

**Grace Westwood**  
**ARTDES498**  
**Integrative Project Thesis**

## **Reflections of Humanity**

“The biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit. We are in great need of people being able to stand in someone else’s shoes and see the world through their eyes.”

–Barack Obama

### **I. Introduction**

Humans have an extraordinary capacity for empathy and a profound ability to connect with others on a deep and personal level. It is the driving force behind love, peace, coexistence, selflessness and compassion. But what is empathy, and how does it work? The phenomenon is perhaps best defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of another” without having these be “fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.”<sup>1</sup> According to neuroscientific researchers, there are two kinds of empathy: emotional empathy is an involuntary reaction that occurs when we simply observe and interact with other human beings, while cognitive empathy is when we make a conscious decision to place ourselves in the position of another in order to better understand and appreciate their situation. Put simply, emotional empathy is visually and socially grounded, while cognitive empathy takes deliberate effort.

But how can one feel empathy for a being who is unseen, unheard, unable to socially engage, and who arguably looks very “inhuman” in the earliest stages of development? And how has our society gotten to the point where the termination of a vulnerable and innocent person is not only approved and commonplace, but even considered a human right? How might we challenge this thinking, and add a fresh perspective on such a tired and polarized debate? Better yet, how might we distance ourselves from this debate, and create a new platform on which to consider and appreciate this initial stage of human life outside of the standard political spheres? Can an appreciation of preborn human life and where we come from be universal, regardless of one’s political views? These are the driving questions behind this project, and in the following sections I will be attempting to dissect these issues to hopefully arrive at a deeper understanding of the issue both for myself and for my audience.

Note: In this paper, I have chosen to use the term “preborn” (which can be defined as “existing but not yet born”<sup>2</sup>) to apply to human embryonic and fetal forms, because it suggests that what exists in the womb is very much alive. It also suggests that, left to natural processes,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/preborn>

this small life will develop into a fully-formed human. Furthermore, preborn sounds far more optimistic than the more commonly-used term “unborn,” which implies that the life in question may or may not be born.

## II. Contextual Discussion

### a. A Closer Look at Empathy

What enables us to have an emotionally-based empathic connection with others? In his “TED Talk” titled *The Neurons that Shaped Civilization*, neuroscientist Vilayanur Ramachandran analyzes the mirror neurons in our brains that allow us to empathize with and learn from other human beings. Ramachandran explains that the adult human brain is comprised of over one hundred billion neurons, and that neuroscientists can observe the activity of each of the brain’s nerve cells using electrodes in various sections of the brain. According to the research of Giacomo Rizzolatti, the neurons that are located in the frontal lobe will fire when a person is performing a specific task. More interesting, however, is the fact that a subset of these neurons will fire when a person is watching another person perform that same task. Ramachandran states that these are referred to as “mirror” neurons, and they are the same neurons that allow us to feel another’s pain or to have a better understanding of the perspective of another.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon highlights the fact that all people are connected despite the social differences and barriers that we have built for ourselves, and that people are wired to feel the emotions of others. However, there is undeniably an empathic disconnect when considering our limited interactions with the preborn, and the fact that we can neither see nor engage with them in the same way. Thus, emotional empathy is greatly restricted. And what of cognitive empathy?

Social philosopher, author, and founder of the School of Life in London, Roman Krznaric earned his PhD in political sociology, and has devoted well over a decade of research on the topic of human empathy. In his *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution*, Krznaric explains that cognitive empathy (that is the ability to understand and appreciate another’s point of view) can be used to bring about radical social changes. He states: “Empathy has the power to transform the way that we value and relate to one another, and if we can develop this natural human ability and seek to discover ourselves in the other, we can perhaps create caring society in which all can have an equal chance at success.”<sup>4</sup> I believe the social inequalities our society is dealing with today stem from the fact that human life in its most fundamental form is not valued in the way that it should be. Although there is a great necessity for empathy, it is very limited, even on a cognitive level because people find it very difficult to place themselves into the lives of those who are different. Research has shown that people can best empathize with those who look like us or who share a common experience. Ironically, although people have all gone through the experience of prenatal growth and development, we have no recollection of that part of our lives, and the concept seems foreign and disconnected from our current state. After reading Krznaric’s book, I became interested in using my work to find an answer to the

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<sup>3</sup> Ramachandran, Vilayanur.

