

UNIVERSITY INTERSCHOLASTIC LEAGUE

READY WRITING CONTEST

HIGH SCHOOL TOPICS

STATE • 2022

Read both of the following statements carefully; then write an expository essay on a topic clearly related to one or the other of the two statements. **Provide your own title.** You are not expected to write on both topics.

Contestants who are hand-writing their compositions must use their own standard 8 1/2 x 11-inch ruled white notebook paper or typing paper, or the paper provided by the host school. Contestants shall write or print the composition **in ink and on only one side of the paper.** If contestants choose to use their own laptop computers, they must bring portable printers and associated hardware, software and paper. The typed entry must be single-sided and double-spaced, using any standard 12-point font on 8 1/2 x 11-inch white paper. When printing the contest on an electronic printer, the print command must be started by the time contest time expires. Students who opt to compose their entries on computers accept the risk of computer malfunction. In case of computer malfunction, the contestant may use the remaining allotted time to complete the composition in handwriting or compose on another computer (if available).

Ready Writing prompts are provided as springboards for thought, not to advocate particular points of view. Contestants should not conclude that quotations or statements used in prompts reflect the opinion of the UIL.

Topic I

America is broken. You don't need a fistful of statistics to know this. You just need eyes and ears and stories. Walk around any American city and evidence of the shattered compact with citizens will present itself. There you will see broken roads, overloaded schools, police forces on edge, clusters and sometimes whole tent cities of homeless people camped in eyeshot of shopping districts that are beginning to resemble ramparts of wealth rather than stores for all. Thick glass windows and security guards stand between aspirational goods and the people outside in Portland, Oregon; in San Francisco; in Seattle; in Los Angeles; New York; and Miami. The soaring cost of living in these cities—which have become meccas for luxury and creative economy work, but depend on service labor to run their dream machines—has a lot to do with this state of affairs. Adjusting for rent and costs, the middle-class residents of these cities now have the lowest real earnings of any metropolitan area. And across the nation at large, America's top 10 percent earns nine times as much as the bottom 90 percent.

This is not just an urban problem. In smaller cities and towns and in rural America the gulf between the haves and the have-nots stretches just as wide, even if its symptoms are not visible. California might be home to more than one hundred billionaires—whose collected assets dwarf the GDP of most nations in the world—but nearly a quarter of the state is poor. The jobs that were once done by hand are increasingly done by machine. Appalachia, upstate New York, Michigan—inequality stretches to almost unthinkable gulfs there too. No matter how much one hears of recovery and new jobs, what those jobs are and what they promise tend to get left out. These jobs are often short-shift work, work without benefits, work so temporary it has created a new term: the *precariat*.*

Financial inequality is not just a symptom of bad public policy, though, or something that has emerged only in tandem with the forces of recent elections. It was formed by decades of injustice and structural inequality in America produced by the nation's growth on the back of stolen labor, the failure of

Reconstruction, the entrenchment of racial bias in the culture, restrictions on immigration and the way immigration law is enforced, the long aftermath of the war on drugs, sexism, gender imbalances, and the complicity of financial services in preying upon populations afflicted by these inequalities with predatory loaning. We also haven't introduced progressive taxation in decades. Whatever benefits the once-robust welfare state ensured have been all but demolished by this deeply enmeshed system of inequality, putting far more at risk than just upward mobility. It has put people's bodies at risk.

The way systems of oppression have entrenched themselves in the United States calls out for a new framework for writing about inequality. We need to look beyond statistics and numbers and wage rates. We need to create a framework that accounts for what it feels like to live in this America, a framework that can give space to the stories that reveal how many forces outside of wages lead to income inequality, which is a symptom of a network of inequalities.

It might sound trite—the notion that the solution to our problems in America lies *between us, not above us*, and not in the governments that have let us down. Perhaps, but all one has to do is get stuck overnight at an airport, as Julia Alvarez did on her way home to Vermont one night, to realize that the thin boundaries between people can easily be broken down by one shared experience. Alvarez watches as people of all colors and backgrounds help one another find places to sleep, blankets to wrap themselves in, food to eat. In America today we have come to view inequality as a problem that afflicts only the needy. What a mistake. For it is in the sharing that we can alleviate a situation that pains all of us.

--John Freeman, Ed., American
Writer/Critic, *Tales of Two Americas*,
2017, b. 1974

**precariat-people whose employment and income are insecure, especially when considered as a class.*

Topic II

The times we live in are indeed alarming. It is a time of the most appalling escalation of violence—violence to the environment, both “nature” and “culture”; violence to all living beings. A time in which an ideology of exterminism, institutionalized in the nuclear arms race, has gained increasing credence—threatening life itself. It is also a time of a vertiginous drop in cultural standards, of virulent anti-intellectualism, and of triumphant mediocrity—a mediocrity that characterizes the educational system that you have just passed through, or has passed you through (for all the efforts and good will of many of your teachers). Trivializing standards, using as their justification the ideal of democracy, have made the very idea of a serious humanist education virtually unintelligible to most people. A vast system of mental lobotomization has been put into operation that sets the standards to which all accede. (I am speaking, of course, of American television.)

