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Dream Variations: Fictional Views of the School to Prison Pipeline

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Kierstin Renée Chaman Anderson, Senior

Pre-Law Concentration

Creative Project

Debian Marty, Division of Humanities and Communication, Spring 2017

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the African American men who would never get to experience the joy of life and the joy of school because of one bad decision, in the wrong place at the wrong time. You do not go unnoticed.

Acknowledgements

Thank you! To my mother, Rita, my brother K.C., to my Godmom Char, Auntie Kathy and Uncle Mike, Uncle John and Sheena, my cousins; Mike, Tony, Keith, Ashlee, Jeremy and Viola, and all my extended family, thank you for giving me the motivation to do this well and to make you proud. I Thank God for you all and all the blessings and favor he has provided me. To my sorority; Theta Alpha Sigma, thank you for bringing me my sisters to help me weather any storm. I love and adore you all. To my professors who never gave up on me and to my classmates and school friends for going through hell with me;

WE MADE IT!

Table of Contents

Dedication:.....	2
Acknowledgements:.....	2
Table of Contents:.....	3
Project Proposal.....	4
Dream Variations: Fictional Views of the School to Prison Pipeline.....	7
Night Coming Tenderly.....	8
Some Place of the Sun	17
Reflective Essay.....	23
Works Sited.....	26

Project Proposal

1. Provide your name and identify your area of concentration

Kierstin Anderson, Pre-Law Concentration

2. **Project Description:** Provide a 50-75 word description of your project idea and what form the project will take. If you are a Creative Writing and Social Action Concentration student, specifically describe what genre you will produce (poetry, creative non-fiction etc.) and what social action issue you are engaging.

I will be writing 2 fiction short stories (1k-7.5k words max), about the affects the school to prison pipeline has on Black American males from different points of view. The first will be a Black American student as they experience this, the next will be from a public attorney or a police officer who mainly sees these cases, and the final will be from the families of the students.

3. **Alignment with Common Theme:** Provide a *concise overview* of your project's *direct alignment* with this semester's shared theme of inquiry.

The shared theme this semester is Leadership, and I will be applying the theme of Leadership in my stories on how my character's take or do not take their lives into their own hands. I will also be taking the principles from Keltner's Epilogue of 'practic(ing) humility', "practi(ing) respect", and 'changing the psychological effects of powerlessness' and applying it to my character's in the stories, or how them not using it affects their power through their health and well-being. I will specifically be using the theory made by Michelle Alexander in her book, "The New Jim Crow", that this system was specifically set up in a way that undermines and sets back Black, African American, and other people of color in the United States, that starts specifically when these demographics are in school.

4. **Purpose:** What is your project's primary purpose? For example, do you aspire to inform or enlighten? To persuade? To contribute to responsible decision making? Some of each?

My primary purpose is to inform and enlighten about the damages this de jure system has that ruins and derails many lives through a medium I feel comfortable with. I also want to show the strength many of these people find when they are stuck in such a predicament

with no foreseeable positive outcome. I want to show that even at their lowest my characters are resilient to their surroundings

5. **Format Rationale:** Provide a brief rationale for your selected format. How will using your chosen format help you fulfill your project's purpose(s)?

By having a creative project, I will be able to show the stories of the people affected by this issue in a way that does not only focus on the numbers and the data of this issue, but this topic as a lived human experience, and how these occurrences both knock down and build up these communities, and giving people a perspective that the other two options could not do as effectively or at a level I wanted it to be conveyed.

6. **Capstone Title:** What is your project's working title?

Dream Variations (taken from the Langston Hughes poem) ((each individual story will use a line from the poem, and the title of the anthology as a whole is Dream Variations))

7. **Working Summary:** Provide a one-paragraph working summary of your project.

