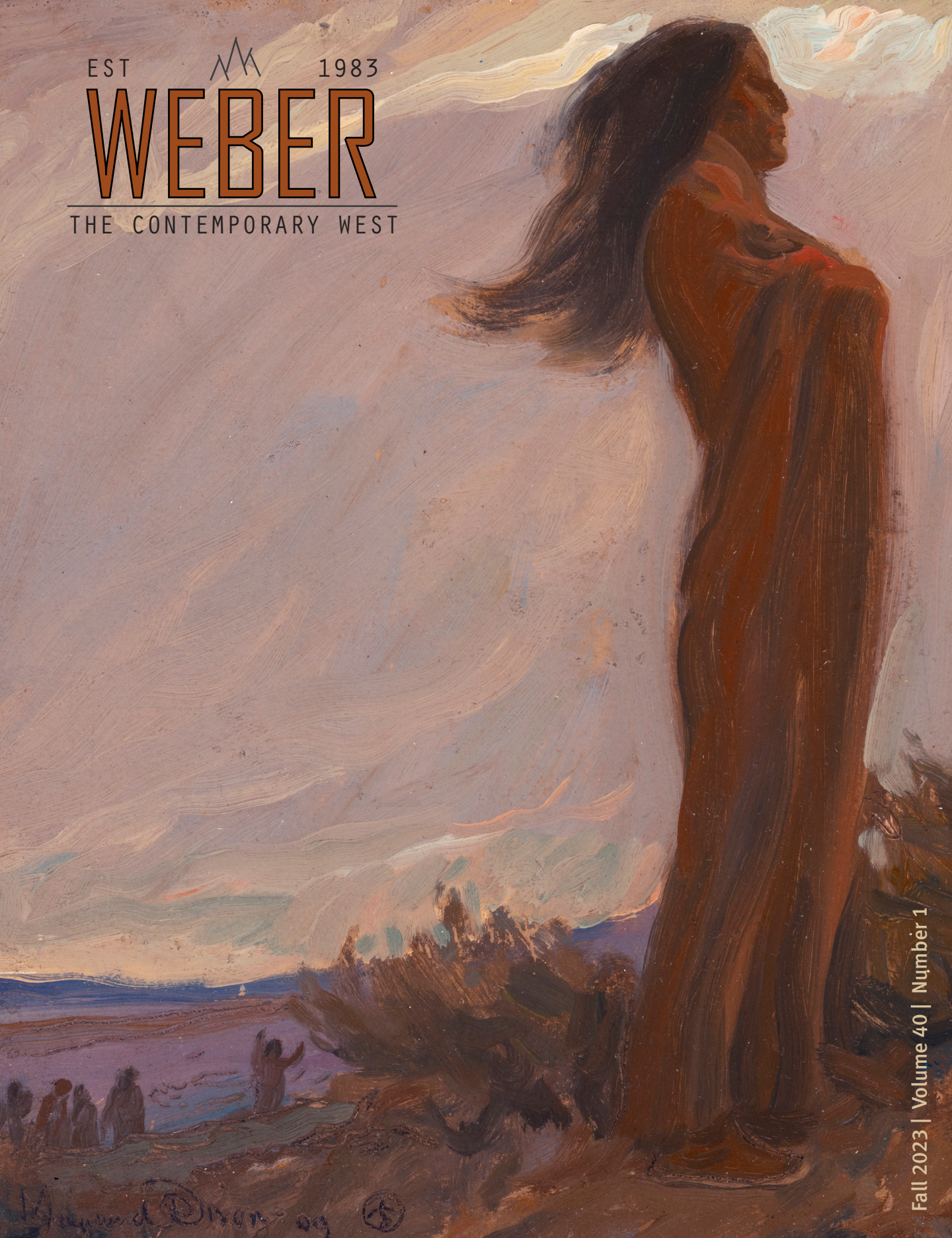


EST 1983

WEBER

THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

Fall 2023 | Volume 40 | Number 1

EST 1983
WEBER
THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

Deriving from the German **weben**—to weave—**weber** translates into the literal and figurative "weaver" of textiles and texts. Weber are the artisans of textures and discourse, the artists of the beautiful fabricating the warp and weft of language into everchanging patterns. **Weber**, the journal, understands itself as a regional and global tapestry of verbal and visual texts, a weave made from the threads of words and images.

INSPIRATION

from the editor's desk

The border has had a profound impact on who I am, and thus on my art as well. I grew up connecting with people who were different from me. It felt very normal to go between two countries, two cultures, two economic realities, two languages. As an opera singer I'm always looking for that connection, for new audiences, for that exchange of culture, and I have an awareness of a world outside of the traditional white, upper class opera audience because of this constant duality.

— Anishka Lee-Skorpa, Artistas Fronterizas

I believe one can have as many rare experiences at the tail end of the earth as in civilization if one grabs at them — no — it isn't a case of grabbing — it is — just that they are here — you can't help getting them.

