Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences
Best Writing Contest 2025-2026

Isabella Cowan

Isabella Cowan is a second-year student in the Public Health program. She is from Broadalbin, New York, and she enjoys creative writing and journaling, often using both to step back from reality and reflect.

Title 1: Labor Speech

Context: This is a speech I wrote and delivered in class for a roleplay assignment set in Greenwich Village. The Character, Leah Shwartz, is a young garment worker speaking from a labor-first perspective.

Speech: Labor First

Friends, villagers, my name is Leah Shwartz, and I have been working in the garment factories since I was 11 years old. Some people look at me and think I'm uneducated, Maude, you hinted at this last time. But let me tell you something: I know how to read, I know to do math, and I know how to survive thirteen years in shops where the air is thick with lint, the wages are an insult, and the bosses treat us like machines instead of human beings.

I want you to imagine 50 girls packed in rows, not allowed to talk, barely allowed to breathe. One bathroom for all of us, and a pacesetter who follows you if you take too long. The air is so heavy with dust that you cough it up all night. Wages so low you pray for overtime just to buy a decent pair of socks. And every day, the fear, the fear of speedups, fear of being replaced, fear of being fired for asking for a drink of water.

Also, I should never see a child no older than 12 working next to their parents in a factory. But I have. I have seen children carrying bundles heavier than they are, Children with burned fingers, swollen eyes, coughing from the dust. If we don't fight for labor first, those children will grow up into the same misery we are living in now.

That is the life we are fighting to change.

Now, I want to be very clear; I am not anti-suffrage, I'm not against women voting, I am simply just pro-labor first. Because a ballot is not going to fix a broken bathroom in a factory where 50 girls share one stall. A ballot won't stop a foreman from cutting your pay. A ballot won't keep a child out of a mill. We need those conditions changed now, not someday, now.

And yes, I did pop the balloon last time, heat of the moment, you might say. However, Alice, you said something about a distant revolution, and look, I'm not usually one for revolutions. I've

spent my whole life just trying to survive, not trying to start one, but I'm getting tired of being quiet, so maybe just maybe that balloon popping was the start of something, because if a little noise can shake this room, imagine what thousands of workers, villagers, immigrants and anyone who wants to join us can do when they stand together.

One thing I don't understand is; Why are we plotting against each other when we want the same thing? We all want dignity. We all want safety. We all want a life where our labor doesn't break our bodies before we're thirty.

And let me say something to the Suffrage faction. You talk as if the only people suffering in this city are women. But in Labor, we don't just fight for women and children, we fight for immigrants, for the poor, for the people of every race who are crushed under the same machines and the same bosses.

Now, Mary White Ovington, if I'm correct, you fought for African Americans and helped found the NAACP. You, of all people, should understand that injustice doesn't stop at gender.
It hits immigrants, it hits Black workers, it hits Jewish workers like me, it hits anyone the factory owners think they can squeeze dry.

And as W.E.B. Du Bois said, "Either America will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States."

Well, ignoring the suffering of workers, all workers, is exactly that kind of ignorance.

So why is Suffrage acting like the only battle worth fighting is the one for the ballot?
We're fighting for survival.

And another thing, the Suffrage faction keeps talking about 'women,' but I have to ask: which women? Do you mean Black women, too? Immigrant women? the girls in the mills who barely speak English? Because I don't hear much about them, and even the national American women's suffrage association doesn't include black women, they talked about women, but they didn't mean all women. And even if the vote does come, my question is: are working women, or the women stuck at home, even going to vote if they get the chance? Most are terrified of angering their husbands, their bosses, their landlords. A piece of paper won't protect them from losing their job or getting kicked out of their home. But a union will. Better wages will. Safer shops most definitely will.

This isn't just about gender. It's about class. It's about race, immigrants, and children. It's about every worker this system grinds down.

So, I stand here today to say this:

Let’s stop fighting over who gets to lead the parade or pageant and start fighting the system that’s crushing us. Let’s fix the factories first. Let’s protect the workers who make the wealth of this town.
Let’s rise together, women, men, immigrants, Black workers, Jewish workers, all of us, because the rising of the women is the rising of the race, and the rising of the workers is the rising of America.

Thank you.

Title 2: Argumentation Rebuttal Paper

Context: This paper was written for an Argumentation and Critical Thinking assignment in which students were required to rebut two arguments presented during an in-class debate. Each rebuttal follows the required structure: restating the argument, critiquing its reasoning, and presenting a counterargument supported by evidence.

