

Through the Lens of Dissent: Photography as a Voice for Change

Growing up I watched my father, a migrant laborer, cradle his sunburned hands after working long days in the fields. My father came to the Yakima valley from Mexico with nothing but calloused hands and a dream of feeding his family. The Yakima Valley Museum's exhibition *Our Stories, Our Lives* reminds me that my father's story is part of a larger narrative. Featuring Irwin Nash's photographs, the exhibit serves as a tribute to farmworkers whose labor is usually hidden. These images quietly resist the erasure of an often overlooked community and illustrate why the freedom to dissent matters. The freedom to dissent is vital in modern society because it outwardly protects democratic life and prevents the tyranny that results from suppressed voices but there is also a quiet, more subtle harm inflicted on creative expression that arises when dissent is suppressed.

Since the creation of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in 2003 under President George W. Bush, raids on workplaces and homes have been normalized. Today, we live under another Republican president who wields more unchecked power than his predecessors because he punishes people who exercise their freedom to dissent. *The Guardian* quoted a farmworker saying how he felt "hunted like an animal," while explaining that raids cost workers their livelihoods because it drives them into hiding at home (Sainato). Stories like these reveal the most obvious consequence of suppressing dissent: silence that enables tyranny. In the absence of dissent, policies and power go unchecked. In the *Journal of the American Judicature Society*, Justice William O. Douglas, wrote that in such cases "freedom of speech...would be dangerous to those in power since they would create doubts and suspicions...or generate opposition to

them” (Douglas 166). When people feel hunted, they start to shrink. Dissent offers a way to reclaim that stolen space. Speaking truth to power, whether through protest, art or even whispered conversations which reminds us that our worth is not contingent on approval from those who govern.

I have seen how fear of reprisal keeps people from questioning those in power. My father whispers “*la migra*” as if speaking its name could summon it while I hear stories of citizens and non-citizens alike being handcuffed because their skin is brown. Andrea Velez, a U.S. citizen was arrested during an immigration raid in Los Angeles in June 2025. Witnesses reported agents grabbing her without asking for identification (Anguiano). This is yet another story that shows that without the freedom to dissent, democracy and international human rights become undermined. When a nation known for constitutional freedoms tolerates profiling and silencing, it sends a message to its own people that they are not protected. Numerous U.S. citizens have been swept up in raids. A government report from GAO, the U.S. Government Accountability Office, found that “ICE arrested 674, detained 121, and removed 70 U.S. citizens from... 2015 through 2020” (GAO). The report was made public in 2021. My father, who once moved through town with easy confidence has become a cautious man, turning down invitations to community events and always scanning for unmarked SUVs. But his fears are not irrational, they are supported by official numbers. Without dissent, the lines between lawful authority and tyranny blur together.

The more subtle consequence that occurs in the absence of the freedom to dissent involves cultural expression. Art flourishes when people are free to question and to imagine different

possibilities. Irwin Nash's Yakima photographs exist because he chose to keep returning with his camera to fields that others preferred not to see. The freedom he had to exercise creative expression through photography, help a community tell its own story. Such art raises awareness of social and political injustices and gives marginalized communities a platform to share their experiences. UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization emphasizes why artistic freedom matters. It is defined as "the freedom to imagine, create, and distribute diverse cultural expressions free from government censorship" (UNESCO). Artistic expression is not just for enjoyment, it is a fundamental human right that we need. Art serves as a powerful medium for dissent by allowing individuals and communities to express opposition to government policies. When dissent can flourish, art and identity grow. This is a direct callback to the first amendment of the U.S. constitution which Douglas comments "creates a sanctuary around the citizen's beliefs. His ideas, his conscience, his convictions are his own concern, not the government's (Douglas). Dissent nurtures art and identity as a fundamental human right that sustains healthy democracies, and when it is constrained, art, vulnerable communities and democratic life all suffer.

A healthy American democracy depends on protecting dissent. These consequences are not abstract concepts, they are lived experiences within my own community. I see them in my father's cautious steps. They are also present in the resilience of those who resist. Each act of dissent, whether a photograph, a question at a town hall or a march through city streets, chips away at the fear that keeps people silent. When I think about Justice Douglas's legacy, I picture him as a boy walking the same Yakima streets my father walks today and internalizing the notion

that citizens must be free to challenge authority. Freedom to dissent is not just about grand gestures or famous court cases. It is about the quiet courage of a farm worker telling his story, the willingness of a witness to film an unjust arrest, the determination of artists to capture unseen realms and the insistence of ordinary people that their government answer to them. Dissent, in other words, is a habit of the heart. It keeps our democracy alive, our art vibrant and our communities humane.

Works Cited

- Anguiano, Dani. "US Citizen Arrested during Ice Raid in What Family Describes as 'Kidnapping.'" *The Guardian*, 26 June 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/26/immigration-ice-raid-andrea-velez#:~:text=A%20US%20citizen%20was%20arrested,%E2%80%9Ckidnapping%E2%80%9D%20by%20federal%20immigration%20agents>. Accessed 24 July 2025.
- Artistic Freedom*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2019, https://www.unesco.org/creativity/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/01/artistic_freedom_pdf_web.pdf#:~:text=cultural%20expressions%20free%20of%20governmental,is%20essential%20for%C2%A0the%C2%A0wellbeing%20of%20societies. Accessed 24 July 2025.
- Douglas, William O. *Points of Rebellion*. Random House, 1970, *Constitution Society*, https://constitution.org/2-Authors/wod/wod_por.htm, Accessed 24 July 2025.
- Douglas, William. "Procedural Safeguards in the Bill of Rights." *Journal of the American Judicature Society*, vol. 31, 1948, pp. 166. *HeinOnline*
- Sainato, Michael. "US Undocumented Farm Workers Feel 'hunted like Animals' amid Trump's Immigration Raids." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 14 July 2025, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jul/14/us-farm-workers-ice-raids#:~:text=Undocumented%20farm%20workers%20feel%20they%E2%80%99re,up%20its%20crackdown%20on%20immigration.
- "Our Stories, Our Lives." *Visit the Museum | Yakima Valley Museum*, Yakima Valley Museum, yvmuseum.org/exhibits/our-stories-our-lives. Accessed 24 July 2025.
- United States, Congress, U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Immigration Enforcement: Actions Needed to Better Track Cases Involving U.S. Citizenship Investigations*, GAO, 20 July 2021. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-487#:~:text=Available%20data%20indicate%20ICE%20and,March%202020>. Accessed 24 July 2025.