

An aerial night view of a city skyline. The foreground shows a busy street with traffic, illuminated by streetlights and car headlights. The middle ground is filled with various city buildings, some with lit windows. The background features a dense cluster of skyscrapers, including a prominent one with 'REGIONS' signage. The overall atmosphere is a vibrant, illuminated urban scene.

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Table of Contents

I. SCHOLARSHIP

Adeyemi Doss.....	10
-------------------	----

II. PROSE

Valentina Concu, Wesley Bishop.....	36
Peter Cole.....	64
Daniel Lockhart.....	82
Marcia Eppich-Harris.....	91
Luanne Castle.....	104
Daniel Morris.....	114
Wm. Anthony Connolly.....	118
Michelle Moyd.....	127

III. POETRY

Ricardo Quintana Vallejo, <i>Introduction</i>	134
Tina Schumann.....	136
Mariana McDonald.....	140
Patricia Thrushart.....	144
DS Maolalai.....	146
Xiaoly Li.....	149
Steven Luria Ablon.....	151
Elizabeth Weir.....	152
Kari Wergeland.....	153
Kat Bodrie.....	156
Ellen Sazzman.....	159
Kate Pashby.....	161
Mike Wilson.....	163
John Grey.....	164
Gerard Sarnat.....	169
David Estringel.....	172
Lisa Bullard.....	174
Connemara Wadsworth.....	180

V. BOOK REVIEWS

Jess Montgomery. <i>The Stills</i> . Reviewed by Betty J. Bruther.....	183
Grays, Donnetta Lavinia. <i>Where We Stand</i> . Directed by Dwandra Kickole Lampkin, Summit Theatre Performance, May 22, 2021. Reviewed by Ben Tebbe.....	187
Gannis, Scott. <i>Very Fine People</i> . Reviewed by Doug Sheldon.....	190
Susan Abulhawa. <i>Against the Loveless World: A Novel</i> . Reviewed by Fouad Mami.....	193
Clint Jones. <i>Stranger, Creature, Thing, Other: Monstruous Reflections on Our Ecostential Crisis</i> . Reviewed by John William Nelson.....	196
James H. Madison. <i>The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland</i> . Reviewed by John Lepley.....	199
Nicholas Newman. <i>The Political Works of Remigius Dei Girolami</i> . Reviewed by Samuel C. C. Bunch.....	202
Thomas Sanfilip. <i>Conversations with Mona Lisa</i> . Reviewed by Jennifer J. Smith.....	205



Introduction: A Time of Reflective Survival

Wesley R. Bishop

Another year has passed, and here we are again with the fall issue of *The North Meridian Review*. Academic publishing is incredibly slow, moving at a pace that makes a snail seem like a sprinter. For those unfamiliar with this glacial process, it can seem annoying and unnecessarily cumbersome, but personally I have always found it somewhat refreshing. As part of a generation of writers that grew up with the internet, a sphere of text with a speed limit around the velocity of light, it is comforting to know that in some venues projects are measured in months, years, and sometimes even longer.

Yet that feature, which means academic writers and editors must choose their words carefully to avoid being obsolete before going to print, makes commenting on the immediacy of a rapidly changing world somewhat difficult. 2020 and 2021 have certainly been those types of hyperactive years. A global pandemic, massive protests, an attempted insurrection in the American capitol, and the tumultuous final year of Donald Trump's presidency were events almost custom-tailored for tweets, hashtags, and minute-by-minute updates. Therefore, as the pieces of this current issue formed and rolled in over the course of a year, we at *NMR* were not surprised to see an emerging theme—reflective survival.

I write this introduction from the campus of Marian University Indianapolis, a quiet corner of an unassuming Midwest city, but this year has shown that despite illusions of separation and isolation we are interconnected in profound ways. Millions have now died from the pandemic, and new variants still pose untold risks to our communities. Likewise, for much of the rest of the world the crisis has not even been alleviated due to hoarding of vaccines. And so, we have a situation where the bigotry of borders rears its ugly head yet again, hoarding vaccines for certain people, denying it to others. For those of us who have survived this first wave of pandemic, we reflect on what our survival means. What world is emerging from these multiple crises? What world do we fear, what world do we dream of, and where can we find ourselves in that negotiated in-between? Our peer-reviewed scholarly article by Indiana State University professor Adeyemi Doss explores this by asking us to question the divide of public and private conceptions of Blackness. Daniel Lockhart and Michelle Moyd, in our prose section, deal specifically with the themes of isolation, ruin, and persistence in an age of disease. Ricardo

Quintana Vallejo, our new poetry editor, put out an excellent call for poems discussing the pandemic. Numerous poets from around the world responded with a host of viewpoints.

That said, the fall issue of *NMR* is never dedicated to a single issue. Valentina Concu and I finish a two-part series translating and discussing testimonies from the Italian Holocaust, and Marcia Eppich-Harris, Luanne Castle, Daniel Morris, and Wm. Anthony Connolly write on topics ranging from memoir to the threat of political tyranny. We conclude, as always, with a book review section examining new titles in the various fields of the humanities.

This journal originated out of the collective vision of a group of Indiana-based thinkers, writers, and artists, and was originally thought to be housed in the Department of History and Social Sciences at Marian University. Yet, as stated above, the world often moves faster than academic publishing, and in the summer of 2021 it was decided that the department would no longer exist, being split into two separate schools. What this means for the future of the journal remains to be seen. This journal's central mission has been, and will continue to be, a space for reflection both in times of survival and prosperity. As long as we continue to publish, we will remain a humanities journal for humanity, a humane space in the face of inhumane forces. Where we go from here as a publication, a city, a country, and a global civilization is not yet written, but no matter where we go next the practice of surviving, reflecting, surviving again, and reflecting more will always be needed for us, the residents of the North Meridian—from the Circle City to around the globe.

Dear reader, it is a pleasure and privilege to bring you this year's fall edition of *The North Meridian Review: A Journal of Culture and Scholarship*.

Wesley R. Bishop
Managing and Founding Editor
The North Meridian Review
Indianapolis, Indiana
Fall 2021

Biographies

Dr. Adeyemi Doss is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Multidisciplinary Studies, where he teaches various classes in sociology. He holds an M.A. and a Ph.D. in African American and African Diasporic Studies with a minor in Philosophy from Indiana University, Bloomington. As a scholar, Dr. Doss' research interests are shaped by a growing trend towards producing scholarships that address issues facing African American men and boys. His research raises important questions about black subjectivity, patterns of black spatial mobility, and embodied resistance.

Luanne Castle's *Kin Types* (Finishing Line Press), a chapbook of poetry and flash nonfiction based on family and regional history, was a finalist for the 2018 Eric Hoffer Award. Her first collection of poetry, *Doll God*, winner of the 2015 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award, was published by Aldrich Press. Luanne has been a Fellow at the Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California, Riverside. She studied English (specialties in American literature, history, theory, and poetry) at the University of California, Riverside (PhD); Creative Writing, English, and History at Western Michigan University (MFA); and Creative Writing at Stanford University (certificate). Her Pushcart and Best of the Net-nominated poetry and prose have appeared in Copper Nickel, American Journal of Poetry, Pleiades, River Teeth, TAB, Verse Daily, Lunch Ticket, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Broad Street, Studies in American Jewish Literature, The Review Review, and other journals, as well as many anthologies and craft texts. Luanne blogs about writing, cats, and everyday life at writersite.org and about genealogy at thefamilykalamazoo.com. She can also be found at luannecastle.com. Luanne divides her time between California and Arizona, where she shares land with a bobcat and other wildlife.

Peter Cole is a professor history at Western Illinois University in Macomb and a research associate in the Society, Work, and Development Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Cole is the author of the award-winning *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area* (University of Illinois Press, 2018) and *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (University of Illinois Press, 2007). He edited *Ben Fletcher: Life and Times of a Black Wobbly*, 2nd ed. (PM Press, 2021) and coedited *Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the IWW* (PM Press, 2017). He is the founder and codirector of the Chicago Race Riot of 1919 Commemoration Project.

Valentina Concu is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics and Head of the German Department at the Institute of Foreign Languages at the Universidad del Norte, in Barranquilla, Colombia. She did her undergraduate studies in foreign language at the University of Cagliari (Italy) and the Universität Potsdam (Germany). She received her first M.A. in German and Spanish also from the University of Cagliari and lived in Germany for 7 years where she taught Italian in public and private schools. In Fall 2013, she started her graduate studies at Purdue University, (USA). In July 2015, she got her second M.A. in German and started her Ph.D. in Linguistics right after. She received her Doctoral Degree in February 2021. Her research interests focus on but are not limited to historical corpus linguistics, historical pragmatics, complexity theory, complex network science, second language acquisition, and cultural studies.

Wm. Anthony Connolly is a writer and librarian living on the Delmarva Peninsula with his wife Dyan and their two dogs, Hemingway Short Story and Professor Leo Tolstoy.

Marcia Eppich-Harris holds a PhD in Shakespeare and Dramatic Literature and taught at the college level for roughly fifteen years. She is a playwright and a founding member of the Indiana Playwrights Circle (IPC), where she is the Scene Nights Coordinator and serves on the steering committee. Marcia's writing includes plays, fiction, poetry, scholarship, and reviews. Her creative writing is influenced by the literature and history of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the British Medieval and Renaissance periods, as well as current events. She focuses thematically on politics, philosophy, the arts, gender, family, and culture. Marcia is also the artistic director of *Southbank Theatre Company*, in Indianapolis.

D.A. Lockhart is the author of *Breaking Right* (Porcupine's Quill, 2021) and *Bearmen Descend Upon Gimli* (Frontenac House, 2021). His work has appeared in *Best Canadian Poetry in English 2019*, *New Poetry from the Midwest*, *TriQuarterly*, *ARC Poetry Magazine*, *Grain*, *Belt*, and the *Malahat Review* among many others. He is a Turtle Clan member of Eelünaapéewi Lahkéewiit (Lenape), a registered member of the Moravian of the Thames First Nation, and currently resides at the south shore of Waawiiyaatanong (Windsor, ON-Detroit, MI) and Pelee Island. He is the publisher at Urban Farmhouse Press and the Poetry Editor at the *Windsor Review*.

Daniel Morris is a Professor of English at Purdue. His latest book of poems is *Blue Poles* with Marsh Hawk Press.

Michelle Moyd is Ruth N. Halls Associate Professor of History at Indiana University, Bloomington, where she is also the Associate Director of the Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society (CRRES). She is the author of *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Ohio University Press, 2014) and co-author, with Yuliya Komska and David J. Gramling, of *Linguistic Disobedience: Restoring Power to Civic Language* (Palgrave, 2018).

I. SCHOLARSHIP

The Burden of Public Blackness and the Promise of Black Privacy

Adeyemi Doss

Abstract

This essay explores the impact of being Black in private (i.e., black privacy) to shield the black body from the taxing nature of being black in public (i.e. public blackness). Deriving from the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmad Arbery, I offer an existential description of how the black body is perceived in public blackness, and the direction black privacy must follow for black people to sustain a sense of self. This essay also connects public blackness to a long-standing societal practice of restricting the movement of black people's bodies, which arises from anti-black ideologies that see the black body as a problem rather than a human being.

Introduction:

Horrendous images of lifeless black bodies flash through my mind like a nightmare, preceded by a constant stream of screams and cries of protest. On May 7, 2020, I watched the first viral video of twenty-five-year-old Ahmad Arbery being chased and killed by three white men while jogging near his home. I felt a wave of dread and anxiety wash over me while at the same time wishing he could flee the ferocious appetite of his killers. On May 25, 2020, Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, was caught on camera pinning George Floyd to the pavement for 9 minutes and 29 seconds with a knee to his throat, causing Mr. Floyd to die due to lack of oxygen to the brain. I was sitting on my couch the day Floyd was murdered, watching him take his last breath while he cried out for his mother, wishing he was able to sink into the asphalt and then resurface when it was safe for him to be visible again. As part of a drug trafficking investigation, Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove of the Louisville Metro Police Department forced their way into Breonna Taylor's home on

March 13, 2020, killing her as she slept in her bed. I could not help but wonder what would happen if Breonna was able to fade into the night, only to return when it was safe to do so.

For months I have watched their dead bodies be recycled in the media, become focal points of mass demonstrations, and serve as a stark reminder to any black person in America of their social status as bodies placed “outside of the world of moral concern.”¹ In light of the tragic deaths of Arbery, Floyd, Taylor, and countless others, I am forced to question my life as a black father, husband, son, and scholar living in a predominantly white community with a history of anti-Black violence, while asking the seemingly impossible questions:

What if the black body could be liberated from a society that considers it as something to be policed, despised, distorted, and erased? What happens when the black body is no longer reduced to the level of the flesh and can break free from being stuck in an ontological space I refer to as public blackness, where it exists only as a feared object? What does a black body have to go through to be recognized and accepted as a human being? I ask these questions in private while I try to come to terms with the fear and anxiety evoked by depictions of black people’s pain and death. In a state of isolation (i.e., black privacy), I can envision a world where the body I see and breathe from is no longer a danger or threat to society but rather a body free to coexist peacefully with other bodies.

As a response, these barriers refer to the paradox of the black body living in two worlds, which occurs when black people find themselves roaming across white social spaces, the white imagination, and the visual field of the white gaze, all of which have been conditioned to see black bodies as a problem (the terms “white gaze” and “white imagination” will be used interchangeably with “cultural gaze” and “gaze of white supremacy” within the body of this essay).

¹ David William Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Context and Contemporary Manifestations of Radical Dynamics*, ed. George Yancy and Janine Jones (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2013), 18.

Being a black man in America has meant fighting a seemingly endless battle against a society that only sees one as a criminal. I began to find emotional relief in the concept of black privacy as a means of avoiding the thought of my mortality. I find myself drawn to places where I am isolated in my attempt to cope with the deaths of Arbery, Floyd, and Taylor, the infectious wrath of COVID-19, as well as the troubling reality that being black in an anti-Black society means continuously facing violence and physical death, as well as a social death that becomes increasingly interwoven with one's life experience. Therefore, black privacy becomes a way of survival and a way of life.

What is Black Privacy?

Before I go any further, I would like to explain how I use the concepts of black privacy and public blackness in my work. Black privacy is, first and foremost, a means of mental defiance against American society's concerted disregard for black people's humanity. This, I contend, derives from a collective perspective and imagination socially conditioned to see and imagine the black body as a threatening object. As a result, black privacy for black people becomes an intrapsychic battle that can be interpreted as the body's attempt to avoid becoming psychologically or physically victimized and as a desire to avoid being treated as a problem rather than a human being.

Within the notion of black privacy, the fear of being perceived as a problem drives some black people to question their existence in a specific space or in society. This phenomenon can cause some black people to question what it means to be publicly visible as a racial body and raise concerns about society's failure to recognize black people's humanity. When we bring into question race relations in the United States, according to George Yancy in his 2008 book *Black Bodies, White Gaze: The Continuing Significance of Race*, many whites have been socialized to "see the Black body through the medium of

historically organized types of information that treat it as an object of suspicion.”² Black people and their bodies, become “a prisoner of an image—an elaborate distorted image of the Black, an image whose reality is held together through white bad faith and projection that is ideologically orchestrated to leave no trace of its social and historical construction.”³ For decades, black people have had to battle and “proactively create themselves” to survive the burdensome nature of anti-Black violence, oppression, and hypervisibility, along with America’s methods of policing black people’s bodies.⁴ The concept of black privacy in reference to my reflection of my existence in a society where being seen as a problem becomes a reality in that I must frequently struggle against the domination of a cultural gaze; my ultimate fight becomes a fight to live. I will go into greater detail about America’s carceral effect by first looking at the historical context of lynching as a way of policing the bodies of black men and boys and its relationship to current issues of black masculine body confinement.

What is Public Blackness?

The complex nature of public blackness operates as an ontological sphere when the black body is present. In public blackness, black people and their bodies encounter a cultural gaze and imagination that it seeks to suppress as it moves about in a specific space or in society. Black people are confronted and more so haunted with the fear of being stereotyped in public. External features of blackness and black bodies (such as flesh, hair texture and color, body size, and eye color) are often stereotyped, influencing people’s racial experience(s). According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*,

One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with sex) is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about who a person is. This fact is made

² George Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2008), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 117

painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize—someone who is, for example, racially mixed or of an ethnic/racial group we are not familiar with. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning.⁵

In public blackness, I argue that black people’s racial experience is not so much a fleeting crisis of racial meaning as it is, for some, a permanent component of the way they experience life as a racial body. “Our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure,” Omi and Winant go on to claim. Comments such as “Funny, you don’t look black” betray an underlying image of what black should be. We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities; indeed, we become disoriented when they do not.”⁶ The way the black body and blackness are seen and imagined is directly linked to the flawed idea(s) of what and how black people are and should act. Thus, blackness becomes the pit of human life under the ideology of anti-blackness, the racial sense of what it means to be black in a racialized society where race is used as a social marker. As a result, blackness is also seen as the “underside of humanism, the consequence of humanism” in which those who appear to exist in blackness can be “alienated, and exiled” at any time.⁷ To comprehend the impact of public blackness on the lives of black people, we must first consider how the collective gaze views blackness and the consequences of being caught in the gaze.

In public blackness, the black body is trapped in the visual cortex of a cultural gaze that has been conditioned to see it as something other than human. It is worth noting that the gaze’s visual field is the ontological anatomy of public blackness. Therefore, public blackness strongly relies on the gaze to regulate the movement of black people. It is not just the look (i.e., gaze) that causes problems for the Black body engrossed in its visual field while in public; it is also what is behind the look that

⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ William David Hart, “Constellations: Capitalism, AntiBlackness, Afro-Pessimism, and Black Optimism,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (2018): 20.

causes problems for the Black body engrossed in its visual field (i.e., the imagination). What then is the connection between the Black body, the white gaze, and imagination? In an anti-Black society, how are Black people's bodies conceptualized?

The Black Body as a Problem

*"When you're young and you're Black, no matter how you look you fit the description. You fit the description of the nonbeing, the being out of place, and the noncitizen always available to and for death."*⁸

-Christina Sharpe

When considering the "problem" of the Black body, we must interrogate the questions posed by two critics. W. E. B. Du Bois raises the question of the phenomenology of Black experience by asking, "How does it feel to be a problem?"⁹ Ronald L. Jackson III asks about the cultural production of this experience of marginalization, inquiring, "How did Black bodies become a problem in the first place?"¹⁰ According to Jackson, "the social assignment of Black bodies to an underclass is a historical conundrum that has multiple origins, two of which are the institutions of slavery and the mass media."¹¹ Throughout the historical development of "Black body politics," "Black bodies were inscribed with a set of meanings, which help perpetuate the scripter's racial ideology."¹² Those meanings have remained to disturb every phase of Black life in America. The system of white supremacy inscribes a set of meanings onto Black people's corporeality that impedes their spatial mobility in society. The scripting of the Black body and Black body politics have often unveiled the "embedded racially xenophobic tendencies that are redistributed and recycled in mass-media cultural

⁸ Christina Sharp. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 86.

⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: 100th Anniversary Edition* (Boulder: Paradigm Publisher, 2004), 1.

¹⁰ Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

practices.”¹³ The Black body steadily struggles not to capitulate to the mental and physical stress produced by these public Blackness practices that construct it as a problem. David Polizzi reminds us in his *Social Presence, Visibility, and the Eye of the Beholder: A Phenomenology of Social Embodiment*, reflecting on the killing of Trayvon Martin,

that the Black body continues to be constructed as the manifestation of social threat and danger. As such, the contours of these constructed fears are not only present within the visibility of the physical body, but also come to represent a type of geographical demarcation or territorialization whereby the Black body may be “legitimately” presented as a problematic body...Trayvon Martin’s killing represents not only the way in which his killer constructed the meaning of his presence, but the way in which the social context of that presenting was employed by him to further “justify” the legitimacy of this construction.¹⁴

The concept of public Blackness is extremely complex when considering how the Black body is constructed in public as a problem. In the battle against this racialized paradigm that portrays the Black body as a problem often used to justify its abuse, the significance of Black privacy offers a type of ontological space where Black people can reinvent themselves. In the reinvention of *self*, Black privacy transforms into a survival mechanism, driving the body and the mind to disengage from the perception of being perceived as a problem. In a racialized society, Black people have had to fight and constantly create themselves to survive.¹⁵ Black people live in a world that is warped with distortions of their reality. For some Black people, experiencing public Blackness is akin to experiencing a kind of social death, where one becomes vulnerable in losing sight of one’s own identity. It is also the psychological experience of confronting the possibility of dying. This is due to the same misconceptions that have helped create the Black body as a problem and, consequently, have contributed to its degradation and continued abuse.

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ David Polizzi, *Social Presence, Visibility, and the Eye of the Beholder: A Phenomenology of Social Embodiment* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2013), 174.

¹⁵ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 117.

In contemporary America, Black males, for example, are both seen and imagined “as inherently violent, irresponsible, and angry street urchins.”¹⁶ Unlike his counterpart [the white male], his body is often scripted as a young, innocent, and immature individual.”¹⁷ Thus, for Black men and boys the probability of facing violence is a part of everyday existence.

As Tommy Curry argues, “The demonization, social marginalization, and extermination of Black males, specifically heterosexual Black males, is among the most long-standing practice of white America’s patriarchal regime.”¹⁸ Conversely, this long-standing practice has a profound impact on the lives of Black men and boys, leading some to turn inward to cope with the mental and physical anxiety and fatigue imposed by public Blackness.

When I consider my own experience as a Black man traveling in spaces occupied by my white peers, I become more mindful of my body schema. I am fighting the urge not to fit into the scripter’s prose as something to be feared now that I am conscious of the possibilities that lie ahead. Now that I have seen what being feared can do to the Black body when it is engulfed in public Blackness, I am wary about being trapped inside the visual field of the cultural gaze. Consequently, countless people who resemble me have died. To avoid death, both physically and mentally, is to avoid society’s distortions of my body as well as the control that whiteness tries to maintain through my death. I seek ways to escape public Blackness (i.e., being Black in public) by practicing Black privacy in my way of physically moving about in the world.

My thoughts are largely focused on how my body, like the bodies of other Black men and boys, evokes fear in white America. The fear that my body is encased in becomes so intense that I

¹⁶ Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, 82.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Tommy J. Curry, “Killing Boogeymen: Phallicism and the Misandric Mischaracterizations of Black Males in Theory,” *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 2 (2018): 247. <https://www.doi.org/10.11612/resphil.1612>.

seriously wonder if the problem is with my body or the outer tones of my skin. As a response, I am forced to consider both my skin color and the meaning of Blackness in a racially divided society, where both are fundamental to America's values, morality, and expectations that people of African descent are intrinsically inferior and irredeemable. For those reasons alone, I am inclined to reject the notion that Blackness, Black people, and Black bodies are wretched, regardless of where or how they exist. In a society that sees you as a threat, Black privacy, however intangible it might seem, is all you have.

White Fear and the Gaze of White Supremacy

"When I grabbed him [Michael Brown, the unarmed eighteen-year-old young Black boy], the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan.... When he looked at me, he made like a grunting, like aggravated sound and he starts, he turns and he's coming back towards me,... His first step is coming towards me, he kind of does like a stutter step to start running. When he does that, his left hand goes in a fist and goes to his side, his right one goes under his shirt in his waistband and he starts running at me...He was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting him," Wilson said. "And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way." This is where Wilson focused his shot placement at Brown's head, killing the unarmed teen. "I remember his feet coming up... and then they rested."¹⁹

-Ex-officer Darren Wilson

On the day Michael Brown Jr. was shot and killed, August 9, 2014, I was left wondering if the fear that often encompasses the Black body generates a desire to destroy it wherever it resides. Yancy emphasizes that "killing the Black body is an act that functions to provide the white body with an omnipotent consciousness, giving whites the illusion of absolute power to take a Black life."²⁰ We see and hear the destructive dynamics of white fear that have transformed into a type of cultural fear that was carried out in Darren Wilson's horrific imaginative fantasy depicted above, especially when the Black masculine body is deemed a threat or out of place.

¹⁹ Darren Wilson, Grand Jury testimony, *Washington Post*, Nov. 26, 2020. [Please provide an article title (and an author, if available)]

²⁰ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 116.

The practice of Black privacy is also a response to the physical and metaphysical containment and violent nature in public Blackness and America's carceral systems that treat Black people as nonhuman. Fear of the Black masculine body must exist to rationalize policing it to death through the hegemony of the white gaze. For this reason, the Black body must be always controlled by those who benefit from what is often referred to as white-supremacist power structures. Public Blackness is a metaphysical extension of both the systems of slavery and Jim Crow in reference to their carceral aim against Black people.²¹ Like the systems of slavery and Jim Crow, public Blackness creates a "carceral reality" where Black people are constantly in conversation with the demoralizing distortions of their presence in the world and with how their bodies are controlled at every stage of their existence.²² These distortions frequently arise from how the gaze of white supremacy apprehends Black bodies. The gaze of white supremacy views Black people as foreign objects that are not to be trusted and are inherently criminal or deviant. The gaze functions within the realm of public Blackness at the individual gaze level or the social gaze. Both, one could argue, have been bombarded with anti-Black ideologies that dehumanize the presence of the Black body.

When trying to understand the cynical connotations ascribed to the Black body, we must also consider how Blackness or the darkness of one's flesh, and the fear that ensues, generates an unsettling sense of understanding how society views one's presence in the world for Black people (i.e., corporeal politics). Blackness in an anti-Black society "encompasses both Black people and the being of Black people."²³ The gaze of white supremacy identifies Black bodies as a danger to white society. Some Black people become *hypervigilant* about the gaze. Most Black people have a collective understanding of the inner functions of white fear, particularly when that fear is projected onto their bodies.

²¹ Jason M. Williams, "Race as a Carceral Terrain: Black Lives Matter Meets Reentry," *Prison Journal* 99, no. 4 (May 2019): 390. <https://www.doi.org/10.117/0032885519852062>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hart, "Dead Black Man, Just Walking," 94.

White fear, as Eddie Glaude Jr. explains, “is the general frame of mind that Black people are dangerous, not only to white individuals because they are prone to criminal behavior, but to the overall well-being of our society.”²⁴ Glaude argues that “such fears can produce cycles of racial moral panic in which Black people are viewed as a threat to everything we [white society] hold dear.”²⁵ The notion of white fear when concerning the existence of Black bodies and Black people becomes “something anticipatory, a fear just waiting to be expressed.”²⁶ One must consider that public Blackness—the very presence of Black people in public—can propel acts of violence.²⁷ For instance, when the Black body finds itself enmeshed within public Blackness, it provokes an anguishing sense of vulnerability to white bodies. This often depends on how the gaze positions the Black body in specific communal spaces. In public, the Black body lacks the freedom to experience its existence without compromising with anti-Black connotations imputed to its flesh by the white gaze.

Taylor, Floyd, and Arbery all died in 2020 as a result of the same fear that killed Brown in 2014. Fear has been assigned the task of destroying and containing the Black body, which is seen as a problem rather than a human.

²⁴ Eddie Glaude Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Broadway Books, 2017), 75.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Escaping America's System of Punishment

*"From slaves codes to Black codes to segregation laws to the codes of color-blind racism, Black people have been constructed by an incarcerating -and- carceral gaze."*²⁸

-William David Hart

The Black body "lives in Absence," argues Lewis R. Gordon.²⁹ Whenever the Black body is present or converts from "Absence to Presence," it "poses a threat to the precarious balance of reality for white bodies that are already present and therefore poses no such threat except, perhaps, in his absence."³⁰ The relationship between the perception and policing of Black bodies works to eradicate anything that jeopardizes white society. For instance, the hegemonically repressed history of lynching in America, which white-supremacist power structures have virtually tried to erase from public memory, presents a context for understanding the brutish nature of how the Black bodies are policed today. Lynching in America—concerning Black people's historical presence, especially that of Black men and boys—spoke volumes to the edifice of white anti-Black behavior. The fear of Black men and boys, both historically and today, has been employed to suppress, profit from, manipulate, and eliminate what is regarded as the most vulnerable threat to society: the Black masculine body. The essence of white fear in a racialized society "is a kind of political fear."³¹ For Black men and boys, this specific fear was frequently induced by the emphatic beliefs held by white America "about who they are and about what they're capable of."³² The perception of "who they were" was brought about by fraudulent claims that Black people were inferior, and "what they were" capable of was often imagined in terms of the Black phallus threatening white women's bodies. After emancipation, the ferocity of white fear, especially about the Black man's sexual yearning for the flesh of white women, was used

²⁸ Hart, "Dead Black Man, Just Walking," 94.

²⁹ Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (New Brunswick: Humanities Press, 1995), 100.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

³¹ Glaude, *Democracy in Black*, 74.

³² *Ibid.*

to justify the uncontrollable terror all through the southern region of the United States. The aspiration to prove that Black people, in particular males, were uncivilized and brutish shifted into an obsession for many white Americans. According to Ronald Jackson II, it was indoctrinated into the social consciousness of the Deep South that the Black man's primary objective "was raping white women."³³ Jackson also argues that "the Black body of the brute was scripted to be nothing less than an indiscreet, devious, irresponsible, and sexually pernicious beast."³⁴ As Rasul Mowatt argues, "lynchings of Black Americans were done to curb the *Black savage* (emphasis added) and protect the sanctity of white womanhood."³⁵

The false impression that Black people were racially inferior permeated the white press and the vestibules of the "ivory towers" of America's colleges and universities. From the Eurocentric religious fabrication of the "noble savage" to the philosophical and scientific myths of racial inferiority, the Black body stands at the center of the historical discourse around race and racism in America. The violence that followed the mythical social labeling of Black people's bodies and, in particular, Black men and boys, is one phenomenon that remains to taint the social and political makeup of America. According to data collected by the Equal Justice Initiative, between the years 1877 and 1950 more than 4,875 Black people died by lynching.³⁶ This particular era in American history tends to be ignored and is the least understood.

Lynching was an accepted practice utilized to dictate the Black community and the Black body and is the precursor to the modern criminal justice system in the United States. According to Donald

³³ Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, 41.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Rasul A. Mowatt, "Lynching as Leisure: Broadening Notions of a Field," *American Behavior Scientist* 56, no. 10 (Oct. 2012): 1367. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0002764212454429>.

³⁶ "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror," Equal Justice Initiative, <https://eji.org/racial-justice/legacy-lynching>.

L. Grant, lynching was “a practice which first appeared in America during the colonial period.”³⁷ This practice was the most practical way of “maintaining the racial cast system which developed after Reconstruction.”³⁸ Lynching was so prevalent in America that it “was considered a proper precursor to the establishment of legally constituted courts.”³⁹ According to George Fredrickson, lynching was “a way of using fear and terror to check dangerous tendencies in a Black community considering to be ineffectively regimented or supervised.”⁴⁰ The history of lynching in America, as Jonathan Markovitz asserts, has “provided a lens or a way of seeing and understanding contemporary relations and spectacles of racialized violence.”⁴¹ The nature of lynching as a public spectacle compels us to severely consider the evolution of the white gaze and its role in dehumanizing and criminalizing the Black body. If we turn our attention to lynching photographs and the consequence of publicness as it pertains to Black bodies, we are then forced to understand the need for Black privacy. One could argue that lynching photos are America’s cartouches of the past. Lynching photographs speak a loud language of silence. Traces of darkness detach the contorted human figure from the background of the bleached-out faces and create a three-dimensional appearance that draws the reader. Most lynching photographs display a wide range of Black shades that offer life to the lifeless. Even though the victims were not seen as human, to us as readers, they are more human than those surrounding them. According to Mowatt, lynching photographs were “created to reflect the ideology of white superiority through Black subjugation.”⁴² The disfiguration of Black bodies was a performance that symbolized

³⁷ Donald L. Grant, *The Anti-Lynching Movement: 1883–1932* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975), 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press), 272.

⁴¹ Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 67.

⁴² Mowatt, *Lynching as Leisure*, 1367

the communal domination and restraint of the Black body. This history forms the foundation of state-sanctioned violence against Black people in the 21st century. Such sadism at one time was deemed a justifiable way of administering the law. David Garland emphasizes that it becomes rather challenging when interpreting something so gruesome as “legitimate actions.”⁴³ This can be due to how we construe the body expressions, dress, and positions of the spectators and presumed executioners. Mowatt reminds us that even though lynching was a form of vigilante justice, it was also a practice of leisure. He writes, “Race, race relations, racism, and racial violence are elements that could be seen through viewing and reading lynching as a historical form of leisure.”⁴⁴ The normality of lynching was “distinctly American as baseball games and church suppers.”⁴⁵

One could further argue that lynching photographs were symbolic representations of the *anti-Black gaze*, in which white subjects generally viewed black subjects as objects to be feared and controlled, even to death. To be the receiver of such fear, especially during the post-emancipation era, was to grapple with the *Other's* fear of one's existence. The Black body at the focal point of lynching campaigns was hauled into the fetishistic condition that was often associated with this vigilante act of justice (i.e., lynching). Lynchings were always preceded by a ceremony that went largely undiscussed. Lynching mobs would frequently dismember the Black body and sell its pieces as relics to and for spectators. As Harvey Young stresses, “the magic of the souvenir anchors itself in its status as contrabands, from a given place or an event. This is why the body parts as keepsake trumps postcards or pictures of the same lynched body.”⁴⁶

⁴³ David Garland, “Penal Excess and Surplus Meaning: Public Torture Lynchings in Twentieth-Century America,” *Law & Society Review* 39, no. 4 (2005): 794.

⁴⁴ Mowatt, *Lynching as Leisure*, 1366.

⁴⁵ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002), 18.

⁴⁶ Harvey Young, “The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching,” *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (2005): 646.

The white-supremacist gaze, emblemized in lynching, seeks to uproot the Black body physically through acts of violence and metaphysically by constructing Black people as uncivilized. This perception has developed into a phobia for a large portion of white America.

As discussed in the preceding section, to better understand how the gaze works within public Blackness and society, we must first consider the complicated relationship that the white gaze has with the Black body. The white gaze is what William Hart refers to as “the criminogenic gaze,” in which “Black people, especially Black males, are regarded as criminal.”⁴⁷ When the Black body is considered criminal, it must be contained not only spatially but also within our collective imagination concerning how and where it should appear.

When we examine the carceral impact and abuse directed at the bodies of Black men and boys living in impoverished urban areas since the Civil Rights Movement, we can see the continuing effects of Hart’s conception of the criminogenic gaze concerning what Tommy J. Curry refers to in *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* in relation to the omission of Black men and boys from our society. The changing American economy during the 1970s and 1980s, according to Curry, had a significant effect on the economic mobility of Black men living in the United States.⁴⁸ “In the second half of the twentieth century, the post–Civil Rights economic prospects for Black men, who had traditionally been blue-collar workers and laborers, were marked by poverty and growing unemployment.”⁴⁹ According to Curry’s reflection on Amadu Jacky Kaba’s 2008 essay “Race, Gender, and Progress: Are Black American Women the New Model Minority?” Black men have not made as much progress out of poverty as their female counterparts, who have made tremendous economic, political, and educational strides in recent decades. “In many ways, their position indicates only further

⁴⁷ Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” 95.

⁴⁸ Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of the Black Manhood* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017), 106.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

social and political marginalization.”⁵⁰ However, according to Curry’s analysis of a study conducted in the late 1970s by James B. Stewart and Joseph W. Scott, they “observed that because Black men are racialized men,” they are subjected to “deliberate and institutional programs to remove them from society.”⁵¹ The notion of eradicating the Black men and boys from society connects lynching to control the Black masculine body to modern policing and imprisonment of the Black masculine body. Both entities have played a significant role in the systematic attempt to erase the bodies of Black men and boys in our society.

In their 1978 essay “The Institutional Decimation of Black American Males,” both Stewart and Scott reflect on a question raised by Jacquelyne Jackson and *American Sociologist*: “Where are the Black Males?” According to Stewart and Scott, this question was prompted by Jackson’s examination of the ratio of Black males to Black females in major cities, which revealed that in 1970, “there were only 85 Black men for every 100 Black women in the Black population aged 25 to 64.”⁵² In 1970, the “sex ratio for the child-bearing age group (15–44) was 87, indicating that the lack of Black males is not due to high mortality rates among elderly Black men.”⁵³ This essay claims that America’s carceral system “destroys Black families, removes fathers from homes, and makes Black men, both literally and figuratively, a disenfranchised and unemployed undercast.”⁵⁴ However, according to Stewart and Scott,

“At first glance, the long-term persistence of a dramatic imbalance in the sex ratio among Blacks, as well as its precipitous decline since 1920, might appear to be a natural phenomenon associated with American society, as a similar trend can be seen among whites. This analysis, on the other hand, tries to show that the primary factor causing a sex imbalance among Blacks is the coordinated operation of various institutions in

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² James B. Stewart and Joseph W. Scott, “The Institutional Decimation of Black American Males,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 2, no. 2 (1978): 82.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Curry, *Man-Not*, 107.