<sup>4</sup> Krznaric, Roman.

following questions: If we could see from the perspective of the preborn, would we develop a greater appreciation of the vulnerable state of development that at which every human begins? And could this appreciation reverse some of the damage that has been done?

#### b. Dehumanization

In order to find a solution, however, one must first analyze the problem. Since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, over 60,000,000<sup>5</sup> abortions have been performed in the United States alone. Although the rate has been on the decline in the past few years, it is not enough. Thousands of preborn children are killed in the US daily because they are deemed an inconvenience, a “clump of cells,” or some form of “parasite,” unworthy of the right to life. In order to reverse the damage that has been done, one must first question how we arrived at the point where abortion is commonplace. The normalization of the abortion procedure could not have occurred without the critical step of dehumanization. As moral human beings, it goes against our better nature to raise our fist to another human and kill them in cold blood. As is the case with most instances of mass violence and murder, the committers of the act of abortion must first convince themselves that what they are doing is justifiable – even beneficial (i.e. women’s rights) – and that the people against which they are committing these acts are inhuman.

It is not as though we do not know any better, however. We have been able to observe, understand, and appreciate the development of a preborn child in recent years, with the emergence and of ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and other technologies. Professor at the University of Michigan Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design and former research professor in the Department of Radiology at the Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, Dr. Bradley Smith, is an expert in embryology and received funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to create a project titled the *Multi-Dimensional Human Embryo*. This project consisted of the creation of a 3-D image of several embryo specimens via MR (magnetic resonance) microscopy for educational purposes and then to make the resource available and distributable online. According to the project website, every specimen was documented “with three pulse sequences to obtain fully-registered T1-weighted, T2-weighted, and diffusion-weighted image datasets” and then time-lapse videos were made using “morphing software.”<sup>6</sup> The specimens that were documented are in the post-ovulatory “Carnegie Stages,” and include twenty-three stages, from fertilization through 56 days. Smith’s research specifically features specimens from stage 13 to 23 (28-56 days).

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.numberofabortions.com>

<sup>6</sup> Smith, Bradley.

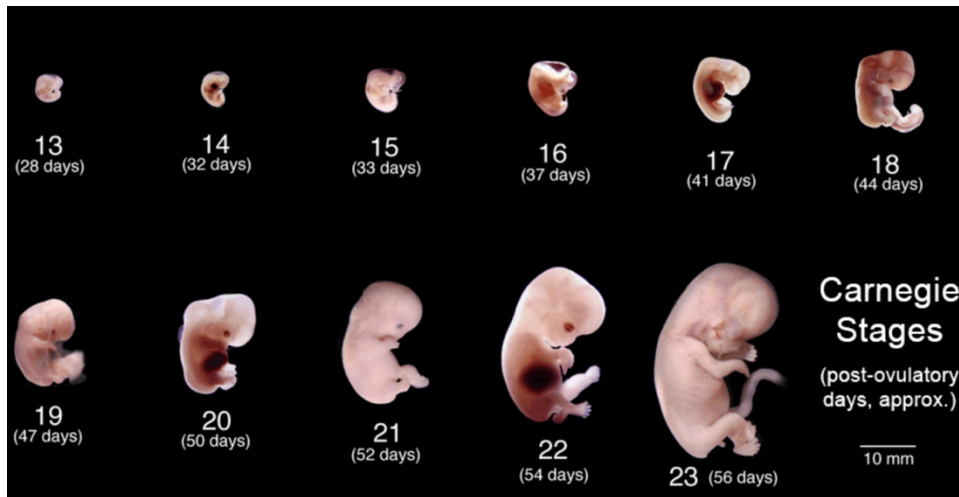


Figure 1: Smith, Bradley.

