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The Southern Dream

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The Southern Dream



“Frisco Disses Texas.” *San Francisco Citizen*, 2017, sfcitizen.com/blog/2015/05/14/frisco-disses-texas-flies-state-flag-upside-down-at-civic-center-in-front-of-historic-city-hall-poor-tech-sas/.

Ryan Shephard

Senior Capstone

Human Communications

Creative Project

Professor Medina-Lopez

Writing and Rhetoric

Spring 2019

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Proposal

For my Senior Capstone project, I would like to do a creative project to discuss this semester's theme of power, privilege and place. The creative project that is most desirable to me is a short story equaling in between 15-25 pages centralizing around four main characters all participating in the same class at University of Houston. My first character would be a Latino living past the Galleria in what the Houston Police force refers to as "Gangland". His opening scene begins with him in a tattoo parlor receiving a tribal cougar tattoo to cover up his "mi vida loca", the three dots that represent a life dedicated to the criminal underworld until jail or death take it. The cougar, representing the University's mascot, represents an escape from his home life, a life that he was reluctantly shoved into because of his family and where he lives. He is a freshman with an avid love for soccer and he is placed in a Political Science class.

My second character will be a young black woman from Third Ward, Texas' equivalent of Compton or Harlem. She brushes her teeth to the site of a drug deal and remembers falling asleep to the sounds of sirens coming up the road and a fight between cops and dealers near her driveway. She feeds her younger brother and sister, who is pregnant, breakfast with no mother or father in sight before she just has time to walk to class before she does her hair and makeup. She is used to being a young "parent" for her siblings, attending school during the day, and then working at a corner store as a clerk in the evenings. She is a returning Sophomore when she takes Political Science

The third character is a poor, slightly racist white young man entering his second semester at University of Houston. He has grown up with racist parents, racist

neighbors, and in a very poor mobile home neighborhood where the sounds of dogs barking, domestic abuse, drugs, and prostitution linger in the air. He is as used to the cops coming to his neck of Houston as the Black girl is, but rather than stay out of their way he has been taught to hate them because they jail “purebred, white Muricans” for committing crimes just like they do others even though he was taught to believe white people were too good for jail. Taking the class and getting grouped with the latino and Black girl at first causes a problem, but when he realizes he lives their struggles also he becomes much more open minded.

My final character is a seemingly straight, rich young white man from the River Oaks country club part of Houston. He is secretly a closeted homosexual and has faced many cases of harassment throughout his time in the Texas school system, even when his parents pulled him for private school. He has the hardest time connecting with the group and the group has the hardest time believing he has had struggle, coming from a rich white family with oil money, until he talks about why he is closeted and embarrassed about who he is.

They all realize that, despite living in the same city their worlds are so different but also that they have endured many of the same trials and tribulations. They bond over the realization that they are all in fact minorities in a world that has punished them for not being given what society deems as the “proper tools” to flourish in a society that damns anyone who is born with “setbacks” rather than accepting that because everyone is different, where we were born or the status and color of family we were born into shouldn’t matter.

The Southern Dream

The tattoo gun tore black ink into his naturally tanned skin, changing his body forever. From the first drop of ink to the last, he watched as his artist painted the portrait into his flesh. Finally, his artist moved the gun away from his right shoulder and leaned back in a slouching leather chair. The gruff looking man tugged at a long beard, transitioning to grey, without blinking as he examined his work.

“I’d say we’re all good here. Take a look and if you’re happy with it, we’ll let it bleed out while we settle the cost. I’ll wrap it up after and you can go” he said. His voice was hardened by decades of cigarettes and a hard liquor love affair.

In silence, Diego pushed himself off the sweat laced black leather chair and headed to the full length mirror in the back of the shop. He fixed his black hair and locked his deep brown eyes with the primal stare of a snarling cougar. In the beasts pupils, a deep red burned that matched the blood dripping from the predator’s maw.

“It’s perfect” Diego called out to the front of the store. A satisfied smile fell upon his face. He flexed his bicep and watched the Cougar’s snarl intensified. After he collected his shirt in a wad in his left hand, his right hand pulled out a black duct tape wallet filled with a wad of twenties.

“What do I owe you man?”

“You going to U of H?” the artist asked. He looked at the fresh tattoo again.

“Yeah. First class is tomorrow at 10. Never thought I’d get in, much less be able to go. I’ll be the first in my family to every step foot on a college campus as a student.”

Diego looked at his tattoo again, pride growing warming him.

“Let’s make a deal. Let’s call it \$200 today. You bring me your diploma back in and I’ll give you your \$200 back.” Diego felt the kind words stun him.

“I couldn’t let you -” Diego was cut off by a boxing mitt sized hand shushing him.

“I insist kid.”

He laid out ten twenties on the glass counter, layering each one on top of the other so each bill was visible. Diego extended his hand, offering a handshake and his artist met it with his own rough and calloused palm and squeezed it with vice grip pressure.

“See you in for years” the man said after he wrapped the new tattoo. Diego thanked him and then took his leave from the shop.

Once he had reset his bones and his shirt was back on his body, he stepped out onto the streets of downtown Houston. With lightning quick fingers, he summoned an Uber to pick him up at his favorite corner cigarette spot. “Two minutes away” he read.