American society that systematically remove Black males from the civilian population.”⁵⁵

For Curry, “Stewart and Scott maintained that the institutional decline of Black men through police violence and incarceration emerged from a political economy that deliberately confined young Black men to poverty, exploited Black males for cheap labor, and rationalized their death as a consequence of their deviance and undesirability in American society.”⁵⁶

In a report published in the *American Sociological Review* in 2004, “the U.S. penal population increased sixfold between 1972 and 2000, leaving 1.3 million men in state and federal prisons by the end of the century.”⁵⁷ Around 12 percent of Black men in their twenties were in prison or jail by 2002. Researchers claimed that prison time had become a normal part of early adulthood for Black men in poor urban neighborhoods due to high incarceration rates.⁵⁸ According to the most recent study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2019, “the imprisonment rate of Black adults at the year-end 2019 was more than five times that of white adults (263 per 100,000 white adult U.S. residents) and almost twice the rate of Hispanic adults (757 per 100,000 Hispanic adult U.S. residents).”⁵⁹ Both the historical practice of lynching and the contemporary practice of policing, surveillance, and imprisonment to control the Black masculine body have the same objective in mind: to eradicate what is most feared about the Black masculine body. To escape America’s system of punishment is to escape both death and isolation.

⁵⁵ Stewart and Scott, “Institutional Decimation of Black American Males,” 82.

⁵⁶ Curry, *Man-Not*, 107.

⁵⁷ Becky Pettit and Bruce Western, “Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration,” *American Sociological Review* 69, no 2 (April 2004): 151. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/000312240406900201>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Prisoners in 2019,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, last modified Oct. 2020, <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=7106>

As previously noted, the desire for Black privacy is a manifestation of the difficulty of living in two worlds, which becomes a concern when the Black masculine body enters white social spaces and society as a whole. Frantz Fanon reminds us that in the white world, the man of color faces “difficulties in elaborating his body schema.”⁶⁰ The self-image of one’s own body is entirely negative. A pervasive sense of unease permeates the body, causing it to question its existence. The advantages of Black privacy include the potential for the Black body to avoid “an atmosphere of certain uncertainty,” where the body no longer becomes an “object among other objects,” but purely human.⁶¹ Simply put, Black privacy becomes an internal space where one can focus on life while selflessly reclaiming what is continually disfigured and destroyed: the Black body’s very presence in the world.

In response to this anti-Black structure of public Blackness and America’s anti-Black carceral practices, the Black body is forced to adapt to complicated mechanisms of surveillance. “From slave codes to Black codes to segregation laws to the codes of color-blind racism, Black people have been constructed by an incarcerating -and-carceral gaze.”⁶² The question then becomes, how can Black privacy protect and sustain the Black body in public Blackness?

Black Privacy and the Sustainability of the Black Body

For the Black body to sustain itself, Black privacy must safeguard the Black body from the dominating nature of public Blackness. For some Black people, public Blackness may lead to a fracturing of their identities to survive. W. E. B. Du Bois called this phenomenon “double consciousness,” an existential state in which one inhabits two worlds in one dark body. This

⁶⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” 94.

perception of self, pushes the Black body into a state of absence.⁶³ When the Black body is in a fragmented state, the notion of the self must become nonexistent to itself if it chooses to live within the domain of public Blackness. Consequently, public Blackness produces this state of double consciousness, forcing the Black body to negate itself or reject its existence to be public. As Yancy argues, “the Black body through the hegemony of the white gaze undergoes a phenomenological return that leaves it distorted and fixed as a pre-existing essence.”⁶⁴

The internalization of this misrepresentation by Black subjects brings them to perceive themselves in the way they have been imagined by the white gaze: as an object to be feared. Public Blackness demands the Black body either comply with this warped, anti-Black perspective or wither into a state of hopelessness. As Hart explores in his analysis of the demands imposed on Black people by the white-supremacist gaze:

Black people are induced to normalize the gaze of white supremacy, to internalize the surveillance, to discipline and punish themselves. In concert with the criminal justice system, [carceral regimes] the dynamics of the carceral American imagination, Black Americans are regarded with animosity, contempt, and suspicion. Even small groups are regarded as insurrectionary or riotous.⁶⁵

Public Blackness, therefore, coerces Black people to embrace and “normalize the gaze of white supremacy.”⁶⁶ The Black body undergoes a phenomenological return due to the white gaze’s control, rendering it “distorted and fixed as a pre-existing essence.”⁶⁷ As Fanon describes in his reflection about what he experiences when he meets the gaze of the *Other*:

Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze gliding over my body suddenly smoothed out rough edges would give me back

⁶³ My use of the term *absents* implies that the black body, when caught in public blackness, becomes so conscious of its position within it, that it seeks to become invisible to move about.

⁶⁴ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 109.

⁶⁵ Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” 94.

⁶⁶ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 109.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

the lightness of being I thought I had lost, and taking me out of the world put me back in the world.⁶⁸

According to Fanon, the gaze has the power to influence the body's movement in the world and the way the body appears to itself.⁶⁹ This, I might add, is only possible if the Black body, as the subject, embodies the gaze of the *Other*, as well as its perspective and imagery.

Black privacy is an approach that allows Black people to avoid public Blackness and its systemic violations of the Black body by defending how Black people recognize their own position in the world, ontologically speaking. Public Blackness shapes the Black body in ways that are harmful to Black people who cross its course. The Black body is viewed as deviant and a danger to the social order within the constraints of public Blackness. This fearful white-supremacist imaginary justifies the carceral regimes that are summoned to police and murder Black people at will. The mere presence of Black bodies within white public spaces (i.e., suburban communities, social spaces, schools, college and university campuses) petrifies what Hart calls the “whiteopian dream; an imaginary (utopian) space devoid of Black people.”⁷⁰ Black privacy becomes a response to society's neurotic behavior toward the Black body, which Black people themselves cannot avoid. When the Black body becomes visible within the structure of public Blackness, it becomes marked for death (i.e., Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Botham Shem Jean, Eric Garner, John Crawford III). Public Blackness compels us to ask, “What does it mean to be killed by the American imagination?”

When a Black body is out of place in white spaces, it must be destroyed either metaphysically or physically by the state. Dead Black bodies, whether physically and metaphysically, are “needed in order to magnify white existence.”⁷¹ The ontological fear that the Black body experiences are the

⁶⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, 89.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Hart, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” 100.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

consequence of having to live in public Blackness. According to Hart, “Black body existence does, in fact, mean killing Black bodies.”⁷² Fear of dying in public due to being Black leads some Black people to become hypervigilant and seek refuge in Black privacy. The mere idea of being engulfed in public Blackness can be disruptive to one’s well-being, triggering a slew of health problems. The Black body is forced to either flee or maneuver inside public Blackness. In any case, Black privacy is required to protect the Black body from the violence within public Blackness, especially when it is perceived to be out of place. According to Hart, in American society, Black bodies that appear “out of place are threatening.”⁷³ They “threaten to pollute the space they inhabit through various kinds of contagion (especially crime). Whether Black people live there or not, Black bodies do not belong in whitoian spaces.”⁷⁴

The epitome of white-utopian spaces that tend to criminalize Black people and their bodies is public Blackness. “Blacks in social spaces are regarded as an invasive species that needs to be carefully monitored, controlled, and possibly uprooted.”⁷⁵ In attempting to defy Black publicness through Black privacy mechanisms, the Black body is bound to adjust to white distortions of its presence while trying to diminish them. In this manner, the Black body finds itself imprisoned within the white imagination. This is where the body is confronted by a warped image of itself, facing “a reality held together through white bad faith and projection that is ideologically orchestrated to have no trace of its social and historical construction.”⁷⁶

One thing that the deaths of Taylor, Floyd, Arbery, and countless others have shown us is a consequence of being Black in public that forces one to want to be isolated. Whether the Black body

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁶ Yancy, *Black Bodies White Gaze*, 100.

is in motion or motionless, no matter how young or old, no matter if it exists as male or female, no matter if it is asleep or awake, one could maintain it will forever be perceived as a problem.

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II. PROSE

Memories in Translation, Part 2: Herta Gerber Testimonial and the Italian Holocaust

Edited by Valentina Concu and Wesley R. Bishop

Translated by Valentina Concu

Introduction:

In our Fall 2020 inaugural issue, we at *The North Meridian Review* offered the first of a series of two Holocaust survivors' testimonies. These translations of Oskar and Herta Gerber, two Jewish Europeans imprisoned by fascists at Ferramonti di Tarsia from 1941 to 1943, provide a key insight into the experiences of Jewish folk during the Italian Holocaust. Oskar and Herta met in this camp upon Herta's arrival, fell in love with each other not long after meeting, and spent the rest of their lives together following the war.

The testimony of Oskar that we published last year was an examination of the Italian fascist regime and how the country implemented its infamous racial laws against its own Jewish population.⁷⁷ Herta's testimony complements Oskar's descriptions of fascist Italy while also describing her own experience of forced removal from the Polish city of Bielsko to the concentration camp in southern Italy.⁷⁸ Herta's memories will also add to the understanding of Italy's behavior toward its own Jewish citizens and the European Jews that were captured and imprisoned in the Italian camps—displaying open hostility and anti-Semitism but often not with the same ferocity as their German counterparts. *The New York Times* reported on such behavior, highlighting how, on one hand, Italian and European

⁷⁷ Michele Sarfatti, *Jewish in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

⁷⁸ Today Bielsko is situated in the western part of the city Bielsko-Biala in Poland. It was an independent town until 1951.

Jewish folk lost many of their civil rights because of the racial laws. On the other hand, the Italian regime did not perpetrate the same type of executions in its concentration camps as did the infamous German ones.⁷⁹

As we mentioned in the introduction to Oskar's testimony, the English translations of Oskar and Herta Gerber were commissioned in 2019 by one of Herta's relatives, who received the original interviews in Italian from the Shoah Foundation. The name of this relative is Joyce Field, a prolific Jewish genealogist. For the conclusion of this series we were honored to sit down and interview her for this issue of *The North Meridian Review*:

Concu & Bishop: Dear Joyce, could you briefly introduce yourself? Where were you born? Where did you go to school? What was your major?

Joyce: I was born in Bronx, New York, and we moved to Detroit when I was about 4.5 years old. I received my B.A., graduating summa cum laude at Wayne State University, in Detroit. I majored in English literature, with minors in Italian and Sociology. My graduate work was at Indiana University and Purdue University, where I focused on English and American literature and literary criticism.

Concu & Bishop: How did you end up in Indiana? What were your first impressions of the Midwest?

Joyce: My husband and I both received graduate teaching assistantships at IU. It was very challenging in the 1950s for a married couple, both majoring in the same field, to receive teaching assistantships at the same department. The Bloomington campus was gorgeous, and I loved the bucolic atmosphere after living in gray midtown Detroit. Then we received jobs at Purdue University. Well, Dutch elm disease had just killed all the lovely trees lining State Street and the campus was like a barren desert. My reaction was the opposite of what I felt about Bloomington. To console me my husband said that we would stay only one year, but here I am 64 years later.

Concu & Bishop: What do you currently do?

I am "retired" from paid employment. But I am active in political and cultural areas. I chair the redistricting reform committee for the League of Women Voters Greater Lafayette, and I am the Metropolitan Opera Live in HD Ambassador for the Lafayette area with a mailing list of 160+ opera lovers. I also maintain my involvement with genealogy by being a consultant with JewishGen.

Concu & Bishop: How did you live the last four years with Trump's presidency?

⁷⁹ "Scholars Reconsidering Italy's Treatment of Jews in the Nazi Era," *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 2010, p. A28.

Joyce: Not well! I spent too much time reading about the daily insults to civil society and bemoaning the destruction of causes that I had fought for in the 1960s and 1970s. I spent too much unproductive time emailing people of like values about the latest Trumpian horrors.

I donated money to liberal candidates and political action committees and to activities trying to overturn gerrymandering. My son called me Don Quixote, but I said I had to do what I could to achieve a more just society.

Concu & Bishop: Could you talk about your activity and work as a genealogist? Why did you decide to embark on such an activity?

Joyce: I got inspired in the mid-1990s. I had “retired” and purchased my first Apple computer. The internet as we know it didn’t yet exist. All we had was a dial-up connection which was quite expensive because the connections were slow, and you had to buy time by the minute and hour. I was just browsing when I came upon the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum site and a datafile on transports to Auschwitz. I remember it was a cold winter day, and I was dressed in a wool plaid skirt, an Aran turtleneck sweater, and warm tights. I had a steaming cup of coffee on my desk, and the sun was shining brightly through my window reflected on the heavy white snow. A cardinal was sitting on a tree branch. I recall this background because of the contrast between the horrors of the concentration camp transport file and my warm comfortable home. My brain was flooded with images of the cold, starving Jews in the cattle cars to Auschwitz compared with my life. It was an “ah-ha” moment. I knew instantly that I had to be involved in Holocaust research. Of course, my husband and I had read and studied about the Holocaust for decades, but nothing was as vivid and soul-wrenching as seeing the transport lists on my small computer screen.

I then started searching for more Holocaust material, and in a short time I discovered JewishGen, an online Jewish genealogy site. They were looking for volunteers, and I immediately wrote to them. When I described my background, they brought me aboard. I assumed more and more responsibilities and developed cooperative relationships with other organizations worldwide to secure data that could be converted to searchable databases for researchers. I was promoted to VP for Data Acquisition and Research and oversaw three important projects: the Yizkor Book Translation Project, the Worldwide Burial Registry, and the Holocaust Database.

The purpose of the Yizkor Book project is to translate into English the many hundreds of these memorial books on European towns whose Jewish population was murdered by the Nazis. These books contain some of the most important information on these destroyed communities.

The JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR) is a database of names and other identifying information from Jewish cemeteries and burial records worldwide, from the earliest records to the present. It is a compilation of two linked databases: a database of burial records and a database of information about each particular cemetery. JOWBR aims to catalog extant data about Jewish cemeteries and burial records worldwide.

JewishGen’s Holocaust Database is a collection of databases containing information about Holocaust victims and survivors. It contains more than 2.75 million entries, from more than 190 component datasets.

Why did I dedicate 12 years of my “retirement” to Jewish genealogy? It became a mission to recover the names and fates of Jews whose identities the Nazis intended to obliterate. They and their lost worlds should not be forgotten.

Concu & Bishop: What does it mean to you to be a descendent of survivors?

Joyce: It is very difficult to explain my feelings: gratitude that my parents had the courage to leave Europe for the US with no money, no language skills, minimal job skills. I don’t know if I would have had their strength, fortitude, and belief in a better life here. I also am forever sad and angry that most of the relatives who did not immigrate did not survive and that I never knew them. I guess the emotions are anger and sadness. And I live with admiration for my parents’ lives.

Concu & Bishop: Why is it important to keep talking about the Holocaust and its survivors?

Joyce: The Holocaust is not only a horrific historical event but a warning to the world that it could happen again, that those horrible dark forces could unleash similar events. What happened on January 6th could be a harbinger of the future, as Timothy Snyder pointed out.⁸⁰ Jews are taught the importance of memory, of being witnesses. We are taught to be the guardians of memory so that the world will learn and never forget.

Concu & Bishop: Could you tell us who Oskar and Hertha were and your relation to them?

Joyce: Oskar’s father and my mother were siblings. Oskar was one of the oldest of twelve children and my mother was the youngest. My mother spent part of World War I living in Budapest with Oskar’s family, and she was like a nanny to Oskar. My mother and the other siblings who had immigrated to the US tried to get Oskar’s parents, his siblings, and his wife visas for the US before World War II began, but it was very complicated because Herta had a Polish passport while all the others had Hungarian passports. As a result, they were on separate quotas.

Concu & Bishop: What do you think these interviews represent in today’s world?

Joyce: They are a reminder and a warning. This could happen again. Trumpism was frightening to me as it reminded me of the 1930s in Europe and even the U.S. The rhetoric, the anti-Semitism, the nativism, the white supremacists, the religious bigotry, the fear mongering, etc. We are not out of the woods yet. Witness the political situation in Poland and Hungary. We still have the KKK, the Proud Boys, QAnon, and other groups here. We cannot blind ourselves to the hate and the fascist white supremacists here.

⁸⁰ Here she is referring to the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol Building by Donald Trump supporters and far-right-wing groups trying to overturn the presidential election results. Timothy Snyder is the Richard C. Levin Professor of History at Yale University who, during the Trump presidency, wrote prolifically on the dangers of encroaching fascism in the United States.

To “help the world to never forget” the horrors of the Holocaust and the threat of fascism, in a season not long after an attempted coup at the U.S. Capitol Building which reminded many of the political turmoil of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe, we at *The North Meridian Review* are pleased to present Herta’s testimony for the first time translated into English. May we never forget, and never fail to rally against these destructive forces.

Interviewer: Today is April 14, 1998, and I’m interviewing Herta Gerber Bratspiess. The interviewer is Maurina Alazraki. We are in Milan, in Italy, and the interview will be in Italian. Good morning, could you tell me your name?

Herta Gerber: My name is Herta Bratspiess Gerber.

Interviewer: When were you born?

Herta Gerber: I was born on the 23rd of September 1922 in Bielsko, Poland.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit about your family, your parents?

Herta Gerber: My parents worked in commerce, my dad had a dental warehouse and he supplied all the dentists and doctors in the area. My mom would help out, and my dad would travel a lot. We were kids and we went to school, first the Jewish school, then high school...we had to go to a cloister, which was safer because they would attack us in the public school because we were Jews.

Interviewer: What was the name of your dad?

Herta Gerber: My dad’s name was Paolo Schuling, in Yiddish, and my mom Amalia. We lived in the same building where my grandparents lived.

Interviewer: Did you have any sisters?

Herta Gerber: Yes, a sister, who now lives in Israel. Her name is Lili, Lea Schaffran. She has a daughter, who is married, and two grandchildren.

Interviewer: Is your sister older than you?

Herta Gerber: Yes, she is. She is two years older than me. Until the end of the war in Italy, we stayed together. Then they moved; they did the Aliyah and went to Israel. My parents too, around one month after they went there.⁸¹

⁸¹ Aliyah is the historical immigration of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, which corresponds today to the modern state of Israel.

Interviewer: Could you describe to me your house? Where did you live exactly?

Herta Gerber: We lived...well, Bielsko was kind of an important city for the production of fabrics; we lived in a beautiful area, the entire building was owned by my grandma, so we lived very well there.

Interviewer: Did other Jewish families live there?

Herta Gerber: Yes. On the first floor, there was a Jewish family. On the ground floor, there were Catholics. And living together was good enough. There weren't a lot of Jewish houses close to us; this square was a little bit isolated, because there was a big fabric industry, and the owners were friends of my grandparents. We lived well, we felt safe, although sometimes there were some problems against the Jewish residents; the attacks would come from the side of Polish people.

Interviewer: To which school did you and your sister go?

Herta Gerber: The elementary school was a Jewish school. Later, we went to high school, it was called the Humanistic School.

Interviewer: What kind of Jewish school was it? Could you describe your school to me?

Herta Gerber: The school was kind of traditional, with religious rituals, they educated us with religion classes. I took a Hebrew class that I liked very much. It was a good school; we were among us. I have to admit that, although we lived in Poland, the language we used at home was German.

Interviewer: So, you spoke German at home?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we spoke German at home. The Polish people would complain about that... but my mom did not go to school in Poland, so she would speak in German, and we did that too.

Interviewer: Did you also speak Yiddish at home?

Herta Gerber: Yes. Our grandparents spoke Yiddish and we liked to hear it so much that, when I can, I still buy some recordings that remind us of our language, our dialect.

Interviewer: Could you describe your life? You went to school, then what were your hobbies?

Herta Gerber: Oh well, it was the so-called bourgeois life, we had piano classes twice a week, we had gymnastics, that was at the Makabi. Our classmates went there too. We met new people. When we were on vacation, we would go not too far to the little town in the mountains, the little lakes. We would go there with my grandma; she would bring us everywhere because my mom was always busy. She would come with us on Saturday or Sunday. I had a little cousin, who was the son of one of my aunts; it was very beautiful.

Interviewer: Did you go to a synagogue?

Herta Gerber: Yes. In Bielsko there were many. We went to the more progressive one, and a little bit more flexible about its traditions.⁸² A beautiful synagogue and I think it still exists today. And then, there were a couple more where my grandparents would go, and those were for what they believed... first of all, the Hazzan⁸³ sang very well and they liked that, and it was smaller and more private. So, we would go from one to another.

Interviewer: Would you go to the temple on every Shabbat?⁸⁴

Herta Gerber: When we were going to the Jewish school, yes. Later, I would not stay for lack of time, but you know, the school was a little bit more challenging, and since we had to go to school on Saturday, because it was a Catholic school, it became almost impossible to go. But we would go for all the festivities. And back at our house, there was Kasher.⁸⁵

Interviewer: Could you describe to me the Shabbat at home? What would your mom do?

Herta Gerber: Oh well, first of all, Friday evening was almost more important than Saturday. My grandma would prepare the challah. She would prepare such beautiful bread loaves, that when I buy it here by Garbagnati, which has very good bread loaves, well my grandma would do them even better. She would also prepare all the fish the way we liked it, in the Polish way, you know? Fish fillet... she would also make some broths that are not allowed today anymore. The first plate was always for my dad and that was always a lot of respect between her and her son-in-law. When we did the kiddush, the mozah, those are things that I remember with a lot of nostalgia because here, yeah, we could do it, but life has become a little...

Herta trails off here thinking about the food.

Interviewer: Do you remember any other festivity? For instance, Pesach?⁸⁶

Herta Gerber: Oh, it was very beautiful. We would start from the attic and collect all the dishes. The glasses with the golden edges, those were red glasses made of crystal, very beautiful, for the wine. My grandpa would prepare the wine himself, with some special raisins that he would order from a shop called Delikatessen⁸⁷ and that shop would also get stuff from foreign countries. They were light-colored raisins, not the dark kind, he would cut them into little pieces and put them in very big containers of a liter or a liter and a half. He would fill those up until a particular level, and then he would put... now I do not remember, he would put them on a little stove because back there, we had only those, but they were beautiful. He would start weeks in advance, and it had a unique smell.

⁸² Jewish communities distinguish themselves on how strictly they follow the Jewish law. While the most traditional communities follow a specific set of rules determined by the rabbis, the most progressive ones see Jewish law more as a guideline for their daily lives.

⁸³ The Hazzan is a Jewish cantor in a synagogue.

⁸⁴ Shabbat corresponds to Saturday, and it is the weekly resting day of the Jewish people.

⁸⁵ A set of dietary rules to prepare food according to the Jewish Law.

⁸⁶ Pesach, also known as Passover, is a major Jewish holiday celebrated in the spring.

⁸⁷ A shop that offers various types of food and pre-cooked meals.

Interviewer: So, everyone would celebrate Pesach?

Herta Gerber: Yes, everyone. Then I remember, and this doesn't have anything to do with the Pesach, the pickles, that we normally buy, my grandpa would put those in big barrels with some acidic little apples which would make the pickles go naturally sour. He would put the sauerkraut...because in Poland those were vegetables, there wasn't a lot to choose from... Anyway, we would make it like this because we also had a vegetable garden that would border on the river Biala, which divided Bielsko from Biala, which were two separated cities back then. In this vegetable garden, he would plant everything: vegetables, flowers. We would spend hours there when he was working, but when all the vegetables were ready, we would go there. We enjoyed it a lot.

Interviewer: So, you went to a Jewish school until when? You said that after that, you attended a public school?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we went to a cloister. So, keep in mind that it was in 1939 when the war started, and I was starting my high school diploma. So, I went to the Jewish school 5 years before that, so it was 1934.

Interviewer: Why did you change schools? Because the Jewish school was gone?

Herta Gerber: Yes, there was no Jewish school anymore. I wanted to study, but then the war started in 1939.

Interviewer: When you changed schools, did you have any problems because you were Jews? Did you hear—

Herta Gerber: Yes. My sister, who was 2 years older than me, went to public high school. The school was led by and full of people who were anti-Semites. They were all the children of officers and employees. Also, the professors—, they not only didn't have any respect but they also did not care about the Jewish students in class.

Interviewer: Did something happen in particular that you can remember?

Herta Gerber: Yes. They would refer to us using a terrible word that they would repeat almost daily... how do you say that? You know, where people who are very sick in their skin, mangy?⁸⁸ That was the word. Many Jews went back to Palestine. Well, my sister after 2 or 3 times hearing that, she hit a girl who was the daughter of an officer, someone in the military. This girl fell down the stairs, and when she went back home, she told her parents about it. The principal called my mom. My mom had already told my sister that she wasn't going back to that school. He called her and he said to her, "Do you know what your daughter did?" and she replied, "Yes. I know, she told me. Since you are not able to protect my daughter, she had to do it herself. So, I'm taking my daughter out of school." So, there was this cloister, it was a high school with a cloister, like the Marcelline and the Orsoline here. It was an Austrian one, from Vienna, Saint Hildegard, and it was a fancy school. It was kind of expensive, you know? But it was a safe school, and for the religion class, a rabbi would come. I still remember his name, Rabbi Hirschfeld. He was a rabbi with red hair, a red

⁸⁸ She is referring to the term "leper."

beard. He was the portrait of a stereotypical rabbi. He came to the school and taught where we played sports in the gym because there wasn't a crucifix there, while in the other rooms there was always one since it was a cloister. We did well there. There were also teachers of German. There was a noble lady, she was very nice, and she told us "You both speak very well, I would like for you guys to join us in the garden." She knew that the Polish people at the school didn't have an opportunity to learn this language. German is hard.

Interviewer: So, there were other Jewish girls in the cloister?

Herta Gerber: We were the majority there. Because once we transferred to the school, the others did it too. It was also dangerous to stay in the old school. I remember that my cousin was still going there... When he would get out of school, they would hit him. We needed to go and pick him up. Those were always horrible scenes. Since my sister was a little bit quicker with her hands, she was the one who always went to pick him up. With the backpack, she would punch people on the left and the right. And this was at a time when Adolf Hitler wasn't even in power. Oh, that was Poland back then. That was an innate anti-Semitism with them. And I also remember this, that our cleaning lady would go to church on Sunday. Sometimes, she would ask us, "Do you all want to come to walk around?" and we would go with her, she would bring us to church and we could hear the priest from the pulpit saying, "don't buy from the Jews," and this from the pulpit, after the homily, "because all the Jews are communist, and they should go back to Palestine." And this in Polish, you know? And guess what, they are anti-Semitic today as well, even without Jews. Hitler wasn't there yet. That was in Poland, but it originated in Russia. A pogrom. Do you know what a pogrom is, right? We experienced that in Bielsko⁸⁹, before Hitler.

Interviewer: Tell me about it.

Herta Gerber: Yes, the house in which we were at, in that square. That square was all close, except for an exit on a little narrow street. And that street, which was also called "narrow street— enge Straße." On this street, when you would take it to reach the big street, there was a tavern of a Jew. On Saturday evening, workers would go there to eat but mostly to drink. One of them got drunk and didn't want to pay. The owners of these taverns also owned weapons because they always had to deal with drunken people. So, the owner of this tavern got scared that night because of these drunk people and shot them, injuring one of them. After that, the workers gathered together outside of the restaurant, and this started the pogrom. They started to go from one house to the other to rummage. They did not come to us because the doorman of the firm blocked the little road that would face that big street.

Interviewer: How old were you when that happened?

Herta Gerber: I was born in 1929, so I was 8 or 9 years old. And I remember that, after a couple of hours, you could hear it. They started burning down things, they cut the duvets because we used them on the bed. They cut them open and all those feathers. The city was full of those things flying around. And it was a pogrom. They ruined the windows of the shops, beat up people, cut beards of those people they met on the street and could not escape. For us, it was very weird because normally

⁸⁹ The pogrom in Bielsko took place in 1937. The stores owned by Jewish citizens were boycotted, and many windows were broken.

those things happened in Russia or in those little towns close to Russia, but never in a city like Bielsko. So, with this, I want to tell you that the Polish people were perfect perpetrators also without Hitler. Hitler wasn't there yet.

Interviewer: There is something I would like to know. The summer of 1939. What did you all talk about at home? Was your dad worried?

Herta Gerber: It was terrible. I remember that my dad wanted to pack our stuff, take all we could take, and move to Israel in Palestine. He was an old Zionist, but it wasn't possible. My mom didn't want to leave her family, my grandparents. They were old already, sick, and she didn't want to leave them. And it wasn't easy. I don't remember it anymore, but in order for you to be able to go to Israel in Palestine you had to buy something, and that wasn't easy to buy. Anyhow, when the war started, close to Danzig, the Polish government called first the Jewish people to fight at the front. Look how evil they were. If you said no, they would take your citizenship away, but if someone had to die, they would send the Jewish people first and foremost. It was the Westerplatte battle, which was in Danzig. Gdańsk is the Polish name for Danzig. Hitler was taking over this piece of land. They didn't want to give up, and the first to die was a Jew, and he was the son of the Jewish family who lived in our house, Morgenstern. His older brother was able to survive. The first emigrated to Israel with a backpack, I remember. He went through Turkey, and he arrived even before the 1930s, in 1927 or 1928, he entered Palestine illegally. Then he started working on the farms, collecting oranges. He is still alive today, thank God. He is old, of course. The other brother, the youngest one, he survived too. The middle one was called to serve, and he died very soon.

Interviewer: So, your dad tried to get these visas to Palestine, but he couldn't?

Herta Gerber: Yes, he was trying but couldn't get them. And it was already late. Then we tried to leave because they were saying that Silesia was going to be occupied by the Germans because we were so close to Germany. Then my dad had this supplier who asked him to go to Warsaw and stay at his house if we wanted to get away from Bielsko. We didn't have another way to escape, and we went there.

Interviewer: When did you go to Warsaw?

Herta Gerber: In August. The first ones to leave were the children and my aunts. My dad stayed there with my mom because of my grandma. My grandpa had already passed away some years before that. My grandma was very sick. When we arrived in Warsaw, we moved into the house of my dad's supplier.

Interviewer: This was before the war, right?

Herta Gerber: It was between the last day of August and the 1st of September. The second day after we arrived, the war began. On September 1st. During the first bombing, all the glasses broke, and we slept with the windows open. The apartment had 10 rooms. My dad took the last train... all the men left Bielsko. My mom stayed with my grandma because she couldn't leave her. My dad took the last train with many other Jews. That train stopped, I think, after Krakow, it didn't go any further. All the people got off and started walking. They wanted to go to Russia. They said, "we are going toward Misrach." When my dad was still in the train, a ticket inspector came on, and at the time, they didn't sell train tickets anymore, there weren't any ticket offices anymore. He asked my

dad for the tickets and my dad replied, “look, no one on the train has a ticket, that is why I don’t have it. And they said this train was to evacuate the area, so no ticket was needed.” The ticket inspector said, “No, no, you will now come with me to the station.” And they started walking through the woods, and my dad thought that he was about to get killed, to get robbed and killed. He had a lot of money with him because he didn’t know where he was going to end up at. But then, after a while, he let him go into the woods. After crossing through the woods, my dad arrived at a highway. But there were no cars. After a while, a car passed by, and then my dad went in the middle of that street— and this was what he told us when he arrived in Warsaw— He went into the middle of the street to stop the car. He saw that in the car there were two Polish officers, and they asked my dad what he wanted? My dad spoke Polish very well and said to them, “I’m fleeing because I was afraid to be caught by the Germans. I’m going to Warsaw because my family is there.” And they replied, “Look, we can take you for a little bit on this road, but then we have to go another way.” They were very nice, and they took him. Later, my dad tried to take another train that was still working. Anyway, he made it to Warsaw. When he got to our place, Orla Street 6, which means “the eagle,” he rang the bell, and we went to look out of the window because we were afraid. We saw an old man with a beard and who was messy. We didn’t want to open the door, but then he started screaming, “Open, open, it is me, it is dad!” For me it was... I had left not very long before that day and what did the man become? A part of it was fear, what he experienced, and then the trip to Warsaw. Anyway, a part of our family was there but we didn’t have any news from my mom. We didn’t have phones or stuff like that. So, we decided to go back, me, my aunt, and my little cousin. We arrived at the border between occupied Poland and Germany, we bought a magazine for my cousin, so he could read and hide himself behind it because he didn’t look German at all. Anyway, we made it to Bielsko. It was already very late at night, and we moved like robbers, and we went home. The same thing happened with my mom. She didn’t want to open the door. My grandma had already passed away and she was home alone. She was getting ready to leave because she had rented a place in Auschwitz. The Germans were saying that by the 25th of December Bielsko had to become Aryan, with no Jews. And she didn’t know what to do. She said, “I didn’t have any news from you all in Warsaw, how could I find you without any contact?” So, she rented an apartment in Auschwitz.

Interviewer: Why exactly in Auschwitz?

Herta Gerber: Because they said it was a beautiful city. My dad would go there very often, he had customers there— doctors, dentists, technicians. My mom also had good memories of Auschwitz. It was a nice city and there were Jews there. She thought that she could be together with other Jews. When she saw us that night, she almost fainted.

Interviewer: Then what happened?

Herta Gerber: We went back to Warsaw but when the Germans arrived, we started to look for ways to leave. We discovered that there were some consuls that were selling some passports. They had made a business out of it. The only one who was giving out passports for free, and we discovered that later, was the Italian consul. They would also try to find some Italian ancestors for the people who applied and gave them an emergency passport because in war times one could do that without asking the country for permission. We took the passports and citizenship from Nicaragua, which were 25,000 dollars in gold. We went to the Italian consulate in Warsaw to get a visa with this Nicaraguan passport, and I remember that there was a very long line. We had the only passport that could get the visa immediately, the others had to wait. I went there with my sister, and

they asked us where we wanted to go, what we were going to do in Italy. What we planned to say was that we wanted to do some health treatments with sand, close to Trieste. And they said to us, "You can get a visa for a year." It cost 6 liras, but at first, we didn't have the money for it. So, we borrowed some money and we got it.

Interviewer: Before we move on, could you tell me how was it in Warsaw, how did you get around, what was happening?

Herta Gerber: Warsaw was... and I don't know if you can call it "a life." So, it was impossible to find anything. Warsaw was terribly destroyed, especially in the parts of the ghetto because the bombing lasted one month, and during that month, the sirens there did not help us much. They also did not let us use the Polish shelters. They would not even let us come down. I remember very well that in the house where we were staying, the backyard was like a graveyard. There were last-minute graves of people killed...we could see the pilots above us. We would go down to the street holding our hands, my dad, my sister, my cousin, and my aunts. Sometimes, there was fire, and the ashes would burn our hair when we were standing against the wall because they would not let us inside. In the shelter, they would let the horses in, and the soldiers that had escaped, they were the first there. Those were the Polish heroes. The food situation was terrible, we could not find anything, not even with money.

Interviewer: Were you obligated to wear the star?

Herta Gerber: That happened later. They started distributing the food on the street. My aunt and I decided to go down to pick up some bread at least. The porter told the police about us, but luckily, the person in charge of controlling the lines was a soldier of the Wehrmacht, he came to us and asked me in German "Sind Sie Jüdin?" (Are you Jewish?). If that had happened today, I would have been smarter about it and said "no" to be able to save myself, but at the time I was afraid and I said "yes." And he said to me, "We can't give food to Jews, you know, but take it today." He was more generous than that pig Polish guy. So, life was becoming impossible. If you went around on the street, you could hear how they were taking people away, especially men. Then we saw that they started to isolate some streets, there were some bricks piled up, and we started wondering what those were for. We thought that maybe they wanted to fortify the walls, so they didn't fall. Nobody realized at the time that those were for the ghetto. Anyway, one day we were able to get all our papers and we left. There weren't any stations anymore in Warsaw, everything had been destroyed. In the middle of the road, there were the rails, and we got on the train there. We were the only passengers on the train. One can only imagine how scary that was. We were traveling in the direction of the Brenner, and then we arrived in Trieste.

Interviewer: Could you enter Italy with your documents?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we had an Italian visa. We got off the train and we asked where the Jewish community was because in order for us to leave... we could only have ten Deutsche Mark. So, we asked for help in Trieste and they told us that we could sleep in the temple. It was well organized because there were already people and cot beds. We heard at the shelter that they were trying to do an illegal "Aliyah," so we tried to contact our relatives in London through the Red Cross. We sent them a message saying that we were trying to get to London and if they could, send us some money. They got the message and through the Red Cross again we got the money. We paid.... I don't remember how much anymore, we paid for a transport that was still illegal back then. We had to go

to Siracusa to board and we were like 300 people that wanted to board this train that ended up in Benghazi, you know?

