Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship

Volume 4 | Issue 1 Article 2

2020

American Exceptionalism and Individualism: "It won't happen to me, and if it happened to you, it's your own fault!"

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Cover Page Footnote

Title inspiration from Courtney Milan on Twitter. Many thanks to Margaret Lundberg for the idea of writing something on this topic, and for the great idea of how to organize and format the scattered pieces I ended up writing.

fifteen

Often one of the hardest things is trying to see something you've never seen before. Then, of course, once it's there, it's even harder to unsee it. Trying to see the other image in an optical illusion is really difficult; trying to get the images to swap back and forth even more so. Pareidolia, or seeing human faces in shapes and patterns, only appears to be everywhere once you know what it is. Or even seeing your old car everywhere once you sell it and get a new one, because you hadn't previously been looking for or noticing it. Each small moment is like wiping a smudge off a lens, finally seeing more clearly, not realizing what you weren't noticing before.

Sometimes, there are people who've always known about or seen those things, have never had the opportunity to go without really noticing it. Sometimes they're the ones to wipe the smudge off the lens without realizing, thinking you could see it the whole time. And once it's gone you realize that right in front of you was an entire skyscraper, obscured by a single smudge, sitting right there in front you, not even in your periphery where it was easy to miss. Now, the skyscraper is front and center, and now you know it's there, it'd be daft to try and walk right through it as though it didn't exist. But that's what you'd been doing this whole time, wondering why people were telling you to stop walking into walls or watch where you're going. They don't seem so ridiculous now.

This is a story about walking into walls.

This is a story about walking into walls. And telling others to walk through them, too.

fourteen

The view from my window is something I've grown intimately familiar with this year. It's become background noise most days, but occasionally the ennui the Romanticists spoke of will hit and there will be an interesting detail across the way in the farm fields or on a hill that will hold my attention for a few long minutes. Lately, nothing has been visible but this haze, this exceptional materialized metaphor hanging over the entire west coast. The swarms of birds that would play in the puddles of sprinkler water outside my bedroom have been missing; instead, I hear the frightened call of the parents seeking out their young, who are now surely almost of age, but still in need of guidance.

It is cliché and relatable to say all this—the minor details that shift due to major causes. The slow and unavoidable slide towards Something, and the equally slow and unavoidable adjustment to this new normal.

Oft repeated is the sentiment that this is all unprecedented, unpredictable, and we are left to simply flounder as we try to find our way out of it.

I disagree.

That is a scapegoat, a litany of excuses, trotted out any time something traumatic pushes us closer and closer to an all-consuming paradigm shift. Which is to say, this is perfectly normal behavior as things are, and these are the expected responses to all of these events, each of which were perfectly predictable and manageable by those in power and with the knowledge and reach to do so.

What is unprecedented is the number of people who are starting to see the sham for what it is. What is unprecedented is how hard people are now collectively pushing:

pushing progress, pushing for answers, pushing those hidden by the obscurity of white supremacist colonialism into the limelight, pushing and pushing and pushing. Pushing back.

What is unprecedented is that the perpetrators have lost all pretense and are saying the quiet part loud. This was never about economic insecurity, or the flyover states, or no new taxes, or innovation, or the free market, or the children, or family values, or individual freedoms, or states' rights, or any of it. Read any news article that offers you straight footage or quotes, and you'll be able to see what it's really about, what it's always really been about.

"*Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites.…"*

From the infamous Atwater interview.

thirteen

During the late 1910s, Thomas Dyer Tuttle was forced to move across the country and change his job on multiple occasions. He went from growing up in Missouri, to studying in New York, to living and working in Montana, then Washington state, then Kansas, and back to Montana, all within a relatively short time span. His life would continue to take him all over the country, and his work put him in the newspapers—and portions of the public consciousness—on more than one occasion.

As a student in New York, he got hands-on experience in his field with the so-called Russian Flu, an outbreak that was extremely deadly in the northeast United States. He learned young and early in his education and career what serious outbreaks

looked like. Years later, he was in Montana when WWI was in full swing, and a new flu popped up on an American army base in Missouri. Having kept it quiet for fear of not being able to send troops overseas, he watched as American troops quickly spread the illness to Europe, including Spain, who was neutral in the conflict. Their newspapers were the first to report upon it, and still adamant about keeping its origins quiet, the name Spanish Flu stuck quite quickly.

Having worked in the public health sector for several years, Dr. Tuttle worked swiftly with his colleagues in both Montana and then Washington state to help offer guidance to the public during an unprecedented epidemic. As the influenza reached far beyond the camps and into residential areas, Dr. Tuttle and others, having had experience with this and the historically recent success of new vaccines and other measures, encouraged the closing of public businesses and churches and the wearing of face coverings. They recommended careful hygiene and remaining far apart from other people, all to avoid spreading this incredibly deadly virus.