“Pack of Blacks and black Bic” Diego said. He pushed a ten dollar bill towards the clerk. The woman obliged his request quietly. Her face carried the stress she was internalizing.

“Keep the change” he said when she tried to return a few bucks to him.

“Thank you,” she said. “Every little bit helps.”

Just as he pocketed his pack, he saw young man in a silver corolla waving to him.

“You Diego?” the driver asked.

“That’s me man” Diego said. The back door unlocked and Diego sat behind the empty passenger’s seat.

The car radio blared news about Trump and his wall while the line became bombarded with callers. Some offered unconditional, unbreakable, and undying support to the Republican party. Others damned and cursed the party and the President.

He noticed the driver was shaking his head after one caller offered his own money and time to help get it built.

“Things are changing” the driver said. His voice was filled with disgust.

“Not soon enough for me. And not in the right direction” Diego said. He flipped the black lighter in between his fingers as he stared out the window. The Galleria and downtown Houston scraped the sky, The traffic surrounding the area loaded the streets like a city-long serpent. Their car cut straight through the hours long traffic as the sunset was lost behind the man made mountaintops. He kept his head to the fading blue in the sky and ventured forth towards his humble home and a loving family while darkness was fast approaching the city.

The many shades of oranges, pinks, purples, and reds reflected off of Mason’s wine glass. The red of the Merlot beautifully blended with the vibrancy of the Southern sky on the crisp, white table liner. They sat on whiskey colored brown leather chairs at a glass table at the River Oaks country club while sixty inch flat screens surrounded them on each wall. His father and sister watched the U.S Open Tennis Tournament on the larger than life television. His mother waved a tipsy hand through the air to gain the attention of a handsome young waiter willing to refill her Lemonade Shanty while he sat tapping his foot nervously, trying to ignore the continuous buzzing that plagued his phone.

“That little fruit that beat you in the finals is going to end up in the pro circuit, you watch.” his father said to him.

“Guess being a fairy helps you stay light on your toes” his sister added. Her comment got a laugh out of their father. Mason ran his hands through his brushed back dark blonde hair.

He looked down at his perfectly ironed, deep purple dress shirt and tossed the napkin tucked into his lap onto the table. With a steak unfinished and his glass full, he snuck off to the bathroom. When the stall door locked shut, he took his Samsung out of his pocket. Keeping it clenched in his hand, Mason leaned up against the spotless, freshly cleaned, white tile wall and loosened his tie. Sweaty, shaking fingers struggled to type in his passcode. He tried four times to unlock his passcode, missing the first three attempts at the last digit. With a deep breath, he opened a text from an unsaved number.

“I wish you were here” he read. He locked his phone and saw his pale grey eyes staring back at him Half of him hated himself for reading it, the other had the same craving as the text’s sender. He slouched his head against the stall door and breathed out while he clenched his eyes shut.

Mason left the stall and washed his clammy hands then cracked the bathroom door and peaked out. His family, drunk and distracted, hadn’t even noticed his absence. Completely undetected, he made his way out of the plate glass double doors of the country club. His Italian leather boots echoed off the nearly empty parking lot until he reached his grey Mercedes. The car lights flashed, the doors clicked open and he reached into the driver’s side door. A single Camel Crush greeted him in the nearly

empty black and blue box. With a pop, the menthol dispensed through the filter and the flavor of singed peppermint coated his taste buds. When the cigarette burned itself down to the filter, he opened up the message from the unknown sender then looked at his watch. The time read 7:07 PM.

“I’ll be there by 8” he typed out. His thumb hesitated and hovered over the send icon. Minutes went by while he stood like statue against his freshly washed car. Like a revolving door, every scenario ran through his brain, every reason to press delete entered his mind while every reason to press send followed in the last thought’s wake. Eventually his impulse outfought his logic and the message went from a draft to a sent text. He opened the door and focused on the clock as the engine erupted life under the hood of the car. It was 7:17. After a forty five minute drive, he pulled into the driveway of a mansion, all blacked out with no signs of life within.

“I’m here” he sent.

A gently used iPhone in a pink and white case sat face down on a cheaply upholstered loveseat and sounded its nightly alarm. Chantel slipped her braids over her left shoulder and peaked her caramel brown eyes out between a crack in the curtains and stared out at the heart of third ward. Between the the bars on the window, she saw the same group hanging out next door, just like every other night for the past month. A deep sinking feeling hit her in the gut. More than a few boys hanging out after dark in her neighborhood meant trouble would likely follow them.

She grabbed her ringing phone and looked at the screen. The time was 8:00 PM. Chantel locked, bolted, and then chained the door shut before silencing her unwavering alarm.

“Come on y’all. Its bedtime. School tomorrow.” she said. Her clapping hands sounded off the walls of the living room over the loud television set. Her twin siblings, one girl and one boy, looked at her with mild annoyance over her clapping while sleep filed up their eyes.

“I want to wait for Mommy” the boy said.

“You know she’s working again tonight De’von. She works every night” the little girl said. “We’ll see her when we get home from school tomorrow.”

“Quiet Kedra” Chantel said, making sure to sound stern but sweet. She knelt down and looked her brother in the eye while she placed her hands on his shoulders. “If she could, she would read you a bedtime story every night.”

She raised De’von into the air and he hugged her tightly around the neck. “She’d be with us every second if she could sweetheart” she whispered. Her voice was muffled by his shoulders and the tight hold of their embrace.