Interviewer: So, how long did you stay in the temple?

Herta Gerber: One month. Then we tried to find a house, and we rented a small apartment, and we were waiting for the right moment to go to Israel. They made us do some physical exercises because they were saying that the ship wasn't arriving at the port, but they would put us in boats and then let us arrive at the boat swimming. Can you believe that? My mom and my dad swimming. We attempted it somehow.

Interviewer: So, you left from where?

Herta Gerber: Trieste.

Interviewer: How did you get to Siracusa?

Herta Gerber: By train. We all had visas. We were in Italy. And I think that the other people as well were traveling without problems.

Interviewer: Who else was trying to board this ship in Siracusa?

Herta Gerber: There were people from everywhere. From Germany, the majority from Poland.

Interviewer: How much did it cost per person? Do you know?

Herta Gerber: It was a lot of money, but I don't remember anymore. However, my mom was very farsighted. She left the money with one person from Bielsko that was with us. He was a good person that we knew for many years and he said, "As soon as we set foot on board, we have to hand over the money." That is why my mom could get her money back. And this person that we knew gave the money back to us. That money was very useful because in Bengazi we were staying at a hotel instead of going... it was a good amount of money, but I don't remember now how much.

Interviewer: So, you boarded the ship in Siracusa. Did you stay a couple of days in Siracusa?

Herta Gerber: No, no. As soon as we got off the train, we boarded the ship. We could not even stay. The majority of the people had just the amount of money for the trip.

Interviewer: The crew of the ship was Italian?

Herta Gerber: Yes, they were Italian.

Interviewer: And the first stop was Benghazi?

Herta Gerber: Yes, the boat brought us to Benghazi. They allowed us to get off the ship and we were all happily waiting [to continue the journey] but then June 10th arrived, and they arrested us all. We were staying at a hotel like a lot of other people when they arrested us. Actually, if I remember

correctly, I think that everybody went to a hotel. They brought us somewhere between Derna and Barce, in the desert. A police station in the desert. I mean, there were things around, because if there was a police station, there must be something else as well. We could not leave but once a week, we could go back to Benghazi to buy some stuff.

Interviewer: Who arrested you?

Herta Gerber: The Italians, because we were Jews, so they arrested us. They could not have done that with the nationalities because Nicaragua wasn't at war against Italy. Even when we were still Polish, they arrested my husband not because Poland was at war, but because he was Jewish.

Interviewer: So, they caught you and how did they transfer you to the police station?

Herta Gerber: With trucks.

Interviewer: Did they not separate you from your mom and dad?

Herta Gerber: No, no, we stayed together at the police station. And that police station was a brick house, but there weren't... there were some showers but only for some hours during the day. There was not much water there to begin with. So, the rest... they gave us food there.

Interviewer: So, you were locked there like prisoners?

Herta Gerber: Yes, and outside there wasn't anything. There was only sand. Where could I have gone? Once a week we could leave, I remember there were those trucks, and once in Benghazi, there were some Jews, poor ones, and they were all in line, one with a can of anchovies, one with some lemons or some other fruits, tuna, all stuff that they would give us. And then for Friday evening, they would invite us to their house to eat.

Interviewer: So, you could visit these families on Friday?

Herta Gerber: Yes. We would all sit down on the floor like it was normal there. They gave us little chairs because they understood that it was hard for us; for them it wasn't. They were good people. Also, they would drink a type of liquor, you know, that was supposed to be good against mosquitos. And if you think that the smallest thing, they got trachoma. When we discovered that we started to worry because they were good people. And to live with this disease. They would give us that liquor, it was strong, and my sister, she had problems with strong things, and she started to cough. So, our friend told her, "So, Lili, turn around, put your hand back and throw it away, so they think you drank it." I still remember that. They would give us couscous, it was delicious. They would cook lamb, and when I was eating it, I had to close my nose because I did not like it. I didn't like either lamb or goat. I did not like that wild taste. Anyway, they were good people, very good people.

Interviewer: And then after dinner, you would go back to the police station?

Herta Gerber: Yes, yes, to the police station. And we could not sleep anywhere else.

Interviewer: Was there a certain time you needed to go back or how did that work?

Herta Gerber: No, no. We were free at the police station. We would go around, we were free, and we did not even have a reason to leave. Also, we were in a country in which we didn't speak the language. Yes, they spoke Italian, but it was everything new for us.

Interviewer: Did anyone get beaten?

Herta Gerber: No, no. From the side of the Italians, I can say, there was a lot of humanity.

Interviewer: Did they interrogate you?

Herta Gerber: No, nothing. They told us that they would bring us back to Italy. They did not mention any prison or concentration camp. They told us that Mussolini wanted us back in Italy because where we were would become a battleground. Maybe he was right because they conquered it and lost it right after that like three times with the British. So, we left Benghazi...I think it was still 1940.

Interviewer: Where did you all go and when was it?

Herta Gerber: We arrived in Naples in September on a ship called *Esperia*. The *Esperia* wasn't a very big ship, and we went through much hardship on that ship. There were raids from the side of the British around Malta. So, I don't know which way we went through, but the sirens went off two or three times. We were without any light, standing still with people screaming, the children were screaming.

Interviewer: Was it a military ship?

Herta Gerber: Yes, it became part of the navy. And we were staying at the bottom of the ship.

Interviewer: Were there children with you?

Herta Gerber: Yes, there were also children with us... . When we arrived in Naples, they brought us in groups to the prison. Outside, some people were looking at us because we looked like we were all handcuffed. People started asking about us in Naples, and they said, "Jews, Jews!" But they did not know what we actually were. Then they throw us oranges, chocolate, some money.

Interviewer: How long was the journey?

Herta Gerber: It lasted a night. For us, it felt like a very long time, you can definitely believe that. Then, we arrived all dazed because the ship would stop once in a while. They did not want to go very fast. Anyway, it was a terrible journey!

Interviewer: So, you said that you were handcuffed when you were going to prison, right? They let you leave the ship and then they handcuffed you?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we were all tied up together. When we got off the ship, they brought us to Poggioreale.⁹⁰ They also told us that there were some of those trucks that they use still today to transport prisoners going to court, for instance. Those were pretty big busses, and they brought us slowly to the station.

Interviewer: Was there someone that was translating for you? How did you understand what they told you?

Herta Gerber: Some people spoke Italian and helped us understand. And that was easier for us, and also safer. You know, someone you don't know can translate what they want. But these people were also involved; they were also Jews. They escorted us to the station and then we got on the train, and we traveled for very long time. It was a long journey from Naples to Ferramonti di Tarsia.

Interviewer: Did you stay in Poggioreale before travelling to Ferramonti?

Herta Gerber: Yes, and it was the pinnacle because it shocked me so much...today, I have asthma but there, even without asthma, just seeing those windows, so... it wasn't a window, it was a hole that went down and you had to look up through a slit, and that was the window.

Interviewer: Did they separate you? From your parents?

Herta Gerber: Yes. But not from my parents. They separated me because of my age, I was underage. The women on one side, the men on another side. And that was terrible because my mom was used to being with my dad and there it was impossible. Then, the one who was translating for us, she was really sadistic. My mom wouldn't feel well during the night and to get anything like a tranquilizer we had to scream. I did not even know about this tranquilizer. I just saw my mom like that.

Interviewer: How many were in your cell? Did they put you in cells?

Herta Gerber: Yes, in the cells. We were four to a cell. I was with the young people, my mom, my sister, and someone else but I don't remember who she was. So, I was with them, so three people. And my dad was on the other side.

Interviewer: Where were you?

Herta Gerber: I was upstairs with other children. Then I asked if I could rejoin my family and they were like, no, but if you do so, you will give up the food. They gave herrings to the children in the morning.

Interviewer: So, you were the oldest among those children?

Herta Gerber: Yes. But there weren't only Jewish children, there were also other convicted children.

⁹⁰ Poggio Reale is a neighborhood of Naples in southern Italy.

Interviewer: So, the Jewish children were together with the other children?

Herta Gerber: Yes, and it wasn't a cell. It was a room because we were all underage.

Interviewer: So, it was like a nursery?

Herta Gerber: Yes, like a nursery.

Interviewer: How many were there of you?

Herta Gerber: Twenty, maybe. But not all the children were from our group. There were young people too, some of them older, some of them underage, but there weren't many. And why were they keeping us there? Because Ferramonti's barracks weren't ready yet. They could not find another way to keep the people if not in that prison. For the air.

Interviewer: What did they tell all of you? Did they keep you there without saying anything?

Herta Gerber: They told us that we had to go back to Germany. They told us that. But they had another plan. One day they told us, "We are leaving today" and to where? To a concentration camp. Where? They said it was in Calabria. So, they loaded us on a track and brought us to the station.

Interviewer: Was that in the morning or the evening?

Herta Gerber: I think it was in the morning.

Interviewer: So, people could see you?

Herta Gerber: Yes, of course, and they also asked why we were all handcuffed? And there too, some people brought oranges, I will always remember that. And from their faces you could see that they were afraid because they were seeing women and children. The journey took a while. It was a little train. And when we arrived at the camp, there wasn't a station in the Ferramonti concentration camp, the station was called "Ferramonti-Scalo," and the train stopped there. The director of the camp arrived in his car. I remember the car did not have a roof, and he would carry the women. The rest would go with the tracks. He was nice to us. He was an ex-superintendent from Salerno who became the director. I can't remember his name. He was nice, a good person. In general, everyone was good to us.

Interviewer: Was he from the military, from the carabinieri or the police?⁹¹

Herta Gerber: From the police. All of them. There was one among them, his name was Formica, this I remember. He went with my father-in-law. Back then he wasn't yet my father-in-law, to Milan by train because he had a 3-or-4-day permit to go visit.... the mother and the 3 sisters were free in Milan. They took only him and his dad, can you believe that? This man received presents from the family because my mother-in-law was trying to become a friend of him, but he was a good guy. He behaved himself humanly.

⁹¹ The Carabinieri are the national gendarmerie of Italy who carry out domestic policing duties.

Interviewer: Do you remember the date when you arrived in Ferramonti?

Herta Gerber: It must have been in September or October, around that time.

Interviewer: So, it was around your birthday, you were turning 17 years old?

Herta Gerber: Yes, my birthday was on September 23rd, but it wasn't an important thing back then. It was more important to know what was about to happen to us. When we arrived in Ferramonti a new world opened to us, you know? Of course, with some limitations.

Interviewer: Could you describe it to me? Describe Ferramonti, how was it? What did you think when you arrived? What did you see?

Herta Gerber: A stretch of land and behind it there were some hills. It was so quiet, and coming from a place such as a prison, full of people. It was also relaxing for your nerves. When they assigned us our little apartment, there were two little rooms, one for my parents, a little kitchen, and outside there were the shared toilets.

Interviewer: So, you were able to be reunited with your family, right? With your dad and your sister.

Herta Gerber: Yes.

Interviewer: Did other people also get these family apartments?

Herta Gerber: Yes, all the families did.

Interviewer: Was the apartment made with brick walls or with wood? You called them barracks.

Herta Gerber: No, they weren't made with brick walls. They were made of concrete. They were white and [we thought them] clean. Because after what we went through in prison, with lice and bedbugs, it was brutal.

Interviewer: Did you arrive with your clothes? Did you still have your dress?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we had our stuff or what was remaining because the train, departing from Warsaw, we had 18 bags. We had all that stuff. When we arrived at the border with the Netherlands, they refused us, the Dutch people. But those were people at the border, so they were more German than Dutch. That is why it was written as "nicht zulassen," "don't trespass." And we had the tickets until London, we bought them, and it was supposed to be only a transit. Anyway, these bags were also sent to Rotterdam, and they stayed there together. We paid so much for the storage space, so many pounds, for 4 years. Schenker is not a joke.⁹² Anyway, even from the affectional value, we had some important things.

Interviewer: So, you lost all your 17 bags?

⁹² Schenker is a division of German rail operator Deutsche Bahn AG that provides shipping and logistics services.

Herta Gerber: No, no. Those were sent away. They left us on the train. I remember what happened to my cousin before crossing the border between Germany and the Netherlands. They told him “jump you bastard Jew so that we can find gold coins.” But, you can imagine, we did not have anything with us. The Germans even took my mom’s wedding ring away from her hand. You mentioned our bags, we had the necessities for every day.

Interviewer: Did they give you some clothes there? How did they welcome you? Did they give you this family barracks, did they also give you some clothes, some blankets?

Herta Gerber: Oh well, we had some clothes with us because in Benghazi we bought some stuff before getting arrested. We had the money. We did not have much but to get changed, it was enough.

Interviewer: What did they do in Ferramonti? Did they register your names? Did they interrogate you?

Herta Gerber: Yes, there were all our papers, our vaccines record against malaria, that did not work very well. We had a salary of 3 lire per day, and the men 5, the wives 2. Look, so much money.⁹³ It was enough to do grocery shopping, to buy food.

Interviewer: Tell me how it was organized. You had your own kitchen then?

Herta Gerber: Yes, each one of us had our own.

Interviewer: And your mom did the cooking?

Herta Gerber: Yes, she did. She would go grocery shopping to buy food in a shop there. I remember that there was an engineer working there that was in charge of accounting as well. He told me, “If you (formal)” I mean “you” (informal) because I was still a child, “if you need anything.” I remember, his name was Tassani, the director there, “I will get you what you need.”⁹⁴ He was very nice.

Interviewer: And this shop, did you work there?

Herta Gerber: Yes, I did, at the register.

Interviewer: Who decided which jobs would one do in the camp?

Herta Gerber: You would ask for it. We were the first to arrive, you know. So, we had more possibilities. We were almost 2,000 or 3,000 people, 2,500 you know? The shop had a great selection of food. My sister worked at the tobacco shop, and her partner... So, she worked in the part that did

⁹³ She is being sarcastic here.

⁹⁴ Italian distinguishes between an informal you (tu), usually used among friends and family, and a formal you (Lei), used in formal contexts.

not sell food. So, in a haberdashery. They sold soap and stuff like that. He was a doctor, and he would sell tobacco, the shop was divided into two parts.

Interviewer: So, you were also in charge of selling stuff.

Herta Gerber: Yes, that is correct.

Interviewer: Where did the stuff to sell come from?

Herta Gerber: It arrived from the towns that were close to the camp. The dealers would come in, we got bread every day.

Interviewer: Did you buy the stuff with the money you got daily?

Herta Gerber: Yes, with that money.

Interviewer: Was that enough?

Herta Gerber: Oh well, not always. It depended on what you ate. If you had bread and onions, yes. But we had some money on the side. And I worked, so I had a salary. I don't remember anymore how much it was.

Interviewer: The jobs were all paid?

Herta Gerber: Yes, they were.

Interviewer: Was your sister at the haberdashery paid too?

Herta Gerber: Yes, my sister too.

Interviewer: Who was in charge of paying the salaries?

Herta Gerber: The administration. There were administration offices in the camp. There was a secretary, a director, and an engineer... what was his name? He was a good person. He was the one who designed the camp, he built it, and then he controlled the camp overall.

Interviewer: So, you said that there were barracks for families and then barracks for men only, right?

Herta Gerber: For men only, yes.

Interviewer: And the toilettes were outside?

Herta Gerber: Yes, for everybody. Some barracks had one toilet. And for us that lived in the family area, there were some houses with the toilets.

Interviewer: Was there water?

Herta Gerber: Yes, there was water, but we had water in the house too to shower.

Interviewer: And power?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we had power too.

Interviewer: Was the camp surrounded by barbed wire?

Herta Gerber: Yes, there was a fence, but it wasn't an electric fence. There were some guards that would call out our names, they would come to the barracks, so we did not have to go out. They would count us to see if everybody was there.

Interviewer: And this would happen every morning?

Herta Gerber: Yes, they did it in the morning, and they would also come inside our house. We would leave the door open. It was a friendly relationship. The people from the black market would come too, they would bring eggs inside the camp through the fence. And I remember that my father-in-law would go with a little trolley to bring watermelons. He got diarrhea once because of all that watermelon. And sometimes we went bathing because there was a river there.

Interviewer: Could you go outside?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we could go outside with an administrator. They would come with the people that wanted to swim in the river too. We could hear the bombing sometimes. We were at the opposite side of Crotone, and Crotone was bombed all the time because it had a port. The sky would turn red in Ferramonti and you could see it on the other side.

Interviewer: Could you move freely inside the camp?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we could. They even built a soccer field, and they would play some matches. So, the Polish Jews would play against the German Jews. My husband was one of the few who had football shoes because he used to play soccer in Budapest as a reserve for the national team.

Interviewer: Tell me when you met him because you are already talking about your husband, but I did not hear that story about when you met this beautiful guy. You met him in Ferramonti, right?

Herta Gerber: Oh yes, I met him in Ferramonti. As soon as we came in, on the first day, he was playing table tennis. They had put a table between two trees, and he was playing table tennis.

Interviewer: He was in the camp already for a couple of days, right?

Herta Gerber: Yes. So, he was there... he was a month in San Vittore. He was already there, he had been already in another "confine," in Campagna di Eboli, and from there, he was sent to Ferramonti.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ "Confino" was the confinement on a small island or in a small village usually in southern Italy that the fascist regime used as a punishment for the opponents of the regime, Jews, and homosexuals.

Interviewer: So, you met him on your first day at the camp?

Herta Gerber: Yes, on the first day. His uncle, who was in our group, was saying that he was sent to a camp and if he was in this camp, he had to see him. So, he introduced me to him.

Interviewer: So, there were Jews from different parts?

Herta Gerber: Yes, Polish, Germans, some French, but not many. The majority were Polish and Czechoslovaks, and Hungarian Jews. In the transport that got my husband there, there were people who recently graduated from medical school. They all got there, and my brother-in-law was there too. He is not with us anymore. He wasn't able to take the state exam while he was there; he took it after the war.

Interviewer: So, what were you supposed to do all day?

Herta Gerber: We were free to do whatever. There were schools, kindergartens, there was an infirmary, there was a theater; they had concerts. We lived a life that was very culturally active.

Interviewer: I heard there was a temple there too.

Herta Gerber: Yes, there was. My sister got married there.

Interviewer: Oh, there was a rabbi there?

Herta Gerber: Yes, there was, Rabbi Adler. But the strange thing was that this rabbi, after marrying my sister, after a while he said, "I'm not authorized, maybe your marriage is not valid because I'm not fully authorized." My sister was so sad, she said to me, "What should I do now?" and I said to her, "You will just get married again with another rabbi." She had all the papers anyway.

Interviewer: And this fist wedding, did your sister get a family barrack or what happened with her and her husband?

Herta Gerber: Yes, yes. He came to stay with us. They put him with us.

Interviewer: I see. Is there anything else you remember that you would like to tell me about?

Herta Gerber: Oh, well. Life there became slowly normal. We were sort of ok with that, we didn't feel like prisoners anymore. We didn't stay that much there to begin with, a total of 18 months. We also asked to be moved up north to stay in confino.

Interviewer: Alright, could you explain this to me? So, you asked to be transferred to where?

Herta Gerber: Only married people. That means people that had family members. And this included my husband because he had his father with him. He wasn't alone. Since he wanted to go north to stay close to his mother, we asked to be transferred close to Bergamo.

Interviewer: So, you chose Bergamo?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we did. Also, the family of my husband was there, in Milan. And Milan and Bergamo aren't very far. So, we moved north

Interviewer: When did you leave Ferramonti?

Herta Gerber: In the spring.

Interviewer: Was it hard to get permission to be transferred?

Herta Gerber: Not at all, it was something fairly common. They proposed it, so, I think they needed to have fewer people in there too since we were constantly getting new people. And so, we arrived at Bergamo. He had to go around a little bit.

Interviewer: Which restrictions did you have? Did you have to stay in a particular place?

Herta Gerber: No, you had to rent a place and once a week, on Sunday, you had to go and show up at the carabinieri station. This was the only obligation that we had. They would give us money there too. And that was it. We couldn't go far without permission, outside of Bergamo.

Interviewer: Did you have your ids?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we did. We had our ids. We were living well.

Interviewer: How did you settle in Bergamo? Did you find a place?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we did. We found a place. We couldn't work though. My brother-in-law was working illegally as a veterinarian. He would go to the farmers, he was very friendly, and a lot of farmers got to know him. So, they asked him "why don't you come to check on our animals?" They paid him with eggs, milk, a chicken sometimes.

Interviewer: Did you listen to the radio? Did you get any news about the war?

Herta Gerber: Yes. While there, we managed to have a very nice group of friends, because the people there were curious about us and wanted to get to know us. And we ended up meeting a lot of families that were on our side, that means against our oppressors. We would listen to "London Radio." The priest was a very good person, you know? That priest, Giuseppe Bravi, he was a very... a real priest from the farmland, not like a priest from a big city that wants luxury. This priest had very old shoes on. Back then, they didn't get any stipend. His sister would provide for him. He would preach in the morning to a big group of very conservative women who were all about the church and he would say to them, "It doesn't make any sense that you come here to pray if you don't do any good deeds. I have to feed five people. Don't ask me who they are, but if you can bring something, I would really appreciate that." For instance, for Pesah... he knew when we had Pesah because of his books... he told us, "Look, now you can't eat bread anymore." It was very moving. He remained our friend even during the raids, he helped us go hide in the mountains, in the barns. And then, when we came back, we would give him something. When my brother-in-law would come, he would bring him stuff, he would buy stuff for him to help him out. But all the people from there helped us. That is the reason why we decided to stay in Italy. My husband, with his job, he

could have gone everywhere. But money isn't everything. To have nice and caring people around that are willing to help you is also important. I think things have changed though today.

Interviewer: Where did you live in Bergamo?

Herta Gerber: In Crusone.⁹⁶ It is a very beautiful town. Then my husband got transferred to Gandino.⁹⁷ And that was even better because the people there were even more helpful. We still have a very good relationship with the people that are still there. A lot of them have passed away.

Interviewer: What happened in July with the fall of the fascist regime?

Herta Gerber: Oh well, when that happened... so, you are talking about the time before? You are talking about Badoglio,⁹⁸ right?

Interviewer: Yes.

Herta Gerber: People started saying that the war had ended. My dad kept saying that he wouldn't leave his hiding place because he was scared. Then a very sad period started. They told us to get all our money.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, because you were still getting the money, right?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we were. So, he told us, "Take your money now because I don't know if you will be able to pick it up later. It is better that you leave and go hide in the mountains. They have already asked to see the list of all the Jews." Then, we went to our friends, yeah, in the meanwhile, we became very close friends. We went to Rovetta, where there was that priest, and we lived in a storage room with furniture in it, left by an emigrant that left for Switzerland. This was in the middle of the town, on a hard floor. And we lived there until 1945 because it was hard to go up in the mountains with our parents that couldn't speak Italian. We younger people could have done that. That situation was very sad. My dad never went out, my mom too. I would go around in the evening. I had a bike, it was a present from my husband a "Bianchi"⁹⁹ bike, it was heavy, but it was a good one. I would ride back to Crusone, to our former landlord, who was the president of the society of San Vincent,¹⁰⁰ and she would receive the ration cards because we didn't have them anymore. And with these cards, we were able to go grocery shopping. I would give the list to someone and they would buy the stuff. Once, when I was going there, the carabinieri stopped me. I had a backpack with me. So, one of them could write, the other could read...¹⁰¹ In the end, one was carrying my bike, and the other was talking to me. Then I told them, "Now I have to go because my boyfriend is waiting for me." Then they looked at me and said, "Your boyfriend is very young then,"

⁹⁶ Crusone is a town in the province of Bergamo.

⁹⁷ Gandino is a town in the province of Bergamo.

⁹⁸ Marshal Pietro Badoglio was an Italian general during both World Wars and the first viceroy of Italian East Africa. With the fall of the Fascist regime in Italy, he became prime minister of Italy.

⁹⁹ "Bianchi" is an Italian bicycle company and the world's oldest bicycle manufacturing company.

¹⁰⁰ The Society of St Vincent de Paul is an international voluntary organization in the Catholic Church, founded in 1833 for the sanctification of its members by personal service of the poor.

¹⁰¹ She is trying here to tell a joke about the Carabinieri.

and I replied, “Oh yes,” and I left. They wouldn’t do me any harm because there were good people but that was during the curfew. But I went out anyway. I wore a black shawl like the farmers. I had a fake ID with a fake name “Baradelli.” “Giulia Baradelli.” I was able to give a fake ID to my husband too. A friend of my brother-in-law was a partisan, and they were able to get fake documents. Giovanni Battista Nodari, who was way older than my husband.

Interviewer: And what happened after September 8, 1943¹⁰²?

Herta Gerber: After September 8, 1943, things went bad because they did raids more often. The SS were all around.

Interviewer: Who gave you the information? The priest?

Herta Gerber: Yes, the priest. And there were also some farmers with the radio that tried to get the news. It was bad because we knew that the people could turn us in... people were also instructed to hand over every Jew for 10,000 liras, and that was a lot back then. Once a marshal came with a pickup truck to get us, but they did not find us. Then, he went to the priest asking, “You don’t know where these people are?” and the priest replied, “Oh, they left, they went to Switzerland, they crossed the border and left.” We were able to escape, and that happened on other occasions too. We had to change locations multiple times because the raids in the mountains were awful. My mom wasn’t feeling well in the hay, and there were rats, there weren’t that bad, but those were rats anyway.

Interviewer: So, you changed locations often?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we did. In the morning, we ate chestnuts. My dad would cut and cook them. It looked like... I wouldn’t say a picnic, but more like military training. The time wouldn’t go fast enough. And the war came closer and closer. It was getting more and more dangerous because there were so many fascists close to where we were hiding. We also feared that people would report us. Not everyone is a good person. But on liberation day...

Interviewer: Oh, tell me about it...

Herta Gerber: That morning, I was going to the mountains to buy milk with a friend who knew the way there. When I came back, they said, “The war has ended!” We ran home and my dad refused to go out for two days until the priest arrived and told him. “Look, it has ended, let’s go and see Mussolini hanging!” and he told us “Come with me!” He was a captain of the Bersaglieri.¹⁰³ He took a cart with a horse and we went to Milan— my sister, the priest, and myself. When we arrived at Loreto Square,¹⁰⁴ it was incredible. I saw a woman spitting on him, she had lost two sons. There were people screaming. It was terrible, I was disgusted in the sense that it wasn’t humane anymore.

¹⁰² On 8 September 1943, the Badoglio Proclamation by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, Italian head of government, announced that the Cassibile armistice between Italy and the Allies signed on September 3 had come into force.

¹⁰³ The Bersaglieri are a special unit of the Italian Army infantry corps.

¹⁰⁴ Piazzale Loreto is a major town square in Milan, Italy. The body of Mussolini was taken to Milan and left in the Piazzale Loreto for a large angry crowd to insult and physically abuse.

But those people suffered terrible things and I don't know how they managed to survive. It was raining that day. We went back and the priest said, "I'm happy. I saw the end of that criminal." He wasn't a communist or a partisan, but he led a patrol that killed sixteen members from the Muti group.¹⁰⁵ Those were fascist, very young boys, fifteen, sixteen years old. They killed them in the cemetery in Rovetta, we could hear the shots from our place. And the priest said that it was the right thing to do because they hanged so many people in the square. They would leave the bodies hanging for three days so that people could watch. They committed relentless slaughter, burned down entire towns, they cut the hair of those women who collaborated with the Germans. My husband sold two wigs to two women that got their hair cut. They asked him because he had relatives in Milan. He didn't know it was for that. They asked him to bring wigs used in the theater and he had some with curls. So, stuff like that, and when you talk about them, it seems like you are telling jokes.

Interviewer: After the liberation, did you still stay in the little town, or what did you do?

Herta Gerber: Well, after the liberation, we tried to go to Milan. My fiancé and I wanted to see if we could get married and if he could start working. And we wanted to have a home, that was a big deal. Where else could I have gone? There was an office in the square... what was its name? Do you know where Case Rotte street is at? In the city center, Scala Square. There is also the native home of ... oh, he was a writer... there is a restaurant there.

Interviewer: Manzoni?¹⁰⁶

Herta Gerber: Yes, exactly! In that house, there was the office for those houses that had been seized. We went there. Those houses were now free, so we could have one of them. There was an accountant, Basola, he was also from the community, he said to us, "Wait, I will try to help you and give you an address." Close to the main station, in Vivaldi Street... we were always among musicians, there was a little villa of an ex-fascist... of a fascist, he was in a concentration camp. The accountant told us, "I could give you that one." And we said, "Ok, but if there is stuff inside?" And he replied, "You take the stuff down in the basement, and you put your stuff there." I didn't have any furniture, so I said "ok." We did that. Until we get a new house, we can use the bedroom. I gathered some Jews to get a full house. I went on Unione Street.

Interviewer: What was there on Unione Street?

Herta Gerber: I got married there. There was the Scalchi building, back then it was not really like a police station, but the temple was there, where I got married. There was a nurse and the infirmary. Some years ago, the nurse who was in charge of everything died. There were also a lot of people that had news, you could get there to get information. There was a tobacco market, the black market. Then I gathered a group of people. There was this family, the Weiss family, they had two children. I asked them, "Do you want to come and live with us?" It was for free. It was just to fill the house. But then, how did they pay me back... but this is another story. There was also a boy who was able to survive Auschwitz with his brother. He saved his brother and did all he could to keep him alive.

¹⁰⁵ The autonomous Legion Ettore Muti was a fascist military group which was active in the area of Milan and Cuneo.

¹⁰⁶ Alessandro Manzoni is one of the most famous Italian writers of the 19th century.

He died here because of the after-effects. His name was Bernhard, I don't remember his last name anymore.

Interviewer: What about your parents? Where were they?

Herta Gerber: They were still in Crusone. We were in Milan without a house, and I would go back and forth. When I gathered enough people for the house because I didn't want to have a villa and live like a princess in there. The house had a beautiful garden with a lot of fruit. In the nights, people would come inside and steal the persimmons, and I had to pay the owners. We became friends with them, they were fascists. I explained to them that we didn't take anything, we went in because we didn't have a house. We became friends.

Interviewer: You got married in December, right?

Herta Gerber: Yes, yes, I did. And in the meantime, I would go back and forth to Crusone to see my parents.

Interviewer: Who married you?

Herta Gerber: Friedenthal. My sister left, and my parents did Aliyah too. They went first to Cinecittà,¹⁰⁷ because from there, there were also the transportations to Israel. They lived for one year in a place made of tin until the stuff from London arrived. The furniture and money. Then they bought a little villa, and they started living like they were used to.

Interviewer: And you decided to stay in Milan with your husband?

Herta Gerber: Yes, I stayed in Milan with my husband. He is a fur trader. It was hard at the beginning because there wasn't any material, so he had to work with very low-quality items. The goats were in terrible condition because of the war. They were barely standing. We bought a car and I learned how to sew. We had to start our life again. Before the war, he imported the goods. He was a supplier and fur trader. It was a tradition in his family, his dad, his granddad. He started to go back to London and in the meanwhile, we rented a house in Piave Avenue, because the fascists came back and wanted their houses back. I wasn't happy about it because of the area. It was the area of the railway workers. They got together and built houses. And I wanted to be able to go to the city center. So, we first rented an apartment on Piave Avenue where my husband kept the goods.

Interviewer: What else would you like to talk about from that time?

Herta Gerber: When our daughter was born, life was good again. They say that every child brings luck. I regret the fact that I did not have any other children after that. Those were hard times when the war ended, there wasn't much of anything and you could not do much, you are limited. Italy was ruined. Anyway, I'm happy and my daughter did better than me, she had two children.

¹⁰⁷ Cinecittà Studios is a large film studio in Rome. With an area of 400,000 square meters, it is the largest film studio in Europe, and is considered the hub of Italian cinema. The studios were constructed during the Fascist era as part of a plan to revive the Italian film industry

Interviewer: What is the name of your daughter?

Herta Gerber: Barbara.

Interviewer: After the war, did you join the Jewish community again, did you go to the temple?

Herta Gerber: Yes, we did.

Interviewer: Did your daughter go the Jewish school?

Herta Gerber: Yes, until graduation. She also kept out Jewish traditions in her family.

Interviewer: When did your daughter get married?

Herta Gerber: I don't remember. So, Isabel was born in 1974, so she got married in 1970... 1971, I don't remember. She married a very good man. We love him like he would be our son. Steven Sassoon, he comes from a good Jewish family.

Interviewer: Then the grandchildren were born...

Herta Gerber: Yes, the grandchildren were born. Isabel in 1974, and Paul in 1976. Isabel is in Israel. She came to visit for Easter, to spend time with us. She went to school, she is a good girl, she has already graduated. Paul studies in London. He is also a good man. They mean so much to us. I hope God will keep them safe and spare them any difficulties, not even mentioning what we have gone through. I would like to give them... not a warning, but a piece of advice. To try to stay close to the Jewish people and to not trust much the events that *could* happen because what happened to us was completely unexpected. We did not see any signs. I hope they will have a happy life without these difficulties.

Interviewer: Thank you.

“Prisoner No. 9,653: Eugene Debs on capitalism,
incarceration, and solidarity”¹⁰⁸

Peter Cole

Eugene Debs (1855–1926) might be the most important, influential, and well-known anti-capitalist in U.S. History. He’s best known as a co-founder of the Socialist Party of America (SPA) and its four-time presidential candidate. Before that, he led the American Railway Union (ARU) which, in solidarity with striking workers of a railroad company, pulled off perhaps the greatest work stoppage of the late nineteenth century. He also helped found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a revolutionary union whose members are known as Wobblies.

In addition to being a respected labor and political leader, and a brilliant speaker, late in life he became a ferocious critic of prisons based upon his own experiences with incarceration. He had served six months in prison for his role in leading the Pullman boycott and strike in 1894. Then, in 1918, he was sentenced to ten years in prison for his outspoken opposition to U.S. involvement in World War I. His criticism of what now is called the prison-industrial complex was rooted in his personal experience which, itself, was part of his larger critique of capitalism.

¹⁰⁸ This essay was adapted from my keynote presentation at the conference of the Eugene V. Debs Foundation, “‘While There is a Soul in Prison, I Am Not Free’: The History of Solidarity in Social and Economic Justice,” in April 2021. Thanks to Wes Bishop, the Eugene V. Debs Foundation, the Cunningham Memorial Library, and the Indiana State University Department of History.

This essay contends that his embrace of working-class notions of solidarity and class struggle, along with his hopes and dreams for socialism, were based in his experiences as a worker, unionist, and prisoner. While not considered a “prison abolitionist” by most, it is instructive to locate Debs in that movement. He believed that capitalism was the root cause of the problems with mass incarceration: “Capitalism and crime have become almost synonymous.”¹⁰⁹ Hence, prisons were emblematic of the broader issue that capitalism created inequality and poverty that could and should be eradicated with socialism.

In recent years, Debs has been experiencing something of a renaissance. Obviously, Debs coming into vogue is due to the renewed interest in socialism as evidenced, for instance, by the explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the mid-2010s and early 2020s. A brief investigation of Debs’s life offers much about labor and political organizing as well as the movement against mass incarceration.

The life of Eugene Victor Debs, best described by his biographer Nick Salvatore, very much defined American life from the mid-19th into the early 20th twentieth centuries. No doubt his popularity was due, in part, to the fact so many others could relate to him—i.e., he was “of the people.” Debs was born in 1855, shortly before the Civil War, to immigrants from the Alsace region of France. He was born and raised in Terre Haute, Indiana, on the state’s western edge and along the eastern banks of the Wabash River, just across from Illinois. In the 1850s, Terre Haute still was something of a frontier town. It also was something of a boom town—benefiting from its location on the Wabash but also thanks to the multiple, important railroad lines that passed through the region.

¹⁰⁹ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 171.

At fourteen, Debs ended his formal schooling and found work on the railroads. He first cleaned grease from the trucks (or wheels), a dirty and dangerous if vital job. Then he became a painter and car cleaner in railroad shops; later, and for many decades, he kept a small tool he had used to scrape paint—displayed on a wall of his house. After cleaning and painting trains, he worked as a fireman (or stoker) for a few years; stokers shoveled coal into the furnace that powered the steam-driven engines that transformed the US into the world’s mightiest industrial country in the world. Stoking was hard, hot, and dangerous. Although he worked on the railroads for only five or six years, Debs’s experiences were quite formative to his worldview. He said as much at his federal trial, in 1918: “At 14, I went to work in a railroad shop. At 16, I was firing a freight engine on a railroad.”¹¹⁰

By the age of twenty, he no longer worked on the railways, settling back in his hometown. Instead, he worked as a clerk in a dry good store. Although comfortable, he wanted more, so he ran for and was elected to several political offices, at the local and state levels, as a Democrat. However, he quickly became disillusioned with mainstream electoral politics. Instead, he found his life’s calling as the editor of his union’s newspaper, *Firemen’s Magazine*, and then as grand secretary-treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. In 1885 he married Katherine “Kate” Metzel, also from the same Indiana town. While Kate maintained the house in Terre Haute for the rest of her life, Debs traveled constantly and for many decades. They never had children and she rarely traveled with her husband. Arguably, he was closer with his younger brother Theodore, who was a constant companion and confidante.