The best critical impulses in our society—such as that which has given rise to feminist consciousness—are under vicious attack. An increasing propaganda for conformism in morals and in art instructs us that originality and individuality will always be defeated, and simply do not pay. There is a strengthening of the power of censors within and without. The constraints which govern us in this society have little in common with the grim normalcy of totalitarian societies. Our society does not censor as totalitarian societies do; on the contrary, our society promises liberty, self-fulfillment, and self-expression.

But many features of our so-called culture have as their goal and result the reduction of our mental life, or our mental operation; and this is precisely, I would argue, what censorship is about. Censorship does not exist in order to keep secrets. The secrets that censors target are usually open secrets. Censorship is a formal principle. It has no predetermined subject. It exists in order to promote and defend power against the challenge of individuality. It exists in order to maintain optimism.

If your liberal arts education has meant anything, it has given you some notions of a critical opposition to the way things are (and are generally defined—for example, for you as women.) This attitude of opposition is not justified as a strategy, as a means to an end, a way of changing the world. It is, rather, the best way of being in the world.

The liberal arts education you have received is not a luxury, as some of you may think, but a necessity- and more. For there is an intrinsic connection between a liberal arts education, by which I mean an education in the traditions and methods of “high” culture, and the very existence of liberty. Liberty means the right to diversity, to difference; the right to difficulty. It is the study of history and philosophy- it’s the love of arts, in all the non-linear complexity of their traditions- that teaches us that.

Perhaps the most useful suggestion I can make on the day when most of you are ceasing to be students, is that you go on being students- for the rest of your lives. Don’t move to a mental slum.

If you go on being students, if you do not consider you have graduated and that your schooling is done, perhaps you can at least save yourselves and thereby make a space for others, in which they too can resist the pressures to conformity, the public drone and the inner and outer censors- such as those who tell you that you belong to a “post-feminist generation.”

There are other counsels that might be useful. But if I had to restrict myself to just one, I would want to praise the virtue of obstinacy. (This is something anyone who is a writer knows a good deal about: for without obstinacy, or stubbornness, or tenacity, or pigheadedness, nothing gets written.) For whatever you want to do, if it has any quality or distinction or creativity- or, as women, if it defies sexual stereotypes- you can be sure that most people and many institutions will be devoted to encouraging you not to do it. If you want to do creative work -- if you want, even though women, to lead unservile lives -- there will be many obstacles. And you will have many excuses. These do not mitigate the failure. “Whatever prevents you from doing your work,” a writer once observed, “has become your work.”

All counsels of courage usually contain, at the end, a counsel of prudence. In Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*, Book III, there is a place called the Castle of Busyrane, on whose outer gate is written BE BOLD, and on the second gate, BE BOLD, BE BOLD, and on the inner iron door, BE NOT TOO BOLD.

This is not the advice I am giving. I would urge you to be as imprudent as you dare. BE BOLD, BE BOLD, BE BOLD. Keep on reading. (Poetry. And novels from 1700 to 1940.) Lay off the television. And, remember when you hear yourself saying one day that you don’t have time any more to read- or listen to music, or look at a painting, or go to the movies, or do whatever feeds your head now- then you’re getting old. That means they got to you, after all.

--Susan Sontag (1933-2004), American
Writer, Commencement Speech, 1983

The Land of the "Free"

What was once the home of the free, the melting pot of the world, and the place credited with the motto "the American Dream" has now become the land of the privileged, the white, and the patriarchy. John Freeman, notable writer and critic, put this frustration into words when he wrote simply that, "America is broken". The recent attack on women, rise in the cost of living, and continued racial disparities has sent the nation right back to its humble beginning. Rather than progress it seems that for every step forward, the country takes two steps back.

The recent leak of a draft that would overturn the Supreme Court ruling, Roe v. Wade has taken the nation by storm; however, the event did not take the American people by surprise. Civil rights, specifically women's civil rights and liberties have been in jeopardy for almost a four decades now. In fact, in Freeman's book, *Tales of Two Americas*, which was published in the early 1970s, admits that there is a war on women, " this system on inequality, puts far more at risk than just upward mobility. It puts people's bodies at risk". Bodies, women's bodies are at risk because of the disgusting state that our government and country is in. The Supreme Court should reflect the views of its citizens, but this is not the case. Over 70% of Americans support safe, accessible abortions, and yet the power of bodily autonomy continues to be at risk. For women that is. America is and has always been a place where the patriarchy thrives, where the wealthy congressman's mistress has access to an abortion. Where a middle-class, single mother of three will die because of a forced pregnancy.

