parade has slowly evolved from an oppositional political force, calling for fundamental transformation of society, into a corporate-sponsored event, absent the political edge. It began with a parade-facilitated distribution of Coors beer for the June 1977 Gay Pride Week, which angered many of the attendees because earlier in the year

Coors had been accused of firing employees based of their queer identity (Marcus 2017). Though a group of lesbian feminists had launched a boycott against Coors at the same time due to the company's well-documented discrimination against LGBTQ+ employees, parade organizers felt that attracting corporate support was worth the compromise (Berg 2024). Even as parts of the queer community tried to distance themselves from a connection with Coors, whether due to boycotts over discriminatory practices or a more generalized hostility to corporate sponsorship, the Parade's relationship with Coors and other corporate sponsors has only grown. By the early 1990s, the parade received its first official corporate sponsorship from a beer company, and today Coors is the title sponsor of Denver Pride, as it has been for nearly 20 years (Lane 2024; Berge 2024). Other "Rainbow Capitalism" Denver Pride sponsors include Nissan, Starbucks, US Bank, and Southwest. For years, activists have requested the Center on Colfax parade organizers ban police officers from the parade, "claiming their presence makes queer people feel less safe and is antithetical to Pride's roots" (Berg 2024, para. 40). But parade organizers continue to invite both the police and the corporate sponsors, celebrating how the parade brings all elements of society together. Duffield from the Center on Colfax understands both sides of the issue. "Maybe Pride is too corporate, maybe we have to ask ourselves if police should be at Pride given the history of policing against LGBTQ people in this country and the history of Stonewall," Duffield ponders. But then again, "There's marketing and money to be made…" (Berg 2024, para. 38, 42).

Marcher's signs for the 1978 Pride. Photo courtesy Aaron Marcus, History Colorado 2017.

The Target section of the 2017 Pride Parade. Photo courtesy Elaine Tassy, Denverite, 2025.

In this way, the queer presence in Denver has gone from "taking over" city council meetings to major corporate sponsorships of Pride Parades. If the LGBTQ+ community was still as transformative as it had been in the past, there wouldn't be this kind of corporate sponsorship because the transformative changes and ideas coming out of the queer community in the 1960s-1980s were focused on disrupting the status quo of dominant culture and systems – including corporate power. As Pride goes mainstream, it's become less transformative and challenging to dominant systems, resulting in an acceptable version of LGBTQ+ visibility that often isn't intersectional. This development prompted Tara Jae, founder of YouthSeen, a queer mental health and advocacy group, to start Black Pride Celebration in 2021 after seeing the "struggle of people of color have in mainstream Pride" (Denver7 2024, 05:14).

This same "gentrification of the mind" dynamic can be seen in the literature being created by and for queer folks, in Denver and elsewhere. Schulman (2012) and Bronski (2012) both discuss how queer authors of the past wrote about their experiences, including stories featuring queer characters, but they typically only found small, niche publishers for their work. Schulman (2012) emphasizes how this queer literature (books, pulp novels, magazines, and newspapers) would often feature radical ideas that challenged dominant systems and society, and would only be published by small publishing houses. Now, as those small publishers close, queer literature is

published by major publishing houses which tend to censor many of the most creative, radical ideals of LGBTQ+ authors and promote publications that soften their social critique.

In Denver, the monthly publication Big Mama Rag (1974-1984) was put out by a lesbian women's collective that combined art, poetry, and stories focused on feminist issues such as "law, literature, religion, politics; sexuality, violence against women and what should be done about it, racism, reproductive rights, a blossoming culture of art and music" (Colorado LGBT History Project of the Center on Colfax and Lavender Hill Cultural District n.d.). But this Denver-based radical queer newspaper has now folded.

Constance Pereyi laying out pages for Big Mama Rag. Photo courtesy History Colorado.

