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**2020 Vision**

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**Cover and Back Cover by Eve Wood**

The St. John's University Humanities Review  
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Maureen H. Daniels, Editor  
Justin Lerner, Assistant Editor  
Cover Art by Eve Wood

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“What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening.”

Donald J. Trump, Veteran of Foreign Wars convention,  
St. Louis Missouri, July, 24, 2018

## **2020 Vision: The Humanities in the Age of Trump**



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## Preface

*The Humanities Review*, founded in 2002 by Paul Devlin, is home to an extraordinary group of editors, guest editors, poets, writers, artists, contributors and volunteers. The importance of historical and political movements within the humanities continues to fill the pages of *The Humanities Review*, and we would like to thank everyone who has contributed to our publication over the last seventeen years.

This issue, *The Humanities Review*, Volume 16, 2019, contemplates national unrest, progressive values, and the literature of the under-represented during the Trump presidency. We are excited to share these many talented voices with you including poetry by David Groff, Kate Lutzner, Stephen Paul Miller, and Eve Wood, a short story by Gabriel Brownstein, critical essays by Denise Ayo, Sarah Jefferis, and Avery Ware, a film review by Mara Lee Grayson, and book reviews by Jacob Bruggeman, Joseph Donica, Tammie Jenkins, Amy M. King, Ilse Schrynmakers, Tanner Alan Sebastian, Simone Smith and Johnny Wiley. We are also excited to share new paintings and sketches by Eve Wood.

Happy reading!

Maureen H. Daniels, Editor  
Justin Lerner, Assistant Editor

## **Eve Wood**

### **Hillary Clinton's Nipples**

Eleanor would have approved.  
Stoic, sometimes irascible in winter --  
Delivering a speech once in Massachusetts  
A snowflake fluttered down inside her blouse.  
Sleep deprived, windswept off the coast of Maine,  
Itching ferociously at the Summit meeting in Luzern,  
Hillary Clinton's nipples have lost  
Their appeal,  
Their strained enthusiasm,  
Erupting from behind the blue Hound's-tooth suit;  
It used to be she could leave a room speechless.  
Now her calves get all the acclaim,  
And while it's true her nipples sometimes give her away,  
Powering through a recent sanction, only her signature  
required, yet she could not help  
But let herself go,  
Half stunned by the beatific face of an intern --  
Stardust freckles and cinnabar hair --  
That girl made her blood shout.  
It was all too much,  
The cameras, the questions, the overhead lights  
Burning a hole at the base of her neck.  
She had to get away,  
Rip off her blouse and run from the room  
Out into the over-populated streets  
To show the world  
How much  
She cares!

## **Eve Wood**

### **The Working Dead**

The dead have started a franchise,  
Donating their bones for oil,  
Marrow transplants for the living,  
All purpose adhesives,  
Bungee cords and walking sticks.  
The dead have gone into business once and for all  
Because things are that bad,  
Our collective grief  
Having permeated the surface of the earth,  
Rallying even the dead hearts of dead men.

The dead have begun to weep for us,  
Rising from their sodden beds,  
Heralded not by sadness for themselves,  
But for the man who beats the dog into submission,  
Breaking its spine with the back of his hand --  
To see the fate of the world on his face  
And know that it is ours.

The dead can be seen dropping their bones at the sides of the road,  
Handing a femur to the woman in the blood red car,  
Jawbone to a passerby,  
The knuckles to a child.  
The dead want us to live,  
To take what they have given us  
To reconstitute the earth,  
Burn their bodies by the light of the sun.

The dead will not embrace the earth  
Until they are sure we have learned  
Not to take them for granted,  
Not to stare or  
Plunder their bones to the sea.

**Eve Wood**

**The Late Field**

*for Anne Marie*

Has nothing in it  
But time --  
The widening swath of low  
Hanging clouds we must  
All walk through.  
Even the air contains a stillness  
Like a breath that's been  
Held for too long.  
It is the undeniable final expanse  
Of your life  
Where every blade of grass  
Seems to sigh,  
Strangely singular and alone  
In a moment that  
Passes too quickly.  
The late field has no sky above it;  
No sun sprung  
In the inviolate vault of Heaven.  
It is simple and complete,  
A widening loop  
Of desire that keeps us  
Walking out to its edges  
And beyond.

**Stephen Paul Miller**

**ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACKFACE**

*after Pittsburgh, New Zealand...*

Strange now to think of you Holocaust  
I can't say you've made a full-blown return  
In a way you're hiding, you're too ordered  
A blanket of snow shielding us from the more disheveled ground  
Of how hatred really kills.  
Mass annihilation cleanses all the other  
Piecemeal annihilations.  
You can say there are no real connections.  
You can support the viral force  
Right here in Indiana.

West Lafayette, IN  
November 1, 2018

**Stephen Paul Miller**

## **HOW I GOT MY REAL NAME**

“Stephen” was for my mother’s Uncle Shalom—she loved his sweet smile and how fluidly he interpreted the Talmud.

When my mother was a little girl, a hit and run bus killed Uncle Shalom, a push cart peddler. His body lay there for hours. My mother told me,

“People thought he was drunk. They took his wallet.

My father couldn’t find him.”

Whenever I asked about my name, my mother would cry.

She took Paul from my father’s aunt, Tanta Pearl, who died after her year at Auschwitz.

From James Joyce, I learned Stephen was the first

Christian martyr (stoned and beatified),

and Paul was the first Christian, Jesus being Jewish.

“Stephen Paul Miller” was the most beautiful,

WASPiest name my mother could imagine.

She loved my father’s father’s *real* last name,

Maleskiewitz, but passing a Miller High Life

Champaign of Bottled Beer sign, my mother said,

“See, ‘Miller’ means the best in everything!”

But then I read the news and found

I was in Trump’s administration — Stephen Miller —

the only senior White House aide to knock Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus,” saying The Statue of Liberty wouldn’t really want “*your* poor.”

That me is Jewish too, but he doesn’t have a middle name.

Lucky when my mother named me “Stephen *Paul* Miller”

she added that dash right in the middle,

a sweet addition to the standard bris, like the sugar cubes

Orthodox Jews place near the eight-day-old,

making up for what the mohel and history had removed.

**David Groff**

**DAVID TRUMP**

Let me say I have no say,  
I the rather renegade son:  
I shirked the guilt,  
the towering father-phallus,  
the grasping hands, although

I confess I thrived up there,  
a Rapunzel of sorts (great hair!),  
squinting in the unobstructed glare,  
food and fabrics fed to me,  
my childhood presented on a tray.

But through some sturdy, winning  
self-made self I will not advertise,  
I distinguished myself  
from extravaganza, though  
I love him like a father.

Don't expect me to chide him,  
to do more than blink because  
I am not a family business—  
I like art, I patronize,  
I favor the productive aliens,

I ride the subway like a stranger.  
I kill no endangered animals—  
I am a trophy I keep in a closet.  
I was born with this face.  
My love from my lovers is huge.

Though we speak weekly,  
I never critique his hands.  
I am a couple mothers away,  
I know not to mention money.  
I run for nothing,

so not for me your stings and buzz,  
though I sympathize. I see you  
there, distinguish your distinctions.  
I am a private jet.  
I will never need to land.

**David Groff**

**MIDDLE-AGED WHITE MAN IN A HOODIE**

He wears it as if by default,  
the zipper revealing skin,

a vestment of possibility,  
its youth-mantle fallen

against a bristled neck  
to display a forthright skull,

a Viking prow of ship-self  
as he sails down a street

he knows he pays taxes on,  
believing in no need to cover,

lacking any demand to shield  
or veil his head unless

the sky gives him rain  
or he decides he's cold.



**David Groff**

**MY COWBOY HAT**

A joke I got in Nebraska,  
the store clerk terse, knowing  
I was an outsider, buying irony,

this hard felt cup with its resistant brim  
never to be worn to drive cattle  
or plow a pickup into a field—

instead, something I'd make a hub  
for some East Coast two-step,  
some mannish swagger,

boots to go with or not, but not  
how a man making \$10 an hour  
to push cows across a clouded plain

would wear it to protect  
the sun from creasing his neck  
into a puzzle of cells,

allow him to squint only  
when he wanted to squint—  
a hat meant to warm or shield him.

So as for me, I must turn over  
the hat to my urban sky,  
invert its purpose and know it,

put inside my beggar's cup  
their names as I reckon them,  
Nebraska names I never chose to know

of men and women who make  
a living under a practical sun  
they follow as I do not,

whose glare I should endure:  
Wade, Julio, Tiffany, Jared,  
Amerigo, Christopher, Jewel.

**David Groff**

**NOISE COMPLAINT**

The decrepit car of some young dude  
roars deliberately loud in the night.  
Yeah, it betrays his belligerent need.  
Do I have to run him down to track  
his particular character's route,  
the number of hairs on his chin,  
the woman or man he revs to impress?

Some sounds carry over place and time—  
urges that pulse inside that guy and me  
and decades and millennia of men,  
bursting into the stupid vital swagger  
of jousts, swordfights, fists, sexting,  
dragging Main. Our anger, our green pride,  
and pride's twitchy lonesomeness arise

like new year's day in new men running,  
differing just in body, tool, and name,  
and in the ears their cuts make bleed.  
The engine that splits the neighborhood says,  
Oil me, put your foot to my floor, make me  
my forerunners: they cried out like wolves.

**David Groff**

**PHOTO OF MY FATHER STANDING NEXT TO HIS GRAVE**

We knew what we were doing  
Though we did not say what we were doing  
Though my father, a well of a man  
Inside of whom words echoed directly, knew  
More than he would let himself think, whereas  
For me every grievous association  
Thuds like earth's church bell.  
We knew he would share this double bed  
With his wife my mother dead three months.  
He did not stand like a man who caught a fish.  
He did not plant his feet like a man before the Capitol.  
This was no equestrian battlefield.  
His pants dragged, his jacket slid to the right.  
He looked at me squinting, me  
Whose idea this probably was,  
Witness and instigator, though he was willing,  
This man of mementos whose edges  
He held like pictures of portent.  
Now I am here in the vertical space  
His body took up beside the stone,  
And he's down there, prone below this baby grass.  
Nobody's around to take my picture.

**David Groff**

**SMALL PEONY**

A little fist waiting to uncurl,  
a little girl's hand gripping  
a ruby ring from the gumball machine,  
her bee-stung pout—

the little girl being you, my mother,  
with your fist that could hit,  
the princess leading the pack,  
wielding your pink flag,

and late in womanhood loving a flower  
extravagant as you were not and were,  
age weighing your petals until  
they bloomed into their wrinkles,

bleeding rouge at their seams,  
sighing into a deeper scent,  
falling into tissue messages  
I fold in my palm.

David Groff

## THROWBACK THURSDAY

You are wearing tragic plaids,  
all your colors puddled into purple.  
Your shoulders are square with resolve & pads,  
your collar pops with promise,  
your sleeves puff like muscles.  
Your hair is a hayloft, feathered to death.  
Your mother looks like your girlfriend.  
Your girlfriend is looking past you.

Your face is sunburned & stupid & nobody  
has yet indented your teeth with his boot.  
You are a toothbrush before it was used.  
You believe in a system of something—  
it shows in the narrow thirst of your face,  
the way you erect your mouth in a smile.  
You might as well be the last  
of the passenger pigeons, shot in 1906.  
Your genitals led you out of the garden.

You'd drag the Camaro down Main  
if you had the key, if you had a Main.  
If you had the key you'd drive the Camaro  
if you had a Camaro  
past its factory & into the past,  
you would drive six days of the week  
& rest on the wheel on the seventh  
if you were a Camaro,

you would leap from extinction right out  
of your dyes & your serrated borders, out  
of time's right angles,  
you'd throttle yourself  
into next week & back again & out.

**David Groff**

**WHY YOU LIVED TO BE 98**

Some recipe of habit or fear,  
along with pleasure, kept you,  
the Great Beyond too beyond for you,  
or else extinct if those atheists  
steal you for their meaty cemetery.

The frozen imitation crab cake,  
a forkful of a pot pie saved for later,  
sweetened milk, sunlight on your face,  
a broad belch, a grandchild's glance,  
the cat-purr you felt but couldn't hear:

All the inadvertent savoring,  
the Buddha moments unacknowledged,  
even the complaints delicious –  
the hardened bowel, the silent phone,  
the dead ones hazy and precise—

all the little reiterations  
a primal practice of a life alive,  
notice of another day  
you would advertently survive.  
Communion with a guest like God.

**Kate Lutzner**

**Luster**

The sound of tulips, and luster,  
and greed. All the actions  
contained in empathy cannot  
save us. It is the season  
of concern, a way to get past  
feeling. I worry myself into  
a beaten egg, mixing  
sentiment until there is no  
clear definition. Even love  
gets blurred, sitting next  
to you last night. The funeral  
mansion won't leave my  
mind, my head  
buried in your lap.

**Kate Lutzner**

**Heat**

I moved my mouth against infatuation  
or fate. You were on the other end  
of my misgivings, new in your chair.  
We'd been worn down by love, little  
nubs presenting themselves in the heat.  
I imagined what your mother might look like,  
beautiful and in need of repair. You said  
my apartment resembled a hotel,  
everything matching and smooth. I walked  
around touching one item after another.  
I wanted to caress the life out of you, to leave you  
wooden and cast-off. You pinned me  
to the wall, your kiss what I wanted  
and what I didn't want. The air is filled  
with nests, everything available  
out the window. After you left, I watched  
a family of birds. Nothing has ever  
seemed so sad, the way they leaned in  
and out again, the way they reasoned  
with each other, the blood blooming  
in them.

---



**Kate Lutzner**

**The supermoon and the debate**

And on and on, the supermoon – we get  
as close as possible, as if a few more  
inches will make a difference. My life  
is touching your life, we are intersecting  
in the way I lean into you during the debate,  
wanting to be as close as possible without  
having sex, like with the moon, only there  
is a difference between people and paper,  
what it looks like to me from the sky, cut-  
out and visible, an austere site to put  
my longing. It is also a hunter's moon,  
I learn, which is different from a blood  
moon – I don't know all the nuances, but  
I do know there are issues of deep concern  
in the election, and you make me not  
care about anything except the moment  
we are in, lying next to one another  
on my bed, the dog repairing his injuries  
from where I nicked him in a haircut  
earlier. I am no closer to God  
lying next to you, but I am piecing together  
a group of wildflowers you picked, Bee  
Balm and Cardinal Flower, Red Columbine  
and Rose Twisted-stalk. I don't want  
to tell you – despite all this, I have felt  
like a failure.

## **The Surreal World: Racism, Capitalism, and Complacency, Millennial-Style**

**Review by Mara Lee Grayson**, California State University, Dominguez Hills

Let's face it: Millennials got screwed.

While Baby Boomer and Gen-X pundits never fail to remind us that the members of today's youngest adult generation are spoiled and oversensitive, lack a work ethic, and flit from job to job seeking some unattainable satisfaction, rarely does public attention turn toward the inhospitable socioeconomic and political conditions Millennials inherited from their elders.

Millennials are more educated than their older siblings and parents yet came of age or entered the workforce during the worst economic recession in nearly a century. Millennials work longer hours than their Gen-X colleagues and, as the iPhone generation, are always on call, yet many cannot afford to rent without roommates or own homes. The list of inaccuracies in the representation of Millennials is long, but perhaps most troubling about the perception that dominates contemporary popular media is that a depiction grounded in white, middle-class, suburban Americana has been universally (mis)applied to the most ethno-racially diverse generation in American history.

In the surreal satire *Sorry to Bother You*, debut writer-director Boots Riley has created an alternate universe both absurd and frustratingly, horrifyingly relatable. Part manifesto, part morality tale, the movie offers an intersectional look at contemporary American racism that is critical, comprehensive, original, and uniquely Millennial.

Cassius Green (Lakeith Stanfield), like many Millennials, really wants a job. He wants a job so much, in fact, that he pads his resume with nonexistent experience, lists less responsible friends as references, and brings generic trophies to his interview at RegalView, a telemarketing firm that peddles the sort of general interest publications one used to find advertised in the back pages of popular magazines. The hiring manager sees through these ploys but is convinced nonetheless: "I don't care if you have experience," he says. "You have initiative and you can read."

With that, before the credits roll, Cash, as he is called, lands himself a job. There is no salary, only commission, but it's a start. Like many Millennials, however, Cash wants more than just a paycheck. He's not sure what he wants exactly but he lies in bed plagued by existential questions like "No one on Earth will have existed... What will I have done that matters?"

We don't know much about Cash's life before he begins working for RegalView, except that he lives in his uncle's garage, drives a beat-up sedan he gasses up forty cents at a time, and has a girlfriend, Detroit (Tessa Thompson), a politically-engaged artist whose passion Cash seems to envy.

On his first day at work, his new manager, a disheveled white man with neck tattoos, warns, "Don't be lazy," an admonition loaded with racist rhetoric to which Cash displays no visible reaction, and reminds Cash of RegalView's motto: "Stick to the script." Script in hand, Cash cold-calls a montage of potential customers: a white couple at dinner, a white couple

having sex, an older white woman who, when Cash tries to be friendly, sobs about her husband's illness. He follows the script, but he can't seem to make a sale.

"Use your white voice," advises a more experienced telemarketer (played by Danny Glover). A white voice, he explains, is less about pitch and cadence than it is about attitude: it's the voice of someone who hasn't a care, someone who has "never been fired, only laid off." It's what white people "think they're *supposed* to sound like."

The complexity of that statement, like a lot of lines in the movie, could occupy the entirety of this review.

Cash's white voice (dubbed in by David Cross) provides a satirical, jarring take on codeswitching: for much of the movie, Cross's words and Stanfield's lips are (seemingly intentionally) out of sync. Other characters in the movie appear to recognize the conceit but, in a move that speaks to the magical realism of the story, only Cash seems to be troubled by it. He gets used to it over time, as do viewers, which is the point.

Soon, the telemarketers unionize, leaving Cash torn between his ethical and personal obligations to his coworkers and his ambitions. He takes a promotion to Power Caller, a role that comes with a talking elevator and a new product to peddle: slave labor reconceived as a convenient lifestyle choice. It would be easy to chalk Cash's choices up to greed, but Riley and Stanfield create in Cash a more complex, if not exactly sympathetic, figure.

All of this happens in the first half hour. A lot more happens over the next hour and fifteen minutes but, with a movie as visually appealing and disturbing as this, it needs to be seen to be believed.

Though clearly a comedy, it is worth nothing that the movie isn't always laugh-out-loud funny. It's filled with jokes that sometimes hit and sometimes miss: the obvious ones, like the telemarketers' repeated comments about calling during mealtimes, are clever but mostly forgettable; the moments that work best are those that are so uncomfortable, so laden with truth, and so horrifying, that there's nothing to do but awkwardly, helplessly laugh.

Most brilliant are the details, like the allusions in Detroit's handmade song lyrics earrings, which include lines from protest songs by Prince, Bob Dylan, and the anti-fascist resistance of the Italian Civil War, and the racialized marketing campaigns employed by Worry Free, a gargantuan company with a corporate structure part Silicon Valley, part Wall Street, part Nazi regime. Against this backdrop, the polite intrusion of the movie's title – and the etiquette to which it refers – seems especially ludicrous.

While most reviews have categorized *Sorry to Bother You* as a movie about race and capitalism, its gaze is far more intersectional. The movie takes on racism, capitalism, political hierarchy, global technology, and popular media, but rather than tease out one thread to emphasize, it acknowledges how each of these systems bolsters the others to maintain broader societal inequity. For audiences inclined toward linear thinking and clear solutions to manageable problems, the movie might feel cluttered and overwhelming. For the Millennial audience accustomed to the onslaught of visual and auditory input that characterizes life in the digital age, the approach is fitting and necessary, which is precisely why the movie's surrealism

works: its alternate version of the present-day United States looks frighteningly like the country we are currently living in.