— Georgia O'Keeffe

In my art and life, I really strive to reverse the old adage that what you see is what you get. If I can be Coyote and practice my sneak-up, I can engage the viewers from a distance with one image and lure them in for exposure to another layer, which changes the initial view into quite a different reality. After all, that is what ethnic culture is all about—or even an ongoing relationship. What you see on the surface is never the same again once you begin to plumb the depths.

— Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

When I first came to Santa Fe, I vowed to myself that I would not paint Indians. Then I saw the numerous over-romanticized paintings of the 'noble savage' looking in the sunset and decided that someone should paint the Indian from a different context.

— Fritz Scholder

Cover art: Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Sketch for Medicine Woman*, 1909, oil on canvasboard, 10 5/8 x 8 5/8 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.



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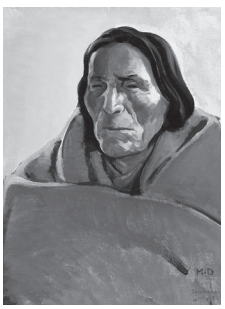
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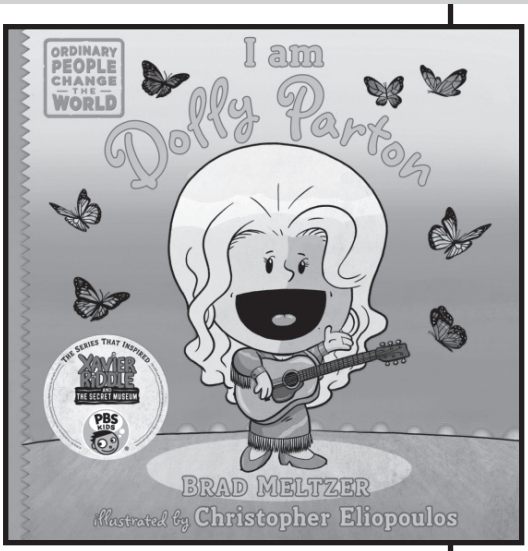
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HISTORY, NARRATIVE, COMICS

KATHRYN MACKAY



A Conversation with BRAD MELTZER



Brad Meltzer is a gifted storyteller for people of all ages. He tells stories through political thrillers, histories, comic books, children's books, and television series. He published his first book, The Tenth Justice, *in 1997 while he was attending Columbia Law School. Since then, all twelve of his novels have been on* The New York Times *bestseller list, as have his nonfiction and children's books. His writings have been translated into over 25 languages. For his work on comic books, he was recognized with the prestigious Eisner Award. He has guided TV shows for the History Channel and PBS as well as the 2005 series* Jack and Bobby. *Please visit https://bradmeltzer.com for his numerous accolades and career highlights. Running through these many projects is his conviction that ordinary people change the world.*

Brad was the featured speaker of the 2022 Ogden School Foundation Fall Author Event. I would like to thank OSF for their help and assistance in making this interview possible.

You are very prolific. You've written novels; you've written histories; you've written all kinds of children's books; you've done PBS television series. How do you do it, besides through hard work?

I do think it comes down to one simple rule for myself—I have to love it. And if I love it, I'll make time for it. When I started writing, I loved thrillers because that's what I read. Those were fun to me, so that's what I wanted to do. But then I had kids. And I thought, well, I want to do something for them, I love them. So, I made time for that. And then I thought, I have these nonfiction stories I want to tell for adults, and I really loved those. So, I think, as with anything in life, whatever you're passionate about, you'll make the space for, and if you're not, you're just going to waste your time.

Let's talk about how you came to writing. I know you were interested in both English and history.

I was a history major. I thought about being an English major, but I just liked the history classes more because. . . I just did. You know, I was the first in my immediate family to go to a four-year college. My parents did the best thing of all, which was that they just let me pick what I liked. And it wasn't because they were great parents, which they were, but because they hadn't been to college themselves. They didn't know what that meant. They didn't know what I was doing. *I* didn't know what I was doing. I literally just went in and thought, these classes seem interesting. And so, I took them. I talked to the head of the history department at my alma mater recently, and he said: "So many parents don't let their kids study history, because they keep telling them you can't make money doing that. And so, our whole department has shrunk." That's just heartbreaking to me.

Yeah. It's happening in the humanities in general. I hope it'll come around again.

Well, it'll come around when people are miserable with their lives and miserable with their jobs.

And it seems that lots of people – I certainly experienced this in my teaching – come into history later on in life. They've had their career, and then they come back. Weber is a good place for returning students. I want to ask you about your children's books. I really like Xavier Riddle *as a program – it's so lively and energetic. You already noted that you got started writing children's books for your own children. And you started with the Abraham Lincoln text, right?*

I started when we had kids. The first two I did—my youngest son was five at the time, my daughter was eight—was ***I am Abraham Lincoln*** for one, and ***I am Amelia Earhart*** for the other. And then, of course, I realized that my gender stereotyping had no business in my parenting and each of them kind of liked the other even more. So that's what we began with.

That's great. And your most recent one is about Walt Disney. Is that right?