Colorado's Out Front Magazine, founded by Phil Price in 1976, is one of the U.S.'s longest running queer publications (Marcus 2024). Price founded the magazine to draw attention to police harassment of the queer community, to document homophobic violence and the AIDS crisis, and to reaffirm "pride and dignity for all gays," (Marcus 2024; Marcus 2017, para. 14). However, in recent years Out Front has switched from a focus on radical social critique and towards "softer" articles like "Gaypleton (Fine. Stapleton)", which lovingly advertises Denver's affluent, master-planned, suburban-styled neighborhood as a, according to the magazine, "great queer neighborhood."

There is a similar dynamic affecting the rapidly disappearing lesbian bar scene across the nation and in Denver. The Lesbian Bar Project (LBP) is an organization dedicated to sharing stories of lesbian bars around the country and helping to keep those bars open. In their 2021 documentary miniseries, they note that the U.S. had about 200 lesbian bars in 1980 but that fewer then twenty-five remained in 2021. In 2026, their website has upped the number to thirty-six across the U.S – but only one of which is in Denver, The Pearl on California Street.

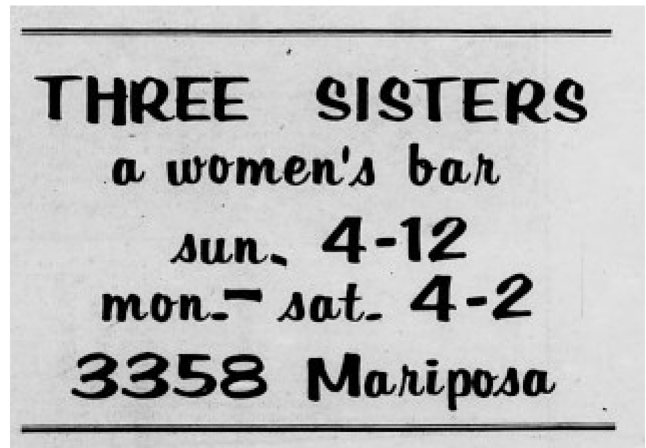
Inside The Pearl, a lesbian bar in Denver. Photo courtesy The Pearl (2026).

However, on April 11, 2026, The Pearl announced on their Instagram page that they would be closing end of the month, saying, "We have worked tirelessly to find solutions and do everything in our power to avoid this conclusion. Unfortunately, we are just not in a position to continue with our doors open while also ensuring our staff and beloved performers, entertainers, djs, and event producers are properly compensated" (The Pearl 2026c). The same day the owners posted a GoFundMe link, with the goal to raise $50,000 (The Pearl 2026b). As of April 12, 2026, they raised over $83,000 with plans to allocate the funds to their staff, payroll, and rent in order to continue operating at least through Pride 2026 (The Pearl 2026a). However, on April 14, 2026, shift leads posted on Instagram saying the "lack of an actual plan to get us through Pride" and the "vagueness of the allocation of funds," along with allegations of one owner posting the GoFundMe without approval from the co-owners, lead to the staff "decid[ing] unanimously that we could not in good conscience accept these GoFundMe funds with the likely chance of ending up in the exact same position in three months" (Lexy et al. 2026). The GoFundMe has since ended, and donations are in the process of being returned to community members (Fiore 2026).

Either way, the various groups and events hosted at The Pearl – such as poetry open mic nights, drag performances, and more – now need to relocate. Though it appears that no lesbian bars will remain in Denver by the fall of 2026, lesbian bars such as Blush and Blu, the Three Sisters, and the Pearl, used to be prevalent. In the 1990s, there were at least six lesbian bars in Denver, catering to various queer subcultures.

Regarding Blush and Blu's closing in 2024, a local journalist's account noted that, "As queer life and rights have slowly entered the mainstream, establishments traditionally recognized as lesbian bars have declined." Similarly, the bar's owner Jody Bouffard noted upon closing that, "When I moved to Denver in 1996, there were over 200 lesbian bars across the country, each a beacon of refuge, though not always safe. Many of us entered through the side door, our hearts guarded and steps careful. Now, 28 years later, only 20 remain. The world has shifted and so have we" (Adamczeski 2024, para. 3). Blush and Blu's former owner said the dynamics of gentrification have eliminated all of them. "Working in these bars, the price of rent has gone up in the last 10 years," said Bouffard, "The decline of lesbian bars across the country, even legendary ones like San Francisco's Lexington Club, have to do with neighborhoods being bought and sold." (Adamczeski 2024, para. 6).

