

Can Art Trump the President?

by

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A THESIS

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When Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election, it marked a drastic change in national and foreign policy. The enactment of new travel bans, the withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and other “America first” policies have sent a shockwave of nationalist sentiment. Under these policies, questions have arisen around who constitutes an “American” and who is an outsider, who ‘belongs’ in the United States and who must stay out.

In the wake of these threats to people’s homes and identities, many artists have directed their work toward political themes, using their creativity to comment and express real fears about the current sociopolitical climate. This Thesis explores some of the social and political changes that have taken place under the Trump administration and examines how artists have responded to them. I interviewed five artists, one of whom supports President Trump, and wrote a profile for each in lyric form. This allowed me to deeply explore their personal lives and past, as well as how that affects their artwork. The lyric form more accurately reflects the poetry of parlance. My research and artist profiles illuminate the complex human condition, and show that no matter one’s political views, everyone just wants a safe place to call home.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professors Peter Laufer and Barbara Mossberg, as well as Michelle Maxwell, for helping me to publish my first independent research project. This has been a turbulent endeavor, especially because my approach has been rather unorthodox compared to the work of my peers. However, the support that these members of my thesis committee has given me, from edits to critical discussions to random visits to their office hours just to vent about my anxiety for the future, has shown me the value of mentorship. Through the work that I have put into the following pages, I've developed a deep appreciation for in-depth journalistic reporting, creativity and the art of writing. These are lessons that I will carry with me far beyond my undergraduate years, to old age when all my body will allow is to craft some stories about the life I've led and the people whom I met along the way. I'd like to extend special gratitude to Professor Laufer, who gave me the courage to pursue this project through poems, my favorite form of literature, and to remind me of the joy that comes with storytelling and striving, above all else, to make a difference.

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Introduction

The last colloquium that I took for the honors college in the winter term of 2018 was Professor Keller's "Global History of Color." Apart from lessons on writing about material culture, Keller emphasized most the importance of "going the footnotes." More than a way to ensure that the information was from a reliable source, it led us to evaluate the author(s) of the texts that we analyzed. Especially in academia, it can be easy to forget that humans, who have lives beyond their research, are behind academia. These lives inevitably and invariably affect the work that one produces, and where one is in his or her life can affect how one approaches a topic.

The first example that Keller provided was Michel Pastoureau, a historian and director of studies at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études de la Sorbonne* in Paris and the author of our primary textbook, "Red: The History of a Color." Pastoureau published this beautifully illustrated, expansive anthology of color this year at the age of 70. He has already made a name for himself among art and material historians, and is likely on the verge of retirement. He has nothing to prove, and everything to celebrate. This book reflects that confidence, that comfort, of established wisdom. Though the book is rich in information — Pastoureau proves a domineering authority of color history — he has fun with his writing. A chapter entitled "Love, Glory, and Beauty" opens with the line, "Let us leave the huntsmen to their hunt and remain with the ladies."

Thus, I think it is helpful for me to acknowledge from the beginning my place in life, as it has certainly affected my research on the following pages. I am a student of the Clark Honors College as well as the University of Oregon, a journalism major with

a French minor. A fundamental value of the CHC is multidisciplinary: the classes that I have taken in my four years as an honors student have run the gamut from Aristotelian dramas to cosmology. My French classes have exposed me to authors and current events not just in France, but francophone countries around the globe. Thus, it seems only right that my thesis should reflect at least to some extent this far-reaching expertise that I now possess. I aim to meld as best I can my various areas of study, and coalesce them in a single research paper.

As with Pastoureau, my personal life is also germane to my academic one. I have spent my entire life traveling. Before high school, my parents worked for a construction company. I was born in Portland, Oregon in 1995, but by the time they quit their positions in 2010, I had already lived in nine different towns and attended seven different schools. I have an incredible appreciation for those dynamic years. My travels took me to the suburbs of New Jersey where moms cared more about how well their kindergartener did in a soccer game than they did in their marriages. I saw the Inuit in British Columbia carve totem poles, and I somehow survived a summer in Tucson, Arizona where the only things worse than the three-digit heat were the scorpions that nestled in vacant shoes. I eventually ended up in Craig, Colorado, a conservative coal mining town that I will discuss further in my first chapter. Every friend I made shaped me, every culture I encountered made me more and more curious, rather than close-minded, about the human condition in all its various forms. This thesis is an extension, too, of that curiosity, an exploration of places and people, buttressed by my multidisciplinary education at the CHC and the UO.

Briefly, I should preface the following chapters by explaining what this thesis is *not*. It is not a traditional research paper. It is, to use the CHC's terminology, a portfolio thesis that "provides a place for cross-disciplinary work." I have written four feature-length profiles of artists who have used their creativity to respond to real issues posed by the political climate under the Trump Presidency. These articles are in lyric form, drawing on my passions as a poet and the courses I have taken, both in poetry writing and in French poetry. This is not a traditional approach, but as I explain in my first chapter, it anticipates a melding of poetry and journalism. After an overview of my research and a theoretical framework, each chapter subsequent will consist of that feature article, along with an explanation of my journalistic approach and a closer analysis of the artist's work as it relates to his or her response to the political scene. I have endeavoured, in all of this, to

I concede that as a near college graduate with only a handful of portfolio pieces, I do not have the temporal wisdom of Michel Pastoureau, nor his academic authority. I have endeavored to do something that disrupts the status quo and that may not be seen as 'journalism' by some. I cannot help but feel that this is a fortuitous sign. Writer and director Paul Auster, in an interview with the late Velvet Underground rocker, Lou Reed, recounted his years teaching writing classes at Princeton. He said that the kids who turned in conventional work, who re-hashed a John Cheever story and limited their horizons in these molds of past greats, those students turned in the worst work. "And the kids who were all over the place and taking risks and blundering about, those were the ones I had hope for," he said. With his advice in mind, I embarked on an academic journey unlike any in my past. I have taken such joy in crafting the following poems,

articles and analyses. They have helped me hone my writing and carve a unique place in my field. Working late into the night, I sometimes entered a space of clarity where every word flowed as fast as my thoughts. I found my voice among these pages. I hope it makes the words sing.

Chapter 1: Song for an Election

*Come what may the house helps us to say: I will be an inhabitant of the world,
in spite of the world.*

— Gaston Bachelard

I remember exactly where I was on the night Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election. My friends had arranged a watch party at their house near the University of Oregon campus. Many of our peers hosted similar festivities, all of us registered Democrats who were sure that Hillary Clinton would sweep the race, and we could celebrate in due fashion with beers and cheap pizza. But as the night wore on, news stations showed more and more states voting red. Clinton had the popular vote, but Trump had the strategic edge, winning enough districts to secure him a win under the electoral college - 304 electoral votes against Clinton's 227, according to the Federal Election Commission.¹ My friends and I were speechless. We sipped at our drinks, picked at the snacks on the table. Some cried. A phone buzzed: a Facebook alert that some people had organized a march downtown. My friends got ready to join, but I decided to stay back. I had a lot of thinking to do, which to me is best done alone.

It was 3 a.m. I sat on my bed, confused and mind swirling with what I could do to calm the fears in my head about the future four years. I wanted to take a long drive but was probably too tipsy and didn't want to risk it. I wanted to scream, but that would wake my roommates. In the end, I read a poem by the Slovenian Tomaž Šalamun. It's called, "Alone," and ends:

¹ FEC Election results 2016

I alone am the air and the golden butter,
linden bark, the king, the sickle and hammer,
the Dalmatian, the saw, Armenia, the key,
alone.

Šalamun gained prominence for his poetic critiques of politics, especially in the wake of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s. His absurdist poems reflect the chaos of the period, sprinkled with poignant references to humanitarian crises or political wrongdoing. Absurdism seemed to encapsulate what I felt that night, and I sought refuge in Šalamun's poetic wisdom. His poems were the only thing to keep me feeling safe through the night, as if his words built a shelter against the fear of the coming years.

Campus was eerily quiet the next day. Some professors had cancelled class on account of the election result, either as a form of protest or a way to give everyone a chance to calm down. I went to my first class of the day, an honors journalism class called Media Theory and taught by Kim Sheehan, a professor and coordinator of the SOJC honors program. Our class sessions were usually clamoring with discussions on case studies and current events, but no one said a word as we filed in and took our seats. The clock struck 10 a.m., when we usually began discussions, but Sheehan just stared at us with the same empty stare that we returned.

She eventually began class by announcing that we would not be having class. We could leave as we wished, but for those who wanted to stay, to be with one another she would stay as long as we needed. Minutes passed and none of us left, nor said a word. Eventually someone started crying, then another person and another, until I myself was among them. Some had gone to the march the previous night, a few of whom recounted seeing people in blackface tromping through campus and shouting

racial slurs. The University of Oregon issued a statement of the incident later that night.² Others said that a group of counter-protesters wielding confederate flags had likewise yelled additional derogatory expletives at the marchers.

“Someone called me a liberal faggot,” one student, and a friend of mine who had been marching with a rainbow flag, said between sobs. “That’s never happened before.” He, like many in the class that day, felt that the Trump administration would make their lives unsafe. Considering that the new President had opened his campaign with a promise to build a wall to keep out Mexicans because, in his view, “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”³ He had also promised to decrease the number of visas (especially student worker ones), increase deportations and reduce the number of legal immigrants in the country - a projected 30 million by 2065.⁴ My classmates worried about peers who may have to leave the U.S., about family members who didn’t know if they could keep their homes.

After class, I went back to my room to ruminate on everything that happened in the last 12 hours. None of it made sense; no one seemed to know what to do or say. I yearned for a way to digest what I was feeling, the stories I’d heard and the fear that pervaded. Ever since I was in high school and first confronting my homosexuality amid a conservative mining town in Colorado, writing has been a form of catharsis, a way to work out thoughts in my head that I cannot express even to those closest to me.

Here, it is only appropriate that I emphasize that my political exposure throughout my life has not been so lopsided as my college days at the University of

² "Statement regarding Nov. 9 Blackface Incident"

³ "Donald Trump Announces a Presidential Bid"

⁴ Brownstein 2016.

Oregon, the alma mater of Ken Kesey where only about 10 of its 20,049 undergraduates are on the campus Republican party club. This has been quite a different political environment than my Colorado hometown, where Trump won 81.3 percent of the county vote.⁵ I served on a committee in high school that worked with a local coal mine, Colowyo, to promote interest in science among students and to apply for scholarships from the mine that would help us receive degrees in mining engineering. We made several trips to Colowyo and the local power plant during my junior and senior years, where employees talked frequently of the advantages of coal over other energy sources.

Part of the reason for this partnership between the high school and Colowyo was because of a lawsuit filed against the mine in the summer of 2015 by the Denver chapter of the WildEarth Guardians, an environmental activist group based in New Mexico. The Guardians accused Colowyo of failing to adequately complete a 2007 environmental assessment. A new environmental assessment consequently had to be completed which suspended mining operations and put 220 local residents out of work, all of whom did not know if they would be able to return.

By September of that year, the Department of the Interior determined that the mine was in line with environmental regulations and no further legal action was taken. However, the case created a clear divide amongst Colorado counties that reflects the political polarization that has now entrenched the nation into partisan warfare (to use Tolstoy's term). Craig's liquor stores and many residents went so far as to boycott New

⁵ "Colorado Election Results 2016"

Belgium and Breckenridge breweries from eastern counties which supported the WildEarth group, and which tend to vote for left-wing candidates.

I have therefore come into frequent contact with “the deplorables” (to use Hillary Clinton’s terminology) who see in Trump a savior, someone who could revitalize my town’s economy. I have in my family many Trump supporters whom I talk to on a regular basis. My dad, a coal miner himself, voted for Trump because of his vocal support for mining operations across the nation. He is proud of his vote and confident that America under Trump will be a time of prosperity, especially for him and his blue-collar compatriots. With this frequent exposure to both sides of the American political coin, and as a journalism major, I had tried to play an observer’s role during the days leading up to the election, rather than voicing my own opinions. As is probably obvious, I have my political leanings — as do journalists in the field — but I tried, and still do, to avoid making these views explicit. When I have critiqued Trump, as both a candidate and as president, I have done so with reference to observable, well-documented issues in his logic — namely his trouble with the truth.⁶

But after that first post-election class, I needed a way to express what I was feeling in a less objective manner. I still wanted to take the observed reality of what was happening around me — the contradictory voices, emotions and experiences — but to talk about how *I* was encountering and interacting with them. Unsure of how to digest this complex cognitive mess, I sat on my bed just as the previous night and began to write. The words came slowly at first, clumsily, then they washed over the page like

⁶ Kiely 2017

rainfall. It felt good, cleansing. It became, among all the forms it could have assumed,
this poem:

It's morning. November 9, 2016:
Smell of old maples dropping leaves,
Of the pale sun
 through their orange and yellow.
It is America like before,

But my country, my country you are not
 as I remember —

I don't know what to say to you
 it's heartbreaking.

I held your bright soul in Washington, 1963
 we sobbed over those Iraqi children
 and promised we'd learn better.

I saw you just weeks ago taking refugees into your big arms,

I stood with you on the steps of the Supreme Court, 2015
holding rainbows when I finally let myself have gay thoughts
without crying. I thought of Harvey Milk,
 Medgar Evers,
 the young girl from Mahmudiyah,

March 12, 2006

I washed your wounds in the bathtub that night,
 they were healing I kissed them
 till the sun rose.

But I went to class this morning
we sat around a big table and cried —

my professor, who never wants to be a mother
held each of us and said we'd be OK,
she'd make sure of it.

We, the *liberal faggots!*
the undocumented of this new Great America,
may we hold each other till we are one mind
 against their horrible shouting.
May my father who's worked the mines
all his life for family,
for me
find peace.

And my friend who calls herself deplorable
says He'll fix the broken parts
so it runs like before:

at least God knew what we needed
she writes on her Instagram

at least God knew what we needed,
right?

I was not alone in seeking solace through poetry. That same day, the *Huffington Post* offered “18 Compassionate Poems To Help You Weather Uncertain Times.” A day after that, *The Guardian* published a compilation of “poems to counter the election fallout—and beyond.” On Saturday, November 12, I attended a poetry slam competition at a local bookstore, Tsunami Books, where I performed my poem. I was not the only one to mention the election in my performance — far from it. People watch and present these kind of poems to share experiences with one another, to partake in the emotions

evoked through the poetic moment. More than writing the poem, expressing it to an audience lifted the weight of the last few days and imbued some kind of meaning — however abstract — to what was going on in my country. Poetry allowed me to create something that responded to real issues, that drew not only from my experiences but from everything that I had been witnessing. It remains one of the most authentic poems that I have written, a piece that speaks to my exact emotional state at the time, a state that is evoked each time I re-read it even after all of this time.