No, our most recent one is on Dolly Parton. And then the next one that will come out is on John Lewis. After that, we'll do Temple Grandin, who is our first autistic hero. So, we are now at 32 or 33 books. It's been an incredible, incredible journey. Chris Eliopoulos, our wonderful artist, said that at a signing last week, someone came up to him and said, "I grew up on your books." The books celebrate a 10-year anniversary next year. So, we have these people, who are now in their early 20s, who grew up on our books. That's been pretty humbling.

You have said that you can change history. I wonder whether you could elaborate on that a little. Are you, perhaps, thinking about changing the future?

To me, history is not just what happens in the past. History is what still remains to be written. What hasn't happened yet is history just waiting to be written for all of us. And that, to me, is what you change. Obviously, you don't change the past, but you change what happens. To me, especially when I'm speaking to students, I always tell them, your life is a book. Write us something spectacular.

You've also said that history is not about dates; it's about a selection process; it's about the stories that you tell. I agree with that. I think it is about the questions that we're asking of the past, which is why history is always changing – because we're asking a different set of questions. So, what questions are you asking of the past that you're writing? To explain and answer, or to make a suggestion about an interpretation?

As someone who was a history major, I think that so much of our past history was written with one point of view only; it was a very standard point of view. And that point of view, you can say, informs, but you also say, it biases—you can pick whatever word you want. I say that simply to say that when I look at history, I really try to figure out what's the other part of the story that we're not showing? And it's always there. It just is. When we worked on ***Xavier Riddle***—we had 28 million kids watching that first season. That's a crazy number of people. And so, of course, no matter who we did on the show, someone's going to say, "I don't like that person," no matter how good the person is. And I always say to them, "Listen, if you're looking for perfection, there are no heroes, there's nobody left." We have to approach history with a little grace, not just with a hammer looking for nails. And for me, I think the stories that we look for are always the stories we need. They may not even be the stories we want, but they are the stories we need. You see over and over why history becomes so informative to us in the present. We're constantly searching for answers for ourselves. History is never just about the facts and the dates of something. To me, history comes alive when we find out something about ourselves.

I think that's really true. In my own experience as a historian, I was in graduate school when women's history was coming to the fore. And so, I was excited about that, because I was the only woman in the group.

Women's history is a tiny little sliver. I was reading about Ruth Bader Ginsburg recently. She's going to be on ***Xavier Riddle***, and we're going to do a book on her. What was fascinating is that when she started looking at women in the law, she read all the case law on cases that dealt with equality for women. And she said, jokingly, "It didn't take very long, because there just weren't many." She helped create it. It was fascinating to me to think there were just a couple of cases, because no one was paying attention to those fights. In fact, on her first Supreme Court brief that she submitted, she put two other women's names on the brief, who, she said, were fighting for this in the 1940s, but no one was listening at the time. I just love the fact that she included them—to say their voices were there, but they just weren't heard.

We have to approach history with a little grace, not just with a hammer looking for nails. And for me, I think the stories that we look for are always the stories we need. They may not even be the stories we want, but they are the stories we need. You see over and over why history becomes so informative to us in the present. We're constantly searching for answers for ourselves.

New people are coming into the academy. Women, Native Americans, and African Americans have come into the academy, and they're asking a different set of questions. They're searching for a different set of materials, and they're producing wonderful books. This sometimes frustrates people, because they think history is always changing. Well, it is *always changing, because of the nature of these questions.*

And also because we're using a different set of eyes. The beauty of books to me is that they let you look through someone else's eyes. And that's not something to be scared of, that's the beauty of it—to see something that you were looking at all along in a brand-new way. How wonderful is that!

Exactly. I think so much of writing is about reading. I'm sure that you are an avid reader, and that's why you're an excellent writer. I'm going to ask you The New York Times *question: what are you reading now? What's on your nightstand?*

I'm just finishing a ton of books on Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I tend to read a lot of nonfiction, obviously. Her biography was the last book I finished. But for fun I read a ton of comic books and graphic novels. That's what I brought with me on the plane. Actually, I brought a couple things on the plane. I read Tom King, I read Neil Gaiman. My favorites are from Alan Moore. I also love young adult fiction. I loved *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*. Someone said that's a young adult book. Not to me. It's wonderful. And so, that's what I tend to read. I read all over the map. I just bought my niece the full *Harry Potter* set. She said, "I just finished book two and am starting book three." So, of course, I want to go back and read book three now, so I can talk to her about it. So, I'm reading whatever I can engage with. And whatever happens in my life tends to drive where I'm going.

Do you have an author that you go back to reading?

I go back to Alan Moore all the time. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* is the only book that I read nearly every year. And nearly every year I find something new in it, and I am, like, "How did I miss that?" It's the only comic book on *Time Magazine*'s Top-100 All Time Novels, and the only one for a reason.

Okay. I know you are fascinated with the two writers who created Superman.

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. If you can't tell, I'm a geek at heart. I just love the fact that it was two 17-year-old kids who gave us *Superman*. They weren't good looking. They weren't popular. They were just two teenagers with one dream and they gave the world something to believe in. I *love* that story. I love that it is not an American *idea*. It's an American *ideal*. And to me, the *Superman* story represents so much of what America is in terms of potential and, you know, sadly, where I feel like we have to remind ourselves to get back to.