His guidance and recommendations were published in local newspapers and drew plenty of attention. Opinions wavered as people, newly employed by the wartime boom in production, resented the measures. For a while, in the first and second waves, cities like San Francisco even went so far as to legally mandate the wearing of masks in public, and threatened citizens with imprisonment or fines should they disobey the mandate. Of course, the jails kept these people in close quarters without their masks, and fines allowed the wealthy and elite to continue to do as they please—so enforcement remained both unpopular and somewhat ineffective. Even the United

States Attorney General advised Dr. Tuttle against reinstating a public shutdown after the second wave had passed in late 1918.

twelve

[the wall]

[at a gas station in Medora, ND, it's nearing 9 pm. 15 minutes until closing.
out of the dozens of cars and even more pedestrians present at this gas station that should really qualify for status as a historical landmark, only two of those walking past are wearing masks. the cashiers inside have a single strip of cloth between them and the packed convenience store, crowded with maskless people of all ages trying to pay for gas and to get snacks and drinks before this, the last shop, closes for the day. the cashier calls it the last 15 rush. shoulders bump into each other, aisles clogged and blocked by bodies. even managing to escape, wearing a KN95 mask, and spraying everything with disinfectant, the panic lingers. a woman walks by too closely, wearing nothing but a tank top, shorts, and a camouflage version of a certain hat that wanes in popularity.]

eleven

Dr. Tuttle was quietly ousted from his position in Washington state, and he moved to Kansas where he held a similar position. But ultimately, he had to leave there, as well, citing the unworkable salary and the abysmal government funding to research diseases when not in a time of crisis. The work he and his colleagues did was only considered important when it was already too late, and their recommendations weren't consistently followed, anyway.

Though organized and registered anti-mask leagues were few and far between, their social impact was still large—enough to oust public health officials from jobs and intimidate mayors and governors into loosening and removing restrictions far earlier than they had been advised. There were protests and complaints and, given the economic upturn thanks to entering the war in 1917, the United States was, in general, loath to obey further restrictions, even when they were meant to prevent the spread of a disease that infected between 20% and 40% of all enlisted military men.

Having pushed back against addressing the epidemic too loudly, President Woodrow Wilson himself became ill with it in 1919 and struggled to keep up with treaty negotiations. He was mostly alone in arguing against the harsh, retributive sanctions on Germany—until, of course, the virus left him weak and silent among the group. The stroke he suffered not too long later was only one of the consequences the brush with the virus left him.

ten

Amidst all of the daily risks we have faced recently—not the least of which are smoke inhalation, loss of life and property due to raging fires, pollution and climate change, and the ever-present threat of a virus that has few reliable patterns to its kills—there is another insidious risk.

There is the risk that we simply accept this as the new normal and continue on, with business as usual. That we don’t see the parts at play and the long-term risks and effects of these things. This is a risk as real as walking into a store without a mask or demanding in-person classes at universities in a country that hasn’t even managed to contain the virus at all. Because it has already happened—that’s how we got here in the

first place. It is the inevitable result of a country and a populace that cannot grapple with its own history.

We have to become comfortable with discomfort, and not in the way that means adjusting to a new normal. Rather, we have to become comfortable dealing with discomfort, having hard conversations, making sacrifices and compromises with our own personal comfort and routine for the sake of others'. Another oft-repeated thing, though rarely in the headlines, is that the way we are reacting to events happening now is how we would've reacted to those same kinds of events in our recent history: what you are doing now is what you would've done during the initial Civil Rights Movement, or the Spanish Flu, or the wars.

And perhaps, newly confronted with this reality and the manifold problems, people get overwhelmed. What are we to do to tackle so many things at once? The common wisdom is to simply choose one and go whole hog. If everyone chooses one item on the list, eventually everything will get done. Alternatively, we could give a little to everything.

This anxiety is not unheard of. It is incredibly common. But the anxiety is, itself, part of the issue—or rather, a symptom of the root problem. As a country, we think individualistically. Bootstraps, owning a home, the nuclear family unit, the stories of individual heroes and villains in the news. The problem is never just one politician, it is the society and the policies that created him. We cannot deal with a history when our response is, "Well I didn't do it!" The problem is not you as a person. It is the systems and attitudes around us, to which we can contribute and from which certain people benefit.

nine

During WWII, the United States was, again, late to join the throng. Considering their greater depth of experience during the war, Britain was eager to inform the new allied country about how best to avoid and combat the German U-boats. Namely, they recommended traveling in convoys, avoiding using popular and well-known travel routes, and having coastal cities go dark at night. The first are a given, but the latter is possibly less intuitive: boats traveling, even a fair distance away from the coast, can be easily spotted in silhouette against the lights of a coastal city. They make easy targets for U-boats that are adept at tracking and moving stealthily.