Argumentation Rebuttal Paper:

Rebuttal 1 (Support Position): The claim that adopting legislation Identical to Australia's Under-16 Social Media Ban is Necessary to Protect Children’s Privacy and Digital Footprints.

Restating the Supporting Argument:

Supporters of the motion argue that the United States should pass legislation identical to Australia’s under-16 social media ban to protect children’s privacy and digital footprints. They claim that social media platforms collect large amounts of personal data from minors, including location data, behavioral patterns, and preferences, often sharing this data with third parties. The supporting side also argues that because teenagers' brains are still developing, minors can't fully understand the long-term consequences of what they post online, and that content shared in adolescence can resurface later during college admissions, job searches, or legal situations.

Critique of Reasoning:

While these privacy concerns are extremely valid and real, the argument assumes that banning minors from social media is the only effective solution. The evidence used focuses mainly on harmful platform data practices, not on proving that minors’ access to social media itself is the primary cause of lifelong harm. This creates a false choice between unrestricted access and a total ban, ignoring policy options that directly regulate data collection and privacy practices. Additionally, the argument overgeneralizes teen behavior by treating all minors as incapable of managing their online presence.

Counterargument With Evidence:

In reality, teens' online behavior doesn't match the blanket assumptions in the argument; according to the Pew Research Center, many teenagers already take steps to manage their privacy, using private accounts, limiting who can see their posts, and thinking carefully about what they share online because of how it could affect their future1. These challenges then claim that minors are universally unable to understand or control their digital footprints. Another Pew study found that most teens do not report experiencing serious negative consequences, such as being denied school or job opportunities, because of their social media activity.

In addition, according to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, strict age-verification systems that require enforcement of under-16 bans may actually increase privacy risks. The EFF warns that these systems often require collecting sensitive personal information, such as government-issued IDs or biometric information2. In other words, the ban could create the very privacy problems it claims to solve. The evidence doesn't show that an Australian-style ban is necessary to protect children's privacy, only that better regulation of platform practices is needed.

Rebuttal 2 (oppose position): Banning deepfake AI limits freedom of expression, which falls under the First Amendment, and provides a tool for creative and educational expression

Restating the Opposing Argument:

The opposing argument claims that banning AI deepfake technology would violate the First Amendment because AI functions as a modern tool of expression, similar to cameras or editing software. From this perspective, AI-generated content is used for entertainment, parody, satire, and education, all forms of expression that are traditionally protected under free speech. They also argue that deepfake AI-generated content can have educational value, especially in elementary school, where interactive and AI-generated content may increase student engagement and improve learning outcomes. Rather than banning deepfakes, they argue society should rely on media literacy and detection tools to address misuse while preserving freedom of speech.

Critique of Reasoning:

While AI can be a tool for expression, this argument overlooks the developmental differences between adults and young children. Just because AI-generated content may be protected as speech in some contexts doesn't automatically make it appropriate for elementary classrooms. The argument assumes that educational use of deepfake AI is harmless. However, it fails to address the risks of exposing children, who are still developing critical thinking skills, to highly realistic but fabricated content. This weakens the claim that deepfake AI is suitable as an instructional tool at the elementary level.

Counterargument with Evidence:

Incorporating deepfake AI into elementary education raises serious concerns about confusion, trust, and misinformation. According to the New York State Bar Association, deepfake technology blurs the line between real and fabricated content, making it difficult even for adults to consistently identify manipulated media1. If adults struggle to distinguish deepfakes from real images or videos, it's unreasonable to expect elementary school students, who are still developing basic critical thinking skills, to do so. Also, introducing this technology to children at an early age risks normalizing deepfakes as trustworthy sources of information.

Additionally, according to the NIH., while deepfake AI may have some educational or creative potential, it also carries risks related to deception and misunderstanding, particularly for users with limited media literacy2. For elementary students, repeated exposure could lead to overreliance on AI-generated content rather than developing independent critical thinking skills. Normalizing deepfake use at a young age could make students more vulnerable to manipulation later, especially outside of supervised classroom settings.

Citations for rebuttal 1:

Atske S, Atske S. Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/. Published December 9, 2025.

Age verification won't "Protect the Children." Electronic Frontier Foundation. https://www.eff.org/pages/age-verification-wont-protect-children. Published December 10, 2025.