If you can't tell, I'm a geek at heart. I just love the fact that it was two 17-year-old kids who gave us Superman. *They weren't good looking. They weren't popular. They were just two teenagers with one dream and they gave the world something to believe in. I* love *that story. I love that it is not an American* idea. *It's an American* ideal. *And to me, the* Superman *story represents so much of what America is in terms of potential and, you know, sadly, where I feel like we have to remind ourselves to get back to.*

I've never been a comic book fan, in part because they weren't allowed in the house when I was growing up.

Well, comic books, when you were growing up, also weren't for you. They were written for teenage boys. That's what they were for—they were written by men, for men. As you said before, there's an entirely new group of women who have come in. There are Muslim women writing Muslim superheroes for the first time—and people are going, what's that? There are women who are writing *Wonder Woman* for the first time. *Wonder Woman* was created by a man and written by a man for years before they gave a woman a shot at it. And then it's like, one woman, and they were like, we did it! We gave a woman *Wonder Woman*. Somewhere along the way, probably in the 1970s and 1980s, those kids who read comics grew up, and they realized, we're not writing for ten-year-old boys anymore. We're writing for adults. That's where you get *Watchmen*; that's where you get Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*; and that's where you get so many other wonderful books that are out there.

I do like Neil Gaiman. I have read him.

I know Neil and Neil is a friend. I love *American Gods* and I love *The Sandman*. They're good stories. Each one of them is a beautiful story.

This is the issue about stories. You are a good storyteller, you appreciate other good storytellers. And for a while there was an effort to turn history into a science. I know we've gone back to narratives, but there is a reason why history is what it is. It's because we are storytellers. Human beings are storytellers.

Since we could etch into a cave wall, that's what we did, we told stories. People think that the Bible is full of rules. It's not full of rules. It's full of narratives and stories. I recently read that people change their own habits of acting based on imaginary fictional characters more than they do on real people. The Dumbledores, and the Scouts, and the Atticus Finches of the world affect us more as a people than any senator, member of congress, or anyone else out there. I love that. That's not a flawed society. It's because we're searching to be something better than ourselves. And fiction lets us do that. And that's why, to me, there's nothing more powerful than a good story.

There are Muslim women writing Muslim superheroes for the first time – and people are going, what's that? There are women who are writing Wonder Woman *for the first time.* Wonder Woman *was created by a man and written by a man for years before they gave a woman a shot at it. And then it's like, one woman, and they were like, we did it! We gave a woman* Wonder Woman. *Somewhere along the way, probably in the 1970s and 1980s, those kids who read comics grew up, and they realized, we're not writing for ten-year-old boys anymore. We're writing for adults.*

I'm intrigued with that as an idea, because I don't write fiction. I write academic stuff. But, I think this idea of storytelling that appeals to emotions and our sense of trying to figure out who we are, that's a powerful idea of articulation.

I don't think it's about emotions. I think it's about appealing to humanity and ourselves. It's not that we're looking to see how we can

Since we could etch into a cave wall, that's what we did, we told stories. People think that the Bible is full of rules. It's not full of rules. It's full of narratives and stories. I recently read that people change their own habits of acting based on imaginary fictional characters more than they do on real people. The Dumbledores, and the Scouts, and the Atticus Finches of the world affect us more as a people than any senator, member of congress, or anyone else out there. I love that. That's not a flawed society. It's because we're searching to be something better than ourselves. And fiction lets us do that. And that's why, to me, there's nothing more powerful than a good story.

get a *rise* out of someone, which, to me, is what the word *emotion* suggests. What I'm far more fascinated with is that people can see themselves in it, that they find something. The best stories are not about the character. The best stories are about the reader seeing something in themselves. The best story you *love* is not because you *love* that character, it's because it meant something to you.

And hence, you're interested in telling stories for children.

And adults too, same thing. If you want to change the world, as a friend said to me recently, start with children. You can actually make an impact.

Which is why there's such a tug of war over what we teach in school. Do you have any comments about the current debate over what is taught in school? Much of it is a war over history.

Oh, it is. As a historian, as a writer, I will never, ever believe that good comes out of banning books. I think if you're banning books, you're on the wrong side of history. It's always proven to be true. Do I think that there are some things that may not be age-appropriate for certain people? Of course. Do I think that there are things that can be questionable? Sure. But when you are the person who's saying that you know what's best, you're already down a path that I just can't get behind. My family didn't have a lot of money growing up. But we had this magical object called a library card that my grandmother gave me, and it changed my universe, and it showed me how big the world is. And if you're scared of that, you're the problem, not the book. I wish more politicians were reading history rather than banning it.