One situation, two points of view. This fiction anthology will tell the tale of a student trying to stay above the waves of an education system that was designed to make them drown in the American Justice and Prison systems. Dream Variations tells the stories of how one topic can cause a ripple effect in many lives. (57 words)

8. **Expectations:** Articulate as clearly as possible the *specific expectations* associated with your chosen project, including a *detailed account of all deliverables*. Be sure to *align the project expectations with the appropriate assessment criteria* and include your understanding of *all documentation requirements* associated with the project.

What I really want to get out of this project is the knowledge that I can apply what I love to do (creative writing) to what I would love to do with my future career (being a lawyer). This topic is one that I have personal ties to and one of the reasons I want to become a lawyer. My own expectations for this project is to make sure that what I write will give the people reading it a sense of understanding in the topic in the sense that they see it from multiple points of view that allows for a basis of change for this issue.

9. **Specific Skills Required:** Demonstrate specifically **competency in the technical skills needed to complete the project in the proposed format** described and how you already have developed them. Be specific! For example, if you have chosen a digital story as the format for your creative project, how did you develop the skills needed to complete a digital story? Did you successfully complete Latina Life Stories? How did you develop competency in using editing software?

I have been writing as a hobby for many years, and I have published works on writing websites, (Fictionpress, etc) and know the basic process of a work, and I am also in a women's writing workshop, and have people who I can help edit my works built into my other course work. I also have an understanding of the topic, and know how to access the information to make sure that they story I am writing will be based off facts.

10. **Next Steps:** What steps will you need to take to meet your project's expectations, including preparation of all required deliverables? (be as specific as possible)

A written outline of each story, and a person/ people who will be able to help me in the creative process (feedback, beta reading, etc.) Time management and allowing myself to write when I can and focus on what I am writing. Understanding that writing comes in spurts and not being hard on myself for that.

11. **Timeline:** Provide a detailed (and realistic) timeline for completion of each step required to meet the project's expectations.

Feb 22nd- have basic outlines of both stories
March 17th- finishing touches on first, starting the second story
April 3rd- finishing the 2nd story and doing final edits
April 24th- finishing edits and finishing supplemental content for submission
May 1st- HARD DEADLINE FINISHED COMPLETELY

Dream Variations: Fictional Views of the School to Prison Pipeline

Night Coming Tenderly...

I thought I would do great things. I tried so hard. In school, in sports, in clubs, at home, everything. Never causing trouble and keeping my nose to the books. If only to live up to the name that my mother spent nights over, pen to paper, linking first and middle names like an astronomer naming constellations after heroes of old.

“Emmanuel. You will do great things. Your name means ‘God Is with Us.’ and when He is with us, nothing can stand against us!” She used to whisper to me as I fell asleep, her feather-soft voice wrapped around me like a blanket and pulling me into a Dreamland, telling me of the adventures she saw me achieve and conquer as she dreamt up my name...

“You will do great things, Manny. I know it! I have so much faith in you... My precious first born, my baby boy! You are so much like your grandfather and I know that whatever you do, you will make us proud...”

“Manny,” Her voice called to me... *Getting louder? Huh?* “Hello? Emmanuel!” It became harsher, transforming into the deep rumble of a man’s bass... “Young Man! Pay attention this is serious!” The voice of the prosecutor came to me in high definition, cutting through my black and white memories.

“I’m sorry. What were you saying?” I glanced up from my hands in my lap to his angry countenance, where I could see his disdain for me clearly written. *Why is he even here...? I’m obviously just another paycheck for him.*

“I was *saying* that it would be best for you to just take the plea bargain. It doesn’t look good that you were driving around four high and intoxicated kids, two of whom are minors, with 2 ounces of marijuana on your person. Not to mention the cop is trying to add charges for resisting arrest. The best choice for you right now, if you want to be the man on campus at Stanford like you planned, is to take this plea,” He spoke around the end of a cigarette, his \$900 dress shoes crossed at the ankles on his desk next to his nameplate, the gold ‘Vince Wagner’

mocking me. "You have to look at the facts of the case. You're here because you were accused of a crime, young man. Take the plea...."

What should I do? Fight to prove that I did nothing wrong? Or take a plea that would stay with me on my record...