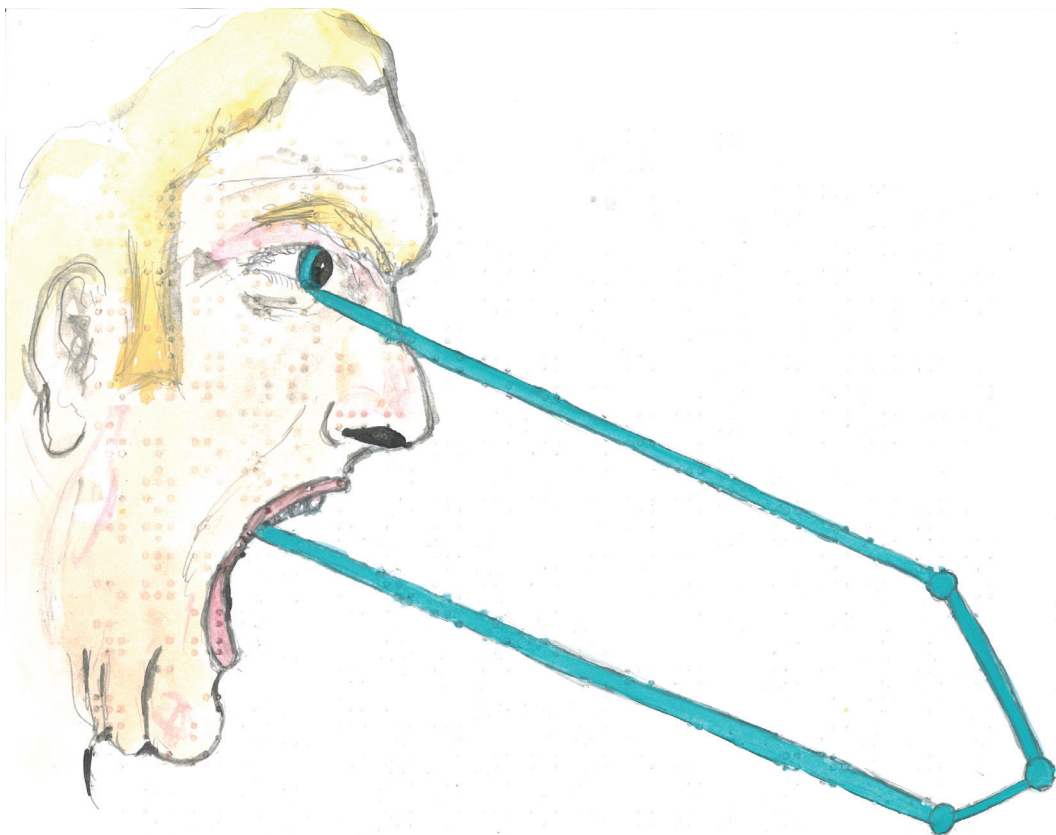
Many American Millennials used their first presidential election vote to elect the first Black man to the White house, or, four years later, to keep him there. In 2016, they voted in record numbers, many in support of a Democratic Socialist primary candidate or a female presidential candidate. Two and a half years later, with a tyrannical jester playing president, the system seems corrupt beyond repair, yet when Millennials attempt to challenge the system from the inside by running for office, like 28-year-old Queens Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, older politicians call them immature, idealistic, and unrealistic.

Stick to the script, Cash and his colleagues are told. Millennials are told the same – and while so many young Americans rage against the script, as we delay owning homes and starting families in record numbers, we can't help but feel that we've been cheated out of something. Like Cash, we know the system is evil, but we still want the success its façade promises.

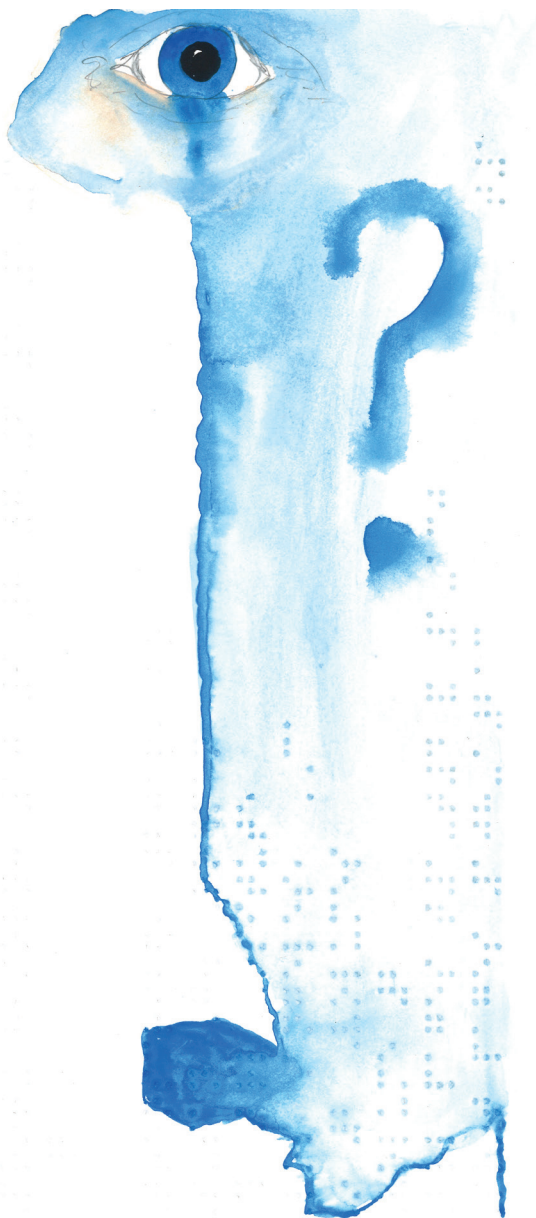
Boots Riley is not a Millennial, but he knows the world we have inherited – and what it has done to us.

### **Work Cited**

*Sorry to Bother You*. Directed by Boots Riley, Annapurna Pictures, 2018.



**Braille 1 by Eve Wood**



**Braille 2 by Eve Wood**

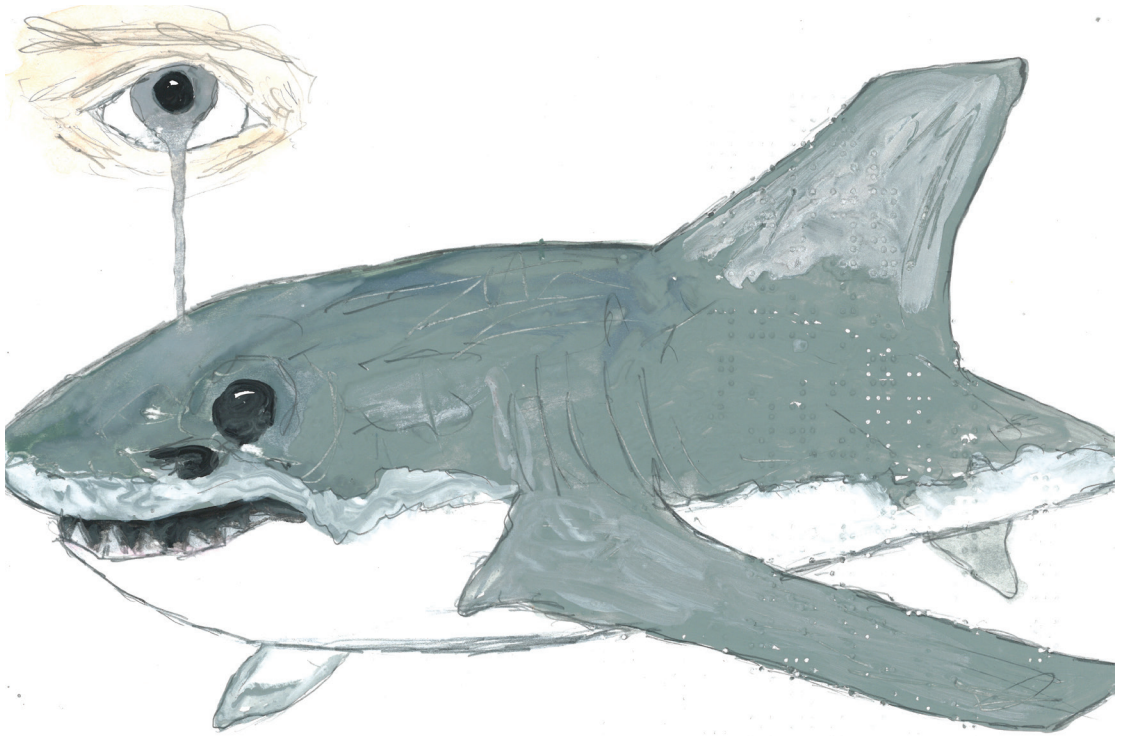


**Braille 3 by Eve Wood**



**Braille 4 by Eve Wood**





**Braille 5 by Eve Wood**

## Unit Cohesion: Parenting and Transgender Identity in Laurie Frankel's *This is How It Always Is*

Review by Dr. Amy M. King, St. John's University

*This Is How It Always Is*, by Laurie Frankel; 336 pp. New York: Flatiron Books, 2017.

"July 26, 2017: President Trump announced, via Twitter, that 'the United States Government will not accept or allow Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the US Military.'" <sup>1</sup> When Donald Trump reversed Barack Obama's opening of the armed services to transgender people, he invoked the old saws of "unit cohesion," "morale," and "efficiency." Similar arguments, of course, had been made around the integration of African-Americans, women, and those belonging to the LGBT+ community into the military, objections which in time seemed patently ridiculous. But in reversing the extension of civil rights to transgender servicemembers Donald Trump was original in one way: he became the first president to overturn and set back the integration of a minority group into the military. This is the position also taken by a character in Laurie Frankel's 2017 novel *This is How it Always Is*, expressed through a video for a high-school history class. The reaction by his liberal parents is one of horrified shock: "He can't be homophobic. He can't be antigay. He can't possibly be antitrans and living in our household."<sup>2</sup>

As this scene from Frankel's novel suggests, we live in a moment when the acknowledgement—as well as the rights—of transgender people inspire polarized reactions. On the side of positive acknowledgment and protection of the transgendered, the state of New York recently passed the *Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act*, which ensures that transgender people are covered by the state's anti-discrimination laws.<sup>3</sup> A few weeks later New York joined fourteen other states and the District of Columbia in passing a law prohibiting "conversion therapy" for minors, a legislative victory that is germane to Frankel's novel insofar as her main character, Claude/Poppy, is a child: five years old, and the youngest of five brothers, Claude says that when he grows up he wants to be a girl.<sup>4</sup> Acting on behalf of those who are hostile to transgender people, the Trump administration through the Department of Health and Human Services is attempting, as the *New York Times* reports, to legislate the term transgender "out of existence" by "narrowly defining gender as a biological, immutable condition determined by genitalia at birth."<sup>5</sup> This attempt to roll back federal civil rights protections of transgender people resists the liberal cultural trend of acceptance that gender may be less fixed and not necessarily equivalent to the sex assigned at birth. Polarization doesn't begin to capture the battle that is currently raging in American society and jurisprudence over transgender rights and the definition of gender.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Discrimination Administration: Anti-Transgender and Anti-LGBT Actions," *The National Center for Transgender Equality*, <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration>.

<sup>2</sup> Laurie Frankel, *This is How it Always Is* (New York: Flatiron, 2017), 164.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Lovett, "Transgender anti-discrimination bill passes NYS legislature, law would ban conversion therapy," *New York Daily News*, January 15, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Gold, "New York Passes a Ban on 'Conversion Therapy' After Years-Long Efforts," *New York Times*, January 21, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Erica L. Green, Katie Benner, Robert Pear, "'Transgender' Could be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration," *New York Times*, October 21, 2018.

Enter *This Is How It Always Is*: at a time when the executive branch is legislating such hostility towards transgender people, Frankel's novel illuminates from within the complexities of the transgender child and those who love and care for them. Claude, who loves peanut-butter sandwiches and tea-length dresses, declares he wants to be a girl, and thus the transformation into Poppy begins. It's worth noting that the novel does not employ the pronouns they/them, but alternates between "she" and "he" as Claude/Poppy emerges and is acknowledged variously by others in the fiction. The novel begins with Claude *in utero*, the mother Rosie fervently asking the universe for a girl who she can name Poppy after a beloved dead sister. As readers habituated to the *bildungsroman*, and perhaps aware of the flourishing of contemporary queer and transgender novels of development, we might anticipate that the novel will quickly move from its *Tristram Shandy* beginnings to the key period of the young adult, when the *bildungs* typically begins.<sup>6</sup> But Frankel's novel chooses to linger instead on the young Claude/Poppy, insisting in its exploration of the young child's gender dysphoria that transgender identity is perhaps not a choice but rather an innate subjectivity. Frankel's touch is light as her point of view is articulated through a charming social worker named Mr. Tongo: "'So, gender dysphoria,' Mr. Tongo began. 'Congratulations to you both! Mazel tov! How exciting!'" (69) Rather than skipping to puberty, the novel stays with young Claude and their family, more often registering the parents' experience of Claude/Poppy encountering the world than the child's experience of it. After all, Claude/Poppy is a young child, and change at this age is constant; the novel focuses on Poppy's desires, which are less about a consciousness about being transgender than wanting to wear a pink bikini and be a "girl fairy." That Claude/Poppy lives in a loving family is key to the lack of pressure they feel (unlike the adults in the novel) for a gender assignment.

A word about the title. At first glance the title, *This is How it Always Is*, seems meant to be construed as ironic, for a narrative that centers on a child who is born male and decides they are a girl could not be "how it always is." After all, the organization of the self in relation to gender is anything but a process that invites the word "always," even if the dominant traditional cultural narrative says otherwise. Partway through the novel's first half a different interpretation of the title emerges. In a conversation between Poppy's parents, Rosie and Penn, about the difficulty of parenting, Penn expresses the idea that parents never know whether their decisions for their children—trans or otherwise—are good ones:

"Never," Penn agreed. "Not ever. Not once. You never know. You only guess. This is how it always is. You have to make these huge decisions on behalf of your kid, this tiny human whose fate and future is entirely in your hands, who trusts you to know what's good and right and then to be able to make that happen. You never have enough information. You don't get to see the future. And if you screw up, if with your incomplete, contradictory information you make the wrong call, well, nothing less than your child's entire future and happiness is at stake. It's impossible. It's heartbreaking. It's maddening. But there's no alternative."

"Sure there is," she said.

"What?"

"Birth control." (85-86)

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<sup>6</sup> See Meredith Miller, "Lesbian, Gay, and Trans Bildungsroman," *A History of the Bildungsroman*, ed. Sarah Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019), 239-266.

*This is how it always is.* Parenting a trans-child is no different from parenting any child, Penn and (by extension) this novel argues. Sometimes parents have to make decisions for their children and their happiness without knowing if it's the right decision. It is *always* an impossible, heartbreaking, maddening job, one with extraordinary stakes ("this tiny human whose fate and future is entirely in your hands") even though the criteria to become a parent— here cheekily noted as sex without birth control— is hardly a high bar. Rather than insist upon the absolute otherness of parenting a child whose gender identity does not seamlessly correspond with their biologically self-evident sex, *This is How it Always Is* refreshingly claims that all parenting is a high-stakes process of guesswork. In insisting that "this is how it always is," Frankel's novel makes the trans-child's experience as one of many possible iterations of childhood.

And yet even this novel, with its ideal parental and grandparental reactions to their five-year old son wanting to dress in ways more typical of a girl, formulates the iteration of trans-childhood as a problem. Claude/Poppy wanting to wear a dress to school is a source of anxiety, not unlike when their other kids might not be "sleeping or doing well in math or sharing nicely during free-choice time" (86). Unsurprisingly, it's the encounter with the larger community beyond the family of origin that the idea of a trans-child becomes troubled; it's worth noting that it is Poppy's grandmother, whose sartorial sense is much more strongly developed than Poppy's parents, who procures the pink bikini and the first-day-of-school-as-Poppy outfit. The novel's account of the school's reaction to Poppy's decision to dress as a girl in the second half of her kindergarten year generates some memorable but perhaps slightly broadly drawn characters and scenes. Miss Appleton, the saccharine kindergarten teacher who is made uncomfortable by Poppy's purse, works with a school principal whose seeming liberal-mindedness doesn't prevent his bathroom hysteria: much hay is made over the issue of bathrooms, and where a five-year-old with a penis and wearing a dress will pee. Ultimately Poppy is made to use the nurse's private bathroom, a reflection of the administration's unwillingness to interrogate the notion of gendered bathrooms, let alone gender itself. But it's the scenes with Poppy's more gender-conforming peers that charmingly exceed and defy the anxious discourse of the adults:

"Does anyone have any questions they would like to ask? I would love to hear from boys and girls with their hands raised nicely who are sitting quietly on their pockets."

Every hand in the room shot up but Claude's.

"Let's see," said Miss Appleton. "Marybeth is raising her hand nicely."

"Did the fairy come?" said Marybeth, and it took Penn a moment to understand that the fairy in question pertained to Susan's tooth not Claude's wings.

"Yup." Gap-toothed Susan grinned. "She left me two dollars *and* a comic book."

"Ooooh," said the kindergarteners appreciatively.

"Next question," said Miss Appleton. "Jason?"

Jason turned to Claude. "Are tights itchy? They look itchy."

Claude flushed and shook his head. (89-90)

It is the adult rather than the kindergartener's perspective that renders the decision to wear a dress (and fairy wings) fraught. As the narrator marvels, "and that was it. No one looked askance at Claude. No one whispered something nasty. Claude's brown jean skirt and wings

were no more or less interesting than a trip to New York or a haircut or certainly an ordinary lost tooth.... They were, bless them, too self-involved to be invested in Claude's identity crisis" (90).

However sweetly accepting the children's reaction to Claude's transformation is, the novel refuses to rest on the cliché that the child's perspective is one of pure innocence. Claude/Poppy and the other children *are* self-involved—as all five-year-olds are—and the novel insists that it is this as much as their innate lack of prejudice that insulates Poppy from the hatred and prejudice that is to come. It's in the day-to-day parenting dilemmas and in the honest conversations between the two parents—the positive result, the novel perhaps implies, of having a trans child—that the novel does its best work, registering the inevitable ambivalence around the “loss” of the boy-Claude as well as the anxiety that the conservatism of parenthood brings. Rosie laments the “hard road” that she believes will be Poppy's fate as a transgender person, a point-of-view given teeth by Rosie's experience as an ER doctor tending to a transgender college student who is viciously beaten after her first kiss (at her first fraternity party in heels). Penn counters Rosie's hope for an “easier way” by arguing that the “easy way” is not what he necessarily most wants for his children:

She looked up at him. “Why the hell not?”

“I mean, if we could have everything, sure. If we can have it all, yeah, I wish them easy, successful, fun-filled lives, crowned with good friends, attentive lovers, heaps of money, intellectual stimulation, and good views out the window. I wish them eternal beauty, international travel, and smart things to watch on TV. But if I can't have everything, if I only get a few, I'm not sure easy makes my wish list.”

“Really?”