I eventually posted the poem to Facebook, to both the exuberant support of my university peers and the snide chagrin from my conservative family in Colorado and West Virginia. That post led a high school friend of mine, who at the time was studying at UC Irvine, to send me a link to an interview published in *The Atlantic* with Don Share, the chief editor of *Poetry* magazine. Share sought to explain why so many people were turning to poetry in the turbulent wake of Trump’s election. He told the interviewer, staff writer Megan Garber, that poets, “take their own personal experience and see how that fits in with what they see in the world.”⁷ He continued, “When people are under pressure of any kind, they turn to poetry. That’s why poetry is with us at the most important occasions in our lives: weddings, funerals, anniversaries.” Though poetry does not have a mass audience, that does not mean that people do not still appreciate the art form. Journalists especially have intertwined elements of poetry into their own reporting, breaking from the inverted pyramid to allow for creative imagery and emotion through words. This practice breaks from journalistic tradition. The late American poet Archibald MacLeish explained how in the past, “. . . young poets are

⁷ Garber 2016

advised by their elders to avoid the practice of journalism as they would wet socks and gin before breakfast.”⁸ But in late 2007, the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism collaborated with the Chicago-based Poetry Foundation to host “Make It News: A Symposium on Poetry and Journalism.” The event centered around the premise that poets have already taken a documentary approach to certain topics.” Muriel Rukeyser’s epic poem, *The Book of the Dead*, ‘reports’ on the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster of 1931 in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. It is so accurate that it has become a major part of the state’s cultural heritage.⁹

The second session of the symposium discussed how the fusing of poetry and journalism is therefore a natural melding of the two forms. One of the main points the speakers made was that, “Many journalists also turn to poetic prose in order to convey a perspective that cannot otherwise be presented.” I have observed this approach in a multitude of articles from traditional news organizations, even the most major reports from *The New York Times*. Consider the coverage around the Oct. 31 “Manhattan truck attack”¹⁰ that killed eight people. The day after the attack, the *Times* published an article about the incident with this lead:

A mother of two from Belgium who had come to New York with her mother and sisters. A young computer scientist from Manhattan. A financial worker from New Jersey. And 10 Argentine men in New York to celebrate their 30th high school reunion. Together they shared a bustling bicycle path along the Hudson River in Manhattan on a brisk, sunny Tuesday afternoon.¹¹

⁸ Garton 2018

⁹ “Overviews of *The Book of the Dead*”

¹⁰ Almukhtar 2017

¹¹ Ransom 2017

This, according to news reports, was the deadliest terror attack in the city since Sept. 11. It was a time of mourning, a city-wide funeral. This article commemorated, like an elegy, the innocent dead. I can only assume that is why editors introduced such a lyric lead that, if put into verse, would be just as fit for *Poetry* magazine as in the *Times*' city region section. Art in general is a way to express the intangibly inexpressible, to articulate beyond the barriers of traditional language or gesture. In the shock of the results of the 2016 presidential election, news organizations understood that people needed a conduit for their emotional responses. Papers are for the people, after all, so some publications took it upon themselves to allow space for these people, to give their voices a *home*.

Chapter 2: A Home for Bachelard - a theoretical framework

“To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world”

— Charles Baudelaire

I first encountered the writings of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard during a class entitled, “Le Tao de Montaigne.” As the name suggests, it is a French class structured around the works of Michel de Montaigne, a 16th century Bordeaux mayor-turned-philosopher who established a new literary form with his *Essaies* (leading to the academic world’s poster child, the essay). Montaigne broke from the Middle Ages practice of speculative or theoretical philosophy, instead appreciating the complexity, the subjectivity of the human condition. He writes in a preface to his first book of *Essaies*, “This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and, when it so befalls, contradictory ideas: whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects in different circumstances and aspects.”¹² The class followed a similar introspection. We met every Friday for three hours, deeply analyzing his texts and comparing them with other French intellectuals. We relished in the human experience. Class began with a meditation, followed by exercises meant to foster an appreciation of the present moment or of facing our fears, most notably death. On one occasion, we ate a mélange of treats — an almond, a blueberry, a piece of dark chocolate — and spent a minute on each item, chewing and taking note of the flavors. The objective of this was to use our experiences with the outside world to, as the Ancient Greek aphorism goes, “know thyself” (*temet nosce*).

¹² "Michel De Montaigne." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

This class transformed how I approached not only the learning process, but my entire life. I took more time to self-reflect, to analyze how I perceive the world and how all of my past experiences inform these daily perceptions. I would often attend office hours with my professeur, Madame Poizat-Newcomb, who to this day has shown me great kindness and invested deeply in helping me through the tumultuous college years. Over tea, we discussed how to live a fulfilling life. She suggested books to read that supplemented the class material. One day, I told her about my Thesis project, and the trouble I was having in structuring my artist profiles around a coherent framework. I told her that I wanted to focus on the lived experiences of the artists, to analyze not only how the Trump presidency has motivated their subject matter, but how their pieces are a manifestation of their own consciousness as it encounters an America under Trump. At the end of our talk, during our usual exchange of literature, she mentioned Bachelard's "The Poetics of Space." She said it was essentially a philosophy of poetry. I ordered it as soon as I got home that day.

Bachelard, above all, is an unconventional academic (and thus a perfect guide for this Thesis). He worked as a post-office employee in Champagne, but ascended via intellectual tenacity through the oft-rigid norms of French academic society to, in 1940, succeed Abel Ray as chair of History and Philosophy of Sciences at the Sorbonne,¹³ the country's premier research institution. (The name was changed to Sorbonne University on Jan. 1, 2018). Like Montaigne, Bachelard favored introspection and the exploration of subjective human experience. He especially enjoyed poetry, and frequently

¹³ Chimisso 2013.

incorporated the works of Rilke and Baudelaire (his favorite poet) to buttress his philosophical theses on human consciousness.

The last book that Bachelard published before his death in 1962, *The Poetics of Space* takes a phenomenological approach to poetry and the imagination. According to Bachelard, the poetic image (be it a poem, a painting, etcetera) is an extension not just of the artist's consciousness, but of the audience who perceives it. The experience of creating art, and of perceiving it, brings a "reverberation"¹⁴ of past moments in a person's life: "it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being."¹⁵ To Bachelard, poetry, art in general, is a fundamental part of the human experience. Ralph Waldo Emerson similarly called language "fossil poetry,"¹⁶ the fundamental essence of human expression. With this, Bachelard progresses to his main hypothesis, that the essence of art is to mimic the geometric and phenomenological structure of the home. Phenomenology, in the context of Bachelard's book, refers to experiential consciousness: *how* one personally experiences a piece of art, or how an artist experiences the creation of art. This perception is embedded within an entire life of subjective past experiences that work together to give art meaning. That is why certain poems, certain paintings touch have the capacity to touch us beyond the tangible. Jackson Pollock's abstract paintings, for instance, evoke memories and emotions in the purveyor. This consciousness, Bachelard asserts, reflects the structure of a *home* (this connotes a greater intimacy than to call it a house). The home, with its nooks, cellars, and attics is a manifestation of the soul; a house "acquires the physical

¹⁴ Bachelard p. 8

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Emerson p. 297

and moral energy of the human body.”¹⁷ A purpose of the poem and of the imagination, then, is to allow space for reverie, to rest in the comfortable nooks of the mind and find safety there from the fears and dangers of the outside world.

I think that anyone who has revelled in the joy of reading after a hard day’s work, or of seeking shelter from the storm to visit an art museum, can understand this point. There is something profoundly satisfying about these moments, and deeply personal. I, for instance, remember the solace that I found in Allen Ginsberg’s poem, “Song,” amidst my coming to terms with my sexuality in high school. This was difficult to face, considering that I lived in a conservative mining town and had a father who ostracized my aunt when she ‘came out.’ My home did not seem like a safe place. I hid in whatever nook I could find, poring over gay authors while looking over my shoulder to ensure no one was watching. Ginsberg taught me:

The weight of the world
is love.
Under the burden
of solitude,
under the burden
of dissatisfaction

the weight,
the weight we carry
is love.¹⁸

Poetry became my attic, a place of reverie where I could go and be completely myself. As I read these words, my past would rush toward my consciousness: memories of my first sleepover and the boner I had to hide, the church sermon from my freshman year when the pastor warned about “hedonistic homosexuals,” and all the unfair, unrequited

¹⁷ Bachelard p. 67

¹⁸ Ginsberg 1956.

love. These were the boxes in my attic, an entire life that would later inform the poems that I would write. Ginsberg was my companion — sometimes my only one. I would cry over his words, and in doing so finally feel a sort of liberation. On the days when I considered taking my own life rather than endure the torture of feeling that I was somehow deficiently human, art helped to continue existing. Bachelard speaks to this in his imagery of the home as soul: “Come what may the house helps us to say: I will be an inhabitant of the world, in spite of the world.”¹⁹ Some poets have made a point to form a home of refuge through their poems. Take Walt Whitman, for example, (another poet who carried me through high school). His *Leaves of Grass* was a polemic work in the 20th century for a multitude of reasons, not least because of its celebration of *every part* the human body and the human experience (“re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem”²⁰).

He addresses the audience directly in “Song of Myself,” presenting himself, and more so his poems, as a source of comfort for those who may feel wretched or who are suffering:

I seize the descending man I raise him with resistless will. O
despairer, here is my neck, By God! you shall not go down! Hang your
whole weight upon me. I dilate you with tremendous breath I buoy
you up . . .²¹

This section of his magnum opus has been credited as representing the core of Whitman’s poetic vision. It is a poetic refuge for “the descending man,” a place where one may rest and find peace amid a world that wants to cast him out. Bachelard speaks

¹⁹ Bachelard p. 67

²⁰ Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass*

²¹ Whitman, page 73

in particular of the liberation that a 20th century poet such as Whitman brings to the poetic image: “Contemporary poetry . . . has introduced freedom in the very body of the language. As a result, poetry appears as a phenomenon of freedom.”²²

If the soul is an abode, and the poetic image is a fundamental manifestation of the soul, then the products of the imagination are mirror of the artist’s subjective human experience. Or, to quote Lady Bird Johnson, “Art is the window to a man’s soul.” Beyond a frilly, poetic assertion, scientific inquiry buttresses this claim. Psychologist Françoise Minkowska organized an exhibition of drawings by Polish and Jewish children “who had suffered the cruelties of the German occupation” during World War II. To draw a house is to call upon the imagination, which as Bachelard suggests is entwined in past experiences. This is an apt experiment to consider for Bachelard’s discussion of the phenomenology of the home. Critic Anne Balif visited the exhibition and provided this explanation of what came to be known as the “House Test:”

Asking a child to draw his house is asking him to reveal the deepest dream shelter he has found for his happiness. If he is happy, he will succeed in drawing a snug, protected house which is well built on deeply-rooted foundations.²³

Children who had experienced trauma drew what Minkowska called “motionless houses:” they were uninviting, rigid, not at all a place of comfort. “One child, who had been hidden in a closet every time there was an alert, continued to draw narrow, cold, closed houses long after those evil times were over,”²⁴ she wrote. The imagination therefore manifests real distress over the physical world and influences the art that one produces.

²² Bachelard p. 12

²³ *De Van Gogh et Seurat aux dessins d’enfants.*

²⁴ Bachelard p. 92

This correlation led me to wonder how the Trump presidency has affected the imaginations of today's artists. Many of President Trump's policies — from the Muslim travel ban to a crackdown on deportations — have sparked fears over both a physical and mental sense of 'home.' According to Trump, one either does not belong in the U.S. because of his or her legal status (despite ongoing debates over DREAMers and asylum seekers) or because of his or her ethnicity. This ideology has sparked a renewed wave of radical nationalism and white supremacy, those who aim to draw a clear divide between people who may call America 'home' and those who must leave. Already, this has led to comparisons of other points in history when artists responded to threats of the home through their work. An exhibition opened in April at Los Angeles' Hammer Museum entitled, "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985." It features 116 female artists, among them the well-known Lygia Clark, Lilita Porter and Ana Mendieta, who have been overlooked and marginalized because they are women and/or because they are Latin American. One of the exhibition's guest curators, Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, said that the featured artists all respond in some way to threats of security over their bodies and national identities — how they inhabit the world. "These are women that have shaped how we understand contemporary art today, how we use our bodies, how we can think about our bodies at a conceptual level."²⁵ The work of one such artist, the Brazilian Martha Araujo, is entitled, "Hábito/Habitante." A performance piece, it features a woman Velcro'd to a wall. Here, the wall is a prison; the woman, a prisoner. The performer slowly, arduously, rips herself from the wall in a symbolic gesture of liberation. Araujo first performed this piece following Brazil's establishment

²⁵ Storms, 2016.

of a democratic government in 1985.²⁶ It is therefore an exploration of the physical and psychological limits of the body, limits that politics imposes. She said of the performance, “For me these gests are the means to find ourselves with ourselves, the others and the environment within which we live while liberating ourselves.”²⁷ This is the same form of liberation that Bachelard ascribes to the phenomenology of a poetic moment. In viewing this piece, one can feel the freedom that comes with ripping one’s body from the wall.

This theoretical framework provides a scope to my research. The artists whom I include have faced similar threats to their personal security and/or come from marginalized groups who have been threatened under the political environment. They have manifested sentiments of those threats in their artwork. In the case of the last artist about whom I write, Ellen Keeland, her pro-Trump art is also a response to threats over the sanctity of her home and community. Her work is a way to voice those concerns, and to express hope that President Trump can rectify the harm that she believes has been caused by the Obama administration and overall liberal politics.

²⁶ "Martha Araújo Habito/Habitante."

²⁷ "Martha Araújo Habito/Habitante."

Uncharted Territory: Why I focus on President Trump

The artist's job is to be a witness to his time in history.

— Robert Rauschenberg

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has led to a significant shift in American politics. News sites have written extensively after the President's first 100 days in office²⁸ on the drastic extent to which Trump has already attempted to alter U.S. domestic and foreign policies, among them including a legally challenged travel ban on seven Muslim-majority countries, a cancellation of the United State's commitment to the Paris Climate Agreement, and the proposed elimination the National Endowment for the Arts. It is the last of these policy changes that particularly interests me and forms the foundation of my multimedia project.

Even before Trump officially took office, controversy sparked over the large number of artists, including Elton John, Céline Dion, and Garth Brooks who explicitly refused to play at the President's inauguration. The Rockettes led a successful and pivotal protest to allow women in the group who did not wish to perform at the ceremony to opt out without punishment.²⁹ Since then, Trump has only become a more prominent antagonist to much of the art world. His immigration restrictions have poignantly targeted artists and performers from abroad and in some cases refused their entry into the U.S. For instance, the Italian band *Soviet Soviet* was denied admission into the country this March after their visa waivers — used by artists for decades to make tours in the U.S. without having to obtain a visa — were declined at an American

²⁸ "First 100 Days: Where President Trump Stands on Key Issues."

²⁹ Williamson 2017.

airport. According to prominent immigration attorney Brian Taylor Goldstein, “there is going to be even more scrutiny and less forgiveness than ever before with regard to artists attempting to enter the U.S.”³⁰ This direct attack on the liberty and expression of artists within the country also manifests within Trump’s changes to economic policy.

The President released his annual fiscal recommendations to Congress in March 2017, wherein he proposed the to cut funding to the NEA. According to a report by the *New York Times* on Trump’s fiscal plan, though the NEA’s \$300 million support from the government represents just a tiny fraction of the \$1.1 trillion of total discretionary spending each year, “grants from these agencies have been deeply valued financial lifelines and highly coveted honors for artists, musicians, writers and scholars for decades.”³¹ Eliminating this funding will further restrict artistic freedom and decrease the number of opportunities for artists nationwide.

Opponents of the NEA, in justifying its elimination, argue that the endowment benefits a majority of successful urban liberals in coastline cities in New York and L.A. while ignoring rural areas, especially in right-wing states in the South and Midwest. An article published in the *New Yorker* May of this year contradicts this claim with empirical evidence. The title is straightforward: “the N.E.A. is not a federal spigot for decadent city élites.” Rather, 36 percent of its the endowment’s grants fund activities that support disadvantaged groups, and a third of grants serve low-income audiences.³² Thus, artists who would be impacted by the elimination of the N.E.A. represent an

³⁰ Tsioulcas 2017.

³¹ Sopan 2017.

³² Rich 2017.

oppressed community not only due to a lack of government support but because many are economically disadvantaged to begin with.