I was just hanging out with friends...

Bang!

Startled back into reality, I made contact with ice blue eyes that would decide if my life was mine to live.

"Emmanuel James Johnson, for possession of 2 ounces of marijuana, you are sentenced to a year in a county jail, and a \$1,250 fine. For willfully resisting arrest, and obstruction of justice, you are hereby sentenced to 2 years in a county jail and a \$2,500 fine. You will be eligible for parole after a minimum of 20 months of your total sentence. Court is adjourned. Bailiff, please escort the defendant back to his cell."

BANG!

The banging of the gavel at the hand of the judge was the sound of breaking glass, shattering the dreams I had of college in California... Wanting to see the pyramids in Egypt... Seeing the Eiffel Tower at night... everything. All the hard work to stay out of trouble with the law... The Valedictorian speech sitting on my desk at home... Broken on the immaculate floor of the courtroom and further stepped on by the guards as they came to take me back to my holding cell.

Walking down the quickly darkening hall, I pictured the faces of my three younger sisters, my mother sobbing into the chest of my father who was stoic as ever as I left their world of light and into the dark where I would stay for 3 years. I wanted to tell them not to worry about me and that I wouldn't disappoint them, that I would be the same Manny and work hard to get

parole... But my words were taken from me by the slamming of the bars of my cell. I questioned where I would be if that day didn't happen as it did...

...

On the outside, the neighborhood between Borough Park, or The Park as my friends and I called it, and Mapleton in Brooklyn was a sentence worse than death. The weather, the busy city, even the people are cold and unforgiving in an already cold and unforgiving world. For me, this place was home. The Park, a rundown corner store and the old man who ran it, the 'Cop Corner' where my friends and I were picked up like clockwork, the families who lived here... everything was familiar. Even the inside of a cop car was familiar to me. All things you got used to growing up as a black kid in Brooklyn, I knew of nothing better. Even my school, Franklin Delano Roosevelt High School was familiar and was the extent of my world bubble. A stoic and sterile environment next door to a cemetery, the quiet of the dead seeping into the cracks of the walls. Inside, the only people who really cared were the kids; the administration, the teachers, they all treated us like we were in daycare before the cops came to take us to a more permanent place. I was not going to be one of the ones who fit their expectations.

-

"Manny! Wanna hang with us tonight? Alicia is gonna be there..." My best friend Z asked as he snuck up on me in the hallway, sweaty from his free gym period.

"Yeah Manny you should go! You know Alicia has some fine ass friends! Damn the things I would do to Ashley.." My other friend Patrick said walking up behind Z, licking his lips and tossing a wolfish grin at Becca as she passed us in the direction of the locker rooms.

"Rick you know she don't like no dark skin niggas, she said so herself. Stop dreamin, man," Z said, pushing Patrick into the nearest lockers with a laugh.

"Are you going Manny? Please?" Rick said, rubbing his arm in recovery under the sound of his friends' laughter.

"I don't know... I have to pick up my sisters, y'all know that! Ruth has practice and my mom would whoop my ass if I missed getting her to hang out with y'all delinquents again," I replied with a half grin.

"It won't be that early bruh, whatchumean? Tonight! I got my older brother; no not the one with the shakes, to get me some stuff that should be a wild ride. You know those girls are more fun after smoking and he gave me some new shit," Z replied.

"Last time you got us some weird shit from that fufu nigga Johnny. And I got arrested and was in the tank for two days before they dropped the charges. You know I need to graduate Z, no more strikes for me. How can we trust you?" I said, looking at Z suspiciously with a shrug, grabbing his backpack from his locker as I spun the combo on mine.

Just focus Manny. Graduation is in two weeks and you have a 4.0. You can do that after graduation. Just two weeks to go. Then a better life at Stanford is calling your name.

"I don't know, Z. Manny is right, seems sketchy and I'm not trying to get caught up. You know the cops in my hood, trigger happy and even happier to slam someone against the ground," Patrick trailed off, looking sheepish as he rubbed his arm.