Her right arm held up De’von and her left hand held onto Kedra’s while the girl trudged along behind them, dragging her feet and making Chantel pull her while the weight of undeserved motherhood fell onto her young shoulders. The trio burst into a bedroom with two twin beds. Kedra jumped under a sky blue blanket while De’von nestled under a royal blue quilt. Chantel reached behind her blindly towards the bookshelf behind her.

“Oh the Places You’ll Go” she read aloud to the twins. De’von was asleep by the middle of the story and Kedra closed her eyes on the last page, each looking very peaceful in sleep. Chantel turned the lights off and went to leave the room when she heard Kedra’s voice.

“Chantel, do you miss Daddy?”

“Every day baby. So much.” Each word felt like choking up a one thousand pound weight.

The TV had become white noise. She scrolled through her phone until she realized it was nearly midnight. She turned off the History Channel’s documentary on the Industrial Revolution and used a small round piece of metal to unlock the door to her room, just across the hall from the twins.

Her bed was creaseless, her dresser dustless and her carpet spotless. Two doors slid open to reveal a small but perfectly organized closet, set up to maximize the miserably minimal space. With vigorous intent she dug through her closet until she found her favorite acid washed jeans and an Andre Johnson Texans jersey. Gently she placed the clothes hangers on her door knob then she unmade her bed when her flea market antique clock began chiming.

The clock struck twelve right as the gunshots rang out. It started out slow, each bang rhythmically in tune with the clock until shots occurred like milliseconds. She dropped down behind her bed and crawled like a soldier through the hall into her siblings room. With a sturdy hand, she reached up and turned the knob and entered the room. The twins were in De’von’s bed, hugging each other tightly and screaming at the top of their lungs in terror.

“Get on the floor, now!” she shouted. Barking orders like a drill instructor to the twins behaving like broken cadets, her voice lead the children to safety in the middle of the floor. Chantel jumped onto them, shielding every inch of her baby sibling’s bodies.

Rubber burned in the road and she heard the car tear up the road at hellacious speeds behind it. Two more shots rang out before the chaos ended.

“Shit that was crazy.” she heard a voice from outside the walls say.

“We all good?” another voice called out.

“Yeah. We’re whole.” a third voice answered.

She hoped desperately that she could say the same. Fingers crossed, she pushed herself off the twins and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of two sets of terror stricken, but very much alive, eyes. The three of them sat up and leaned against the weak and creaking bed frame in silent relief. “Just another night in the ward” she thought to herself.

Chantel slept in her sister’s bed that night, holding the shaking girl like a mother comforting her infant. She was able to tune out the sirens, the lights, and the shouting by 2 AM and fall asleep.

A glass shattered against Lee’s already damaged bedroom door. He jolted himself awake and forced himself out of bed, pumping with fear, when he heard his father’s staggering footsteps rattling the paper thin walls. The booming knock dropped a painting from his wall and the Bible from his nightstand. He took a step back towards his dresser and put his hands up, ready to defend himself. For a moment there was a silence then a crack like thunder split the door in two and ripped it from its hinges. He saw his father’s tan work boot struggle to work itself out of the splinters. Scents of cheap bourbon and expensive cigars wafted in with his father.

“I hear you in here, trying to sneak out boy. Can’t get your sorry ass away with nothing under my roof. Come Here!” His father lunged at him, almost getting a hand on him before Lee got out of the way.

“I was asleep Dad! Your bottle probably fell off the couch again and woke you up.” he said. Adrenaline laced his words.

“Asleep my ass. I know what footsteps sound like. I heard you stomping around from the living room.” Spit wetted his shirt as he yelled, already stained yellow from years of wasted beer.

“I got class in eight hours Dad. Where would I be trying to go” Lee pleaded.

“Nowhere good” he slurred with a lumbering stumble. His left fist flew lazily at his gut. He sidestepped it and shoved the arm aside, only adding to the momentum of his Father’s right hook. When it landed it sat him down and left him in a daze of pain and confusion while he tried to piece together the events and simultaneously collect himself.

“Not under my roof boy.” his father said. He left his son in the middle of his bedroom floor, his left eye already swollen shut.

He clambered to consciousness at 9 AM. He didn’t remember what happened when the sun pierced his eyes like needles, just one hour before he needed to be seated in a desk. He tossed on a pair of faded Levi’s, a grey shirt with the “Stars N Bars” on the left sleeve and his pair of Sharkskin cowboy boots. It wasn’t until he walked into the bathroom for his toothbrush that he saw his wound and remembered. The memories of the previous night flooded him until he wanted to drown.

His eye was sealed tighter than a tomb. The bruise was blacker than midnight took over his Atlantic blue eyes and spread like a plague across his face. From the brim

of his nose to the brim of his brow, the it pulsed and throbbed with his heartbeat. His worked hands gripped the counter tightly until all color flushed from his already pale fingers. He let his head sink low and he closed his other eye as tight as he could. He ran a hand over a half an inch layer of dark hair over his head and let out a sigh. It became a growl then a roar that crescendoed into a primal scream of white hot hatred. Through the mirror, he watched the rage change and contort him. His eyes grew bloodshot and the complexion of his face reddened to match. His veins protruded from his neck and his bones shook in place as he seethed. His shoulders rose and fell like the black waves on an angry sea. Just as quickly as it began, however, the storm within him settled. He hung exhausted to the hair and dust covered bathroom counter.