The commonly held assumption that one can rise from "rags to riches" is outdated and implausible. Inflation, a global recession, and not to mention an outbreak that lasted over two years, taking the lives of thousands, caused the cost of living to skyrocket. Financial inequality has always been an issue for the bottom 90% even before the rise and fall of Covid-19. To put this issue in perspective you must acknowledge that in the status quo America's highest 10% of earners make nine times as much as the bottom 90%. This statistic alone is triggering, as hundreds of thousands of people live below the poverty line while Elon Musk bathes daily in a pool of Benjamins. Many argue that those living in poverty put themselves there, "They are lazy, they do not want to work". This idea that in America you must work diligently, and you will be rewarded does not take into account the blueprint of systematic racism and gender inequality that our country was built upon.

"The way systems of oppression have entrenched themselves in the United States calls out for a new framework", writes John Freeman. It is one thing to talk about racial inequality is another to put a foot down and

change the way in which the nation operates. In this century alone we have witnessed the inauguration of the first African American President, we have watched the first African American women be elected to the Supreme Court and we have seen the first African American women serve as Vice President. We have come so far, but the fight is not over yet. African American men continued to be killed at higher rates than their white counterparts, while African American women struggle daily for equitable access to healthcare. The arms of oppression reach even further, into the hands of immigration law. We can no longer continue to watch mothers, fathers, and children die under the supervision of boarder control. Those sworn to uphold national security and protect our constituents are tarnishing the country's reputation. The controversial events taking place at our nation's borders are not upheld in the framework of our constitution. Bound to our country is the idea that all men are free, that civil and social liberties will be upheld under any circumstance but, America is broken.

To truly be the land of the free we must first be the land of equality. We must vow to fix systemic issues. We must hold our government leaders to the same standard that we hold our friends to. We must admit our defeats so that we can once again succeed as a country, as a society, and as the human race.

When You Give Us a Pen

The foundations of our culture shake with the rage of some long-forgotten God. The bricks, once laid delicately, with purpose and passion, are disregarded and left to crumble in the sands of time. The building that once stood as a monument to progress, to passion and to freedom, now stands stagnant like a dying language. The first strike of the wrecking ball is shocking, freezes the onlookers in their steps as they watch their memories fall to the ground, and for a moment it is as though their hearts die as well. As the second strike comes around, however, they allow themselves to fall into the steady staccato rhythm and smile, walking away with perhaps a bit of wreckage for memento, for if the building can no longer stand on its own, those who loved it will stand for it. Its beauty no longer shines like the rising sun, but it was never the bricks that encapsulated passion, never the building that brought such joy, but what it stood for. The power of the pen, the beauty of art, is never lost on the artist, and will be carried on despite the efforts of a dull generation.

Time does not discriminate by worth, and even the beloved and memorable will crumble. The powerful, grand physical representation of someone's culminating purpose falls as sand and rock to an unforgiving Earth. The erosion of our culture has allowed art to become unappreciated for the powerful weapon it is, but history stands to prove its value. The bloodiest war America has ever seen and also the grandest test to our foundational belief of freedom is testament of this. Harriet Beecher Stowe, referred to by Abraham Lincoln as "the little woman who started this big war" is credited as the catalyst for the Civil War with her novel *Uncle Tom 's Cabin*. This biographical work detailed the grueling, true life of a slave in morbid detail. The North had previously been blessedly ignorant of the true horrors of slavery, but the power of the pen to allow one to step into the shoes of another despite their differences sparked in them such a passion for humanity that outrage spread across the North. The bloodiest war America has ever seen. The beginnings of freedom regardless of skin color, can all be credited not to a politician, a millionaire, or a warrior, but a book. There is magic within the pages of a great novel, The magic that allows one to empathize on a level we never could before and truly connect with our fellow man. This country was built on art, and as our very foundations crumble and crack, the facts remain that the magic is still there waiting to be grasped.

The walls fall with an astounding crash, and the building crumbles in place for something new, something needed, but the efforts to demolish a crumbling building, to diminish a supposedly "forgotten art," mean nothing as bricks and stone never made a memory. Artists hold to their passion despite the prevailing culture's disregard of its beauty, as can clearly be seen in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet "To George Sand." This sonnet, in typical Browning fashion, fervently praises the talents of a fellow female poet who goes under the pen name, George Sand. In this poem, Browning curses "the applauded circus" for its disregard of Sand's poetry and says with great conviction that if Sand were to receive the praise she deserved, angel wings would sprout from her back and Jesus and Mary would kiss her face. Sand's work was ridiculed in its time, but Browning saw its true worth and beauty beyond physicality. While the monument itself was crumbling, Browning took it upon herself to ensure it was not forgotten and carried it forward in the only way she knew how, extremely hyperbolic praise as a beautiful representation of how one artist recognizes the skill of another and refuses to let it die even as the "applauded circus" praises its lions, tigers, and bears. In a culture fixated on doing what pays, on advancement in weaponry and physical strength, we don't take into the account the absolutely fundamental importance of the arts. We destroy groundbreaking work for what creates the most profit, but the efforts of the builder are never forgotten on those who took shelter under its roof.