With this information in hand, the United States instructed their shipments to—stick to the known routes without convoys. They made loose suggestions for coastal cities near these routes to turn their lights out for the night, but adherence was incredibly scattershot. As a result, in a matter of months, the United States lost an estimated 22% of their tanker fleet, 233 ships, and over 5,000 seamen to German U-boats, a set of casualties that Britain's information had been intended to prevent.

Given the state of the country at the time preceding their joining the war on the side of the allies, this prolonged dismissal of professional guidance makes sense. Having been led out of the Great Depression by President Roosevelt, the country was once again about to experience a wartime boom, and therefore a kind of boost to public morale. Only spurred to enter the war by the Pearl Harbor attacks, the general sentiment among the populace had been rather ambivalent or even supportive towards the Nazi regime. There had even been such events as a "pro-Americanism" rally held at Madison Square Garden in 1939, organized by and featuring leader of the German

American Bund and Nazi supporter, Fritz Julius Kuhn. Additionally, creators of the now iconic comic *Captain America*, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, both Jewish men, faced intense antisemitic backlash for creating comics about the American spirit and the all-American man, wherein he is shown punching Hitler in the face.

Entering the war was, for America, about saving face and retaliation for Pearl Harbor, as evidenced by the belated and strategically unnecessary attacks on majority civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the deeply and darkly ironic internment and deportation of Japanese citizens. This was “America First” in action—even if it meant sacrificing their own people and supplies for the sake of a national ego.

eight

[at a coffee shop in Alexandria, VA, a woman storms in. she walks up to the counter, orders a drink, and begins yelling at the baristas that she got sick at this store. with no mask over her face, she angrily proclaims that these workers had best beware the Asians, as they’re the ones carrying it. and after all, it’s their fault she got sick to begin with. she pays for her drink and the barista tells her in no uncertain terms that she is to leave the premises and never come back. they take a picture of her receipt and send the alert to management to deal with.]

seven

Post-war America saw an age of supposed economic exceptionalism. With most global economic players knocked out by the damage and costs (both human and financial) of WWII on their doorstep, the mostly unscathed domestic front of the United States was free to dominate and fill the now empty economic slots in the global market.

This boom was, of course, mostly felt by the propagation of the white suburb and the nuclear family unit.

What also rose up was the unstoppable resurgence of activism, particularly around the Civil Rights Movement. Despite being allowed, or asked, to participate in the war effort, Black veterans were still subject to the legal and systemic oppression they'd grown up with once they returned back home; very little, if anything, had really changed. The growing paranoia around communism and what would be known as the prolonged red scare only intensified these realities.

The segregation and Jim Crow era weighed heavily on U.S. progress and conscience. While most today remember a singular speech from only one of many leaders at the time, the lived experience of the time was agonizing, painful, slow, and incredibly fraught with danger and intrigue. Sensing the unified masses, the U.S. government secretly developed COINTELPRO, the Counter Intelligence Program. This was originally targeted at the Communist Party, but given their alignment with civil rights groups, it was quick work to expand their focus, in particular to the Black Panthers. Once it was clear that their ethos and message was unifying initially disparate causes, and white people from other groups were joining their ranks and sharing resources, COINTELPRO committed to dismantling the Blank Panthers wholeheartedly. It wasn't their armed patrols of neighborhoods that spurred their targeting, but rather their community-building efforts, such as the meal programs for children they established in poor neighborhoods. Efforts against them included deliberate infiltration and fracturing of the party from within and hoping to prevent anyone from becoming a 'messiah' for others to truly unify around.

Fred Hampton, a young member of the party who was charismatic and well-liked, was seen as a likely possibility to fulfill this ‘messiah’ role. He would meet the same sort of fate that MLK Jr. and Malcolm X had.

Seen as a threat, he was targeted in a falsified raid in the early morning hours of December 4, 1969 in Chicago. There were 14 men who composed the team set to raid Hampton’s apartment, which at the time held the drugged (by an informant) and sleeping bodies of himself, his fiancé who was nine months pregnant, and seven members of the party. After killing the man guarding the apartment, the men stormed in, dragging out the pregnant Deborah Johnson and shooting Fred Hampton. When he didn’t appear dead, they shot him twice more at point blank range. Altogether, the officers fired almost 100 bullets; the only bullet to come from the party members present was triggered by the death convulsion of the guard who was killed first.