¹¹⁰ Debs, *Debs and the War*, 40.

In 1893, Debs played a pivotal role in forming the ARU, which elected him as its first president. The ARU was founded as an industrial union, in stark contrast to the typical railroad craft unions, including Debs' old one. Called brotherhoods, the railroad industry's craft unions were conservative, meaning they solely focused on the material interests of members and nothing more—also nicknamed “bread-and-butter” or “pure-and-simple” unionism. By contrast, the ARU was industry wide, meaning any worker in any craft in the industry could belong. Debs and other founders of the ARU were influenced by the Knights of Labor, the first powerful union to emerge, in the mid-1880s, as a national force. Simply put, industrial unionists believed workers were far weaker when divided into different craft unions. They were well aware railroads were the largest, wealthiest, most powerful corporations the country had ever seen and believed workers only could stand up to them by uniting everyone in the industry. After all, the brotherhoods clearly had failed to amass sufficient power to challenge the railroads. Industrial unionists hoped to counter the wealth and political influence of corporations with superior numbers and solidarity.

Debs also was mindful of the pervasive nature of white supremacy deeply dividing the U.S. working class which was, and remains, far more diverse than the middle and upper classes. In the Gilded Age, Debs was quite unusual among white unionists in loudly advocating for equality for African Americans, including in unions. At the ARU founding convention, Debs spoke in favor of opening membership to Black railroaders; however, the majority rejected this proposal. This vote was indicative of the racist line that most working-class white Americans refused to cross. While Debs had not embraced Socialism as a philosophy yet, he already embraced a commonsense notion of solidarity that is socialism's foundation.

Despite this setback, within months the ARU demonstrated real promise. The ARU quickly had become the country's largest union, with over 100,000 members. In April 1894, the ARU defeated the powerful Great Northern Railway in a strike that reverberated across the land.

The following month, the ARU—with Debs at the helm—undertook the largest, arguably most important strike of the era. The previous year, the worst depression of the still-young American industrial economy had begun. Nicknamed the Panic of 1893 though it lasted five years, millions of workers were laid off by businesses in a desperate attempt to avoid going bankrupt though many still did. Just south of Chicago, the Pullman Palace Car Company, the country's leading manufacturer of dining and sleeper railroad cars, fired many workers while the rest saw their wages slashed. Worse, their rent was not reduced; since the Pullman company was both an employer of and landlord for many workers in the town of Pullman, cutting wages without cutting rent was a double blow few could handle.

Many Pullman workers belonged to the ARU, and this local declared a strike in May 1894. In solidarity, albeit with trepidation, Debs and the entire ARU voted to boycott all railroad lines still moving Pullman cars—nationwide. That is, the ARU called for a boycott of every railroad line that used Pullman cars, whether in Maine, New Mexico, or anywhere else. Technically this action was not a strike because railroad workers continued working (other) railroad cars. However, since Pullman cars were so numerous, the effect of the boycott was to snarl traffic across the country and greatly impair commerce across the nation. The boycott proved incredibly effective, particularly in Chicago, the industrial and railroad hub of the country. Debs compared this boycott to “the Christ-like virtue of sympathy...the hope of civilization and supreme glory of mankind.”¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 137.

What had started as a strike in the Chicago area became a national one in which hundreds of thousands of railroad workers—not even all in the ARU—respected this boycott. In so doing, the ARU demonstrated incredible power and the effectiveness of the industrial union model and working-class solidarity.

As the Pullman boycott shut down the most important city in the country and slowed traffic nationwide, employers and those sympathetic—including the middle and upper classes, mainstream media, and political establishment—criticized Debs. A *New York Times* editorial called Debs “a lawbreaker at large, an enemy of the human race.”¹¹² Debs and his supporters, of course, thought quite differently. Debs described this struggle as “a contest between the producing classes and the money power.”

The Pullman boycott carried on for more than two months, largely peacefully, until the General Managers Association, a Chicago-based organization of several dozen railroad corporations, secured the active support of the federal government. U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney, who previously had many railroads as clients and still received a huge retainer from one, deployed the U.S. Department of Justice to defeat the ARU. Olney suggested that railroad companies put U.S. mail onto Pullman cars. That way, if railroad workers refused to move trains with Pullman cars attached, they interfered with the delivery of the mail; in other words, boycotters unknowingly and unintentionally were tricked into committing a federal crime. Quickly, a federal judge issued an injunction ordering railroad workers to cease interfering with the mail.

Since the ARU refused to call off its boycott, President Grover Cleveland ordered tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers to enforce this injunction. Although this boycott had been peaceful up

¹¹² *New York Times*, July 9, 1894, 4.

to that point, once National Guard troops were involved—including in Illinois, where the governor opposed deployment—clashes quickly broke out between strikers and their sympathizers against the military. In more than a score of states, dozens were killed and hundreds injured. Soon enough, the railroads started running again, with Pullman cars. Once the president, attorney general, federal judiciary, and military sided the employers, the ARU boycott was broken. Debs and seven other ARU leaders also were found guilty of violating the federal injunction and sentenced to prison, in Debs's case for six months.

Debs's experience in Woodstock proved pivotal in his life and, indeed, the entire country. He and the other ARU members served their time in prison in tiny Woodstock, Illinois, about fifty miles northwest of Chicago. Just like later political prisoners in Northern Ireland, Palestine, and South Africa, they chose to educate themselves. They formed the grandly named Co-Operative Colony of Liberty Jail, reading books on economics and history, to prepare for the next chapter in the working-class struggle.

The Woodstock jailer allowed many visitors, including several who helped Debs convert to the cause of socialism. Many accounts give the credit to German-born, Milwaukee-based socialist Victor Berger with Debs's "conversion experience." However, Scottish union leader and Labour Party leader Keir Hardie also visited Debs and urged him to embrace socialism. Unlike Berger, Hardie came from a much more humble, working-class background. Due to the intense poverty of his family, Hardie had gone down into the coal mines as a ten-year-old. Hardie joined the coal miners' union and, later was a founding member of the British Labour Party. Labour's first Member of Parliament, Hardie happened to visit the United States in 1895. During his several-month tour, Hardie spoke in Chicago on the second U.S. Labor Day. Hardie then visited Debs who had deeply impressed the Scottish unionist and socialist.

In the most widely circulated telling of Debs's conversion story, Berger brought some English translations of writings by Karl Kautsky, a Czech Austrian writer very well known as an interpreter of Karl Marx's writings. However, Hardie also left some writings for Debs, who already was developing such a worldview. In prison Debs had plenty of time to think about how the Pullman boycott was incredibly effective until the U.S. government put its fingers on the scales and basically defeated the strike. Therefore, Debs became far open to more radical politics. As Debs later wrote: "The writings of Kautsky were so clear and conclusive that I readily grasped not only his argument but also caught the spirit of his socialist utterance and I thank him and all who helped me out of darkness into light."¹¹³

Right after completing his six-month sentence, Debs walked out of Woodstock jail only to be greeted by a huge crowd. He then took a train to Chicago where, despite heavy rains, a crowd of reportedly many tens of thousands of supporters thronged the station. Soon after disembarking, Debs gave a speech and declared:

Manifestly the spirit of '76 still survives. The fires of liberty and noble aspirations are not yet extinguished. I greet you tonight as lovers of liberty and as despisers of despotism. I comprehend the significance of this demonstration and appreciate the honor that makes it possible for me to be your guest on such an occasion. The vindication and glorification of American principles of government, as proclaimed to this world in the Declaration of Independence, is the high purpose of this convocation.

¹¹³ Eugene V. Debs, "How I Became a Socialist," *New York Comrade*, April 1902.

Debs continued, lambasting elected leaders “as men with heads as small as chipmunks and pockets as big as balloons who occupied the most sacred public offices.”¹¹⁴ Debs’s criticism of both main political galvanized people and further transformed Debs into an immensely popular public figure.

In the late 1890s Debs continued to figure out his politics. In the words of biographer Salvatore, “The Debs who emerged from jail was not the same man who had gone in... a new idea, that of socialism, was beginning to take hold of him.”¹¹⁵ However, the Socialist Party did not yet exist, though other, very small such parties did, including the Social Democratic Party of America. Meanwhile, Debs’s old union, the ARU continued endorsing quite socialistic policies, including government ownership of the railroads. In an open letter for the ARU newspaper, the *Chicago Railway Times*, Debs declared, “We have been cursed with the reign of gold long enough. Money constitutes no proper basis of civilization. The time has come to regenerate society. We are on the eve of universal change.”¹¹⁶

Just a few years later, in 1900, Debs helped found the Socialist Party of America (SPA) and became its standard bearer for the next quarter century. In the view of SPA supporters, the two main political parties in the United States were both committed to capitalism as demonstrated through policies that ignored the plight of most American workers and farmers—rhetoric notwithstanding. Hence, Debs and other socialists believed a radical alternative was needed. Notably, the idea that Americans could create a new party that, in the not-so-distant future could gain power, did not sound nearly as far-fetched as it does to Americans in the 2020s. After all, in

¹¹⁴ Debs, “Liberty: Speech at Battery D, Chicago,” 1895, in *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches*, 337–344.

¹¹⁵ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 149.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 162.

the 1850s—just two generations prior—the Republican Party had been born, elected a president in their second election attempt (1860), and became the dominant party into the 1930s. Although Debs remained committed to the electoral approach as embodied by a political party, he continued advocating for working-class people to join industrial unions.

In 1905, Debs returned to Chicago to help found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), perhaps the most powerful, and definitely the most colorful, revolutionary union in U.S. history. Debs and others had many reasons to start a new union. First and foremost was the extreme poverty, suffering, and inequality in America, especially in cities. At that time, a small group of corporations had incredible power, with monopolies and oligopolies dominating every single sector of the economy. However, despite the surge of corporate power, the government did nothing to regulate industry while a tiny group of American capitalists amassed wealth greater than European monarchs could imagine. In addition, the government consistently took employers' side in workplace disputes, the courts were deeply conservative, while the military and police essentially provided free security to corporations to defeat workers' strikes and crush unions.

Worse, workers wanting change received no help from the mainstream labor movement as embodied by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), divided into dozens of craft unions. Debs never seemed more militant than in castigating the AFL at the IWW convention: "What we want today, above all things, is united economic and political action, and we can never have that while the working class are parceled out among hundreds, aye thousands, of separate unions that keep them for reasons, many of which they readily suggest themselves."¹¹⁷ Debs's critique of reformist

¹¹⁷ Debs, *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches*, 386.

craft unions who embraced “bread-and-butter” unionism was shared by the two hundred other left-wing radicals who had gathered to found a new socialist labor federation on May Day 1905.

Debs was joined in Chicago by other legendary figures such as Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, the famous union organizer and child labor abolitionist; William D. “Big Bill” Haywood, the leader of the militant, socialist Western Federation of Miners and chair of what he declared “the Continental Congress of the Working Class”; Lucy Parsons, the Black anarchist and widow of Albert Parsons who was executed by the state of Illinois after the Haymarket massacre and; a host of other socialists, anarchists, unionists, and revolutionaries from the U.S. but also Canada, New Zealand, and Spain. Wobblies believed that capitalism was the core problem and, thus, the solution was socialism. The IWW’s powerful preamble reads, in part, that a new society needed to be fashioned out of the ashes of the old but only after the abolition of the wage system. Wobblies believed that socialism only could be achieved via workers organizing on the job, through revolutionary unions.

Debs, however, envisioned the IWW’s One Big Union more as the trade union wing of the SPA. In other words, socialists of the SPA variety embraced both economic and political approaches, but socialists of the IWW strip believed people had their greatest power on the job, so should focus their energies there. Big Bill Haywood famously said that workers’ greatest power involved simply putting their hands in their pockets, i.e. stopping work. However, the Wobblies increasingly rejected electoral politics, believing that economic elites totally controlled the political and judicial systems. Instead, only workplace action could possibly succeed, via the general strike or One Big Strike. What began as a simple disagreement grew over time. Within a few years Debs was not involved in the IWW, and other SPA members like him also drifted away.

Then, in 1912–1913, a major rift occurred between socialists who believe in the SPA and socialists who believed in the IWW. Haywood and other Wobblies left the SPA.

Debs ran for president in 1912 when he and the SPA had their greatest electoral success. Keir Hardie, who returned to the United States on several occasions and wrote about U.S. politics for an English audience, was effusive in his praise of Debs and the SPA. The election, no doubt, is fascinating because Debs was part of a four-way race in which all four candidates embraced at least some policies that could be called Progressive and, arguably, socialist. As Hardie wrote:

The late Mark Hanna, the Republican boss, predicted that Socialism would be the leading issue in the campaign for 1912. Unless there is a great war in which America will be involved before then, his prediction seems likely to be completely verified. Educated America stands aghast and ashamed at the power of the trusts, their disregard of law, and their corrupting influence upon public life. And so that class is turning to Socialism as the only way of escape. They realise that the nation must own the trusts, or otherwise the trusts will own the nation. The feeling of despair which formerly led good men to wring their hands as those bereft of hope for their country is being replaced by one of confidence in their future.¹¹⁸

Truly, Debs and the SPA's popularity pulled everyone leftward. Overall, the SPA did relatively well and won hundreds of offices at the local level and hit double digits in a number of western states. President Woodrow Wilson, like Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Howard Taft before him, enacted a series of Progressive policies that—for the first time and only partially—used governmental power, on behalf of the people, to rein in corporate greed and power. In retrospect, though, 1912 proved to be the high-water mark for Debs and the SPA.

World War I broke out shortly thereafter, in 1914, and while the United States officially remained neutral, the government actively supported the British and French side against the

¹¹⁸ Keir Hardie, "America Re-Visited: Labour Vote To-Day and To-Morrow," *The Labour Leader*, October 9, 1908.

Germans. Generally, the U.S. Left was highly critical of the war as well as of European socialists who basically chose nationalism over international working-class solidarity. Such was the line of many Americans on the left, including Debs and others in the SPA.

Most famously, in June 1918 in Canton, Ohio, Debs delivered a speech in which he harshly criticized the U.S. war in France. His criticisms were numerous. First and foremost, “the working class, who fight all the battles...who freely shed their blood and furnish the corpses, have never yet had a voice in either declaring war or making peace. It is the ruling class that invariably does both.” By contrast, “The master class has always declared the wars. The subject class has always fought the battles. The master class has had all to gain and nothing to lose, while the subject class has had nothing to gain and all to lose—especially their lives.” Crucially, working-class people—on both sides of the war—suffered the negative consequences and gained none of the benefits. Additionally, many Americans pointed out that Germany had not attacked the United States and questioned Wilson’s argument in favor of war, namely “to make the world safe for democracy,” as arrogant rhetoric masking imperial ambitions. Of course, Debs’s critique was hardly unique, but he was the most prominent socialist in America and perhaps the most principled left-wing leader respected beyond the left and the labor movement.¹¹⁹

Debs’s speech received very wide attention in the press and from the government. As a result, shortly after his speech, Debs was charged with violating the Espionage and Sedition Acts. His case quickly went to trial, in September 1918, with national coverage.

Debs was at his popular apex, during the trial, and delivered some of his most famous remarks. He used the forum to, as always, advocate for his beliefs:

¹¹⁹ Debs, *The Canton Speech*, 19,

I believe, Your Honor, in common with all Socialists, that this nation ought to own and control its own industries. I believe, as all Socialists do, that all things that are jointly needed and used ought to be jointly owned—that industry, the basis of our social life, instead of being the private property of a few and operated for their enrichment, ought to be the common property of all, democratically administered in the interest of all...I am opposing a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence.

In his remarks at the sentencing hearing, when he could have pleaded for clemency, Debs cried out: “While there is a lower class I’m in it. While there is a criminal element, I am of it and while there is a soul in prison I am not free.” As poignant as those words were, the single word “solidarity,” associated with Debs if even more so with the IWW, might suffice. Few were surprised when Debs was found guilty and sentenced to ten years in prison.¹²⁰

At the age of 63 Debs was incarcerated as federal prisoner 9,653. He spent his first few months in a relatively comfortable state prison in West Virginia before being transferred to a new federal prison in Atlanta. In his new prison Debs quickly found himself in wretched conditions. The food was unpalatable, and he could not eat for two weeks despite working in the clothing warehouse. For fifteen hours each day, he was confined with five other men in a small cell in the southern heat. On a few occasions, it was reported that Debs was near death due to lumbago, heart trouble, blinding headaches, and kidney trouble caused by atrocious food.

Debs was, of course, hardly the only human sent to prison for opposing the war. He joined thousands of other Americans and immigrants in what now is called the First Red Scare (with the Second Red Scare commencing after World War II). While in Atlanta, he became depressed as his beloved Socialist Party became bitterly divided over a variety of issues, including how to respond

¹²⁰ Debs, *The Canton Speech*, 41-42 and 57.

to the newly formed Soviet Union. Debs also worried that the massive government repression—which also threatened the existence of the IWW. In prison, Debs became despondent, wondering whether what he had devoted his whole life to would ever bear fruit. Indeed, the world seemed so far from where he hoped it would be.

Nevertheless, in 1920 Debs agreed to run for president one more time—from prison, the first time an American had done so. The SPA slogan was “from the prison to the White House!” The government, however, made it nearly impossible for Debs to campaign, for instance only allowing him to compose and share one 500-word statement a week. Despite this repression, he received more than 900,000 votes. While it is impossible to know, the large vote total might have been inflated by those in sympathy with Debs—but not Socialism. Many also were deeply upset about his continuing imprisonment when the war had ended two years prior. There was a widespread belief that the Espionage and Sedition Acts were unconstitutional, violating the First Amendment by criminalizing thought as opposed to action.

There also was a national campaign to free Debs as well as other political prisoners that emerged in 1919 and picked up steam. In 1920, a new president, Warren Harding, was elected. Ironically, it was Harding, the conservative Republican, who commuted Debs’s sentence ahead of Christmas in 1921, whereas the Democrat Wilson had been Debs’s foe. When Debs left the Atlanta prison, thousands of inmates broke out in enormous cheers that could be heard far away and which brought tears to his eyes. After a brief meeting with Harding in the capital, Debs made it home to Terre Haute before year’s end. 50,000 people welcome him home. He was 66 years old.

Debs was weakened by his prison experience and no longer a young man. In his final years of life, he was not as much of a public figure—having been weakened by decades of travel and stress—though he did many interviews. He also wrote a series of nationally syndicated stories, in

1922, about his prison experiences and his thoughts on incarceration as a system. David Karsner, a long-time collaborator and socialist journalist, brought these together and a few more essays, released the year after Debs's death, in 1927, as *Walls and Bars*.

There are countless fascinating aspects of this book, but the basic argument was that the class bias embedded in prisons meant that to identify those who were imprisoned as poor was redundant. He explained why prisons were so unjust for the poor but also that the rich rarely went to prison; instead, “the prison as a rule, to which there are few exceptions, is for the poor.” For those who believe in equality, the U.S. prison system must be a devastating indictment, for all one need do was look at the prison population—Exhibit A for America's massive inequalities and unfairness. Hence, prisons “should not merely be reformed but abolished.” And the only way to do that would be revolutionary change to the economic system. Only socialism could succeed in “taking the jail out of man as well as taking man out of jail.”¹²¹

In his final years, Debs grew weaker. He and his loyal wife still hosted many people at his home in Terre Haute, but on multiple occasions he checked into sanitariums to rest and recover. Debs spent a lot of time, including his final weeks, at one such place in Elmhurst, Illinois, where he passed away at the age of 70. Many thousands of people gathered, soon after, in Terre Haute outside of his house where the funeral ceremony was held in 1926.

One way to reflect upon Debs's long and impressive life is to consider his increasing radicalization. In his typical fashion, Winston Churchill cynically remarked that, as people age they “naturally” become more conservative. However, an analysis of Debs contradicts Churchill's claim. Ultimately, since capitalism was the root cause of society's great ills including

¹²¹ All quotes from Debs, *Walls and Bars*.

unemployment, poverty, war, and prison, the only answer was to move to socialism. Thus, over the course of his life, Debs traveled the “opposite” path and embraced ever-more left-wing, radical solutions to the world’s problems such as revolutionary unionism and Social Democracy. By the mid-1890s, the solution for Debs became clear, and it remained so for him until his death.

It also is fascinating that, in 2021, Debs is better known and more respected than since the 1960s or, maybe, the 1930s. In 2021, the Democratic Socialists of America has increased to nearly 100,000 members in less than a decade; DSA members now serve in the U.S. House of Representatives and in elected office in many cities and states. So, too, the IWW which is larger today than probably since the 1930s. In spring 2021, when this essay was composed, the country was gripped by a widely publicized (soon-failed) campaign to organize a union among Amazon warehouse workers in Bessemer, Alabama. That a majority-Black workforce in one of the poorest states in the country took on the most powerful corporation in America is a sign of the times. In another, many Americans, particularly in the younger Millennial generation and Generation Z, have a more favorable opinion of socialism than capitalism. If Debs was alive today he would be truly excited because, like many Socialists, he was a hopeful person. As he once declared, “I am for socialism because I am for humanity.”¹²² His life continues to provide both lessons and light.

¹²² Debs, “Open letter to the American Railway Union,” *Chicago Railway Times*, January 1, 1897.

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Migrations: On Breaking Isolation and the Trauma of the Familiar in a Pandemic

D. A. Lockhart

I am sitting on the forward deck of the *Pelee Islander II*, in the now not-so-odd warm day in the early part of Falling Leaves Moon, and we are approaching the large federal dock for Pelee Island at Westview. Cormorants slingshot themselves southward toward Middle Bass Island, across the even surface of Lake Erie, crisscrossing the imaginary border between nations. My wife points out the string of cars and work vans heading to the dock. It is rush hour on the island and a small cadre of vehicles move past closed-up shops and restaurants, wave-eaten shoreline, and lifeless houses. This is Pelee in hibernation for humans. Or damned near it. Midpoint of autumn and the summer luster of the island, already faded in the tint of a global pandemic, and it is easy to sense the tiredness of a slow crawl to a blanketed slumber. The slumber, the hibernation, a fact driven by our established human calendar. A calendar that has locked us in with its familiarity. A calendar that most of understand has come to be broken as we limp through a dramatically changed world. We've come for the first time since the pandemic grabbed hold of creation and strangled the familiar from it. Except here. Except the quiet of this island at the edge of Canada. We've come in search of, or perhaps despite the familiar. This is not the usual time to visit the island for mainlanders. Or so our everyday has told us.

For those that know Pelee, they know that it is high migration season for the birds here. That is nothing of a surprise. Perhaps acting on that very impulse ourselves, we have left our isolation and home-bound life for the first time in months to visit this, our island. Migrations, no matter the distance

covered, requires a departure and a coming together. This island of solitude at the center of Waabishkiigo Gchigami marks the first time we've spent more than a few passing moments with strangers. On the ferry, during the one-and-a-half-hour transit, we break our isolation with face masks and arbitrary distances. We are more aware of others by their mere proximity; the photographer, the crew members moving between forbidden spaces, the families huddled together in the forward lounge. Their presence, their movement, makes the brief window of our time together more real and tangible than any of the previous months or moments or afternoons or evenings that have passed over the last year. In this shared time, all of this is tentative. None of us move with any certainty. The familiarity, the comfort of repeated transits, is gone. Each of us wants to move as if by memory, yet hold back these motions out of the reality that has settled atop us. Fear of connection that may ultimately kill us. Our world has changed, we all know it, but all desperately push on in the way that news media, government officials, and business owners have told us to. And the ferry cuts the waters beneath us like it always has. The flag before the township hall still sways in the persistent westerly winds. There is one person standing on the deck of the Westview Tavern, likely smoking, taking in the sudden business before them. Before us is the departure part of this migration.

But what of the coming together?

Aren't there too few of us to count a coming together? We shall remain as isolated as before. Is this what generations of bird migrations have come to experience, too? We recognize how little has changed in our absence. We, also recognize how the fabric that holds those things in place has frayed and is a continual process of unwinding.

We are called to our cars below decks as the ferry comes into dock, stopping broadside to the island, then reversing into its spot on the federal pier. We move through the three stories and sparsely peopled ship. In our well-worn Subaru we wait, separated by steel and plastic and glass from the belly of the boat and our fellow travelers. Our landfall is marked by the ever-so-slight shifting of our weight,

the jarring chirp and grind as the *Pelee Islander II*'s skin rubs alongside solid footing. Our safe passage ends in the pregnant pause between stillness and the opening of the ship's loading ramp.

Car taillights and engines spark to life.

The cold metal shadow of the car deck is flooded by the sunlight afforded by the lowering of the ramp.

One by one, we and our fellow travelers are guided from the belly of the boat.

We burst into the brilliant fall afternoon light. The whole process is a momentary blur of motion and land. Even in passing, none of this feels as it should. Not familiar, not strange. It is all mechanical, but there is something askew. Isolation in hermetically sealed cars, all of us. We don't celebrate this arrival. Instead, we dissipate into the tree cover and farm fields like the other flocks passing through the island.

We can talk about isolation again. Not because of the raging pandemic. But because islands can isolate and merge. And how medicine for what ails us is often found through the gifts provided by being alone. We speak of it in negative terms, of how isolation is the second scourge of this apocalypse. We are awash in half-truths wielded by capitalists that want nothing of our world to change from its current course. This wave breaks in unending opinion pieces about shadow suicides and the type of long-term psychological damage that settlers forced on First Nations through residential schools.

It's all hyperbole.

The sort of thing politicians and propagandists build careers upon. But those half-truths have no footing in a place that has failed to garner the capitalist's eyes. A reservation against the world around us, we are afterthought here to those on the mainland. An afterthought that means no island-wide viable drinking water system, spotty internet, dirt roads, and intermittent power. And in that afterthought is an act of salvation, a lapse that lets truths of the world pour in around weekday grocery

fliers and media predictions of housing values and new farm-to-table eateries. Pelee is the world striped down to its bare essentials: dry land, sun, wind, bird song, the cries of distant foxes. We have merged then surged forward, alone from the murmur of the other cars, along the roadway we see the cars hustle down toward the ferry.

This island, a shallow-lake mountain top, an anchor of terrestrial life in a fresh-water sea, stretches out before us in canyons of some of the oldest trees in Essex County. We've come home here, surrounded by relations that breathed the same air as our ancestors, felt the steadily warming sun and air against their bodies. The living memory of the western Lake Erie basin in the form of Carolinian trees, shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers embraces us as we drive with windows open to the island air. We make our way to a rental cottage for the weekend, our land here in no shape for our tipi. Pelee surges in waves of starlings, killdeers, guided by herons, sung into motion by wrens and kinglets. Trees, mostly still green and late-summer lush, hold fast against the fall that the rest of Canada has already mostly descended into. Pelee breathes out, and it surrounds us in the warm embrace of a family reception.

During the first months of this pandemic world we felt it shrinking to something no further in perimeter than our small urban encampment in Pillete Village at Waawiiyaatanong. The world had slowed to a quiet crawl. Our lives mirrored the isolation that we heard about through radio and nightly news broadcasts. Perhaps there were truths to their stories. The absences that ran through our new reality made it hollow, without air traffic, trains, the arrival of relations, the quiet of life without the familiar, the expected. Isolation perhaps exists only in the familiar. Or in light of its absence. It is what we believe and understand that we are missing. Our lives conceal from us the manner that we are rarely physically alone. Once the news and radio are turned off, our smartphones hidden from sight and retrieval, this realization nestles itself down. How creation creeps back into the spaces stolen from us by tight-packed urban housing, suburban tracts of neutered earth, crash of a wide-freeway, it all

becomes apparent. Creation promised to us by our ancestors returns in slow-tentative starts; wild turkeys in back allies, foxes sleeping in tulip beds, eagles dancing between skyscrapers. We are still close enough to others, there are at least hundreds of other people within a few blocks of your fortress of solitude. One is alone only in your mind. Even here on this island, with a fraction of the city's population, that notion of alone is at best wrong.

We pull up to the small yellow cottage surrounded by farm fields and an active (or as active as Pelee ever gets) quarry as neighbours. The gravel road that runs alongside the house is an afterthought. There are no people around us for at least a kilometer and yet we feel more embraced and welcome than we had in the previous half-year. Here we rest in the outskirts on an island on the outskirts of a nation. It is alive and full here despite location. Isolation is a word best suited to the world it can't possibly describe. It has no place here. The elm and sycamore branches chatting in the persistent wind. The woodpecker catching bugs from the sunroom walls, the persistent motion of startling and cowbirds. One is welcomed into a family, into a home that you've forgotten. The scent from the lake drifts in through the hedgerows, brought on the cooling air, thick with the dust from pickups floating in from distant traversed roads. There is no absence here. You know because you instantly forget about that half-life you've been sleeping through, big-box store parking lots, tight-packed dining rooms, the anger of customers required to wait more than the thirty seconds they envision as proper. Here, the dance of a chickadee from the shed to the sugar maple to car's roof-rack is all that matters. It is that very thing you know you've been missing. Since well before the pandemic shattered the world.

In isolation, this type imposed by the act of crossing a great lake and found on islands in their midst, we find a connection. We are part and parcel of the world around us. You feel it, you breathe it in through the cutting western wind. You feel it in the heavy thuds of waves crashing against the nearby northern shore. This is the world, the living breathing part, that you've missed while locked up

inside your home since late winter. It's one you've missed being locked up inside for the better part of three decades. Where I stand is relatively empty of people, yet full of life. The very antecedent of what we are told we must feel when we hear the word isolation or alone. In fact, our singular physical bodies are never alone. We are Blake's universe in a grain of sand. Our existence touches an endless array of living beings. We touch creation, feel welcome in it, because we are creation. We feel our relations through the rustle of leaves in the wind, the call of flickers as they dance through ash trees, the scraping of squirrel claws in bark as they run up the nearby sycamore. This is world that actually exists beyond marketing campaigns and nightly news briefs. It is the one that embraces us, invigorates our senses, draws us to the gift of life, of the lives we've been afforded in its presence. This reminds that there is past, a present, and a future and we are all part of it.

It has taken a migration to arrive here. The natural process by which living beings connect to the rich tapestry of a gift the land itself has always afforded us. Walls and borders have no place in the world we were gifted. One can witness the blue jays, the orioles, the cormorants move as our ancestors; at will and as required. Isolation, in its honest form, is the prison that has been crafted by distant men wishing nothing more than to squeeze each bit of power and material from the world for their own gain. One of the first moves of the torturer is isolate the victim. One of the first rules of survival is to break that isolation. Migration is that step. In motion we break those loose connections. At rest we rediscover the world unburdened by that thin-shallow understanding of life itself. To migrate is to reconnect. To rest upon the land is to contemplate and understand that connection.

Standing upon the deck at this cottage on the north side of Pelee Island on an early autumn day, I am well nestled in that second part. And this second part is the first truthful view of the pandemic world. This is the realization that any sense of isolation is misinformation, grown out of a blind comfort that has been shaken by a ripple in the fabric of how we have come to engage over time. We were tricked into a sense of comfort by Black Friday sales, smart homes, the warmth of flat-

screen televisions saturated with Netflix shows. The pandemic shattered that comfort, illustrated the hard truths of the world. We have been forced to change and then sit in the ruins of the thing we've been forced to leave behind: crowded craft beer festivals, sold-out sports stadiums, people watching from downtown café patios, sardine can airline flights. From this angle all we can see is the shattered bits of the familiar, the parts that brought us joy in lieu of trading our finite time for money. We love and miss them because they have become familiar, the things that we have always simply done to be happy and have been unwilling to see the faults of our ways. The very sort of faults that have led to a destabilized ecosystem, massive income disparities, and a raging global pandemic. We were failing Creation and each other. And must change the familiar. We must defamiliarize our place in this moment. A difficult task either to accomplish or to set out to accomplish with the bubbling trauma and disease that surrounds us. Yet we must because it is critical to survival. And survival is difficult in the best of times. That act or attempt has landed me here. A migration of sorts.

This is not to say I am unfamiliar with Pelee. We've been coming to the island for years. But it still lacks the familiarity of the everyday I've come to experience in my "home" back at Waawiiyaatanong. The old, ordered sense of movement, along numbered highways, streets named for rich colonizers, and the big-box stores that take root alongside them. The way we have come to expect our time and lives to unfold. Measured by the market economy calendar anchored by "Black Friday" and "Back-to-School Sales." An order that has gifted us with a simultaneously burning and sinking planet we've come to witness around us. And while it was always there, it was that we were far too exhausted in our old wrong ways, we could not see outside of its detritus. Our world and our lives are stratified, dramatically, and the view from afar, from the common ground beyond, was the only true manner to examine the damage. Here on Pelee there is one co-op, a bakery, a LCBO, two restaurants, and winery. Nature controls who those people are and when they arrive by the sheer force of the lake and the changes between seasons. Our calendars are set to migrations, both avian and human. As

such, our time here is measured in arrivals and departures. Those arrivals and departures are measured by seasons. Our sense of being, our sense of measurement, our connection point becomes tied to creation itself. We are no longer alone with the mechanical time-out-of-mind measurement of lives.

It is the next day as we make our way through Nature Conservancy land on the east side of the island that these thoughts come back to me. As the afternoon slides into evening, we visit the old farm field the Nature Conservancy has rehabbed into pathways of wild echinacea, naturalized tall grasses, and ponds. Before us the ultimate act of reclaiming creation from the darkness of a mechanical disconnected world. It is a breach from the common, the expected even on this island. Healing looks like this. It is a reconnection of species and ecosystems, an answer to isolation. We wander through this crack from the work-a-day soybean farms, the vineyards, the towns of cottages. Here is the island as it was engendered by Creation to be. The island before the McCormicks and generations of settlers to follow them. In the sweetened air above the restored habitat, it is easy to sense the warm buzz of space filled with life. This is the ancient honest feel of the land, from when Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee set up camp here generations before settlers plied the lakes with their migration of ferries. This feeling, too, was familiar, common. It gets at the lie of the isolation of the pandemic. Illustrates the extent to which our own choices have led to majority of loneliness in this pandemic. This restored portion of Creation is the break in our common. As our common was the result of shrinking three islands into one through the draining of marshland, reshaping the ancient familiar, making an island in this archipelago resemble the farm fields of the distant mainland. This is the island of our dreams, of our past, the must be in our future.

We walk through the field, following the trampled down portions of wild echinacea to the distant man-made hummocks, encrusted with prairie grasses and desiccate flowers. The quiet here carried by wind from the far side of the island. Only the intermittent clatter from distant vineyards chasing off hungry birds breaks it. This is the land as dreamed. This is the survival that we all wish

possible. We are alone with everything. Isolation, quiet in its means solitude, compiled in several world flowers, cloudless blue fall skies. He we are reborn into our ancestor family with each step though the field. Unfamiliar only to our recent generations, learned through urban indoctrinations of late capitalism, the life before us. Each step atop this reclaimed flower carpeted path is an homage, a healing, and return to the ancestral meaning of what it is to be alive in the vibrancy of creation.

And it is at a break in the paths that we spook from the thicket at that path's edge a flock of turkeys. They burst into daylight, the same mottled colours and texture of the Earth itself. Sprung free from a dormant earth, it is both a sharp alarm to their presence, followed by the excitement of proximity to another living, breathing, creature, and one that a great many us would not be able to call familiar. Whatever notions of isolation we still harbour are obliterated in that moment. Even in the invisible here there is life, there are our relations. In migration, we've returned home to this reclaimed field on the east side of Pelee Island, and we can witness the truth that lies ahead, that shall always lie ahead.

Our world in flux, in illness, in the quiet between greater things, is temporary.

Our isolation an imagined emotion.

Our isolation another self-imposed sickness.

And what lies ahead, through all the migrations that await us we shall behold the promises that have always been here. We are never alone, so long as our bodies touch the warmth of Creation beneath our feet.