The foundational structure of every society is balanced on the arts. Though the walls cave in and the ceiling may fall until all that's left is dust, if we lose the memory of what once was there, we lose a foundational part of who we are. The expressions of our heart's deepest cries, connections to our predecessors and fellow man are all lost, civilization is lost, if we lose the arts. Khaled al-Asaad, an 80-year-old museum director throughout the Syrian Civil War, recognized this and as ISIS invaded his home country, destroying thousands of years of progress and culture in moments, he smuggled several special artifacts away from the destructive hands of ISIS. His reward for this bravery in the preservation of his culture was beheading followed by being publicly hung from a light pole with a sign reading "Director of Idolatry," as ISIS saw the art and artifacts of the museums as a disrespect to their own religious beliefs. Khaled al-Asaad lost his life violently due to his unrelenting passion for the arts because he knew if they lost what had made them who they are, they would lose themselves entirely. Those covering this story said that while the beginnings of civilization are almost indecipherable from the many opinions of historians, what makes civilization becomes clear in the absolute lack of it. Writers and art lovers around the world heard and shared this story and while Khaled al-Asaad's death is irreversible, he will never be forgotten as what he stood for

and what he was willing to sacrifice is the very heart of an artist, the very foundations of civilization that no weathering or erosion can truly take away.

Nothing is built to last, and every building will eventually fall, but in the conscious effort to destroy something upon which entire belief systems are built, something inside of us becomes aware to the active assault against our society. As the heavy booms of falling debris, of our fallen culture, fill our ears and the rank odor of ashes fill our nostrils it is not what we have lost physically that draws the warm tracks of tears down our faces, but it is the realization that civilization is not a given, and we have a responsibility to carry it on. The arts, the foundations of our cultures, igniters of our passions and reflections of who we are as people, are absolutely crucial to our survival. The erosion of our culture and turbulence of the current times has no power like what we can achieve when you give us a pen.

If Bridges Could Speak

Falling is suspended illusion. For my brother, as he jumped from a bridge onto highway 360 in Arlington, Texas, that illusion must have seemed an eternity. Too often I have wondered what thoughts raced through his mind as he fell, what sensations he had as the wind rushed through his thinning hair and he heard the sound of his tainted blood pounding in his ears, and what grief his bruised and battered heart was capable of feeling. Perhaps the only volitional act he had time for was to look up and behold the looming Dallas skyline, a city of gods amidst a decaying world, tall and remote in its dreadful glory. My wishful thinking leads me to believe he felt regret in that fateful three seconds, that he thought of his family and his God as he rushed towards the highway, towards the thousands of people being swept along in the tide of their ignorance. But perhaps the crystal meth rolled onward through his blood, and all thoughts were drowned in its course.

His story is but one of many. Countless Americans have been led on their decadent path to sorrow and ruin, not necessarily by drugs, but by the broken systems they helplessly try to survive in. For years my brother lived on the margins of a society that rejected and misunderstood him. His scarlet letter "A" was the sores on his arms and the scars on his wrists, taken as proof by a presumptive society that he must have disbelieved in the glorious and infallible American Dream. But a ten-minute walk through the crumbling streets of any major city is evidence that dreams and hopes are not in short supply. Be they drug addicts, immigrants, single mothers, ex-felons, or simply people weary of the constant uphill struggle, the difficult truth is that the destitute citizens of this country are not ignorant of its dream, but rather it as a nation is ignorant of theirs.

Just as the speeding cars continued onward under the overpass, not heeding the sickly man leaning over the rail as he peered downward at his distant doom, so do we as a society race down the highways of our ignorance, not noticing for a moment the broken souls all around us. History forgotten and humanity ignored, wealth and status fly along the interstates, traveling shamelessly from one degenerate city to the next, not bothering to slow down for the gentle cries of those left behind. But this exile forced upon the margins of society is more than just economic. Fernando Pessoa, the tortured yet brilliant hero of Portuguese literature, said in his collection *The Book of Disquiet*, "After all, what am I when I'm not playing? A poor orphan, abandoned on the Street of

Sensations, shivering with cold on the windy corners of Reality, having to sleep of the Steps of Sadness and eat the bread provided by Fantasy... I look up and see the stars in all their meaninglessness... And all that remains is me, a poor abandoned child, whom no Love wanted as an adopted son, and no Friendship chose as a playmate."

Pessoa's sorrowful reflections display a different facet of the exile of human souls created by cruel systems, an exile that does not merely restrain people economically or socially but attacks their very individuality. Pessoa, in his loneliness that he describes all throughout *The Book of Disquiet*, has defined himself by what his life was made to be. And just like Pessoa, countless others feel the same degradation in the continually renewed rejection of institutionalized America.