Lee noticed the blood from the cut on his father's knuckles pooling under the unconscious man on the hardwood floor of the living room. Shattered glass littered the floor around the sofa.

"See you later Dad" he scoffed. "Keep losing your life on that couch."

Precisely at 10 AM a black man with a shaved head entered the silent auditorium sized lecture hall. He wore a black pinstripe suit with a black leather briefcase in his left hand. He placed it on a Texas oak podium in the front of the room. Before saying a word he picked up a black dry erase marker and wrote three words on the board, each one under the other. The sound of the pen sounded off throughout the whole room.

Power

Privilege

Place

“My name is Professor Aikman. Everyone please rise up from your seats. I am going to simultaneously call attendance and sort you into groups for the semester. Your groups will test together, write together, and, at the end of the year, present together. With forty students I’ve decided to break y’all up into groups of four. Each section of the room is numbered one through ten. When a group is filled, take your seat in the first chair of the next available section.”

“Chantel Carter.” She was the ninth name called. Chantel took the first seat in group three in the very front of the class and waited for the other three to fill.

“Diego Castillo.” He tugged his jeans up towards his waist and cinched the canvas belt, holding up his khaki Dickies, tighter and dropped his stuff down in the empty chair on the left of Chantel.

“Lee Chase” With a homemade ice pack covering his eye, he sat down and looked at his group members uncomfortably.

“Mason Czar” He tried to tuck in his wrinkled shirttail into the slacks he wore the night before. He sat down nervously, completing the third group. The four recently introduced strangers exchanged silent glances until the rest of the class was sorted.

“Now, each assignment given will center around one or all three of the words written on the board. For your first assignment I want each member of the group to write two pages, for a total of an eight page paper. The topic will be an incident where you either benefitted or were hindered by these themes and explain the cultural significance to perhaps explain why the event occurred. Due one month from today. Since it’s the first day of class, y’all are dismissed as soon as y’all schedule the first group meeting.”

Chantel took out a pen and a brand new notebook and wrote her name and phone number down on the top line. She handed it to Diego and by the time it got passed back around to her, she already had a group message typed out.

“Y’all just want to meet on campus?” Lee asked. He sounded slightly annoyed.

“My place is always free. How about we get out of here today and I’ll send my address over the group chat?” Mason suggested.

“Sounds good man.” Diego said. He grabbed his athletic style backpack and walked out of the room with the rest of the group.

It was another two weeks on a Saturday before all their schedules matched up and they were able to meet. Mason sent a text with his address and a 7 PM meeting time.

Diego dropped his keys into the pocket of his hoodie and leaned against the arm of a floral couch pushed back against a yellowed wall. He kissed his mother’s cheek.

“When will you be home?” she asked.

“I’ll be home late tonight, early tomorrow” Diego said. He moved to the kitchen, not wanting to leave his grandmother feeling ignored.

“Make it to Mass on time tomorrow. You were late last Sunday” she said. Her accent was thick, just like her knowledge of Mexican culture and history. He promised to be on time three times before he was able to get a hand on the front door knob. Before he opened it, he looked down at a crib in the nearest corner of the room.

“Te amo Sobrino” he whispered into the sleeping child’s ear.

It took less than ten steps out of his front door to run into trouble. Just up the block he saw several faces eyeing him, and wearing Cholo colors, waiting for him to be

vulnerable. Each step he took, they encroached, approaching him slowly and looking menacing. He saw two of them reaching into forearm deep pockets, gripping items at the bottom of them. He took a deep breath and got ready to run. When they were less than fifty feet away, a Police cruiser turned the corner within sight of the potential encounter. The young men staring at him turned their attention to the police and ripped empty hands from their swallowing pockets. They turned around and wandered back across the street and inside the walls of another rundown apartment complex.

The passenger side window rolled down and the officer turned his head and stared at him intensely from behind a pair of reflective lenses, forcing Diego to look back at his own self, shaking in the middle of the sidewalk. The police car lingered for a few more seconds then took a right turn at a four way stop. After he was left alone in the safety of solitude, he took his focus off the streets and summoned an Uber to take him to campus.

Lee was sitting on a park bench at an empty table in front of the campus' practice Baseball diamond when Diego found him.

"Want a smoke?" Diego asked.

"No thanks" Lee said without ever turning his head.

Diego shrugged and whipped his pack out, tossed one into his mouth and burned it to life with his lighter while he inhaled deeply. Next he watched as Lee pulled out a pack of Marlboro Reds and a red Bic lighter. After igniting it he left it in between his lips. Diego swallowed his frustration at the seeming act of disrespect but sat down next to him anyway. When each one cigarette was out, they turned around to a honking horn and saw Chantel smiling at them.

“Did you see what part of Houston this dude lives in?” Chantel exclaimed.

“Yeah, the ivory district. Within walking distance of River Oaks. His neighbors aren’t going to do know what do with us.” Diego said.

Chantel parked the car in disbelief of the luxury their eyes beheld. “Holy shit” the three whispered under their breath as they craned their necks upward so they could see the entirety of the house.

“Think they ever get lost in there?”