"Yeah I know. I just didn't think you would be a punkass about it, damn," Z said as they reached their lockers.

"Yeah, you've been there when my dad gave me one of his, 'I grew up on the South Side of LA, I know how things are, be careful' talks. I don't know. I'll hit you up later. I have practice." I said around the closing clang of my locker, the bite of metal against metal reminiscent of the last time I was in jail. A charge of possessing a firearm that turned out to be a water bottle. It wasn't the first time.

"Okay, man. Me and Rick are gonna go to The Park. Hit me up if you change your mind," Z said, pulling Rick along with him by the collar.

"Okay cool. You should go get that broken tail light fixed instead of going to smoke weed at a skate park!" I said after them, Z's unaffected laugh my only reply. "These friends of mine... I

should listen to my mother.” Shaking my head, I went along with my day as usual, putting all thoughts that weren’t about school to the back of my mind.

“Hello?” a voice spoke through the static.

“Hey, man. It’s me. Where are you? Can you pick us up? Rick decided to smoke too and we can’t drive... Alicia got her brother to get her FL’s,”

A pause, followed by a tired exhale. “Fuck really? Where are y’all, I’m on my way.”

“We are at the park sitting in Rick’s car. Thanks, Manny.”

“See you in 30,” I said, grabbing my wallet and taking the stairs two at a time.

I hope tonight doesn’t end in trouble.

Loud.

Everything was loud, the pounding bass from Rick’s speakers, the laughter from the girls as they messed around with the different snapchat filters in the backseat. The wind whipping past through the open windows.

“Hey Manny, hold this for me, will ya? I don’t have pockets,” Z said, tossing a small bag to me from the back seat.

“Manny how come you didn’t smoke?” Alicia asked, scooting forward in the seat behind me. Looking into the rearview I saw she had a pout on her pretty pink lips. “Don’t you usually?”

“Sorry, babe. I gotta stay clean for college,” I said, winking at her.

“Why though? You just turned 18, you have a 4.0 and scholarships for baseball to great schools, live a little babe,” she said wrapping her hand around one shoulder and resting her head on the other.

“You work so hard babe, you need to relax,” She said with a grin, before grabbing the drink from the cup holder. “Have some fun with me!”

“I am almost there, girl, can’t quit now!” I said, turning on my blinker and preparing to turn onto Becca’s street, glancing at the rearview where a car took the turn too...

That’s weird. I hope it’s her neighbors.

“Lish, Manny is gonna be a big man on campus. All the girls flocking to him? He’s gonna make us pro-”

That car is still following us... why?

“Hey babe put your seatbelt on, will ya?” I said, cutting Z off.

“Huh? Sure. But Man-” She started to say before the flash of crimson and cyan that showed through the rearview cut her off, and dropped the euphoric feeling in the car, only to be replaced with a mass panic.

“Shit! The cops!”

“I know, don’t panic. Just sit here quietly and don’t act fucking suspicious.” I said, pulling the car over as everyone rushed to hide the cans of alcohol and Z’s pipe.

The bite of the officer’s flashlight as he knocked it against the window broke my haze of panic, making me jump as I lowered the window and turned the music down lower.

“Can I see your license and registration?” The officer asked me, shining his flashlight directly into my eyes.

“Sure, can you move the flashlight please sir? It’s hard to see,” I replied, turning towards Rick and meeting his terrified eyes as I reached for my wallet and struggled to get it from my pocket. I felt the tension in the car, thicker than the smoke that they had been blowing 20 minutes earlier.

“License and registration,” he replied, one hand on his gun as the other swung the beam from my eyes to roving it over the interior of the car, and the four other terrified people in it before training it back on me.

I handed him the information with a “here you go,” before he walked back to his cruiser, bursting the bubble of tension in the car when he passed the back tail lights.

“Stop fucking twitching guys. We will make it out of here,” I whispered to the rest of the car as I kept my eyes glued to the officer.

“It’s all in Becca’s bag. All that I had was the we-” Z cut himself off when he saw the officer walked back up to the car.