The Power of Theatre in the Time of an American Nero

Marcia Eppich-Harris

After the inauguration of Joe Biden, I have been hesitant to think about, or write about, America's forty-fifth president. The years 2016–2020 mark an era I have no interest in reliving. But there is a certain amount of responsibility one must embrace as a citizen of a democracy, and within that responsibility is the obligation of remembrance. We are tasked with remembrance for a number of reasons, among them setting precedents or opposing them. I would argue that it would be best to temper the instinct to forget all about Donald Trump, post-inauguration, no matter how much we would like to, but only to ensure that Trumpian politicians are irradiated from American government through our electoral processes. If we fail to take seriously the insurrection of January 6, 2021, when Trump supporters raided the Capitol, some seeming intent on hanging Vice President Mike Pence,¹²³ and others smashing windows, beating police, and causing the deaths of five people and the injury and COVID-19 infections of dozens more,¹²⁴ then our democracy is utterly doomed.

There are plenty of ways our remembrance duties can be fulfilled, but I would argue that the freedom to examine politics and history exists in theatre in ways that cannot be replicated in nonfiction, journalism, social media, or everyday life. The Trump presidency inspired an incredible

¹²³ Martin Pengelly “‘Hang Mike Pence’: Twitter Stops Phrase Trending after Capitol Riot,” *Guardian*, Jan. 10, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/10/hang-mike-pence-twitter-stops-phrase-trending-capitol-breach>.

¹²⁴ Jack Healy, “These Are the Five People Who Died in the Capitol Riot” *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 2021, last modified Feb. 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/who-died-in-capitol-building-attack.html>.

amount of critical writing: speeches, biographies, tell-all books, and sociopolitical criticism.¹²⁵ However, as both a literary scholar whose specialization is Shakespeare and a creative writer, I am more prone to think about Trump in Shakespearean, theatrical, and metaphorical dimensions. Significantly in today's partisan landscape, we can sidestep partisan leanings in theatrical productions and be encouraged to consider a specific story or event that might resonate with our own moment without alienating members of either party. A famous case in point came in 2016, within weeks following the election. Then Vice-President-elect Mike Pence saw *Hamilton*—a pointedly progressive show—on Broadway. The crowd booed Pence,¹²⁶ and yet, even as those in his party were allegorically criticized by the rhetorical thrust of the play, Pence reportedly enjoyed the show. The fact that Pence listened to the *Hamilton* cast when they addressed him from the stage after the curtain call is so stunning and anomalous that it hardly seems possible that a similar, respectful action would be taken in response to say, John Bolton's book *The Room Where It Happened*, a title that recalls a pivotal song in *Hamilton*.

¹²⁵ See, for instance, David Frum, *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018); David Cay Johnston, *It's Even Worse than You Think: What the Trump Administration is Doing to America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); Omarosa Manigault Newman, *Unbinged: An Insider's Account of the Trump White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), Cliff Sims, *Team of Vipers: My 500 Extraordinary Days in the Trump White House* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019); Anonymous [A Senior Trump Administration Official], *A Warning* [New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019]; Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig, *A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump's Testing of America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020); John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

¹²⁶ CNN reported that "Pence said he did notice the booing, but it didn't spoil the show. 'My daughter and I and her cousins really enjoyed the show. *Hamilton* is just an incredible production, incredibly talented people. It was a real joy to be there,' Pence said. 'When we arrived we heard a few boos, and we heard some cheers,' he said, 'I nudged my kids and reminded them that is what freedom sounds like.'" Eric Bradner, "Pence: 'I Wasn't Offended' by Message of 'Hamilton' Cast," Nov. 20, 2016, CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/20/politics/mike-pence-hamilton-message-trump/index.html>.

I am certainly not the only person to think of Trump's presidency as a living literary metaphor and cautionary tale. Stephen Greenblatt's book *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (2018) makes oblique references to Trump as it works through Shakespeare's major and minor league ne'er-do-wells, although never naming the forty-fifth president explicitly. James Shapiro's *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (2020) discusses the controversial Public Theatre production of *Julius Caesar* (2017) in which the eponymous character is dressed like Trump, including a wig, and is assassinated by women and people of color. A more classical version of *Julius Caesar* was produced in the summer of 2017 by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in Stratford-upon-Avon. In fact, the RSC's season in 2017 consisted of entirely Roman subjects—a feat not attempted there since 1971. While the RSC productions did not attempt to connect with Trump in their staging, a full-page picture of Trump and Barack Obama in the program for *Julius Caesar* made clear that the season linked the political present to the theatrical past, as we are often prone to do. Famous twentieth-century examples include Orson Welles's *Caesar*, which commented on fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, and Laurence Olivier's 1944 film version of *Henry V*, aimed at bolstering British morale in the war.¹²⁷

In 2017, I was preparing to teach an honors class about Shakespeare's Roman and history plays, so I was deeply engaged with Shakespeare's historic subjects, and of course, the major influences on his writing. It occurred to me after seeing their productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* that what was missing from the RSC Roman season was a tribute to the first-century Stoic philosopher and dramatist Seneca, whose work influenced Shakespeare's tragedies and histories. Seneca was an important political figure in ancient Rome, too. He had been the tutor and chief advisor to the emperor

¹²⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018); James Shapiro, *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us about Our Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021). *Henry V*, dir. Laurence Olivier (Two Cities Films, 1944).

Nero in the hopes that his Stoic philosophy would rub off on him. Ultimately, Seneca’s attempts to make a Stoic out of Nero failed.

I decided after that RSC season that I wanted to write about Seneca and Nero. I had taught Seneca’s plays in my Humanities classes, and I knew some of the history behind his relationship with Nero. I started a leisurely bit of research on the pair, reading James Romm’s book, *Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero* (2014), and reading all of Seneca’s tragedies.¹²⁸ When the anonymous op-ed “I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration” was published in the *New York Times* (September 2018)¹²⁹ I could not stop thinking of how that senior official in the Trump administration seemed very much like Seneca—at least in the way they described themselves.¹³⁰ The germ of an idea was planted in my mind. But it wasn’t until Tuesday, September 24, 2019, when Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi announced that an impeachment inquiry would commence against Trump, that I knew what I wanted to write. I opened a new file on my computer and started an allegorical play about modern America, starring Seneca and Nero. Thus, the writing of my play *Seneca and the Soul of Nero* began.

I don’t always have such a clear path to inspiration when I write, but in my mind, Seneca and Nero were the perfect historical and allegorical characters to represent the presidency and ambivalent administration of Donald Trump. Trump’s narcissism, and his Romanesque hedonism, strongly

¹²⁸ James Romm, *Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

¹²⁹ “I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration,” *New York Times*, Sept. 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>

¹³⁰ CNN later reported that Miles Taylor, chief of staff to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, wrote the anonymous op-ed, as well as the book *A Warning* that included many more details about the behind-the-scenes stories within the administration. See Jake Tapper and Jeremy Herb, “Author of 2018 ‘Anonymous’ Op-Ed Critical of Trump Revealed,” Oct. 28, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/28/politics/anonymous-new-york-times-op-ed-writer/index.html>.

matched Nero's. The anonymous op-ed writer, later revealed to be Miles Taylor, described almost exactly the sort of position Seneca occupied in Nero's reign. Taylor stated, "We want the administration to succeed and think that many of its policies have already made America safer and more prosperous. But we believe our first duty is to this country, and the president continues to act in a manner that is detrimental to the health of the republic."¹³¹ Taylor went on to describe Trump's leadership style as "impetuous, adversarial, petty and ineffective,"¹³² a description that could certainly be applied to Nero. Seneca, like Taylor and his colleagues, constantly tried to temper his leader's worst instincts without success. Despite Taylor's reassurances that there were adults in the room who were virtuously fighting for America, Trump continued his erratic governance, with more cabinet member departures than any of the former five presidents, according to the Brookings Institute,¹³³ as well as attempts to defund the Postal Service—possibly to interfere with the 2020 election during the COVID-19 pandemic. With government officials from Rex Tillerson and John Kelly to more recently Dr. Anthony Fauci desperate to quell Trump's legally and ethically questionable moves over the past four years, I have been continually reminded of Seneca's failed attempts to stop Nero's worst instincts. Taylor's realization that his and his colleagues' approach to Trump was doomed to fail is a stunning parallel. In an interview with CNN, Taylor said, "The country cannot rely on well-intentioned, unelected bureaucrats around the President to steer him toward what's right. . . He has purged most of them anyway."¹³⁴

¹³¹ "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration," *New York Times*, Sept. 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, "Tracking Turnover in the Trump Administration," Aug. 14, 2020, Brookings Institute, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/>

¹³⁴ Tapper and Herb, "Author of 2018 'Anonymous' Op-Ed Critical of Trump Revealed."

That said, I will admit that I am *far* more sympathetic to Seneca than I am to any Trump official, partly because of the distance of time and partly because Seneca had fewer choices in his political system than we have in America. Nero was only a teenager when he ascended to the imperial throne, aided by his mother, Agrippina, who assassinated her husband, Claudius, to put Nero in power. There was no democratic election; Nero ascended through murder, and he was not the first nor last to do so. Agrippina had recalled Seneca from exile¹³⁵ to be Nero's tutor when he was a young teen and made him Nero's chief advisor. Agrippina's recall and appointment meant Seneca owed the family, and with a family that killed its own, one needed to be carefully compliant. So, while Seneca's insider status in Nero's reign had similarities to Trump's insiders and cabinet members, the stakes were far higher for Seneca—a matter of life and death. For that, as I've said, I felt sympathy was warranted.

Meanwhile, I felt that Taylor's presentation of the alternative, virtuous Trump lackey was a pseudo-attempt at presenting his Stoic martyrdom to the world. Our pop psychology definition of "stoicism"—a repression of emotions—is a very shallow understanding of the philosophy. While it is true that in the Stoic tradition, according to the *Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy*, the "ideal agent has no emotions," it is also true that "The ideal agent has 'good feelings' of wishing (which replaces desire), caution (which replaces fear), and joy (which replaces pleasure)."¹³⁶ What Seneca shows in his writing, and I try to show in my representation of Seneca as a character, is that his utmost concerns are living ethically and using reason to improve himself so that he may become virtuous. My own introduction to Stoicism was through Shakespeare's complication of the philosophy in his Roman plays, particularly

¹³⁵ According to James Romm, Seneca was accused of adultery with Caligula's sister, Livilla, as a matter of political expediency. Claudius's wife, Messalina, wanted both Livilla and Agrippina to be removed from Rome so that she could consolidate her own power over the emperor. Seneca happened to be a convenient man to accuse of adultery with Livilla, as they had a close relationship. He was sentenced to death for his supposed crime. However, Claudius commuted the sentence to exile in Corsica. See Romm, *Dying Every Day*, 25–28.

¹³⁶ Katja Vogt, "Seneca. 3.3 The Therapy of Emotions," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/seneca/#SenSto>

in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.¹³⁷ But as I learned more about Stoicism from reading Seneca's philosophical works and dramas, I realized that my own philosophical leanings happen to coincide strongly with Seneca's, despite Shakespeare's caveats. It was through reading Seneca that I was inspired to think much more deeply about Stoicism.

However, when faced with Shakespeare's warnings that Stoic ethics cannot shield a person from an unethical tyrant, one wonders if it pays to be ethical. And yet, Stoics would say seeking virtue is its own reward. In other words, it matters that you *seek* to be virtuous, even if you do not always succeed. Compare this noble concept of virtue seeking with the flagrantly unethical Trump administration and the chaos that has resulted from Trump's tactics, and one can see the appeal of a philosophy that, as Ryan Holiday writes, advises its followers to "Take obstacles in your life and turn them into your advantage, control what you can and accept what you can't."¹³⁸ For the novice Stoic, Seneca's writings, both philosophical and dramatic, are an excellent gateway. He is often didactic in his approach and asks the reader to follow his example in using reflection and reason in the quest for self-improvement. In his treatise *On Anger*, Seneca gives a prescriptive example of how one should deal with personal shortcomings:

I pass the whole day in review before myself, and repeat all that I have said and done: I conceal nothing from myself, and omit nothing: for why should I be afraid of any of my shortcomings, when it is in my power to say, "I pardon you this time: see that you never do that anymore?"¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Shakespeare suggests in both *Brutus's* and *Antony's* failures and suicides in the two aforementioned plays that Stoicism fails to neutralize Machiavellian realpolitik, however attractive the tenants of Stoicism.

¹³⁸ Ryan Holiday, "Stoicism: Practical Philosophy You Can Actually Use," blog post, June 17, 2014, *Ryan Holiday: Meditations on Strategy and Life*, <https://ryanholiday.net/stoicism-a-practical-philosophy-you-can-actually-use/>

¹³⁹ Seneca, "The Fifth Book of the Dialogues of L. Annaeus Seneca, Addressed to Novatus. 'Of Anger,' Book III," sec. XXXII, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Of_Anger/Book_III#XXXVI.

The idea that self-improvement is something that must be addressed routinely shows that emotional regulation and self-care were practices that Seneca struggled with himself, but one's failings are not something to dwell on, Seneca says—you can do better next time. Seneca's one-day-at-a-time mentality feels progressive and modern to me and suggests that failure is not the end of any given situation. And yet if we're to believe Tacitus, Suetonius, and others, Seneca failed to fashion Nero into a virtuous man. This failure ultimately led to Seneca's death. In my play, Seneca nevertheless persists — not only because he believes it is his Stoic duty to mentor Nero, but also because he cares for him, thinking of him as a son.

Seneca and the Soul of Nero opens on the day that Claudius dies and Nero, in effect, becomes emperor. Seneca and Nero have been interrupted in their studies of the Curse of the House of Atreus, a revenge myth that Seneca writes about in two of his tragedies—*Thyestes* and *Agamemnon*. Seneca's wife, Pompeia Paulina (nicknamed Poppy), opens the play, saying, “I thought you were teaching today, husband. Or has Nero claimed omnipotence already?”¹⁴⁰ Poppy is a far more important character in my play than history suggests. Her virtue and wit match her husband's, and she is a true partner to her philosopher husband. She knows that Nero is impetuous, but charming—as we see when friendly banter between the titular characters that tilts toward danger:

Nero: Philosophy, psh! You do not like to laugh, Master Seneca.

Seneca: I laugh at you every day!

Nero: (Joking) To your peril, my friend.¹⁴¹

While Seneca and Nero tease each other amiably, the purpose of the scene is to set up the tension in their relationship. From the beginning of the play, you see that while Seneca and Nero are close, as teachers and students sometimes are, the power balance between them is always askew, in this case

¹⁴⁰ Marcia Eppich-Harris, “Seneca and the Soul of Nero,” unpublished manuscript, act 1, scene 1, p. 1 (in Marcia Eppich Harris's possession).

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

with the student rather than the teacher having the political upper hand. I see this sort of tension play out in the Trump administration—from when Trump, a political novice, demanded loyalty from James Comey to his infamous telephone call with Volodymyr Zelensky, the president of Ukraine. Nero’s murders of his support system, including his mother, Agrippina, his first wife, Octavia, his second wife, Poppaea Sabina,¹⁴² and the ordered suicide of Seneca mirror Trump’s dismissal of members of his administration who were once avid supporters, such as Jeff Sessions, Reince Priebus, and John Bolton, among many others—not to mention Trump’s stoking of violence in the Capitol insurrection by telling domestic terrorist supporters that he loved them in a video statement on January 6, 2021.

In writing historical fiction, a writer frequently takes liberties with causation and timing of events to tell a good story. Shakespeare, for instance, telescoped time constantly in his history plays, collapsing several years into one play and only portraying events that illuminate specific themes. In most cases, Shakespeare used the politically correct version of a character (politically correct for his time) and illustrated them in a way that would please the reigning monarch and the censors, whether that portrayal was true to historic fact or not. Both Prince Hal and Richard III are good examples of Shakespeare towing a party line, regardless of the historical accuracy (or inaccuracy) of his sources. In my play, I collapsed several years into two hours, and in doing so, I had to make choices about what to portray, using episodes that showed causal relationships between events to make a point. I selected scenarios that I felt would show a strong connection between current events and Nero’s reign, as well as juxtapose Stoic virtue and narcissistic villainy. For instance, Tacitus reports that Nero killed his then-pregnant second wife, Poppaea Sabina, by kicking her to death during a tantrum.¹⁴³ This event

¹⁴² Poppaea Sabina is the historical name for Nero’s second wife. I use the name Sabina to distinguish her from Seneca’s wife, Pompeia Paulina. In the theater, the names might easily be confused.

¹⁴³ Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (Pantianos Classics, 2017), 245.

happened in 65 CE, after the great fire of Rome and Seneca's forced suicide. However, I changed the order of these events for the sake of social commentary. In my play, Nero kills Poppaea Sabina, then in revenge for his *own* mistake, he punishes Rome by setting it on fire, destroying the city while he mourns in Antium, keeping Seneca, who had asked to retire and was denied, at his side. In the next scene, a conspiracy to overthrow Nero is unveiled, and Nero condemns Seneca to suicide. In Tacitus's account, the conspiracy was to put Gaius Calpurnius Piso, an aristocrat, on the imperial throne, but Romm notes that it might have been the desire of the Praetorians, led by Subrius Flavus, to put Seneca himself on the throne.¹⁴⁴ For a streamlined dramatic effect, I edit Piso out of the picture to focus on the conflict between Nero's and Seneca's points of view. The chain of events in the play allegorically represents Trump's first impeachment. His own misbehavior caused Trump an incredible number of personal and political headaches, including impeachment, but more significantly, his actions punished America for electing him. After the Capitol insurrection, Trump was impeached again, and yet, the Senate's acquittals in each impeachment trial suggest to me that the America I had believed in—where politics could be set aside to address clear wrongdoings—had been unequivocally lost, or perhaps never existed in the first place. What virtue, if any, is extant in America? Perhaps a Stoic such as Seneca can inspire us to seek it out in ourselves.

I am not the only person to equate Trump with Nero or to bemoan a lost sense of virtue. Although I started writing my play long before it was published, a book titled *American Nero: The History of the Destruction of the Rule of Law, and Why Trump Is the Worst Offender* was published just before Trump's impeachment trial.¹⁴⁵ As the *Washington Post* reported, the book centers around the "icy, granular detail, of what has happened to constitutional democracy in three short years, and all that we have absorbed,

¹⁴⁴ Romm, *Dying Every Day*, 181.

¹⁴⁵ Richard Painter and Peter Golenbock, *American Nero: The History of the Destruction of the Rule of Law, and Why Trump Is the Worst Offender* (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2020).

integrated and somehow moved beyond. In some sense, then, it stands less as a unified argument than as a scrapbook of things that no longer horrify us.”¹⁴⁶ In retrospect, several months later, no one could have predicted Trump’s impending failures—not containing the COVID-19 pandemic and inciting insurrection. Ironically, a month after the first impeachment trial concluded, on March 9, 2020, #NeroTrump was trending on Twitter after Trump retweeted a meme of himself playing a violin with a fire burning in the background, captioned, “My next piece is called. . . Nothing can stop what’s coming.”¹⁴⁷ Trump wrote in his tweet, “I don’t know what this means, but it sounds good to me.” Critics jumped on Trump, as former Federal Bureau of Investigation Assistant Director and NBC News contributor Frank Figliuzzi did: “It means that playing golf while Americans die during an uncontained epidemic makes you look like the Emperor Nero fiddling while Rome burned. The fact that neither you nor your social media director understand this meme and retweeted it makes you even more oblivious than Nero.”¹⁴⁸ Continuing the analogy, Bernie Sanders, in his speech at the Democratic National Convention, said regarding Trump’s handling of the pandemic, “Nero fiddled while Rome burned; Trump golfs. His actions fanned this pandemic, resulting in over 170,000 deaths and a nation still unprepared to protect its people.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Dahlia Lithwick, “Defending the Rule of Law in the Trump Era,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/defending-the-rule-of-law-in-the-trump-era/2020/03/19/7dfac5d0-618a-11ea-845d-e35b0234b136_story.html

¹⁴⁷ According to *The Hill*, the tweet was originally posted by White House social media director Dan Scavino on March 8, 2020.

¹⁴⁸ Frank Figliuzzi (@FrankFigliuzzi1), “playing golf while Americans die during an uncontained epidemic makes you look like the Emperor Nero fiddling while Rome burned,” March 8, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FrankFigliuzzi1/status/1236793534964883456>

¹⁴⁹ Bernie Sanders, transcript of speech to Democratic National Convention, Aug. 18, 2020, National Public Radio, https://www.npr.org/2020/08/18/903398536/watch-bernie-sanders-speech-to-the-democratic-national-convention?utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=politics&utm_term=nprnews&utm_source=facebook.com&fbclid=IwAR2Zj084P_-bX_XP4O448VwvNUK-mc943sI8zK3Un5E-JJLFAW3Ta6Bcr1g. As of June 19, 2021, there have been almost 600,000 deaths from COVID-19 in the United States according to the CDC Covid Data Tracker. See <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#demographics>.

In all, it took about seven months to complete *Seneca and the Soul of Nero*, although I had been mulling over the idea for some time. For me, writing about Seneca was cathartic, especially knowing that his position in Nero's court must have felt like climbing a mudslide. But writing this play also reminded me that the arts, especially theatre, have a crucial place at the political and historical table. In *Seneca and the Soul of Nero*, every major character dies with no Horatio left to tell their stories or mourn them. To me, it was important that every character died, not because I'm morbid but because I wanted to show the totality of the destruction wrought by Nero's pathology. If we had been forced to endure another four years of Trump in the White House, I believe the American republic would also have suffered a similar calamity. This is why writers must document the cycles of political history in the arts to remind ourselves of what we're capable of as human beings, both for good and ill.

As a demonstration of this belief, I wrote two different scenes in my play in which Seneca is writing tragedies to teach Nero. In writing both scenes, I felt an intimate connection to Seneca that collapsed the 2000 years between our historical moments. At heart, both Seneca and I are teachers, and we both believe in trying to do the right thing, working toward self-improvement despite inevitable failures, and honoring reason and virtue. I can relate to Seneca's desire not to give up on Nero, as a teacher so often does not want to give up on her wayward students. Nor do I want to give up on America. While it's true that Trump was not elected to a second term, with voters admonishing his administration—unlike the craven Republican Senators who voted twice not to convict Trump of high crimes and misdemeanors—in the greater scope of history, we often do not learn the lessons that we should. Playwrights, therefore, must not cease to engage creatively with history, politics, and philosophy. It is our duty to cut through the grind of endless partisan chatter. The art that we create in this era can last longer than the tell-all books of fired cabinet members. And as with Shakespeare's and Seneca's works, our contemporary plays will have something to tell future generations about our past and their present simultaneously.

That said, if *Seneca and the Soul of Nero* is *only* about the Trump administration, then it's not a very good play. The larger questions in the play about leadership, Stoicism, ethics, duty, and virtue are themes that have been around for a long time. Shakespeare thought about them; Seneca thought about them. If past is prologue, there's a good chance that we will always have to think about these themes. What we will conclude is anyone's guess, but I think it's the playwright's duty to encourage audiences to refine our sense of what our obligations are as citizens, and the first, and perhaps most important, obligation is to remember.

A Long Time from Burdick Street

Luanne Castle

Five years ago, I stood near the push-to-walk button and glanced kitty-corner across the wide main street to where the luggage store had once stood. Rather than scrutinizing the current façade--straight lines and too-new reddish brick—I envisioned the narrow window filled with a display of attachés and briefcases. The PNC bank logo had replaced the striped sign with the bull’s horn logo that had been a part of our family history and identity, but I imagined the old back-lit marquee still there.

Back in my hometown of Kalamazoo, Michigan, for my father’s funeral, I saw the downtown that had once meant so much to him through my own lens. What had been scruffy, but vibrant and quirky, now seemed genteel but melancholy. I found it hard to shake the fog of grief.

Turning around, I looked down at what remained of the Kalamazoo Mall. Once famous as the first outdoor pedestrian mall in the country, Burdick Street was now reopened to traffic, the fountain and little playground long-since demolished. “For Lease” signs obscured the emptiness behind many windows. As if stores weren’t necessary to the downtown economy, leafy trees in early fall color shielded the signage. A narrow street and decorative brick sidewalks had replaced the concrete mall. This morning, the storefronts that once had seemed like magical portals to different worlds were quickly passed by anonymous cars, notwithstanding the city’s attempts to spruce up the center of town.

A pillar erected at the corner of Burdick and West Michigan Avenue displayed a plaque commemorating the mall and telling its history. I leaned against it as a wave of dizziness swept over

me. Memories assaulted me. The angel hair white and red velvet of Santa and Mrs. Claus in the department store window; the gift stores selling tapestries, incense, and dangly earrings from India; the July sidewalk sales I worked as my father yelled to passersby with a megaphone; the Peter Max silk scarf I discovered in a stack of cheap fabrics at J.C. Penney; the patty melts and olive burgers I devoured at the diner. All those family-owned businesses gone. Our family-owned luggage store long gone.

After lunch, I traveled farther south on Burdick Street, to the community where my mother and her father before her had grown up. At Balch Street, Grandpa had owned a Sunoco station. Before Grandpa was born, his father had immigrated from the Netherlands and opened a fish market and, eventually, a soda shop on the same site that the station later stood. The retail businesses my family owned didn't begin in the United States. My ancestors owned a paint and colonial goods store in the Netherlands. Before that, they were bakers, shoemakers, and tailors—all trades that foreshadowed retail businesses selling bread, shoes, and clothing.

I found the area desolate where the soda shop and then my grandfather's Sunoco Station had been located. The corner where I had spent time with my grandfather was now a case management operation for the disabled. The only building left standing was the unique brick house across the street. I tried to justify away the pain I felt at the loss of the family businesses. After all, change is necessary to life.

###

Grandpa was down in the pit, operating on the belly of a customer's car. I sat right under the display of road maps, listening to the talk of the men who hung out at the station and eying the machine that popped out fancy green glass bottles of Coke when someone put in a quarter. As usual, I had no quarter.

“What do you think about that Kennedy, huh?” one said.

“It was Eisenhower who started this with Cuba.”

I stared out through the glass-paned front door and saw the reverse lettering of *Sunoco Oil*, followed by *A-Z Lubrication*, and then, *Adrian Zuidweg, Proprietor*. The notion of Grandpa’s name starting with the first and last letters of the alphabet fascinated me.

Later, Grandpa took me out behind and showed me the tomato plants he grew back there. “Look at them tomaters,” he said, bending down and holding up a small green tomato just starting to blush. “Kalamazoo muck.” He ran his fingers through the moist black soil. “For celery and flowers.”

“How come you’re growing tomatoes then?” I looked at Grandpa’s mismatched eyes set in his craggy face. I tried to remember which was the blind eye—the blue or the green one.

Grandpa pointed to some zinnias on the other side of the door, then showed me the difference between a weed and a tomato plant.

My grandfather’s daily routine never varied. Early morning, he drove downtown to Michigan News Agency for a paper, then read it over blueberry pancakes Grandma served him. When he had finished the paper, he walked past two houses to his corner service station. That’s what we called it—not a gas station because the emphasis was on the service. The boys and one elderly man who worked for Grandpa filled tanks and polished windshields. I didn’t want any part of that work, and the gas and oil smell permeating even the coarse paper towels in the tiny restroom made me want to wash my hands when I got home. “What’s there to do? I’m bored.” I rolled my head with practiced drama.

Grandpa pulled off his Sunoco cap and smoothed it back down on his thinning gray hair, nodding across Balch Street to the distinctive brick house on the corner. “My grandfather built that house. I grew up there. See the light stripe through that dark brick? That’s his signature. He built the Ladies Library Association uptan, too.”

The house was a little taller than the wood-sided homes on the block, so it impressed me to know Grandpa had grown up there. “Where did your parents live?”

“Inside the house. We all lived together. Before Dad died, he turned the fish market into a candy and ice cream shop. He bought a genuine marble countertop during the Depression.” I didn’t find out until years later that Grandpa’s father died soon after purchasing the countertop. Then in rapid succession, my grandfather’s grandfather and mother died, leaving him alone at age twenty-one. The family business sustained my grandfather and allowed him to marry my grandmother and begin a family.

That night, over crispy liver and onions, I announced that I would never work with stinky cars. “Too bad Grandpa didn’t keep the ice cream store!”

My mother put down her fork. “You could have taken it over when you grew up. Been an entrepreneur.”

I gave her the fisheye. “I’m going to be a writer!”

###

Dad had an unfortunate argument with his boss and came home yelling. A week later, he signed a lease for a one-room office in a corrugated metal building on Lake Street on the east side of Kalamazoo. It had a parking space big enough for a garbage truck.

“Hun, I’m starting it on a shoestring,” Dad said one night when his thoughts were off outside our living room, and I was the only person in the room. I looked up from my *Dolls of the World* coloring book, crayon poised in mid-air, and scrutinized his face. In my mind, I imagined him with an open shoebox containing a few coins, some baseball trading cards, and one shoelace.

“Janet, what’s a good name for the business?” He called to Mom in the kitchen.

A few days later, he came home with a used garbage truck he’d bought from the city. After giving me the tour of it, he let me sit on the sidewalk and give him advice while he painted *Industrial Waste Disposal Company* on its side in the big, bold letters my second-grade teacher encouraged. “Make the / straighter, Daddy. Like a soldier.”

Within weeks, we settled into our new routine. Until he could hire a man to help, Dad did all the physical work of the business. I liked to ride with him in the cab of the front-loader garbage truck, thrilling when its two automated forks jabbed at the dumpsters like monstrous earwig pincers.

Without Dad's paycheck coming in, our finances needed to be handled with the attention to detail that only my mother could provide. Mom staked out her spot at a desk shoved into a corner of the basement. Like Mary in *Babes in Toyland*, she moaned once a week over a stack of bills from that seat of grief.

I sat on the floor near Mom's desk, under the fluorescent lamp, and wrote little stories on scrap paper. Sometime in the hazy future, I planned to be just like Jo March, with a pet rat, a school of children, and a desk where I could write books.

My father had the heart of a small business owner but not always the head for it. He hadn't grown up in a family business the way Grandpa had, or Mom—or me. Rather than staying put and doing his best, Dad was always looking for a new business deal, and in those early days, more often than not, they weren't very successful. When he bought the "20 acres," we drove for hours to take a look at the sleepy woods out in the middle of nowhere. Then my parents talked about the "50 acres" and, later, the "back 12." He would trade one for another or for a small, failing business, and too often, he didn't come out ahead. Even so, he wouldn't quit. When I wanted to give up ballet because the big girls intimidated me or tried to leave a game because I was losing, he always said, "Don't be a quitter. Quitters never get ahead."

Nevertheless, Dad was forced to sell the trash business. The story I heard my father tell someone was that a man from the Chicago mob came to Dad's office. The guy fingered a knife while he explained to my father why he had to sell to the man's "company." Dad accepted the lowball offer. Many years later, I realized that the mob was Dad's embellishment, but the story's truth nugget was

that the buyer was slicker and rougher than my father. I suspect my father, who lacked investment funds, couldn't face the fact that his first business didn't have enough capital to stay afloat.

###

I looked up from my tenth-grade algebra book and stretched my neck. From where I perched on the chair at the little desk in the back room of the luggage store, I could see through the opening onto the sales floor. The black-flecked red indoor-outdoor carpeting, left over from the bar that had closed the year before, was frayed at the seam down the middle.

Dad had used the money from the sale of the trash business to buy the company on a land contract from an older couple who were retiring to Florida. At that time, the store had been in a larger, sunlit space with plenty of low display islands for matching sets of pink, midnight blue, or olive green aluminum-framed vinyl luggage. It attracted the wealthiest customers, and they had followed the store when Dad moved it because it was the only luggage and leather goods store in Kalamazoo.

Now I noticed that the sets were no longer full; powder blue Ventura was missing a tote bag and a 24" and there was only one piece of white Samsonite left. The main room in the basement had been stacked floor to ceiling with cardboard-boxed suitcases when Dad moved the store. There had been stacks of six to ten cases, but now the pallets to protect the merchandise from flooding were occasionally visible; for many styles and sizes, there was no backstock at all.

Farther down the narrow space, up front by the display window and front door, were the glass cases. On the west side, leather handbags hung on wall hooks behind the women's Buxton and Princess Gardner billfolds, cigarette cases—both long and short—leather key cases, and cosmetic bags. On the east side, glass cases held wooden trays of men's billfolds stitched out of genuine top grain cowhide, fandango calf, and Moroccan leather. Behind the cases, men's brief bags and attaché cases were stacked sideways like books on shelves, and a wooden library ladder hung from a metal sliding bar to reach the catalog cases on top.

I had to peer around the mountain of bills and correspondence on the desk because it towered above my head. Nancy, the full-time salesperson, walked past me to set a train case with a broken handle on the shelf of “to do” repairs. We hadn’t seen Dad in hours. Mom always said Dad had ants in his pants. Staying put in a store was not in my father’s DNA.

“Nancy, why are all these bills here?” I’d never seen such a glaring example of an untidy mind. Although Dad ruled our lives, Mom took charge of the house. It had taken her until I was ten to train Dad not to drop cigarette ashes into the bathroom sink, but she ran a pretty organized household. The out-of-control nature of the paperwork alarmed and amazed me.

Nancy put on her best rueful expression. “Your Dad hates doing that stuff. He hoped I’d take it over.” Nancy had the same aquiline nose, light brown eyes, and graying hair as my father, but her puppy dog joviality set them apart. “Heck, I admit I’m not any better at that stuff than he is.”

I slid open an envelope with my finger. The form letter inside had a big red stamp across it: PAST DUE. I wasn’t sure what Dad expected me to do. He’d airily gestured to the pile and suggested I might want to do something with it. However, I had been oblivious to Mom paying the bills at home and had absorbed nothing about the process.

“They want their money, that’s what it means. Why don’t you go out on the floor and straighten the billfold trays?” I could see the pity on her face. Nancy figured I would rather be with customers than stuck with the pile of bills, but I preferred to hide behind paperwork, avoiding strangers and sneak-reading a book.

“Be sure the \$16 and ups aren’t mixed into the \$10 tray.” Nancy lit up a Virginia Slim over by the dirty sink at the top of the stairs.

###

My husband turned up the radio volume. “Listen!” I was standing in our suburban luggage store’s deep display window, adjusting fake fall leaves in the Thanksgiving exhibit I was creating. To hear the radio better, I had to jump down and walk toward the center transaction island.

Ira’s body tensed as he strained toward the ceiling speaker. “The stock market is tanking!”

Neither of us had a job outside our long days at the store. We had a baby son and expected the arrival of a baby daughter in a few months. Also, I was a graduate student working on a not-so-lucrative degree in creative writing. Since we had bought the store from my father, we had moved the luggage store to a larger, sunnier location. We had increased the inventory dramatically to give customers the feeling that we had every suitcase, leather accessory, and related item under one roof. I suppose that we were trying to bring the store back to its condition when my father had purchased it twenty years before.

Inventory is money, though, and it meant more bills and a greater need for that bugaboo “cash flow.” Customers needed to keep buying every single day. They couldn’t get scared of the stock market and “hold off.”

A week later, Ira and I went across the street to a restaurant bar. I stirred my Bloody Mary and examined the olives and celery stalk on the plastic sword while Ira talked. I heard “writing on the wall” and “time to get out.” I forced myself to focus on the difficult conversation we needed to have.

“Luggage is changing, you know.” I ate the first olive.

Ira nodded. “The direction it’s moving in is cheapo stuff from China.”

I chewed on the second olive. “You know I want to write, not stand in the store all day. Although I would be happy continuing to run the office and making the displays. If we can’t keep it going, what will you do?” I didn’t want to increase Ira’s disappointment, but I loved not having to work for someone else. If I had to have a survival job for writing, let it be where I could be creative and control my schedule.

Ira tossed the rest of his drink back. “I couldn’t stand seeing my father working for my uncle. He should have been the boss. My grandparents owned a candy store on Sutton Place, you know.”

“Really? My grandfather inherited a candy and soda shop from his father!”

Ira signaled the server to bring us another round. “There used to be a candy store on every other corner. They’re like dinosaurs.” With that comment, we both sat in silence until our drinks arrived.

###

Although I figured that the doorbell meant another package had been dropped on the doorstep, I clicked *save* on the story I was revising. With the recent rash of mail thefts in the Phoenix area, I wanted to retrieve the package right away.

Besides the Walgreens at the corner and grocery shopping, I hadn’t been inside a store for several weeks. Cat food and litter, household supplies, even cosmetics, I ordered through my Amazon Prime account. A day or two later, the package would appear. I was finding it increasingly difficult to find the merchandise I wanted to purchase in local stores. Still, every time I read about a store going out of business, a sickening wave of loss passed through me.