Diego asked. They walked up a crushed granite walkway surrounded by a line of perfectly shaped hedges on the right and a beautifully grown garden of a garden hosting a rainbow of flowers on the left until they stopped in front of the hand carved, white oak door. Lee grabbed the gold knocker and they heard an echo first and then activity within.

“If a butler welcomes us in I’m going to lose it” Chantel said. They tried to stifle their laughter when the doorknob began to turn. Mason greeted them and welcomed them into the entry room.

“We were expecting an old English dude in a black tuxedo carrying a silver tray and referring to us and sirs and ma’am to get the door” Diego said.

“What? Am I batman?”

“Hey you’re both tall handsome white dudes with way too much money living in houses that are way too big. All you gotta do is learn how to fight.”

“And get a butler apparently” Mason added. They all laughed again. They followed Mason up the carpeted steps to the second story.

“Third door down on the right. There’s a study room in there.” Mason said

Lee opened the door to the nicest room he had ever seen in his whole life. Four leather chairs, each a different color leather, sat around a circular Sequoia table while a white board sat at the table's left. A miniature freezer storing a few bottles of wine rested in the far right corner of the room.

Mason filled four glasses up with a freshly uncorked Zin and the others sunk into their individual leather laps of luxury. Diego took his Rockets hoodie off, yanking the sleeves of his t-shirt up enough to expose his tattoo.

"That one new?" Lee asked

"Yeah. Got it the day before we met."

"What does it mean to you?" Chantel asked.

"An escape. I didn't get a choice when I was younger to choose who I wanted to be because Houston saw us however they wanted to. Usually my brother and I were seen as the troublemaking Mexicans, whether we were out raising hell or not. Whatever they thought we were, my brother was the exact opposite. He was driven, smart, focused, giving, and just all about expanding himself through school. He said skin color didn't matter if you had a suit, a tie, a firm handshake and degree on your wall behind you. He was two years away from graduating as Valedictorian when it happened. He was out with some friends that had gone down the wrong path, trying to bring them back from their mistakes when another cruised up next to them. The tinted windows rolled down and the semi automatics came out. He was dead before anyone else got hit with a single shot. When the cops told us about the incident, they blamed my Mom for letting him run down the wrong path. The next day in the paper, he was on a corner story of page 13 in an article about rising gang violence in the inner-city. After that I gave up on

my world, my family and myself. I got in with his friends and earned myself a “Mi Vida Loca” tattoo right where the Cougar is now.

“What's “Mi Vida Loca”” Mason asked. He was already refilling his glass.

“It means “my crazy life” three dots shaped up like a triangle that spell out an unfulfilled prophecy. Each dot represents the endgame for every gangster that never make it past warring on the streets. It stands for ending up in the hospital, the prison, or the morgue. Mass and Mom pulled me out of that. Crying through a few confessions kicked the gangster out of me and I dedicated myself to becoming everything my brother never got the chance to be. I graduated with honors and when I got accepted, my nephew’s mother drew a cougar for me and I wanted it to be on me forever. My arm went from spelling my doom to being what makes me able to escape a future of violence for myself and a future in general for my brothers little boy.”

A silence crept into the small room, remaining unbroken for a few minutes until Chantel cleared her throat.

“My Dad protected his family his whole life ever since his Dad walked out on them one day when he was still in Elementary school. His sister always needed the most help. With her dad gone, she turned to bad man after bad man to fill the void he left and when the bad men didn’t fill the void anymore, she turned to the drugs that bad men would give her to stick around. When I was born my family was watching her become an addict and by the time we met, she was selling herself for her fix. When I was in Middle School, we were all having dinner when my Dad got a call from his brother saying my Aunt was on the corner. He took off to go get her, leaving my Mom at the sink with the dishes and the three of us at the table, the twins in the high chairs. Half an

hour later, the phone rang and my Mom burst into tears. My uncle had drugs in the car, enough to sell, and with a known prostitute in the car and Dad's narcotics charges on his arrest record, it was gonna be for life. Our court provided attorney took the worst public beating for the sake of a black man in Texas since the KKK ran the state's nightlife. We barely even get to see him once a year. Mom had to pick up a third job and I took over as the parent for my sister and brother. Every time I see a cop I wonder if we would have been treated the same way if the system wasn't ran with an old south mentality."

Mason wiped tears from his eyes and said "I can't imagine what it would be like to lose someone so close to you" he paused. "Then again, I can't imagine what it's like being close with your family. Our house kind of represents our relationship, not a whole lot of closeness. My Dad's a busy lawyer and my Mom's depressed because of it. My sister spends more time at her boyfriend or best friends house than she does here and I'm too different for my family to accept. I've never verbally said this before but, I'm gay. My family is very judgemental about people with less money, people with darker skin, or anyone who immigrated here, but because we're Christians they hate gays the most. I have to listen to my family make jokes about and demean gay people in public or on TV and it only makes me realize more and more that all I want more than anything in the world is something I'll never have because the people who should accept me couldn't be able to do it."

After enough time had passed to not disrespect Mason's confession, Diego turned to Lee and said "Your turn man. Finish off our pity party with your story."

“I ain’t really got a sob story to tell” Lee said. He looked down at the table and flicked his lighter on and off, focusing on the changes their conversation forced upon his idea of the world.

Diego hopped back in the car with Chantel. She beeped her horn and the pair waved at the two young men standing in the driveway.

“Sure I can’t drive you Lee” Mason asked. Lee detected concern on his voice.