Living proof of the importance of individuality is in downtown Fort Worth, Texas, just a few blocks from 1-20, where there is a plain brick building, standing one story above the ruined houses of the city's poorest district and accessed by the cracked and neglected pavement of Hattie Street. The building is called Beautiful Feet, and it's a homeless shelter, serving the needs of the forgotten population of the city, giving them food and clothing. For ten years I have been blessed enough to be able to serve every month at this establishment, primarily assessing the clothing needs of those who come through the doors and going to the donations closet to find them whatever I can. Sadly, not a month goes by when I can even come close to alleviating the dire needs of all who come for aid, and countless sets of weary feet have left wearing the same torn and useless shoes they came in. Despite the depressing circumstances Beautiful Feet is constantly reminded of, there is more joy in that crumbling building than anywhere else I have ever experienced. But it is not just food and clothing that is given there, but *humanity*. After serving there for a decade, I have realized that humanity is the most valuable currency distributed there, humanity which is given to the forgotten wanderers of a wealthy city. The same soul that has left the doors without adequate shoes has also been reinvigorated by being seen, by being given the priceless and essential dignity of being a person. The walls of Beautiful Feet can give evidence to this invaluable exchange of human emotion.

And indeed, the phrase "if only these walls could speak" is powerful and inspiring. But I have more often wondered what we could learn if bridges could speak. My brother, though he attempted suicide, did not die. Instead, the first cars that came upon him parked themselves perpendicular to the flow of traffic, forming a barricade around his helpless form so that the racing cars of the highway would not kill his already threatened life. The bridge saw everything. It saw him restlessly fret for hours over his fateful decision; it saw him glance

tearfully at the cruel slashes on his wrist; it saw him stand on the railing, preparing himself for three and a half seconds of suspended illusion; and at last, it saw the incredible sacrifices of compassionate people, putting their own lives at risk to save the broken man laying before them. But perhaps that bridge also witnessed the newlyweds stop to look out at the beautiful skyline in the moonlight, sharing an embrace in the moonlight; perhaps it saw the young boy holding the hand of his father as they walked to the park, or the homeless man in his worn-out shoes, humming a song he heard at church that day, and smiling because a young girl shook his hand.

The highways of life are swiftly traveled. It is dangerously comfortable to allow the current of ignorance to carry us onward towards the next city, passing over the lines of broken streets and the lines on people's faces. But it is the charge of a free society and the responsibility of a human soul to have the courage to form a bridge between who we are and who we cannot forget. My brother is alive right now because a few precious souls chose to halt the brisk continuation of their lives. Now, every time I see a bridge, I think not only of the tragedy of my brother's attempted suicide, but also of the incredible human compassion it witnessed. It gives me hope to think about what we as a society could become, if only we listened to the bridges of our busy lives.

The Price of a Life

Logic would reason that if something is broken, it should be fixed. Ideally, parts would be replaced, gears would be oiled, and surfaces waxed, leaving it better than ever before, but America has taken a different approach when it comes to its problems. Our country often does not bother to even put the pieces back together, much less make sure that everything is as it should be. Instead, it sticks bandages over each crack and imperfection, until nothing else can be seen but all of its failures in acknowledging the problems that run deeper than the surface. America has failed. It has failed everyone. Everyone but the rich. Billionaires and millionaires spend their days jetting off to foreign countries to dine in Michelin star restaurants with equally rich colleagues while the people at the bottom wonder if they will be able to put food on the table that night while sitting in their one-bedroom apartment that houses three generations of family. Financial inequality was not born overnight, but rather over decades of racial and immigration-based discrimination that the poor pay for with their lives.

America has always had a hatred for poor minorities and a big love for money. In the mid-to-late twentieth century, the redlining practice was rampant all over the nation. Racism was as American as apple pie, and people of color were not welcomed in communities that others wanted to keep uniformly Caucasian. Those red lines were prison bars that separated people of color from white people, allowing white Americans to build a home and generational wealth, while minorities were given leftovers from a hand that did not want to feed them in the first place. It spread like a disease, and the effects still shake America every day—now more than ever—with coughs and sneezes that rattle all poor communities. The rich got richer, while the poor stayed poor, and now, the rich see poor communities as an eyesore. They see low socioeconomic areas as lands of opportunity that are just waiting to be beautified. But no one ever tells the lower class that beauty can be a devil in disguise. When mom-and-pop shops get replaced by supermarket chains, local parks become business centers, and mansions replace shambled homes, the poor have lost, and the rich have won. Gentrification makes the cost of living soar, and people living in these areas lose their homes to people that have dollar signs as pupils. And they can't do a single thing about it. In our nation—in our world—money is power. Poor people don't get a voice. The ones who aren't in need do. And so, the poor, the working class, and now even the middle class at times, are left clutching each other in fear, hoping that they won't be the next ones to lose it all to the sharks swimming in their pond.