Citations for rebuttal 2:

David, David. The deeply complicated issues surrounding Deepfakes - New York State Bar Association. New York State Bar Association - NYSBA. February 2025. https://nysba.org/the-deeply-complicated-issues-surrounding-deepfakes/.

Martínez ON, Fernández-García D, Monteagudo NC, Forero-Rincón O. Possible health benefits and risks of DeepFake videos: A Qualitative study in nursing students. Nursing Reports. 2024;14(4):2746-2757. doi:10.3390/nursrep14040203

Kripa Hongalgi

Kripa Hongalgi is a freshman studying microbiology. She has trained in the classical Indian dance form Bharatanatyam since the age of six, navigating a tradition rooted in Tamil, a language not her own. Her writing reflects this intersection of identity, culture, and self-expression. Beyond dance, she has been involved in the arts through violin and finds balance through tennis. She seeks rhythm and meaning in the spaces between movement, language, and experience.

Title: Thai Ha Thai

He moving to something you couldn't fully translate but feeling it anyway.

I am a person of rhythm, even when the words escape me.

For years, Bharatanatyam—the classical Indian dance my grandmother once whispered about and my teacher fiercely embodied—was both my anchor and my battle. I didn't know the language of the lyrics, so I learned to survive through the beat: stamping feet when others recalled meaning from words, memorizing steps when gestures told stories I could not yet understand. Compared to my peers who pieced dances together through context, I felt like an outsider moving to music I couldn't fully translate.

At first, I hated that gap. The heavy eyeliner, the jewelry, the characters I had to become on stage felt like costumes I was borrowing from a culture I do not entirely know. If someone could see me in my natural state—tall frame, bare face, dark circles inherited from my grandmother—why should I have to hide behind layers of paint and posture? Dance remained in my life: footwork sharpened my tennis game, Sunday classes rooted me in South Asian tradition, and in secret moments in my room, I still danced for myself.

It took preparing for a long performance for something to shift. My teacher, who once teased me for loving tennis more than dance, began to push me to take ownership of my art. She challenged me not to repeat the choreography, but to experiment—like light shattering through a kaleidoscope, refracting gold jewelry, symmetry, and meanings too intricate for words to capture. Slowly, the shy girl hiding in the back row found her voice. Dance was no longer about pretending to be someone else; it was about discovering the person I already was.

But just as I was beginning to understand it, I let it go. Halfway through high school, I walked away. Not because I didn't care, but because I was scared I couldn't do it all—school, sports, expectations. For a while, I convinced myself I had escaped the weight. Then came my cousin's arangetram.

In the second row, I gripped my knees so hard they hurt. The stage lights caught her jewelry, the same gold I used to wear, and every stomp of her feet echoed what I had abandoned. Pride swelled, but shame burned hotter. I wasn't just proud of her—I was mourning myself. With every turn she executed, I felt another reminder of the stage I had left behind. The applause that rose for her felt like thunder in my own chest, exposing the silence I had chosen. By the time tears blurred my vision, I knew the truth: quitting had been my greatest mistake. It wasn't just a choice about dance; it was a choice that had hollowed me, stripping away the rhythm that once held me together. That moment was less a performance and more a mirror, forcing me to see how much dance had shaped me, and how unmoored I felt without it.

In a world of words, my body had found its own language. A mudra for water, neer, twisting from my head to my hip. Stepping into that current, drawn back into its rhythm, I realized the dance was speaking for me — not in translation, but in something older and truer than words.

The frame I carry everywhere is reshaped by rhythm into patterns too fleeting for silence to contain, unfolding beyond its borders like motion refusing stillness. Dance is where I rethread the parts of myself I once unraveled. And in the corner, with her beat on the thattu mali and kazhi, I saw the teacher who had given her time and compelled me to live this art to its fullest. My steps may be shaped by identity, but their meaning comes from something deeper: the rhythm that binds me to others, the humanity stitched into every movement.

I am a person of rhythm.

Thai ha thai he.

Diana Lezama

Diana is a second-year Pharmaceutical Sciences student. She has developed a deep academic focus on oncology and pharmacokinetics, driven by an interest in how drug movement within the body impacts cancer treatment. Beyond the classroom, Diana serves as a budget coordinator for the American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists (AAPS) student chapter, where she manages financial planning and resource allocation to support the organization's professional development goals.

Title: The Cost of Belonging

Before sunrise the street fills with blue and red light. It paints the stucco walls in bruises. The engines idle low, like animals breathing. Mrs. Alvarez's front door hangs open, one hinge bent. A pot of beans still simmers on the stove, thick and sweet in the air. On the couch, a cartoon flickers to no one. Her son's Spider-Man shoes sit by the door, toes pointed outward, waiting. By the time the sun climbs up, the house is quiet in a way that does not feel like sleep.