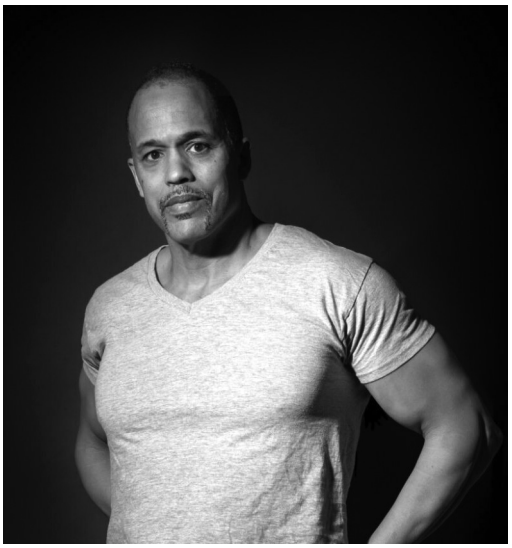
I agree. Thanks so much. I really appreciate it.



Kathryn MacKay is emeritus professor of history at Weber State University. She has published articles and reviews in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, *The Western Historical Quarterly*, and *History Nebraska*. She is an associate editor for *Weber.* She is also on the boards of the Utah Humanities, the Ogden City Landmarks Commission, and Utah Westerners.

KEITH HAMILTON COBB AND THE UNMOORING OF AMERICAN THEATER

DAVID W. HARTWIG



A Conversation with KEITH HAMILTON COBB

Keith Hamilton Cobb is an American stage, film, and television actor. In the latter category, Cobb is best known for his roles on Gene Roddenberry's Andromeda *and* The Young and the Restless. *He is a classically trained actor with an MFA from New York University who has performed in many Shakespearean stage roles over the years. Nearly ten years ago, Cobb began giving performances of a one-man play that explored the experiences of a Black actor auditioning for the role of Othello and being told how to "act Black" by white directors and producers. Over several years, that work evolved into Cobb's play* American Moor, *which debuted at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York in 2019 and was published by Methuen in 2020. After the play's off-Broadway debut, Cobb began garnering significant attention from academic audiences, and he gave a virtual reading of the play at the Shakespeare Association of America's 2021 annual conference. This is where I had my introduction to Cobb and* American Moor.

In the years since the play's publication, Cobb has given many more performances and staged readings of the play. During this time, he conceived The Untitled Othello *Project, which he then launched in partnership with Sacred Heart University. This project interrogates not only the insipid and harmful depictions of the character Othello that have characterized the overwhelmingly white American commercial theater approach to the character and his play, but also disrupts the product-focused practices of commercial theater. Cobb and his co-investigators have coined the term "creative altruism" to define their work, which seeks a conscientious approach to the creation of art for its own sake and in the interest of social justice, rather than art as a commodity.*

In January 2023, Cobb spent a week as the Hurst Artist-in-Residence at Weber State University, where he worked with students and

faculty in classes and informal settings, and gave two staged readings of American Moor. *The play is challenging, forcing the audience to examine the ways in which theater broadly, and Shakespeare's* Othello *specifically, have contributed to racial division and strife in America, while failing to produce true art on stage. I had the opportunity to sit down and speak with Keith the morning after the first of his staged readings.*

I saw a truly moving piece of theater last night. It was embodied on stage by you and by the student actors you were working with in that staged reading. The content was not always joyful, of course, but I felt truly moved, and it makes me happy to feel that in the theater, which is something that doesn't happen as often as it should.

I think people who are going to the theater must be going because they are made to feel something or hoping to find something. You know, often it is just to be made happy, to be entertained. Others derive that joy that you describe from something being given in the stage presentation, even some horrible things to think about. But in as much as theater has done that to them, there is a form of joy that theater did that. I can't not think about this. From a performer's standpoint, and of an age where you begin to think about legacy, "What are you leaving here?," that is validating and yet, is it that you want more? You still feel, I still feel, often ineffectual. There's not enough. And I would be lying if I didn't look at the lives of others. One example that I hold up is Sean Penn, who is a contemporary. We're pretty much the same age, started out in the same place. He got to evolve and grow into his talent and his human perspective within the industry, getting paid and being comfortable, and is able to leverage that level of celebrity at all kinds of things. Create change. Sometimes with ridiculous, stupid results. "I'm going to go save the world in Haiti," or "talk to the cartel boss because I'm Sean Penn and I can do that." Such people have the wherewithal to effect change and create iconic performances. I'm very envious of that, because I desire that power. I desire the ability to make change on a scale that I know I made it.

There's a confluence of so many energies in The Untitled *Othello* Project which, if they were taken up and pushed forward in a big way, would create a moment in history where this happened, where we started looking at making theater this way. We abandoned this three-to-five-week production model and this celebrity model, and we decided to start to look at a deep dive into the humanity of characters and how structures, theatrical structures, are put together and what they can do when we invest in them in terms of the direction they send our culture. That's a fantasy, but it's possible on some level. On one level, you just have to get up and show up. It's not wholly satisfying, this struggle, but that's no reason to stop doing it. Students in [WSU professor] Callahan's acting class asked about that. They said, well, "How do you just fight depression?" I think one young man said, "I'm looking at the world, and I don't see this going anywhere positive. I don't know where positive I would particularly go in it," you know. I said, "that's not clinical depression you're expressing. It's existential depression." You're looking around saying, "Well, what is this? What the hell?" And I said my answer to that is always, for myself, what's the alternative? Except to keep showing up in some way.