“Kid, who’s car is this? Your last name is Johnson, and the car is registered to a Mrs. Avery,” the officer said, cocking his hip and adjusting his hat, his green eyes boring into me.

His radio beat any of us to an answer when a static “Backup in route to your location, please-” was heard before he turned the sound down all the way.

“Who’s car, son?” he repeated.

“I-I-It’s my car sir,” Z stuttered from the back seat. “I let him drive because I was tired and it was safer,” he kept going, his voice gaining its normal strength as he went.

“I see...” the officer narrowed his eyes at Z in the back, and the girls clutching their purses, Becca already crying and Alicia on the verge of tears.

Why won't they be chill! They need to calm down now.

The sound of another siren broke the tension, as two more squad cars rolled to a stop in front of us.

“Can you step out of the car for me?” The officer asked me after sucking his teeth, stepping back from the car.

“Can I ask why you pulled us over, officer?” I asked, not making a single movement.

“Yes. Step out of the car!”

It's better to just cooperate... We have nothing to hide. We will all be home soon.

“No Manny! Please don’t please!” Becca said through her tears.

“Ma’am I need you to be quiet, this is a police matter,” the officer said, glaring at the crying girls in the backseat as I went to take my seatbelt off.

“Becca it’s gonna be okay. Calm down. I’ll get you home safe,” I said, shooting her and Alicia a smile in the rearview.

“Hurry up!” the officer said as I opened the door and went to get out of the front seat when the small bag of weed that Z had tossed at me fell from my pocket.

That moment seemed to slow down as I went from staring at the small bag to meeting the officers’ eyes.

The next moments happened in a flash and a scream; I felt him yell as he grabbed my arm and threw me onto the pavement. I heard the click of the other two officers grabbing their guns as Becca screamed. Z and Rick were yelling at the officer to let me go as I felt the gravel dig into my cheek, the weight of the officer pressed into my back.

I was then picked up by my hoodie and dragged to the police car while I heard to yells of my friends trying to get to me while the other police officers turned their guns on them.

“Stay in the vehicle!”

“What the fuck did he do!”

“Stay in your car this is police business!”

“Why are you throwing him around what did he do!”

In the backseat of the cruiser, everything was muffled from the shock.

“All of you are just alike. But not on my shift. I won’t let it.” The officer said as he started the cruiser and pulled away from Z’s car.

“Bro what the fuck! What are you doing! He didn’t do anything!” Z yelled as he ignored the cops and ran after the cruiser before he was tackled to the ground by another officer. “Oof. Get the fuck off me! Why are you taking my friend!” He continued to yell as we drove away.

“Where are you taking me man, it wasn’t even mine!” I said, my words sounding distant to my own ears.

But I never received an answer. No answer to what had just happened. No explanations. Nothing.

Some Place of the Sun

“Mr. Wagner, you have a call from the precinct on line two,” The soft voice of my receptionist said into the quiet of my office, bringing me back to the reality that I wasn’t in fact on a beach in the Bahamas with my wife and children, but at work.

“Send them over Angie, thanks,” I said into the speaker, leaning over the mess of papers on my desk.

“Sure thing sir.” Angie said before the voice of Police Chief Nelson rang loud and clear in my office.

“Mr. Wagner! The best prosecution attorney this side of the Mississippi. How was your vacation? How are the kids?” Nelson said exuberantly, the background sounds of the precinct his orchestra.

“Doing well, doing well. They didn’t want to go back to school today, but what 11 and 13-year-old does after a week in the Bahamas?” I replied, spinning in my chair and waiting. “So what is the nature of this call Nelson? Got a new case for me? You know I just got back from vacation.”

“Yeah I know Vince,” He replied with a sigh. “I have no control over these things. We have a new case for ya.” He kept going, his voice losing some of its usual bright edge.

“Oh?” I said, pulling myself to the desk and grabbing a pen from the gold cup on the edge of my desk.