I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Bradley Smith, and speaking to him about his work and my visions for my own project. We discussed the fact that the first stages of life look rather “inhuman,” despite the fact that it is a stage that we all begin at, and is quite possibly one of the most human experiences that we all go through. This made me question what the criteria are for “humanity,” and what it actually means to “look human.” Is it our external appearance/bodily functions? Would this mean that people with deformities are somehow less human? Is it our capacity to show emotion through facial expressions? Is it our genetic makeup? Is it based on biology or is the basic definition of humanity a societal construct? Interestingly, when one looks up the term “human” in a dictionary, one will likely get definitions along the lines of the following: “of relating to, or characteristic of humans,” “consisting of humans,” and “having human forms or attributes,”<sup>7</sup> but interestingly, these specific forms, attributes, and characteristics are not further defined.

Dr. David Livingston Smith has extensively studied human psychology and philosophy and their interconnectedness, and is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of New England. He has written numerous books and articles on a variety of topics, including Freudian theories, the psychology of war, and dehumanization. In his book *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*, he states that “people are dehumanized when they’re not recognized as individuals” and goes on to say that to dehumanize is to objectify—that is, seeing a human being as property for which the owner can decide his or her fate. Smith has also written an intriguing article titled “*What Does It Mean to Be Human?*”. He makes the following observation in the introductory paragraph of his article: “Minimally to be human is to be one of us, but this begs the question of the class of creatures to which ‘us’ refers.” Interestingly, he goes on to say that the definition of humanity cannot be answered in terms of science. He states that we do not have the sort of evidence that will help us reach a conclusive answer to the question of how to define our humanity, partially because the term “human” is a folk-taxonomy and has no grounds in biology. Furthermore, he makes the claim that, while some folk-taxonomies align with biological taxonomies, humans do not possess “any

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/human>

biological properties that distinguish them” from other species.<sup>8</sup> The definition of humanity varies with each person and their own conception of what constitutes the human being.

Sadly, because the term “humanity” is defined by humans themselves and isn’t constant, there will inevitably be controversial exclusions from the category. We can see this happening throughout history, and Livingstone provides several examples of this. Much more relevant to my particular argument though, Livingstone goes on to say that “another example is provided by the seemingly interminable debate about the moral permissibility of abortion, which almost always turns on the question of whether the embryo is a human being.”<sup>9</sup> The fluidity and controversy what the term “humanity” can be applied to can be seen in various aspects of society today, from primates, to the preborn, and with every category there is extreme polarization (Creationists vs. Evolutionists, Pro-life vs. Pro-choice, racial supremacy, etc.). So, I began to wonder: How could I challenge and expand societal definitions to include those who are only a few weeks old? And how might I remind my audience that they emerged from these forms, and that they truly matter?

Strangely enough, we as a society seem to value preborn children less than ever, despite the fact that we know so much more about them now. It would seem that we have gotten to the place where the humanity and value of the preborn hinge solely on whether or not it is wanted by the parent or by society. Expectant parents who are going to abort their child do not often refer to it as a “baby.” Likewise, parents who want and value their child will not often state that they are “expecting a fetus.” Despite the fact that they are both the same biologically, the child in the latter situation will be granted a chance to live a full and happy life, while the child in the former situation will be terminated. Thus, the specific issue that we have is one of *selective* dehumanization, and hinges on convenience and the desirability of the child.

We have seen that emotional empathy depends on visual and social interaction, and because preborn humans are developing in an enclosed space, we cannot relate to them as we would to a fully-formed human being. Our inability to construct an empathically-grounded connection with the preborn leads to many seeing them as inferior – even inhuman – beings. We have also seen that cognitive empathy depends on each individual, and those to whom they choose to care for and relate. Consequently, those who do not want a child are going to claim that it is inhuman or disposable (selective dehumanization), while those who believe the child has value are going to fight for his or her rights. So, now that we have broadly analyzed the problem, how might we find a solution?