In a way, it sounds analogous to teaching: you spend a semester with a group of students, hope that you open a couple of minds, hope that they gain some new insights. As the teacher, you never get to see the end result of that. How you've affected audiences

with American Moor*, you don't get to see that change. Many of those people you'll probably never have another interaction with.*

In the moment. And that's all you can draw your sustenance from, right? All you can draw your joy from is that you are there in the moment and they're listening, so say what you have to say. The week before I came here I delivered a keynote address at Bates College during the MLK Day commemoration, which is something of a tradition for them. Every year, they take the Monday and do workshops on a theme. This year was "Art and Activism." And they asked me to come to do that. They had gotten wind of, I guess, who I am in the world as an artist. I said, "Well, if you're doing workshops on art and activism, let me bring some of The Untitled *Othello* Project ensemble there and let's make that part of the day. Let's talk about *American Moor* as an activist piece and the evolution of that, which is The Untitled *Othello* Project." And so, I brought three other ensemble members out there. We had a good time. And I gave an address and they said, "Most times when you reach out to somebody to give an address, they come up, they spend forty minutes, give their address, they shake hands, and they leave. They're not part of the presence of this event or why it's going on. So, we were kind of excited and happy that you helped us create this day." I probably come off sounding conceited, but you'll understand in the wake of all we've just discussed, what strikes me was, what the fuck did you think I was going to do? You know? If you're doing this for the reasons you say you are, and you're inviting people and saying come help us, they start to iterate and say, "Okay, well, yeah, these are things that I can do." And again, on the level of administration at the top, it's probably people who couldn't care one way or another it's MLK Day. They're doing their thing running the college. Beneath that there's probably all kinds of people like me thinking, "Okay, how do I make a difference?" And when you see the reactions to the work that you do, again, you say, "Okay, well, there's something. I'll take that and go onto the next thing." You know, you start to feel like a very small boat in a very big ocean. Just maybe the artist's dilemma.

This might sound like a stupid question in response to everything you've just said, but how do you feel about the success of American Moor*? Would you, without* American Moor*, have been invited to Bates to make that address and to have that experience with the people of The Untitled* Othello *Project? We've been talking throughout the week about the theater industrial complex and how it's so inculcated into us that success means it made money, but the fact that we're still talking about it, the fact that you're here, the fact that you were at Bates, a lot of that is because of the artistic success of that play. Does it surprise you that it has been so successful? Are you happy that it has been?*

The answer to the question is complex. It doesn't surprise me because, in the same way that somebody would hire me to do an acting job and then say, "Wow, you did an amazing job"—to which I would respond, "If you didn't think I was gonna do an amazing job, why did you hire me?", it took the evolution of the play and putting it on in front of audiences and watching their responses over the years that made me fairly certain this is an important work. What also made me certain that it was an important work is that the greater, more visible, call it "Broadway industry," rejected it. Right? Because this shit is not simple and easy, and it's a hard one for the American conversation and narrative to support. It has had this continually burgeoning life in academia that coincides with this growing community of African-American early modern race scholars, who are speaking more and more loudly about these issues. And I can trace all this back in *American Moor*, and you're going to listen because now I'm here. And so yeah, people become aware of that and they reach out. And I say, "yes"; I show up because if this is the

way that I can continue to generate a conversation that will create change, I'm eager to do it. I lament that there has not been a national discussion that a Broadway run of this show would generate. And I'm being perfectly honest with you, I lament that something that exhibits half the craft, and significantly less in terms of relevance to any real discussion of the issues of race within our culture, gets handed Pulitzer Prizes and Tony Awards. And, of course, I lament that nobody can really hear me say that because they say, "Well, what else would you say? You wrote the play."

American Moor has not had the advocates that it needs. When we were talking to various people about putting the play into Bloomsbury's *Modern Plays* series, a a plethora of academics said, "No, no, no. You have to put this where they're already interrogating this, in the university." That's amazing and, of course, all very validating. I tell people very openly, this was a particular piece of my body of work; it's the only thing I speak this way about. I've done interesting things, and people have given me notice and that's validating in as much as they say, "I saw that and I loved it," or, "My family watched that!" That's always nice to hear. *American Moor* is doing particular things for a particular reason and they manifest very clearly. They manifest in the pushback that this play got from its producers who brought it off-Broadway. From its producers?! Think about that. They felt like, "Oh no, this is like creating a Frankenstein," and sort of backed away. It makes clear that there's something particularly important here with this play.