At the corner lot where the men gather for work, the gravel is scattered with white dust from yesterday's drywall. Their trucks remain, doors locked, ladders strapped tight. These are the men who shingled roofs in August heat, who poured concrete until their backs stiffened like the slabs they smoothed. They paid taxes with numbers that were never meant to hold them. They pledged loyalty to a country that used their hands but would not hold them when they were sick. When the vans took them, they wore the same work gloves, palms cracked, still smelling of sawdust.

At school, the office hums with fluorescent light. A little girl presses her face to the glass, waiting for a father who always comes early. Her backpack is heavy with library books and a permission slip folded three times. The secretary whispers into the phone. No one says deportation out loud. At recess, the swings move without children. The girl drags her shoe through the dirt and asks if her dad will be home for dinner. The teacher looks down at her clipboard.

This was our land once, my grandfather says, tapping the table with a knuckle bent from fieldwork. The river did not always divide us. The border did not always slice through neighborhoods like a scar. Now we are told to prove we belong here, on soil our great-grandmothers harvested, in towns renamed by men who arrived on ships. The real foreigners built fences and called them laws. They took labor and called it opportunity. They denied care and called it policy.

At night the neighborhood holds its breath. Porch lights stay on longer than usual. Phones glow in dark kitchens. A mother sits upright on the edge of her bed, shoes still on, waiting for a call from a detention center hours away. The house feels split down the middle, like a board forced apart. Families are torn quietly, efficiently. Children learn new words—custody, removal, sponsor—before they learn long division. By midnight the street is still, but no one is resting.

The silence is not peace. It is absence.

Makenzie Partridge

Makenzie Partridge is a freshman on a biomedical pre-med track with a strong interest in human health, science, and storytelling. Alongside her studies in biology and chemistry, she works in a nursing home, where she gains firsthand experience with patient care and the complexities of aging and memory. She writes creative nonfiction and fiction that explores identity, atmosphere, and the quiet tensions of everyday life. Her recent work—including The Smell of Oranges—focuses on emotional nuance and the weight of what goes unsaid. She hopes to pursue a career in medicine while continuing to write, using both disciplines to better understand and give voice to human experience.

Title: The Smell of Oranges

By the end of the shift, everything smells like antiseptic and oranges.

The oranges are from Mrs. Alden. She keeps a ceramic bowl of them on her dresser, though she can no longer peel them herself.

“The smell reminds me of Florida of ‘62”, she says whenever someone inquires. Though no one really knows if she ever actually lived there.

When residents arrive, they are encouraged to bring pieces of their lives with them- objects that can be lifted, boxed, labeled. Photographs. Quilts. Lamps- that soften the overhead light into something less exact. Chairs that have already learned the shape of their bodies.

The idea that familiarity can be arranged.

But arrangement has limits.

Every room is built with the same measurements. The antiseptic is everywhere- sharp, sterile, baked into the walls and polished floors. The same bed that responds to buttons instead of bodies. The same floor that anticipates spills before they happen. The same call light, suspended within reach, an engineered form of asking.

The personal items don't erase any of that. They sit inside it, slightly misfit.

Mrs. Alden's room is no different. The oranges are placed carefully beside framed photographs- faces caught mid-expression, their context sealed behind glass. A faded quilt sits folded at the foot of the bed, stitched with florals that have softened with age.

Nothing in the room is accidental.

Nothing in the room quite belongs.

The nursing home hums in its own tired way. Wheelchairs click softly across the tile floors. Rubber soles squeak faintly as aids move from room to room. A television somewhere down the hall blares a game show too loudly, the laughter track echoing bursts that feel strangely hollow.

Someone is always calling for someone else.

“Hello? Can someone help me?” The voices drift through the halls like loose threads.

On paper, there are supposed to be more of us; in reality, it's just me. Sixty patients- one CNA. The number sits heavy in the back of my mind all shift long, like a clock that ticks louder every hour. Sixty rooms, sixty lives, sixty sets of needs that never quite line up in schedule.

Some need help eating, some need help walking, some just need someone to sit long enough to remind them they aren't alone.

It doesn't announce itself. It accumulates. It alters how you stand in a doorway, how long you let your hand rest on someone's shoulder before removing it, how often you check the clock without admitting you're checking. You begin everything already aware of the next.