As for The Three Sisters, run by three women named Julie, Jesse, and Jan, the lesbian bar was located on Mariposa Street and was a "significant landmark … for cool lesbian culture" in Denver from the 1970s and into the 1980s, according to prior-employee Wren Davis Pheonix (2016, 0:26:00). Davis Pheonix (2016) recalls the three women as matriarchs and "grandmoms" of the queer (and especially lesbian) community who together created a culture where Davis Pheonix was able to "customize" themselves as femme, butch, or androgenous. Davis Pheonix (2016) also remembers a bar called the Broadway, which they recall as a "chic environment", acting as a "facelift" for the queer community and promoting the idea of the LGBTQ+ community as "fashion leaders" (0:42:00). While it was a gay bar, Davis Pheonix (2016) remembers it as a place that heterosexual people would also come because the Broadway had a reputation of a very fashionable, entertainment scene. Davis Pheonix (2016) also recounts a group of older women they socialized with, most of whom were couples and some of whom were "absolute cross dress professionals … no one ever knew these individuals were not men" (0:34:48). This was a "culture of women that completely found ways to push beyond the matrix, the patriarch culture" Phoenix explained. They created their own extended families and family dynamics that were outside the norms set by dominant culture.



Advertisement for The Three Sisters in Big Mama Rag's July 1977 issue. Photo courtesy Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection of archived Big Mama Rag issues.

In their interview, Davis Pheonix describes a variety of similar queer scenes throughout Denver, each with various degrees of visibility to the dominant culture. But almost all those bars and other businesses like the Broadway are now disappearing – serving as examples of how transformational queer culture is disappearing into gentrified spaces that are unthreatening towards dominant culture identity. Developments like this suggest that the political and cultural future of Denver's queer community is unclear, but signs point towards the same kind of depoliticization we have seen in other US cities. Part of the challenge is simply the loss of queer physical space in inner-city neighborhoods like San Francisco's Castro and Atlanta's Midtown. Denver as well has been rated as America's second most gentrified city, and generally more affluent white residents have increased their population levels by 400% in the last twenty years in Denver's Capitol Hill neighborhood (Roberts 2025).

It's unclear if changing demographics and physical uses of space in Denver's Capitol Hill and Cheesman Park communities—once the heart of radical queer politics—will lead to Schulman's "gentrification of the mind," but there are some important signs to watch. One such sign is the disappearance of once-queer spaces, such as the lesbian bars Blush and Blu and The Pearl in the heart of Capitol Hill, as discussed above. In this way the gentrification of physical space (the low-cost queer bar) is also the gentrification of the mind (disappearing queer culture).

As another sign to watch, consider how designer Zach Kotel has recently founded the first designated queer cultural district in Colorado, Lavender Hill (also shortened to Lav Hill) in June 2023 (Giles 2023). Lavender Hill encompasses parts of Denver's Cheesman Park, Capitol Hill, City Park, Congress Park, and Baker. Kotel wanted the district to have "intentionally blurry lines", or 'zones of influence', in order to honor how queer spaces have "always adapted, shifted, and often existed in the margins" as well as the fact that queer life and businesses, both historically in Denver and present-day, are not located in a single area of the city (Giles 2023, para. 2; The Society for Experiential Graphic Design SEGD [SEGD] 2025, para. 5). According to Lav Hill's website, the district's mission is to officially designate neighborhoods that already have "commercial, political, cultural, and historic" significance to Denver's queer community in order to create a space to "tell and preserve" queer stories and their "importance and contributions" to Denver (Lavender Hill Cultural District 2024).