As Americans began to shop more and more online, I still couldn’t see how fully we would turn our backs on retail until 2020, when quarantine and lockdowns kept so many of us from shopping in already-beleaguered local retail stores. Even after my visit back to Kalamazoo, I stuck to my philosophy that change is necessary. My family had sold what people wanted, and those wants did not remain the same. In 1910, people demanded fresh fish. By 1925, they had enough pocket change for sodas and candy. Americans began to travel more in the 1950s and 1960s, so they required luggage. Now that so many retail businesses have shuttered or are floundering from the COVID-19 pandemic, I see a broader viewpoint. The danger to retail companies is no longer in the product. Retail itself is in danger of extinction.

But in 2016, I was still not focused on the gradual decline of retail. The box in front of my door was larger than usual. I couldn't remember what I had ordered, but that wasn't unusual. My front porch had become the setting for a revolving supply of packages. When I sliced the tape with the scissors' blade, I saw the suitcase inside--a lightweight molded carry-on with wheels. I checked the packing slip. My daughter had ordered it for herself. Ira and I owned three sets of luggage, but they were from our store's era—too heavy and clumsy to think of handling without a porter's assistance.

At the time, the irony of my daughter purchasing a suitcase when we used to be the only store in town for high-quality luggage struck me with the force of another loss. I lifted the new suitcase again, thrilled by its seeming weightlessness. At least this would be more convenient than an old-fashioned train case for bottles and jars as we used to sell. I thought about how the carry-on would make up a bit for how uncomfortable air travel has become. For my first flight, I wore my best dress and Mary Janes, and the stewardess who wore a trim suit and smart little hat pinned a set of "gold" wings on my chest. After an hour of snacks, I walked down the ramp-stairs feeling like a pampered princess. When I flew to Kalamazoo after my father's death, carrying my own bags and rushing from one airport gate to another had left me frazzled. Although that first flight was far more enjoyable than the last, ten months into the pandemic has left me craving any kind of travel. I want to spend time in family-owned shops and restaurants in the United States and abroad. I hope they will not be gone when the pandemic is over.

Of Ratner's Born

Daniel Morris

Tonight, in Indy after bringing newborn Hannah home to 52nd and Delaware from St. Vincent's Hospital off 86th and Ditch (our nurse, Wanda, a Sister, a cross in every room), I light the range, coat the frying pan with an excessive amount of oil, and then place the six frozen Ratner's cheese blintzes fold side down (as instructed on the package) in the pan to brown. These are "Kosher for Passover" blintzes, made, the package says, "with special matzo flour." Small world, this late capitalism. Even in Central Indiana we get blintzes from Ratner's! Even at the goyish Marsh Supermarket on 86th and Ditch!

No one else in this household that now includes three infants, two bewildered parents, and my in-laws is even trying to avoid chametz, though I did wolf the kosher, but breaded, soy chicken patties cold for lunch that 18-month-old Aaron and 30-month-old Isaac didn't touch. In an example of family resemblance by way of diet, not talent, I follow in the footsteps of Isaac B. Singer, whom I used to observe eating his hard roll and black coffee at a cafeteria in South Miami Beach. Am I a vegetarian because I thought the choice would inspire my Yiddishkeit muse to speak to me? Given my responsibilities, I think now more pragmatically about how the need for protein outweighs the strict adherence to Passover rules. For me, certainly not on a low carb diet, just avoiding my ersatz Einstein bagel (with heart healthy butter spread and decaf in the morning) seems sacrifice enough. And so, I eat the faux chicken dipped in the (need I say?) Tref mini plastic container of McDonald's barbeque sauce that accompanies the McNuggets that go with a trip to the Children's Museum, where I managed

not to lose either infant son yesterday. I went to the museum to keep our minds off their mom, who was delivering their baby sister.

When it comes to keeping Kosher for Passover, see, I bend the rules. More accurately, I invent my own. I decide, for example, that buying Kosher for Passover soaps and spices and dressings and jellies is simply going overboard. I refuse to line the pockets of Manischewitz, which gouges for items that range in taste and texture from glue to sawdust and yet somehow still everything is 300 calories for a tablespoon serving of salad dressing. If that sounds like a case of a self-hating Jewish commentary, so be it! They charge four dollars for a sugar-spiked coffee cake mix that is really enough for maybe two people at breakfast and takes 45 minutes to stir in their little aluminum pan. A cake mix that I believe should cost no more than 99 cents. I rationalize. I follow the *spirit* of the Passover laws. It is like being “mindful” of the Sabbath, even as I shop, drive and check my business email on Saturday. Isn’t the focus on spirit, rather than law, a Christian virtue?

Once icy pale planks of tough if eggshell thin white dough, the blintzes are now to my surprise frying quite nicely to golden brown in the bubbly hot oil. It is then that the blintzes transform once more into a symbolic image: The Lower East Side blintz. I have, in fact, eaten such storied cheese filled crepes myself, as did my late father, Ernie, before me, at the real places in Brooklyn and the East Village. I’m talking the now-defunct Ratner’s, where my father took my mother, Phyllis, who can’t be here in Indy right now because she has dialysis down in Pembroke Pines. I’m talking the now-defunct Kiev, where my friend Stephen once had Allen Ginsberg write a poem especially for him on a napkin (Ginsy used Stephen’s back as a desk). I’m talking even more authentic places with Hebrew names I never could pronounce, such as where my friend Norman, another poet, who lives in Cincy, once bumped into Donald, a neighbor from Cincy whom Norman hadn’t seen in years.

My blintzes are inauthentic, but they resemble the real item. (Of course, the New York blintz is itself a 20th-century re-creation of the humble cigar-shaped blins that for centuries filled the bellies of

Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern and Central Europe and Russia before their erasure by Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin and World War II). Granted, I used a hell of a lot of oil to get the blintzes to imitate the image in my head of the East Coast version, choosing the heart-unhealthy but potentially more Jewish of the two methods listed on the back of the box. The blintzes fried, but not too much, I offer two with applesauce to George, my Presbyterian but open-minded father-in-law. The blintzes are not so exotic to him as I had predicted (hoped?). It turns out George used to order sweet cheese filled crepes at the IHOP all the time in New Haven when he was a prep school Yale in the 1950s. Aaron, a year and a half, toddle hops in semi-circles with a piece of a blintz for a while before giving it back to me. To my pleasure, however, Aaron tastes some applesauce with a fork. He has a thing for sauces and dips — the ketchup not the fries, the orange French dressing not the iceberg lettuce, the maple flavor icing not the cake donut. Bread products for him are devices to deliver toppings. Bread is to be dropped when the topping has been completely licked off by tongue and teeth on mouth and hands and shirt and table. Aaron will do very well around Passover restrictions in the future, I suspect, as I put on pounds eating off the floor the various crusts left behind from peanut butter sandwiches and pizzas of long ago. I stuff in my mouth the rest of the still warm blintz Aaron rejected, then, sensing I'm the only one interested in having more, gobble the last two. That is four (of the six) blintzes in all for me.

I have motive. Who but me in this household could decipher the symbolic meaning of my gluttony? Who could know I prepared these blintzes as a private ritual act and consumed them in the same unruly manner on behalf of the memory of my late father, Irwin Walter Morris, among the heavy sons of Brooklyn, gone these 30 plus years, on the day we bring my daughter home, named for my mother's mother, Hannah?

Without Ratner's Dairy Restaurant, formerly of 138 Delancey Street on the Lower East Side, a case could be made I would not be here. Hannah would not be here. These blintzes now in my belly

would still be stacked in their box behind the glass cases in the frozen foods section of the Marsh on 86th and Ditch. It was Ratner's, after all, where my father took my mother, Phyllis, on their first date. My mother remembers with some repulsiveness and laughter. Her future husband inhaling the basket of warm onion rolls with loads of butter. God how he loved those famous free rolls with real butter!

I am myself daydreaming of those baskets of warm onion rolls and butter when my son Aaron toddles out the front screen door. I wasn't aware of Aaron's escape until I hear his shy "hi" in the darkness from the sidewalk. Thank God he didn't go into the street! It is a dead-end suburban street in a very good midwestern neighborhood, but still! Anything can happen.

When I am seven and it is summer, and it is 1969 and Daddy is still a third-grade teacher in a town called Hicksville. And we live on Long Island, and we are a family on Jones Beach. We are near where Daddy was stationed as a Coast Guard attendant in the tower at the drawbridge during World War II (the very tower he pointed out each time we passed it on the way to the beach). And now the riptides of the Atlantic are trying to take my seven-year-old self in for good. The undertow has me until Daddy rather nonchalantly bends his knees, and, like a primitive fisherman, clutches my left arm with his ham hock right hand. He refuses to let me leave this world too early, and now I am here in Indy, belly full and totally blessed.

Radio at Night

Wm. Anthony Connolly

[thrumming]

Drowsily dreaming lying in bed, warm sun leaking through the sheer curtain, I awoke—my mind struggling with disorientation; where was I? All around me, the room spun in the gloaming, whirling things, places, moments. My body heavy still with sleep, tried to build itself, to reassembly its various parts, its form, that it might give where I was a name. My convolutions, through the reassembling of feet, and thighs; of ribs and lungs, fingertips and shoulder blades, eyelids and ear tips, each conjured from morphing accoutrements; pieces of furniture, smells; light through the curtains, a litany of rooms in which it had one time or another slept and resurrected itself in the midst of the maelstrom dust moats and burgeoning day. And before I could register with my brain any of this, my body catalogues the successive rooms, their bedspreads, the occupants, my brother, then no brother, Man Mr. Nobody, hunching guardian angels resting on bedposts and windowsills; and slowly, it all rose and fell, into me—and I thought I heard an answer to a question I had been contemplating lately come from the radio. The signal is a mix of static and clarity—I cannot tell if it is me or the radio? And it says:

He ain't heavy he's my brother

Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister.

There are spaces too

[*he ain't heavy* ... I miss my dead brother, my dying mother, my sisters, my brother, friends fading dastardly constellations.

I try to make sense draw up a shape ...]

... of roaring silence, a drone thrumming deep down in my bones echoing an emptying, a filling up; propinquity, but of what? Not realizing it happens like that, until it has happened, and afterwards drunk on the beauty of it so inexplicable and indescribable.

Later, this I write down, my pen digging furrows in a journal. I worry these pages—*these dead me scrolls*. I worry sometimes about these pages falling loose, like leaves or garbage, on the street and being found, being found out, found out for what is found there on these fugitive pages. Leaves of lacunae; exegesis of the soul unrolled for consumption by ravenous dogs and gyrovague sojourners who need the sheaths as blankets. The contents of my head. Last utterances until they become the precursory, proem to more.

In these pages, a quiet madness, an incessant ache to love and be loved; a continual Chautauqua with some unseen entity who may or may not know what is best for me in matters of chess moves and careers. In this accounting, evidence of a mild case of self-inflicted, self-diagnosed autism: My head full of nothing one day, and then crowded with the scents of flowers not yet found, echoes of tunes not yet heard. Head filled with trapped *sparrows*. But mostly yearning.

Now, the answer on a radio, distant, me lying in bed stunned and sleepy, does not say this—it says, in a flutter in the chest, to keep writing it all down, to keep an ear piqued. Something about gravity and grace, and love, always love. The beauty of the world is a labyrinth we are told, and our ache is making its way through. I rise and go into the study. Ever since childhood, I had been a fugitive. I called Kenny N a nigger when he slashed me across the legs with a hockey stick. My horror and the beating he laid on me, made me a recluse and never again, would I face my darkest fears—that I was a dumb creature—I would write them down instead. Ineffable screed. And so, the fugitive needs a record.

On the way to my study, I think of pennies (my brain a Pachinko machine). For all those pennies offered and lost, being unable to say exactly what can be discovered here. I wonder now where all those misspent pennies are in wonky stacks smelling of copper and sweat. Or marbles sunk in freshly dug shallow graves. The young friend with a prized cat's eye. My salad days of schoolyards and summer holidays; running across winter ice, traversing snowy continents, my footfalls the only trace of my existence.

[this is me dreaming]

Taking them back, I remember crying to *Detroit Rock City*, a song about dying young in a car crash. *No time to turn*. Bass line. I remember a friend, whom I had not seen in weeks, arriving on my doorstep and handing me a gift: a knife. Blood stain Rorschach on dark velvet paisley wallpaper. My brother died that summer, on a stretch of the highway undulating from his drunken eyes, but lived another two decades to haunt himself.

He ain't heavy he's my brother

Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister

Oh she loves me, loves me like a rock, my mother

Holy Ghost, son and father

Back then, I remember defending a gay man against the taunts of my friends—one of the proudest moments of my life. And afterwards, for years, seeing this man and sharing unspoken moments; a nod of the head, a quick hand in the air, a smile as if saying together: do you believe this shit. Such small gifts. It happened long ago, but I can still feel its impact. It rounds up back.

He ain't heavy he's my brother

Back then, I was going to be a star. They all told me this. Silver screen. Sunny days, flat prairies, and sky aquamarine. Running faster than most. Hiking through rows of corn as if sentinels at posts. Gasoline in a pothole filled with rainwater. The taste of it, sweet and dangerous; foreign to my hunger. Dad wrapping strawberries in paper towels, in tin foil and plastic, and ice. A house on the edge of an open field burnished in the sun, burning leaves in some sacrifice. Listening to contraband radio under

the sheets at night. Unseen signals from afar riding milk moonlight. Thrumming in the bones. *Blinded by the Light*—the shivering unknowns. Her flat stomach, skin milk, honey, soft, the line of hair leading down. Anita. My fingers: The moaning. Anita. *Another runner in the night*. Making love in forest cathedrals with dawn birdsong and dark basements, with the music loud enough to cover us with dark sides of moons, to give us stairways to heaven, to sing of a farewell to kings. The feel of my bike between my legs as I pedaled, alone, down a stretch of road. Bank Kilimanjaro bent and snowed. *Some silicon sister ... something strong, funky break ...*

[pen across the page, across the years, circling back, ink stain]

All this comes up and goes down. The order of importance hardly matters. Some can look back upon their lives, see the patterns, and give some calculated shape, some exquisite mathematical proof of our string theory lives. *She got down. She's gonna make it through the night*. It is just too hard to tell with me; everything becomes narrative whether or not it belongs to me or fits. It is hard to discern an answer as to why at this age while others bank hours and sell insurance, I find myself in my bathrobe scribbling in a book. Of all the things. How supremely green artists are to the settling of bills and bar tabs, in lining up nests and eggs. *But Mommy that's where the fun is ...*

I could always charm them. I could always outrun them. *No time to turn*. Bass line.

But these thoughts. Piano chords runnel the road. Gnats worry the mind. *She's gonna make it through the night ...* Lines on a page, page out of mind.

He ain't heavy he's my brother

Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister

Oh she loves me, loves me like a rock, my mother

Holy Ghost, son and father

Come on people now, shine on your brother ... try to love one another

Right Now.

It is all down on paper, but when they ask, offering copper, I stutter before saying a word. I plod, shuffle my shoes. How to tell them how much I love them; how much I want them to see the wonder of it all. How much I want them to see the color green in an obscure painting, in my ever-changing moods. My stupefaction. Green means stop, stop being a dumb creature.

[pick at the memory s(c)lab with the nib of my fountain pen bleeding purple ink]

About how, when I was very young and playing with friends, hoisting mud into the back of someone's open station wagon, I'd been thrown into a garden shed and locked in there, the house of my dying; oh how I clawed at that stubborn door. The smell of gas, grass clippings, and bird shit. Old wood; thin cracks in the slates, exposing the ferns ablaze in green. That if I wanted to, I could easily place ...

[*Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly*]

Jesus in there with me, both in me and sitting there on the John Deere riding mower, chewing a cheroot, dangling keys. *Want out?*

About how in a quiet moment on a beach looking out over crystal clear water on a hot morning as a young man, I could see at once the pebbled bottom and the rippling wind on the surface. Mother Mary on a hovering jet ski. *Wanna ride?*

[*Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly*]

I wish, sometimes, it was easier for me to make sense of my world in words that crawl across the bottom of a TV screen, to make my way in this life, but it is not and maybe I would not like it otherwise.

I remember old houses on my paper route. The dogs that chased me, their skulls full of yellow fangs. Scars on my hands from broken rubber bands. Plastic horses on wheels. Simon Says. Avoiding cracks, mother's broken back. I remember cold dark nights walking home, my breath fogged. The crunch of snow. The feel of it beneath my boots. The sky pockmarked with stars. If I put it all in order, maybe one thing would link to another like film reel or chains; like hands holding, breathless in the dark. Panels of paint, impasto. The stutter of dirt roads, drunk, and crazy.

But I like the space in between.

The cloud of unknowing.

Gaps.

[*Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly*]

That I am a mystery to others, but more so to myself. I am *a million different people from one day to the next*, as are you: *For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

A mystery why this is what comes to mind is put down in my book, when I contemplate an artist's abstract expression of violence, of war. For months, I had been looking for some answers as to why my brother had died and what it meant to me, other than to feel the utter emptiness of his passing, and the lacunae that seemingly formed in his absence, in the absence of what a person of faith might feel for Christ, for God, for their self. And I found myself, as I do when I wander into an art gallery and in that art gallery, being granted a view of what might be, of what ought to be, a view of being locked in, yet free; a vista that is both labyrinth and open field. Of neither the darkest of nights nor the brightest of days. I was drawn to a room-size painting by Cy Twombly. *Lepanto.*

Perhaps because it defies meaning. Or that it hints at other things—mono-myths, lifecycles, and hope in staving off brutality. Inside, the lacunae itself, the stuff that matters, warbles. Perhaps that. Black holes are found by the nearby wandering warbling lost.

Ultimately, it might be because it is a child's drawing, an individual's attempt to wrest uncertainty and chaos to its knees ever so briefly; to say this is what I saw. This is me dreaming. This is me with twelve panels and buckets of paint.

Oh she loves me, loves me like a rock, my mother ... another runner in the night ...

A brother's death. A life of lacunae. Man Mr. Nobody holding shards from smashed China plates.

[Lepanto]

- Cy Twombly, American, 1928- , *Lepanto 1-12*, 2001; acrylic, crayon, and graphite; 12 times 85¼ x 122¾ inches; Udo and Anette Brandhorst Collection (Brandhorst Museum, Munich, Germany)

So get up close, as near as you can get without setting off alarms, you begin to see, perhaps feel ...

So when I say, that if you move in real close to Cy Twombly's *Lepanto*, move extremely close to the first of the twelve panels and see in the upper right hand corner a sliver of green, and that the green impasto is God, you would just have to take my word for it. For what is found there is what is found in all of us—mystery, and too much love sometimes to contain, and radio, radio at night. Unseen signals from afar. *Blinded By the Light*.

Solar eclipses and God blind us. Looking directly means not seeing at all, it is blurry and scary. The only way is through; we can see the moon cover the sun, God incarnated, only by projection—onto boxes, into music, off walls, and in people's faces. Through these slivers and memories, through witnessing this, this is how I come to stand before a daub of paint and see the deus ex machina. Someone has found this, and this is what is found there—

We're one, but we're not the same

We get to

Someone has razed the house and hung its walls vandalized by a tormented resident. Standing back affronted, but scrutinizing the display nevertheless, twelve panels come into view as if roof, hallways, furniture, and floors of this dwelling has been shunted. These are walls, scrawled upon and dirtied by a frenzied hand. These are projections, gargantuan biographical Rorschach blots, of a mind swarming with bees. To the dwarfed witness scanning this work, it appears a suspended miasma, partly due to its immensity, but also because of violent and chaotic streaks, smudges and smears of strange tonality. One wonders if the gallery roof has leaked, or crazed activists have broken in to defile the canvases with water and lye. Splotches of red and black cankers arise to adjusted sight as if open wounds from the predominately bone color of the panels. Closer, paint drains like horror movie blood streaking over stark crimson and tangerine flash splattered stars; light Aegean blue dimmed with an underpainting of skim milk white obfuscates like smoke; over-painted dark lines borne perhaps from a graffiti artist's bold black Sharpie riddles canvas after canvas and conjures an armada in an odd, orderly formation being savaged. Given all this, still the human eye here is a weakened instrument.

Drawing near, fearing as much the clichéd moth's demise, and examining the first of the twelve panels, there along the upper right-hand corner, lays a sliver of Kelly green, nothing more than a cleft of paint. (Out of eyeshot: akin to Icarus' scissor-kicking into Brueghel's drink or the JonBenet crawl beneath Larry King; a symphony's conductor, culling a four-beat measure, moving the baton in the sign of the cross). This is a green fissure, an identifying stamp, perhaps from the resident of this dismantled house. This green streak, blooming as it does amid the immensity's chaos, seems careful and full of intention. It says it was madness in here, but there was still presence of mind; that in all the hues of brutality, hope remains that something anew flowers from catastrophe. The color never reappears. As one works their way through *Lepanto*, the chosen palette takes on an organizational pattern arranged in

two-three-three sequences throughout the twelve parts. Each panel represents a particular, shall we say, camera angle: bird's eye, mid-shot, panoramic. While these angles are repetitive, here color is king. The repetition of color gives *Lepanto* voice. Sometimes surd, sometimes susurrante, this voice all the while cants: History repeats itself. As one becomes more accustomed to the work, like slowly regaining eyesight in bright sun, Cy Twombly's *Lepanto* impacts like a grotesque triune, consisting of three panels in each section, segued by three sparrow's-eye-view panels. In each section, the story is repeated by way of signifying colors. In this way, *Lepanto* is a twelve-part loop of Acrylic, wax crayon and graphite grouped in three repetitive chapters. If folded back in on itself, the resulting structure would be a mausoleum to war, an ossuary of violent bones. In these times of discordant moral rectitude, some might then secure materials to reattach a roof, establish hallways, bearing beams, and install a suitable door to be sealed—forever pleading ignorance to the drone from within its walls. The installation does depict horror; this is true. It does so by addressing our fragmentary and vapid attention span, borrowing conventions—the shaky camera Dogma 85 edits—from movie houses, home to our most passive form of numbing inoculation. But, for that green, that wondrous green daub of hope. It is telling us something, if we focus, if we slow. To ignore this detail, to mock it or blink to dismiss it is to assist the sextons with our own burial plots. We cannot walk past without pause.

First, *Lepanto* is the story of a 16th-century naval battle between Turkish imperialists and Christian isolationists, delineating in history the Ottoman Empire's demise. The alliance of Papal States, coupled by Spanish and Venetian might helped to vanquish the Turks. Eyewitness accounts of the October 1571 battle said the waters turned red with blood, smoke obscured the sun, and ships burned gold and crimson against the night sky. The installation reads like a film reel. The work appears rudimentary and haphazard, perhaps even stained or damaged from afar, but closer examination shows the genius of composition in re-creating the conflagrations of combat at sea. This is a tortured soul writ large, circular, and rhythmic.

In one respect, the vessels and oars Twombly creates harken back, pay homage to the Lascaux cave paintings. Those Paleolithic paintings—found in the 1940 by a group of young boys and their scampering dog in southern France—were drawn on the walls of underground caves and were characteristically large and crude. Moving forward through time, the *Lepanto* painter takes on another watershed of art. The painting drippings and blobs found in most of the panels might find progeny in the likes of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, although Twombly's hand appears less taut, more childlike. The impasto, where brush strokes are visible, suggests Twombly's signature of departure from those 1940s–1950s abstract expressionists, whose strokes were more aerial in orchestration than grounded upon surface. In another respect, the recent past is evoked here too. Jean-Michel Basquiat, New York's art wunderkind who died in the 1980s, could have easily scrawled Twombly's boats on the walls of lofts in the Meat Packing District. In a way the artist uses the history of his medium, pulling the viewer from 15,000 BC through to modern times, to illustrate while an idiom changes, what it speaks of does not. An age sharpens or dulls a work of art by its implications. Whatever is derived in service of this goal, the impact is original and revelatory. *Lepanto*, like Homer's *Iliad*, speaks of a point of history, but also voices contemporary concerns. Both are implicated by what the viewer brings to the work of art. Art instructs outside of time. A viewer's experience serves to re-create the initial impetus, the creative response to an external stimulus. Since this is a nation at war, to say *Lepanto* is a direct dialogue with the U.S. citizenry is not overstating the case. It was created in the year America was attacked. It does strike me as peculiar yet universal. Neither ugly nor beautiful;

neither a relict nor prophesy. It seems ancient in its song cycle. Therefore, those mad bees might just be inside us all. This bedraggled house might be our very own. Those burning ships, our flotilla far from these shores.

But of course, not everyone can live with this, to live within those walls or even cultivate an understanding of such a structure. Abstractions tend to speak a highly individualized lingua franca. What one hears might not be what the other hears—or sees. The soldier will invariably be drawn to Twombly's panels of destruction as if in the inertia of duty. The engineer might be inquisitively drawn to the vessel formation and calculate the number of oarsmen to gauge propulsion. Those seeking the substance of things hoped for might be drawn to open spaces or skeins of green. In this light, *Lepanto* can be approached in two ways: seeing is believing or believing is seeing. Abstract art is more about the viewer than what is being viewed. This meaning, this projection finds its source in personal psychology, undoubtedly, *my brother is dead*, but also surely within the psychosis of a society ... this is a culture of violence.

... *Another runner in the night* ...

[violence]

First coined by Jungian Marie-Louise von Franz in her 1978 volume, *Projection and Re-Collection in Jungian Psychology* “projection” is the process by which a mind, faced with perceptions about itself that it finds unapproachable firsthand, buries these perceptions in the unconscious. The unconscious, then, being indisposed to such reticence, finds some other way of dealing with the material. Slyly it then projects this repressed perception onto some external person, thing, country; it could be a wall in a cave, a wall in a suburban home, foreign power, a canvas to be hung in a gallery, the words found in an essay. By externalizing, the mind can then address the material in a disguised form of objectivity, resulting in either some overt form of action; this might manifest itself in homophobia, racism, or warmongering. Fittingly, *Lepanto*, composed in 2001, came in an era of heightened fear, of terrorists, and extraordinary carnage. A time when foes are found by length of beard; we finger enemies by color of eyes or how many times they fall to their knees.

In Twombly's retelling of this historical battle, empires puff up their chests and pay for their hubris; witnesses say the sea turned to blood; the point of view changes, but the story remains the same. Nothing remains that violence cannot put asunder until it defiantly grows to battle anew. Violence is always responded to with violence. When terror hit American soil, force was dispatched to its supposed source. But fat with vengeance and a penchant for half-truths, the U.S. government continued its push to ferret out those who would do her harm. With zealotry, it proffered Black or white stories about the gray world. The administration drew its sword on false charges, and continues, to this day, to torment its denizens with packaged rationale, which rains like so many veils. It is an administration the Ottomans would have been proud of, an administration after its own deceitful heart. The cycle never ends. Death is supremely victorious. Truth is its first victim upon which the darkest curtain falls.

It is perhaps important for a viewer to concentrate on the installation, paying close attention to panel number six. This panel, this wall of the house dismantled, is cleaved. There is a duality here, at the very least, a sense of “before,” and “after”—a demarcation of sorts. Moving left to right, a third of the canvas is distant and foggy until like a sudden storm cloud the right portion of this scene intrudes.

Dark blood and sores are exposed; yellow flourishes and Blackness reigns in a shroud of paint. Viewers might be drawn here, swaying side to side imperceptibly, trying to come to grips with this marked implication. There is a time before, just before the veil comes down, and then it is through the dripping darkness we go, until as *Lepanto* shows, we circle back and find ourselves once again on the doorstep of this strange house. If only we stopped to contemplate “the real” green. But it is just a painting, albeit a large one, composed by an old man who does not even live on this soil.

He ain't heavy he's my brother

Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister

Oh she loves me, loves me like a rock, my mother

Holy Ghost, son and father

Come on people now, shine on your brother

Everybody get together

Try to love one another right now,

& forever.

We're one, but we're not the same

We get to

[trust]

Lepanto then becomes an ironic entity of an age, an age the CIA could describe as a “wilderness of mirrors.” This is the term used for when operatives lie, and their lies are piled upon lies making the truth all but inaccessible for its wild thicket lair. Everywhere we turn, reflection upon reflection produces discombobulation and nausea. Here, truth no longer matters. Here, what you see is what you get: Yourself staring back. Oh, then it all must be okay. *I trust that person*. Of course, who supplies and polishes these reflections? We do; we, the people unwilling to speak of what some see in the horrid canvases hung for us nightly and broadcast. To say the house first must be dismantled, put on display for others to see. There must be blood and explosions; there must be uncertainty and carnage. There must be a chronicle of torment, a drone in the skull. Still, it is open to interpretation, but at least what is viewed, ugly and scary, will be more than our own façade. It is a viewing inside that Huber hive of the soul, where masks are removed. The personal unmasking that *Lepanto* guides, answers these queries with devils, disturbances and, for some, deliverance. It depends if one notices Twombly’s *deus ex machina*, that sliver of green. It depends if one listens to static for slivers of silence.

[Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly]

So when I ask, when I plead on my knees to come closer, to get closer to anyone, to seek in the eyes of others that impasto, a little slivered green—you’ll do it, because when my brother died, all I saw were holes, and when you come to know that inly, there are no distinctions; the lacunae is filled by others ... and you will see and know, we are all a little drowsy, mad, and miraculous listening to radio at night.

Or in the immortal fiat of Chrissie Hynde (Mother Mary on a jet ski): *Now the reason we're here as man and woman, is to love each other.*

Take care of each other ...

Everyone has green eyes, sparrows trapped inside ...

Carry each other.

Carry each other.

Round and round it goes where it stops no one knows. Save that cleft of green. Green means stop. Save dispatches from afar, save the secret scar. *Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly*

♫ I say you.

Life, When It's All Ruin

Michelle Moyd

I. Immersion

There were times during the pandemic that I allowed myself to feel.

I had feelings, of course. Lots of them. So much rage. Dismay. Disappointment, too, in a society hell-bent on destroying and discarding the lives of Black people, Indigenous people, poor people, queer and trans people, immigrants, disabled people. So much fear and worry for distant relatives, elderly neighbors, immuno-compromised friends. So much self-directed anger at my belated recognition, once again, that I too am just a worker. Given my job security as a tenured professor, I had rarely thought about its potential precarity. The prospect of the pandemic destroying universities, my job thereby becoming an unnecessary luxury, descended upon me in a new way, surpassing any of the other times I had considered the inconceivable. I too can lose my job. What if I lose my job? If I do, I will become a different kind of worker. What would I do? What could I do? How can I care if I don't have care?

Fleeting, beyond those feelings, I sometimes let myself feel wonder.

One of these pandemic moments replays in my mind. A touchstone, a glimpse of beauty and possibility enabled by the specific dark coziness of that day early in the pandemic. In my mind, the moment evokes cinema. In real digital life, it's a still photo. My daughter twirls on the dining room hardwood, holding her precious well-loved blankie loosely in her hand. She twirls. I watch her from the kitchen, entranced. She is barefoot, looking down, lithe, elegant, the ratty heirloom blanket following her, flowing. Her flowered fuchsia leggings are paired with a white long-sleeved t-shirt emblazoned with a sparkly gold and pink unicorn. She loves pink.

I post the photo on Facebook, and my dancer-dance critic-anthropologist friend remarks that she, my daughter, could be a youthful Judith Jamison. She says the image is healing. I think so too.

I am in my kitchen, preparing fresh food purchased from the upstart new farmer's market in town, the People's Cooperative Market.¹⁵⁰ The city's long-standing market couldn't figure out how to dislodge a white nationalist from its midst. It's a long story, but also the same story that one might

¹⁵⁰ Ellen Wu, "Ethos of New People's Market Focuses on Food Justice, Mutual Aid," *Limestone Post*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.limestonepostmagazine.com/peoples-market-ethos-focuses-on-food-justice-mutual-aid/>; Ellen Wu, "Bloomington 2019: 'The Year of the Farmers' Market Controversy,'" *Limestone Post*, Dec. 20, 2019, <https://www.limestonepostmagazine.com/bloomington-2019-year-of-farmers-market-controversy/>.

find in any number of predominantly white, liberal midwestern college towns. The People's Cooperative Market is the counternarrative and antidote, and preparing food purchased from its vendors makes me feel like I'm doing something right.

While preparing food, I listen to music. Not just through my earbuds while walking our dog, but through a speaker, in the kitchen, for all of us to hear. I don't do this often enough, I say to myself. Because if I did, I would have to feel and acknowledge the wonder of immersion in the sounds, the lyrics, the grooves. And someone might see my immersion and ask me about it. Can't have that. I'm too busy being stoic, or angry, or sad. I resist joy.

Still, occasionally, I treat myself to the immersion. I treat myself to feeling more than my poker face gives.

My daughter immerses herself too, dancing. Or maybe I just remember her dancing. Maybe she was just spinning around for fun, playing with music. I recognize that we are both moved by the music. I share.

II. Life

The soundtrack is Frank Ocean's "Pink and White."¹⁵¹ On repeat in my own small world, on headphones, it haunted, comforted, moved me for reasons I still can't fully explain. After countless listens, it is a song that sends me into myself, nostalgic, feeling loss but also the warmth of beloved memories.

A short violin flurry, a flourish, introduces the song. Then, simple piano chords and their punctuating repeat, lilting, building, receding. The bass line is regular, but also produces a playful feel, like a child skipping, ambling. Or ocean waves lapping.

The lyrics come in.

That's the way every day goes, every time we've no control. If the sky is pink and white. If the ground is black and yellow. It's the same way you showed me.

Ocean's poetry evokes a strange skyscape (pink and white), a believable landscape (black and yellow).

"It's the same way you showed me." An incantation throughout the song that on this day tells me we will be alright.

Another two verses follow, gestures, north-south geographies, atmosphere, and an unequivocal statement about love, trust, and support during disaster.

*The way it is, we're on land
So I'm someone to hold true*

¹⁵¹ Frank Ocean, "Pink + White," *Blonde*, Apple Music, 2016, audio file, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzS3WG6__G4.

*Keep you cool in this good life
Won't let you down when it's all ruined*

And then, a bittersweet chorus.

You showed me love, glory from above, regard my dear, it's all downhill from here.

Ocean's song names love from another time, love lost, as well as care that taught lessons, showed glory, kept him alive. Perhaps not maternal love, but this may be why the song gets into my fearful soul during that uncertain time.

III. In the wake of a hurricane

*In the wake of a hurricane
Dark skin of a summer shade
Nosedive in the flood lines
Tall tower of milk crates
It's the same way you showed me
Cannonball off the porch side
Older kids trying off the roof
It's the same way you showed me¹⁵²*

The sound is ethereal, the lyrics recalling children's play and swimming pools. The steady bass line and recurring piano accents push the song along, insistent. A strumming guitar comes in, breezily, and the song takes on a new feel, lightness, movement.

At the end, the multi-tracked background voice of Beyoncé sings "take it easy," lifting, soaring, taking the song ever skyward. If the sky is pink and white.

Remember life, remember how it was...

The final lines of the song shout out to friends, family, cigarettes, transgressions, tragedy, commodity. Immersion in nostalgia for an ominous time, but still a time of connection. Fond memories backlit by menace.

"Bitch, I might like immortality," Ocean sings, and I raise my eyebrows, nod, smile.

IV. When it's all ruin

I made this memory at the start of the pandemic lockdown. I looked up the date of the memory, and I was surprised to learn that it hadn't happened later in the summer or fall. From my current vantage point, it already felt like a much older memory. Technically, it was spring, but the cold temperatures and dreary rain suggested winter hanging on interminably. Fueled by many sources, my

¹⁵² In a 2012 interview, Ocean described a childhood memory of the aftermath of flooding in New Orleans using nearly the exact same language and imagery. See Matthew Trammell, "Soul Caliber: Frank Ocean," *Wax Poetics*, 50 (Winter 2012): 82.

multidimensional anger permitted little space for feeling otherwise. A few months later, I would write about the cruel system that refuses to care for people in a time of emergency long in the making, urgent in its deadliness. I would write about the cruelty and selfishness that animates a significant portion of this country's population. I would speak to administrators, colleagues, and family about the cruelty of expecting productivity in a time of ruin.¹⁵³

It didn't matter.

I had to work, my partner had to work, and we cared for our child at home while working.

For a time, this felt like the worst thing. But in truth, the worst things never touched us. We had jobs. We didn't have to worry about how to care for our child. How to keep her safe from the unending dangers afoot in the United States in 2020. We worried anyway.

Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor had already been murdered, though most of us didn't know it yet. George Floyd and Dreasjon Reed were still alive. So many others were still alive.

Over the next few months, the worst things happened to so many people. Hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands died of COVID-19. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets to protest the police murders of Taylor, Floyd, Reed, and others. Thousands were arrested, brutalized, gassed, harassed for protesting. We watched *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* and saw the horrors of history on new filmscapes, with new eyes.