“Makenzie?” Mrs. Alden's voice is thin and sharp.

“You disappeared again.”

“I was gone for five minutes.” I say, stepping into her doorway, leaning lightly against the frame.

Her room is half-lit by the late afternoon sun. The curtains are open just enough for the light to spill across the floor and climb the edge of her bed. Dust floats lazily in the beam like slow snow.

The air smells sweet, citrus trying its best to fight the chemically clean.

“That's what they all say,” she mutters, but she reaches for my hand anyway.

I used to think this job was about tasks. Pills at six. Showers before lunch. Charting before shift change. Efficiency, Precision. Checklist and schedules. But that's the version you put on paper. The real version is slower, heavier.

It's the refusal of Mr. Grandshaw to eat unless someone sits with him, even in silence. It's the repetition of Mrs. Widanka’s question- Is he coming? even though he passed eight years ago, which resets each morning without carrying any of the previous answers forward. It’s the way, time here doesn't pass so much as circulate.

“Am I dying?” Mrs. Alden asks suddenly.

The question lies between us, simple and unadorned. I don't flinch anymore like I used to.

“Not today,” I tell her.

She studies my face like she's checking for cracks.

“Good. I still haven't told you about the night I stole a police officer's hat.”

I pull the chair close to her bed. The vinyl sticks slightly to the back of my legs.

“You absolutely cannot drop that sentence and not continue.”

Her laugh is dry but real. For a moment, she doesn't look fragile. She looks mischievous. Alive. As she talks, I peel one of the oranges. The skin tears open with a soft rip. Juice beads on my fingers. Outside her door, a call light rings. Someone coughs. A cart rolls past.

I am aware, always, of how thin the line is here. People think working in a nursing home means you get used to death. That's only half the truth. You get used to the nearness of it. The way out sits quietly in the corner chair. The way it waits.

Last month, I held Mr. Crosier’s hand while he took his last breath.

There was no crescendo. No final speech. Just the uneven rhythm of air and the faint, clean scent of his blanket. His daughter cried softly, as if anything louder might disturb something sacred.

Afterward, I stood in the supply closet for longer than I needed to, not for privacy, but because it was the first space available that didn’t require anything from me. Shelves of gauze, gloves in ordered boxes, labels facing outward. Everything in that room was designed for use, not for meaning.

You don't clock out of that part.

“Are you listening?” Mrs. Alden says, squinting at me.

“Every word,” I say.

And I am…Because here's the truth, I don't always say out loud: I am afraid of becoming numb. I am afraid of moving too quickly, treating people like rooms to rotate through instead of lives in front of me. Afraid of treating people like tasks instead of stories.

But then Mrs. Alden steals half the orange slice from my hand and winks at me.

“You are too serious, you'll wrinkle early.”

I laugh, and it startles me how real it sounds, how easily it comes.

At the end of the night, when the hallways grow quieter and the sky outside turns deep blue, I walk past each door one more time. Soft breathing. A murmured dream. The faint glow of nightlights.

This place holds more history than any museum. Wars survived. Babies raised. Love lost. Regrets carried like folded letters in the jacket pocket. And somehow, I am allowed to stand inside the last chapters.

When I step outside, the cold air feels enormous after the small warmth of those rooms. My scrub smells like antiseptic… and oranges. I sit in my car for a moment before starting the engine, thinking about how strange it is that in a place so close to endings, I have learned more about staying. Not dramatic staying. Not heroic staying.

Just pulling up a chair.

Just peeling the orange.

Just saying “Not today.”

And meaning it.

Sriyansh Vemula

Sriyansh Vemula is a first-year Biomedical Sciences' student on a pre-med track. He wrote this in response to farmer and food justice advocate, Leah Penniman's visit to campus as sponsored by the Humanities 115: Voice and Identity course.

Title: When Hunger Is Louder Than Justice

Leah Penniman stands at the podium and asks what seems like a ridiculous question: "Does anyone in this room eat food?" The answer is obvious to the crowd. Then she quotes Fannie Lou Hamer, a sharecropper turned civil rights activist: "If you have 400 quarts of greens and gumbo soup canned for the winter, nobody can push you around or tell you what to do." The point she's making then becomes clear. When you control someone's food, you control their voice. When you can't feed your children, you put down your protest sign. As Leah puts it, you crawl through the dust with your hands outstretched, and you beg. You stop talking about justice because your hunger is louder than your principles. Leah Penniman's message that food autonomy enables political freedom exposes how systemic oppression works most effectively not through violent silencing but through the economic dependence that makes resistance nearly impossible, proving that amplifying marginalized voices means nothing if those voices belong to people who are starving.