### III. Methodology

In the creation of this project, I went through countless themes, forms, and iterations, most of which centered on the idea of the value of preborn life. Some of the topics that I’ve

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<sup>8</sup> Livingstone, David Smith.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

pursued include patterns, landscapes, the potential psychological effects of abortion on women (i.e. disenfranchised grief, apathy, emptiness), abandonment, the societal impact of abortion (i.e. voids created by people who could have been), fetal development, effectiveness of preventative pro-life art vs. negative anti-abortion art, etc. I believe that the final form that my project has taken includes many of the themes that I had been considering, but for the sake of brevity, I cannot go into each one. I will, however, attempt to summarize some key points.<sup>10</sup> During my iterative process, I constantly wrestled with how I could take on the issue of abortion in a sort of middle-ground between bold/direct and conceptual/ambiguous. I did not want my argument to be missed. However, I did not want to create imagery that is so politically-charged, dogmatic, straightforward or even gory that it would be unapproachable, hold no interest or require nothing from the viewer. Furthermore, I also was considering my Ann Arbor audience and the fact that the overwhelming majority of my viewers would likely be pro-choice University of Michigan students. Consequently, I did not want a piece that would be so bold that it would be a turn-off and something to which no one would want to get close. This led me to the question of how I could create a positive project that engages my audience in some way. This, along with my interest in empathy, drew me into the idea of perspective and placing oneself in the position of another (cognitive empathy). If I could use my work to place the spectator in the position of the preborn, would that change the value of that child in their eyes? I then became interested in mirrors and reflective materials that would create a dialogue between viewer and viewed.

One artist who really fueled this interest was artist, theorist, and one of the leading figures behind the Italian Arte Povera (“poor art”) movement, Michelangelo Pistoletto. He has created work that spans several media and themes, but he is perhaps most famous for his work with mirrors. Jonathan Jones, art critic and journalist for *The Guardian* since 1999, interviewed Pistoletto about his “mirror paintings.” He states that “decades before interactive art became the buzzword it is today, Pistoletto’s mirrors were putting the spectator into the work.”<sup>11</sup> The discovery of his work was a turning point in my project. I had been seeking for a way to include the spectator in a way that was personal, but because painting a figure on a canvas is fixed and representational, it is not inclusive of the general public. With mirrors, people of every nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. can be included with an experience that is constant and does not favor a certain group. Also, mirrors are far more intimate than canvas, as they allow the viewer to take part in the work and to become one with the image surface, thus bridging the gap between spectator and spectated. In speaking about his own work, Pistoletto makes the following statement about the use of mirrors as objects of truth and discovery: “There is no limit to the reflection of the mirror. We have this possibility to exist in the mirror, to appear and disappear. And so, we see that our existence is a very limited period of time. Mirrors are not the expression of my will or my feelings, but a phenomenological effect.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> (Note: for a full list of iterations, visit <https://graceelisabethwestwood.weebly.com>)

<sup>11</sup> Jones, Jonathan.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

My own iterations with mirrors were quite extensive, including shattering the mirrors (inspired in part by Pistoletto, but also to show the destruction of life), etching designs, hand-painting designs, and sandblasting:



I also created an acrylic painting of a mirror that was, of course, not functional, to illustrate our inability to see ourselves in the image of the preborn.



Following my December review by Stamps faculty, I resolved to focus on the positive and wondrous aspects of preborn life, and to continue to use mirrors (but not negative, shattered ones) to remind my viewer of their origin and the importance of this stage of life. I ultimately wanted to create a progression of embryonic and fetal stages, but was frustrated with my inability to work with the human figure, as well as the lack of precision that I thought such a work required. So, I trained myself to work in Adobe Illustrator to create designs that

could be cut with a vinyl cutter and adhered to the surface of each mirror, and then airbrushed in the desired areas (with the areas that I wanted to reflect being masked off by the sticker).



Later in the semester, I had the privilege of meeting with local artist Caleb Larsen, who provided feedback on my project progression. He pointed out that the images were very static/digitized, and did not seem to be true to my organic and spontaneous methods of working (seen in the paintings hanging in my studio) and said that the work lacked a human touch. He recommended that I take risks in the process and included hand-painted elements (which led to me painting on the wall for the final exhibition). These (and many other processes which I do not have time to get into) led to my final project, *Reflections of Humanity*.