The animosity that has grown under the Trump administration, be it the racist rhetoric of the alt-right or the violent protests conducted by multiple political and social groups, has done little to progress issues of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomics. Instead, they have only fed the flames of public discontent. Research shows that the American people are “more politically polarized than ever,”³³ and the violent rhetoric of President Trump and his administration only deepens the divide. Trump’s messages resonated best among the uneducated working white class that has been aligned with the “alt-right” movement that now pervades Europe. Oddly enough, this population has the highest mortality rate in the U.S. as a result of a combination of opioid abuse and preventable diseases (like heart attacks from poor diets).³⁴ This population, who also faces unprecedented poverty and unemployment,³⁵ therefore stands to lose a great deal if the Trump administration demolishes Obamacare and slashes welfare programs that provide retraining programs. It is therefore of little coincidence that the places where slavery was most heavily enforced and where Trump was most popular—the South, Rust Belt, and Appalachia—are among the poorest states in America.³⁶

Methodology

I interviewed seven separate artists who created work with political themes that were a direct response to the Trump presidency. All of these artists are professionals, which I define as someone whose livelihood depends on the creation of material

³³ "Americans more politically polarized than ever," 2016.

³⁴ Khazan 2016.

³⁵ Chen 2016.

³⁶ Bertrand 2014.

through the engagement of the imagination. Of these seven, I selected four to interview further. I used this material to write a feature length profile for each artist, emphasizing how their personal life and interaction with news stories, current events or their community have impacted the art that they create. The aim here is to communicate a sense of each artist's personality and inner world, which invariably affect their work. As this is a portfolio thesis, all of these articles should be able to stand by themselves as publishable material. Each profile follows journalistic guidelines of truth and objectivity, while allowing some creative room to evoke emotion and connection with the artists through figurative language.

Traditional news journalism utilizes the **inverted pyramid**: the most important information goes at the top, followed by supplementary details, increasingly 'unimportant' information. The structure was borne out of necessity: the telegraphs that journalists used to transmit information could lose connection as they were transmitting information and could be costly to use if the word count ran too high³⁷. Getting the most essential information first ensured that the public at least had a baseline understanding of the day's news. Editors could also easily and literally cut the last paragraphs of a story if they needed to fit it in the paper. However, this structure has its limitations that seem cumbersome in the digital age.

The lyricism of my lines, broken into metered narrative form, emphasize certain words or phrases. It also highlights the poetic moments that arise from a speaker's own words, without their ever realizing it. Take the article about Lisa Grunberger for example. When I asked her about the role that poetry plays in her life, she responded, "I

³⁷ Scanlan 2017.

think writing is this exorcism to allow us to keep taking in the world without letting it harm us.” This is an excellent quote on its own, but it does not communicate the weight she gave certain words, the methodical slowness she took with her reply, which contrasted with her usual, fast-paced parlance. I structured her quote to better reflect this rhythm and mirror her emphases:

“I think writing is this exorcism
to allow us to keep taking in the world
without letting it harm us . . .”

This approach aims to more accurately capture the lived experiences of these artists, and to best reflect the poetry of everyday speech. Her language, after all, is a manifestation of her imagination — “fossil poetry,” to again use Emerson’s term.

One artist, Ellen Keeland, supported Donald Trump and his policies through her wood sculptures. Hers is a vital story to highlight in a journalistic thesis. Reporters, under the Society of Professional Journalists’ code of ethics, should operate under four main principles, the first of which is to “Seek truth and report it.”³⁸ In order to accomplish this, the SPJ calls upon journalists to, “Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.”³⁹ Keeland speaks for a significant part of the American people. If this Thesis is to progress the conversation around the topic of Trump’s presidency, it must draw upon a diverse set of voices. If my father has taught me anything, it is that understanding can only come through open, honest dialogue. I endeavor to portray Keeland and her home, physical or otherwise, in the most accurate and fair light.

³⁸ “SPJ Code of Ethics”

³⁹ *Ibid.*

I buttress these articles with a description of how I met each artist, why I chose to highlight him or her, and a closer analysis of their artwork as it relates to its political context. I mean for this to deepen the value of this Thesis as a phenomenology not just of the artist and his or her work, but of my lived experiences in engaging with these poetic images, as well as with the progression of President Trump's political tenure. This project has invariably intertwined with my personal life, just as Trump's policies have had an immeasurable effect on my consciousness and sense of place in this country.

Research Questions

1. How do artists use their imagination to respond to real issues of security on the basis of their ethnicity or identity?
2. To what extent do these reflect Bachelard's text on the link between the poetic image and the phenomenology of the home?
3. What are the historical and political contexts that impact the work that these artists produce?
4. What are the artists' goals, and do they feel that their work has accomplished these goals?

Significance

Narratives have been used for centuries to share common ideas and unite peoples over tales whose themes emphasize recurring values. Journalism that is done well has the capacity to illuminate human experience and allow audiences to better understand and thus relate to those who seem inherently foreign to one's own value

system. Good journalism, in my opinion, uses in-depth information to allow the public to make well-informed, responsible decisions. It confronts complexities and contradictions and deeply explores the motivations and implicit influences behind one's belief system. 'Infotainment' that incites dualism among political and ethnic groups to attract readers' attention cannot create this educated public, and it highlights the need for reporting that seeks to inform and illuminate rather than sensationalize.

Since the election of Donald Trump, news media has published content that emphasizes a partisan duality that has only exacerbated political polarization. Academics within the realm of media framing use the term "frenetic inaction" to describe "the tremendous amount of media coverage, occurring in a short timeframe, coverage that ultimately did little to address the problems of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism in the wider society."⁴⁰ News coverage that focuses on making a spectacle of politics through emphasizing conflict among partisan/ethnic/religious/social groups or by focusing content on the meaning behind Melania's hand swats fails to affect any tangible social change. To date, all of the artists whom I have read about in relation to the presidency have been anti-Trump, and do not seek an audience beyond the liberal partisan line. My thesis melds the journalistic feature profile — relatable, human interest stories with a story arc — and the lyric poem to delve deeper into the new policies of the Trump administration and their effects on people both within the nation and abroad. Central to these stories are issues of race, class, and sex. By devoting this amount and breadth of storytelling to this news topic, I will be able to explore the complexities of these issues and better portray my subjects'

⁴⁰ Wachs 2016.

personality and lived experiences. In highlighting a Trump-supporting artist and offering my own experiences in conservative Colorado, I hope to fill a gap in the news coverage and invite readers from both political poles to glean something from these stories.

Trump in Poetry: Lisa Grunberger

News organizations became one of the few platforms for people to express artistically how they felt about the Trump presidency. In September, *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof announced a “Trump poetry contest” for the newspaper. His aim was to “capture the ethos of our times in verse.”⁴¹ Thousands of people submitted poems to the contest, some for Donald Trump, but most critical of him. One of the highlighted winners was Lisa Grunberger, Ph.D, an assistant professor in English and writing at Temple University in Philadelphia. She lives in South Philadelphia, an area of the city known for its cultural diversity.

Grunberger is Jewish herself and grew up hearing stories from her father who fled Germany in the wake of Nazi violence. Ironically, her poem is about anti-Semitic graffiti that a man spray-painted on her house in spring of 2017. This represented a far-reaching wave of hate crimes in her neighborhood that took place since Trump took office. I mention in the poem how during the 78th anniversary of Kristallnacht — the notorious day when Nazis vandalized Jewish businesses around the country — neo-Nazis repeated history by spray-painting swastikas and Donald Trump’s name on homes and businesses.⁴² This occurred just a day after Trump won the presidential election and represents a greater sense of fear that he has invoked since the beginning of his election. I will elaborate this point later, after telling Grunberger’s story.

Poem: Lies that Tell the Truth:

⁴¹ Kristof 2017.

⁴² Revesz 2016.

How a hate crime inspired a Philadelphia-based poet

Poet Lisa Grunberger says that she rarely writes the truth.

According to her, “Whenever you write, it’s a lie.”

Any writing, not just poetry,

is messy translation, she says. It’s taking what happened

“and interpreting it based on your own lens.”

Any poet writes from the imagination

which deals less in reality than

in daydreams, fantasies and nightmares.

She drives with poetic license into emotional truth,

the sensations that words on the page can evoke.

She ditches reality in the rearview.

When she writes that the city was “raining monkeys and stars”

she means the streets were cacophonous, chaotic and

twinkling like a nighttime country sky.

She wrote about her father’s death

when he was still alive, just to face the darkness.

When he really did die,

she was about to go for a bike ride.

Her poem about his funeral is all about the senses,

how it *feels* to lose the hands that raised you:

My body a ghost of roses, engraved with memory.

My father's scent still so fresh,

the earth on my hands, beneath my nails.

The words breathe, squirm, smell of a home long gone.

One should not ponder their meaning for too long,

lest that feeling flee.

A time to tell the truth

But then there's that one poem

about the day in August when she returned home

to find a giant white 'J' spray painted on the side

of her olive green house in South Philly.

"That really did happen," she says.

It's a poem about a Jewish family

who lives in a country with a President

promising to "Make America Great Again,"

by building walls and digging trenches,

all with vocal support from white supremacist leaders.

It's about that family coming home to a scarred house

one late summer day, victims of an anti-Semitic hate crime.

She submitted the poem to a national contest

organized by *The New York Times*, and won.

The recognition has helped her feel

that she did something about the injustice,
but it can't wash the paint away. "The 'J' is still there," she says,
"The city tried to cover it up, but it won't wash away."
The first time Grunberger's four-year-old daughter saw it,
she thought the 'J' was just a letter of the alphabet.
She grabbed a pen from her mother's purse to draw a 'K' beside it.
Grunberger, who had just picked her daughter up from her Jewish school,
looked at the mezuzah on her front door. She talked to her neighbor,
who said he yelled at the the man who did this,
said he didn't see much of him except his bald head
as it melted like snow into the shadows.

What words can do

She thought about her poems which speak beyond the words themselves.
She saw a lot more than just a letter.
"Words are clamor-filled shells,"
said the French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard.
It was the clamor that shook her.
Grunberger is a first-generation American:
Her father was born in 1920s Vienna and raised in
1930s Berlin. He wasn't even 20 when Jewish businesses
of his friends and family started getting vandalized and ransacked,
synagogues destroyed across the city.

As the numbers of missing people mounted,
he fled his home for Romania. Then he boarded one of the last boats
that secretly carried “illegal” immigrants to Palestine
where a Jewish state would be etched after the horrors,
to make up for all those bodies, those bullets, those bad bad people.
Shortly after he left, according to documents from the Jewish Virtual Library,
the Romanian army succumbed to Nazi pressure.
They began shooting Jews whether they were soldiers or civilians,
or throwing them from moving trains like unnecessary baggage.
Her father nearly starved on his trip to Palestine,
forced to eat raw potatoes and onions.
He eventually made it to America, the land of equality and opportunity.
Grunberger, who lives in the house she inherited from her father,
points out the irony that he would embark on such a journey
only to have his home scarred with the same symbol he risked his life to escape.
That was the clamor Grunberger saw as she stared at the graffiti.
“She doesn’t know that words have danger,” she said of her young daughter.
“They *mean* something,” she said.

What people can do

The Grunbergers are not the only victims in South Philly.
Since Trump took office, Grunberger said that the neighborhood,
known for its cultural diversity, has been a target for discrimination.

“We’ve had swastikas graffitied all around South Philly,” she says.

“Just when you think we’re past these things.”

To be more specific:

the 78th anniversary of Kristallnacht,

the day when Jewish-owned business and buildings

in Nazi Germany were vandalized and destroyed,

happened to be just a day after the 2016 election.

In commemoration, neo-Nazis spray painted swastikas, racial slurs

and president-elect Donald Trump’s name

on storefront windows all around Grunberger’s house.

Police investigated. Major news outlets reported.

Neighbors and activists painted over the damage.

No convictions. No answers.

It took Grunberger only 30 minutes to write the poem

that would win her the *New York Times* Trump Poetry Contest.

The paper declared her one of six champions in October, 2017

the lot of whom hailed from Salem, Pittsburgh,

one from Comfort, Texas, who closed his poem

with Maya Angelou’s promise:

You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I'll rise.

“They wanted to include a picture of the ‘J’ and I refused”

Grunberger said of the *Times* team running the contest.

“It was too tabloidy. I want to get away from the literalism.

It’s about art, not the event itself.”

Not the word, the clamor.

Not the truth, but what the truth *feels* like.

It’s about poetry. And what it does for people.

“Isn’t writing an exorcism for us?” she asks,

her words coming slower, weighed before given.

“I think writing is this exorcism

to allow us to keep taking in the world

without letting it harm us . . .”

Grunberger has seen the blemishes of this country,

and like the blood-stained hands of Lady Macbeth

The paint won’t wash away, America;

it demands to be seen and talked about.

We need to talk about it, Grunberger says,

we need to wake from whatever somnolence

has silenced us and take to the streets.

She isn’t so sure that poetry can do that.

She talks about her role model, Grace Paley

the Jewish American writer who surrendered fame
for activism: first against the Vietnam War, then
against nukes, then against the entire patriarchy.

It can be easy for a poet to float in the clouds
above reality, in what Mary Oliver calls “a world of words.”

Grunberger thinks of the swastikas that her father escaped more than 70 years ago,
and the people who brought them to her doorstep just months ago.

“We think somehow that art produces change,” she says,
not convinced. She considers how history just repeats itself
like a broken record. She’s been writing and publishing poems
for more than 30 years, but she wonders, “does it change anybody’s mind?”
If she believed it once, she doesn’t anymore.

That’s why Grunberger, known professionally as Dr. Grunberger,
has a day job teaching writing at Temple University.

It fulfills her, she says, to see her students reach into themselves
and yank from the rough a diamond. She has seen their eyes alight
at finding through words a way to confess, to create, to profess
a love for this life, or a desperation to change it.

“I probably contribute much more to social change as a teacher
than through any poem I’ve ever written,” she says.

She thinks of the young aspiring poets and writers in her classes.

“Nobody in their right mind would be an artist,” she says.

Poets are mad by nature: they erect statues from syllables;
they say a dawn is music, a woman is a summer's day.
It's almost as crazy as white Americans lauding
"The land of the free and home of the brave,"
E pluribus unum and "one nation under God"
but desecrating thy neighbors without the guts to even face them.
It doesn't make sense
none of it makes any sense.
Grunberger has heard enough history to know
that it seldom learns from its mistakes. It is what it is.
It knows what it will do.
The last lines of her poem don't speak so much
to hope as to this final emotional truth.
The words come from her neighbor,
whom she calls Jorge though his real name
is Matthew. He sighs as if this is just another day,
says he will paint over the "J," promising,
*It will be
like new, like it never happened.*
Be it graffiti in South Philly
or a President in the White House,
those lines may be the truest that Grunberger
has ever written.

Analysis

Before I relate this poem to my theoretical framework, here is Grunberger's poem in its entirety, as I will occasionally reference it:

A story about the Letter J

*I had to stop here and there in order by resting to allow
my Jewishness to collect itself.*

— Franz Kafka *Diaries*, November 1, 1911

A “J” spray-painted on my olive green house in South Philly,
its white-hooked tail grazes my daughters head.

A skin-head, says my neighbor Jorge,
un racist blanco, , no entiendo,

holding my hand inside his hand
far longer than any gringo would.

He smells of saw-dust and cologne.
I shoot a picture with my phone

of my daughter underneath the “J.”
Evidence is always good to gather.

She traces the letter with her small finger.
She's just learning about how letters

make words, and words make sentences.
Doesn't yet know sentences can kill:

Arbeit macht frei. Sentences can lie:

Make America Great Again. Sentences

can heal: *I have a dream*. She's fished
a pen from my bag and draws a K beside the J.