“No thanks man. I’m really more of a walker. The bus will be at this stop soon.” He forced a smile and disappeared down the row of iron barred mansions.

Lee walked from the bus stop until he heard the familiar barking of massive dog. He put his hands on a rusted chain link fence and listened to the incessant metallic clinking while weeds from a disastrously unkempt lawn tickled his skin. Stones turned into gravel lined the messy pavement, littered with weeds poking through, dirtying his newly shined boots with each step. He unlocked the door and opened the screen to the sound of his father’s screaming.

“Where the hell have you been boy” his father asked

“School Dad. I told you”

“You didn’t tell me shit!” he shouted. “Trying to get CPS up here again I’ll bet. I’ll beat you with that boat paddle again boy, give them a real reason to come up here.”

“I’m eighteen Dad. They don’t help adults, no matter how fucked up their homelife is”

“Oh you’re an adult” his Dad snickered sarcastically. “Then what are you still doing at home where it’s so bad for you? Why don’t you go make something of your useless self?”

“What like you? Your only legacy is the assprint in that sofa. Trust me I’d love to get out of here but my fatass old man takes all my money to the liquor store and uses the rest to pay his corner girls!”

“I’m gonna kick your scrawny little ass boy!”

“Come and get it Dad”

His father tried to push himself up off the couch, but in his drunken state he slipped and stumbled. For the first time, Lee used his father’s clumsiness against him. He moved forward and slammed a hard knee into the man’s disfigured nose and watched as the colossus fell into a heap on the hardwood floor and shards of glass.

He closed himself in the bathroom once again and looked in the mirror. Without warning, he slammed a fist into the plate of metal and glass. Like a spiderweb, it crackled and slowly broke across the whole piece. A million small copies of himself stared back and looked him in his shame filled eyes. They fell one by one, each piece shattering into oblivion when they landed on the false tile floor. When the last piece of glass lost its grip, he fell with it, fainting. He woke up the next morning feeling alive, relieved, and changed.

“Don’t forget group three, you present on a moment that the themes of Power Privilege and Place changed you personally next class. Be ready to talk for twenty minutes. Class dismissed” Professor Aikman said.

The class bustled to life with the sound of packing bags and the frantic activity of the excitement of the weekend.

“Y’all still want to meet Sunday to go over the presentation one more time?” Lee asked.

“I’m down but my car’s in the shop. I can walk to campus but I’ll need a ride home.”

“And I got Mass on Sunday mornings. I can Uber to school from the church if Y’all don’t mind a bit of a wait.”

“Don’t do that. I’ll grab Lee first then we’ll meet you at the church and see Chantel on campus.” Mason said.

“Sounds good man. Let’s get this semester done.” Diego said with a smile as the four of them walked out of class together.

Sunday crept up on them quickly. Lee woke up to an “I’m here” text from Mason. It took five minute to shower the day before off of himself and another three to dress himself and get in the passenger seat of the car. The stained glass doors to the Cathedral opened just as the Mercedes parked on the opposite side of the road. Lee got out of the car and stood by the door, waiting for a sight of Diego. When they saw him and his family leave the church, Lee waved him over. He said goodbye to his family quickly before hustling across the busy street.

Lee shook diego’s hand with one hand and hugged him with the other. He opened the door for him before hopping into the backseat himself.

They were just a couple miles from school, in the middle of Third Ward when Mason asked frantically “was there just a stop sign?”

“No man, you’re good.” Diego said confidently.

“Then why are the cops pulling us over?” Mason asked again.

“Shit” Lee said. “Let’s just deal with this and get to campus.”

Mason pulled the car over and placed both hands on his steering wheel. Diego put his hands on the dashboard and Lee grabbed the driver's seat headrest with both hands.

"Out of the car! Now!"

Mason checked the side view mirror. "Shit! They've got their guns out!" he shouted.

The doors of the car popped open and the three young men piled out into the road. A white officer stepped forward and pulled the boys to the curb while another black officer began ripping through the vehicle. "I know it's here" he continued repeating every few seconds. "I know it's here."

"Where'd y'all hide it?" the officer standing by them asked.

"Hide what" Mason said. His tone conveying the panic on his face.

"They think we have drugs man" Diego said. "It's this part of town."

"We don't think you have drugs, we know you do. And we're pretty confident you're the one who sold it to them."

"Why? I'm brown?" Diego sounded like he hoped the cops would laugh.

The cop standing by them wandered over to the drivers side of the car and began ripping through the untouched side while the other ordered Mason to pop the trunk.

"We're going to campus man, I got my I.D in my pocket man. It's right here."

Diego slipped a finger into his back pocket when the world erupted in thunder. Three explosions sounded off. The first bullet tore a hole through his cougar, the other two stopped his heart before he hit the ground. Mason screamed and Lee ran over to Diego

only to look into the eyes of a soul whose life had been stolen. The cop searching the trunk stood facing them with a smoking gun aimed at the corpse. Inches from the body sat a black duct tape wallet, turned open to a student I.D card bearing the logo of the University of Houston's Cougar.

"Group Three was scheduled to present today. After our classes recent tragedy, however, I gave them the option of waiting until the last week in the semester. They decided that they would still present today." Professor Aikman said. He leaned his elbows against the podium while he addressed the class. A solemn sadness blanketed the class like a black mourning veil when the three members of group three took their place in the center of the floor.