The country was built on the backs of people who weren't wanted here in the first place. And it still is. White supremacy filled the veins of a large majority of white Americans throughout most of history predating the late 1900s. They bled hatred with hearts branded by malice and venom on the tips of their tongues that spouted racial slurs that their biased minds came up with. In recent years, specifically, it has been the silent population that has been on the receiving end of hate in the "Land of the Free": undocumented immigrants. Most come here out of necessity with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the shoes on their feet. They build everything from the ground up to give their children four walls to make a home and food to give them the energy to do what their parents never could. These immigrants are often confined to the tedious task of agricultural work, burning under the hot sun for twelve-hour days only to make below minimum wage. They live in poverty for generations upon generations until someone finally has a breakthrough. But the agricultural community is dying. Big corporations are building businesses on land that once fed people. They're making jobs, yet simultaneously taking them away. And undocumented immigrants will suffer for it. I know it because my father is one of them. He tells me that he can find work elsewhere once it happens to his employer, but I can see the silent fear in his eyes. Few people want to employ those who don't have the documents that people like my father only dream of having. 26 years of living and working the land that produces the food that keeps the rich full can't make people like him citizens—it can't give them other job opportunities. It can't give the money they came here for. It won't make them billionaires. This "land of opportunity" won't make them the next Elon Musk because that opportunity is a myth unless you were born with privileges that most minority groups do not have and may never will. Wealth and financial stability are derived from opportunities that are the fruits of privilege. Without one, you cannot have the other, especially in America.

There is a consequence to being poor. Of course, there is constant food insecurity, less educational opportunities, and little to no money to find joy. But this consequence is even greater than that. It is the one that takes the light from people's eyes and tears their hearts out of their bodies before old age can even begin to creep up on them. Suicide rates disproportionately affect the poor and minorities. That is not to say that the rich do not have their own battles with mental health but being in one of these rates increases the risks severely. Poverty welcomes in the unwanted guest that is instable finances that linger in every crack and corner of the house in the unpaid bills on the counter and the loans that have yet to be repaid. It all grows and festers until it is all-consuming, making them blind to the light at the end of the tunnel. It becomes everything, and they become nothing. They don't even have access to proper mental health services that would give them the treatment they need because America seems to

thrive on making people pay for things they can't afford but require, especially when medically necessary. One would think that billionaires, such as Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg, would jump to help such people by donating to causes that would cut the prevalence of these issues in half. But they don't. They spend their money going to space and creating flame thrower companies that benefit no one, and only exist to satisfy themselves. They are often so out of touch with reality, that they do not realize the canyon that financial inequality has become. Until people who do not face the struggles of poverty and constant financial instability do not open their eyes, they will remain blind to the true reality of the world, while the poor take their own ability to see everything they could have become if it weren't for the money they didn't have.

We are made to think that the government is there to support us—to protect us. Really, it is only there to protect the people that get to have a say in politics—the rich. They have mouths to speak but their money speaks louder. Propositions to raise the federal minimum wage have been shut down, and political leaders cannot seem to care. The cost of living has raised, but the federal minimum wage hasn't. It's been the same for the last 50 years, if not more. It has been left in the hands of the community members to do what they can to keep people on their feet instead of in graves that bloom in relief of being set free from the chains of a money-driven world. In a developed country, there should not be people struggling as much as they are. There is no reason that people should have to resort to working three minimum-wage jobs just to keep themselves alive. At that point, they have become the living dead. Awake, but not truly living—killed by the need for money they do not have and cannot get. And only living out of not wanting to die. Poor people live without much, but come together to give themselves everything the government won't.

The quality of life in a country should not be defined by the power it holds, nor the amount of territory it controls. It should be defined by the way even the poorest of the poor live, and how big the gap is between the rich and the poor. Power is superficial. America may look good on paper: "guaranteed" rights, technologically advanced, and a patchwork of cultures that add to its diverseness. But superficial appearances don't mean a thing, especially when there are people who are afraid they'll have to skip dinner for the third day in a row, while Jeff Bezos flies off into space for the fun of it. There are cracks lingering beneath the surface of our country, and they have made their way to the top. America is broken, and it has been for a long time. Our own country has put a price on every one of our lives, and in the end, the poor—minorities especially—will be the ones who pay the most for simply existing in a world that caters to the ones who aren't drowning in all the ways they have been let down.

Shut Up and Listen

The root of all inequality is misunderstanding---both deliberate and unconscious. When a person closes their heart to the struggles of a friend, their friendship is destroyed by belittlement, unsolicited advice, and judgement. When a nation closes its ears to the pleas of its people, distrust festers in the very seams of its constitution. This distrust is like a malicious weed. Running beneath the nation's sidewalks, the weed sucks hope from the bare, battered feet of the weary, its roots tearing open the concrete and shattering it beyond use. The antidote is not violence. Weeds spring up again, no matter how carefully they are cut down. The solution, then, is to plant roses instead. Allow their graceful blooms to choke out the weeds until beauty can overtake malice. Temper discrimination with empathy; remedy distrust with openness. You see, the key to breaking down barriers put in place by systems of inequality is to listen to the stories of the marginalized with alert ears and a willing heart. Giving voice to the voiceless is the first step in achieving liberty for all.