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Now that American Moor *is in print, have there been other companies or universities that have approached you about performing it, obviously with other actors in the roles?*

Sure, small, small, small companies across the country. And for a variety of reasons. I mean, post George Floyd and the emergence of the We See You White American Theater manifesto (*Dear White American Theater*...),[1] all these companies are checking their boxes. They see *American Moor* and say, "Social justice, two actors, costs five bucks. This is the one." They don't care if it's good, bad, whatever. This is how we are built in this culture, and this is what we often default to. Of course, there are people whose thinking and mindsets extend beyond that. After our unfortunate off-Broadway run and after COVID, we had to start that train rolling again. And we thought for a while, well, we made this really lovely definitive production that is impactful in all the ways that it needs to be. To let little resident companies around the country do it would be to dilute the power of that definitive production. So, we never completely released the rights. We talked about it, but we were thinking, "Okay, well, we're going to work our way back into the public eye with this." And as soon as things started to happen again, I went around to major regional theaters saying, "Hey, I don't know what you're doing, but here's a thing. And here is a spate of reviews that speak to

the depth and complexity and importance of this work over the last ten years. Here would be something for you to do." And I am sure that I did not get those calls returned because I was nobody important. They are looking for celebrity. They are looking for celebrity in the director, celebrity in the producer, celebrity in the actor, and something that they can sell.

I put *American Moor* in the hands of Kwame Kwei-Armah, who runs the Young Vic. He's directing something on Broadway right now. He was running Center Stage in Baltimore. And I put this in his hands three times. I said, "You know me, read this." He never had the time of day for it, and I think that's a problem. Here's an opportunity to look at something and decide for yourself what value it has, and make a difference. Not make a career, right? Not make a life so that you get appointed to the Young Vic, so that you get to direct on Broadway, so that you get a gazillion dollars, so that you live comfortably forever, right? I don't think that's a reason to be doing this. But I think that's very much what the American *ethos* teaches us, to think that way. And I think it's somewhat inadvertent. If that project came from the hand of Denzel Washington, he'd have fucking read it. Simple as that. And he'd have talked to him about it. As opposed to just looking at it on its merits.

I can speak from my own perspective. I saw the reading that you gave at the virtual Shakespeare Association Conference in 2021. It blew me away. The depth and the artistry of the performance, of the writing and the performance going hand-in-hand together, as a thing of aesthetic beauty—it was mind-blowing. But then the way it changed the way I think about the play Othello. *The insights into the character of Othello really changed the way I think about the play and the way I think about the place of the play in modern society. And then of course it had me thinking about the bigger socio-cultural issues of race, of socioeconomics in this country and how those intersect, and the way that we have commodified art in this country.*

It's all in there. If people are available to sit and hear it, they will be affected. Even if that effect is, "This is way too inconvenient for me to deal with. I am rejecting it just because I don't have the tools to deal with this," right? That's an effect. But I don't think that's the problem when you're dealing on a regional level. On a regional level, it is simply because they are playing their role in the machine, and they don't have time for something that is not clearly and easily a slam dunk.

It strikes me that American Moor *is both a love letter to Shakespeare's works, especially early in the play, when you're talking about the language, about the love of that Titania soliloquy. But then, it's also a critique of Shakespeare. And in the talkback session last night after the reading you said there are fifty to sixty percent of Shakespeare's works that we could set aside. Do you still feel that love and connection with some of Shakespeare's works, some of Shakespeare's language, some of Shakespeare's characters?*

Yeah, I do. The only thing that worries me about the emerging pedagogy that the African-American early modern race scholars are evolving is that there seems to be this tendency to put on Shakespeare layers and layers of stuff that I can't imagine he, she, it, whoever, intended. It's layers of stuff that is so coded that if it's there, it's because he was living within the code inadvertently. You would have to be beyond a genius to layer in all the things that scholars are pointing out all the time. He didn't have time to write a play like that.

He was answering to his own theater industrial complex.

That's right. That's absolutely right. And he, she, again, whoever that was, was a brilliant poet. I should say, I don't try to find my way through the passages that are so obscure in terms of the language and the poetry that it's clear that they were written referencing usages of words that no longer exist. If I need

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half a page of glosses to understand the passage, I don't need to be doing that play. I don't really need to be reading that play.

Pick up an Arden edition and it's more glosses than play.

It doesn't feel like poetry to me anymore. When Richard II gets to the end of his life and is discovering for himself why it has gone that way, he says, "Nor I nor any man that but man is | With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased | With being nothing" (5.5.39-41). Every time I hear it, I want to weep. Because you want to be the poet that left that indelible fucking mark, right? That's what the character, as emblematic of myself, in *American Moor,* fell in love with. I can put my African-American humanity and all the energies that seem to be too dangerous for this culture—the raising of my voice, the *pathos*, the anger, the anxiety, whatever it is—into this language. And all of a sudden, it's acceptable, right? And so, I am not looking for anybody to get me to hate Shakespeare because of, you know, racial coding. I can draw on the scholars and read what they write, and some of it makes sense and some of it is just, as scholars do, reaching for something to write a book about, so somebody else will quote you and write a book about the book you wrote.

That's our own academic industrial complex.

When we were, I think in the second year, or late in the first year, of the first writing of this play, it was really very much about this character who came in and had a plethora of anecdotes for the director. He had all these anecdotes that expressed some aspects or facets of his life. He wasn't just a Black guy. He was all of these things, he had all these experiences. "See, I'm not just this thing you see before you. I'm all these things. Why don't you love me?" And that wasn't working. It seemed like it was too much of a lament. It seemed it was self-pitying. And my buddy Gary Sloan, who made theater with me in the regions for years, said, "Listen, man. Where's Willy in all this? I know you love Shakespeare. I want to see where that relationship is." And as I began to think about that, it became very clear to me that this was about this relationship that had been attrited because somebody else didn't like it.