Hampton’s headstone is riddled with bullet holes from officers and their firearms.

six

If there is a way to prevent other people from misinterpreting the things you say, I don’t know it. It has always been the case that things, once written, made, completed, or published, become out of date as soon as they’re done. Though we often discuss things like movies, songs, or novels as being timeless, there will undoubtedly be some reference, some stance, some *thing* that became out of date the moment it was finished. Maybe it gets left on the cutting room floor in the process, hoping to ward this off, or maybe, like with many megacorporations nowadays, they remain determined to make reference to a meme already 3 years old in an attempt to seem current and nonthreatening, perhaps even relatable.

Even in saying these things, I may have dated this paragraph myself. I can say with absolute certainty that this piece remains almost impossible to craft because each day there is added something new that seems to demand attention or commentary. Many say and feel that this year, 2020, has been particularly packed, particularly busy. In some ways, it probably has, but the element that has truly increased is the magnification of all of these things.

It has been a liberal centrist claim for a while now, and one that conservatives frequently turn to for their own purposes, that people often exist inside their own self-curated bubbles, and rarely see or hear or speak to anyone or anything outside of it. In some ways, this is true, but not so far as to allow a person to preach hate speech on public campuses. Rather, we must think of our physical locations as bubbles: they can merge and move, can be opaque or transparent, and can protect or deflect as the case may be.

How many police cars do you see in your neighborhood on a daily basis? Is it an outlier when you see one, or are you stopped at least once a week by an officer, to or from work or school? Does this question stand out to you as an odd non-sequitur, or are you already anticipating the direction of this line of thought and dreading that the focus must shift to a different audience and set of concerns?

How much do you interact with your neighbors? Do you live in a suburban neighborhood, a city neighborhood, near farmland, or a truly downtown set of apartment buildings or homes? Do you own your home, or do you rent? Are you living with roommates or family? When was your first job, and what was it? Do you always carry ID with you? Is your home accessible to you? Is it really yours?

Were you able to start working from home when the pandemic truly hit, or were you forced to continue your service industry job? When did your hazard pay end, or did you even get any? Were you laid off? Was the last time you traveled a significant distance during the pandemic for a previously planned trip, or because you had to return home with no other options available to you?

These are the bubbles that we construct and that are constructed for us. They are maintained, not by personal ideology necessarily, but by the structures around us.

It can be painful to unpack the logistics and history of generational wealth gaps, pay disparities, redlining, bad home loans, city planning, price gouging, gentrification, or any such thing. Yet, these are the bubbles we live in. When COVID-19 and an incompetent government administration coincided, these bubbles became magnified, reflective, and in some cases more transparent, and perhaps even began to overlap.

five

For several weeks, even months, the air on the west coast of the United States was nigh unbreathable. Visibility was reduced such that I could barely see the end of my street out the window. The birds that would swoop freely by my bedroom had been silent for a long time. I was beginning to forget what the view from the backyard looked like in this small, mostly white, mostly elderly neighborhood.

The smoke provided the literal manifestation of much of this year: being stuck inside, with it being dangerous to go out; the threat was made more visible. Trapped in a home that was without power for 24 hours, without cable or internet for 38 hours, and in an area that, had it not been for the incredibly aggressive and quick response by firefighters and other workers from all over the area, would have been in as much

danger as so many other towns all across the state and along the coast, a sense of isolation could only grow.

Ultimately what this year has served to demonstrate is that our world and the systems, structures, and elements that constitute it, are incredibly fragile. *We* are incredibly fragile. This country's structure, in particular, is fragile. And we have immense power and control over it all.

This is not an overtly positive take: the systems that exist, that are fragile, are currently accelerating themselves into something more difficult to reckon with. They are fortifying themselves with fascism and authoritarianism. These symptoms have been present since the beginning of the current governmental system but were only attacking the areas of the body that were considered, within certain bubbles, expendable.

Like an asymptomatic carrier, the coordination of COVID-19 and the workers and instruments of fascism have managed to quietly spread and leave immense damage in their wake; even those who think they are asymptomatic could end up with potentially lifelong cardiac damage. Perhaps this analogy is even too apt, too on the nose.

Much like the first day that the symptoms hit hard in COVID-19, things are getting much worse, incredibly quickly. Every day is an overwhelming barrage of seemingly new issues. The problem is, however, that by the time we can turn our attention to these areas most in need, the damage has been done.

We do, however, have one advantage over this analogous "illness" that we don't yet have over COVID-19: we have seen this before. We have seen this many times before. Though we have seen pandemics and have learned how to deal with them (though those in power have refused to put that knowledge into action), we have many

test cases of fascism. The problem is that we haven't ever necessarily beaten it. Through trial and error, we have learned how to slow it, how to combat it, how to turn it around.