Such is the founding principle of restorative justice: to heal broken community bonds through positive action rather than to senselessly punish. A justice system whose sole mission is to strike down and demoralize the offender is inherently an opponent to true justice. True justice is nonviolent, seeking to rehabilitate the offender for the purpose of improving the nation rather than upholding the status quo. In doing so, it subverts the prejudices and mistakes made by the current penal system that punishes black and impoverished citizens at disproportional rates in comparison to wealthy white citizens committing crimes of the same caliber. Such people rarely have the platform to defend themselves or the resources to amend their choices; therefore, it is the responsibility of the privileged to give them the equal chance at life that they deserve. The lawyers featured in the book *Just Mercy* (as well as the movie by the same name) formed a non-profit devoted to providing legal counsel to black men on death row unfairly convicted. Their stories are similar: a lack of a good lawyer, the mishandling of evidence, or a false conviction from a biased court. The lawyers return agency to men so long deprived of it, giving them a platform for fair representation. These lawyers are believers in true justice. False justice deprives men of their humanity, their voices, and their freedom to amend their lives. True justice, by contrast, upholds the truth by allowing the downtrodden to speak and be heard.

Indeed, one way to make liberty heard is through a voice in a courtroom; however, voices can be expressed in all aspects of American culture. The voice of the artist is a powerful one, for no other profession can transform the

issues of the world into such a tangible, accessible platform for change. The outcast artist, sick of being ignored, puts paintbrush to paper in the hopes that this time, people will listen. The artist, like contemporary painter Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, transforms their story into a vehicle for change. Raised on a reservation, Smith's multimedia work *Trade (Gifts for Trading Land with White People)* expresses the bleak realities of reservation life alongside a tongue-in-cheek criticism of European inquisition on Native Americans. The Native people were offered nearly worthless goods in exchange for their land. *Trade*, in turn, presents commodified Native culture in the form of Cleveland Indians hats, Red Man tobacco, and toy tomahawks strung above newspaper clippings of reservation life, forcing its viewers to hear its ironic question: You took our land in exchange for trinkets ... Why don't you give it back for the same price? Through art, righteous discontent is given a voice. Art is raw. It is the human soul laid bare, and thus, the most honest mode of communication to exist. It deconstructs preconceived notions of reality, promoting empathy from all who allow themselves to be molded by its influence. Art, then, is key to breaking down societal barriers between groups, ideals, and individuals. It cuts straight through all prejudice and speaks directly to one's soul.

No one understands the impact of using one's voice to deconstruct biases better than Ashley-Baccus Clark, a cellular biologist turned storyteller. Discouraged by five years of being the only woman of color in her biology lab at UC Berkeley, Clark found her calling in carving out a place in the world for black female scientists, a home where their identities would not only be validated, but celebrated. Mirroring the importance of intersectionality in American culture through the intersection of technology, narrative, and visual art, Clark created *Neurospeculative Afrofeminism*, a Virtual Reality video installation featuring speculative inventions that showcase what inclusion in technology should look like. Her products include: a sunscreen made for dark skin tones, an electrode cap specialized for a kinky, curly hair texture, and earrings that record audio and visual in hostile situations. Our world often leaves women of color on the sidelines of progress, simply because no one is listening. Medical advances are targeted at white males, and even some automated bathroom faucets are programmed to sense only lighter skin tones. Through her installation, Ashley Baccus-Clark gives a voice to one of the most marginalized groups in America, shoving them to the forefront of innovation. She knows the unfortunate truth of our apathetic nation: When no one is listening, you must make yourself heard.

It is a fact that the gift to listen is the greatest treasure humanity possess. Yet, like any talent, it must be nurtured and engaged daily to stay a fine-tuned instrument for change. All unjust societal institutions are first

uprooted when called into question by the people they benefit. But to begin to question the legitimacy of such an institution requires an understanding of the tremendous plight of the people it does not benefit. This is where listening comes into play. Too often, our society snatches the breath from the lungs of the marginalized. Too often, their voices are drowned out in a cacophony of noise, noise, noise. Opinions blare into our ears from every front: social media platforms, news outlets, radio stations, and politicians. Thus, for change to occur, a careful ear must be lent to those lost American voices weeping at Liberty's feet.

Hear that? That slight, persistent rumble? That burgeoning tremor in the earth?

That is the sound of change. The sound of triumph.

Hear that? It just got a little louder.

When Inequality is a Commonality

The preamble to the Constitution promises that the United States government will work, tirelessly, continuously, to form a more perfect union. It does not swear to be exactly perfect, nor should it; impossible promises are not a solid foundation for any form of agreement. We do not expect this country to be a perfect utopia, but the general consensus is that we expect it to continue to improve and correct itself. The Constitution acts as the contract the citizens have made with the government and the government has made with the citizens, each compromising a little with the belief that both will benefit overall. American writer John Freeman wrote in 2017 that the citizens' trust has been misplaced, that one could "Walk around any American city and evidence of the shattered compact with citizens will present itself" The compact Freeman refers to is found in the Constitution, the promise to form a more perfect union, but its roots lie in an Enlightenment-era philosophy called the social contract. American society has broken the social contract in its purest form, compromising the very fabric of our society.