“Easy is nice, but it's not as good as getting to be who you are or stand up for what you believe in,” said Penn. “Easy is nice, but I wonder how often it leads to fulfilling work or partnership or being.” (85-86)

If contemporary literature like Frankel's can sometimes seem too self-aware of its own hermeneutics to need the interpretive work of literary criticism, it's also admittedly a conversation not out of place in a twenty-first century realist novel. One can imagine parents of this socio-economic class having exactly this conversation. There is a perfection to Penn, the stay-at-home father and writer in the novel, that can sometimes try my patience: is any parent this nice, this patient, this willing to make up bedtime stories for five children? I prefer what Frankel was able to accomplish with the portrait of Rosie, whose interest in things other than Poppy—her own work, for instance—as well as her willingness to express ambivalence about Poppy's transformation that makes Rosie seem more multi-dimensional than Penn: “Please God, Rosie prayed, let him be looking at porn.” In fact, Penn is Googling vaginoplasties, and otherwise throws himself into supporting Poppy in ways that are utterly admirable but sometimes not entirely convincing in its single-mindedness. If I was pressed to find another fault with this otherwise immensely likeable novel, certain scenes (such as the one cited above) can sometimes feel less like challenging fiction and more like a novelized form of self-help, a book for parents of children with gender dysphoria—and indeed several reviews of the novel point to the utility of the novel in exactly this way, taking pains to point out that Frankel herself is the parent of a transgender child.

And yet *This is How It Always Is* is also much more and much better than this would imply. It does not detract from either the appeal or the verisimilitude of the novel that its two-

part structure actually models two different possible parental decisions about how to help a child with gender dysphoria to encounter the world: the first half of the novel takes place in Wisconsin and shows the repercussions of honest grappling with gender transformation, and the second half in Seattle, when the parents fall into a decision that has Poppy pass as a girl, with their biological sex (and the fact of “Claude”) a secret. That the novel only imagines these different, if equally challenging, responses to their child’s gender dysphoria, rather than take seriously the violent prejudice of the voice that would deem it unnatural and shameful, is a mark of the progress we have made and its historical positioning in 2017. Living in America between 2016 and 2020, as this immensely readable and accomplished novel imagines, need not be dictated by the so-called values of Trump.

## “Suffering Beyond Suffering”: Tommy Orange’s *There There*

Review by Jacob Bruggeman

*There There*, by Tommy Orange; 301pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.

In an [op-ed](#) written for the *Los Angeles Times* in 2017, Native American author Tommy Orange called America to question one of its revered holidays: Thanksgiving. Orange observed that Americans, himself included, “are still trying to absolve [them]selves of history,” a history of the systematic exploitation, genocide, and ignorance of America’s native peoples. Our want for absolution translates to familiar episodes: we desperately plea to circumvent the conversations that “get political,” and we quell questions when they become too many or too deep. We, the American people, often do anything to keep our traditions and truths protected from the special kind of erosion offered by attention to historical detail.

Orange’s new novel, *There There*, brings readers face-to-face with the ugliest aspects of American history, and in so doing it gives cause for reflection on the identities, myths, traditions, and shaped in and by the long shadow of that history. The setting for this reflection is contemporary Oakland, California, where various Native American protagonists encounter each other, their ancestors, and the display for readers the weight of identity. In particular, *There There* provides a powerful interpretation of Indianness in modern America which focuses on “Urban Indians,” a group loosely defined by Orange as those who belong to the city and “came to know the downtown Oakland skyline better than we did any sacred mountain range, the redwoods in the Oakland hills better than any other deep wild forest” (11). A sense of place pulses through *There There*; Oakland is central to each character’s identity; it is a constant, a loadstone, a concrete wellspring of rootedness in worlds otherwise fluid.

The book’s title is taken from Gertrude Stein who, an Oakland native herself, once observed that “the there of her childhood, the there there, was gone, there was no there there anymore” (38). The ‘there there[s]’ of Native Americans’ ancestors are gone, corroded through the centuries by a devastating combination of brutality and indifference. What remains is a searing sense of ambiguity.

Take the example of Edwin Black, a character introduced to the reader in the washroom, where he’s waiting for bowel movement after six days of constipation. Constipation is quite common, but it means something uncommon for Orange’s character. The prevailing thought when the bowels fail to move is “the sense that everything didn’t come out,” as Edwin Black recites from WebMD, or that nothing at all ‘came out’, and that instead things remain stuck in the intestines (62). “This feels true about my life in ways I can’t articulate yet,” Edwin thinks; it’s “like the name of a short-story collection I’ll write one day, when it all finally does come out” (62). Edwin is lost in the process of becoming, the never-ending self-creation that feels particularly poignant in one’s early years. Fiction, be it a collection of stories or the online game *Second Life* in which Edwin invested four years, provides Edwin with an escape from his reality. And his appears to be bleak: he’s addicted to internet gaming and perpetually garners motherly lectures about his obesity. Beneath his weight and the tension between his real and online lives, Edwin is stuck on something far more consequential: the question of being Indian in America. As his character confesses to readers, “I don’t know how to be,” not all of who he is or who he wants to become has ‘come out’ (72).

Orange's use of failed bowel movements to introduce Edwin, clever and funny as such a literary construction is, does not obscure the sharpness of this insight. Edwin exemplifies both the internal problems of becoming someone in general and the specific confusion and pains felt by those of native descent in contemporary America, a country that claims to celebrate native cultures but fails in committing to its claim. Edwin, like *There There's* author, is biracial; half white and half native, his is a Janus-faced inheritance.

Nuanced as *There There* is, there is no question that it paints an ambivalent portrait of white Americans, who can be well-meaning but ignorant of both American history and the pain that history causes the descendants of its native peoples, whose actions and words have not—and cannot, in the final sense—compensate for the wrongdoings of the past. Readers possessed of a general skepticism or particular political bent might finish *There There* and think that Orange has made a monolith of “white America” and misconstrued the oppression of the past with the complex problems of the present. However, Orange's novel was neither intended nor meant to be read as an attack on white America; it is, foremost and finally, a brilliant case of literature's power to capture reality, meditate on its meaning, and refract back for readers a world almost exactly like their own, so close to reality that its protagonists are able to problematize and critique the worlds of author and reader alike.

The world, however, is simultaneously universal and individual; it is at once all things and nothing save the self. *There There*, from its prologue to the various personal stories that follow it, is an intense exploration of the seemingly infinite expanse between the universal and the personal, the indefinite dark and grey spaces separating you and me, us and them, home and not-home, history and the present. Orange's prose probes these spaces by asking powerful questions: What are the costs and effects of tragedies long past on people living in the present? When does guilt beget action? How do we hear history's echoes in the modern world? And, as *The Guardian's* book review asked, “How do you rewrite the story of a people?”

These questions can be answered neither swiftly nor simply but must be given the time and place to sink in, to mingle with the mind. Orange does not provide clear answers, and the novel is better for it. As Colm Toibin wrote in *The New York Times*, “Nothing in Orange's world in simple,” nothing is apolitical, nothing is quelled, no question is left unasked. This should be no surprise to readers as they finish the book. Good literature often leaves readers with more questions than answers, more mystery and awe than clarity. *There There* is good precisely because it provokes, at the very least, moments in which readers ponder the pain and mythologies wrapped up in American history.

Early on in the novel, Orange's character Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield reads a prophecy aback a laminated picture of “the sad-Indian-on-a-horse silhouette” that another character, Jacquie Red Feather, had taken from her purse (48). The prophecy, entitled “*Crazy Horse's Prophecy*” [italics in original], provided a vision of the world in which the “Red Nation” rises through “suffering beyond suffering” to become a “blessing for a sick world,” a world plagued by “broken promises, selfishness and separations” (48).

‘Sick’ is the world inhabited by Orange's characters, but so, too, is that of his readers. Suffering and poverty persist in today's world despite unprecedented achievements in its governance, medicine, markets, and technologies. Ours is a society obdurate in both its racism and self-deception, a society that simultaneously claims to be open, fair, and free, but is helplessly bound by and to horrible histories of prejudice, exploitation, and slavery. If our world is to change, it will be in part because of literature. *There There* and the history, nuance, and



questions it stirs within readers is a remarkable, hopeful step toward that change in America's treatment of its native and marginalized people.

## **Verbal Marginalization: Christina Dalcher's "*Vox*: A Novel"**

**Review by Tammie Jenkins, South Baton Rouge Charter Academy**

*Vox*, by Dalcher, Christina; 336 pp. New York: Berkley, 2018.

What would you do if you were no longer free to make your own decisions? What would you do if you were forced to live your life in public silence daily? How would you endure never learning to read, write, or communicate? In what ways would this your life change? What if this only applied to females? How do these changes affect men or do they? Imagine one day you awaken to find that as a female you have lost or will never receive basic human rights (e.g., voting, reproduction) and that your voice has been silenced or limited by law. Disobedient females are publicly displayed and chastised while little girls are rewarded for being seen and not heard. Well, this is the near future that Christina Dalcher presents in her debut novel *Vox*. Set in the United States, the book opens with Dr. Jeanne McClellan, a neurolinguist specializing in Wernicke's (Receptive) Aphasia, explaining how her small acts of resistance (e.g., using her allotted number of words daily) enabled her to topple the country's totalitarian government. Although Jeanne acknowledges that repaving the road towards gender equality was not easy, she shares how her simple actions contributed to all women and girls receiving the same rights as their male counterparts.

Divided into eighty short chapters of two to three pages in length, *Vox* starts in Jeanne's present before seamlessly floating into her immediate past. Jeanne's internal flashbacks to the years predating the silencing of females give readers information regarding the social climate of the larger society that ultimately resulted in the revocation of women's rights and civil liberties in the United States. Dalcher opens the novel with Jeanne stating that the totalitarian government had been dissolved; hence, marking a new frontier for women and girls across the country. Initially, working women were sent home and instructed to care for their families while little girls were slowly denied meaningful educational opportunities. *Vox* provides an interesting interpretation of the ways that women voices are systematically being silenced or marginalized by men.

Dalcher emphasizes this point by comparing the number of words spoken by an individual on average before and those allowed to females after the Pure Movement. Beginning in the Bible Belt states as a Christian conservative ideological movement, the Pure Movement, spread across the United States which lead to a dissolution of many of the basic human rights and civil liberties of everyone slowly legislated away from women. These views gained political momentum; hence, evolving into legislated oppression of women and girls in the United States. This movement reinforced traditional gender roles for men (e.g., breadwinner) and women (e.g., homemaker) much like during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Victorian ideals contributed to the establishment of the Cult of Domesticity (also known as the Cult of True Womanhood) in the United States.

In *Vox*, women are no longer permitted to work outside the home and they are limited to speaking only one-hundred words per day while little girls are encouraged to remain silent. Females are no longer educated, allowed to manage their finances, or live independently of a man's authority. Now, devalued females are forbidden from expressing themselves through writing, reading, or non-verbal communication such as sign language. Both women and girls are

required to wear a bracelet that counts the number of words they have spoken in a day and this apparatus also administers immediate consequences when their verbal threshold has been exceeded. The story centers on the character of Jeanne, a married mother of four including a six-year-old daughter, named Sonia. *Vox* demonstrates the lengths that one woman is willing to go in order to achieve her goal. Determined to regain not only her voice but also that of her gender group Jeanne takes advantage of a unique opportunity to achieve both. Over the course of Jeanne's narratives, the reader is treated to moments from her life that she felt furthered the persecution of females during the presidency of Reverend Carl, the leader of the Pure Movement, which spread from southern states to the rest of the nation. The Pure Movement established a totalitarian government that systematically removed the rights of women and girls from the public sphere to that of the home. A turn of events led to Jeanne returning to work for the President Reverend Carl, whose brother has suffered a head injury while skiing that is affecting the part of the brain responsible for speech. Summoned to the White House, Jeanne brokers a deal that allows her to resume her research with strict perimeters while permitting her to not only remove her bracelet, but also her daughter to remove their bracelets during Jeanne's working hours.

Even though Jeanne's meeting with Reverend Carl marks a turning point in *Vox*, this moment does not fully capture Jeanne's daily acts of resistance that began in her home with her family, like using her words to challenge one of her son's thinking, before expanding to the surrounding areas. *Vox* is a testimonial to the possibilities and limitations of language as well as human rights in the United States. In this novel, Dalcher employs her knowledge of theoretical linguistics with cognate in the area of phonetic sound changes, to construct to character of Dr. Jeanne McCellan. Sharing her personal experiences and understandings of the field, Christina Dalcher, creates a scenario that verbally imprisons women and marginalizes their physical bodies while presenting how a man may react under similar circumstances (e.g., the president on behalf of his brother). However, the final chapters of the text offer opportunities for redemption as Reverend Carl realizes his limitations and expresses a need for the services of Jeanne, a woman. Undeterred by the treatment she and her gender group have endured, Jeanne does not seek vengeance, instead, she accepts his request and implements an agenda of her own which leads to the resolution of *Vox*'s storyline.

Christina Dalcher's *Vox* is a time representation of the attack of womanhood in the United States. As twenty-first century women political movements such as #MeToo and TimesUp gain momentum in the United States as well as opposition from detractors, *Vox* offers an alternative version of a future reality for women, particularly those who fail to take action and add their voice to larger social discourses.

## Fault Lines: Omar El Akkad's Second US Civil War

Review by Joseph Donica, Bronx Community College, CUNY

*American War*, by Omar El Akkad; 416pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.

Many writers have contemplated what the second American civil war might be like from the issues that would bring it about to who would secede first to what the exact dividing lines would be. Many of these speculative books have fallen under the genre of alternative history or speculative fiction such as Jack Strain's *Divided We Fall* (2012), Christopher Brown's *Tropic of Kansas* (2017), Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). To date, none have looked at the second American Civil War from the standpoint of how climate change will affect it, and it was about time we had a novel that looked at the growing rifts in society through the genre of climate fiction (cli-fi). This is the genre of Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017). In the novel, El Akkad imagines a United States ravaged not only by the Second American Civil War but also from a changed climate, which brought on the war. From 2074 to 2095 the Federal States, whose capital is now in Columbus, OH, and the Free Southern States of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina are embroiled in a violent war that makes use of traditional tactics as well as suicide bombers and chemical warfare. One of the most striking elements of the book is its initial page in which El Akkad lays out a map showing what the US looks like in 2075. Aside from the split between Northern and Southern states, the map shows Florida no longer there and good portions of the East Coast under water. New York City is nowhere to be seen in this book, and neither is DC. Political power has shifted to Columbus and Atlanta.

The inciting incident for the war is the declaration by the Federal government banning all fossil fuels. While the Federal States maintain the ban, the Southern States break off and continue to use fossil fuels but are sustained with a supply of them from a powerful, new empire in the Middle East and North Africa named the Bouazizi Empire—a gesture toward the name of the Tunisian street vendor who self-immolated and who is given credit for inspiring the protests that would lead to the Arab Spring. The ban coupled with the assassination of President Ki by suicide bomber Julia Templestowe—hailed as a hero in the South—set the stage for decades of violence. El Akkad paints of picture of a US that was bound for civil war. In the opening narration, given by an academic whose identity is not revealed until the end of the novel, we are introduced to relics of twenty-first century American life in the forms of postcards. They remind the narrator “of America as it existed in the first half of the twenty-first century: soaring, roaring, oblivious” (3).

Oblivious indeed. However, El Akkad suggests the US was oblivious to more than just looming climate disaster. The country was also oblivious to rifts along cultural lines that had not been addressed since the first Civil War. Race is not mentioned in the novel as a driving motivation, and Southern fighters represent a range of races. But there are still echoes of the issues that helped fueled the South's war to protect enslavement such as anti-Federalism and insistence on extra-judicial justice. The primary target of El Akkad's ire is the incredible violence humans can enact on each other given the right conditions coupled with the rhetoric of “a cause.” El Akkad critiques caustic, violent masculinity more than racism in the book. When the main character, Sarat Chestnut, is a child playing with her brother she wonders “if all boys

were like this, their meanness as self-defense” (19). Sarat herself will come to embody this meanness as a survival tactic and eventually simply as a revenge tactic.

Climate change is used as a backdrop for the entire novel and never as a subject in itself. From the first page of the novel *El Akkad* confronts us with the impacts of climate change on the narrative with a pair of maps showing the effects on the US with much of its coasts under water. Mexico has taken back much of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. But climate change’s impact on the war is always in the background. For example, the Southern States are able to continue their reliance on fossil fuels thanks to the Bouazizi Empire, the Southern militias (not officially sanctioned by the Atlanta government but tacitly supported) use outdated vehicles and ships that run on fossil fuels, and the Southeastern part of the South is repeatedly decimated by intense hurricanes. Instead of focusing on the details of just how climate change has brought about the war, *El Akkad* chooses to focus on character development. And this is the strongest element of the novel because so often the genre leans on details of the science—actual or made up—and obscures the intimate details of the people affected by their own stubborn inaction.

All action in the novel surrounds Sarat’s displacement from her home when her father is killed in a suicide bombing in Baton Rouge and her journey up to the Reunification Plague of 2095. After her father’s death, her mother and two siblings are moved to a refugee camp, and this is where Sarat transforms from a girl curious about the world to a radical once she experiences the violence inflicted on Southerners. Her twin sister is killed along with her mother, and her brother is severely disfigured when Northern troops raid their camp. But Sarat’s radicalization begins earlier in the camp when she meets a mysterious figure, Albert Gaines, who teaches her what he thinks are the secret forces behind the war. Gaines is an expat from the Bouazizi Empire who chooses to work for the South because, as he tells Sarat, “When a Southerner tells you what they’re fighting for—be it tradition, pride, or just mule-headed stubbornness—you can disagree, but you can’t call it a lie” (142).

What Gaines is actually trying to do is recruit Sarat to be a suicide bomber for a Northern target. Sarat eventually will be just this, but to much more devastating effect than Gaines can imagine. Sarat, though, is not motivated by allegiance to the Southern cause. In fact, she is disdainful of the Southern leadership and seems not to be politically aligned at all. It is her allegiance to her family and revenge for the violence against them that drives her to become a violent lone-wolf assassin with a high body count. It is this small, insulated focus on allegiance to family that *El Akkad* seems to critique as well. If these characters (especially Sarat) had been more devoted to cause and survival of larger groups than simply family, he seems to argue, then maybe they would think twice before killing over 100 million people. These are not characters focused on mitigating the impact of climate change they see in front of them, but characters focused on adding to the damage of the climate on human bodies with even deadlier forces.

What is especially engaging, for those wanting every detail of the world *El Akkad* has created, is how he communicates the history of the war and the fallout. Instead of imbedding the history into the narrative, each chapter is followed by a historical document—excerpt from a history book, proceedings from Senate investigations, memoirs of Southerners and Northerners, a syllabus for a course about the war, and even receipts from those receiving payment for the losses incurred by the war. These artifacts not only offer details essential to understand a narrative that moves the reader all over the map but also make the reader work in piecing together the timeline of the war. *El Akkad* offers a map but no detailed timeline. It is as if the

reader is the student of the narrator taking his class about the war. The significance of this for the narrative is that it frees up El Akkad to focus on character development. For the reader, it is significant because we are looking back on past events imagining climate destruction as a foregone conclusion. The narrator actually is a professor, who we come to find out is Sarat's nephew Benjamin, is a professor. Sarat befriends him toward the end of her life and ensures his passage to Anchorage, a neutral city. Benjamin survives the plague that his aunt imposes on the country and becomes a historian of the war. This is a brilliant narrative strategy by El Akkad in that he gives us a historian of the war whose narrative we are reading but who is also an unreliable narrator given his admiration and love for his aunt, Sarat.

In telling people about the novel, they wanted to know more details of the world El Akkad created. I did as well. But he gives us just enough information to support his narrative and no more. There are several of the more interesting and mysterious threads that are never fully developed such as Sarat's relationship to her trainer, Albert Gaines. He has a fascinating backstory that simply remains a mystery. The details of the Bouazizi Empire's rise are also left to the reader's imagination as well as the fate of Sarat's mother. She disappears in the raid on the camp, and we are given one line about her death toward the end of the book. For readers not too devoted to details like this, the novel will offer no frustration. But if you are anything like me, you will be frustrated by strand after missing strand.