A new story begins. Across the street
Mozart seeps out of the second story,

twelve year old Anita from China.
Jorge and I look up, as if music were something

to be seen, as though it were something we could hold onto.
I'll paint for you, he says solemnly.

*It will be
like new, like it never happened.*

What struck me most about Grunberger was how much her familial past reflected her current situation. It was disheartening to hear her describe the persecution her father escaped, only to face discrimination in the country meant to be a haven. Bachelard mentions the powerful effect that the past has on one's experience with the poetic image: "every great image has an unfathomable oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special color."⁴³ When Grunberger saw the graffiti, she immediately remembered the stories her father told her of Europe and felt a profound sense of sadness, and of worry about her daughter's safety. It also brought Kafka's diary entry to her mind, though it had been years since she read it.

⁴³ Bachelard 53.

The vandalism represents a very clear threat to Grunberger's home. But her poetic response extends beyond a concern over the tangible home to a fear over her religious identity, her spiritual home. When I asked her how she has felt in the wake of these anti-Semitic hate crimes, she responded, "Some days it makes me feel like I want to run away and seek shelter." She meant this in a physical and psychological sense. As Bachelard described, one yearns for the safety of an abode, a nook, either in geometric or mental space. For Grunberger, writing poetry is a form of seeking shelter, a cathartic experience to take action against her fears about the outside world. Her approach to poetry reflects the physical. She described herself as "a poet of the body and the visceral." Her writing process, she said, "is very tactile for me." That is why her poem evokes nearly all of the senses — the music from next door, the smell of cologne from her neighbor, and of course the olive-green paint of the "J" on her house. She occupies geometric space in this poem, and transports the reader here as well.

It surprised me that Grunberger was so pessimistic, or perhaps realistic, about the power of poetry. When I asked her how she thinks the art form can affect greater political change, she said it couldn't. Poetry does not have a large enough audience to challenge a president whose Tweet reaches millions. "People basically neglect us," she said of her fellow poets. Her poetic response to an attack on her home served a more personal purpose, a need to express an emotional truth. I appreciated this point, the idea that all poets are liars in some respect. It evokes Bachelard's idea that the imagination is inextricable to one's perception of reality. The aim of all art is to capture this emotional truth, for the poetic image is simply an extension of consciousness.

Grunberger does believe that her teaching can affect greater change. In equipping students with the ability to create their own poetic images, she feels that they will be better able to digest the world around them and the thoughts within. Apt to this thesis, Grunberg has recently been involved with Temple's new initiative to teach courses in digital storytelling. She has worked to bridge the gap between poetry and journalism in a similar approach to my own. Like me, she sees the potential in allowing space for creative writing in news media and hopes that its inclusion can help to foster empathy among audiences, rather than incite divisions.

Incendiary news has proliferated since the Presidential election in a way that the world has not yet experienced. Its divisive effects have only been deepened by the development of social media. It is Thursday, April 19, and journalists have been busy reporting on the relationship between Fox News personality Sean Hannity and President Trump. The President's personal lawyer, who has been under criminal investigation by the FBI, was forced to admit on April 16 that Hannity is also one of his clients, a fact that the conservative host has failed to disclose to the public, despite journalistic codes of ethics. Hannity has been one of Trump's most vocal supporters, calling the FBI investigation into Russia's possible collusion with the 2016 presidential election a "witch-hunt" that "is now a runaway train that is clearly careening off the tracks."⁴⁴ He devotes most of his weeknight broadcasts to defending the President, while inciting distrust in major news organizations like *The New York Times*, *CNN*, and any who critique the President. He laments of, "rampant corruption"⁴⁵ among these types of publications, an ironic claim in light of these recent developments. Nevertheless, many

⁴⁴ Gold 2018.

⁴⁵ Hains 2018.

Americans — my father included — now believe that long-trusted news groups have biases toward their reporting. A 2018 report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that American media consumers are the most politically polarized in the world.⁴⁶ Those who lean right are twice as likely to say that they do not trust the news than their left-winging counterparts.

Right-leaning Americans are twice as likely to say they mistrust the news than those on the left, the report found. And, overall, just 38% of Americans say they trust the news media in general (53% say they trust the news they consume). While Trump and much of the media capitalize on differences, on hostility, poets aim to connect with readers. The moment of poetic reverie that Bachelard describes is only possible through a reverberation of the poetic image, from the poet to the reader. Chief editor of *Poetry* magazine, Don Share, described to *The Atlantic* how poetry is a way to step into the mind of someone different from oneself “in a way that isn’t violent.”⁴⁷ Grunberger’s visceral poetry allows the reader to do just that. The lines invite one to imagine her reality, her emotional truth, and rest there, as one would in a guest room of her house.

Kristof’s Trump poetry contest also had a profound effect on Ohio’s poet laureate, Amit Majmudar. Seeing the fervor with which people responded to the submission call, he decided to compile an anthology of poems about this turbulent political time. His poems seek a similar compassion as Grunberger’s, showing readers his own and others’ experiences in order to foster empathy.

⁴⁶ "Digital News Report 2017."

⁴⁷ Garber 2016.

Amit Majmudar

I heard the poems of Amit Majmudar before I read them. I was listening to *The Poetry Foundation*'s podcast, "Poetry Off the Shelf" while making dinner in October of 2017. Most of the time, the poetry podcasts give a mere rhythm to my cooking, a sort of soundtrack that doesn't require me to skip through half a playlist on Spotify. But when the host, Curtis Fox, introduced Majmudar as the poet laureate of Ohio, my ears perked. *Ohio has a poet laureate?* I thought to myself. *And he has written an anthology that responds to the Trump presidency?* Cooking could wait; this was serendipity.

I have listened to the interview at least 10 times since then, and I am still struck by how his quotes reflect the framework of my thesis. Majmudar, as I detail in the poem about him, disliked political poetry until politics started to affect how people treated him. A son of Indian immigrants, he has faced multiple instances of discrimination since 9/11. Seeing a rise of xenophobic sentiments under the Trump administration, Majmudar felt an unshakable need to respond somehow to the fear of his compatriots. He described Trump's political platform as one that "tries to curtail empathy." The focus of Majmudar's anthology, as with poetry in general is to create a one-on-one connection with readers through the poetic image. As I describe in the following poem, this results in the creation of a home of poems that welcomes all views. He selected the included poems not based on their ideology, but their merit. Of course, the majority of poems remain critical of the current administration, but their content is not insidious. Many of the are satirical, but they do not aim to exclude anyone from reading them or incite divisions among their audience. I'll allow Majmudar's story to take it from here.

Poem

Amit Majmudar says that for most of his life
he disliked political poetry. It's a bit ironic
coming from Ohio's first poet laureate,
whose newest collection of poetry is called *Dothead*.

The title poem refers to a racial slur against South Asians.
In it he recounts a cafeteria conversation with him
and a couple white kids outside Cleveland where he grew up:

*So wait, said Nick, does your mom wear a dot?
I nodded, and I caught a smirk on Todd—
She wear it to the shower? And to bed?*

The son of Indian immigrants, Majmudar
says that he his whole life has been a balancing act
between two worlds: India and the U.S.,
poet and radiologist, brown skin and white expectations.
He grew up near Cleveland, Ohio,
fell in love with the state and hasn't moved out.
He got a BS at the University of Akron,
an MD at Northeast Ohio Medical University,
and did his medical residency at the University Hospitals of Cleveland.

On why he resisted political poetry,
Majmudar said for much of his younger years,
especially the '90s "there wasn't all that much to worry about.
You could float through
without being engaged with national and political life."
That stupor broke at the turn of the 21st century
when 19 Islamic extremists
crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Out of the rubble and death

were born the Patriot Act and the TSA.

Words like *al-Qaida*, *Taliban*, *ground zero*, *radicalism*, *extremism* entered the everyday American lexicon.

People began to fear differences that they did not before.

The FBI says that since 9/11, five times more Anti-Muslim hate crimes have been committed across the country.

Islamic veils have become scandalized, even banned in countries like France.

Majmudar is an Ohioan through and through, but that does not stop TSA agents from noticing him in the airport security line.

He wrote about it in a poem, aptly titled *TSA*:

*At O'Hare, at Atlanta, at Dallas/Fort Worth,
it happens every trip,
at LaGuardia, Logan, and Washington Dulles,
the customary strip
is never enough for a young brown male
whose name comes up at random . . .*

Profiling is another term that entered the everyday American lexicon after 9/11.

An agent spends all day reading names: Smith, Martinez, Romano, until an ID reas Majmudar.

An enjambment of a j against an m, the 'u' that comes round off the tongue like a vowel with an umlaut. An agent, seeing this name, likely associates with other names in his or her lexicon:

al-Qaida, *Taliban*, *ground zero*, *radicalism*, *extremism*.

Names, words, mere sounds of the mouth are the reason Majmudar has to allocate extra time to make his flight so he can appease an agent's demands by offering a leg, a foot, his dignity.

The question begs, from Juliet's lips,

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet . . .*

It was changes like this that worried Majmudar,
and led him to seek solace in the only way he has known: through writing.
“To this day, I feel at ease only in a crowd of books,” he told NPR in 2016.
“In some ways, I feel like I *am* a book, to be honest with you.”

Majmudar caught the world’s eye in 2009
with his debut novel, “Partitions.” The book explores
the Partition of India in 1947, when after 300 years of British colonial rule,
the country was left to its own devices.

Like a prisoner unsure of what to do with freshly un-cuffed hands,
many in the country were scared under a new government,
lacking confidence in their leaders and trust in their neighbors.

Hindus and Sikhs on one side,
Muslims on the other, a mutual genocide erupted,
“as unexpected as it was unprecedented,” Majmudar wrote.

His is a tale of broken hearts and scattered families:
more than 15 million people uprooted,
somewhere between one and two million dead
(but after so many bodies pile and are strewn,
it can be hard to get an accurate headcount).

He has heard the stories,
knows what can happen when people dig trenches
on their own soil, against their own countrymen.

When Majmudar heard Donald Trump open his political campaign
with a promise to build a wall to keep out “bad hombres,”
he wondered what would happen to his dear Ohio, and country beyond.

“I had a lot of anxiety about our country, like a lot of other Americans,” he said.

So he once again returned to his books, where a mind can be free.
He read a lot of political poems to assuage his fears about Trump,

many of which were written in direct response to his presidency. He had read so many by last February that he decided to give them a book of their own.

By May he had compiled and edited *Resistance, Rebellion, Life: 50 Poems Now*.

An Amazon summary describes the anthology as,

“50 crucial poems written in response to the current political climate, selected and introduced by the Ohio Poet Laureate—and son of immigrants—Amit Majmudar.”

He admits in the introduction that it took the destruction of a World Trade Center to begin reading and liking political poetry.

It was amid the chaos that Majmudar looked to poetry for truth, which is the aim, too, of *Resistance*.

He has read too much philosophy to believe there is one supreme truth, but one climbs the mountain anyway, to ask the sage the truth of *this*, my life, and what to do with it.

“Let us speak of conditions here and now — this civil unrest, for example — and the measures to be taken.”

Despite all the politics,

Majmudar says he selected poems not for their ideology, but for their quality.

Still, he admits that *Resistance* leans left to the point of toppling.

He wonders why it was so hard to find pro-Trump poets, more importantly why “I can count the number of truly conservative poets I know on the fingers of one hand.” He justifies the gap by looking at how poets, and how Trump, approach truth.

“We poets are the absolute antithesis of Trump,” he writes.

Just as there is not one truth, there is not one America.

A poet like Majmudar lives in a very different America than the one Trump tweets about, one on the verge of ruin from “Radical Islamic Terrorism,” “bad hombres,” “haters and fools.”

His lexicon, like his country, is that of TSA agents.

Majmudar says he wanted to show the world of poets at a time when the world reads more tweets than poems.

Resistance features greats like Robert Pinsky, Ada Limón, Eileen Myles a short but poignant poem by 16th U.S. poet laureate Kay Ryan:

The Elephant in the Room

*The room is
almost all
elephant.
Almost none
of it isn't.
Pretty much
solid elephant.
So there's no
room to talk
about it.*

Implicitly political, yes,
but it doesn't take much speculation
to know who the elephant is.

But our President is not the first elephant in the room
nor will he be the last.

This poem, written in a different era,
could just as easily have applied to any number
of embattled leaders who inflate their bodies
with talk of hoaxes and scandal, all born from fear.

It could apply to other politicians like Nixon,
to Trump's old advisor and McCarthy-era hangman, Roy Cohn.

Majmudar says that a political poem like Ryan's succeeds because,
"It creates timelessness by using the timely."

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard agrees that the poetic image
transcends time, it transcends space.

A poet, in his lonely ruminations, creates "an immense cosmic house."

It allows him to inhabit the universe, he says.

“Or, to put it a different way, the universe comes to inhabit his house.”

A reader can transcend time through the poetic image

because the poetic image exists outside of time.

In this a poem releases not just the poet but

the people.

There is no mass audience for poetry these days,

and that’s alright with Majmudar.

“We” he says, meaning poets,

“are interested in that very intimate one-on-one connection

with the artistic encounter and the poetic encounter.”

When one sits down with a poem, he sits too with the poet

in his immense cosmic house. Here, Bachelard says

“winds radiate from its center and gulls fly from its windows.”

It is alive and inviting, big enough that anyone can sit and call it home.

Majmudar says it is this power that may be the greatest stand

poetry can make against a president trying to make America

a small home, not big enough for people from

Syria,

Libya,

Iran,

Yemen,

Chad,

Somalia,

North Korea

and Venezuela.

“Our self-focus is directed towards the other,” Majmudar says.

“That’s definitely not what Trump does.

He considers himself for the sake of considering himself.”

While Majmudar did not contribute any original work to the anthology

he concluded it with a cento composed of

one line or phrase from each of the 49 preceding poems,
punctuated with one final echo of his own invention

Song of Ourselves

A night of rubber bullets
and tear gas.
His fat face
on my screen.

What the fuck are you crying for

Fight and make music
after the markets crash
here (*here!*)
like all the mobs in story books.

The words demand action,
not just rumination they spur us to
do something in the face of demagoguery,
and of the institutions behind it all:

Set that on fire.

A certain beauty in the duty of it:
The pain in which we trust.
Knuckle our eyes
in disbelief.
Peer in its lion's mouth.

Rage against the fear in airports,
Rage against the roar of Steve Bannon and his alt-right
against supremacists and radical nationalists

whose rage is all hatred and a thousand blind windows.
Majmudar knows his history, how his divided America
is also his parent's partitioned India, war drenched:

Listen, there were other
ends, other reckonings —
blackout shades and a brambled mouth, singing extinctions.

Volunteer,
foreigner,
friend,

what on Earth are we?

America America America

Majmudar says his last line can be inflected any number of ways,
with lilted glory, flat disappointment, slow sobriety . . .

Critics have asked Majmudar what changes he expects his book to affect.

What can the poetic image do for a polarized country?

"I try to be clear-eyed about what I do, and that includes the anthology," he says.

"It is a document of its time, its moment.

I did not for a second think it would have an actual effect in the world,
much less on the new President."

For he is nearly certain that Trump won't be reading any of these poems,
neither will Steve Bannon,

nor the countless others who perhaps need poetry the most.

A poet must resolve within himself that his words,
like history, will be forgotten or ignored.

Is it really all so bleak, Majmudar?

America America America

what is there to do?

Majmudar says of himself fellow poets,

“I think we can stand in our truth and be who we are because who we are and what we do are the opposite of what Trump is and what Trump does.”