“Yeah. Some black kid got caught last weekend with a bag of weed on him. 2 ounces of it.”

I sat the pen down, blowing air through my nose in frustration. “And why are you giving me a call? That is a simple charge. Unless he has a record and there’s another issue there should only be a fine and a weekend spent in the tank. I really don’t need games right now James,” I went to end the call before he stopped me.

“Wait Vince, don’t hang up, I’m not done!” He said in a hurry.

“I’m listening...” I said, picking my pen up again with a frustrated sigh and jotting down the facts so far.

“He is an eighteen-year-old baseball star on the other side of town. He was driving a car that wasn’t his. And he had 4 other people in the car who were both high and drunk. Two of them were minors. He claimed that the owner of the car was one of the passenger’s parents’, but the arresting officer did not go as far as to confirm it. He is getting a charge for resisting arrest as well. He also has another strike on his record; one for theft of a convenience store when he was 15 and another for underage firearm possession. That last one was dismissed because it turned out to be a water bottle in his pocket. But his parents are refusing to pay the fine because of how the arrest went down,” Nelson said, his background becoming much quieter with the soft click of a closing of a door. “I’m sending you the investigation report now, including his record.”

I sighed and put my pen down, rubbing my eyes.

I wish I was still in the Bahamas. At least there I didn’t have to deal with stupid cops and even dumber citizens.

“Okay. I’ll have to talk to the other partners and let you know what we think of this case. Do you have the footage of the arresting officers body cam? If we take this, we can use that for evidence for the claim of resisting arrest.” I said as I sighed again as I pressed the button on my desk that would let Angie know that I needed her.

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and I narrowed my eyes as I heard the Police Chief stutter to answer. “W-we-well we recovered the footage not from the body cam, but from the cruiser. The officer turned off his camera when he arrived on scene, and even with the footage from the cruiser there is a bit of,” Nelson paused, his silence pregnant with possibilities. “Force. On the side of the officer. Since we do not have the body cam, there is no way if this is an action or just a reaction.” Nelson finished, blowing all of the air out of his lungs in relief.

“Are you meaning to tell me you want me to try a kid in court for resisting arrest with my only evidence being a shit camera from 10 feet away and Hearsay?!” I yelled into the phone, my already present frustration bleeding into my tone with the speed of a cut artery. “You know I can’t get far with that! Tell your trigger-happy officers that if they want to charge kids for petty shit to have their cams on. It makes both of our lives easier. I will let you know our decision.” I said, hanging up the phone before Nelson could get a word in edgewise.

“Mr. Wagner?” Angie said in a small voice from the door.

“Yes Angie, the precinct will be sending over an investigation report about the case Nelson just briefed me about. Please receive it and place it on my desk, and let James and Tom know I need to talk to them about taking this case on.” I said, running my hands through my hair and trying to calm my frayed nerves.

“Yes sir,” She said, writing down everything I had said on her notepad. “Welcome back, by the way,” She tossed me a teasing smile as she left my office.

“Is it good to be back?” I replied to her retreating back before getting up and heading to the wall of books in my office. This case was going to be interesting.

“Mr. Johnson is here to see you,” Angie said into the speaker, interrupting the conversation I was having with the Defense attorney on the case.

“Send him in please. Tell him his lawyer is already here.”

“Will do sir,” She said as the door to my office opened and a 6 foot 2 inches’ tall black male walked into my office, dressed in black slacks and a pale button up. From the first scan of him, I could see where the officer was weary of him and wanted to call back up. I could also see that he knew his way around formal wear.

Sports maybe? How many years?

“Emmanuel? My name is Vincent Wagner. I will be the prosecuting attorney for this case. It is nice to meet you,” I said formally, holding out my hand for him to shake.

“It is a pleasure to meet you sir. You can just call me Manny.” He said taking my hand in a strong grip after looking to his lawyer with approval. This kid knew his stuff.

“Okay Manny. So, do you know why you are here today?” I replied, gesturing for him to take a seat as I sat in my own office chair.