There was much talk about divisions, ruptures, and silos in American culture after the presidential election of 2016, and this novel can be read, in part, as a response to those divisions. I have frequently found myself rolling my eyes when I hear the word "silo" as if Americans had not realized the perennial cultural divisions that have defined the Republic since its founding. But this is, perhaps, the most important thrust of El Akkad's novel. Sometimes it takes an outsider, non-American (El Akkad is Arab-Canadian) to show us not just how ridiculous the fault lines are but how incredibly dangerous they are as well. Regionalism is still a powerful lense used to interpret our own position within a society, and El Akkad shows us the dangers of regional allegiances. The Second American Civil War is a terrifying prospect but one that many have speculated is just over the horizon. I am not saying it is, but if any issue takes us to the brink, it most likely will be the refusal to respond to the rapidly changing climate. El Akkad's suggests the war was caused not only by the refusal of some to respond to climate change but also along similar lines of conflict--ones the US has been trying to heal for a century and a half.

For cynics, skeptics, and lovers of apocalypse that lacks any shred of hope, this book is perfect reading. In the prologue, narrated by Benjamin, El Akkad says it all: "This isn't a story about war. It's about ruin" (6). It is hard to read the novel and not think about the legacy of the Arab Spring embedded within the book and the implications it has for our own moments of divisions. Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian vendor, was seen as a martyr for the cause of injustice in that country. Sarat too is hailed as a martyr once she volunteers to carry the reunification plague in her own body to Columbus—a plague of revenge on the Federal States that will eventually kill 110 million people. El Akkad has an implicit critique here of the violence a country can do to itself if it allows divisions to go unaddressed and injustice and inequality to remain in the realm of political rhetoric without any policies to address them.

## **The Time is Now: On Duchess Harris's *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Trump***

**Review by Ilse Schrynemakers, Ph.D., CUNY, Queensborough Community College**

*Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Trump*, by Duchess Harris; 251pp. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Duchess Harris's *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Trump* provides a timely update to her previous book that ended with the Obama years. The book covers much of the mid-to-late twentieth century quickly with a spotlight on defining historical moments that may remain vivid to those who lived through them. But each moment is now revisited through its impact on Black feminism. This edition is a must read for academics and non-academics alike who seek to comprehend the roots and evolution of Black feminist politics since the 1960s.

The edition begins with a poignant memory: the departure of Michelle Obama from the White House and the arrival of President Donald Trump, who earned only 4 percent of the Black woman's vote. Hillary Clinton won that by a whopping majority; however, among the white women voters, to whom her brand of feminism would most appeal, 62% of the non-college educated female white voters supported Donald Trump. These statistics are very telling. They communicate central conflicts for today's Black feminist voters, their lack of representation, their lack of seats at the table, and the resistance to their causes from both genders and parties. Each of the book's successive chapters, organized chronically, underscores this reality. However, Harris is hopeful and points towards the importance of past Black feminist movements (the Combahee River Collective, National Black Feminist Organization) and present movements (Black Lives Matter) to show a clear pathway to navigate this post-Obama era.

The struggles of the Black feminist movement to gain momentum and expression are first discussed amidst the Nixon and Reagan years. To win the white working class, both politicians exploited the idea of welfare abuse and high urban crime among non-whites. Harris credits the widely circulated and popular Moynihan report (1965) as doing long-lasting damage: Black problems were being blamed on Black women (rather than white racism) which in turn empowered Black men to oppress Black women. Black men, driven by the desire to exert their manhood, gain control over Black women, and thus assert a patriarchy, created division within Black communities. During this era, writers Michelle Wallace and poet Ntozake Shange called for a sisterhood of Black women, especially given how the era's feminism reflected mainly white women's realities. The crowning of Vanessa Williams in 1983 suggested some inclusion of Black females in white femininity, her de-crowning in 1984, a betrayal.

During the book's discussion of the Clinton years, Harris rebukes the policies and rhetoric of the Democratic party. Harris first turns the spotlight on the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings. The case showcases how much Black women's power closely aligns with Black male support, and how "being Black" and "being female" creates two identities with divided loyalties and distinct disadvantages. The realities of these conflicts are shown in the careers of the era's famous female Democrats, which Harris discusses in detail. Harris also strongly reprimands Clinton's policies and politics for their promotion of the negative Black stereotype, the "welfare queen." The Black feminist again felt betrayal, now by her own party.

It comes as no surprise that during the same decades (1960-1990s) organizations were needed to give voice to the Black feminist movement. Harris documents the evolution of three,

namely Fourth Consultation of President John F. Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW), the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), and Combahee River Collective (CRC). The overview includes a close-up look at the platforms, struggles, sacrifices, and personal histories of members of the organizations. The distinctive agenda of each organization is given—such as the for the PCSW, the employment and volunteer opportunities, the media image of woman, and the struggle of the Black female—the topics resonating loudly with their continued relevance. Harris notes how this agenda produced mixed results. While the concerns of the Black feminists did gain the attention of federal lawmakers, Black feminists still were not welcome in mainstream politics. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, a Black woman's rights activist, was refused entry as a delegate at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. However, CRC's community activism did have some notable successes, in particular, their late-night marches and the creation of a woman's shelter.

Next, Harris discusses the Bush and Obama years. She rebukes the Republican Party's for their insincere appeals to the Black community and praises the choices and actions of the era's Black feminist politicians. In the aftermath of 9/11, the consistent record of pacifist resistance by Congresswoman Barbara Lee is upheld as a prime example of an individual gain in the Black feminist politician's movement. Harris equates Cynthia McKinney and her 2008 nomination to the Green Party ticket with the bravery of the women at the Seneca Falls convention. However, progress is slow, given the early struggles of Michelle Obama to gain acceptance by the American public and right-wing media outlets. Harris also faults President Barack Obama's handling of race during his presidency as fraught with missed, golden opportunities to secure African-American women in powerful positions, most notably the Supreme Court.

Along this harsh critique of Obama's presidency, Harris fierily advocates for the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement (begun by black woman in 2013 after George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin). Harris writes with great urgency to the high stakes in today's political climate—if we do not invest in this movement. Trump's Cabinet members and advisors include white supremacists, such as Steve Bannon and Jeff Sessions, who fail to enforce or even consider policies that may provide advancement for African-Americans. Trump also has failed to appoint Black people to powerful positions; in fact, the appointment of Jeff Sessions replaced the first Black woman to be a US Attorney General, Loretta Lynch. In this political climate, the grassroots organizations, Black Lives Matter and Color of Change, are two places where Black feminists can make strides for exerting influence, seeking public offices, and thus representing the issues central to Black communities.

Harris looks to these grassroots groups as well as Black feminist politicians to enact real change and activism in the years ahead. Any reader of this impressive, comprehensive history of the struggles and achievements of the Black feminist movement would believe that strides are possible, given the long uphill journey undertaken so far. For that to happen though, society must be given opportunities to hear Black feminist voices, and must listen to and uphold these voices, since, as Harris so eloquently expresses, "The future is female--Black female" (192).



## **Inventive Protests: On Bill McKibben's *Radio Free Vermont: A Fable of Resistance***

**Review by Tanner Alan Sebastian, University of Nevada, Reno**

*Radio Free Vermont: A Fable of Resistance*, by Bill McKibben; 241pp. New York: Blue Rider Press, 2017.

In a time when social media activism runs rampant, Bill McKibben reminds his readers in *Radio Free Vermont* that effective resistance requires action and sacrifice. Throughout the novel, McKibben's band of peaceful Vermonters engage in some good old-fashioned civil disobedience. Vern Barclay, the novel's protagonist, begins his life of resistance with an attack on national corporations, using a radio broadcast at a Walmart opening to remind his listeners about the seedier practices this new business undertakes. At the same time, 19-year-old Perry Alterson has reprogrammed the sewer system within the store to send its contents back through the pipes and into the aisles. In this moment of serendipity, Vern and Perry flee the store and become partners in resistance, hiding out at the farmhouse of Vern's friend Sylvia Granger, who engages in her own civil disobedience by dumping a truckload of Coors onto the ground and replacing it with Vermont-brewed beer, thereby showing her support for local businesses that use local produce and promote the local economy instead of a national corporation who could care less about the smaller state or mom-and-pop business that struggle to survive. These acts are simply the beginning; as the stakes get higher throughout the novel, the acts of civil disobedience grow in scale.

Although McKibben gives his protestors extreme goals for their resistance movement, he is less interested in the *why* of their protests and encourages his readers instead to focus on the *how*. In an author's note, McKibben insists that "we need to resist with all the creativity and wit we can muster, and if we can do so without losing the civility that makes life enjoyable, then so much the better" (219). In other words, McKibben wants his readers to be inspired by the unique, cheeky, and peaceful protests his characters execute. While marches, rallies, and other traditional forms of protests can certainly be effective, McKibben urges people to use their unique gifts to stage creative acts of resistance, for the most unexpected or humorous forms of civil disobedience can spark discussion and spread a message to a wider audience. The moral of McKibben's "Fable of Resistance" is not necessarily anti-Trump or anti-capitalism (although his characters certainly lean more to the left). It is that if people find causes they truly believe in, they need to act and promote their message creatively and peacefully even if it means risking arrest or being ostracized from their community.

Even though he supports this important message with amusing examples throughout *Radio Free Vermont*, McKibben undermines his moral through his lackluster prose. The primary technical issue McKibben faces is flat characters who are more symbolic than fleshed-out human beings. Vern Barclay represents the privileged white man who learns to empathize with and provide a voice for those who lack such privileges. This learning occurs only in flashbacks, however; he does not grow or change from the present-tense events of the novel, leaving his character stagnant. Rather than have Barclay start the novel at a state of awareness or "wokeness," McKibben could have had his protagonist evolve from a non-believer in the power of protest into the voice of the Free Vermont resistance movement. In this way, the readers could identify with Barclay as they too absorb McKibben's message of civil disobedience.

Similarly, Sylvia Granger is a lesbian who runs a school to teach out-of-towners how to be Vermonters. Granger could have been the most interesting character of the novel through her

queer status and fascinating role as unofficial ambassador of Vermont, but McKibben fails to deepen her personality beyond her love for her state. McKibben tries to capture the feel of a fable in this symbolic characterization (or lack thereof), but this leaves the characters stilted and speaking in unnatural ways. McKibben does deserve a break as this was his first venture into fiction, and *Radio Free Vermont* is still worth the read for its ideas on civil disobedience alone.

*Radio Free Vermont* at its heart is about individuals using their talents, interests, and platforms to fight against injustice they see in the world. Certainly, social media posts and words are still important. Vern Barclay is a radio host, after all. But McKibben reminds us that if we want to make a change in the world, words are simply not enough. Instead of sharing memes about and/or retweeting our preferred candidate for local, state, or national office, you should make a real-world impact through grass-roots advocacy, volunteering your time to help their campaigns. Or, if you are against a particular candidate, stage a protest to make the nation understand how you think and feel. Just be creative and keep it peaceful.

## Works Cited

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**Sociopolitical America and the Weight of Deception in *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* by Michiko Kakutani**

**Review by Simone Smith, St. John's University**

***The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump***, by Michiko Kakutani; 154pp. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

Foreshadowed dystopian downfall. Those are the words that come to mind when facing the deception Michiko Kakutani, former chief book critic for *The New York Times* and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism, outlines in *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*. We all have something to fear: whether it be news, politics, finances, or social media. Kakutani delves deep into our fears of being copied, marginalized or degraded. Conspiracies like deep fakes and movies such as, *Sorry to Bother You*, increase our likelihood of one day living in a dystopia we actively deny will take place. Kakutani argues that deception is more dangerous than we would like to admit, and it is happening all around us in daily life because information has become “faked,” sparking the end of reality, the death of truth where Veritas has been swallowed by the genuine grievances of society. Kakutani urges the reader to imagine Veritas as sociopolitical America and the genuine grievances as each trending political scandal of the Trump administration.

If we were to treat every small and personal truth like microaggressions sitting upon the shoulders of sociopolitical America, the legs of America would be sinking into the floor, and its frame would be shaking with the weight of deception. Michiko Kakutani admits the demise of truth is taking place within our era, and the generation that grew up with George W. Bush and the Iraq war vaguely alludes to the latest chapters of American history through memes like “Why you always lying” and hashtags such as #DumpTrump and #worstPOTUSever that encapsulate the frustration and resistance of millennials.

*The Death of Truth* reads like the threaded twitter blog post you've seen retweeted in your feed several times. You know it is all-important, you know it will demystify some of the things you didn't know or don't remember about the 2016 presidential election such as the resignations by campaign chairman Paul Manafort and National Security Advisor Mike Flynn, the Democratic National Convention hack, and the ongoing FBI investigations of the Trump administration, but it also leaves your head feeling sore. It's easy to note each falsehood of this era, but what are we left to do about it? Social media activism is the next frontier of resistance and it is better than signing up for a "Need to Impeach" petition. For the college student seeking to make ties to contemporary society and the fictional dystopia of George Orwell, Kakutani makes those ties for you by detailing how the Trump presidency and politicians themselves have, “always spun reality, but television—and later the internet—gave them new platforms on which to prevaricate” namely through the rise of New Journalism and postmodernism.

*The Death of Truth* defines the disinformation spread by Trump as something that is not terrifying because of how he says it, but because Trump was made the symbolic figurehead of what “America” wants. Unpacking this idea is potentially frightening, but Michiko Kakutani does it by recognizing who is left affected by the public Twitter comments and political scandals where she writes, “Trump lied reflexively and shamelessly, but that those hundreds upon hundreds of lies came together to create equally false storylines that appealed to people's

fears.” Today is the latest moment in history, and Americans are split into two groups: those who want to make America great again, and those who want to know and analyze what “again” means. Kakutani argues that Trump’s ideology, “Depicting America as a country reeling from crime...a country beset by waves of violent immigrants,” is just as dangerous as the ideologies of anti-vaxxers and climate change deniers, gradually gaining power and relevance by exploiting fake news.

Kakutani describes each key article and text that summarizes our era, such as the commencement speech given by David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in 2005, where he notes, “‘the truth’ is wholly a matter of perspective and agenda.” Kakutani wants readers to focus on the age of statements like these because, written decades ago, they have begun to epitomize modern society.

Examining each point, the direct quotes from journalists and references to various artists, authors, and media provides the reader with plenty of content and comparison to 20th-century literature and journalism. Kakutani adds her point of view on philosophers like Derrida and Foucault but disregards theory from others. For instance, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s take on ethics about the constant threats imposed on society, along with his values regarding individualism and freedom coincides with the deductions made by Kakutani but doesn’t make an appearance in the text. Collectively, novels such as *1984* frame her view of dystopia and make are found through the book. Due to the weight of these details and facts, analyzing *The Death of Truth* would mean becoming a member of your local book club or taking the political college seminar you’ve been avoiding. Michiko Kakutani’s approach in one hundred and eighty pages lacks no details and connects each reference perfectly. *The Death of Truth* defines facing what is right in front of you and acknowledging its presence by drawing attention to its lies and deception. Fake news as Kakutani admits has become an epidemic. Each new wave of technology brings innovation and misinformation with the two feeding off each other until they become almost unrecognizable. She encourages the postmodernist theory on the “idea of truth” and what that would mean for each variable of knowledge and perspective. Kakutani bluntly describes daily life in America and it sounds like the trailer of a new Netflix thriller:

America in the second decade of the new millennium, at a time when nineteen kids are shot every day in the United States, when the president of the United States plays a game of nuclear chicken with North Korea’s Kim Jong-un, when artificial intelligence engines are writing poetry and novellas, when it’s getting more and more difficult to tell the difference between headlines from The Onion and headlines from CNN (Kakutani 80 )

As a result, the reader benefits from all these truths and grasps how Kakutani’s notes on falsehood are not a work of fiction.

Kakutani unties previous works of media, journalism and literature within *The Death of Truth*, breathing relevance and urgency into its pages by stating the correspondence of American reality as viewed in 1960’s and 80’s along with postmodernist theory “which arrived at American universities in the second half of the twentieth century via such French theorists as Foucault and Derrida,” and as a result making Michiko Kakutani’s notes on falsehood extremely well-rounded. *The Death of Truth* borrows two quotes that become the most striking out of the entire text after piecing together all of our current issues: Rudyard Kipling “We’re all islands

shouting lies to each other across seas of misunderstanding” and William Gibson, “When you want to know how things really work, study them when they’re coming apart.” These powerful statements adhere to Kakutani’s bias because they are protected by her extremely conclusive evidence. Action is the only way to deal with the burden that lies on our shoulders and in front of us. *The Death of Truth* is Michiko Kakutani’s message to stop the lies and study why they’ve become so powerful.

## **In Pursuit of Privilege: Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land***

**Review by Johnny Wiley, St. John's University**

***Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right***, by Arlie Russell Hochschild; 187pp. New York: The New Press, 2016.

The United States of America is an enigma. We are the world's oldest continuous democracy. Since the conception of our Constitution, we have allowed those who were recognized by the state to cast their votes for the leader of the "free world." Yet time and time again, people have participated in the democratic process and elected people who advocate for policies that are against their own self-interest. In other words, they have voted for someone who will not advocate for them when they arrive in the nation's Capital. While this is a common occurrence in American history, the Election of 2016 was one where millions of voters elected a person who campaigned for policies that directly contradicted policies that were in the best interest of these people. While there are many reasons for why people casted their votes for Donald Trump, resentment towards the social progress that we as country made during the Obama Administration seemed to be a determining factor. Famed sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild examined this idea in her novel *Strangers in Their Own Land* by traveling across the State of Louisiana interviewing people who support Pres. Trump and his policies even though they conflict their own self-interest. In this book review, I will summarize her findings and provide a critique to her analysis regarding the "analogy of the hill."

In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Hochschild discusses how Donald Trump was able to represent and articulate the emotional resentment of many white Americans, specifically those living in Louisiana. Captivated by what seems to be paradoxical (cancer survivors who advocate for the roll back of environmental policies and Christian women who advocate against social programs like food stamps), she starts to examine the progress that the United States has made over the course of the Obama Administration and whether or not that is the cause of this resentment. Hochschild then analyzes the roles that emotions play with regard to political perception and alliance. When discussing these two factors, Hochschild narrows in on how peoples' views on personal values and morals can cause them to have political views that are in conflict. This in turn causes her to come back to the same question: Why are people's personal views and alliances not represented in their political choices? This is most notably seen when Hochschild discusses the dilemma with her friend Madonna, who is a devout Christian. She doesn't understand how a lady who is so religious can be opposed to programs aimed at helping the poor. She soon develops the hypothesis that the animosity or feelings of resentment that white, Christian men and women have towards the progress we have made as a country is the root cause of their support for Donald Trump. This is most notably seen in her explanation of the "deep story."

In the Chapter entitled the "Deep Story," Hochschild discusses the feeling that old white, Christian men have towards different groups of people through her "waiting in a line" analogy (otherwise known as the "deep story"). In the scenario, old white Christian men and women are waiting in line to achieve the American Dream (which is represented by a hill). These people who are waiting in line have suffered economic hardships, but nevertheless waited and never lost faith in their country. Then all of the sudden, they notice people from different racial backgrounds, gender identities and classes "cut in front of them" (Hochschild, 133). Leading the

pack, these people see President Obama. The President is leading these people to the front of the line because they have had a harder time in life and this all part of an effort to correct societal wrongs caused by history. This, in turn, causes resentment toward minorities in America, especially racial minorities. With regard to feelings of resentment because of race, Hochschild suggests that many people have felt attacked by the North of being racist since the Civil War.