"My name is Chantel Carter."

"I'm Lee Chase"

"Mason Czar." Mason waved to the class. They were met with thunderous applause from the rest of the room.

"We had a presentation prepared for you last week, but after Diego died" Chantel paused. "Well we believed we needed to make a few changes."

"Diego would have wanted this story to be grown from his death. He always wanted to serve a higher purpose and stand for something. With the opportunity to speak today, we will fulfill that wish for him." Mason said.

Lee stepped forward and took a deep breath. He shook with nervous energy and felt not butterflies, but hornets in his stomach, setting his insides ablaze. Chantel squeezed his shoulder.

“It’s okay.” she whispered “it’s not you anymore”. Lee nodded his head at the sound of her voice.

“When I walked into this class on the first day, I was a racist. My mother was killed in a hit and run attack at a stop and go while she filled up her car with gas. I was in a carseat in the back, less than a year old and unable to comprehend what loss meant. From that day forward, my father drilled it into me from the day I was born that the “White” in “Red White and Blue” was the most important color of the flag. I learned that white stood for purity, for class, for cleanliness. In turn, I learned that my city was filled with crime because of the minorities that kept bringing drugs into schools and raising the murder rates within city limits. I forgot words like “Latino” and “African American” and had them replaced with the worst kind of filth a human could utter at another.”

Lee stopped and glanced at the professor. “I hated that my class was taught by a Black man. I assumed I already knew more than him because I was white and he was not. I was disgusted at the idea of sharing a table with a Latino and a Black girl, having to listen to their cries of White Privilege and police brutality after my Mom was killed by people just like them. Then they made me realize I was the only thing I hated more than minorities and immigrants.” he dabbed his eyes. “I realized that I was my father’s hate. Not because that’s what I wanted to believe, but because I was too afraid to tell him he was wrong.”

“I came home that day after our first meeting and gazed at myself in the mirror for nearly a half and hour. Everything that I had learned to love about myself because it made me great, all of a sudden made me feel like death had already taken me. I fainted

on the bathroom floor and woke up the next morning feeling, for the first time, alive. I learned that the key to life was spread through love and that anger was only a path to sadness and death. Anger kept me from believing in change, from believing in unity. It kept me believing that any culture that could create diversity truly belonged here and the country benefited from them.” He heard Chantel dabbing at her nose with a fresh tissue handed to her by the professor while Mason stood stoically with a quivering lip.

“Diego’s life taught me something even more important. When I watched him die I learned that even when it is ingrained into every fiber of your being by every aspect of your life, it is always possible for hate to be replaced by love. All it takes is seeing the world through another set of eyes. But his death taught me something far more important. I learned that America isn’t the same for us all. While a field of white faces or the sight of blue uniform makes some rest easier, it only begins the hell for others. I realized that this idea that a white America is a right America needed to die when Diego did.”

Lee looked up to a shocked to silence classroom. His eyes darted all over, feeling the cold sting of judgement surrounding him. He jumped back in anxious terror when Professor Aikman cleared his throat.

“I’ve guided at risk teens away from the desire to commit murder and end up as another death row statistic. I’ve saved young men from siding with their neighborhood gang and young girls from carrying the children of men that were already full fledged members. I’ve supplied adrenaline shots that have saved addicts from the brink of death after an overdose and have talked down a boy holding a gun to his head and ready to pull the trigger. But I have never felt more fulfilled than I do now, knowing that this class,

this assignment and those three words; Power Privilege and Place, have stopped hatred from trickling down to your family's next generation. That's what is so beautiful about our city ladies and gentleman. We have the ability to not only witness our own lives but the lives of almost every culture in the world and how the rest of the world responds to it. We have the means to create the change America needs and it can start in the place where hatred was once the most severe."

Professor Aikman stepped forward and extended his hand. Without hesitation, Lee met and shook it fiercely before saying "Not just as your student, but as your fellow man, thank you for showing me that we can change."

When Professor Aikman dismissed class, each student filed out of the room focused on the idea that, on some level, they had all experienced a metamorphosis similar to Lee's that would lead to a more beautiful world in the years to come.

Reflection

Aesthetics

I tried to identify the "colors of Texas". I thought about what colors captured Texas, and more specifically Houston, accurately. I used a heavy amount of reds, whites and blues, describing sunsets, the endless blue sky and the white within the country club setting. Whites were used to detail the walls of places seen as discriminatory in the short story. Greens and yellows captured the outside scenes perfectly, with Texas' rains and periods of extreme heat that change the color of grass with the season. I used blacks to describe moments of servitude and what society deems as less desirable than others. The thematic component of certain colors

appearing in the same scene allowed the advancement of the plot from lighthearted happiness to tragedy and then to the moment of clarity.

Audience Purpose

The overall purpose of the piece after seeing its completion is threefold; to entertain, inspire, and provoke thought. As a creative writer, first and foremost is the importance of grasping the attention of the reader and keeping them interested and entertained by the story. The depth of the short story would be lost if it was not delivered in an entertaining fashion. The second goal of the piece is to inspire an idea for tolerance. We are all different. No one is exactly the same as another person, no matter how similar two people may look. This idea of modern tribalism and believing that common characteristics lead to a safer environment is one that should have been lost when we advanced past living in unprotected villages. Lastly, I'd like to know my piece provoked people to question whether or not they do discriminate against others and if so, why. The purpose of the piece is to point out how pointless and meaningless hate for hate's sake truly is.