“Yes.” He replied, keeping his eyes trained on me as he kept his answers short.

“Son, I am going to need you to elaborate on your answers. I have my side of the story; I just need yours. We *are* here to see if a plea bargain is the best decision for this case.” I said, leaning forward in my chair for emphasis and meeting his eyes.

“Please do not call me ‘Son’. My mother named me Emmanuel. We are here because I got pulled over for a broken taillight and was arrested for weed that wasn’t mine.” He said, meeting my eyes with a gaze that spoke of more years seeing the criminal justice system than someone his age should.

If he just followed the rules he would stay out of trouble. Why doesn’t he understand that?

“That’s fine Manny,” I said, picking up my pen and turning towards his lawyer. “Ms. James, what is the goal for you for this meeting?”

She cleared her throat and moved her chocolate brown bangs from her pale blue eyes. “We want to get the charges dismissed as a whole, since Manny is looking to attend Stanford o the fall, but if you provide evidence of otherwise, we would like the charge of resisting arrest dropped because of the nature of the arrest. Mr. Johnson’s family is willing to take this to trial if it must. The cruiser camera shows that the officer acted with excessive force for a threat-less situation.” She said, leveling her eyes on me and sitting up slightly straighter than she was before she spoke.

“And I understand that sentiment. I have a son of my own who I too want only the best for. But let us look at the case together...” I said, opening the investigation report and turning it to them.

Manny leaned over the report and lifted a page. "The pages are worn. How many times have you read this?" He asked, looking back up at me.

Hmm. He's observant, I thought and I semi-forced a smile at him.

"I like to do a thorough job no matter what I do, Manny. Let's get started," I said, grabbing my pad and pen with what the State was offering as a plea.

...

"Vince, how did it go?" Tom spoke from behind me. I turned away from the fridge to let him by as I answered.

"Badly. This kid thinks that he can get an innocent ruling. Just based off the facts of the case, it looks like he's gonna be spending his first year of college in a jail cell." I took a sip of my coffee with a sigh.

"Are you talking about the new case?" One of the interns asked as she walked in, a case file under her arm.

"Yeah, why?" I answered, turning around to give her my full attention.

"I saw his parents yesterday. You know, cause they came here first when they heard you took the case?" She glanced over her shoulder at me with a raise of her eyebrows.

Why come here, I'm the one trying to put him in jail for his crimes...

"How did they seem?" Tom asked her before I could get a word in, biting into a bagel and spewing crumbs with every word.

"Just like any black parents, concerned abou-" She started before Tom cut her off with a snort.

"Concerned? If these parents were really concerned, or even *cared*," he said, pointing a cream cheese covered plastic knife at her. "Their kids would be in school or at home instead of on the streets causing trouble. Half of them are single parents anyways. I understand that you are from that area, Shayla, but don't get it 'twisted' about the truth of these kids."

Shayla narrowed her eyes and left the break room in a huff.

"I don't think she was the person to say that to Tom," I told him, grabbing a muffin for myself.

"Well I can't do anything about the truth. And you can't do anything about some hoodlum that got caught with weed, Vince. It's not like this isn't normal for that area. I know you always want to see the best in every defendant, but if they are just some black kid from Brooklyn, is it really possible for them to have a best side?" Tom said, pouring hot water over a tea bag for jasmine tea. "Just do what you do best. If he doesn't take the plea, or his lawyer can't make him, rail him. We don't need more of them just running around. Think of your kids." He says as he leaves the break room.

"Think of my kids, huh?" I muttered, staring blankly at the half full cup of coffee in my hands.

Maybe I can't do anything to change his life. But I can keep kids like him off the streets and set their life straight.

I walked out of the break room and back into my office, calling the courthouse as soon as I sat down.

"Hello?" The receptionist answered.

"Hello, my name is Vince Wagner the prosecution attorney on the Johnson case? I spoke with the defense and they rejected the plea. Our side has decided to go ahead with the full case, with intention of getting the max sentence." I said spinning in my chair and facing the window.