Acknowledging the racism in Louisiana, she describes three distinct views of blacks that many of these people have in Louisiana. The first group consisted of wealthy entertainers and athletes who “deserved” what they received. They had “earned” what they made in life and were “deserving” of their fortune and success. However, the two remaining views of blacks that many of these people had were that of criminals and people on welfare. Hochschild then starts to discuss the feelings of resentment these people have with regard to the progress that women have made during the Obama Administration. Hochschild points out that women are perceived as unworthy of a “man’s job.” Additionally, there is resentment towards the fact that men have to “compete” with women now. Moreover, the fact that the public sector jobs that women receive have better benefits than men only further causes resentment and entitlement. Lastly, Hochschild discusses how class plays into this. The whole analogy of “cutting the line” is an expression of class conflict. She outlines perfectly that these Louisianans believe that society is made up makers and takers and the takers do not deserve anything from the federal government; they receive government handouts and take advantage of the system. While these feelings have developed over time, Hochschild specifies that they all stem from southern resentment after the confederacy lost the Civil War.

When discussing the Southern white experience, Hochschild begins her analysis in the 1860s. She acknowledges the “deep emotional grove” or feelings of resentment that were engraved in people” (Hochschild, 192). Moreover, she describes how along with slaves, these individuals who were also low class were poor sharecroppers who were looked down upon in society. After the Civil War, Hochschild explains how the South went through drastic change after the Civil War. The mass influence of carpetbaggers and the installation of Governors by the North to lead state governments in the South combined with the absence of morality caused the South to resent the North. These feelings only heightened during the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These were specifically noticeable during the civil rights movement. The enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, various Supreme Court decisions, and protesters like the freedom riders reinforced the idea of the North “moralizing the South” (Hochschild, 192). Additionally, with the rise of other social movements like the LGBT movement and the women’s rights movement, white Southerners have felt like their “honor” was being compromised because other identities were forming and they wanted to express their identities just like other groups of people. However, the will to express “Southern honor” was not worth the risk of being labeled a bigots and racists. This fear Hochschild suggests lead to many people simply accepting the direction of the country yet resenting the progress it made. These feelings came to a climax when Donald Trump announced his candidacy for President in 2016.

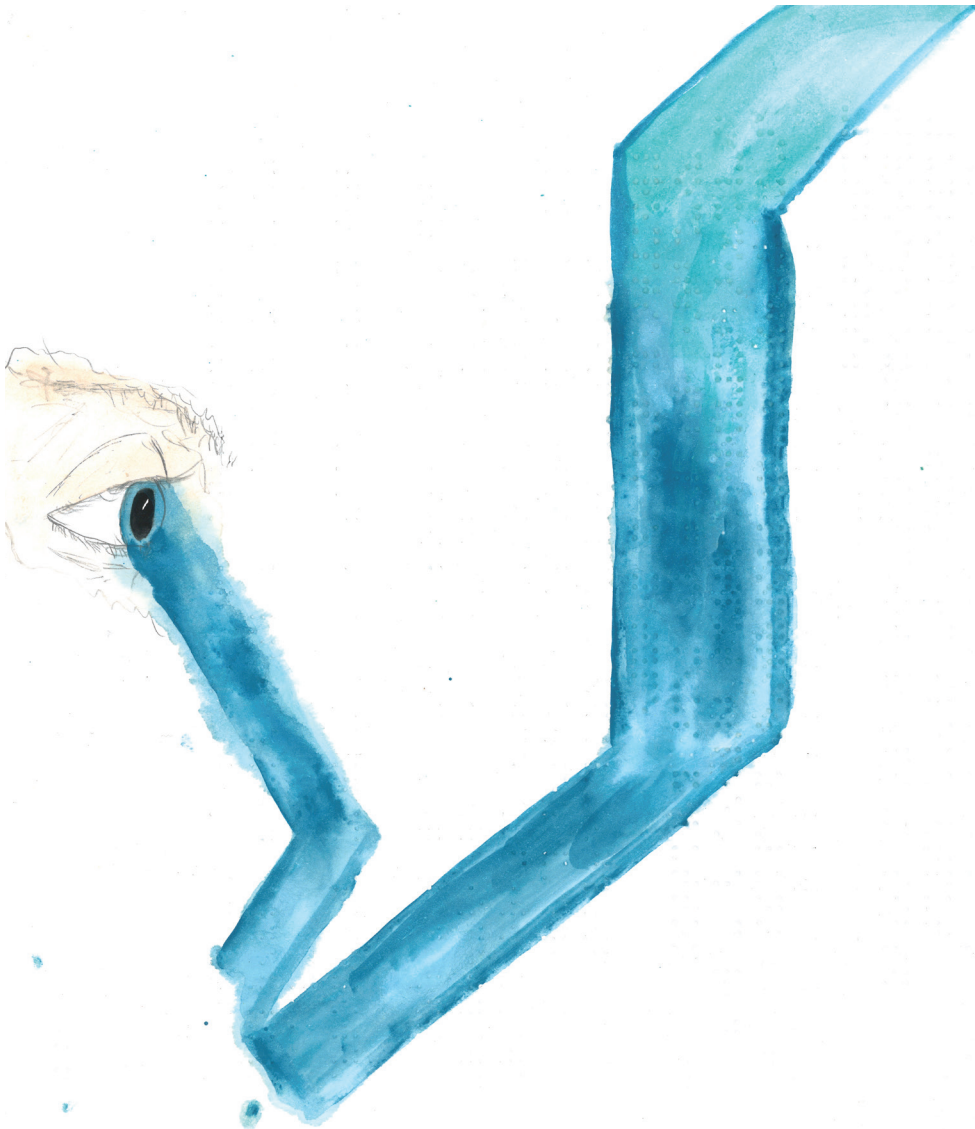
Hochschild argues that candidate Trump became a charismatic leader and totem for Southern whites. She points out that Trump validated the feelings behind the idea of the “deep story” but more importantly he supported and affirmed the idea. Trump’s appeal to emotion and support of the “deep story” gained him support and unity amongst those who were feared other people who were “cutting the line.” Furthermore, his lack of political correctness and racism was attractive to many of his supporters because it simply reinforced their own prejudicial feelings about certain groups. This was seen most notably seen in his remarks regarding Syrian refugees

and Muslims. When discussing how Trump became a totem for the southern whites, Hochschild describes how Trump was able to bring people together and “unify worshipers” in a religious sense. Using this logic, Hochschild proclaims that the real “excitement” in Donald Trump is not just Trump being who and what he is, but rather how his campaign brought unity between those ‘white evangelical enthusiasts’ who are afraid of those who are “cutting the line.” This unification between these two groups is complex because Pres. Trump’s rhetoric on the campaign trail contradicts the teachings of Christ with regard to compassion for the poor, suffering, and the weak. Moreover, the actual events brought individuals together who were eager to join the movement and advocate against policies that they believe regulatory impact them. While Hochschild does a phenomenal job explaining why these Louisianan have resentment and casted a vote for Donald Trump, she provides the causes of these resentments with legitimacy which I believe is chief flaw in her analysis.

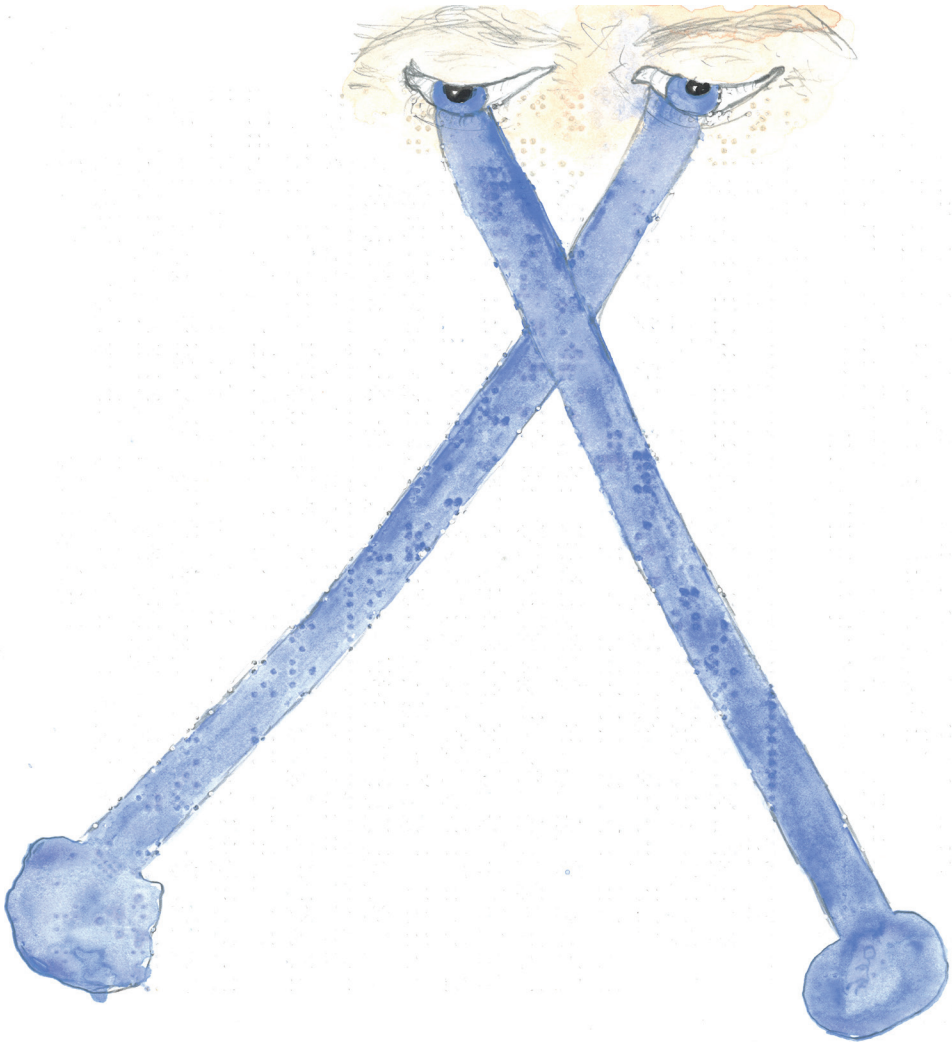
Resentment towards progress is not unusual--it is expected. If we look throughout American history, whenever we have made progress as a country, there has been push back from those whose status has been threatened. However, this pushback has usually been based off of prejudice. Hochschild does not discuss this in any way. She simply provides an outlet that explains what these people think and why they think it. Never in her analysis does Hochschild state that these resentments, specifically those with regard to affirmative action, are based off of ignorance and false pretenses. Affirmative action has been one of the great equalizers of the last half-century and to simply state a specific group’s resentment while not stating the factual evidence that supports the issue simply provides ignorance with a free platform that suggests this idea about affirmative action is legitimate.

American democracy is a phenomenon like no other. We are always shocked by the decisions are leaders make, yet we forget the fact that we sent them there. Moreover, many find it peculiar that their white friends and colleagues vote for particular candidates who advocate for policies that do not support them in particular. It is an enigma that cancer survivors support the deregulation of environmental protections and devout Christians support the defunding of programs meant to help poor children because they feel that their “status” is at risk. Hochschild explains that these decisions are part of a massive backlash that at its core is the result of progress we have made as a country. This backlash/resentment she argues had led to people voting out of their own self-interest, with the chief aim of protecting their societal status. This in turn has led to the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States. While resentment towards progress was a factor in the election of Donald Trump, history teaches us that resentment will never cause progress to halt.

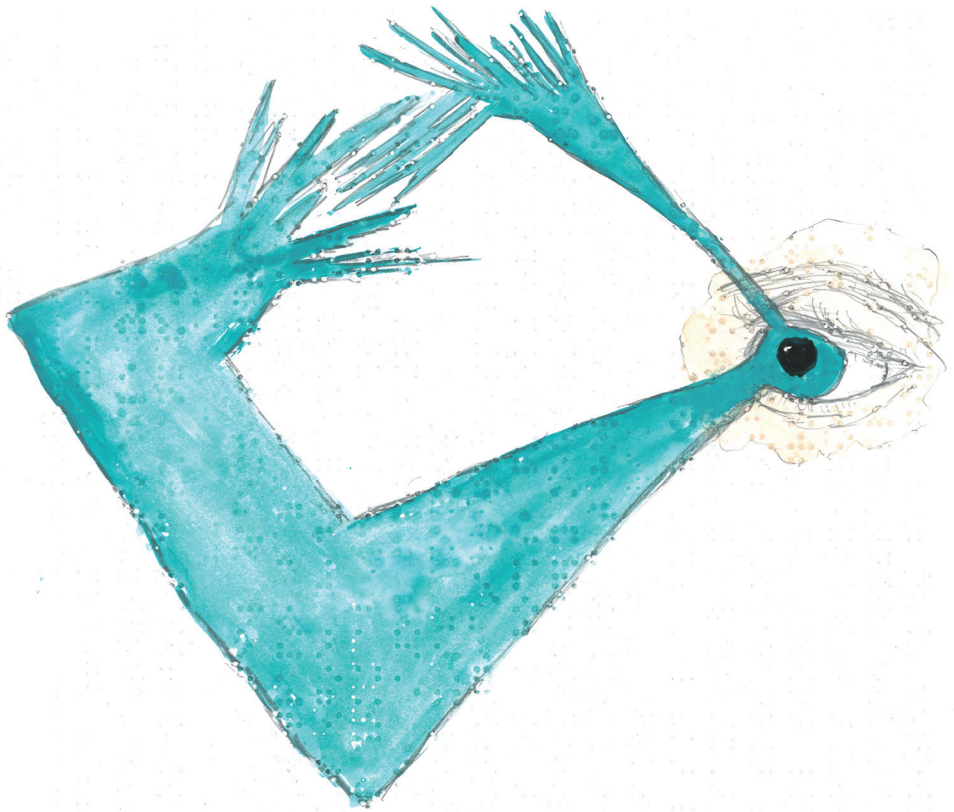




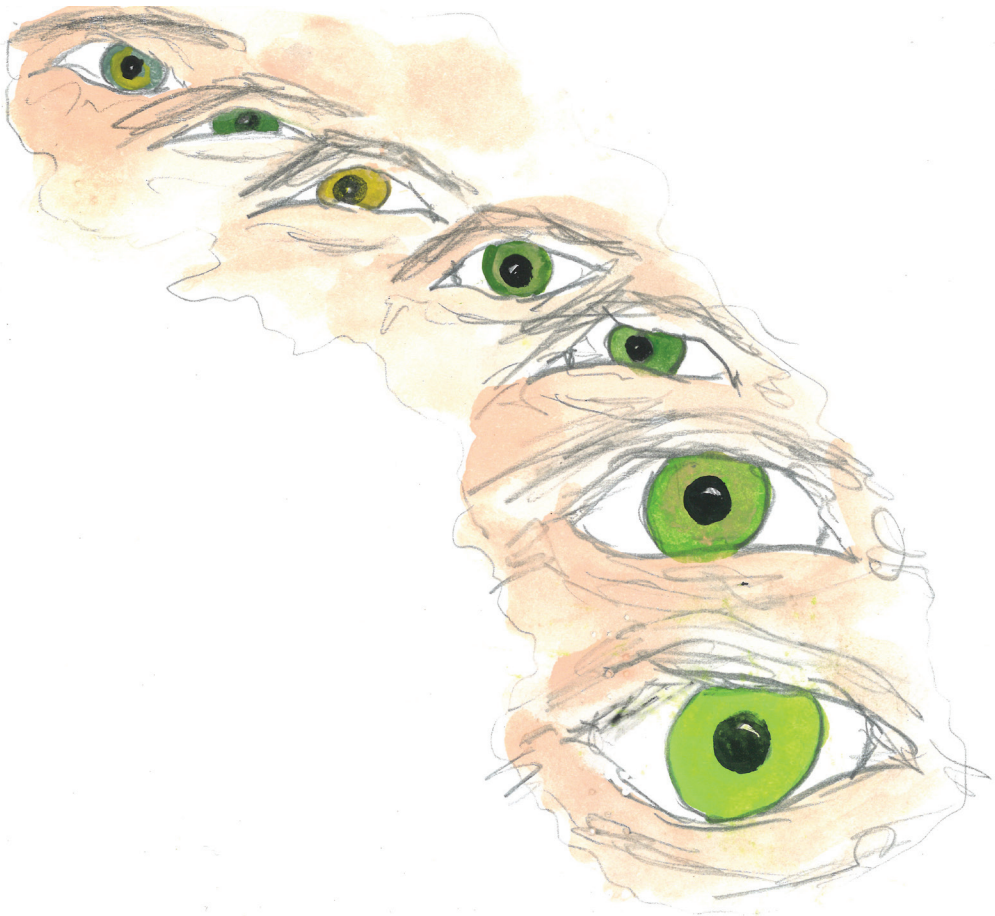
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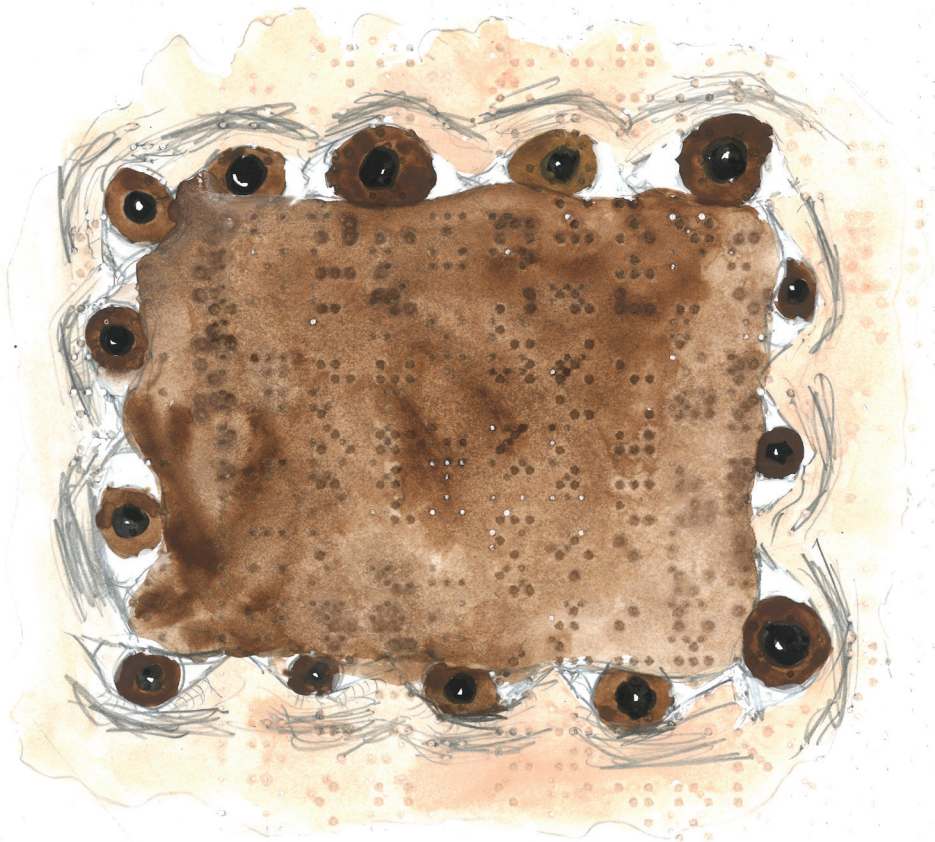
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## Immigration in Trump's Post-Truth America

An Essay by Avery Ware, Youngstown State University

The United States of America has a long, documented history of its obsession with national identity. This obsession with identity has manifested itself into the close monitoring of, and desire to identify, the “American culture” or “national narrative.” Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, authors of *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*, report national narrative as, “a story of agreed principles, values, and myths that gives the country a coherent sense of identity.” In an attempt to control the national narrative, and define American identity, there is an increasing surveillance and preoccupation with immigration. The growing presence of immigrants threatens the homogenous narrative, identity, and culture that the majority (heterosexual, middle-class, Christian, English speaking and white) is so desperate to define and propagate.