But like those who insist that masks are a conspiracy meant to infringe upon their rights—up until their dying breath—we face the ultimate challenge of admitting there's a problem to combat in the first place.

four

The 19th anniversary of 9/11 passed—and so did the 3,000 dead, every single day now for well over a month. These people are not numbers; it is a defense mechanism to protect ourselves from the grief that these numbers represent, but this pandemic has revealed exactly the ways in which compromise and staking claim to a "moral victory" by "going high" really, truly, has no positive bearing on peoples' lives.

Those in power seek to stay in power by any means necessary. They seek to obtain and maintain control over others' lives and what is considered acceptable. We need not look abroad for examples of just how badly this can go; even in our own history, something we have yet to truly reckon with in this country, there is genocide, slavery, economic and legislative oppression. As has become a calling card, all these things were legal—proving we cannot judge the moral value of an action by its legality.

The United States of America is particularly unique in its approach to the law. We are one of few countries, or even the only country, that equates legality to morality. We are also highly individualistic, moralizing even the matter of community and individualism. We also lionize the documents and systemic foundations of the country as it is today, despite it being written into these things that times and people change,

and therefore so should these documents and systems. There is something about all of this that has culminated into this idea of American exceptionalism—either for the positive or negative.

There are a lot of problems within this country that are entirely unique to it; the same can be said for most nations around the world.

This country is neither the worst nor the best that has ever existed. There is, in reality, no such thing; any judgment of 'best' or 'worst' relies on context and metrics. And globally, there are too many differences and too much nuance to account for.

Saying this country is irredeemable absolves you of the responsibility of fixing it. Saying it is the best country ever does the same thing.

These are self-preservation techniques because facing criticism and culpability are difficult and make one feel vulnerable.

The consequences, however, if we don't, are actual people's lives. We're already incredibly deep into this process. How many thousands, if not millions, have died because of the negligent and deliberately oppressive policies and actions of this country, both domestically and internationally? Every president has blood on his hands. From the food we eat to the language we speak, there is nothing in this country that is free from corruption or blood.

And that can be overwhelming.

three

It shouldn't have taken a lethal and devastating pandemic to make the gigantic flaws in the system blatantly obvious to people. But it did and this is where we are. If you are newly spurred towards action, follow that impulse and stick with it long-term.

If the pandemic is exhausting, if climate change is exhausting, if police brutality (which is just policing) is exhausting—imagine having been fighting these things for decades.

There have been major wins. And we are currently facing major backlash. We must bolster our movement and join together, now more than ever.

We must be committed to true progressivism. Not to ideology, but to our fellow human.

two

[the wall again]

[a man and his team walk into a carefully chosen venue and forego testing; they insist on the honor system. one among them tries to stifle her coughs. only one wears a mask, knowing what she carries.

rather than attend the funeral, they throw a party—maskless, hugging and shaking hands.

the man travels as soon as he can.

the same scene plays out 30,000 times: fever. chills. aches. tested. positive.

another scene plays out 700 times: people who never got to say goodbye.]

one

When I was 9, I walked into school after the final decision had been made about the election and the ballots in Florida: another four years of the same were to come. Classes started a little late; all of my teachers were crying in the staffroom.

When I was 12, my dad and I stopped at a gas station and went inside to grab a snack. The woman at the counter wouldn't take the money from his brown Mexican hand. It felt like the same disgust I faced from a fellow student who mocked me for having "hairy Mexican arms."

When I was 14, my cousins on my dad's side had gone out for a bachelor party. Some off-duty police officers got into an argument with them, then a fistfight. Later in the night, they showed up with seven police cars. One of my cousins, just a few years from becoming a doctor, was quite literally curb stomped, and suffered a life-altering traumatic brain injury. There were no indictments or charges.

When I was 16, a wonderful friend of mine, white, had been on a kick of telling silly jokes. One day his joke was: how does a Mexican family take a Christmas portrait? They climb in the back of their pick-up and run a red light. I told him my dad was Mexican. He didn't tell anymore jokes after that. That same year, he sat quietly as his mom defended Arizona's SB 1070 to me.

The summer when I was 21, I was up late and saw the tweets start coming in from Orlando. I went to sleep, feeling uneasy. When I awoke, 49 of my siblings were dead.

We are staring down the barrel end of an era-altering election.

I've seen the ugliness in this country firsthand—as spectator, victim, attempted accomplice, family, friend, community member.

We will never be done. We can never be complacent.

We must keep working.

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