"Oh, okay Mr. Wagner. I will send a memo to the presiding judge and the defense right now. Thank you," The receptionist said, sounding flustered.

"Thank you, have a great day," I said as I hung up.

I really wish I was in the Bahamas again.

Reflective Essay

The topic for this semester is Leadership, and through the lense of taking charge of my own ideas and project I will be taking my voice in an academic space and giving it to not only my character, but real persons who do not have the ability to have their lives seen in an empathic manner concerning my topic of the School to Prison Pipeline. In our class, we read *The Power Paradox*, and one of the first principles the author Dacher Keltner says is that “Power is about altering the state of others.” (Keltner 23). So, I will be using my power at this level of my education to hopefully influence and alter the viewpoints of my readers, as well as give people like my main character Manny their voices back.

The aesthetics of my stories are in the first person, with the only viewpoint being from the main character to show that even if the issue affects others around them, the biggest impact affects the person it happens to. Many of the images in the story are based around one end of my topic; prison. Using the images of the clanging of prison bars and being trapped in the space with no ability to escape, and even the hopelessness many African American males feel having to be trapped in a place because of minor offences or one wrong decision. With the last image in mind, I focused all my details and character development around the idea that my main character befalls a bad decision.

The main audience that I plan on writing to is a general audience; anyone who is interested in the story could read the first part and completely understand the story of a young man. The second piece is harder for a general audience because of the heavy usage of legal terminology and the criminal law process from the viewpoint of an established lawyer, but my main goal was to provide a topic as heavy as the school to prison pipeline in a way that even people who are not completely aware of the issue would be able to understand the issue from a personal viewpoint. The main and overall purpose of making this topic into a creative piece is because I wanted to make this topic into something everyone can relate to. I wanted to also

inform them of the humanity and the realness of the people who would otherwise be known only as a stigma and a statistic. Because I both wanted to inform and entertain people with my creative writing ability, I felt that writing two creative pieces was best.

The hardest part of this project was the process. Because I had a very rudimentary grasp of creative writing, I had to reach beyond what I felt like I had done in the past and make it better. I also know myself to be a strong self-critic and an even stronger perfectionist, so when I was stuck on a concept or not where I wanted to be in my project I would stress out, and move into editing my piece until I did not recognize it. One of the best things I think I had was the ability to bounce my ideas or parts of my work to other people, so that I both had someone in my corner rooting for me and my process, and a realistic critic who would tell me straight what I needed to improve on.

One thing I struggled with in this process was creative fiction that was realistic enough to still be connected to both my theoretical framework but also the topic itself. I felt at some points I was just weaving a story that had nothing to do with the topic, but after hearing different feedback I realized that how I made my character's and the character development and just interactions with other character's is how I would show the topic and my theoretical framework.

The shared theme for my section of capstone this semester is leadership. The way I decided to apply this to both my capstone and my life is through both how I took control of my project, as well as how my characters did or did not have power over their lives.

In class, we discussed "The Power Paradox" by Dacher Keltner, and the principle I decided to apply to my character's is the effect that "powerlessness" has on people. For example, my main character Manny is an African American male who grew up in a bad neighborhood, and has had to deal with the strong police presence in his life, while still trying to attain his goals and dreams that are outside of the space and world he grew up in. Because of the events of the story, he eventually does not "escape", and ends up having to pay the price for a petty crime and an unfair charge. By showing Manny's mentality and how he feels about the

events he goes through, I am showing the effect that a lack of power has on a person. In concerns to translating that to something bigger than just a topic for a class, I think that for the men and women who are stuck in the school to prison pipeline who had no other choice than to be stuck in the justice/prison system, having a story that tells of how they possible felt, or even showing that there is someone in an academic space who does not believe they all are criminals whose only option in life was to eventually end up in prison is something I think is important. It may be a small action, but all small actions add up to bigger actions. And who knows, maybe my stories can change the mindset of at least one person reading, and that in itself is achieving what I planned to do with this capstone as a whole.

Works Sited

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