In order to adequately examine national identity, a critical examination of white supremacy and American exceptionalism must also be considered. American exceptionalism, a byproduct of white supremacy, alludes to images and ideas of baseball games, apple pie, and fireworks. It appeals to the notion of a fair and color-blinded democracy, hardworking individuals, and extending equal opportunities to everyone. American exceptionalism insinuates that anyone can come to the “land of free,” and through hard work and dedication to one’s country, success can be achieved. But the reality is that, these privileges are only extended to white Americans (although many people of color use this model to gain success). Whiteness has always been the measure of Americanness; the concept of whiteness is older than America itself. Pamela Perry, in her essay titled “White,” explains that European historians, travelers, and naturalists of the sixteenth and seventeenth century cultivated and circulated the notion that fair skinned (white) people were perfect and pure. British colonist then brought these ideas of whiteness to the Caribbean and North American colonies, laying the foundation for American white supremacy and the horrors, oppression, and unequal structures that come along with it.<sup>1</sup>

Through colonization, the standard of Americanness (read: whiteness) was set, performed, and enforced by nativist (nativist were people who believed that they were ‘true’ Americans). Evidenced after a large influx of immigrants in the early 1800s due the lax provisions on immigration, self-proclaimed nativist became a growing and influential opposition to immigration in the 1850s emphasizing the importance of pure “American values.” In the late 1850s into the 1900s, the process of Americanization, stripping immigrants of their native culture and assimilating them into the “national fabric” was exuberant. Immigrant children in New York City schools were made to practice pledging allegiance to the American flag as a part of the public school curriculum, businesses like Ford Motor Company and facilities like the YWCA and YMCA held classes teaching immigrant workers English, and ceremonies were held across the country where aspiring citizens would pledge allegiance to their new homeland. But what’s even more telling, in this process of Americanization, is how assimilated immigrants would discriminate against and expel new waves of immigrants and Black people. When discussing how immigrants sought acceptance into Americanness, Julia Higgins wrote in an

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Perry, “White”, *Keywords For American Cultural Studies* (October 2007) [keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/white/](https://keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/white/) (accessed December 4, 2017).

opinion piece titled “Immigration: The Myth of the Melting Pot”, “you became white by opposing those who weren’t.”<sup>2</sup> Essentially, mirroring the mistreatment brought against them at the hands of whites granted them access to whiteness, legitimacy as person of America. Built into the “national fabric” of America was/is dehumanization and discrimination of the “others.”

Fast forward to present day America and the same ideas of whiteness cultivated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the concepts of assimilation and Americanization introduced in the 1800s and 1900s, still persist today. A great example of this is the 2016 Presidential Election.

In large part due to the 2016 Presidential Election, present day Americans are haunted by and engrossed with identity, citizenship, and who is *really* American and who *really* belongs. Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan is coded language for keeping America white, homogeneous, and racist. It is, anti-immigration and obsession with American identity that got Trump elected. He established his entire political platform on racism and xenophobia, first targeting Mexicans and then Muslims. He would spew racist propaganda such as, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapist.”<sup>3</sup> The use of “they” here puts emphasis, especially in the context he used it, on Mexicans being non-citizens and even less human – there is an obvious otherness in his use and employment of language. Throughout the course of his campaign, he used language that made clear distinctions between “them/they” (people of color, usually) and “us” (true American, e.g. white people). National identity, and the need to define it, was Trump’s ticket to the White House.

There is similar language used by neo-Nazis when it comes to national identity. Marisol Bello of *USA TODAY* did a study on the white power movement and how their attitudes towards immigration is strikingly similar to their attitudes towards race. When interviewing a neo-Nazi, he said,

Historically, when times get tough in our nation, that’s how movements like ours gain a foothold... When the economy suffers, people are looking for answers. ... We are the answer for white people.

And now this immigrant thing in the past couple of years has been the biggest boon to us... the immigration issue is the biggest problem we’re facing because it’s changing the face of our country. We see stuff in English and Spanish. ... They are turning our country into a Third World ghetto.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Huggins, “Immigration: The Myth of the Melting Pot”, *Newsweek* (December 26, 2015) [newsweek.com/immigration-myth-melting-pot-408705](http://newsweek.com/immigration-myth-melting-pot-408705) (accessed July 25, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Alvaro Huerta, “The ‘War on Immigrants’: Racist Policies In The Trump Era”, *Huffington Post* (August 1, 2017) [huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-war-on-immigrants-racist-policies-in-the-trump\\_us\\_5980bf68e4b0d187a596909b](http://huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-war-on-immigrants-racist-policies-in-the-trump_us_5980bf68e4b0d187a596909b) (accessed July 10 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Marisol Bello, “White Supremacist Target Middle America”, *USA Today* (October 21, 2008) [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-10-20-hategroups\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-10-20-hategroups_N.htm) (accessed December 5, 2017).

The use of “them” and “our” is very indicative of what white people think they own and have the ability to audit based on white supremacist standards.

In the *New York Times*, journalist Lynn Vavreck goes into detail about the clear line drawn in the sand as it pertains to immigration and citizenship. She writes in “The Great Political Divide Over American Identity” that:

The distinctive emphasis Mr. Trump’s primary voters placed on the importance of European ancestry and Christianity explains a lot about the 2016 presidential battle over the meaning of America. Would America be “stronger together,” as Hillary Clinton believed, or weaker because of the non-European, non-Christian people knocking on its door?”

This context makes it easier to see why many people interpreted Mr. Trump’s appeal to “make America great again” as a call to exclude some groups of people from belonging or feeling like Americans.<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, leading up to the presidential election, The Democracy Fund, a bipartisan foundation that fields political research to ensure democracy, fielded interviews of over 8,000 people who voted in the 2012 election. The results speak to how a lot of people see and value key aspects of what they believe to be American identity. Forty-nine percent of Democrats placed importance on “those who want to call themselves American” to either be born in America or live most of their lives in America. A third of Democrats deemed affiliation with the Christian religion was also essential to American identity. Across the aisle, 72% of Republicans believed either living life in America or being born in America was a precursor to citizenship. Fifty-six percent of Republicans thought that being a Christian was vital to Americanness. Additionally, 75% of Democrats and 95% of Republicans thought that speaking English was of importance, and 16% of Democrats and 23% of Republicans believed being of European heritage was important.

While some may look at these numbers and assess that many Americans, Democrat and Republican, are moving away from an “exclusionary notions of American identity” as Vavreck puts in her article, I see these figures and conclude that the numbers, especially across party lines, leave very little room for those that don’t fall within the bounds of white, Christian, English speaking, and native born, all byproducts of white supremacist notions of Americanness. Particularly, outside of these specifically structured bounds are immigrants. This is evident in policies and proposed legislation that the current administration has announced since the election of Trump, including but not limited to, Executive Order 13769, popularly known as the Muslim ban or the travel ban, and ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA).

Executive Order 13769 was one of Trump’s first orders of business of as President of the United States. It is popularly known as the “Muslim ban” because it restricts immigration, travel, and visitation from predominantly Muslim nations. The most recent update on this xenophobic executive order was more than 100 million individuals, according to lawyers from the ACLU, from the following countries: Iran, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Chad, North Korea, and

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<sup>5</sup> Lynn Vavreck, “The Great Political Divide Over American Identity”, *The New York Times* (August 2, 2017) [nytimes.com/2017/08/02/upshot/the-great-political-divide-over-american-identity.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/upshot/the-great-political-divide-over-american-identity.html) (accessed December 5, 2017).



Venezuela. Trump and his administration are pushing for the legitimacy of this ban under the guise of national security and protection against terrorist. Not only is it racist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic to equate all Muslims to terrorist, but it's a wildly inconceivable claim given Trump's documented record of anti-Muslim tweets and statements.<sup>6</sup> Several federal judges agree that the executive order is based more on bigotry than national security. Judge Theodore D. Chuang of the Federal District Court in Maryland says that "the new proclamation was tainted by religious animus and most likely violated the Constitution's prohibition of government establishment of religion." Similarly, Judge Derrick K. Watson of the Federal District Court in Honolulu says that the order "plainly discriminates based on nationality."<sup>7</sup>

Not only are immigrants being prevented from entering the country, but immigrants and their descendants that are already here are on the receiving end of Trump's anti-immigration crusade. The ending of the Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals program, popularly known as DACA, is an example. DACA offered legal protection to roughly 800,000 people known as "DREAMers," who entered the country "illegally" as children. More specifically, DACA offered individuals brought to the United States as children before mid-2007 the ability to apply for protection from deportation and work permits if they met certain requirements. It also, under certain guidelines, allowed beneficiaries the opportunity to enroll in primary and secondary education and obtain work permits. The ending of DACA puts more than 800,000 at risk for deportation.

The Muslim ban and the ending of DACA are clear signifiers of whiteness controlling and defining the national identity of America via anti-immigration and xenophobia. By deeming them all as terrorist or safety hazards (Muslim ban) and/or denying them access to resources (DACA) is exclusionary and designed to deny humanity and revoke aid to marginalized individuals based on American essentialist standards that aim to erase marginalized people from the American narrative.

However, studies predicate that immigration is set to increase in vast numbers in the coming years, creating less homogenous communities. Reihan Salam in the *National Review* explains that America's cultural character is rapidly changing due to the influx of foreign-born individuals. He writes, "Over the next 50 years, demographers at the Pew Research Center anticipate, new immigrants and their descendants will account for 88 percent of all population growth."<sup>8</sup> The reasoning for this is in part due to native-born Americans having extremely low birthrates. Salam is calling this influx of foreign-born individuals in America a "cultural war," a war between Republicans/conservatives and non-native-born individuals.

This ongoing cultural war between native-born and foreign-born individuals has offered several, mostly ignorant and rooted in bigotry, arguments against immigration. One of the most

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Landers, "Trump Retweet anti-Muslim Videos", *CNN Politics* (November 30, 2017) <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/29/politics/donald-trump-retweet-jayda-fransen/index.html> (accessed February 15, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Allows Third Version of Trump's Travel Ban to Take Effect." *The New York Times* (December 4 2017) [www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/us/politics/trump-travel-ban-supreme-court.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/us/politics/trump-travel-ban-supreme-court.html) (accessed July 10 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Reihan Salam, "Republicans Need a New Approach to Immigration", *National Review* (January 4, 2016) [www.nationalreview.com/article/429192/republicans-should-promote-assimilation](http://www.nationalreview.com/article/429192/republicans-should-promote-assimilation) (accessed December 5, 2017).

common is that “immigrants will take all of our jobs.” This has always been the “to-go” argument for people against immigration, but there’s was an increase in this rhetoric in the conversation concerning DACA and the DREAMers. There is a plethora of research that disproves this claim. David Card from the University of California, Berkeley writes in “The Elusive Search for Negative Wage Impacts of Immigrants” that immigrant work has very little effect, sometimes none at all, on native-born Americans. He also states that immigrants are more likely to compete with each other than native-born Americans. Additionally, a whole range of economists, 95% to be exact, answered that the average American would be better off with more (highly skilled) immigrants working in the United States. More specifically, Americans benefit from immigrant workers in innovation, the price of good and services, the numbers of jobs, government finances, and even wage.<sup>910</sup>

Another argument is that immigrants don’t assimilate into “American culture.” Again, this is assuming that there is a universal, agreed upon culture by which America operates. However, there are various studies that have rendered this claim to be false. Economist Jacob Vigdor speaks on 20th century immigration and says,

While there are reasons to think of contemporary migration from Spanish speaking nations as distinct from earlier waves of immigration, evidence does not support the notion that this wave of migration poses a true threat to the institutions that withstood those earlier waves. Basic indicators of assimilation, from naturalization to English ability, are if anything stronger now than they were a century ago.<sup>11</sup>

The notion of the need for immigrants to assimilate is troubling, but also supports of the original argument for this essay. The desire for immigrants to assimilate is the desire for immigrants to strip themselves of their original culture, language, and customs and take on those of whiteness. Or, better yet, to just fade into the background of “American culture.” Hence, erasure of identity for the national narrative. This speaks to the original argument that whiteness is threatened by immigration because it distorts their idea of what American identity is and should be.

In his article in the *National Review*, Salam poses the question of how to integrate this growing number of immigrants into “American society.” He says that,

To win this new culture war, conservatives must do more than embrace a new approach to immigration. They must offer a new conception of American nationhood. Just as the melting-pot nationalism of the 1900s forged a new American identity that natives and immigrants of various European nationalities

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<sup>9</sup> David Card, “COMMENT: THE ELUSIVE SEARCH FOR NEGATIVE WAGE IMPACTS OF IMMIGRATION”, *Berkeley.edu* davidcard.berkeley.edu/papers/jeea2012.pdf. (accessed December 6, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Harris, “Why Your Economic Argument Against Immigration Is Probably Wrong.” *Fortune* (September 11 2017) fortune.com/2017/09/11/daca-immigration-economy-donald-trump/ (accessed December 6, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Vigdor, “The Civic and Cultural Assimilation of Immigrants to the United States,” in *The Economics of Immigration: Market-Based Approaches, Social Science, and Public Policy*, edited by Benjamin Powell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 90.

could embrace, a new melting-pot nationalism is needed to counter the ethnic and class antagonisms that threaten our society today.<sup>12</sup>

A “new conception of American nationhood,” as Salam puts it, would mean that the myth of American exceptionalism would have to become reality and equal opportunities would have to be extended to everyone including immigrants. That means wealth would have to be distributed and systems would have to be dismantled. Melting-pot nationalism sounds nice and progressive, but, it needs to go beyond that into taking a serious look at the way whiteness has constructed the current concept of American nationhood and how that works in concert with American exceptionalism and white supremacy.

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<sup>12</sup> Salam, “Republicans Need A New Approach to Immigrants”.

**On Being a Single Mama in America**  
**An Essay by Sarah Jefferis, Cornell University**

“Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

--MLK

“The role of the writer is not to say what we can all say, but what we are unable to say.”

--Anais Nin

**My Mama and Emmett Till**

I understood murder before I could ride a bike without training wheels. Murder happened daily, and so far, only one person had come back from it. When I was five, my half-blind white well-meaning mama gave me the tragedy of Emmett Till, as a bedtime story, a not story-story, told between stories of the Cross and the arsenic in Hamlet. I grew up in Colonial Williamsburg; I had a habit of listening for the dead.

Today she told me about Nicholas Jerome Ackies, who was originally from Richmond, Virginia. His mama, Ruth, was my mama's best friend. Nick was the second son Ruth had to bury. He was an 18-year-old criminal justice major at the University of Norfolk. And his life cannot be forgotten.

My heavy mama sat on my dirty sheetless mattress and told me of the boy who was lynched by white men in Mississippi, of how lynching was what many white people did but never spoke of afterwards. She told me that if on the rare occasion, some neighbor or teacher spoke of attending one in front of me, say over coffee in the parish hall at the local episcopal church, or at the pancake breakfast at the firehouse, I was to run from the room immediately. And to tell her who said it. Lynching was an unspoken disease that I could catch. My mama always reminded me that Till's mama *wanted the world to see what those men had done to her son*. I was never shown the photograph of Till in *Jet*. Though *Jet* was on the coffee table next to *Time* and *Langston Hughes Poems*. (Always there was something to read even if the electric bill didn't get paid, or if the fridge was empty.)

I do not believe we have seen what those men did to Emmet. Or to Nick. Or to Trevon Martin or any of the hundreds of young children of color who die at the hand of racism every day. How many times have we turned our heads? Or closed our eyes? How much easier is it to say *I have not witnessed injustice, but I believe those people who said they have seen it*. In Trump's America, whiteness gives us the opportunity to *Birdbox* ourselves whenever we can't breathe. As if injustice happened outside of us and was something we could keep at bay if we didn't speak of it.

Perhaps my mama told me of Till's story because it was her way of saying in the late 80's this is why the KKK burned my friend Yolanda's house down, or this is why my white music teacher's boyfriend-a MOC- was moving them both out of Williamsburg. I missed my teacher Ms. Jacobsen and in fourth grade, I did not know why Yolanda was not allowed to speak to me

anymore. Though I get it now. I didn't understand that as a girl, the representation of myself as a white person could exist as the possibly enemy. Thus the ignorance of white privilege. My ignorance. The inability to understand one's historical self that simultaneously exists in the present self. The inability to think "I exist" without history, or outside of American History. To think I exist as one singular I, alone in this thing we call the present time, this vast drowning home we call America.

*Carolyn Bryant Donham who accused Till of grabbing at her and being sexually crude admitted after 50 years that she was a liar.*

Maybe my mama told me Till's story to remind me that she always loved the black mechanic named Roservelt, even if she would not openly risk being his girlfriend. Or how she knew it was his life on the line and not hers to risk. *Rogers Auto* was after school while my mama worked laundry at *Minor's gas*, and I learned catalytic converters, and mufflers and how to change the oil. Roservelt protected me from men who cat called outside his garage. *She is just a girl. Back off.* He saw me as a child—not like the other white men who leaned to my prepubescent body like a dock they ached to moor towards.

## II.

### **Mama Pain and Historical Witnessing**

Dana Schutz, a white artist, used open coffin photographs of the mutilated body of Emmett Till to create her own abstract painting entitled, "Open Casket." Almost immediately, there were arguments against the inclusion of this abstract painting at the Whitney Biennial show, and several artists wrote to argue for its prompt removal. I do not think that Schutz should profit from the story or pain of Emmett Till. I do not believe it is her story to tell. Though she claims the painting is not for sale, her career is supported by the Whitney's choice to display it. I am not arguing for censorship; rather, I am arguing for sensitivity. And against cultural appropriation.

In an article entitled: 'Open Casket' and the Question of Empathy," Aruna D'Souza reminds us to ask: "Is it historical witnessing or cultural appropriation for a white woman to take up this story?" The difference between historical witnessing and cultural appropriation lies not only in the intention of the artist, but also in the values of the institution that supports the artists' work. It exists both in the object that has been created, and the audience reception or rejection of the creation. We are never solely ourselves with one canvas. We bring our ancestors with us to every stroke, every line, every verse.

Schutz was perhaps guilty of cultural appropriation and white privilege made her believe that it was historical witnessing. This does not redeem her. When a witness becomes a person, who repossesses—they often, intentionally or not, believe their similarity across one identity point dissipates the other points of difference. They can't seem to hold points of similarity and difference simultaneously. Furthermore, being a witness to pain is incredibly intimate, and should not be taken lightly, and a community—whoever they may be—may not want so many eyes. And yet, Till's mother wanted Emmet's casket open. Perhaps then we could wait and ask before witnessing.

Schutz claimed that the painting was not for sale and that she did not intend to cause harm. But the impact of her painting has caused unnecessary harm, and incredible dialogue both about the abstraction of pain, and the ownership of grief and narrative. It is incredibly important to be careful about the kinds of narratives we create and the kinds of narratives we share. In a statement released by the museum, Schutz said "I don't know what it is like to be black in America, but I do know what it is like to be a mother. The thought of anything happening to your child is beyond comprehension. Their pain is your pain."

