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Introduction to Tapestries Volume 7: Breaking the Shackles of Silence: Knowledge Production as Activism and Resistance

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Introduction to Tapestries Volume 7: Breaking the Shackles of Silence: Knowledge Production as Activism and Resistance

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Introduction to *Tapestries* Volume 7: Breaking the Shackles of Silence: Knowledge Production as Activism and Resistance

Eleanor Benson, Dylan Bontrager, Elizabeth Eggert, Victoria Guillemard, Ayaan Natala, and Sarah Nemetz

As Seniors in the American Studies department at Macalester College, our goal was to create a *Tapestries* edition that represents the work we have accomplished in our four years here. In attending a private liberal arts college, we participate in an institution which purposefully shuts out large portions of the population from accessing and producing academic knowledge. We strive to use our privilege as students in this exclusive space to disseminate knowledge beyond the narrow confines of our campus in an open-access format. We hope our work may serve a purpose beyond the ivory tower: to challenge institutional silence, we must start within the institution we have been a part of for four years. Throughout this project, we strove to find connection, love, and humanity within ourselves and hopefully inspire others to search for that humanity within themselves and each other. Silencing voices is a way to maintain an oppressive status quo; therefore, supporting and amplifying the voices of marginalized people is not only an act of connection and humanity, but one of defiance, resistance, and even rebellion. We see this issue of *Tapestries* as part of larger popular movements—a people's rebellion against oppressive authoritarian governance.

As prisonization has risen, we have seen democracy dwindling. We believe that this is no coincidence. Prisons are, and have always been, a tool of social control—they are inherently authoritarian institutions—and we recognize that the dehumanization enacted upon prisoners is not contained by concrete walls, watchtowers, and barbed wire. Though a disproportionate number of people of color are the hardest hit, dehumanization spills over into the streets of major cities and rural areas alike, affecting every member of American society. We write this journal not to speak for or over those who are directly affected but because we are affected too.

All of us participated in a course taught by Karin Aguilar-San Juan titled “Critical Prisons Studies.” The course explored the prison industrial complex and felon disenfranchisement. The course was unique because it encouraged students to participate in an internship to embody their politics rather than stay fixated on theory. In the class, we began to reflect upon our identity, privilege, and assumptions about American democracy.

We structured this journal so that the focus of our pieces begins in prisons and moves out to broader society. Dylan's paper explores the Attica Uprising as a people's rebellion to examine how Attica can offer hope for collective liberation in the future, but ultimately remains in the prison for now. Elizabeth's piece connects the issue of prison rape to broader conversations surrounding the culture of sexual abuse in society. Eleanor's piece takes us from prisons to home and back again along the airwaves that prisoners use to connect with their loved ones,

forcing us to remember that those in prison are not cut off from the rest of society. Both Victoria's and Sarah's pieces explore systems of oppression that are entwined with those of prisons. Victoria deals with voter suppression of Native Americans which silences their attempts to right injustices and live freely, while Sarah examines social control in school and foster care which both over- and under-medicates youth of color, labelling them 'deviant' and priming them for prison in the future. Finally, Ayaan explores international and personal connections between and within Black student movements, and urges Black activists to form transnational networks to more fully address interconnected issues.

We chose to order our pieces this way in an attempt to demonstrate that our liberation is not separate from that of people in prison, disenfranchised voters, children in schools and foster care, or Black student activists—all these issues are interconnected. This dehumanization affects all of us because our willingness as primarily white writers, readers, and academics to overlook these issues and our refusal to interrogate whiteness attacks our own humanity and souls.

As a predominantly white collective, it is essential that we address our racial identities in the undertaking of this issue of *Tapestries*. Our whiteness puts us in the position of oppressor and colonizer even as we address the myriad ways that oppression and colonization devastate this country. Our whiteness shields us from state power, allowing us to discuss issues of race without fear of retribution from the state or from dominant American society. Breaking silence as white people in a state governed by white supremacy means that we need to recognize our complicity within that system. This complicity harms every single one of us, so we write to affirm that our liberation is bound up together—if your soul is damaged, then so is mine.

There are major misconceptions about the American invention. As American Studies majors, we have the opportunity to explore the different interpretations of what it means to be American, citizen, and human. The polarization in our country is not new and will continue to exist while we continuously adapt and re-adapt America. As the only writer of color in this collective, I—Ayaan—felt obligated not to start this journal in an optimistic light. As a Black person in this political climate, I am reminded by my own country that I am not considered fully human. The stories that we share in these pieces are not necessarily new. However, our privilege as college students allows us to amplify the voices of others (or myself) who experience the contradictions of the American invention. The biggest flaw in American society is our inability to grapple with the contradictions of our invention that carry through each generation. As a nation, we are experiencing a spiritual death. We as a society are still fixated on the ideal versus the reality of America and now are complicit with our social decay.

Our class left this project with the understanding that we are all oppressed and disconnected from our own humanity. The ways we experience oppression are unique and multifaceted. As a result, our ability to find hope in our country depends on our positionality and relationship to social tragedies. Our epiphany allowed us to recognize an epiphany our country still must grapple with—until we reconnect with our spirit and recognize our interconnectedness to other spirits, America's spiritual numbness and social ills will persist.