#### IV. Creative Work

*Reflections of Humanity* is a two-dimensional installation featuring a series of ten 12" paintings on round acrylic sheets, arranged into a spiral orientation. Each mirror painting depicts a particular stage in the first trimester, from implantation through the twelfth week of development. I have chosen to specifically focus on the first trimester because the vast majority of abortions occur within these stages, and because it is during this time that the child appears the least "human" according to the societal definition (that is, in comparison to fully-developed humans – although the genetic makeup does not change). Because the aim of my project is to *rehumanize* the image of the preborn, depicting the child at stages where it supposedly appears "inhuman" makes this project far more challenging. However, I have accepted this challenge because I do not want to make the same mistake that some "pro-life" individuals have made, and that is to show a child in the final stages of fetal development to make the case for all



preborn children's humanity. It is problematic because children are rarely aborted at this stage of development, and if one truly believes in the value of the preborn life at even the earliest stages, we should embrace these forms as human forms and normalize them.

Behind the reflective acrylic sheets is a green spiral design that is painted directly onto the wall with acrylic paint, and it "connects the dots" between each image. Spirals are often symbols of continuity and life cycles<sup>13</sup>, and the color green can be thought of as a symbol of life, growth, and positivity. Life in this form is not static, but always changing, growing and developing. Ultimately, I want to remind the viewer that this used to be a form that they once had, and to create a dialogue between viewer and viewed. As the viewer looks into the image of the child, they are confronted with their own image, creating an inseparable and constant shift from foreground to background, and consequently, a comparison.

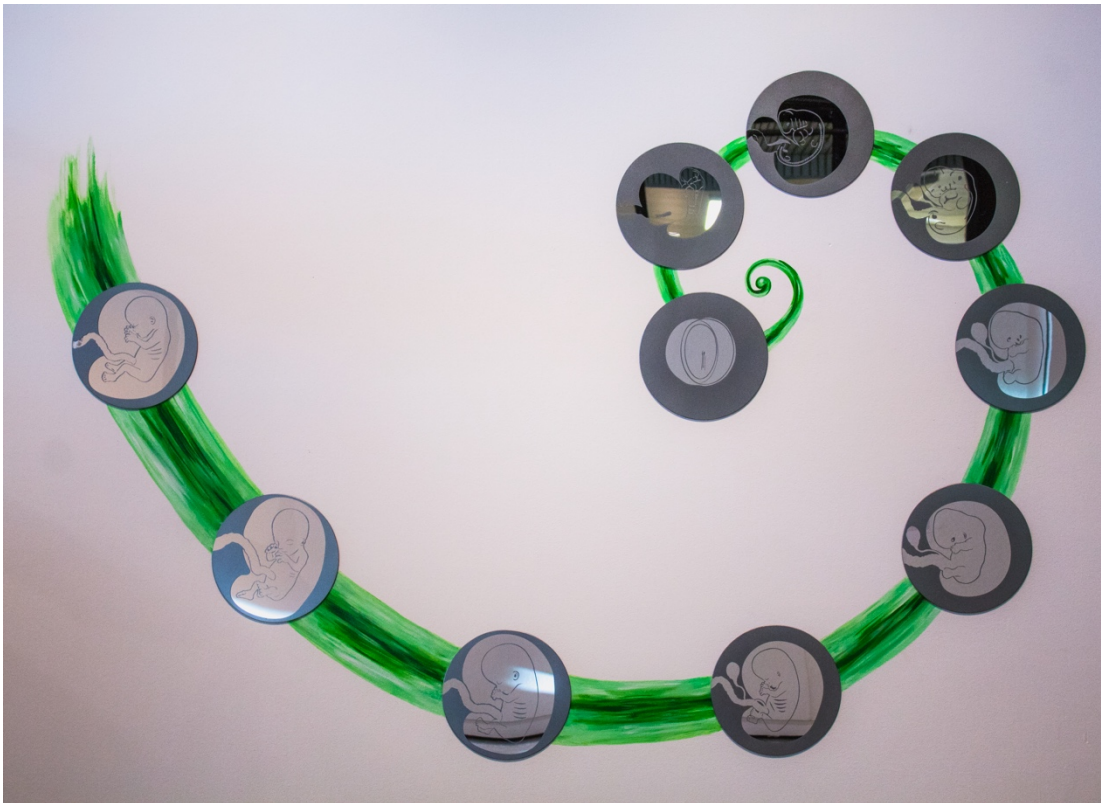


Figure 2: Reflections of Humanity (full view)

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<sup>13</sup> Lima, Manuel.