But the challenge is that Kotel wants both to preserve historic queer spaces in Lavender Hill, and to "weave queer stories into new spaces" that are being created by "ongoing development nearby" the district along Colfax and Broadway – and much of that development is undeniably of the gentrification sort (Schoenbauer 2023, para. 7). When proposing this district, Kotel studied neighborhoods like San Francisco's Castro District, New York City's West Village, and Chicago's Northalsted (Boystown), which have all struggled to preserve their radical queer heritage while blending in with area development pressures. This same kind of gentrification and cultural displacement challenge may also come to Denver's Lavender Hill, as Kotel has partnered not only with the Center on Colfax and Black Pride Colorado, but also with the Colfax Ave Business Improvement District (BID) in creating the Lav Hill cultural district. It remains to be seen if the typical embrace of gentrification by Business Improvement Districts will align with goals to preserve the radical queer heritage of Capitol Hill Denver, which has often pushed back against corporate and normalizing pressures of broader society.

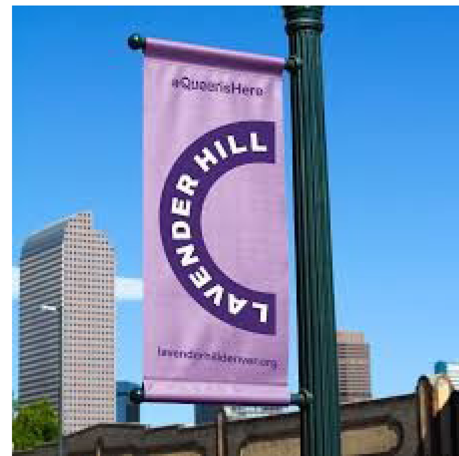


Photo Courtesy of Lavender Hill's Instagram Page.

Based on Rios's (2010) analysis and definitions of different kinds of space, Lavender Hill as we can see it today is more of a negotiated space (balancing multiple economic/social perspectives) rather than the queer assertive space that Cap Hill and Cheesman Park neighborhoods have been in the past. Lavender Hill, while having goals to preserve historic queer space and to encourage a community embrace of this heritage, nonetheless appears to also embrace a more gentrified and assimilated approach to how they define and promote modern queer spaces. While the Lavender Hill project does highlight some of the more assertive and adaptive neighborhood spaces that produced creative and transformative ideals historically (such as through historical tours that highlight sites like the Center on Colfax and the R&R Lounge, an "incognito" gay bar before becoming "out and proud"), it does so in a way that implies that the era of the queer political activism is over and no longer necessary. Similar to the Castro District of San Francisco, the Lav Hill project seems

to promote a commodified and assimilated image of Denver's LGBTQ+ community, without an ongoing focus on how queer communities can still today foster "new ways of thinking" (Schulman 2012). Unlike Atlanta's Peachtree Street, which has resulted in the "de-gaying" of the neighborhood, Lav Hill and San Francisco's Castro do still attempt to advertise the areas' queerness, though it is still in a way that is arguably uncritical and generally accepting of dominant society.

Conclusion

The LGBTQ+ community and the creatively transformative ideals and alternatives emerging from their queer spaces have always been a threat to dominant society and culture. Movements fighting against oppressions such as heteronormativity, homophobia, and, in its more intersectional spaces, white supremacy, capitalism, and the patriarchy, have always been linked to transformational physical spaces like politically charged neighborhoods (the Castro) and transgressive bar scenes (Stonewall). But in recent years, facing the flood waters of gentrification, radical and transformative queer spaces have been washed out by a more palatable and marketable version of queer that embodies the assimilated, gentrified mind. Queer neighborhoods and other spaces in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Atlanta, and Denver have all found their energy drained by the displacements of gentrification and the lure of accommodation. The gentrified mind comes to accept the status quo as natural and thereby unchangeable and values what privileges it gains from the dominant systems rather than critiquing them and creating alternatives.

This paper is not meant to argue that increased acceptance and even celebration of LGBTQ+ people is a bad thing. What is problematic is what was given up to arrive at this point in time. Instead of managing to force the dominant systems and society at large to change in fundamental socio-economic and psycho-cultural ways, the transformative potential the queer community once represented has largely been abandoned in favor of a "repressive tolerance". The queer neighborhoods have been gentrified, and the aesthetic of queer culture has been commodified, but the "freedom, oppositionality, imagination, rebellion, and interaction with difference" that allowed for creative change and discovery was abandoned (Schulman 2012, 82).

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