Whereas Trump tries to curtail empathy for suffering, he says that poets introspect to connect with readers.

Bachelard calls experiencing a poem a “reverberation” of the original poetic image. That is why the heart jumps at a particular line on the page,

why the eyes swell at words picked just right.

It is in times like these that Majmudar says those moments are needed most.

“I would argue that one form of resistance is being able to continue working toward things that you hold dear and still being able to follow your bliss artistically in spite of this bombardment that we’re dealing with right now,” he says.

Fight and make music

America,

and of the hatred, like the funeral pyre,

Set that on fire.

Rejoice in art, dance among the gravestones
and believe once again in

America America America(!)

Analysis

Much of Majmudar’s poetry has been a response to the struggle of being an American but appearing somehow “un-American” to others because of his skin color. Though America has always been his home, he has often felt like an outcast — particularly in those airport security lines. That treatment stems from a fear over

stereotypical impressions of people who appear different from an established idea of what being ‘American’ looks like. Those in power can have great effect on these impressions, which is why Barack Obama devoted entire speeches to racial reconciliation. During a 2008 address in Philadelphia, he affirmed, “working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.”⁴⁸ His aim, like Majmudar’s, is to call upon *all* Americans — “Volunteer/ foreigner/ friend” — to galvanize for the common good.

Trump has built much of his presidency on fear of a decidedly antithetic “Other.” During a speech at Trump Tower at the start of his campaign, June 16, 2015, he pledged to build a wall along the Mexican border to keep out, “bad hombres,” whom he also categorized as rapists, drug dealers and murderers.⁴⁹ He buttressed these claims with ostensible evidence that the national murder rate “is the highest it's been in 47 years.”⁵⁰ He expressed frustration that more people did not realize this trend and placed the blame on the press whom he said, “doesn't like to tell it like it is.”⁵¹ Like Hannity, he incites distrust over the sanctity of American journalism, which has exacerbated the sociopolitical divisions among citizens. So why isn’t the press reporting about this unprecedented high in murder rates? Because it doesn’t exist. FBI crime reports show that the murder rate in 2015 was just 4.9 per 100,000 people.⁵² In the 1990s, this rate was almost double that, hovering between eight and 10 murders per 100,000 people. But Trump does not seem to care much for the truth. What he wants to entice, ironically

⁴⁸ "Barack Obama's Speech on Race," 2008.

⁴⁹ Anderson, 2017.

⁵⁰ Diamond, 2017.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² "FBI Crime Rates in the U.S." 2016.

similar to a poet, is a sentimental truth. He has used the fear of the struggling working class — the population that Vance highlights in his book — to accrue his following. The conservative writer Reed Galen, writing about a Trump convention prior to the 2016 election, described it as “a fear-fueled acid trip.”⁵³

All of this rhetoric and political action has delineated a very clear parameter of the American home, as well as who is allowed in. It has also empowered people to lash out against those whom they deem unacceptably different. I have observed this phenomenon in my own community of Eugene, Oregon. In the first year of Trump’s presidency, from 2016 to the end of 2017, the area experienced a 70 percent increase in reported hate and bias crimes, according to the city’s annual hate and bias report.⁵⁴

Randy Blazak, who chairs the Oregon Coalition Against Hate Crimes, told *The Register-Guard*, a local newspaper, that this represented an unprecedented spike in these types of crimes. “It’s a dark trend across the country,”⁵⁵ he added.

Targeting those that have been deemed insidious to the country or a community is a phenomenon that the government has mirrored. Trump’s rhetoric against “bad hombres” manifested in on-the-ground action, with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency more empowered than ever. Under Trump’s administration, ICE announced plans to quadruple the number of workplace inspections that it conducts. The largest workplace roundup of immigrants in a decade occurred April 5, 2018 at a meat-processing plant in Bean Station, Tennessee.⁵⁶ Agents from the I.R.S., ICE, and

⁵³ Galen 2016.

⁵⁴ “2017 Hate and Bias Report.”

⁵⁵ Glucklich, 2018.

⁵⁶ Blitzer, 2018.

local police arrested 79 people that day. Most were workers originally from Mexico or Guatemala without legal papers, people who made less than minimum wage to support their families. Owners of the plant, headed by James Brantley, owe the government millions in back taxes, but none of them were arrested. The government's goal here is clear: those who 'don't belong' in the U.S. had better pack their bags.

From rising hate crimes to crackdowns on immigration enforcement — particularly of the migrants themselves and not of the Americans who hire illegally them — the very sanctity of one's identity has been challenged. Many people, especially from minority groups, fear that they will be the next victim. This phenomenon of *imagined* fear inciting *real* violence is not something unique to this presidential administration. Walter Lippmann, a writer and media critic who studied the effects that newspaper stories have on people's sense of the world and others, published in his seminal book, *Public Opinion*, in 1922. In it, he described how much power the media have in shaping people's behaviors and conceptions of people. He coined the term, "stereotype" to explain how the media portray issues and people using simplified media frames, shirking complexities and contradictions to give a clear *picture* of the world. These pictures enter the public's mind and affect their views of, say, ethnic groups like Muslims. When Trump enacts a "Muslim travel ban," it leads his supporters to see that entire group as a threat that requires action. In Lippmann's words, "The way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what men will do."⁵⁷ When a president, whose voice dominates news headlines, crafts a very specific sense of the world, the public listens.

⁵⁷ Lippmann, 1921.

Like Grunberger, Majmudar has a sobering view of the power of poetry. He knows that it is extremely unlikely Trump will ever read his anthology, or that the book will have an effect on the political scene. His focus is, like his poetry, introspective. As I quote him in the poem, he believes that “one form of resistance is being able to continue working toward things that you hold dear and still being able to follow your bliss artistically in spite of this bombardment.” Poetry for him is a form of reverie, of liberation from the harshness of the outside world. As with any good poem, he affirms that a political poem allows the reader to “exit time through an aesthetic encounter.” Thus the power of the anthology exists in its ability to empower individual readers to pursue truth in spite of Trump’s neglect of it. It allows space for shared expression, a home where readers may rest and know that they are not alone in their fears. There is, especially in Majmudar’s concluding cento, a call to action. It is namely to “be who we are,” as he put it, to not allow an administration to strip the country of the freedoms that it has worked centuries for. It is an inclusive liberty, a shared space.

Sharon Cory

I spent my finals week of winter term in Manitoba, Canada, reporting for the UNESCO Crossings Institute, a radio news show based out of the University of Oregon. In the small provincial border town of Emerson, across the North Dakota state line, droves of asylum seekers had been crossing illegally from the U.S. since Trump was elected in the fall. Most are refugees from Muslim-majority countries like Libya, Somalia and Syria who have been the targets of President Trump's various Muslim-targeted travel bans. On the campaign trail, Trump called for a "total and complete" ban on any Muslims entering America, from anywhere.⁵⁸ As President, Trump has watered down that decree to appease the courts. His travel-ban executive order is now in its third version following court challenges, but still includes five predominantly Muslim countries: Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, in addition to North Korea. In a statement released on Facebook in February of 2017, Trump explained, "This is not about religion - this is about terror and keeping our country safe."⁵⁹ Like the ICE raids, Trump's migrant crackdown derives from a fear that *all* people from these countries pose a threat to American security. Human rights groups, as well as court officials, have pointed out that none of the countries on the ban list have ever been implicated in a deadly terrorist attack in the U.S.,⁶⁰ arguing that it is indeed about religion, about seeing *all* Muslims as inherently dangerous to American sanctity.

⁵⁸ Pilkington, 2015.

⁵⁹ "Trump's Executive Order: Who Does Travel Ban Affect?" 2017.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

This migrant crackdown has led refugee families from some Muslim-majority countries — especially in Africa — to flee the U.S., where they have been waiting for courts to approve their asylum claims. They have chosen to cross into Canada, whose Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, has publicly supported refugees. He said in a news conference in 2015, “I think the world continues to need open, accepting countries like Canada to lead the way on allowing people to build better lives for themselves and their children.”⁶¹ But getting to Canada isn’t a straightforward process. An agreement between the U.S. and Canada says that refugees who are denied asylum in the U.S. cannot file for a second claim in Canada, and vice versa. But there’s a loophole: if refugees cross into Canada illegally, then they can file a second claim in a province like Manitoba. It’s similar to what the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees have been doing by sneaking into Europe by boat.

Refugees who make it onto Canadian soil are arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, but released when they make an asylum claim. Authorities then take them to Winnipeg where they begin another long legal process, hopeful that the government approves their claim.

All of this brings me to Emerson, one of the most popular towns for refugees to cross into. Its miles of flat prairie land and desolation make it an easy place to evade border patrollers. Emerson Fire Chief Doug Johnson told me that the border crossings have completely changed the atmosphere around town. “It’s usually so quiet,” he said. “But at night it comes alive.” Those who cross the border typically face a five to seven-hour journey through snow-covered farmland and subzero temperatures. When they

⁶¹ Foran, 2017.

believe they have made it into Canada, they call the emergency line to be picked up, arrested, then brought to Winnipeg.

Johnson has had to respond more than 200 migrant calls since January. Most of them come at 2 - 3 a.m. from families lost in the nearby fields, freezing in blizzards. Because many of the refugees are from African countries, they do not wear appropriate clothes for the harsh Midwest winters. Some are wearing nothing but sweatshirts when Johnson and his team find them. Two Ghanaian men who crossed in February of 2017 lost most of their fingers from frostbite.⁶² As I detail in the poem below, the migrant crisis has conjured mixed reactions among Emerson residents. I stayed in Emerson for three days to hear their opinions. Some, like mechanic Wally Turton, fear that the refugees will over-burden Canada's welfare system, leading to increased taxes for citizens like himself.

One of the last people with whom I spoke was painter Sharon Cory. Her studio was a literal breath of fresh air thanks to all of the tropical plants in her window, an artistic juxtaposition on their own in contrast to the snow and dead grasses around town. Cory is Lebanese — her grandparents came to Canada as refugees themselves, and she grew up hearing stories of their struggle to find a new home. It is no wonder that among those in Emerson, she has been one of the most voracious supporters for incoming refugees. She has even taken the almost two hour drive north to Winnipeg to help nonprofits provide food and clothing for them on the weekends. Though Cory is not an American artist, she has indirectly been affected by President Trump's policies. Her

⁶² Grabish, 2017.

story is thus an imperative part of this project, showing how the issues posed by this administration can seep so easily and pervasively across borders.

Poem: Seeking Art in Suffering

Emerson, Manitoba is a town of less than 700 people.

The ground extends flat as a board in all directions
across great swaths of tundra. This is more of a place people pass through
than stop and take notice of.

The Pembina-Emerson Border Agency,
located just a mile from city hall,
is the second busiest crossing point
between the U.S. and Canada border west of the Great Lakes
and only a one hour drive to Winnipeg, the provincial capital.

Emerson's downtown consists of a mini-mart,
a body shop,
a dilapidated motel — favored by truckers —
and several vacant shops left rusting and frosted over with snow
that sticks until May most years.

Propped against a boarded-up, long-ignored brick building
is a small square shop with the words "Art Studio"
pasted above the wooden doorway.

Just on the other side of its large sash windows,
tropical plants heave fan-like leaves toward the glass,
and pom-poms of bright flowers light like fireworks
in contrast to the snow outside.

Just beyond the small jungle,
under the amber light of the studio,
sits Sharon Cory, a local painter with a frizz of grey hair and hard,
piercing blue eyes.

They are poised tightly on a canvas that's been muddled
with acrylics of various colors and haywires of fine, dark lines.

There's no distinct image,
only implications of bodies and hints at faces.
Her eyes scan her progress,
pupils widening as her eyes match the top left corner of the canvas.
"This is our world here," she says, pointing to splashes of red and yellow,
"full of color and culture and everything exciting happening."
Then she gestures to a somber corner of the canvas splotched with two dark figures,
their surroundings ominous and blue-black as a storm cloud,
or Pollock's "Full Fathom Five."
"Just across the other side of that wall,
a man is carrying his child to safety," she says of this section.
"Underneath this dappled light of the trees,
the blue represents the spirits of the people who are dead."
Hers is an abstract approach,
in which she treats her work as a process of subconscious influence,
evoking emotion and notions through color, lines, and tone.
"You cover the whole canvas with paint," she explains.
"You're not trying to make sense of it. And then I look for something.
If it's bothering me, I'm going to look for it in here."
Cory has drawn inspiration from media coverage
of refugee conflicts in Syria or Europe
that she sees on Facebook or on television.
Her work is a visual, subconscious response
to the emotions evoked by deeply vivid depictions
of the destroyed homes in Aleppo
or sunken migrant ships in the Mediterranean.
"It's a great way to paint
because I'm not pushing my feelings into anybody's face," she says.
"I'm letting them absorb what I'm feeling."
Cory is Lebanese. Her grandparents came to the U.S.
as refugees immediately after WWII.

“Lebanese are everywhere,” she says.

Her ancestors were Phoenicians, artisans
who built their lives on sailing the world for commercial trade.
She says it is this heritage that imbues in her a sense of duty
to help those who are far from their native homes.

When Syrian refugees first entered Canada in 2015,
she taught English to some of the families brought to Winnipeg.
After speaking with them about their lost homes and loved ones,
Cory processed their stories in her studio like a Modernist poet,
melding the imagery of a family’s suffering
with her own pain at hearing such tragedies.

“I try and imagine what they’ve been through
and the turmoil that their lives have become,”
she says of the people depicted in the pieces.

The paintings are now part of a series entitled
“Raise the Tents of Shelter” that explores themes of loss,
fear, and a yearning for home in the wake of violence.

Cory especially laments the suffering of displaced youth,
titling many of the paintings after quotes from migrant children
who have been interviewed by aid workers and journalists
during their voyages to safety.

Most quotes, such as

“I want to be safe” and

“I want to go home,”

depict the bluntness of the children’s yearning for a better life.

Recently, Cory has focused the series
on a migrant crisis unfurling in her own backyard.

Since fall of 2016,

Emerson has become an increasingly popular destination
for international asylum-seekers fleeing the U.S.

for a chance at a better life in Canada.

A loophole in the Safe Third Country Agreement signed by the U.S. and Canada in 2002 allows the refugees who have attempted to claim asylum in the States — most of them from Ghana, Libya, Somalia, and Ethiopia — to reapply for asylum in Canada once they've crossed the border. But there's a catch: They have to do so illegally.

A steady stream of migrants have trickled illegally from the U.S. into Canada for years. The two countries first signed the Safe Third Country Agreement mostly as a way to assuage the number of these double-claimants. But the recent outpouring into Canadian border towns like Emerson poses greater challenges to organizations within the country who are trying to accommodate the unprecedented number of migrants.

Rita Chahal is the executive director of the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (MIIC), a nonprofit in Winnipeg that has been the most active in finding housing for asylum-seekers and guiding them through the asylum process. She says the MIIC usually sees around 50 to 60 migrants per year. “Toward the end of 2015, beginning of 2016, we started to see a trend changing and most of them were coming through Emerson,” she says.

This year, in a period of just three months from January 1 to March 21, 259 claimants have already crossed through her doors. The spike in illegal crossings coincides with the election of President Trump, whose travel bans,

- visa restrictions,
- proposed Mexican border wall,
- and controversial remarks toward ethnic groups

have caused those already fleeing conflicts in their home countries to flee the U.S. out of legal necessity or fear for the future.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau

responded to Trump's first travel ban with the tweet:

“To those fleeing persecution, terror & war,
Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith.
Diversity is our strength #WelcomeToCanada.”