Leah doesn't let her audience treat the food system's racism as history or someone else's problem. She opens with that question about eating food, establishes common ground, and then reveals that everyone who eats benefits from a system built on silencing people through economic desperation. Fannie Lou Hamer's quote works because it provides a concrete number, 400 quarts. The specificity gives the claim authority. Then she invokes a disturbing and degrading image of people crawling on their knees through dust, hands stretched out to feed their children. She traces the same pattern from slavery to convict leasing to sharecropping to the Bracero program to H2A visas today, arguing that these represent the same system under different names. She calls it the DNA of the food system, stolen land and exploited labor, and that DNA hasn't changed. By opening with "do you eat food?" and emphasizing "this is happening in 2019," she eliminates the distance between the audience and their idea of oppression.

This message resonated with me because I understand the calculation Leah describes. My family, like many others, understands making choices based on economic security rather than desire. What Leah's talk clarified is that this calculation becomes more brutal the further down the economic ladder you go. I can think about future plans and possibilities. Farmworkers Leah described can't even think past the next meal. I eat three meals a day. I'm sitting in college. I

benefit from a system that keeps others too desperate to organize, too hungry to protest, too economically vulnerable to use their voices.

But the message goes deeper than food. Food becomes a metaphor for everything required to exist as a full human being with freedom. When you're worried about keeping a roof over your head, you can't organize a union. When you're working three jobs to survive, you can't attend town halls.

When you're one medical emergency away from bankruptcy, you can't risk getting arrested at a protest. The 400 quarts represent more than nutrition. They represent the foundation that takes you from someone begging for scraps into someone who can make demands. Oppressed groups don't lack courage or intelligence or important perspectives. They lack the security to use them. Systems are designed to keep them so cautious, so desperate, so dependent that using their voices becomes nearly impossible.

Discussions about voice often focus on amplifying marginalized voices, as if volume were the only issue. But Leah's message reveals the conditions that come before protesting. You can hand someone a microphone, but if they're worried about feeding their kids tonight, they're not going to use it to criticize the system that controls their food access. The microphone is useless. Worse than useless, actually, because it creates the illusion of access while changing nothing about the power dynamic. It's like asking someone to speak freely while holding a gun to their head. Technically possible, but it's practically absurd. What Leah depicts is that the most effective silencing happens through economic control. People aren't only ignored, but they're actively kept dependent, so they can't speak up. You don't need to threaten someone into silence if you can make their survival depend on staying quiet.

The question that's always bothered me about history is why oppressed groups didn't resist more. I think Leah's message provides the answer. It wasn't a lack of awareness or courage. It was hunger. It was the 400 quarts they didn't have. When daily survival is uncertain, why would you fight for survival? Resistance needs a foundation. You can't fight when you're starving. You can't organize when you're exhausted. You can't risk everything when you have nothing. The most evil part of oppression isn't the violence. It's the way it makes you complicit in your own silencing by making survival depend on compliance. Workers who don't report abuse because they need the job. Immigrants who don't seek help because they need to stay in the country. The mechanism is always the same: if you control the resource, you control the voice.

Leah ended her talk with Toni Morrison: "Grab this land, take it, hold it, shake it, squeeze it, and pass it on." The verbs used are possessive, active, and insisting on change. They're the opposite of begging. You don't grab what you're begging for. You don't hold what someone is graciously allowing you to borrow. You don't squeeze what isn't yours. Morrison's language assumes

ownership, assumes power, assumes the right to make demands rather than requests. Land means food. Food means you can tell the truth without starving. Food means you can stop asking permission to exist. The real question isn't whether marginalized people have important things to say - obviously, they do. The question is what those of us with economic security are willing to sacrifice to change the system we benefit from. Supporting marginalized communities requires supporting their material security first: their land, their autonomy, their ability to exist without crawling through the dust with outstretched hands. The food system isn't broken. It's working exactly as designed, keeping some people comfortable while keeping others hungry and unable to speak. We're all eating the fruits of someone else's silence. The question is whether our comfort is worth their voice, and if the answer is no, then it's time to grab the land back, hold each other accountable, squeeze justice from a system built on exploitation, and make sure they have the 400 quarts to finally make demands instead of requests.

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