As if being a mother made us alike. Motherhood, while incredibly powerful, does not immediately mean we are on the same team. It does not even mean, necessarily that we both have vaginas. Motherhood, in its glory and deep heartbreak, connects us, but it does not do so at the cost of, or eradication of other points of intersectionality. For Schutz, she understood her connection to Till's mother first, and foremost, and though she acknowledges she is not a POC, the likelihood of her children not dying at the hand of racism may not have occurred to her. And her own privilege to have her work displayed in the museum may have escaped her. Her motherhood does not erase her position of privilege as a white upper class woman. It does not occur in a vacuum. Perhaps she thought of herself as an ally. Perhaps Schutz thought her mother pain translated across racial lines.

Hannah Black, a British bi-racial artist claimed that the subject matter of Till's death did not belong to Schutz. Further in D'Souza's article, Black asserted: "The painting should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about black people, because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute black suffering into profit and fun, though this has been normalized for a long time." The practice and the normalization of it is the grease in the wheel of white supremacy. My hands, and perhaps yours, are dirty. Even as I think of myself as woke. Even as you might. But it is important, necessary even as a white person, to know when to sit down and step back and not speak. To know when to witness and not steal.

As a white woman writer, there are some subjects, some deaths that I can only witness and that do not belong to me to recreate. And I feel obligated to tell the stories that no one is talking about. How shall I tell them? Who shall I tell them with? Black asserts that "white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others and are not a natural right." If the freedom of speech has served the hand of white supremacy, do we fault the artist or the social institution that supports and finances the show?

I cannot divide myself from my own whiteness. Even as I know I have—unintentionally or unwillingly so-- benefitted from a system--that has presented me privilege and ease. And I have been blind to it. I am sure I have had Schutzian moments. Have not you? I-we-have benefitted unwillingly from a system of white supremacy that has moved through us. It is the ether of America. I have normalized supremacy in my silence. And I am sorry. And that is not enough. But this essay moves past guilt. To stay in guilt is to resuscitate the system of oppression, rather than having a dialogue about how to break it down. And that dialogue begins with multiple conversations about witnessing and appropriation, and about the essence of narrative.

### III.

#### **My own girls**

My greatest joy and my greatest heartbreak are one in the same. Ilah who is fourteen and Frida, who is nine. It is a privilege to be their mama. Our white skin means we can choose to have the consciousness of privilege or choose to close our eyes and believe the others. It is not even a question for me. Not even a choice. Intentions are only half of the recipe of motherhood. Impact is critical. *Nevertheless, it happened* is a phrase we often say both about our actions and the news.

To not tell Ilah and Frida about Emmett Till, or Nicholas, or the others, is to do an injustice. Those narratives are as necessary as bread and water. To not have conversations with my girls about racial injustices daily, and the subsequent young repetitions/echoes and reverberations of Till is to participate in white supremacy. I will not participate. The goal of white supremacy is to keep us all quiet and to argue that talking about or writing about race is rude, impolite and problematic. So, I choose rude. I choose impolite and problematic.

I teach my daughters to pay more attention, to notice when they are receiving benefits from a system, and to tear that system down. In the moment. To take the risk and speak to injustice. I mother them to be rebellious and respectful, to witness without stealing. I do not have to have a conversation with my daughters about how to respond when white police officers stop them. I don't have two girls who are perceived as targets. They are not perceived as threats or as adults. They know this privilege and want to unravel it. I mother courage.

### IV.

#### **Mama as Educator**

With each year around the sun, I have attempted to teach the girls and my students justice. As someone who attended a predominantly white private undergrad institution of Higher Ed (even on loans) and a predominantly white Ivy League Institution for grad school, that contends, "any student, any study," I am sure there have been moments, both as a student, and as a visiting lecturer, and even as a past member of the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives when I have witnessed microaggressions. And what good is a good heart, if radical change has not occurred? And there have been moments when I have spoken against cultural appropriation.

Intentions are not the only step in creating racial and economic justice. I can intend to love and be equitable, and I still live in a system called America, one that asks me to sign books as an alumna, but only has one POC out of ten at the table. A system that encourages me to spend residencies writing but does not have any POC as teaching artists. If I am not asking, *where don't I see? Who don't I see represented here? Who is talking? Who is not talking? Whose narratives are being told and retold?* Then I should quit.

I know that all rooms are not for me to be in; I know there are moments when I need to sit back; I am intentionally about my ally ship; and challenge my students to explore this idea of being an ally. I can choose to have the necessary conversations about race and privilege that will make some of my students uncomfortable. I am not afraid of uncomfortable. Are you?

But clearly, I-we- are not working hard enough. We can't get complacent. Complacency is to stroke the myth of meritocracy which is just the two headed sister of white supremacy. In this classroom of said Ivy league institution, that has made strides, but has miles to go before they create safe places for all underrepresented scholars, I teach Baldwin, and Coates, and Rankine; I offer poetry by Trethewey and Dove, and Lorde.

Is the response of the professor, my response one of the interlocutors, the middle person, the translator between artist, art and student? And even as my culturally responsive pedagogy informs my choices, my consciousness, and my desire to take apart the system, I have to wonder if I am any different from Schutz. Am I profiting off the stories of black pain as prescribed in these poems in order to feed my girls? Should I teach Frost or Yeats and sit the fuck down? Is the difference because I am teaching to learn, rather than teaching to think I have something to say?

The authority of diverse voices and narratives are shared in my classroom. Yet, am I still only reenacting white privilege when I assume that students of color want to have these conversations, or want to write/share their stories of struggle and beauty? Or am I not reenacting white privilege because of my intentions, or consciousness, or because I refuse to fetishize the other? The Ivy League institution provides me the platform to teach these diverse texts and ideas. The Ivy or the Whitney—ain't much of a difference.

I use my privilege in the service of the oppressed. Or is that also problematic? As a poor white bisexual mama, I sit in, if not simultaneously, the place of both privileged and oppressed. My economically disadvantaged status is not the same as growing up a person of color. My privilege got me a publisher for my books, and a job--albeit as an adjunct- in the academy.

If I sit down when I assign the texts, or if the students lead the discussions, or if I say at the very beginning: this is not my story to tell, but here are these texts, these voices, and let us be inspired to use them to unpack this system of supremacy. Let us use texts as hammers. Texts as bridges. Narratives as ways to help us witness without being thieves. And still white privilege attempts to close my mouth. I choose not to let it.

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<https://longreads.com/2018/05/21/open-casket-and-the-question-of-empathy/>



## The Emergence of Empathy in the Era of Trump

An Essay by Denise Ayo, University of Notre Dame

Trump is a narcissist.<sup>1</sup> Thankfully, every year since he emerged on the U.S. political stage, Walt Disney Company has offered its impressionable American audiences lessons in what Trump, like any narcissist, lacks most: empathy. June 16, 2015, Trump announced his intent to run for President of the United States. Three days later, Pixar Studios introduced “the little voices inside your head,” which taught the value of validating another person’s pain rather than expecting them to smother it with performed happiness.<sup>2</sup> November 8, 2016, Trump is elected the president. 15 days later, *Moana* saves her island and her people with emotional attunement. Then, on November 22, 2017 and November 21, 2018, Disney offered two more big-budget films, *Coco* and *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, that tackle the narcissism/empathy dichotomy. Given that *Frozen* (2013) teaches young (female) audiences to control their (hysterical) emotions and *Big Hero 6* (2014) depicts a physical healthcare robot trying to heal emotional pain, these films represent a dramatic shift in how Disney presents and understands human emotions.<sup>3</sup> This essay explores this trend. In all the films under discussion here, an adolescent must choose between social expectations and his or her heart’s desire. This formula, of course, is not unique. What is unique is how integral empathy—or a lack thereof—is to the films.

### “Team Happy”: *Inside Out* (2015)

Energetic, optimistic, and attractive, Joy (who personifies the emotion joy) serves as *Inside Out*’s narrator and the de facto leader of 11-year-old Riley Anderson’s core emotions. Joy is also overbearing and impatient with her fellow emotions, especially the dumpy, bespectacled Sadness: “She...well she...I am not actually sure what she does. And, I’ve checked, there is no place for her to go.”<sup>4</sup> Validating Joy’s efforts, Riley’s mother praises her daughter’s ability to suppress her negativity and “keep smiling” despite undergoing an upheaval, a move from Minnesota to San Francisco, and being increasingly ignored by her father, who is preoccupied with his new business.

The conflict that Riley experiences between wanting to please her parents and needing to express her unhappiness propels the film’s main events: Joy and Sadness’s expulsion from Headquarters, Riley’s crumbling Islands of Personality, and her eventual decision to run away. The solution to Riley’s inner turmoil given by the film is empathy. First, Sadness empathizes with Riley’s imaginary friend Bing Bong: “I’m sorry that they took your rocket. They took something that you loved. It’s gone. Forever.” Then, Riley’s father validates his daughter’s pain once she finally expresses it: “You know what, I miss Minnesota too.” Sadness succeeds where

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear, I am not attempting to diagnosis Trump with Narcissistic Personality Disorder. He is, however, “an undisputed poster boy for narcissism”—a fact on which even professionals who decry diagnosing Trump with NPD can agree. (Allen Frances, “I helped write the manual for diagnosing mental illness. Donald Trump doesn’t meet the criteria,” *STAT*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.statnews.com/2017/09/06/donald-trump-mental-illness-diagnosis/>.)

<sup>2</sup> Pete Docter and Ronnie Del Carmen, *Inside Out* (2015; Burbank, CA: Disney Pixar, 2015), Movie poster.

<sup>3</sup> Estimated production budgets according to The Numbers, Nash Information Services, LLC, accessed Feb 28, 2018, <https://www.the-numbers.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Pete Docter and Ronnie Del Carmen, *Inside Out* (2015; Burbank, CA: Disney Pixar, 2015), DVD.

Joy fails. Her empathy fortifies Bing Bong, giving him the courage he needs to help Joy and Sadness to return to Headquarters, while Riley's tears trigger her father's empathy, healing the rupture in the family dynamic.<sup>1</sup>

### ***"I know your name": Moana (2016)***

A short way into Moana and the demi-god Maui's journey to restore Te Fiti's heart, they meet Tamatoa.<sup>2</sup> This unabashedly narcissistic crab proceeds ("in song form!") to mock emotional depth while drawing an extensive comparison between his and Maui's superficial natures.<sup>3</sup> Although both characters privilege external beauty and physical strength, Maui's "aching heart," the crab suggests, allows the decapod to get the upper hand. Ironically, this emotional pain is also the reason for Maui's dependence on external validation and eventual theft of the heart:

Maui:	I had human parents. They, uh, took one look and decided they did not want me. They threw me into the sea like I was nothing. [...]
Moana:	You took the heart for them. You did everything for them; so they'd love you.
Maui:	It was never enough.

Rather than try to inspire Maui to action ("You gonna give me a speech?!"), Moana uses empathy to feel his pain and understand his motivations.<sup>4</sup> This recognition renews Maui and allows the pair to continue their journey.

Once they reach Te Fiti, Maui and Moana attempt to put the heart back, first by force and then by stealth. Te Kā thwarts both efforts, so Moana employs empathy: "I know your name. / They have stolen the heart from inside you. / But this does not define you." Asking the Ocean to part, she removes the physical barrier between herself and Te Kā while her words close the perception gap.<sup>5</sup> Moana validates Te Kā/Te Fiti's anger and fear; she quenches the latter's fire and thus is able to return the heart. Understood and restored to her original form, Te Fiti can even forgive Maui.

### ***"Remember Me": Coco (2017)***

<sup>1</sup> Janina Scarlet, "Psychology of 'Inside Out.'" *Superhero Therapy*, June 21, 2015, <http://www.superhero-therapy.com/psychology-of-inside-out/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ron Clements, John Musker, and Chris Williams, *Moana* (2016; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2017), DVD.

<sup>3</sup> Tamatoa cites their shared focus on appearances ("Little Maui's having trouble with his look") and external adornments ("Yet I have to give you credit for my start / And your tattoos on the outside / For just like you I made myself a work of art / I'll never hide, I can't / I'm too shiny"); displays of masculinity ("What a terrible performance / Get the hook! (Get it?) / You don't swing it like you used to, man"); and physical strength ("You try to be tough / But your armour's just not hard enough").

<sup>4</sup> The referent for the pronoun "they" could easily be Maui's parents, humans in general, or both, suggesting that Maui's efforts to please humans could be seen as attempts to earn his parents' love. It could also be argued that Maui's inability to wield his hook once he and Moana retrieve it from Tamatao is connected to his being abandoned by the gods (for 1,000 years on a deserted island) in the same way his parents abandoned him at birth.

<sup>5</sup> Moana and Te Kā share a hongi (a Māori greeting of pressing foreheads and noses together to show unity) both before and after Te Kā physical transformation into Te Fiti seemingly signaling a shared understanding in spite of external appearances.

12-year-old Miguel wants nothing more than to be a famous musician; but his family hates music. Miguel's great, great grandfather, Héctor Rivera, abandoned his wife and daughter to pursue his "dream to play for the world."<sup>10</sup> Several generations removed, Miguel sees his family's ban as unfairly punishing him for his ancestor's mistake. Over the course of the film, however, Miguel repeats this mistake and gains a new understanding of music and family. Different versions of Miguel's favorite song, "Remember Me," track this progression.

When Miguel first mentions the song, the film cuts to his idol, Ernesto de la Cruz, performing an extravagant musical number on a giant stage, flanked by nearly 80 female back-up dancers in brightly colored dresses. The tone is upbeat and flirtatious, and it represents the fame, excitement, and grandeur that Ernesto embodies for Miguel. The aspiring musician identifies with Ernesto's hubristic appeals to be remembered since, at this point in the film, he desires nothing more than to be the next de la Cruz. In the Land of the Dead, however, Ernesto's former best friend offers a drastically different version. Although the lyrics remain the same, the tempo and tone vary drastically and thus create a new message. Héctor's song is not about fame: it is a lullaby, a "secret song," written by a father for his daughter to assuage the pain of separation.<sup>11</sup>

Miguel hears this version after descending to Héctor's level—both figuratively, he repeats Héctor's mistake and repents it, as well as literally, Ernesto tosses them both into a sinkhole to prevent damage to his reputation. In such a position, "Remember Me" resonates with Miguel. The agony of knowing that he may never see his family again forges a deep connection between him and his great, great grandfather. Miguel's pain then melds with Héctor's as he realizes that the latter's desire to be remembered stems only from a desire to see his little girl (Miguel's great grandmother) again: "I didn't write 'Remember Me' for the world! I wrote it for Coco".<sup>12</sup> Miguel feels the ache behind the song's imperative; he empathizes with his ancestor's plight while a series of poignant camera shots make this emotional attunement unmistakable.<sup>13</sup>

Back in the World of Living, surrounded by his family, Miguel performs "Remember Me" one last time. With tears in his eyes for Héctor and Coco alone, Miguel plays his great, great grandfather's guitar and sings the secret song in a desperate attempt to communicate with his great grandmother who seems to have given in to her dementia. Until this point in the movie, the elderly woman barely moves or speaks and does not recognize her family members. But as Miguel sings, Coco's fingers begin to twitch. Her face slowly comes alive, and she begins to sing along. Coco smiles after the song ends and pulls out a photo scrap containing Héctor's face, which completes the family portrait that Miguel carries with him throughout the film. The film

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<sup>10</sup> Lee Unkrich, and Adrian Molina, *Coco* (2016; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2018) DVD.

<sup>11</sup> The drastic difference in affect between the two lyrically-identical versions gesture towards the difference between cognitive and affective empathy, only the latter of which can heal emotional pain. (See, for example, Erin Leonard, "How to Help a Loved One with Loss," *Psychology Today*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/peaceful-parenting/201903/how-help-loved-one-loss>.)

<sup>12</sup> Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, *Coco*.

<sup>13</sup> After Héctor finishes singing, the film uses a series of cuts to symbolize the pair's connection. First it pans so that Miguel and Héctor face the audience, with Miguel in the foreground and Héctor in the background. As they share a grito in celebration of being related, the camera angle zooms out to a view from the top of the sinkhole. It then returns to the original shot and their expressions' slowly fall as they simultaneously realize that they have both been abandoned.

then focuses on the completed photograph, symbolically suggesting that this version of the song and the emotional connection it creates healed the pain Héctor's initial departure caused.<sup>14</sup>

### ***"You know you are acting like a real bad guy here": Ralph Breaks the Internet (2018)***

In *Wreck-it Ralph* (2012), Ralph attempts to transcend his role as a video game villain. In *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), this unsettled identity becomes toxic. Although being Vanellope Von Schweetz's hero and best friend pleases Ralph, the sequel's opening makes it clear that this new identity is incredibly fragile by resurrecting the heart-shaped cookie medal, frosted with the words "You're my hero," that Vanellope gave Ralph in the first film. Like a cookie, Ralph's identity quickly begins to crumble as the second film takes Vanellope on her own journey of self-discovery. As Vanellope drifts further and further away from Litwak's Family Fun Center, Ralph desperately tries to make her stay, first by fixing her arcade game "Sugar Rush" and then by breaking "Slaughter Race," i.e. the game that she now wants to call home. To Ralph, Vanellope's desires seem ridiculous, childish, and selfish.<sup>15</sup> Vanellope, on the other hand, worries about hurting her friend, feeling torn between Ralph's expectations and her own happiness.

In a last-ditch effort to convince Vanellope to return to the arcade, Ralph releases a computer virus programmed to seek out and replicate weaknesses. This backfires when the virus replicates Ralph's insecure identity, creating a horde of Ralphs that overtake the Internet. To defeat the virus, Ralph must acknowledge his selfishness. Ralph yells at his viral forms, "It's not right to hold a friend back from her dreams. You don't own her. [...] You need to let her go. I know. It's gonna hurt a little bit when you do. Who am I kidding? It's gonna hurt a lot. But you're gonna be okay."<sup>16</sup> Not only does Ralph's newfound self-awareness end his dependency on Vanellope, it also allows him to empathize with himself.

### ***#SHINY: Disney's 20/40 Vision***

It is hard not to think of #GamerGate—in many ways, a harbinger to Trump's America—when Ralph's narcissistic attempts to possess Vanellope result in a virus spreading through cyberspace. *Ralph Breaks the Internet* also makes it hard not to connect Ralph's newfound self-awareness to Disney's own in recent years. Disney calls attention to this connection through the film's "Princesses Scene" in which Vanellope meets 14 former Disney princesses who teach her that her dreams matter while she teaches them the magic of t-shirts. But before the princesses accept her as one of their own, Disney has some fun at its own expense with not-so-subtle digs at past movies' insistence on the damsel in distress trope:

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<sup>14</sup> Kristen Anderson-Lopez (who wrote "Remember Me" with her partner Robert Lopez) explains, "That is when the family sees that music for Miguel is not about leaving the family, it's about healing the family" ("Remember Me" from Disney/Pixar *Coco* - For Your Consideration," YouTube video, 6:24, posted by "Disney-Pixar," December 22, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=7&v=p78MjAXIusc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=7&v=p78MjAXIusc)).

<sup>15</sup> The film even draws attention to how Ralph's reaction could be read as a projection of his own insecurities:

Ralph: You're just a kid.

Vanellope: Oh and you're some mature adult?

Ralph: Well, I'm bigger.

Yesss: Don't be insecure big fella!

Rich Moore and Phil Johnston, *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Animation Studios).

<sup>16</sup> Rich Moore and Phil Johnston, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*.