Despite Trudeau's warm welcome,
Cory says that the spike in illegal crossings,
especially into Emerson, has angered many of her neighbors.
They fear that taking in migrants will rob Canadians
of jobs and bring crime to communities.

Wally Turton is the owner of Wolf Turton Autobody in Emerson.
A Manitoba native, he spoke in a thick Canadian accent
with staccato vowels and spurts of “eh” and
“ya know?”

He said he has seen a few migrants cross over the border
in the 51 years that he has lived there,
but his patience over all of these foreigners is wearing thin.

“I don't want to be an ogre,
but we're getting to where enough is enough,” he said.
“It's going to tax our system because first of all,
where are they all going to go? Each of them takes money to process.
By the time they become productive citizens,
it's gonna take a while,
ya know?”

Cory says images she has seen on social media
and derogatory remarks of townsfolk
whom she considers her friends
have influenced some of her more recent work.
“I'm processing the influx of dark skin
because I know that's affecting a lot of people here,” she says.
“It's the first thing they see.”

One image that she has been unable to get out of her mind

is a journalist's photo she saw showing a group of Somali migrants who had gotten lost crossing during a sub-zero blizzard in the middle of the night.

"They had to take shelter in a shed and people found them there," she says.

"There's this wonderful shot of them standing with this light going through them and this almost triangular railroad."

She turns her bright eyes to a row of paint bins.

"That will come out somewhere," she says.

She describes Emerson before the rise of illegal crossings as a "very dull, unexciting little town."

She says that in a place where everyone knows and has to tolerate everyone else, conversations tend to stay on superficial topics:

"How's the weather?"

"How's your garden?"

"How are the fields?"

She's hopeful that the recent events inspire meaningful change in the community, rather than a rift between homes.

"It's exciting to have different things happening," she says.

"It makes people think. It makes people talk."

Despite the xenophobia of some of her neighbors,

Cory says the dullness of the town gives her peace to focus on her work.

"There's a safety here," she says.

"I can come back here at 3 a.m. and feel safe about working here.

That's very hard to find in the city."

She says that painting has become the only way for her to process the horrors in Syria, North Africa, and her own backyard.

"It's the only way I can make this beautiful," she says.

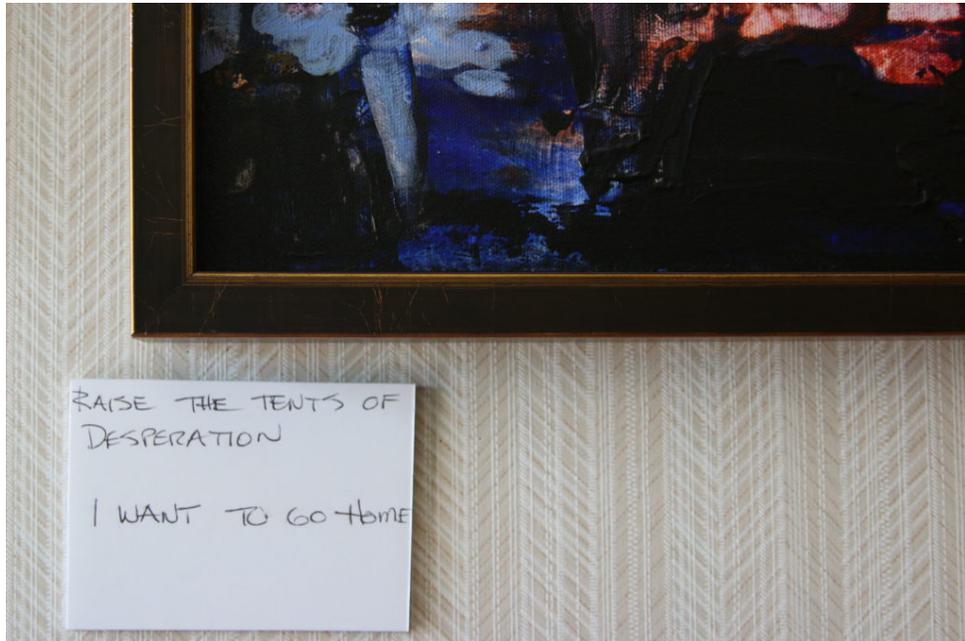
"It's all I have."

Analysis

Cory's work responds to a very immediate disruption of her home occurring in her own backyard. But it becomes clear that her past — namely the stories of her grandparents' struggling to rebuild a community they lost in Lebanon — makes her react very differently than her neighbors. Her art, as Bachelard explained, thus manifests this personal past, literally adding “special color”⁶³ to her paintings. As she put it, an abstract approach allows creative room for her subconscious, her emotional world, to project itself onto the canvas. The contrast of these colors — bright ones to represent cozy space, dark ones to represent bodies lacking safe space — evokes within Cory and the observer a suggestive response. The abstraction allows one to better project his own soul, his own past onto the painting. Comic theorist Scott McCloud discusses this in *Understanding Comics*, arguing that less detailed cartoon characters are more appealing to audiences because they allow for universal identification. As he wrote, “it is by stripping down an image to its essential meaning that an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't.”⁶⁴ The essential meaning in Cory's series, finding home, gives a visual aspect to Bachelard's poetic framework.

⁶³ Bachelard p. 53

⁶⁴ McCloud, 1993



“Raise the Tents of Shelter”

Cory’s newest art series responds to refugee crises ranging from Syria to her own backyard. Each painting contains messages, explicit or implicit, that communicate a desire to create a safe home for the millions of displaced people.

The title of the series, “Raise the Tents of Shelter,” already connotes a Bachelard-esque creation of a safe home through artistic images. Cory’s thematic aim is to create a space of introspection wherein one considers the threat of disruption, of the loss of home. The quotes that Cory sometimes places within or beside her paintings — “I want to be safe;” “I want to go home” — communicate a desire for secure habitation. As Cory mentions, this issue of finding a safe home intertwine with issues of race and culture. The “influx of dark skin” has spark fear among some Emerson citizens, reflecting a greater xenophobia in the U.S., as well as European countries in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis. Hearing Cory discuss her work, I thought back to a colloquium I took my junior year with Professor David Frank. It was titled, “The Rhetoric of Racial Reconciliation,” and centered around two novels: Ta-Nehisi Coates’

Between the World and Me, and J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*. Both utilize elements of journalistic reporting to give a documentary-style description of privilege I will discuss the latter in relation to Ellen Keeland's story, but the former reflects the essential meaning of Cory's work.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' novel, though written as a letter to his son about the challenges of growing up black in America, evaluates a multitude of other issues—both social and economic—that have plagued all races, sects, and creeds the country's founding. The book's overarching theme, particularly relevant given Trump's recent political rhetoric, is the social construction of race (race is the father of racism) in the U.S. and the dualism that accompanies such an ideology.

During his time at Howard University, Coates meets a lesbian and fellow classmate who makes him realize the hypocrisy of asserting an ostensible superiority through labeling a group as 'Other' or 'backward,' i.e. the social construction of race. He admits, "Perhaps I too had the capacity for plunder."⁶⁵ This is a vital confession, for it shows that habit of exploiting is independent of race. The habit itself derives from a hunger for power, and the belief that another group must be vanquished if one is to justify his own existence. However, it is in college that Coates sees and lives among "The Cabal, the Coven, The Others, The Monsters, The Outsiders, The Faggots, The Dykes, dressed in all their human clothes."⁶⁶ Through his interactions with disadvantaged groups, especially those that challenge his notions of race and identity, Coates gains the ability to see racism in America as a tool to divide and oppose groups who would otherwise possess the capacity to reconcile differences. Coates resolves his

⁶⁵ Coates p. 60

⁶⁶ Coates p. 60

own prejudices against his lesbian friend after she helps him during an especially rough night of partying. This experience illuminates Coates' worldview: "this girl with the long dreads revealed something else—that love could be soft and understanding; that, soft or hard, love was an act of heroism."⁶⁷ The love that Coates learns of at Howard exists beyond race and sexual identity. It reaches across the divides set by social expectations (reinforced by media coverage) and crafts the way for a new, race-less appreciation and respect of other people devoid of the need to appear superior to an 'Other.'

This method of understanding through exposure to competing cultures is an approach taken by other black contemporaries who, like Coates and Vance, have used artistic outlets to propose new ways of considering race and culture. The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon currently features an exhibition titled "Between the World and Me: African American Artists Respond to Ta-Nehisi Coates." One of the works, "La Source," is a painting by Kehinde Wiley, a New York-based portrait painter. "La Source" depicts a young black woman holding a traditional Haitian basket around her left shoulder, chin raised and eyes gazing down at her observers. Wiley is known for his juxtapositions between Western art canons and black culture, and "La Source" follows this style. While the painted woman carries a Haitian basket, she is set against a Baroque-esque floral background reminiscent of lavish European wallpapers. Wiley's work re-imagines culture, borrowing the proud achievements of Western nations with the proud faces of black society. Wiley explains, "The backgrounds of the paintings incorporate images of vegetation found on Haiti such

⁶⁷ Coates p. 61

as okra, brought first to the island from Africa, and sugarcane, a food product that was broadly exploited as a cash crop during slavery.”⁶⁸ The result is both a reclamation of the black body against colonial powers and a way to break down the construction of solely racial distinctions of identity, where black people can utilize the power of purportedly ‘white’ culture for the purpose of liberation from white supremacy. Breaking from the confines of race is exactly what Coates sees as being the solution to structural inequalities that exist at a policy and social level. One of his starkest discoveries that the world must allow for a universal culture that does not create conflict and hierarchy based on tribal ownership. Coates uses a line from fellow journalist Ralph Wiley (no relation to Kehinde): “Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus.”⁶⁹ Kehinde Wiley’s work provides a tangible example of how a universal canon can be created that denies the dominance of ostensibly ‘white’ culture and celebrates ‘black’ and ‘white’ styles with equal grace. He therefore transcends the dualism of race and creates a space where a black woman can inhabit the world on the same footing as a white person of privilege.

Coates’ novel also aims to create a universal canon, one that resonates with the ‘black’ hodgepodge of plundered peoples (‘The Cabal, the Coven’ as well as Vance’s ‘white’ hillbillies). To do this, Coates challenges traditional language throughout his novel. He entrenches the niche tone color of inner-city dialects that reads like poetry into hard hitting analysis of Western literary classics that read like scholarly research. Tucked in his description of the cultural *mélange* of Howard University shines this line: “There were the scions of of Nigerian aristocrats in their business suits giving dap to

⁶⁸ Notman 2016.

⁶⁹ Coates p. 56

bald-headed Qs in purple windbreakers and tan Timbs.”⁷⁰ The common reader would have a hard time deciphering this sentence. Words associated with domination—‘scion’ and ‘aristocrat’—are pitted against cultural jargon (I had to comb the Internet to find that ‘dap’ is slang for when two people bump fists as a greeting). Just a few pages later, Coates delves into a historical analysis of Nubian culture.⁷¹ Coates reimagines language and challenges the literary canon to similarly challenge the very concept of cultural canonism. His work, like Wiley’s paintings, emphasizes synthesis of different cultures rather than opposition (i.e. the racial dualism of ‘white’ and ‘black’ culture). The very structure of Coates’ novel—devoid of the traditional chapter-by-chapter segregation and unresolved conclusion—act as similar tools to comment on the state and trajectory of populist racism in America.

In a similar way, Cory’s story attempts to reconcile racial conflicts that have grown more agitated since Trump took office. Her art creates a space outside the scope or influence of politics wherein she can explore notions that are *beyond* racism. It allows room to discuss the wrongs of the world, to feel with poignant emotional, personal depth the messages that individual viewers will glean from the canvas. It carves out a psychological space, perhaps not as cozy as a home, but a structure nonetheless, to discuss Emerson’s migrant crisis, even if Cory’s neighbors would rather shirk the topic.

I ended the poem with Cory’s comments about how she herself feels safe in her hometown, especially her studio. The latter serves as her nook, a place cozy enough to allow for daydreams and poetic imaginings. “The only way I can deal with these

⁷⁰ Coates p. 40

⁷¹ Coates p. 45

emotions is to paint them out,” she said. At the end of the day, Cory’s life necessitates the creative process. Though she, like Grunberger and Majmudar, understand that her series will not spark political change, something within her demands a response to one’s loss of home, perhaps because it represents one of the most profound losses one may face. I recognized that same uncontrollable need for artistic response in Austin-based museum curator Matt Adams, though he did not necessarily ‘create’ any art on his own.

Matt Adams

Matt Adams never planned on becoming a museum curator. He worked a corporate manufacturing job until the company downsized, and he was forced out. When his fiancé, Dominic, asked him, “What do you want to do?” Adams could not think of a reply.

“I hadn’t held that mirror up to myself,” he said. For years, he had dinked around with various art projects — collages, the occasional painting — but had no ambition to try to start a struggling career in the industry. “Over time, I found over time that I am better at helping other artists with their work than creating my own.” Giving space to deserving artists brings purpose and happiness into Adams life, though he does most of the work as a volunteer.

When Trump won the presidential election, it brought a profound sense of loss to Adams. He described feeling anxious and upset, as if he had somehow lost the country that had only recently come to (at least legally) accept his sexual orientation. He felt, too, an urgent need to comment on the political scene. When a friend advised that he curate an art exhibit for Trump-inspired creations, he described the motivation to do so as a push into water, and he “dove right in.” The exhibit opened on April 27, 2017, on Trump’s 100th day in office, a date of symbolic that has been used to measure the early success of a president since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first term in 1933. At the start of F.D.R.’s presidency, the Great Depression had left a quarter of the nation’s workforce without a job and more than 1.2 million people homeless.⁷² In response, F.D.R. enacted a barrage of legislation — he passed 15 major bills passed Congress in

⁷² "Digital History: The First 100 Days."

those first 100 days — that reshaped the economy and boosted welfare programs.⁷³ The latter was especially important in establishing a safety net for impoverished Americans. F.D.R. pumped millions of dollars into state welfare programs, along with a myriad of federal work opportunities like the Civilian Conservation Corps, "not as a matter of charity but as a matter of social duty."⁷⁴ Notable achievements in Trump's own first 100 days in office include: reversing 23 environmental rules, trying to enact the first of his Muslim-majority travel bans, and pulling the U.S. out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.⁷⁵ So as not to slight the president, I should mention that the White House mentions that Trump signed more executive orders in his first 100 days than any president since F.D.R. Most of these included rollbacks on regulations that push his "America first" agenda, empowering businesses to operate with less oversight or setback from the government. But these were also controversial days. Trump's travel ban, of course, was met with thousands of protests after airport officials barred some refugees and migrants, even those with green cards, from entering the country. Trump also infuriated members of the LGBTQ community after he reversed Obama-era guidance to public schools that allowed transgender children to choose which bathroom they use.⁷⁶ Over the summer, he would spark further controversy over LGBTQ issues after announcing a transgender military ban, an order that courts would later freeze.⁷⁷

These policies worry Adams, who fortunately lives in a more progressive part of Texas where he has not yet faced persecution because of his sexual orientation. As I

⁷³ "Digital History: The First 100 Days."

⁷⁴ Cohen, 2009.

⁷⁵ "Trump's 100-Day Plan, Annotated: Where His Promises Stand," 2017.

⁷⁶ Rafferty, 2017.

⁷⁷ Cooper, 2018.

explain in the poem below, others in the state have not been so lucky. Though Adams has not created original art that responds to Trump, I found it important to highlight someone who has given space to political artists. Were it not for galleries and exhibits, visual artists would not be able to engage audiences in a conversation around their pieces. Curating a Trump-focused exhibit spurs introspection and possibly action on the part of viewers, a goal that Cory expressed for her own art. With this in mind, I set about telling Adams' story.