Frank Ocean grew up and lived in New Orleans until Hurricane Katrina disrupted his life as a college student and destroyed his recording studio. "Pink and White" recalls a time before disaster, as well as survival in its aftermath.¹⁵⁴ When he sings "in the wake of a hurricane," listeners glimpse possibilities beyond the catastrophe. Nostalgia shades his poetry, warming me, just as the sun warms the youthful inhabitants of his lyrics.

V. Pink and White

Over a year later, memories of survival, domestic closeness, and simple truths learned during a year of unacknowledged grief intermingle with the current fantasy of the catastrophe's end. My daughter still loves her blanket. It was once white, once my underused baby blanket, stored lovingly in my parents' attic until my daughter was born, then passed along as an heirloom. Now it is gray with the years of my daughter's fierce love and laundering. Gray like much of my hair. Gray like the rain that day.

She still loves pink despite my past futile efforts to stop her from loving pink. I refused pink for her as an infant, and now it's all she wants. My feminism includes pink now.

¹⁵³ Michelle Moyd, "You Need Devotion: A Syllabus," Digital Feminist Collective blog, Sept. 8, 2020, <https://digitalfeministcollective.net/index.php/2020/08/28/you-need-devotion-a-syllabus/>

¹⁵⁴ About Hurricane Katrina, Ocean told an interviewer, "I can't credit it with too much. I can credit it with being the reason I moved to L.A. Ultimately, the reason I'm successful might be attributed to Katrina. I don't think I would have moved if it hadn't been for that storm, and I don't think I'd have been successful if I'd stayed in New Orleans." See Trammell, "Soul Caliber," 82.

Her favorite color and her beloved blanket, Frank Ocean's poetry. More than a year later, I still love "Pink and White." I still hear the catastrophe, the recovery, the potential in the song, and that allows me to see it in our lives. The memory of that day, my daughter twirling, the care of preparing food, the beginning of a new visceral experience of care in its many dimensions, as work, as life. In "Pink and White," I feel it all.

Acknowledgements

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I dedicate this essay to recently deceased family and friends: Ada Moyd, James A. Wilson, Jr. Denise E. Brown, and Theodore Douglas Wilson. And to my parents Henry Louis Moyd and Heather Ann Moyd for their uncommon strength, and for teaching me to feel through music.

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IV. POETRY

Introduction:

Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo, PhD.

The North Meridian Review sought poetry that takes a snapshot of the grief, uncertainty, and withdrawal that characterized the year 2020. At a time where the comfort and expectations of routine became a source of anxiety, we turned to poetry for scrutiny and respite.

We were fortunate to receive poems that depict a range of experiences and sensations: the sense of annoyance in the early days of the pandemic, when we thought that we would be back in our schools and workplaces by the end of summer; the reshaping of our everyday lives because of homeschooling and home-office; the anguish and chaos faced by healthcare workers; the echoes of other viral pandemics such as HIV; and the upheaval of our interactions and relationships, embraces given through Zoom.

Finally, several poems in this collection address our shared global anxiety. Discourses of globalization imagine our existence as digital beings, hyperconnected to each other internationally, watching the same videos and films, conversing as if we were in the same room, despite the geographical realities in which our bodies dwell. Yet no other event in recent history can foreground how corporeal we really are: a strain of crown-shaped RNA has overhauled many of humanity's mundane and momentous practices, from how we work and shop to how we get married and celebrate graduations. Unfortunately, our realization of global bodily interdependence also bred racist and xenophobic images and sentiments in the poetry we received. I rejected every single poem about bigotry and hate because our objective in collecting these poems is to enable connection, catharsis, and empathy.

We gave preference to poets from the Midwest in accordance with the journal's obligation to serve its community and region. However, we included poems from all over the United States and abroad, including Mexico and Australia, to provide multifaceted perspectives on an event that affects humankind.

This collection includes the esteemed work of two poets, David Estringel and Lisa Bullard. Their poems are reprinted here for accuracy and were previously published online. Although not about the COVID-19 pandemic, they are a valuable addition to this issue.

Tina Schumann is a Pushcart nominated poet and the author of three poetry collections, *Praising the Paradox* (Red Hen Press, 2019), which was a finalist in the National Poetry Series, Four Way Books Intro Prize, and the Julie Suk Award; *Requiem. A Patrimony of Fugues* (Diode Editions, 2017), winner of the Diode Editions Chapbook Competition; and *As If* (Parlor City Press, 2010), which was awarded the Stephen Dunn Poetry Prize. She is editor of the IPPY award-winning anthology *Two Countries. U.S. Daughters and Sons of Immigrant Parents* (Red Hen, 2017.) Her work received the 2009 American Poet Prize from the *American Poetry Journal*, finalist status in the Terrain.org annual poetry contest, and honorable mentions in *The Atlantic*, *Crab Creek Review* and *The Allen Ginsberg Award*. She is a poetry editor with Wandering Aengus Press, and her poems have appeared widely since 1999, including *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Ascent*, *Cimarron Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Nimrod*, *Parabola*, *Palabra*, *Poetry Daily*, *Rattle*, *Verse Daily*, and read on NPR's *The Writer's Almanac*.
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Isolation Affirmation

I make more of these moments
than perhaps I should. Last night
in a friend's garden, over a dinner
of take-out curry and saag, the last warm air
of summer cushioning our conversation, we spoke
of long-ago travel; motorcycle tours over the Dolomites,
sailing cruises to Catalina, hitchhiking in Spain.
Because we had been sequestered and forced to face
ourselves for too long the mere talk of travel felt rebellious,
thrilling in a way it hadn't since our teens.
We were rule breakers.
Throwing our masks into the air behind us
and blowing down the open road.
While the ice cream man chimed his bells
throughout the neighborhood,
we looked into each other's faces
and reaffirmed the facts of our past –
saying *We'd been there. We'd done that.*

October

Lately, it's been like Groundhog Day
around here; same thoughts, same steel
whistle of the kettle, same slow pulse
of another smoky sunset. Still, people
really are trying – what with their chipped
toothed jack-o'-lanterns
crouched on the front porch
and gauzy ghouls peeking out
the screen door. They are trying
to say hello to this misstep of a season
contained within this misstep of a year.
This close to the end of it all we reach out
for the usual and the comfort of a childhood
mask. As if the scare tactics of reality
were not enough. We want the kind of fear
we can decorate and fold away in a box
the next day. Now that we are all bi-polar
and understatements abound – it's a trick
of the mind to keep going – a treat to be
delusional together. That's OK. Let's be something
less capricious than the garden-variety delusional;
you buy the waxy candy bars in their little coffins
of colorful paper, and I'll screw in the red lightbulb
over the front door. Someone is bound to ring
our bell in their chosen disguise
just begging for something
completely different.

Self-Portrait as Shut-in

Even the summer air seems carotid
with disease. Invisible though it is.

The season is no invitation, but a rude
seducer. Not a caress, but a diabolic con-
sequence. It gives you pause, and then
another pause and another. Better to not
venture. Don't speak. Don't blink. Just
don't. Streetlights cast dystopian
beams over cars and empty bleachers.

It floods this suburban dream. Like a bad cop
in a windowless room it demands –

Where are you from? Who sent you here?

Show us your papers. The words are muffled,
of course, as every mouth is wrapped in gauze.

The radio is no help, not the news
or the mail. Those daily standbys
only reinforce the rules: *don't touch your face,*
stand six feet apart, try to make your eyes look like a smile.

Now, every love song is overwrought.

Ridiculous with ardor. Every old impulse
a broken notion; unattainable, passé, a joke
you forgot was a joke. Nature is no longer free.

Public spaces? Not so much. You feel yourself

an imposter, escapee, out-patient

on the lam and that old song keeps running

through your head ...*Got nowhere to run to baby, nowhere to hide...*

Mariana McDonald is a poet, writer, scientist, and activist. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including poetry in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and the *New Verse News*; fiction in *So to Speak* and *Cobalt*; and creative nonfiction in *Longridge Review* and *HerStry*. She co-authored, with Margaret Randall, *Dominga Rescues the Flag* (Two Wings Press, 2019) about Black Puerto Rican heroine Dominga de la Cruz. McDonald lives in Atlanta.

Sleepless

Hypnagogia:

Not a place,
or ancient myth,

but endless miles
of highway
the mind travels
on the road
to sleep.

The scenery
is neon clouds,
fluorescent fields,
and glowing
craters.

The jaunt was
now and then
before all this.
In coronatimes,

it's nightly.

Sometimes

I'm almost there,
at my yearned-for
destination
—blissful oblivion—

when a thought
zips by
like a pebble
on the windshield,
and I swerve awake,

suddenly
in a traffic jam
where nothing
moves,
the hours pass,

and I'm stalled
in hypnogogia
again.

Against Reopening

Brookhaven, Georgia. May 2020

Brookhaven is the city I had thought of,

small but bustling, vibrant,
young and on the way to great
adventures. Just the size

of that day's virus deaths
across the country, in the
thousands—fifty-three,

a number quite unsettling.
I argued that the virus is still
raging. Look, as many people dead

as all of your own city,
can't you see the danger?
People want to open up. I get it.

But I'll refrain from outings
for my safety, all our safety.
That was two weeks back.

Today, the numbers at John's Creek,
nearly ninety thousand people gone.
Soon it will be Macon's hundred-fifty.

How I fear the terrible road to Atlanta!

It makes me think

It makes me think
of AIDS.

The blundering, the slowness.

Denials and neglect and
ravaged bodies. Toxo in the
brain and purple lesions. Morgues
heaped with Black corpses.

It seems like that
yet different.
Omnipresent in the
stars and skies.

It makes me think
we have to rise
again, angry, fearless,
to make a better history,

to leave
better memories
for the earth.

Patricia Thrushart has published three books, *Little Girl against the Wall* (Quimby, Pickford & Cheshire Publishers, 2009), *Yin and Yang* (Quimby, Pickford & Cheshire Publishers, 2017), and *Sanctity: Poems from Northern Appalachia* (Quimby, Pickford & Cheshire Publishers, 2020). Her work appears regularly in the *Watershed Journal*, a regional literary magazine of Northwestern Pennsylvania, and on the websites Dark Horse Appalachia and North/South Appalachia. Her poems have been published in *Tiny Seed*, Clarion University's *Tobeco*, the *Avocet*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Feminine Collective*, *Curating Alexandria*, *High Shelf Press*, and included in the *Northern Appalachia Review*. Her first historical nonfiction book, *Cursed: The Story of Marion Alsobrook Stahlman*, will be published in October 2021 by Adelaide Books.

Grocery shopping

Mask on, I learn
how much I rely on
the lower half of my face
to make amends —
my cart in the way of the flour,
my long pause in front of the tuna,
going the wrong way.
Gone is the smile that says:
I'm friendly! I'm sorry!
I wear a covering below my eyes
behind fogged glasses that don't emote
the way glossy lips would.

I'm instantly inscrutable,
suspected of hoarding flour,
being too choosy about tuna
and snooty too—
with a high-end car
that opens the trunk
when I wave my foot below the latch.

Groceries in the trunk,
I go home to the only ones
who now see
the intimacy
of my naked mouth.

Masked

I start sewing on Passion Friday,
the silver needle piercing
a bolt of black cotton
woven tight, tripled,
cut and
tucked
to shroud the nose, the mouth;
bound with ties
to draw the fabric close,
like a winding-sheet.

I sew, the needle like a thorn,
the fabric bunching and smoothing
under the glare of machine light,
the hum of bobbin and thread,
taking tiny stitches
until the mask is done.

I put it on the face
I shouldn't touch,
hiding the sorrow
I know it shows.

DS Maolalai has been nominated four times for Best of the Net and three times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, *Love Is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016) and *Sad Havoc among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019)

His new moustache

we met him
up near
stoneybatter,
when he was only
a few days home,
just after
a month-long
binge, he said, in sligo
in a house
by the country-
side mountains,
where he'd lived
when the covid
had hit. he'd been cycling

when we saw him
toward the stoney-
batter markets,
kicking speed
and wearing
a rugged moustache,

and he skidded a loop
through dust and around
light traffic
and stopped
by the courthouse
to talk.

and we had been out
a minute easy,
walking the dog
and picking up
our groceries
and fish grew hot
by the wine
and stained our knees
with sunshine, sweating
through thin
plastic shopping bags
to the seaside smell
of fresh and dribbled
piss. and he told us

about his problems
getting work
since he'd been back
and his problems
getting dole, or any sort
of covid payment,
his problems

meeting girls right now
and meeting his friends –
our friends –
for a drink. he talked
a good 30 minutes – it was
unusual – he'd been
in paris
and australia
and not talked
so much.

eventually we made
excuses – the dog
needed to be fed –
our masks were
sweating us –
and went on. he must have been
very lonely
to want to talk
so much. afterward,
crossing the road,
we looked back
and he was gone,
stitching his wheels
into traffic, dragging
his sweating body
and his rugged
new moustache.

Xiaoly Li is a poet, photographer and computer engineer who lives in Massachusetts. Prior to writing poetry, she published stories in a selection of Chinese newspapers. Her photography, which has been shown and sold in galleries in Boston, often accompanies her poems. Her poetry is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *Spillway*, *American Journal of Poetry*, *PANK*, *Atlanta Review*, *Chautauqua*, *Rhino*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *J Journal*, and elsewhere. She has been nominated for Best of the Net twice, Best New Poets, and a Pushcart Prize. Xiaoly received her Ph.D. in electrical engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute and her Masters Degree in computer science and engineering from Tsinghua University in China.

Far and Near

Red Planet hums millions of miles away
as we expand our wings deep into space.

Yet we are hiding. Hiding from viruses
that are invisible and older than us.

The world is trembling as we cut down forests,
boil the wild with our hot pot.

Now virions sneak into our cities,
stifle our breathing.

In this hazy morning, winter jasmine blooms
spring, a pair of robins hop in the backyard grass.

And so bright and big is the moon — awoken and
humbled, I want to touch it with my sanitized hands.

How Corona Evolves or Makes Us Evolve, or We Have to Evolve Together

— video chat with Mom on a busy snowy day in March

Are you all staying home now?

Yes, our poetry group meets online.

We have five hundred people meditating twice a day at home at the same time.

And we only take walks in our neighborhood.

Don't go out, just do Taichi in your backyard.

We walk the opposite side of the street when people pass by.

China is the safest place now; do you go out?

We still stay at home. A manager calls every day to check our temperatures. We need to persist.

What are you eating, do you get things you need?

Rice-millet porridge, walnuts, Brazil nuts, pine nuts, and a Fuji apple

Don't go to stores.

These were home-delivered and left at our front door.

Soak vegetables in soda water to keep them clean.

Oh, good idea, will try

How is our granddaughter in the hot spot of NYC?

We have pleaded and she's not coming back.

She said she can concentrate better on the work over there
and prevent cross-contaminating us.

And she wants to read more books in the evening.

Does she stay at home and learn to cook herself?

She works from home but jogs along the river.

And we told her to make ginger, lemon, and honey tea.

Sometimes we shop online for her to grab a delivery time slot.

She used to dine out. Look at this photo what she has made last night!

*Wow, very impressive. Roasted chop,
red peppers and asparagus, fresh colored and shining.*

Do tell her not to go out and to exercise at home.

We can't keep warning her.

She wants to hear life's other stories.

Steven Luria Ablon, poet and adult and child psychoanalyst, teaches child psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital and publishes widely in academic journals. His poems have appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines such as the *Brooklyn Review*, *Ploughshares*, and the *Princeton Arts Review*. He has published five full collections of poetry including *Tornado Weather* (Mellen Poetry Press, 1993), *Flying over Tasmania* (Fithian Press, 1997), *Blue Damsels* (Peter E. Randall Publisher, 2005), *Night Call* (Plain View Press, 2011), and, most recently, *Dinner in the Garden* (Columbia, South Carolina, 2018).

A Gross Anachronism

I am a physician, taking your pulse,
pumping the ball for your blood pressure,
warming my stethoscope before I listen
to your heart, asking you to breathe deeply,
hold your breath as I percuss your lungs.

Now I am a doctor of screens, I visit you
on zoom, you enter my waiting room,
you are flat on the screen, your voice
electronic, I don't know when you will
stop talking. I don't know what you wear

from the waist down, what shoes. I no longer
touch you. Is this the oath of Maimonides
that I took 50 years ago, this technology,
a mere thread of the tapestry medicine,
an anachronism of virus and social distancing?

Elizabeth Weir grew up in England and lives in Minnesota. Her book *High on Table Mountain* was published by North Star Press in 2016 and was nominated for the 2017 Midwest Poetry Book Award. She received four S.A.S.E./Jerome awards, and her recent work has appeared in *Evening Street Review*, *Gyroscope*, *Turtle Island Quarterly*, *Talking Stick*, and *the Kerf*

On the Day the Pandemic Was Declared

March 11, 2020

Beyond breakfast and my kitchen window,
a Red-tailed Hawk landed, awkward, on the lawn.
I watched it hesitate, spring upwards, legs extended
to clutch at something unsuspecting in the grass.
The hawk rose with a garter snake writhing
in its talons, flew to a bare branch and tore
at the head. The flailing lash of tail stilled
as the hawk ripped and gulped down
chunks of flesh. The snake had been basking
in warm sun when death darted in.

Kari Wergeland, who hails from Davis, California, is a librarian and writer. Her work has appeared in many journals, including *New Millennium Writings*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *Chariton Review*. Her chapbook, *Breast Cancer: A Poem in Five Acts* (Finishing Line Press, 2018), has been named an Eric Hoffer Book Award Finalist. Meanwhile, her long library career has taken her into libraries up and down the West Coast. At some point in all of this, she served as a children’s book reviewer for the *Seattle Times*.

Pandemic

Stave churches were built in Norway
before Black Death opened its eyes
and lumbered over cities,
leaving the streets littered with dead.
Long staves took a long time to cure.
A father would start the process—
a son might finish,
watch the church materialize,
resemble a Viking ship
with menacing dragons on each end
to ward off evil spirits.
They meant business.
1000 churches built in time
to take on the plague
but only a few edifices survive.
These remaining vessels shift and creak
with the rocking of time—
wooden engineering holding firm.
It’s an important voyage for those used to steel,

plastic – stone even –
for people who have never experienced a pandemic
until now.

Getaway

On the road,
first public restroom
after 10 weeks of sitting in my own germs.
Someone holds the door open –
gratitude I don't have to touch it.
A bare hand shoves coffee out
the drive-through window.
Miles later,
I observe few masks in the grocery store.
Highway curving alongside the sea.
I pull into the driveway,
slip into my tiny shelter
like a hermit crab
with suitcases, laptop, groceries, books.
I plan to buy a puzzle
from the friend who sells gifts.
Spray the knob before locking up –
rub it down.
When I take my masked walk,
I spot what followed me here
dogging my attempts to soar,
I bow to the horizon,
go back inside
wondering if this shell
will take on the clam's jaw.

Kat Bodrie is a professional editor and creative writer based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Her prose and poetry have appeared in *Poetry South*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *West Texas Literary Review*, *Rat's Ass Review*, and elsewhere. Learn more at katbodrie.com.

Uncertain Times

“To some degree life will be uncertain no matter what we do.”
– Mick Scott

how do you know
you won't die tomorrow

in sunshine, driving to the public library,
Maui Jim sunglasses framing your oval face,

burgundy skinny jeans you'd hunted online
hugging your ass and thighs —

it's the perfect disguise

an ugly moment posing
with the right filter

—

I take issue with “uncertain”

we still walk & talk & fuck
& make jewelry

the measuring cup scoops out
the right amount of Science Diet cat food
twice a day

how can I not create some amount of certainty
for those I love

—

this year, my twentieth high school reunion
was cancelled

ten years ago, I refused to go

and found out after

none of my bullies were there

maybe I'll never see my friends in person again
maybe I don't need them

—

they say chaos breeds creativity
but this is normal

fear events are the state of the planet

we should start a newspaper
and call it Uncertain Times

—

in small print on page 1 section b
some UN adviser says we are living
in the shadow of nuclear war

it is always a shadow
bending over our shoulders
reaching for the Times

wouldn't it be ironic
if one day it strangled us

we never saw it coming

—

in December, before the pandemic
the bigwigs trimmed the fat: extraneous

editors whose work would siphon
to others. I sobbed

in front of the HR lady who said
I could take action if I felt it unfair:

I thought I was there
to turn in medical paperwork

for a standup desk to help my IBS
and reflux, back pain, poor circulation

I packed a box with all my unseen illnesses
and didn't look back

—
interviewer: what is it like
living in today's uncertain times?

the cat does not respond
continues licking her belly

like a furry seal on the verge
of sluggish extinction

Ellen Sazzman has recently been published in *A3 Review*, *PANK*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Eklebrastic Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Sow's Ear*, *Lilith*, *Beltway Quarterly*, *Southward*, *Dash*, *Miramar*, *Common Ground*, and *CALYX*, among others. Sazzman received an honorable mention in the 2019 Allen Ginsberg poetry contest, was shortlisted for the 2018 O'Donoghue Poetry Prize, and was awarded first place in Poetica's 2016 Anna Rosenberg poetry competition. Sazzman was also a 2012 Pushcart Prize nominee by *Bloodroot Literary Magazine* and a 2010 Split this Rock finalist. Her poetry collection, *The Shomer* (Finishing Line Press 2021), was a finalist for the Blue Lynx Prize, a semifinalist for the Elixir Press Antivenom Award, and a semifinalist for the Codhill Press Poetry Award. Sazzman is a writer living in Maryland, although Sazzman grew up in Cleveland, Ohio.

Long Division in The Time of Quarantine

Charlotte does not want to learn Long Division.

Who can blame her – the operation's not child's play.

Marshalling Digits, more Digits than

She possesses. Digits separated

For their own good into

Columns, hundreds, tens, ones,

Soldiers in lockstep,

Obeying orders, carrying Down

Carrying Down, always less and

Less.

Mother the MD is worried the Pandemic has become endemic.

Self-Isolation, the solution, is not spontaneous,

Cannot be calculated in the head or on fingers.

Deployment requires a strategy, supply lines,

Paper, pencil to notate the problem, an eraser

For mistakes. Artillery. Grandma is enlisted

To zoom-teach. Grandma is practiced for better
Or worse at apportioning
Affection and paring
Back.

Charlotte hates all those D words and that lopsided bracket
Missing a leg that shields Dividend from Divisor
Until the siege when Divisor invades Dividend
Repeatedly and takes away, takes away,
Deriving, finally, the quotient whole number
With/without a remainder,
Leftover phantom, a sum
Sometimes estimated into a nullity,
A zeroing out some Denounce as
Assault.

Grandma imparts safety in numbers. Pairs split too easily.
Pairs are the answer, chants Charlotte. *Into Noah's ark*
The animals come marching two by two. She wants
To press her mouth against her best friend's ear,
Whisper of the boy she has a crush on and the body
That was hers ripening into another's, secrets
She no longer shares with her mother.
The amputee bracket stands
Upright under its weight of
Correctness.

Kate Pashby (they/them) is a queer Mexican American poet from San Jose, California, who resides in Washington, DC. Their work has been published or is forthcoming in the *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *Genre: Urban Arts' House*, *Embryo Concepts Zine*, *Constellate Literary Journal*, *subTerrain Magazine*, *Northern Otter Press*, *The Confessionalist Zine*, *Burrow*, *Rogue Agent*, and *Rabid Oak*. Kate was nominated for Best of the Net 2020.

exit the immune system

I once took great solace in the thought
that if there were a coronavirus outbreak
I could be among the first to die
incapable also of surviving the first wave
of a running zombie apocalypse
without the medications that allow me to walk

I wait for the infusion nurse
to plug my arm into the IV
find the thick vein that likes to roll
back and forth,
a cigarette between my deceased grandmother's
thumb and forefinger

I run my lotion-soft palms
over cracked knuckles
bleeding from cold air and hot water
and yawn
waiting for the tragic and untimely death

that was never promised to me,
the one who could not come to terms
with the possibility of a long, fulfilling life

Mike Wilson's work has appeared in magazines including *Cagibi Literary Journal*, *Stoneboat*, the *Aurorean*, and the *Ocotillo Review*, and in Mike's book *Arranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic* (Rabbit House Press, 2020), political poetry for a post-truth world. Mike resides in Central Kentucky and can be found at mikewilsonwriter.com.

Until We Hug Again

April 10, 2020

Today is Good Friday, social intercourse is a
venereal disease and capitalism clicked on *pause*.
I watch old movies where strangers are kissing
and reckless crowds aren't social distancing.
After I drown the voice of Donald Trump
in the bathtub of common sense I see
something peeking behind the trunk of a
fast-growing pine pungent in sap that's
rising to the occasion. I fall to my knees believing
Sunday movies will disappear and everyone
will take their clothes off and hear trees preach
the sermon of centuries from an astral plane.
I raise my eye to the sky and chant a song –
the uncloudy day – and everyone sings along.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Orbis*, *Dalhousie Review*, and *Connecticut River Review*. John's latest book, *Leaves on Pages*, is available through Amazon.

Stuck At Home

One

Home is God.

These walls, floor and ceilings are America's soul.

And God says, via his agents here on Earth,

that I am at the precipice

so stay back.

For some virus has put together a war machine

that could be from a lab

or a bat,

or that same God because,

according to his televangelist disciples,

he hates homosexuals.

So if I have to be here, cocooned inside God,

I'd best start working on a Bible.

The book of Covid-19.

The book of Trump.

The book of Pence.

The book of Fox News.

And how the new Ten Commandments

was written on the brim of a MAGA hat.

Make America god-fearing again.

Huddled in our homes,
fear, fear and fear some more.

If only I had a gun.

I'd line up that virus in a rifle's sights
and blast it right between the eyes.

That's how they did it when
the country was young.
During the Revolution.
In the Civil War.

My neighbor
hung a noose
from a beam in his garage.

But he didn't go through with suicide.

He's not well
but he doesn't want to die
before he gets to eat at his favorite restaurant
one more time.

And who knows when that will happen.

Two

I envy the birds.

They don't live long enough
to die of something new.

Even the rabbits –

they look at me as if

I'm the worst thing that could happen.

They don't realize that we giants
have our own hawks and bobcats
to be concerned about.

They hide inside droplets in the air,
can strike at any time.

When you're invisible,
size is no matter.

I've seen every movie twice.

I've read the same books over and over.

My days are reruns.

The true groundhog slips into nursing homes
at night,
condemns the inmates
to an eternity of winter.

The survivors will forever see his shadow.

Some day it will all be over, so I'm told.

God will die,
his dominions collapse,
followers dissipate.

I will walk out into the world
and rediscover its magic.
Yes, that means you,
bookstores.

No one will do a Lazarus on my banking account.

But other people will look less like the enemy.

My mask can come off.

The cloth one that is.

All others will remain.

(My parents, in heaven, are missing all this.

Maybe they look down

through some kind of telescope.

Maybe they're the voices I hear.)

Three

Somebody's on tv,

declaring that they've made a complete recovery,

survived a trial by lung.

They're now free to breathe in

all those chemicals that will

ultimately kill them.

(No matter how I die,

I anticipate a tremendous path,

a billowing flow.

the power that was the heart

given over to the spirit.

In the meantime,

I could really use a week at the beach.)

The phone rings.

It's someone I haven't seen in months.

“How are you doing?” asks the voice
on the other end.

“Surviving,” I reply.

Even if I wasn’t quarantined,
I doubt I would have got together
with them anyhow.

And they would not have phoned.

So the virus has a flag I can fly
now that I am a country.

A phone call.

I open a window and it blows in the wind.

Gerard Sarnat won San Francisco Poetry's 2020 Contest, the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for handfults of 2021 and previous Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published, including in *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Delta Review*, *Northampton Review*, *New Haven Poetry Institute*, *Texas Review*, *Vonnegut Journal*, *Brooklyn Review*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, the *Los Angeles Review*, the *New York Times*, the *London Reader*, and *Review Berlin* as well as by Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Chicago and Columbia Presses. He has authored the collections *Homeless Chronicles* (Pessoa Press, 2010), *Disputes* (Pessoa Press, 2012), *17s* (Pessoa Press, 2014), and *Melting the Ice King* (Pessoa Press, 2016). Gerry is a physician who has built and staffed clinics for the marginalized as well as a Stanford University professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with climate justice, and he serves on the board of Climate Action Now. Gerry has been married since 1969, has three children plus six grandsons, and is looking forward to future granddaughters. gerardsarnat.com

Intensive Care Unit Blues

*...Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter...*

-- T.S. Elliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

i. Star Chamber

Asterisked
elder at-riskers*

are now briskly
dust/whisked off

by their brusque
feral caregivers

themselves without
bad vertebral disks

which prevent us
from being as frisky

as in our distant past -- or
at much real COVID peril

although unlike balding me,
they may need to go for haircuts.

* just speaking for Gerry

ii. Patients Just Fading Away haiku

Failed anonymous
septuagenarian's
name image likeness.

iii. **I See You In ICU...Do You See Me?** -- thanks to Eliana V. Hempel M.D., Blood Ties, *NEJM*, 28May20

Distraught woman before us
with that hunted look
in her eyes seems all too familiar.

Filigreed monogrammed hankies
make repeated trips
from mouth to lap then back again

as our collective horror
at the rapidly increasing amount
of bright red froth intensifies.

She's barely able to breathe
let alone talk rationally as metallic
smells mingle with Mom's viral raw fear.

iv. C-Ward #17

-- thanks to Silvia Castelletti, M.D., A Shift on the Front Line, *NEJM*, 4June20

Thursday. Just finished another shift.
Look me over in barber-shopoid cascading mirrors:
C on nose from doubled-up N95 masks

worn all the time and leaving deep marks
engraved by four overlapping elastic bands.
Eyes are tired. Hair damp with sweat. Oy.

I'm simply a physician no longer —
now also one unprepared soldier drafted to fight
against invisible Coronavirus blown in dirty wind.

Before frantic nightshift,
I have to don protective gear
which's when get predictable adrenaline rush...

Earlier in on-call room with colleagues,

you try to crack bad jokes
but our bodies must reflect shared worry

regards shielding selves adequately
as we attempt to carry out correct steps dressing:
gloves, gown, second pair of gloves

glasses, cap, mask, visor, shoes, shoe covers...
tape over tape to keep everything sealed.
Persons who help you dress

write name/ role on white lab coat
with a red marker because thusly-costumed,
no staff recognizes once familiar teammates.

After s/he says "Done," it's showtime to face the music.
Each caregiver feels like about to jump from humming plane,
hoping their very-complicated parachutes

will pretty-please open to keep us clean plus safe.
Entering is walking into some surreal silent bubble
with sounds muffled by mounds of heavy equipment.

For first ten or fifteen minutes can't really visualize
since breathing fogs my visor
until it adapts to cooler ambient temperature.

Then gradually begin to see between droplets
of condensation, proceed into ward hoping shoe covers
won't come off (as usual). Ninth shift so far this week starts.

David Estringel holds a Bachelor's degree in English. His poetry and short fiction have appeared and/or are forthcoming in online and print publications, such as the *Setu Bilingual Journal*, *Azabares Literary Magazine*, *Route 7 Review*, the *Blue Nib*, *Pif Magazine*, *Cutthroat: A Journal of the Arts*, *Latin Anthology*, *Rigorous Magazine*, *Bosphorus Review*, *Labar Magazine*, the *Bitchin' Kitch*, and *Drunk Monkeys*. David has also been a lead editor at The Good Men Project and editor at *Red Fez* and the *Elixir Magazine*.

Digging for Lost Temples

Thumbing through *The Borderlands*, I can't help but feel not brown enough. I'm Mexican Lite. Got a case of the "coconuts." There are no rageful battle cries inflaming this breast. No bitterness lingering on the tip of the tongue (the back of hands and the starch of white collars taste just the same no matter the bearer's color). No tortured soul, longing for identity and re-appropriation. There's just me and this suit of rosy-beige meat that touts my value best in the dead of winter.

"If you're not pissed, you aren't paying attention," some people used to say. Others, "We're nothing but second-class citizens—wetbacks—to them!" (My back dried three generations ago) Then, there is all this talk of The Wall, as if one had actually never existed before in the first place. How funny people are when the invisible begin to reflect the Spectrum of Things in the cruel clarity of daylight—ancient atrocities shining, unforgivingly, like newly minted coins under brusque fluorescents. When did symbols become more real than the things they represented? (Maybe around the same time 'detention centers' and 'concentration camps' meant different things?) "Better them than me," I would think to myself. "Everyone's got to hate someone, right?"

Call it apathy. Detachment. Indifference. Call it what you like, but don't let an absence of tears convey a treason of the flesh. I know where I come from and where my people have been. I am one of the many brown bodies that was piled in heaps, used as target practice by Texas Rangers that stood proudly before them, posing for photographs. I swung low from sturdy boughs in the Southwest, proving Strange Fruit —plucked in all its hues and flavors—tastes coppery and bitter in Life's maw. I starved outside with the rest of the dogs, staring into diner windows—mind, body, and spirit consumed—barred from entry, wanting for crumbs. The narrative's my own, but the story remains the same.

I'm no one's *machisto*, gangbanger, Latin lover, wetback, or Spic. I am no one's pimp, *Sancho*, *caballero*, or *maricon*. I can't roll my Rs, I hate tequila, and I don't code switch. Sheepskins—paid by my own coin—adorn my walls, not holographic portraits of The Last Supper or La Santa Muerte adorned with plastic red roses from the dollar store. I am not "spicy" like something that is novelly consumed. And

I—a being, self-determined, not cast from a vulgar mold— respect God’s will as much as he respects mine (which doesn’t say much).

The blood of peasants and slaves, warriors and kings run through our veins. Our ears once heard gods’ whispers through the rustling of leaves in the breeze and the trickling of streams over time-smoothed stones. We rode the winds--the sun kissing our backs (not breaking them)—as we flew through fields of pale azure upon Serpent’s wings, over treetops and verdant expanses. We ate our enemies’ courage and drank victor’s wine with lips, stained red, from their skulls. (So, step back with your ‘tallboys’ and that Four Lokos jive!) This is what lies beneath the skin. Melanin be damned! We are the sons and daughters of Earth and Sky, Aztec Temples of Sun and Moon, buried beneath blanched soil, crowned by cathedrals—papal tiaras anointed by brown blood that pepper the land like so many gravestones. Remember?

Remember!

So, I pray to the Archangel Anzaldúa to help me find my lost sovereignty—my words wafting up into the clouds on velvety ropes smoke of sandalwood incense and braided sweetgrass. Tears of honey fall from Heaven upon my skin, feeding cuts and scrapes no one (not even I) can see. Unfolding her rainbow-hued wings, like Hebe on Olympus, she descends with arms outstretched and an angelic smile. Face to face, she pulls me close, blesses my forehead with champurrado-scented kisses then tugs at my ear and says with the fire of cinnamon on her tongue, “*Huervo*, just love the skin you’re in!”

Lisa Bullard has written ever since she could. She was raised in Montana where she was once bucked off a horse and didn't get back on. She now lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and two children. Before having children, she travelled around the globe on a shoestring, and since children she has found a new appreciation for packing snacks and a change of clothes for all excursions. Besides writing, she enjoys snowboarding, hiking, canoeing, and binge-watching shows while folding tiny items of clothing. She has taught writing courses at colleges and universities in Washington, Montana, and New York.

Papa: "The Awaited Guests Arrive" and Other Poems

Time

I used to think of time as flowing forward
relentlessly marching forward
never to be snatched back
or bargained back
even with good deeds or repentance

but in my own mind time travels backwards
again and again
to times I crave forgetting
to people who hurt me
even to times I feel deep in my DNA
but cannot place on my tongue

at night especially I fall backwards
tumbling through time
in the wrong direction
back through history that is my own and is not
behind closed eyes and closed doors
bending the laws
of time that were laid out
that say time moves in one predetermined direction: forward

You've Got to Have a Plan

for when your burned-out flame finds you
because he thinks the stars you wished on
together
the dreams you whispered
to one another
meant that you were meant for each other
forever

he thought the poems he wrote
would be the only poems
you would get
from a lover

you loved him

you've got to know what to do
if he shows up
and thinks you owe him

you once nurtured him
the same way you nurtured
a new kitten who lost his mother

you've got to know
how far you would go
you've got to got to got to
have a plan
have a plan
have a plan

A Flashback

time clutches me
with a sudden grip

one second I wait for sleep
and the very next: ***NO!!!***
but I can't stop the assault
on my mind as he looms over me again
and I am powerless again

raped
again
terrified paralyzed
I leave my body again
and return again

seconds pass trapped in the memory
but the anger stays raging
and the shame
I want so bad to shake

and I lay awake
feeling betrayed
by time and my mind

You, Papa

Standing by the bank of the Birch Creek
I stoop down and
dip my hand into its icy current
and the water moves past me
I can't hold onto it
I think of you, Papa,
I struggle to grasp you
but again you slip away
and I knew you more in my mind
than not, you always left
away to Texas, away to Nevada,
away to Alaska
you look different from every angle
and when you arrive
you slip through my fingers again
and the slap of my expectations
sting
and I try
to please you, to be your girl
and oh how you are proud of me
but you forget birthday after birthday
you miss most of my plays
you aren't there to screen my dates
but you took me fishing
and we laughed together
and you baited my hook and gutted my fish
and fried it on the fire for our dinner
and I cling to that memory
rolling it in my hand like a smooth stone
but then you leave again and again
you're always leaving
then you drink too much again
you come late to my wedding
and you leave early
and we don't dance a father/daughter dance
but you give me a plaque you made
when you were a little boy
a homely looking plaque featuring a hand-painted hunting dog
and I hang it, cherished, on my wall

I. Papa: “The Awaited Guests Arrive”

doop-doop-dee-doo

A little tune for you, dearest dear dear dear
dear daughter . . .

oh, okay, so I'm a little just a little drunk . . .
hee-hee-hee

but just hang on, sit tight
and CHECK THIS OUT!