British philosopher John Locke's social contract theory posits that when we form societies, agreeing to live together and work with each other for the common good, we form what is called a social contract. We each give up certain individual freedoms in return for the promise to maintain each other's well-being. At the beginning of civilization, this would be modeled by Caveman Og and Caveman Ug deciding to split the labor of survival with each other: Og gathers, Ug hunts, and they each agree not to do anything crazy, like hitting each other with a really big rock. As civilization grew more complex, this turned into the formation of cities, with high walls to keep out predators or others who wished to do the residents of the city harm; the residents are permitted to live safely behind the walls, so they agree to follow the laws made by the city's king. Everybody lives happily ever after, until they don't.

If the primary half of Locke's social contract theory explains why we have governments, the latter half explains why governments change. Locke asserts that when the ruling body breaks the social contract, failing to uphold their end of the bargain, it is the right and duty of its citizens to revolt against the government. This philosophy inspired countless Enlightenment thinkers, reaching across the Atlantic Ocean to inspire some of America's Founding Fathers to revolt against British Rule. Americans have already revolted once based on breach of contract, but we now rely on elections to assert the will of the governed, assuming that the electorate has the capacity to determine which elected officials have breached the social contract and vote them out in turn. This logic

fails in the face of voter suppression, which takes the form of a voting district in Houston designating a singular polling station for over a million voters. It takes the form of Mississippi's new voter ID laws, the type of which have been proven to decrease turnout of voters of color. The very act of voter suppression breaks the social contract, but it also prevents citizens from acting against other instances of broken social contract. When asked to condemn the violence breaking out at BLM demonstrations, activist Kimberly Jones explained in a viral video filmed during a protest in 2020 that America has continuously broken the social contract, specifically in our treatment of Black people. Jones argued that the rampant police brutality, income inequality, and structural violence against Black people in America meant that they were no longer under any obligation to abide by America's laws; we broke the contract, so where do we get the audacity to enforce it?

Another branch of philosophy that has become critical to the structure of modern America is the Tragedy of the Commons, which is predicated on the belief that any form of public property will be subject to degradation by the public. A plot of land designated for public use to graze livestock will be overgrazed because each individual will see it as their right to partake of the land, and upon seeing other people assert their right to partake of it, hurry to do the same because they are fearful of being somehow cheated out of their fair share. It's a cynical, bitter philosophy that discredits one's fellow human beings, so naturally its mindset, if not the exact philosophy itself, has reared its ugly head in the structure of our society. It presents itself in the increase of the exclusive and decrease of the communal, in anti-homeless architecture, in a lack of funding for public parks, in skyrocketing rent prices and education costs. Cavemen Og and Ug entered into the social contract on the basic premise that they would share with each other for the benefit of each, but our social contract with each other has eroded to the point that it is no longer about sharing, about meeting basic needs. The Tragedy of the Commons has infiltrated the contract to reduce it to the value of protection: we pay taxes, and the police ensure that our cars are not stolen. We believe that we are not owed anything else for the forfeiture of some of our liberty. This erosion of the social contract has stretched it to the point of breaking, and that point has arrived in the form of rockets shaped like penises.

The past couple of years have seen the revival of the space race, but this time it is not between nations, but between billionaires, and that's not the only critical difference. During the initial space race, we went for the purpose of discovery, for the advancement of science, for the safety of the nation. Billionaires are going for bragging rights. Last year Jeff Bezos took a questionably-shaped rocket into space for no more than 11 minutes before returning to Earth, and in the process he released more carbon into the atmosphere than anyone could release by driving a car

every day for a lifetime, all for the sake of a glorified joy ride. Space privatization is the ultimate example of the Tragedy of the Commons, because while space may be the Final Frontier, there's no Homestead Act to make it affordable for the average Joe to try their luck in it. Space is only accessible to the privileged elite, allowing them to indulge in their penchant for exclusive areas. The concept of Planet X, a supposed "backup" planet to be used once life on Earth becomes unsustainable, is continually referenced by Elon Musk, whose company SpaceX carries out environmentally destructive missions similar to those of Jeff Bezos's company Blue Origin, destroying the planet while purporting to be attempting to save its inhabitants. If a Planet X were ever to be found by one of these private space companies, the capitalistic nature of American society practically guarantees that it would be populated by those who could offer to purchase a spot. Thus, the Earth becomes the ultimate Common, a public lot degraded by those who see it as their right to abuse it in their attempt to leave it behind. This blatantly breaks the social contract: we're supposed to all compromise, allowing ourselves to lose out individually so that we gain collectively. Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos are not losing, but the American people are.

The social contract is only fulfilled when everyone gives up an equal amount of liberty. It is broken when governments or individuals shift the distribution, creating inequality. Freeman argues that the way to mend the social contract is to stop viewing that inequality as the problem of the needy and begin to view it as a problem of the society. The sharing of the problem is what allows us to remedy it. We must make inequality the common, and instead of exacerbating its condition, we must defy the Tragedy of the Commons and alleviate it. We make voter suppression not only the problem of those whose votes are not counted, but the problem of those whose are. We make police brutality not only the problem of Black people, but the problem of every ethnicity. We make the preservation of our planet not only the problem of those who will be forced to live on it, but the problem of those with the resources to sustain that life. We lead a revolt of compassion. We repair the broken promises of our ancestors.