Pocahontas: What kind of a princess are you? [...]  
 Snow White: Were you poisoned?  
 Vanellope: No.  
 Aurora and Tiana: Cursed?  
 Vanellope: No!  
 Rapunzel and Belle: Kidnapped and enslaved?!  
 Vanellope: No! Are you guys okay? Should I call the police? [...]  
 Rapunzel: And now for the million dollar question: do people assume all your problems got solved because a big strong man showed up?  
 Vanellope: Yes! What is up with that?!  
 Disney Princesses: She is a princess!!!

After growing increasingly concerned by the princesses' giddy recitation of what Disney has put them through, Vanellope passes the ultimate test to earn her place among them.

In addition to offering nuanced depictions of empathy and self-awareness, the films discussed here raise several important issues that Trump's presidency has brought to the fore. Not only do the empathetic characters under consideration represent populations marginalized by the U.S. president, the films themselves, as various critics have pointed out, explore important social and political issues like mental health, the environment, diversity and cultural appreciation, immigration, and (cyber-)bullying. Unlike its presentation of empathy, Disney has made it a point to highlight these aspects of their films. It is well known that Disney consulted psychologists for *Inside Out*, formed the Oceanic Story Trust for *Moana*, hired Lalo Alcaraz, a Mexican-American cartoonist (as well as playwright Octavio Solis and former CEO of the Mexican Heritage Corporation, Marcela Davison Aviles) as consultants for *Coco*, and sought help from Princess Tiana's original animator and actress as well as the advocacy group Color of Change in response to complaints that *Ralph Breaks the Internet*'s trailer whitewashed the princess.<sup>17</sup>

However, Disney's vision, as many critics have also pointed out, is still not perfect. In the initial stages of *Coco*'s development, for example, Disney tried to trademark Día de Muertos.<sup>18</sup> Critics of *Moana* point out that not only does the film lump numerous diverse cultures into one, it takes some offensive liberties with these cultures' beliefs and traditions in order to articulate problems specific to American culture. It also seems problematic—though arguably indicative of our current cultural moment—that Disney relies almost exclusively on women and/or minority cultures to portray empathy as a powerful character trait. White American men, the films seem to

<sup>17</sup> Brian Truitt, "Why that Disney princess moment matters in 'Ralph Breaks the Internet,'" *USA Today*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2018/11/19/why-disney-princesses-moment-matters-ralph-breaks-internet/2047076002/>.

<sup>18</sup> Wes Judd, "A Conversation with the Psychologist Behind 'Inside Out,'" *Pacific Standard*, July 8, 2015, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/a-conversation-with-psychologist-behind-inside-out>. Peter Sciretta, "How Disney Formed the Oceanic Story Trust to Make 'Moana' More Authentic," *Slash*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.slashfilm.com/moana-oceanic-story-trust/>. Joanna Robinson, "Pixar's *Coco* Is a 'Love Letter to Mexico' in the Age of Trump," *Vanity Fair*, December 6, 2016, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/12/pixar-coco-gael-garcia-bernal-dia-de-los-muertos-miguel>. Cindy Rodriguez, "Day of the Dead trademark request draws backlash for Disney," *CNN*, May, 11, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/10/us/disney-trademark-day-dead/index.html>.

suggest, are either incapable of empathy or not culpable for its lack. Riley's father, who is absent for most of *Inside Out* and whose absence contributes to his daughter's distress, displays a capacity for empathy in the film's final moments but does not acknowledge his inattentiveness throughout the film. Ralph admits to and takes ownership of his narcissistic tendencies, which allow him to develop self-empathy; however, his clear genesis in the Japanese-created simian Donkey Kong undermines the applicability of his character arc to the average caucasian male living in the United States. Outside of these two characters--both of whom Disney depicts as loveable despite being driven primarily by anger--Disney excludes white American men from the films and thus seems to absolve them from practicing empathy and condemning the perpetuation of toxic ideologies. Obviously, this is incredibly problematic given that America's most visible white male is also its most visible narcissist.

But even if the films did not avoid white American men, I would not argue that *Inside Out*, *Moana*, *Coco*, and *Ralph Breaks the Internet* are in direct conversation with Trump, his presidency, or his policies. They are, however, definitely voices in a larger conversation. Empathy has become a popular topic not just in Psychology Today articles, but throughout popular entertainment: Mantis and Ego in *Guardians of the Galaxy 2*; every episode of *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*; and even *South Park* features a distressed Tweek desperate for his boyfriend Craig to empathize with his fears. Brain scans have revealed that power damages a person's capacity for empathy, and studies have examined the link between self-awareness and empathy.<sup>19</sup> All this growing positive interest in empathy signals, at least to me, that Trump and all the anger, hate, and fear he represents are the dying gasp of an older order. Perhaps the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States will lay a conch shell rather than a stone.

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<sup>19</sup> Jerry Useem, "Power Causes Brain Damage," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/07/power-causes-brain-damage/528711>

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### **A Short Story by Gabriel Brownstein**

I can be depressive before dinner, slow to wake in the morning, but at that moment just before lunchtime, when I open the fridge with no one there but me, I am filled with anticipation and confidence.

I do the microwave—but also toaster, oven, broiler, and range. Unexpectedness is my game. Curry doesn't have to go with leftover rice, just because they both came for dinner on Monday. Don't underestimate the versatility of toast. Cauliflower and lentils make a great sandwich.

Lunch is a time for me to indulge in something I would not share with company. That old Tupperware of tomato sauce, back of the fridge, do I remember when it was cooked? Do I care? It has sausages in it, and they'll cheer up nicely over rice, especially if accompanied by a good cupful of grated Parmesan cheese. Also olives.

I give you two words: fat and salt. More specifically, a pickle or an egg. Or both. Don't eat the take-out Chinese chicken and broccoli out of the cardboard container. That's depressing. Make an omelet. Eat kim-chi on the side. Flush with pleasure when no one's there to say, "Dad why is your lunch so smelly?" I look over my life, and if I'm not grading on any kind of curve, I give myself mostly B's and C's in the most important subjects, writer, friend, lover, or member of the family. But in this one category my marks are sterling. You want to verify that? Please, don't come over.

## Contributor Biographies

**Denise Ayo** is the Associate Director of Undergraduate Programs for the University of Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs. Before joining the Keough School, she served as Associate Director for the University's Center for the Study of Languages and Cultures. She received her Ph.D. in British and Irish Modern Literature from Notre Dame and has taught and published essays on Irish, modernist, and video game culture as well as co-authored a chapter on language center management and development. She has also digitized a selection of the work of the Irish-born American literary critic Mary Colum: [www.marycolum.com](http://www.marycolum.com).

About her work, she states: I am strong believer in the power of empathy. I also believe that narcissism is much more prevalent than we typically think. Trump is merely a symptom of our culture. We have long privileged values and behaviors that cultivate individuals like him, such as success above else, fear of strong emotions, and a belief that some people are just better than others. I wrote "The Emergence of Empathy in the Era of Trump" in an effort to trace what I see as a growing effort on the part of popular culture to wrestle with these issues and help point us in a new direction.

**Gabriel Brownstein** is an Associate Professor of English at St. John's University. He is the author of a collection of stories, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, Apt 3W* (a PEN/Hemingway Award winner) and a novel, *The Man from Beyond* (a New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice). His most recent story, "No Time Like the Present" appeared in the *Harvard Review* in 2018 and won a Pushcart Prize. His newest book, *The Open Heart Club: A Story about Birth and Death and Cardiac Surgery*, is a memoir and a history of cardiology, and will be published in the fall of 2019 by PublicAffairs Books. This piece, "Leftovers," was originally written for a magazine that never came to be: *Adrift*, which aspired to be "*Cigar Aficianado* for the underemployed set."

**Jacob Bruggeman** is an honors student in his fourth year at Miami University with majors in history and political science, and a combined BA–MA program in political science. Jacob was recently honored for his research as one of fifteen national recipients of the Gilder Lehrman History Scholar award, and he is one of two Joanna Jackson Goldman Scholars at Miami. Next fall he will begin coursework for a MPhil in Economic and Social History at Cambridge University. Outside of the classroom, Jacob is a Graduate Assistant at Miami University's Center for Public Management and Regional Affairs, an Associate Editor of the *Cleveland Review of Books*, a co-Book Review Editor of *The Metropole*, and the Editor-in-Chief of *The New Herald*.

**Joseph Donica** is an assistant professor of English at Bronx Community College of the City University of New York. He teaches American literature, literary criticism and theory, and writing courses. He has published articles and reviews on American architecture, 9/11 literature, Edward P. Jones, Arab-American literature, Netflix and the digital future, the politics of the Internet, Hurricane Katrina memoirs, Digital Humanities' methodology, and disability studies. He is writing his first monograph titled *Inequality's Subjects: Neoliberalism and American Literature after Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring*. He currently serves on the executive board of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, is a monthly columnist

for *Screenshot Magazine*, and he is the chair of the committee awarding the John Leo and Dana Heller Award in LGBTQ studies through the Popular Culture Association. He has turned his attention, recently, to climate fiction and the effects neoliberal subjectivity has on our collective response to it.

**Mara Lee Grayson** is an Assistant Professor of English at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Her research explores rhetorics of race, teacher education, and racial literacy in writing studies. Her first book, *Teaching Racial Literacy: Reflective Practices for Critical Writing*, provides theoretical framing and pedagogical strategies for instructors seeking to implement racial literacy curricula. Her work has also appeared or is forthcoming in *English Education*, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *English Journal*, *Fiction*, *Columbia Journal*, *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, and numerous edited collections. Mara Lee holds a PhD in English Education from Columbia University and an MFA in Creative Writing from The City College of New York. After graduating college at the height of the recession, Mara Lee worked in real estate then as a theatre and film critic for *Show Business Weekly*, both of which may help to explain the inspiration for this piece. Mara Lee is a nationally registered yoga and prenatal yoga teacher who, when she is not in the classroom, often can be found in the studio, teaching yoga or practicing Pilates. A Brooklyn, NY native, she lives in Southern California with her husband and two very strange cats.

**David Groff's** book of poems *Clay* was chosen by Michael Waters as winner of the Louise Bogan Award and published in 2013 by Trio House Press. His previous collection, *Theory of Devolution*, published in 2002 by the University of Illinois Press, was selected by Mark Doty for the National Poetry Series. Both books were finalists for the Lambda Literary Award. He has co-edited two anthologies, the Lambda-winning *Who's Yer Daddy?: Gay Writers Celebrate Their Mentors and Forerunners* (University of Wisconsin Press) and *Persistent Voices: Poetry by Writers Lost to AIDS* (Alyson). For his friend Robin Hardy he completed the book *The Crisis of Desire: AIDS and the Fate of Gay Brotherhood*, which was published by Houghton Mifflin and the University of Minnesota Press. David received his MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop and his MA in English from the University of Iowa. He is an independent editor book and publishing consultant and teaches in the M.F.A. creative writing program of the City College of New York.

**Sarah Jefferis** is an author, editor, and mentor. Through her consultant business, Write. Now., Sarah serves as a 1:1 writing coach for graduate students working on dissertations and for writers who need assistance with brainstorming, revision, editing, organization, query letters and the like. She designs and leads generative workshops on the creative process and the necessity of vulnerability, as well as subject-specific writing workshops that empower mothers and children to honor their artistic spirit and develop confident voices. She offers poetry readings on surviving trauma, and on trusting the writing process as a tool to speak out and effect change. Sarah holds an MA in Creative Writing and Literature from Hollins University, an MFA in Poetry from Cornell University and a PhD in Creative Writing from SUNY Binghamton. Her most recent poetry collection, *What Enters the Mouth*, was published in February 2017 by Standing

Stone Books. *Forgetting the Salt*, her first book of poetry, was published by Foothills Press in 2008. Currently she is a part-time lecturer at Cornell University and makes a home for two brilliant feminist girls in Ithaca, New York.

**Tammie Jenkins** holds a doctorate degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She has a profound interest in the areas popular culture, dystopian novels, as well as women and gender studies. What appeals her most, is how her cognates overlap through the language, narratives, and actions of a given character across domains and discourses. This is what drew her to read and review *Vox: A Novel* by Christina Dalcher. Although *Vox* is a work of fiction, the text is embedded with each aspect of Dr. Jenkins's research and personal interests. When Dr. Jenkins's is not reviewing books for publications, she is a full-time special education teacher in Baton Rouge, where she lives with her two sons. In her spare time, she reads, writes, and submits essays for publications in journals or edited books. Her most recent publications include "(Re) Imagining Race, Gender, and Class as Choice in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*" (*Scripta Humana*), "From Harlem to Haiti: A Niggerati Renaissance in Caribbean Negritude" (Rowan & Littlefield Publishers), and "Visualizing Cultural Spaces: (Re) Imagining Southern Gothicism in the Film *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997)" (*Königshausen & Neumann*).

**Amy M. King** is an Associate Professor of English and the Director of Graduate Studies at St. John's University. She is the author of *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (Oxford UP, 2003, 2007), and the forthcoming *The Divine in the Commonplace: Reverent Natural History and the Novel in Britain* (Cambridge UP, August 2019). She is a contributor to the new *Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (2nd edition), the *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*, and the Norton Critical Edition of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*. Dr. King has published widely in journals such as *Novel: a Forum on Fiction*, *Victorian Review*, *Common Knowledge*, *BRANCH*, *Victorian Studies*, and *Eighteenth-Century Novel*. Her current scholarly projects include a monograph on contemporary televisual narrative and its relationship to Victorian seriality and conceptions of the provincial, as well as a second project on nineteenth-century natural history performed outside of Great Britain.

**Kate Lutzner's** poetry and stories have appeared in such publications as *The Brooklyn Rail* and *Mississippi Review*. She has been featured in *Verse Daily* and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize as well as the Best of the Net. Her chapbook, *Invitation to a Rescue*, was published by Poet Republik.

**Stephen Paul Miller** is a professor of English at St. John's University. His eight poetry books include *Art Is Boring for the Same Reason We Stayed in Vietnam* (Domestic), *There's Only One God and You're Not It* (Marsh Hawk Press), *Being with a Bullet* (Talisman), *Fort Dad* (Marsh Hawk Press), and *The Bee Flies in May* (Marsh Hawk Press). His four scholarly books include *The Seventies Now: Surveillance as Culture* (Duke University Press) and *The New Deal as a Triumph of Social Work: Frances Perkins and the Confluence of Early Twentieth Century Social Work with Mid-Twentieth Century Politics and Government* (Palgrave Macmillan). "Orange Is The New Blackface" concerns the place of the Trump administration's ("Orange's")

rhetoric and actions in relation to a new kind of Jim Crowe. The poem also explores how the absence of a Holocaust-scaled catastrophe blinds us to the ongoing devastation of continual government-inspired racial bias, violence, and murder. “How I Got My Real Name” is a meditation on what it might mean to be named Stephen Miller, as does one of the architects of the Trump administration’s anti-immigration and white supremacist rhetoric and policies. Does my middle name, Paul, indicate something distinct from Trump’s Stephen Miller?

**Ilse Schrynemakers, Ph.D.** has been an assistant professor of English at City University of New York’s Queensborough Community College since 2015. She received her Master’s in English from St. John’s University (with Dr. Sicari as her thesis advisor) in 1998 and her doctorate in American literature from Fordham University in 2009. Prior to teaching at CUNY, Ilse Schrynemakers was a teaching fellow and Writing Center Director at Fordham University; she also held a full-time teaching position at Berkeley College. Her research and teaching interests focus on developmental education, composition pedagogy, and post-World War II crime fiction. Her work has appeared in *Studies in the Novel* and *Clues: A Journal of Detection*. In addition, she has been the recipient of a PSC-CUNY research grant and CUNY’s Community College Research Grant. She wished to write the review of *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Trump* in order to draw attention to Harris’s important scholarship. In this current political climate, spreading the message of this book, the need for the representation and involvement of black feminists in our country’s policies and politics, is urgent, and the book’s hopeful message, relevant. By writing this book review, she wishes Harris’s work to reach a broader audience.

**Tanner Sebastian** is a PhD candidate at the University of Nevada, Reno, focusing on Victorian theatre and gender/queer theory. Specifically, they are interested in homosociality as a site of simultaneous gender reinforcement and escape. Tanner graduated from Ohio University in 2017 with their Masters in English Literature and from Robert Morris University in 2015 with their BA in English Studies/Theatre. Their essay “De-Dandification and the ‘Name of the Father’: Masculinity and Fatherhood in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*” was published by Etudes, an online theatre journal, in December 2016.

Tanner was interested in writing for this edition of the St. John’s University Humanities Review because the current political climate has inspired a level of resistance in them as a queer person that has forced them to reevaluate and redefine their identity. While Radio Free Vermont does not focus on queer people specifically (despite having tokenized queer characters), McKibben’s book appeals to Tanner in its message about people working together to express their values, a message needed not only in the LGBTQ+ community, but in America at large.

**Simone Smith** is a first year MA student from Long Island who is majoring in English at St. John’s University and will begin the English PhD program in Fall of 2019. Her research interests include social media activism and making a difference in her community through the curricula of literacy and writing. In her first year at St. John’s, Simone became a member of the English Graduate Organization as incoming secretary. Outside of academia, Simone works with individuals with all abilities and high functioning autism students. Simone continues to support the work of organizations such as the Vocational Independence Program and wants to create new and innovative forms of inclusive student learning both in the classroom and on campus.

**Avery Ware** is a soon-to-be graduate with an M.A. in American Studies from Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio. His research interests include 20<sup>th</sup> century gay male culture, race, gender, masculinity, and desirability. Outside of academia, Avery is also a blogger and freelance writer. On his blog, [alotonymindblog.com](http://alotonymindblog.com), he covers a range of topics including race, class, gender, sexuality, and pop culture. However, at the foundation of all of Avery's work is to speak truth to the human experience, as Amiri Baraka once said.

We currently live in a cultural climate of fake news and alternative facts – what many are beginning to call a “post-truth” era. However, Avery refuses to live in a world void of facts and lacking in truth. As W.E.B. Du Bois articulated in his essay titled “The Criteria of Negro Art”, “I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right.” This was Avery's primary goal in writing “Immigration in Trump's Post-Truth America.” There is something absolutely freeing and validating in truth-telling, especially in a culture that desires to pivot from the truth. Ultimately, writing with integrity is Avery's motivation.

**Johnny Wiley** is a Junior from Uniondale, NY who is majoring in Government and Politics at St. John's University. He is dedicated to fighting for social justice and making a difference in the world. In the summer after his freshman year, Johnny interned at the international law firm Shearman & Sterling, LLP. There, he worked in a group on pro bono cases involving wage theft, immigration, unaccompanied minors, and more. On campus, Johnny is involved in service-learning activities including the Midnight Run, a late-night delivery of food and clothing to the homeless in New York City. He also served as a student panelist at both of the university's "Meet the Candidates" nights held in advance of the 2017 local elections. A member of the College Democrats organization, he also traveled to Albany, NY, with classmates as part of the Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities' New York Student Aid Alliance Advocacy Day.

**Eve Wood** is both an artist and critic. She was represented for six years by Western Project and before that at Susanne Vielmetter; Los Angeles Projects. She has exhibited her work at numerous galleries and museums including Angles Gallery, The Huntington Beach Museum of Art, Angles Gallery, The Vincent Price Museum, The Western Carolina University Museum and The Weatherspoon Museum of Art. She most recently had an exhibition of her drawings at Ochi Projects in LA. Her art criticism has appeared in many magazines including *Flash Art*, *Artnet.com*, *Tema Celeste*, *Flavorpill*, *White Hot Magazine*, *Artillery*, *Art ltd.* *New York Arts*, *Angelino Magazine*, *Art Papers*, *Bridge*, *ArtUS*, *Artweek*, *Latin Arts.com*, *Art Review* and *Bomb*. She is also the author of five books of poetry published by university presses. She is an associate professor at CSUN.