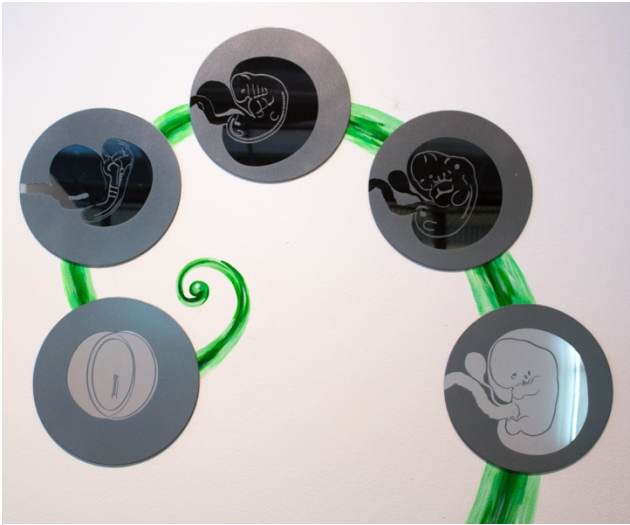


Figure 3: Reflections of Humanity (detail)



Figure 4: Reflections of Humanity (detail)

The piece attempts to elevate the current status of the preborn, by suggesting that the viewer and the preborn are in conversation as equals – but at different stages of life. The images themselves are not confrontational, but being face-to-face with your own image – an image that is enclosed within that of a preborn child – is a confrontation in itself. *Reflections of Humanity* is an attempt to overcome the empathic barriers that exist between the born and preborn, and offers a solution to many of the aforementioned problems and obstacles by encouraging a form of cognitive empathy.

As we have seen throughout this paper, there are several barriers that restrict us from creating an empathic connection with the preborn. The issue is worsened by the fact that they have been dehumanized by society, degraded, and reduced to a pawn in a political debate rather than being acknowledged as a valuable human being. This series will hopefully encourage a form of cognitive empathy – that is placing my viewer in the position of the preborn and allowing them to metaphorically reflect on this past state of their own existence, while at the same time literally reflecting by being confronted with their own image in the series of mirrors. Because the abortion debate has become very polarized, with both sides full of contempt for each other, I want to remove the preborn from that arena and appreciate this stage of life as one in which we all originate and which ultimately serves as a symbol of equality. Rather than telling my viewer what he or she must think and walk away with, I am making the work as neutral as possible, to allow room for a more personal experience.

This is an attempt to raise awareness about and to combat the systematic dehumanization of the embryo as well as to elevate its status as a symbol of humanity and equality. It is my ultimate goal to use the visuals that I create to remind the spectator that we all begin life's journey in this vulnerable state – regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and social class – and consequently the preborn should be treated as equal and unique beings, worthy of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

## V. Conclusion

Before taking on this project, I would not have considered myself a political activist by any means; In fact, I am actually more of a landscape painter. However, standing up for preborn life is something that I am extremely passionate about, and I was determined to use my platform to speak out about the social injustices of abortion. The lack of bold pro-life artists in the professional world – and particularly women artists (as most of the artists who I discovered in my research were men) – indicated the necessity for me to speak out strongly for those who cannot speak for themselves. I hope this project inspires others to use their platforms to stand up not only for their own beliefs, but more importantly for the wellbeing of humanity. There are still many questions that remain unanswered, and the process actually created more questions than I had going into it, but I plan to continue down this path and to continue to use my work to speak out against injustice and inequality.

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