Wooo-eeee! Jeff gave me this harmonica
tonight! See! We drank a little whiskey
to celebrate YOU coming for a VISIT!

Oh you know I miss you kids!

doop-doop-dee-doo. Ha ha ha.

And here's a little tune to you
my son-in-law, son-in-law

doop-doop-dee-doo

Can you tell I just played harmonica
For the first time in my life TONIGHT!

Wooo-eeee! Am I glad you're here.

I LOVE you two! You know that
don't you? Woweee! I love you!

doop-doop-dee-doo. Ha ha ha.

II. Daughter: “Cotton Candy Land: It’s Where We’ve Always Lived”

the words are
stones in my belly
stuck in my throat
sand in a pipe
and damned if I’m going to let them out now

*I feel like I’m three years old again and I don’t want to be!
This brings back too many memories. I can’t laugh because it’s not funny to me.
I love you, Papa, but I can’t be around you when you’re drunk. I’m leaving.*

we don’t do that in our family
we carefully look away
we forget what we saw
when we remember, we pretend
that we don’t

it’s all cotton candy for us
everything is okay for us
sweet soft and fun for us

if we can just stuff enough
cotton candy in a volcano
maybe it will turn into a candy land
if we can just get it right

and damned if we won’t try

and damned if we won’t go crazy trying

I tell myself to lighten up
it’s *just* a fun time dammit
I can laugh myself back to cotton candy land

“Ha Ha Ha! That’s so funny, Papa! Ha Ha Ha! Wow!
What a *frickin’* musical genius! Ha Ha Ha!”

Connemara Wadsworth's chapbook, *The Possibility of Scorpions*, about the years her family lived in Iraq in the early 1950s, won the White Eagle Coffee Store Press 2009 Chapbook Contest. Her poems are forthcoming or have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Solstice*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Smoky Blue Literary & Arts Magazine*, and *Valparaiso*. "The Women" was nominated for publication in Pushcart Prize Best of the Small Presses by *Bloodroot Magazine*. Connemara and her husband live in Newton, Massachusetts.

Mask Making

I have oiled the machine, cut
the cloth, the last of the lining.

 I'm still mastering
the technique of sewing in elastic,
laying in pleats.

How easy masks are to misplace.

Each coat must pocket one,
 each purse,
 glove compartment.

I will stitch some with color,
and pattern to shelter in.

I'll pleat one that will herald
Lichtenstein's red lipstick kiss.

 Another from a bandana
appliquéd with the corner triangle,
another with sequins along the un-
 remarkable edges.

Maybe take a Sharpie marker,
write, *Ten feet away please*.

It is the nature of its design
to mask smiles, frowns

 leaving us to read
only each other's eyes.

They say this won't be over soon.

I'll tailor thin shields—make
more masks from cloth scraps.

IV. BOOK REVIEWS

Jess Montgomery. *The Stills*.
New York: Minotaur Books, 2021.

Reviewed by *Betty J. Bruther*

Jess Montgomery's new book in the Kinship Historical Mystery series takes a deep dive into Prohibition and its impact on the people of fictional Bronwyn County, Ohio. Returning as main characters in the book are Sheriff Lily Ross and her friend Marvena Whitcomb Sacovech, the protagonist of *The Widows*, which explored the world of coal mining in Appalachia through the eyes of two women—one, a member of the local elite, the wife and widow of the local sheriff Daniel Ross; the other, a widow, a member of the working class. The author highlights the efforts of union organizers to expose the unsafe conditions in the local mines and the tyranny of the mine owners in the company town through the medium of a murder mystery. A second novel, *The Hollows*, works in the same manner, allowing the author to explore two major themes—white supremacy and male privilege.

As the new story, *The Stills*, opens, a teenage boy witnesses a seemingly murderous attack on a federal agent. In the aftermath of the attack, he drinks some of the moonshine that he was guarding, and collapses. Sheriff Lily Ross is forced to arrest and imprison Marvena Sacovech, the producer of the illicit spirits, which are believed to be tainted. Subsequently, Sheriff Ross discovers Marvena's moonshine is not tainted; instead the teenager's sipping has revealed that he has sugar diabetes. Marvena had produced the moonshine to raise money to treat her daughter's severe asthma, which is treated through her grandmother's homeopathic treatments and the local doctor's prescription of

asthma cigarettes. As for the diabetes, the youngster learns to inject himself with insulin. Faith healing, folk medicine, and scientific remedies for common ills are a secondary focus of this text.

Sheriff Lily Ross also discovers that two individuals from *The Widows* have returned to the county—Elias and Luther Ross, both of whom had been involved in local corruption and the murder of her husband, Daniel Ross. Their appearance is the first of a series of events, including two murders that shake Sheriff Lily Ross's faith in her friends. George Vogel, a crime boss, and his minion, Abe Miller, are back, as are his new wife, a local, Fiona Weaver Vogel, who has inherited property from her recently deceased uncle, Henry. George Vogel has plans for isolated, rugged Bronwyn County—he wants to build a secret moonshine factory on his wife's property. Furthermore, as readers discover, the federal government has poisoned manufactured alcohol, so that it cannot be used as a base in making illicit spirits. Rumors of tainted alcohol spread throughout the community, threatening the independent craft distillers. In fact, George Vogel plans on tainting the local speakeasy's alcohol, but the plan is revealed. Both Luther Ross and Elias Ross are removed permanently from the tale; George Vogel goes to jail. Two murders are solved. A Christmas celebration ends the tale; life returns to normal in Bronwyn County, Ohio, in December 1927.

Women are the stars of the series—Lily Ross, the sheriff; Marvena Sacovech, the working-class country woman, and even the nascent crime lord, Fiona Vogel. Each woman proves strong and resilient. They chart their own courses, overcoming obstacles set in their way, leaving behind the societal expectations of their roles. For example, in *The Widows*, Lily and Marvena work together to solve the murder of the sheriff, Daniel Ross, whose widow, Lily, has been appointed sheriff to serve out his term until a special election. Often municipalities and counties did this very act, appointing the widow to serve out her deceased husband's term until an election, so that the family could receive a paycheck. Often the women were just figureheads, but in real life as in the novel, some became excellent law officers, winning election in their own right. Readers also take a deep dive into the life

of an Appalachian coal miner. The novel opens with the explosion and deaths of miners at the Widowmaker mine, located near Rossville, a classic company town. A local miner and union organizer, Tom Whitcomb (Marvena's brother) has been accused of Daniel Ross's murder. Lily and Marvena investigate the murder, one hoping to reveal the truth about her husband's death and the other, hoping to clear her brother. During the investigation, readers are introduced to life in the company town, where the mine owner, Luther Ross, pays the miners in company scrip, not U.S. currency, forcing them to purchase food and other necessary items from the company store. He also owns all housing in the town, so he can evict union organizers and others that he feels are a threat to his profits. He can even close the company-owned elementary school, so that the older boys are forced to work in the mines. George Vogel, the regional crime lord, has invested in the mines, hiring enforcers to help Luther Ross suppress the union organizers. Both men place monetary profit over human lives. Although the two women solve the murder, they find themselves making a Faustian deal for the greater good of the community. Rather than face arrest for conspiracy to commit murder, George Vogel withdraws his money from the mining company. Once that happens, the mining company is sold to new, more humane owners. The new owners allow the establishment of a union and upgrade mine safety. Tom Whitcomb is cleared of any complicity in Daniel Ross's murder, but the men who ordered the sheriff's death are allowed to leave the county.

Approximately six months later in *The Hollows*, Lily Ross, the newly elected sheriff, becomes embroiled in another murder, the brutal death of an elderly woman thrown in front of train. The elderly woman holds a dark secret which is revealed over the course of the novel. Lily Ross and Marvena Whitcomb discover the pernicious role of white supremacy and male privilege in their community. Lily finds that her community has a white supremacist underbelly—the presence of a women's chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. The elderly woman, suffering from what is clearly Alzheimer's disease, called dementia, has retreated into her distant past, escaping from the local mental asylum,

The Hollows, and wandered into danger. Her secret, written in her journal, rests hidden in the asylum. Meanwhile, Hildy Cooper, a friend of the women, finds herself rebelling against the expectations of her mother, who has arranged for her marriage to an older wealthy man. Cooper inserts herself into the investigation, placing herself in some danger as a resident of the asylum, so she can find the woman's journals. She reads the journals, finding a mentor in the life of a world traveler and adventurer. She finds the courage to break her engagement. The journals also contain an explosive secret, a member of the regional elite has been "passing for white" unknowingly. As a child, the elderly woman had carried a newborn African American child to an abolitionist family where he was raised as a white man. Since that time, members of the family had left behind their abolitionist beliefs, embracing the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy. The killer hoped to maintain the family position in society, and therefore, brutally murdered the old woman.

As for the novels, they fit neatly into the regional historical mystery genre, allowing the reader to explore the history of a particular time and place, touching on current "hot button" issues, such as feminism, socialism, and racism, all within the context of a re-created world. You, as reader, can be looking over the shoulder of a private investigator, Alba Flavia, walking the mean streets of Imperial Rome in the first century of the Common Era or "the eye of the red tsar," Pekkala, walking across Red Square in Stalin's Moscow searching for the truth about the deaths of the Romanovs. And you might learn a bit of history.

Betty J. Bruther is a retired instructor of history at Marian University in Indianapolis.

Where We Stand, written by Donnetta Lavinia Grays, directed
by Dwandra Nickole Lampkin, Summit Theatre
Performance, May 22, 2021.

Reviewed by Ben Tebbe

On a warm evening in May, on the campus of Marian University in Indianapolis, a lone actor hummed her way from the grassy audience area to the nearly empty stage of the Allen Whitehill Clowes Amphitheatre. On her way, she subtly encouraged the diverse gathering of 50 or so souls to join her in rhythmic clapping to keep time as her hum transformed into a song reminiscent of a spiritual.

She was inviting us along. Our act of clapping together in unison creating a community. And the story she was ready to tell was all about community.

Where We Stand is a new play by Donnetta Lavinia Grays and from May 21 to 23, 2021, was presented as a staged reading by *Summit Performance* Indianapolis. The play weaves poetry, song, and theatre together in a unique experience. A solo performer, named simply “Man,” attends to us as an “everyman” or perhaps a better description would be as a griot in the great tradition of African storytellers. As Man begins, he is pleading for forgiveness—pleading for his very life—grateful that we are “holding our stones” until his story can be told. What unfolds is moving and relatable. A story of someone on the outside who wants in. Of someone who is bombarded with messages to make his life “better.” Out of the blue he is presented with a bargain from a “golden” stranger with a quick fix to turn him and his town from a “used to be” into a “still could be.” But it all will come at a cost.

Man, in this staged reading is played with full, powerful delivery by Manon Voice. Though Ms. Voice is not a traditional actor, she is a talented artist, poet, and spoken-word performer. Throughout

the story she embodies several other townspeople. And while her physical performance vocabulary may have been a bit limited, her robust vocal instrument facilitated clear definition of each new character being introduced. As a staged reading, Voice kept her script with her, but she displayed complete command of the tale belying the fact that she and director Dwandra Nickole Lampkin rehearsed only a week. The ease and comfort with which they fostered community throughout the play was manifest.

Where We Stand, though in many ways a straightforward narrative about a downtrodden Man being swayed to a quick fix, is profound because of its medium. Theatre has always created community when an audience joins performers in a space to share a story. But in this case, we as audience are also forced to *become* the community of the story. In the end, we must decide the fate of Man. Choose *forgiveness* or *accountability*. *Compassion* or *punishment*. One of the striking things about this piece is that the playwright has insisted the performer be Black. As a white man, I felt the weight of passing judgement on this character. Additionally, it occurred to me that we as the community in the story were complicit in the town's downfall. For me, all blame could not be placed on Man. On this particular Saturday evening, the majority of our community chose forgiveness. And Man was grateful.

At times, it feels a bit like Grays is trying to fit too many big themes in her piece and the ending is rather abrupt following the vote. But overall, the rhythm she creates with the piece is captivating. The play calls up notes of religion and freedom and mercy. And she captures the truth of humanity that what we all want is community, friendship. And maybe even more so after a year of pandemic life and protests demanding equity for Black bodies. Gratitude, mercy, and compassion certainly go a long way to cultivate community.

Summit Performance, in a lovely touch, enlisted Danicia Monét Malone to moderate a post-show discussion which was a beautiful extension of our community experience rounding out a beautiful late-spring evening. As a professional, women-focused theatre company Summit has produced several

staged readings over its few-year history with more planned in the future. Through this outlet they can present newer plays or harder-to-fully-produce plays. But they have the formula down, and with Summit one can expect enough “stage” and minimal “reading” for a full experience. An experience with a community.

Ben Tebbe is an assistant professor and director of the Marian University, Indianapolis, theatre program.

Gannis, Scott. *Very Fine People*. Dayton, Ohio: Atlatl Press, 2020.

Reviewed by Doug Sheldon

Scott Gannis's freshman outing, *Very Fine People*, takes its title from Donald J. Trump's reference to white supremacists during the violence at Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. It introduces us to Jude Glick, a midwestern adult-orphan, working part time as both a comedian and a museum security guard and inching toward probable suicide. A former child frenemy, Stephen Scheisskopf, has wandered back into his life as the campaign associate of a Trumpian figure running for president. Schiesskopf exploits Glick's life story (poverty, addiction, sickness, premature death, crippling debt) to mold a far-right narrative drawing supporters to his candidate. Glick's self-loathing then escalates and soon progresses outward and imposes itself on the far-right supporters with catastrophic aptitude.

Very Fine People is more of a choleric essay cosplaying as a novel. It paves a road made from anger at the 2016 election but does not quite weave itself into solid fiction. The narrator, Jude, swirls like many did in the 2016–2020 haze of fascist resurgence and drags readers along with him while cloaked in a veneer of hard-boiled retorts posing as narration. But that might be the hidden fun of Gannis's debut: that so many people I know, including myself, identify with Jude's anger early in the thinly fictionalized Trumpian universe, until his inward thoughts trickle outward to force him on-the-lamb. For example, Jude breaks narrative saying things like "A few thousand people, active oppressors, or active oppressor adjacent...meditation appropriators, and the speciously thoughtful flannel wearers who want to bone them" (8) and while funny and observant, it doesn't add much to the books

attempted message of anti-fascism. Jude appears more whiney than righteous. This might be Gannis' point, to show murky nature of current political identity, yet Jude's narration often cannot meet this goal. Much of the narrative paragraphs read like Twitter threads, rant-ish, distracting, and, intentional or not, come off disjointed after a few chapters. When it comes to executing cohesion in a long-form narrative, *Very Fine People* falls a bit flat as the fury-layered pages lose steam building toward acts of violence consequential to Glick's journey.

Although, one thing is clear: Gannis did his homework. Borrowing the simmering despair of writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Dan Chaon, and, most obviously, Joseph Heller, we get a narrator you cannot stop listening to. No matter how much the narrator drips with rage, some of it justified and some of it privileged, you root for him, even if you don't want to, as he attempts to delegitimize the dark forces swirling in pre-pandemic America. There are great twists and interesting characters that pilot Glick around in this ill-fated pilgrimage. Gannis exudes great rhetorical accuracy when assessing the copied-and-pasted speech of extremist actors, which stems from Schiesskopf's strategizing, and illustrates the antidemocratic nature of populism. There are even moments where Glick questions his own growing extremism after justifying the fame of a domestic terrorist like the Unabomber: "The fuck is wrong with me? With us?... could I ever forgive myself regardless" (p. 193). There is a sense of roundness to Glick. He is not just a flat extremist turned domestic terrorist or a cartoon drooling at death, but a complicated middle-American torn between extremism and decency who feels abandoned by his country and thirsts for revenge.

The novel concludes with a confessional author's note in which Gannis searches for sympathy in a senseless world. This feels like the whole novel distilled into four pages. He jabs lovingly at readers, reminding us all of the way we might have felt in late 2016, that we are connected by tissue and bone to those dark four years that followed. But the connectivity of this mini-revelation does not translate

into the text of the novel itself. In the end, *Very Fine People* falls into a similar trap in which many contemporary novels of the Trump era have found themselves: sacrificing story for message. This could be avoided, perhaps, if the self-loathing comedy of the novel took time for introspection rather than extrapolation. The sojourn for a great line, a pithy quip, or a darkly comedic paragraph has won out over narrative in *Very Fine People*, but damn if this anti-*Goldfinch* isn't a compelling examination of how fantasy-heroics can char the edges of a movement.

Doug Sheldon is a writer, scholar, and professor living in the Midwest. His work has appeared in Flyover Country Review, Midwestern Miscellany, Mid-America, and Teaching Hemingway and Gender.

Susan Abulhawa. *Against the Loveless World: A Novel*. New
York: Simon and Schuster, Inc.,
2020.

Reviewed by Fouad Mami.

Against the Loveless World is Susan Abulhawa's third novel. Her *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) are accelerators toward this work. Here, Abulhawa spells the ABCs of the Palestinian revolution to come. Readers do not encounter the terror-stricken Yousef of the first novel, nor the damaged Nur of the second. One cannot get enough of Nahr ("river" in Arabic) if only because she is a voluptuous dancer. Nahr is not a secondary character as with *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Instead, Nahr stays *le réacteur conceptuel* of the revolution, but she does not attribute any narcissist role to herself. As there exists no script to follow, it is her being that metamorphizes to the essence and that, in turn, organically develops to a concept for the revolution. Nahr embodies in absolute certainty the way a revolution becomes irreversible. Only when the would-be revolutionary dances erotically does life become incendiary.

Readers meet Nahr when she is incarcerated in the cubicle, a high-tech security facility that targets the detainees' knowledge of the absolute. She narrates her exile from its beginning in the pre-1990 Kuwait City, when a large Palestinian community is building Kuwait. Nahr marries Mhammed with presumably unmatched credentials as a revolutionary, which explains why he is a celebrity among Palestinian girls in the city. Because he is gay, Mhammed cannot reconcile with his strict gender expectations and painfully leaves Nahr. As her family's main source of financial support, Nahr takes various odd jobs until she meets Um Buraq in a wedding ceremony. An Iraqi living in Kuwait, Um

Buraq is enchanted with Nahr's dancing and adds her to a team of girls in an underground brothel for rich *khalidji* customers. The night Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait, Nahr and two other girls are entertaining exacting Saudi *emirs* who turn out to be extremely abusive. With the occupation underway, the *emirs* are arrested and later executed, showcasing poetic justice.

With the liberation of Kuwait, Palestinians become overnight *personae non gratae* in a country that they helped build from the sands. Nahr's family find themselves refugees in Amman now. Under the Oslo Accords of 1993, Nahr is finally convinced to visit the West Bank, terminates her divorce papers, and remarries. Mhammed's brother, Bilal, facilitates the daunting procedures and Nahr slowly becomes entangled in Bilal's secret workflow. She discovers that under a surface of docility, underground groups from multiple villages form autonomous resistance cells to Israeli occupation. After earning their trust, Nahr becomes part of Bilal's unit and helps organize several painful blows. In consequence, she must serve an eighteen-years prison sentence. This explains why readers encounter Nahar in the cubicle early in the novel. Exchanged in a deal, readers meet her in closing in Amman. She sees Bilal again but resists the urge to publicly reunite as he is still on the Israelis' wanted list.

The novel's world is far richer than the details of its plot. If Karl Marx's call for communist revolution, his disposition against the state and money, or his historicist approach seem too abstract, Nahr's choices facilitate the reception of such abstractions better than the finest professor in the finest institution. Nahr embodies Marx's *Gattungwesen*, the life of men and women free from alienation. She incarnates the ontological vibration of the primordial tradition predominant before the Neolithic Revolution. Readers discover that the communism of the future can be no other than the way Nahr, Bilal, Samar, Jumana, and Ghassan live, with or without occupation. Before resorting to the armed struggle, they are mentally clear that the revolution is how they need to challenge their society's sedimented gender roles and sanctions of morality. Their anti-statist logic does not waver before either

Israel, Palestinian Authority, Jordan, or Kuwait. Any state, they find, is the codification of alienation. During the short window of time between the Iraqi occupation and American liberation (August 1990-January 1991), Nahr witnesses first-hand how money is commodity fetishism. With inflation escalating like wildfire, people reclaim communism almost in a reboot mode. Even when not articulated as communism, that brief experience undid the ghettoization into Kuwaitis, Iraqis, and Palestinians.

The proof for an underlying revolutionary approach is that Nahr did not have to shy away from her past as a sex worker. Still, not shying away is in no way championing that past. Rather, it is despite that past, perfectly understandable with the logic of undesirable refugees in the Gulf, that she was able to reflect on her condition—a reflection that tolerates the emergence of a radical consciousness actively seeking to reverse the collective misfortune. Her radical logos results from bypassing private misery, refusing to sabotage or coerce one's clarity by zooming in instead on the collective injustice. Sex work is redefined to signify not subscribing one's life force in the reversal of occupation, any occupation. Nahr forces comparisons with both Zoulikha in Assia Djébar's *La femme sans sépulture* (1976) and Hajj Khaled in Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Time of White Horses* (2007). Hatred for opponents fails to motivate these three protagonists. Unsurprisingly, they lack personal enemies. With these three characters, readers note the ancestral breath of the hunter-gatherer. As Nahr admires the curve shaping her breast (reveling in her *Dasein*), readers cannot overlook the parallel of the curve with the hunter's arch. Both subscribe to the same sacral (not sacred) breath. In hitting the prey, the hunter seeks sustenance, not profit. Readers close the novel with the conviction that whoever cannot dance cannot qualify as a revolutionary.

Fouad Mami is a professor of English at the University of Adrar in Algeria.

Clint Jones. *Stranger, Creature, Thing, Other: Monstruous Reflections on Our Ecostential Crisis*. Stevens Point, Wisconsin: Cornerstone Press, 2019.

Reviewed by John William Nelson

You and I are monsters. So too is Clint Jones, and in his book, born out of a lecture series on the Environmental Humanities, he makes it clear that all of us had better get in touch with our own monstrosity before it is too late. Part jeremiad, part pop-culture reference work, this book offers a philosophical compilation of Jones's environmentally conscious musings about humanity's future in an age of inevitable global climate shift. Taking the monster as an avenue through which to discuss humanity's relationship to a dying world, Jones proposes it is time to upscale our own knowledge of the self "to keep pace with the upscaling of our social understandings" (p. 3). In other words, as we grow increasingly aware of the scale of a global calamity that threatens the entire earth, and accept our devastating role in that crisis, we must rethink our own positionality within nature and embrace our strangeness as a monstrous species apart.

Jones approaches the question of our place within global climate shift from the perspective of philosophy. In Jones's interpretation, philosophers dedicated most of the twentieth century to the questions of existentialism. This existential preoccupation was a reaction to a series of human-induced wars and catastrophes in the twentieth century, but Jones proposes we move beyond such queries to a new mode of thinking that he terms "ecostentialism." In this new ecostentialism, we move beyond asking questions of *being* to questions of our *belonging* within the natural world. The trope of the

monster offers an accessible way into these questions for even those without a philosophical background.

In Jones's chapters, various monsters from lore and pop culture offer valuable lessons for humans within a failing world. For instance, vampires, werewolves, and zombies serve as destructive consumers of one stripe or another. Humans have fallen prey to their consumer appetites, in the process ruining not just their own prospects but the environment around them. To amend these disastrous habits, we must begin to think as creatures with a relationality to the world beyond us. As Jones puts it, we need to shift from "an anthropocentric relationship to creation bolstered primarily by hubris, luster, and a stubborn unwillingness to see ourselves enmeshed in the world" to something more collaborative, and more sustainable (p. 79).

Jones effectively weaves his themes of the monster with useful critiques and accessible distillations of a range of thinkers. His thoughts on Karl Marx are worth noting, as he shows that the ghostly inheritance of Marxist critiques, while useful against capitalism, are not capacious enough to correct all that is wrong with our world amid global climate shift. But for all of Jones's calls for global thinking and capaciousness, a few elements of the book read as oddly provincial. Rather than outlining the threats of climate change in global terms, for instance, Jones discusses such threats in the language of Americentric regions: Northeast, Midwest, Southwest, etc.

Such a limited scope reads jarringly when matched with the bulk of Jones's arguments, but hints at a larger tension in the work—the balance between localism and universalism. Writing from the intellectual ecosystem of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, this book is a product of both a local academic community and a manifestation of our global concerns as survivors in the Anthropocene. This observation is less a critique of Jones's work, however, and more a reflection on the larger challenge that continues to face us as intellectuals within the humanities: how to expand our interpretations to answer a climate dilemma of global proportions while staying grounded and accessible to our

geographic and academic locales. Jones's use of the monstrous offers us one medium through which to brave such a daunting task. His take serves as a suggestive, if not definitive, interpretation of how we might think of ourselves as both a species apart while also intimately responsible for the survival of our wider world.

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James H. Madison, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland*.
Bloomington: Indiana University
Press, 2020.

Reviewed by John Lepley

History clashed with memory when *USA Today* interviewed Adam Driver about his role in the 2018 film *BlacKkKlansmen*. Raised in Mishawaka, Indiana, Driver recalled the Ku Klux Klan as a ubiquitous presence throughout his childhood. “If anything, I was more aware of it as a kid growing up in Indiana because they were always Klan rallies, like, every summer,” he shared. However, James H. Madison, a historian at Indiana University, threw cold water on this reminiscence. “Most of the memories of this sort tend to be grossly exaggerated, but at the same time, it’s quite possible that he [Driver], saw men and women in robes and sheets. It’s quite possible that he saw a burning cross. But not a lot of it,” Madison explained.¹⁵⁵ We ought to cut Driver some slack, though; his recollection exemplifies the history that Madison describes in *The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland*.

In the early 1920s, the Indiana KKK boasted over 300,000 members, peaking in 1922–1923. Madison contends that too much attention has been focused on its elites, particularly Grand Dragon D. C. Stephenson. Instead, he tells us to look at the rank and file that organized “Klaverns” in every county in the state. “In the American heartland, the Klan found its best people,” Madison writes. (p. 2). Nativism, 100% patriotism, and militant Protestantism provided a milieu that African

¹⁵⁵ “*Star Wars* Actor Adam Driver Says He Had KKK Neighbors in Indiana,” 5Chicago, modified Aug. 21, 2018, <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/star-wars-actor-adam-driver-says-he-had-kkk-neighbors-in-indiana/49645/>

Americans, Jews, and Catholics threatened to tear asunder. While the Klan reinforced de jure and de facto structures to marginalize African Americans, “they were never considered as dangerous as Catholics” (p. 95). The Klan is usually associated with virulent racism because of its origins in the aftermath of the Civil War and resurgence during the Civil Rights era in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the Great War intensified the suspicion with which white Protestants regarded the Eastern and Southern Europeans who immigrated to the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. By the 1920s, these factors created a siege mentality upon which the Klan erected a formidable redoubt.

The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland is outstanding regional history. The endnotes reveal deep archival research. One-third of the monograph is visual; two galleries feature photographs and images illustrating the Klan’s pursuits. A flyer for a Klan picnic in Vincennes advertised “One Whole Day of Diversified Delight and Amusement”; several photos bear the name of “W. A. Swift,” a Muncie photographer who covered Klan functions. Still, Madison’s focus on the local level unearths a deep vein of exclusion and division in the American past writ large. “Running through that history is racial, ethnic, and religious conflict and hatred,” he continues (p. 7). Hoosier Klan members were not illiterate backcountry rubes who eschewed civic and patriotic ideals. To the contrary, in their minds, they were its defenders and evangelists who used modern technologies to promulgate their creed, enforce moral standards, and regulate who belonged to the nation. Less than a decade after Woodrow Wilson screened *Birth of a Nation* at the White House, the Klan produced the films *The Toll of Justice* and *The Traitor Within* that “portrayed the Klan as a nonviolent moral reform organization” (p. 107).

Madison’s emphasis on the Klan’s cultural, political, and social aspects creates a rich history, but it lacks a political-economy perspective that would have enhanced his argument. For example, did the postwar glut in agricultural commodities influence Klan membership? The distinction that Madison makes between the Klan’s intimidation of African Americans and the violence the Klan actually perpetrated invites scrutiny as well. Even if there are no primary sources to support the claim

of “an intensely violent Indiana Klan,” (p. 110) mere threats are on the same spectrum as actual deeds. Chapters on the Klan’s critics and opponents, its political endeavors, the downfall of D. C. Stephenson, and brief revivals in the latter decades of the 20th century round out this excellent contribution to midwestern history.

Driver’s recollections of the Klan prompted others to speak up. Corey Havens, a reporter for the *South Bend Tribune*, documented several instances of Klan violence and hate group activities in Indiana in the 1990s and early 2000s. Travis Childs, an educator at South Bend’s History Museum, who had also cast doubt on Driver’s claims, owned up to his mistake. “I was shocked. I would never have guessed there were that many events. Shocked and saddened,” he admitted.¹⁵⁶ In an ironic way, this row anticipated Madison’s conclusions in *The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland*. “The Klan story does not give comfort. It rests at the core of American history, not at the margins” (p. 198).

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¹⁵⁶ Yes, There Were Plenty of KKK Rallies when Adam Driver Lived in St. Joseph County,” *South Bend (IN) Tribune*, Aug. 21, 2018, https://www.southbendtribune.com/news/local/yes-there-were-plenty-of-kkk-rallies-when-adam-driver/article_ddeafc15-d21f-5cce-beff-6e48f66a1e00.html.

Nicholas Newman, *The Political Works of Remigius Dei Girolami*. Belleville, IL: St. Dominic's Media, 2018.

Reviewed by Samuel C. C. Bunch

It is certainly no secret that we citizens of the United States are a people fiercely divided into political factions. It is no more a secret that many of the controversies of our day are bound up in questions regarding the proper relationship between the moral precepts of religion and the laws of the states. Considered in this light, it is easy to understand why Nicholas Newman's study and translation of several of the works of Remigius Dei Girolami might be seen as a timely and relevant contribution to both historical scholarship and public intellectual discourse.

Newman provides, in the opening pages, a concise and effective introduction to the Investiture Crisis, explaining how the question of whether the supreme temporal authority (in the form of the Holy Roman Emperor) or the supreme spiritual authority (in the form of the Roman Catholic Pope) is greater than the other in earthly affairs had produced an extremely volatile political situation.

Newman places readers in the context of a city of Florence riven by violence and controversy, which is itself a part of the larger Italian peninsula that has also been riven by violence between its various states, and throughout the book reiterates this historical context as necessary to understanding the works of Dei Girolami, who was both a citizen of Florence who sought the common good of the city's people and a Dominican friar loyal to the Catholic Church and the Roman Pontiff.

Newman's central claim appears to be that Dei Girolami's purpose—healing the political divisions and their destructive consequences for the city of Florence—which the friar would have

witnessed firsthand during the late 1200s and early 1300s, is advanced by utilizing a philosophical framework which emphasizes the common good and repeatedly calling attention to the damage to the polity caused by the neglect of the common good, particularly the goods of peace and justice.

The relationship between Dei Girolami's works on the common good, peace, and justice is brought to the fore by Newman when he addresses the scholarly debate over which of the works preceded and influenced the others. He takes the position that Dei Girolami's work on the common good was written first, and his case for that position is well argued.

Perhaps more interestingly to lay readers, his introductions help in understanding how Dei Girolami viewed peace and justice in light of the common good. One of the lines from Newman's translation of Dei Girolami's sermons on the topic of peace is an excellent example of the rich material Newman is drawing upon: "injustice does not permit peace to be kept."

Current-day activists who chant, "No justice, no peace!" would probably be surprised to learn that a Dominican friar writing in the 1300s had already argued that justice is a prerequisite for peace. It is also worth noting that Dei Girolami's lengthy arguments, many based on classical philosophy and reasoning by analogy from nature and demonstrating that the common good is more important than certain individual goods, could well appeal just as strongly to secular critics of capitalism and consumerism as they do to Catholic integralists.

Fortunately, this brief volume is written in a style accessible to scholars and to educated layfolk. Scholars of history and political science who cannot read Latin may greatly appreciate the new English translation of Dei Girolami's works and Newman's citation-heavy introductions to those works. The book-loving political activists seeking to contextualize current controversies will find much food for thought on the relationship among the common good, the church, and the states. Catholics trying to find a way to reason clearly about the common good and peace and justice as a response to

contemporary crises might discover that they are both challenged and reassured by Dei Girolami's own efforts to accomplish the same.

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Thomas Sanfilip. *Conversations with Mona Lisa*. Des Plaines, IL: Bigio Marato, 2019.

Reviewed by Jennifer J. Smith

Reading Thomas Sanfilip's *Conversations with Mona Lisa* is a bit like looking at a Marc Chagall painting: the pieces are dreamlike, often ethereal, yet tethered to everyday reality. Sanfilip's volume of prose poems and poetry paint images and scenes that blur around the edges. The book is divided into untitled, numbered sections, and the prose poems within each section contain recurring images or settings. One section focuses on a hospital room where the speaker's sister is close to death, while another section evokes a day spent at the seaside. Sanfilip wishes to capture poetic consciousness as the speaker moves through and bumps into the world. More than a few pieces are dedicated to surreal dream sequences where the speaker seems to have found human connection only to awake and have missed it. These fragmented poems capture consciousness at those moments when it pauses before rushing on to the next image; in doing so, the book attempts to mirror the human psyche in its wanderings.

An early piece invokes the eponymous *Mona Lisa* as muse. Sanfilip begins by establishing the setting: "The crowd pushes forward, the rapid fire of cameras clicking, flashes of light bouncing off the Plexiglas that shields the Mona Lisa from every conceivable assault of hot breath...yet under fire she remains poised and gazes out with all her enigmatic wiles intact, tranquil, calm, patient and eternal." The speakers often resemble Leonardo da Vinci's subject: aloof and ever present. They seem to be looking at the world through thick glass. He ends this same piece by directly addressing the woman at the center of the painting: "Help me find my way to your side where I can speak without

fear and listening become one beyond the murder of your light, beyond the weight of your bones. Give me your last smile as the day wanes and the sky bursts in a flash of dying blue” (p. 9).

For me, the most compelling pieces were those tethered to a grounded reality. In a prosaic vignette, the speaker visits a library giving away books that have not circulated in twenty years, and the speaker finds “a worn out biography of Cezanne,” implying that it was once well loved and now obsolete. He next stumbles upon a book called *The Pleasures of Antiquity*, which prompts the speaker to “laugh at the irony of old books left rotting” (p. 52). In one of the pieces set at the seashore, Sanfilip captures what it feels like to be at the beach, writing, “There are moments the air drops into absolute silence. The waves meekly run to shore without any noise. Even the drone of a small airplane is muffled... a stillness, coming and going as though something muting the energies” (p. 81). His language here mirrors the sense of suspension that comes with sitting where water meets land.

The sense of suspension is also present in a powerful piece on a life-altering diagnosis of the speaker’s sister. Here he uses em-dashes to show the way that time contracts and elongates at moments where the body waits to see what will become of it: “doctor questioning her—pressing her swollen abdomen—we study her chest x-ray from the back—enlarged heart I mistake for the left lung” (p. 100). In this piece, as in the one on the *Mona Lisa*, the speaker approaches enigmatic images and tries to discern meaning. In many ways, all the pieces echo the questions that arise when he looks at Da Vinci’s masterpiece and the x-ray. What is real? What can be counted upon? What slips away? These are the central questions of Sanfilip’s volume.

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