Poem

His face fills the art studio at Houston's Sawyer Yards creative community:

One painting shows him clutching his chest,

mouth agape as if choking,

his long Pinocchio nose stretched across the canvas.

In another he is holding the raised arm of the Statue of Liberty

like the referee of a boxing match,

joined by Pepe the frog and a scroll that reads, "GREAT AGAIN."

No matter the context he always has the same sandy hair

combed over and above, the same pudgy jowls poised to dispute.

There's also a typed copy of the Presidential Oath of Office

with most of the words blacked out like a confidential memo

so it reads, "execute

the Constitution of the United States."

Then there's the largest exhibit in the room:

a 70-foot blank wall quietly invading the gallery

like a giant white elephant, one that finally has people talking.

Matt Adams, curator of the Houston exhibit,

"The First 100 Days: Artists Respond," says of the 104 works

that artists submitted for the show,

depicting their reactions to President Trump’s first 100 days in office, this wall is his personal contribution.

“It represents all the work submitted in support of Trump,” he says.

Adams is an avid curator and president of the Visual Arts Alliance that produces professional art exhibits in the Houston area.

Of the 81 exhibits that he has mounted, this was his largest. It was also his busiest.

He says he expected about 150 to attend, but by the end of the weekend 600 visitors perused the show, the most that Adams has ever seen at an art exhibit.

Subhead

Adams got the idea for the show during a conversation with fellow artists a few days after the election.

“I was frustrated, and I didn’t know what to do,” he says.

When a friend told him to do what he does best, that was all he needed to hear.

“It was like a push off the diving board,” he says,

“I decided to curate an art show and dove right in.”

The problem was when to do it.

Adams says he needed an event, a reason for people to come to *this* show.

The inauguration was too soon, and Trump was too unpredictable to plan something around one of his political moves.

But centennials — now that’s a crowd pleaser.

“The first 100 days” goes back to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who coined the term over a radio broadcast in 1933.

He had spent the last year enacting 15 major laws to combat the Great Depression.

It has since become a benchmark for measuring the success of a president.

The White House published an online report for Trump’s own hundred days with an introduction that read: “At an historic pace,

this President has enacted more legislation

and signed more executive orders

than any other president in over a half century.”

CNN reported that Trump signed 49 executive orders in that period —

Lyndon B. Johnson was the last president to do so.

An executive order is a powerful sword President Trump wields:

With a swipe of his pen he can change policies and practices.

With this he can craft a new America, and that’s what he promised to do.

Take, for example, his words at the last presidential debate of the election:

“We have some bad hombres here and we’re going to get them out.”

He has stuck to this promise so far, taking out such purported villains like the Obama-era Clean Power Act, which Trump abolished in 2016.

David Doniger of the Natural Resources Defense Council

told the BBC that the reversal of the act was

“a climate destruction plan in place of a climate action plan.”

Then there was Trump’s travel ban on seven Muslim-majority countries, which the CATO Institute reported have never sent a terrorist to the U.S.

Then there was Travel Ban 2.0, which he ordered after the last ban was blocked by federal judges.

Then Travel Ban 3.0, which a federal judge in Hawaii, Derrick K. Watson, blocked for the same reasons as the judges before him:

It “plainly discriminates based on nationality”

in a way that opposes federal law and

“the founding principles of this Nation.”

One is wise to remember that quantity does not always mean quality.

Another of Trump’s attempted ban came

among a barrage of early morning tweets, July of 2017,

one after the other like artillery fire because of the 150-character word limit:

After consultation with my Generals and military experts,

please be advised that the United States Government will not accept or allow . . .

Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military.

Our military must be focused on decisive and overwhelming . . .

victory and cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail.

Thank you.

So Adams did a national call for entries in January, 2017

and received replies from artists of all mediums,

of all walks of life, and *eventually*

of all ideologies

He judged the art he received on visual criteria:

“Good execution,
good composition,
use of color,” he says.

“I kept a blind eye to the subject matter.”

But he did not hear from any pro-Trump artists until after the show.

One artist called him complaining

“I wanted to submit work, but I’m pro-Trump —

I didn’t know that I *could*.”

Another worried that his political stance would be the minority.

The blank wall of pro-Trump art is therefore more than an irony

it’s a testament to a politically polarized America:

After the 2016 presidential election,

the Pew Research Center did its asking and found that

45 percent of Republicans and 41 percent of Democrats think

that people in the opposing party “are so misguided

that they threaten the nation’s well-being.”

The animosity is a slippery slope that’s been sliding

faster and faster since the 1960’s, when thoughts on the war in Vietnam

turned the nation sour. Now more than ever, Pew researchers say,

it’s Donkeys versus Elephants, and the trench between is deep.

Opposing views have become as welcome in the U.S.

as “bad hombres” or Muslims.

Matt Adams is privy to to the polar parties, and absolves no blame:
“I think we need to understand that everyone is part of the problem,” he says.

Adams has a fiancé — Dominic.

Texas isn't the best place for a gay couple.

Ranked among the worst states for LGBT people to live in,

Rolling Stone gave Texas the bronze medal

behind Mississippi and Alabama.

Texas' 47th governor, Rick Perry, equated homosexuality
with alcoholism.

But Adams says Houston, like Austin,
is enough of a liberal oasis to find peace.

Houston's former mayor, Annise Parker (an out lesbian),
passed a non-discrimination ordinance in 2014

promising equal access to employment, housing and healthcare.

“We're self-insulated in the ‘gayborhood’” Adams says.

Here, he hasn't feared for his life. He hasn't felt like an Other.

But Trump's policy changes were a wakeup call.

“I have felt that since the '50s,

Americans have become fat and happy,” he says.

“As an American born after 1950,

I've been fat and happy.”

But as Robert Frost said of summer flowers,

dawn and

the garden of Eden:

“Nothing gold can stay,” or

as Adams put it,

“When a society becomes fat and happy,

it doesn't stay that way.”

There's a cynicism to this,

as if the political polarization pre- and post-election

is simply a chain of expletives hurled one generation after another, and the fighting won't ever stop.

"Humans have not truly evolved," he says.

"We are based on conflict, and humans will not ever get rid of conflict."

While he's no John Lennon Imaginer, Adams has committed himself to community service and activism. He and Dominic marched for gay pride last June, and the Women's March last January. All of his art galleries are volunteer events, and any money raised either goes to operating costs or participating artists. Even in dark times, Adams finds happiness in sparking happiness in others.

"This exhibit, like all my exhibits, is about helping artists find their creative voice, make connections and a stand," he says.

"That's the light in my life."

Analysis

It surprised me that this exhibit has been Adams' most highly attended one, something which speaks to public's particular desire to respond somehow to the current administration.

What struck me about my interviews with Adams was the poetry in some of his quotes. When he recounted his friend's suggestion to organize an art show around Trump's presidency, he said it "was like a push off the diving board." His parlance opened the door for figurative language and lyricism in the lines. I especially loved crafting this section:

But as Robert Frost said of summer flowers,
dawn and

the garden of Eden:
“Nothing gold can stay,” or
as Adams put it,
“When a society becomes fat and happy,
it doesn’t stay that way.”

Writing this came as easily and naturally as the poeticism of Adam’s everyday speech.

Part of the joy in this project has been finding the art of the journalistic interview.

Professor Laufer even teaches a class at the SOJC on “the art of the interview.” An

online description of the coursebook quotes Laufer: “The interview is intimate,

immediate, and often an entree toward the soul.” If that is true, then Bachelard was

correct in calling the poetic image a fundamental expression of the human soul.

Language is indeed, as Emerson called it, “fossil poetry.”

To continue along my theoretical framework, Adams’ exhibition also allowed a literal home for artistic responses to Trump. He welcomed submissions from all media and ideology, judging it only on artistic merit. Despite this open door, pro-Trump artists still felt unwelcome to participate. This speaks to the polarization that I described in Grunberger’s chapter, a phenomenon that has led to distrust among the American public. Still, allowing a space for bipartisan artwork, for conflicting views, may help to progress this national crisis.

Adams did not seem so optimistic about the broad-reaching effects of his exhibition. He, as with the previous artists, had no grand expectations about the impact his work would have on the political climate. But he did voice a strong desire to wake his audience from their “fat and happy” lives. This idea is something that has been echoed by art leaders who have also called upon their colleagues to wake the public from complacency. I’ll even provide an example that rings close to home. CHC and

SOJC alumna Hanna Steinkopf-Frank, class of 2017, published an article through the digital nonprofit news site, *In These Times*, about a challenge that Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel issued to dramatists around the world for Presidents' Day: "Write a five-page sketch placing the Trump administration in the land of Ubu Roi, an 1896 French absurdist play about an idiotic, power-hungry king."⁷⁸ Steinkopf-Frank got the idea from her travels in France during the summer of 2016, a trip she took for her own honors thesis. The parodic play was popular among anti-fascist artists in the 20th century, especially during and after the Nazi invasion of France. It helped to establish the Theater of the Absurd, which critic Martin Esslin writes was a movement to "shock audience out of complacency."⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Steinkopf-Frank, Hannah, 2018.

⁷⁹ Bowles, Introduction to "Theater of the Absurd" 1996.



The First 100 Days: A Trump Art Show

Matt Adams' art show responded to the President's first 100 days in office. The left painting depicts Trump's sexual scandals, and next to it are 'presidential oaths of office.' The artist, Felipe Contreras, blacked out certain words so that they read, "execute . . . the . . . Constitution of the United States."

Adams approached his gallery with a similar aim. As I quote him in the article, he lamented Americans, himself included, have become "fat and happy" since the '60s. Post-World War II brought economic prosperity to the U.S., leading to its hegemonic power over nations that had been crippled by the fighting. Much of the rhetoric of Trump's speeches and tweets derives from a fear that this hegemony will decline, thus the nationalistic, "America first" direction of his policies.

At the end of the day, Adams just wants to be happy. Whether it's making connections with artists or supporting the community, the psychological aim is to create a safe, welcoming abode. That also explains why he and Dominic have been active in marches for women's rights and gay pride. To echo a sentiment from Amit Majmudar

about artists, “who we are and what we do are the opposite of what Trump is and what Trump does.” Adams’ exhibit encapsulates this statement. Its essence, as is true of all of the art that I have thus analyzed, beckons inclusivity, conflicting views, and creeds of all kinds. With that in mind, I move to the fifth and final artist in of my Thesis, a woodcarver who was the only artists whom I found in support of President Trump.

Ellen Keeland

The idea to write these artist profiles as poems actually came from my interviews with Ellen Keeland. I began work on this story during fall term of 2017 as a student in Peter Laufer's interviewing class that I discussed in the last chapter. The last assignment of the term was a deep-dive profile of a person in Oregon. This came during a time of personal crisis for myself, both because of the worry about senior year and finding a job, as well as my aforementioned anxiety about where my country is headed.

Despite the incredible opportunities that I have had as a student, I haven't been motivated to, as we chanted in Laufer's class, *change the world*. Blame it on senioritis, blame it on the public disdain journalists have received, or on this renewed worldwide wave of xenophobia that seems to play throughout history like a broken record — it doesn't matter, the point is that I have been stuck in a rut and wallowing in it rather than doing something about it. When it came to the last assignment, I wanted to get it out of the way. I didn't even want to be a journalist anymore.

Then the deadline approached, and I had yet to find a story that I could care enough about. When I visited him in his office and related these feelings, he asked what I *did* care about, and I told him poetry. "So write a poem," he said. Not just said, he demanded that I write one, wouldn't accept any other format. I left his office smiling, feeling for the first time in a while *excited* to write an article. Still, I couldn't find a topic. Then I stumbled across a photo from last Spring break when my family and I drove through Reedsport. We stopped at Ellie's Chainsaw Gallery because my dad saw

a giant wooden sculpture of President Donald Trump out front. A coal miner from the holler of West Virginia, my dad was ‘tickled to death by it,’ as he would say.

We went inside, where Ellen Keeland herself greeted us. I had to go to the bathroom, perilously so on account of a questionable burrito that I had eaten a couple of hours prior, so I did not have the pleasure of talking much with Keeland that day. My dad told me in the car that she was a very interesting lady, great to talk with. The first idea that I had for this final project was an artist that was somehow involved in activism, so I called up the gallery. Ellen answered, and when I told her about my family’s visit to her gallery, she immediately remembered.

“I couldn’t forget your daddy’s accent,” she said.

She was more than happy to have me come by her gallery. I made the drive on Thursday, Nov. 2 through a torrential downpour. Keeland greeted me at the door, just like last time. We sat by her wood furnace, especially cozy with the rain outside, and had a wonderful talk that lasted more than an hour. I also talked with a few of her student carvers who took breaks from their pieces to rest by the fire. Keeland took a break from our talk to play a tune on a piano by the front door. The whole experience seemed surreal, too good to be true on such a dreary day. She took me to the garage, where the carvers worked. Taking a chainsaw from the wall, she demonstrated her technique. The work engulfed her, which gave me time to talk more with the carvers there. One man, Rex Byers, told me that Keeland was not always the rough-and-tough carver/trapper/farmer before us. “She was a hippie in the day,” he said. I asked her about it, and sure enough, Keeland took a short drug escapade in Eugene after her first divorce. This woman deserves a book rather than just an article.



Keeland's Chainsaw Workshop

Keeland takes a chainsaw to the carving of a lumberjack made of cedarwood. The Reedsport wood carver often creates pieces that reflect the economy and culture of her town, especially local timber workers.

After thanking Keeland for her time, I went over to City Hall, where Emerson Hoagland works. He was not in that day, but I left a note for him and we talked the next day about the town's beautification projects. I drove through town until I came to the National Forest office. I figured they may have some information about the old mill that everyone whom I had talked with said destroyed the town. I met Ranger Shores there, who gave what appeared the most sober recount of the whole ordeal (everyone else used a lot of colorful language in reference to the town's current status and future prospects).

I drove near the old mill site and parked near a big blue building with an eagle painted all along one wall. Behind it was the American flag; in front, the word, "Indivisible." A man drove by and saw me staring at it. He stopped his truck and told me, "They painted that after 9/11."

It felt so good learn about this place, *really* dig deep and get a sense of the town. I felt a connection to these people, what with my dad's mining job in perpetual limbo and the town where I grew up already in dire straits because of tighter environmental regulations. When I've recounted my experience to friends at the University of Oregon, some seem confused why I would not critique Keeland's views. Others expressed outright disgust over her support for Trump. All of this made me realize that I want to explore the human experience in its myriad of forms, uninhibited by fear of judgement on my part. Journalists should aspire to allow their subjects comfort in expressing their authentic opinions and stories; otherwise, it isn't journalism. That is not to say a journalist cannot start a conversation to challenge these opinions, and this leads me back to the purpose of my Thesis. In telling Keeland's story, I hope that I give justice to her complex personal history that has informed her current views and portrayed her town accurately. I shall let the reader be the judge of that.

Poem: Carving a Home:

why a Reedsport wood carver used her art to support Donald Trump

For Sale signs stare from windows
like scarecrows keeping away customers.
Once-bustling businesses mildew
in the rain that, like most days
is pouring from low clouds onto downtown.
The place is Reedsport
and it, along with small towns across America
from here, to the Rust Belt
to easternmost Virginia
is struggling.

“Economists and pundits recommend giving up on small towns”
says an article from *The Atlantic*.

A Reedsport National Forest ranger, RJ Shores
says his small town is now so small
it can't keep a restaurant,
save for McDonald's, Subway (the like)
that crowd around Highway 101.

Their big signs flash like paparazzi.

Shores says things haven't been the same
since the International Paper mill closed down in '97.