Process

I made a lot of phone calls to my family still living in Houston to capture the real feeling of the Southern Metropolis. Because of the two million lives within the city and the fact that the city is different for each life in it, there are many different angles to develop and discuss to create the real feel of a Houstonian setting. Furthermore, I wished to establish and identify many problems plaguing the country and Houston both. Racial discrimination and homophobia play a huge roll in both our treatment of others in our everyday lives and the bonding of my characters within the story.

Thematic/Social/Historical Context

I found Houston to be the perfect setting for the class theme of “Power, Privilege, and Place” because of the areas of low, middle and high class and the demographics each area tends to contain. The River Oaks area leads to a far different life than the Third Ward area offers it’s residence. Because of such discrimination within the South, Houston also maintains an area that is predominantly populated by gay men. Because of all the places in Houston and the idea of Power and Privilege that separates them, I chose Houston because I couldn’t think of a more perfect setting for a story that examines these three themes.

Artistic Tradition and History

Aside from discovering the “colors of Texas”, I used the South’s notorious history of discrimination against minorities to also bring in the realism of the city. The South is rich with racist history. There are both goods and bads to this. The positive is that it will always be remembered, therefore it will never be possible to lose that era to time and see it repeat itself. The negative is that the brutal parts of that history are still idolized by some still living there. History is only doomed to repeat itself if it is allowed to be forgotten. This story, along with every other story pushing for change, will keep us remembering American History for what it was, not it’s romanticized story of always being the hero.

Synthesis Essay

The primary way I believe I contributed directly to the class was during the reading responses. There were so many chances to explain my opinions or strong feelings about one of our readings to those in our group just as I had a chance to understand differing opinions from mine. I accepted that growth could occur in this course and did not fight the ideas of letting previously undeveloped opinions I had about the world evolve into thoughts and ideas I now cherish. Through each conversation, I could tell everyone was willing to listen. No one believed they knew everything or had all the answers, everyone accepted the fact that we are all clueless on a solution for society because we don't even have solutions for our own selves. The admittance of not knowing where to go from the current state of things in the world was eye opening because it allowed for suggestions to be built upon and an overall idea for why power was so important to begin with

When we were doing the work to create the class presentation over crime statistics within Monterey county, the most difficult aspect to work around was the overall busyness of our senior semester schedules. When we realized time to meet would be limited, we adapted and ended up learning how to work very well through a group chat and two shared documents; one powerpoint and one word document where thoughts were organized and shared in regards to other aspects the presentation needed to be closer to completion. The Powerpoint was initially created by myself and I chose four cities within the Monterey county to discuss. Once Salinas, Marina, Monterey, and Carmel were all chosen by the group members, we each worked respectively on our own cities. I gathered much information on the inner workings of the

Salinas crime prevention methods as well as the repairing of the relationship between citizens and police. I learned that in communities with lower income and minority citizens there is a fear in calling the police because of the discrimination it can bring, not only from law enforcement but from gangs within the same community. Finally, when the stars aligned and we were able to meet, we agreed on a time in the library and worked for two and half hours to finish up our presentation as well as learned about each other and how our own lives were affected by the class theme as well. When we presented I learned so much not only from my fellow presenters, but from the class sharing their stories of discrimination and bias they have faced in their lives.

Throughout the class, we taught each other, and learned from each other, that privilege and place have a lot to do with power and who holds it. We also learned the many ways discrimination can affect an individual, especially if discrimination is the only thing that individual has faced. Each group's presentation explored further the ways that our world is genuinely unfair to certain groups simply because they desire the same way of live as those discriminating against them. Most importantly, we taught each other that America for myself is far different than the America of the man or woman filling the chair next to me. Because of these lessons, my senior project focused on not what America desired to stand for globally but what it stands for to each individual American. This country is truly great, but just like everything else, it is far from perfect. While the Stars and Stripes can be proudly displayed in someone's front yard, someone else will blame the stripes on their prison uniform on America's greatest flaws. I did not focus on America's historical heroism in times of war, nor America's progress to become the land

of opportunity, but the opportunities taken away from my characters because of the power the negative aspects of our history have over the country still today.

My paper paralleled the theme of the Capstone classes “Power Privilege and Place” by having that be the theme of the Freshman history class each of my four characters step into on their first day. When the theme was introduced and I was thinking about how best to convey it with my story, I initially just wanted it to take place in Texas. Because I was born in Houston, and Houston does have nearly every demographic in the world populating the city of two million as well as the history of racism, I chose it to represent the idea of place. The power in my story are the old world ideas that still exist all over America but are thought to heavily belong in the South. I wanted power to represent the hatred and racism that needed to be tossed aside for the sake of humanity. Lastly, I wanted to challenge and contort the idea of privilege. It is thought that money and status solve many problems that will constantly plague people of the lower classes, but struggle is hard no matter how padded a bank account it. One of my characters lives in a mansion, but is forced to hide his true self from his parents because they are extremely homophobic. I wanted to put forth an idea that skin color, homosexuality, gender, intelligence, wealth, or age are all reasons for discrimination but the need for oppression and dominance has been our true enemy from the start.