“Everybody pretty much left after that,” he says.

Then he thinks of Ellen Keeland
and Ellie's Chainsaw Art Gallery,
a place in the heart of downtown
that people hear before they see.

“If anyone here can turn this town around
it's her,” he says laughing, though it
is not a joke. With eight apprentice carvers under her wing,
she must be one of the biggest employers in the town, Shores says.
Sure enough, her gallery is one of the few stores
with a crowd of cars in the parking lot on a Thursday afternoon.
They belong not to customers but
to carvers, her pupils, busy with a zoo of wooden creations: a heron,
a salmon, a rosy-cheeked lumberjack with an arm missing.

A History of Hardness

Keeland sidles up by a wood stove in her cozy showroom,
away from the chainsaws' buzzing.

She wears denim overalls and a golden cross 'round her neck
that she twiddles from time to time as she tells her story.

Keeland has been a carver for 18 years,

but that is only a recent branch of her life.
She is also a trapper,
with pelts hung around her gallery
like paintings.
She's leather-skinned,
steely-eyed
and a self-made woman
above all else.
She served in the army for three years
making charts and graphs for military briefings in Germany.
She has had three husbands:
divorce took the first one away
when she was fresh out of high school, too young for love.
Lung and prostate cancer took the second and third,
respectively.
“Or was it the other way around?” she ponders.
She has to think about it for a moment —
that is how hard her heart is.
Captain John Fiocca, that was the name of her second husband.
“He was Italian — smoked plenty good,
he must have had the lung cancer — that's right
Old Captain John, always with a cigarette.”
Her blue eyes like water deepen as she turns to the window
remembering the shores of Maryland where they met.
She'd saved up money from the army:
\$300 a month for three years which added up to
\$4,000 by the end of her service, plus a GI Bill.
She spent it on a fine arts degree at St. Mary's College
on the edge of the Chesapeake Bay where Captain John
worked a tugboat pushing barges.
For ten years she lived with him on that boat

“An old, old boat — white cedar,” she says.
“It bends more. It smells good, too.”
She knows wood like a painter knows brushes
and just the right one to use.
“They say that carvers and sculptors are more akin,” she says.
“We see things in black and white.
Painters — they’re more emotional.”
Keeland doesn’t *feel out* a carving. She has to hack into existence,
show it who’s boss:
“You got to use *strong* lines,” she says of her chainsaw techniques.
“Don’t beat around the bush.
Start from the top — always start from the top,” she continues.
“Carve what you see. Don’t make it up — it looks amateur.”
She knows animals best from her years on a farm and the trapping.
Carving them right, she says, is about finessing the details.
“The ears are critical,” she says.
“I know my ears: bears’ are out, doggies’ are up.”
Then *stand back* so you can see it, I mean
really see it. Look at it head on.”
Keeland heads to the workshop next to the gallery
to demonstrate her skills on an in-progress sculpture of a lumberjack.
She blasts old worship songs over a radio as she works,
smile bright above her overalls now covered in sawdust.
“Regulations say that they have to wear chaps out here,” she says,
with a wave to her fellow carvers.
“But they don’t say that I have to!”
Keeland loves to carve, though many of the finished pieces
wait for years in front of the store for a buyer.
“We’re not making money, that’s for sure,” she says, but she doesn’t seem to mind.
That’s not what all this this is about.
Keeland stops her carving to help one of her students,

a woman with a tattoo on her neck,
sketch lines on a wood block that would become a salmon,
something small that the two hope will sell.

Building Hope

Reedsport City Hall is just a block away from Ellie's Chainsaw Gallery, where Emerson Hoagland, the town's new Main Street Coordinator, has his office. Hoagland started in September, fresh from University of Oklahoma where he earned a bachelor's in political science. He made the drive west with a wife and a cat, too early in his life to have enough stuff to justify a U-Haul. He has been managing a \$100,000-dollar grant the town won last year to give businesses a much-needed face-lift. "I've barely been here a month, so we're just getting started," he says of his plans, which include new storefront signs, paint jobs and bright flags on telephone poles. "Welcome to Reedsport," the flags say, waving in the ocean breeze. One such flag flaps outside Keeland's studio. Her business got a new sign with the funding, made of wood to match the gallery. She says she appreciates the help, but "Beauty is one thing. It's not everything." Just like a face-lift is only a cosmetic surgery not even worthy of an insurance claim. "We need the mills back, we need canneries," she says. "The town needs to produce something." So when news headlines spotlighted a presidential candidate with a moneymaking attitude and a bulldog spirit, Keeland saw a savior. During the 2016 election, she carved a larger-than-life statue of Trump. It still stands outside her gallery, anchored with a chain around his right arm to prevent theft or vandalism. "Surprisingly, no one's touched him,"

she says of the man immortalized in cedarwood.

A Man, A Savior

On top of his business skills, Keeland says she admires Trump because “he’s a conservative and a Christian.”

He has “good home” values like America-first and a right to bear arms.

Like Ranger Shores, she remembers when the big mill shut down.

“There went the whole town,” she says.

“It was awful hard on our boys.”

Our boys,

as if the whole town shared a last name

and something deeper.

She thinks back to her third husband, a logger named Lloyd who died only two years ago.

She thinks of the resort on Loon Lake just a few miles east where they used to live surrounded by trees — Douglas firs,

“one of the fastest-growing trees in the world,” according to Keeland.

“It only takes 40 years to grow a Douglas fir,”

so she doesn’t understand why the scientists and environmentalists make such a fuss

about saving them.

“Biologists,” she scoffs,

“they have these fancy jobs with their charts and their graphs.”

She blames them on the tightened environmental regulations and for much of the town’s troubles.

“They don’t think about the little guy,” she sighs.

But Trump does — or so he boasts in the speeches she hears.

“We need someone who can make money like that,” she says of Mr. President.

“We need *him*.”

There are reasons for Reedsport to be optimistic about its future.

A brewery opened about a year ago with a food truck —

How could something so Portland not stay?

Some loggers who lost their jobs have found new ones as truck drivers,
and an Olympia-based developer, George Heidgerken,
bought the site of the old International Paper mill last year,
though he told Ed Russo of The Register-Guard that he does not yet
have plans for the place.

Still, there are coal miners in Colorado
losing jobs to renewables and natural gas,
potato farmers in Oklahoma
scraping to compete with commercial operations and big machines —
so many of them blue-collared and praying for Jesus to come back.
Reedsport is as much a fabric of America
as the brilliant New York skyline or
the South Side of Chicago, where children
howl prayers believing
beyond city streets.

Keeland believes, above all, in the light.

“I don’t believe in the Devil, though I know there must be one,” she says.
She also believes that people have a right to believe what they wish,
and despite what she had to say about biologists, she knows everyone
“is on this earth to do something.”

Asked what it is she’s here to do, she takes a pause. Her eyes soften,
or maybe it is just a cloud outside loosening her steely squint. She smiles —
that is undoubtable and says,

“I think I’m here to help people.”

Analysis

Although many of my political views do not align with Keeland’s, her story
touched me perhaps more than any of the four preceding artists. I’ve mentioned that I

grew up in rural, coal mining Colorado, the son of Trump-supporting, coal-mining parents.

Trump won the hearts of blue-collar Americans because he has lauded himself as a savior of the working class. During his election victory speech, he claimed, “I’m going to be the greatest jobs president God ever created.”⁸⁰ Clinton tried to win over this demographic on the campaign trail but blew her chances when she called half of Trump backers, a “basket of deplorables.”⁸¹ I’ll gloss over her poetic use of metaphor to focus on the fact that my dad still brings this up every time we try to have a conversation about politics. He sees her comment as a microcosm of a general superiority that the left expresses over their political counterparts. Keeland spoke to this point in her interview when she stated that left-leaning biologists and environmentalists “don’t think about the little guy.” After all, her main reason for supporting Trump derives from the conviction that he will fight for her struggling town.



Keeland’s Ode to Trump

A larger-than-life statue of Donald Trump holds a welcoming hand out to passersby of Ellie’s Chainsaw Carving Art Gallery. Keeland said she carved the statue to voice support for Trump during his presidential campaign. She and other Reedsport locals see the president’s “America first” policies as a way of revitalizing the town’s economy.

⁸⁰ "Donald Trump Speech: 'I Am Going to Be the Greatest Jobs President That God Ever Created,'" 2017.

⁸¹ Chozick, 2016.

This speaks to the heart of my Thesis. Keeland's story shows that no matter which side these artists lean toward, they respond to fears over the sanctity of their homes and communities in the wake of political change. Keeland's concerns reflect a national anxiety among white, working class Americans over the state of the economy.

I referenced Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* in relation to Cory's work. It is only appropriate that I mention its thematic counterpart, J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, which offers an explanation to why the populist movement has gained so much traction in the U.S. He writes, "President Obama came on the scene right as so many people in my community began to believe that the modern American meritocracy was not built for *them*."⁸² Vance, who grew up in the Rust Belt of Ohio, comes from an area where Trump's message resonated deeply among voters. This population also has the highest mortality rate in the U.S. as a result of what researchers call "deaths of despair" by suicide, drugs or alcohol.⁸³ These people have been among the hardest-hit victims of national rises in income inequality and financial insecurity.⁸⁴ With the rise of environmentalism and minority human rights movements like Black Lives Matter, struggling white workers have felt that left-leaning politicians in particular will not fight for their interests. They, like Keeland, see businessman-Trump as someone who can elevate them from economic despair and give voice to their concerns. I do not want to debate these views, but they reveal a deep-seated anxiety over a loss of economic comfort and psychological well-being. Their homes, both physical and mental, suffer

⁸² Vance, p. 151.

⁸³ Boddy, 2017.

⁸⁴ Chen, 2016.

from a lack of “well-paying jobs for whites without college degrees,”⁸⁵ as Princeton University researchers Anne Case and Angus Deaton found in a 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winning study on American poverty.

Keeland’s story is hers as much as it is my father’s, as much as it is woven in the American fabric. Blue-collar workers know it best — the President says he knows it, but I’m not convinced. It was my hope with this story not to have Keeland take up all the room. I wanted to highlight other voices in the town, as well as Reedsport itself. As I said of Adams’ poem, writing Keeland’s story in lyric form felt natural; the words came so easy and so fast. The night I returned from my interview with Keeland, I stayed up until 3 a.m. writing about her because I felt, for the first time since traveling to Manitoba, that what I was writing really mattered.

I want most of all to show it to my dad. I want him to be proud of the way I described the town and Keeland and all the people who are just trying to make ends meet. I want to show that Trump supporters are humans, with as much capacity to love as to hate, just like the rest of us. I don’t have the answers to all of Reedsport’s problems — neither does Keeland, nor Shores, nor Trump. But I hope that I can use writing to bridge some gaps, to show the enemies in their trenches and prove that they don’t have to be enemies. The trenches don’t need to be dug.

⁸⁵ Stein 2015

Conclusion

Reflecting back on my research and reporting, which took place over the course of almost two years, there are some major takeaways that I shall coalesce here. To begin, every artist with whom I spoke was eager to tell me their story, despite their busy schedules or reservations about the media. Each also shared intimate details of their personal lives, which helped to not only portray them but draw connections between their past and their artwork. Some have even become friends. Lisa Grunberger and I have continued to correspond via email, sharing our writings and discussing the poetry of others (especially that of Slavic poets, a shared favorite).

A second takeaway: art is personal. It manifests an internal world of profound depth, one that responds to outside contexts as well as one's past experiences. Bachelard's point that the personal past adds "special color"⁸⁶ to the poetic image applies to all five artists. If Keeland had not been hardened by her years in the army, the loss of multiple husbands, or the decline of the timber industry, her artwork would be invariably different. Perhaps she wouldn't have become a woodcarver at all. Nevertheless, we are where we are, and art is a way of declaring that habitation. To echo Bachelard, it helps artists to say, "I will be an inhabitant of the world, in spite of the world."⁸⁷ This occupation of space, be it physical or psychological, is a deeply human necessity. That explains why these artists also share an insatiable drive to create art, even though they acknowledge that it may not have any effect beyond personal expression.

⁸⁶ Bachelard 53

⁸⁷ Bachelard 67

These artists, whether for or against Trump, aim to speak through their work what cannot be spoken in a courtroom, or in Congress. They carry the concerns of marginalized communities either because they feel directly an injustice, or they cannot help but respond to the wrongdoing of others. The human soul demands expression through creativity. What the soul demands to express is that it is human, and deserving of treatment as such. The work of Grunberger, Majmudar, Adams, Cory and Keeland all share a common sentiment, that to understand is to forgive. When a Democrat or Republican looks across a partisan battlefield, it is easy to see nothing more than an enemy and to consider nothing more than the differences between them. But the artists with whom I spoke did not want war. They wanted people to take the time to engage with their work, for it illuminates so much more than a label could speak. They wanted so eagerly to share their stories because that is what an artist lives for — connections. All art is metaphor, after all, the bridge between the soul and the world.

What these artists understand that I did not at first was that art cannot have a mass impact in and of itself. A poetic image does not burst into the world with celebration and worldwide captivation. People must recognize it as important and tell others to come see. It requires attention, particularly media attention, to highlight these artists' work. Many of the Latin American artists featured in the "Radical Women" exhibit that I discussed in my theoretical framework have received no recognition in the U.S. until now. The underworld of artists is full of long dead souls not famous until years, decades after their death.

As for my experiences, this Thesis illuminated much about my life that I hadn't yet considered in depth. Connections between myself and these artists kept arising and

gave me a profound appreciation for my personal past. It opened conversations with my parents about their beliefs and the reasons for those beliefs. It allowed me to forgive my father, whom I have distanced myself from since coming out to him in high school. We now share a kinship, a friendship even that I haven't known since I was in elementary school and we would scramble up boulders together in the Colorado Rockies. Just the other day, he called just to tell me how proud he is of the work that I have done at the University of Oregon, especially with my Thesis. He only attended a semester of college before dropping out to support a pregnant girlfriend by working in a West Virginia coal mine. Before he hung up the phone, he said, "I love you, buddy."

This project has been such a joy. Taking the time to write all day, for hours, has improved my work elsewhere. I feel that I have a voice, that I have a presence on the page all my own. It is a way, like these artists, of inhabiting this space with my own imagination. It has made me so contentedly happy to dedicate my time to a craft, carving it like wood until it takes the form I imagined. This is something I will carry with me, writing until my hands decay arthritic, and writing still through some kind of futuristic narration or prosthesis.

I shall end as I began, with a poem of my own creation. I wrote it for an assignment in Damian Radcliffe's "Audio Storytelling" class that I took during winter term of my senior year. He instructed us to write a one-minute op-ed script on any topic of our choosing. Thoughts of my Thesis dominated my brain, and I wanted to capture the _____

The Mountains that Made Me, Us

I grew up in coal country,
where the ground is as hard
and calloused as the hands that work it.
I grew up with a West Virginia coal miner as a father,
who's worked under that ground all his life
to scrape a living for his family.
There has never been room for softness in his house,
nor compassion. Only survival.
People ask how someone could vote for a man
like Donald Trump.
When I asked my dad, he replied
“How could I vote for someone who called me deplorable?”
And that's the problem, isn't it?
We're at war, America, at war with each other,
and I don't know why.
We may look and act quite differently,
but the things we aspire for—
love, happiness, a roof over our heads and food to eat—
these stay the same.
It doesn't matter if you're a Silicon Valley millionaire
or a hillbilly coal miner struggling to make ends meet,
we all just want some country to call our own.
I grew up under the motto
E pluribus unum — out of many one.
We haven't really upheld this value,
but I think it's time we start.

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