I'll tell you another story. I can't name names because we just can't go there right now. Off-Broadway you have these producers who pick up this play, and they bring it and they see a couple previews. And then various important "to the manner born" white men come and say, "Yeah, I don't really like it." And these producers start to back away. I said to my director, just look at this in terms of *Othello*: we and our play, my director and me and our play, we're Desdemona, right? The producers are Othello. Iago is these guys who are threatened by what this is. And so therein lies that people getting in the way of your relationship. It's very, very meta.

One of the debates/discussions that's happening in education and society at large is, what is the place of Shakespeare? Shakespeare has a place in our curriculum; it just may be an outsized place. And when we think about the history of Shakespeare in performance, whether it be the racism of Othello*, the anti-Semitism of* The Merchant of Venice*, the misogyny and patriarchy of so many of the plays, but* Taming of the Shrew *jumps to mind, making some space for some other playwrights is not about canceling Shakespeare. It's just about making space… space for* American Moor*. Let's teach that in a Shakespeare class.*

And some do. Some do in institutions around the country. We do know going in that Shakespeare is cultural capital, and it's difficult to undo that. And there will continue to be pushback and entrenchment around that because of what it stands for. You will have students who, in the extreme, will say that very thing: we need to cancel this playwright because all we get is how this is more important than anything we're thinking or doing or iterating around or creating ourselves. So that there's not a study in the August Wilson cycle or a study of Arthur Miller, because that's what got me excited about theater.

It's frustrating that there isn't more power in the hands of individuals to say this should be attended to differently. Professors on this level, especially those who reach a tenured position, can begin to push envelopes and make noises. And then there's the question about who gets those tenured positions. We're dealing with one structure that's governing all this. And we can make noises within it to the extent that we can at all, and I think that is contingent upon the size of our presence.

I've said this several times over the week that I don't know that any of this changes, because it all rests upon a foundation that was made very strong a long time ago. The browning of the culture changes that foundation little by little. And things will evolve. At some point this institution, if the institution remains, will be run by people with vastly different ideas than the ones running it right now—a hundred years, one hundred and fifty years from now, whatever. The demographic will look so different. You already have this growing Latino population that's going to start to say, "Let's stop looking at that and look at this." It's frustrating that there isn't more power in the hands of individuals to say this should be attended to differently. Professors on this level, especially those who reach a tenured position, can begin to push envelopes and make noises. And then there's the question about who gets those tenured positions. We're dealing with one structure that's governing all this. And we can make noises within it to the extent that we can at all, and I think that is contingent upon the size of our presence. Denzel can make noises I can't make, if he wants to. He can do things that I can't do.

I did want to ask more about The Untitled Othello *Project. If time and money and cultural conditions were no barriers, what would be your ideal outcome or a shared ideal outcome amongst you and your collaborators on this project?*

If none of those things were barriers, it would allow us to bring in a cross-section of interlocutors that is larger than the twelve ensemble members we have. Part of what this is, perhaps, is a new model of making theater. You bring in designers from the first day and

have them look at what you're evolving and then go home and think, "This reminded me of this. Maybe this is a way to go." And have them there throughout as opposed to paying them a fee to come at a certain time, look, design, build, and then make the actors do whatever the set dictates to them. You're looking at your musical underscoring and how that works. You're looking at how are these people costumed? What is this world? What weapons are they fighting with? Are there dialects that are different between Cyprus and Venice, and what does that sound like? What did they look like? Bringing in the supernumeraries who create a world, who are always deficient in major productions because the equity contracts will not support forty people.

But it's a huge mythic world. This is what Shakespeare gives us, these giant, beautiful worlds full of people doing the things that make the tragedy happen because they are who they are where they are. On Cyprus, there are partisans, because it's an occupied island. Some of them are not happy with the occupier, and they're around. And what do they do? How are they different? So, it would be: one, the ability to bring all that in for the sake of itself. To see where it goes. That work, that fruitful sort of figuring out what this is, what would arise out of that, would be much, much quicker, and we would be much more able to look at it and say, "That's exciting, let's go in that direction." Two: to be able to do outreach. This project is about people on this level, university students coming in. In the hour we were in your Shakespeare room, one student said something about Desdemona that my people didn't think about. Students need to be in the room. They need to be seeing. We need to be creating a fully supported culture of artistic creation for its own sake. And that would do it. Now, of course, we all know that's a complete pipe dream, except success speaks for itself. If you create something that's astounding, that's a sea change in how things are done, everybody notices that. Or if you are making enough noise with the connective tissue, if we can continue to get colleges to collaborate with us at Sacred Heart, making everybody more visible, making scholars commit more ink to writing about this, then the *New York Times* shows up and says this is happening. That gets closer because there's more money. And it also allows us to further figure out what the project is. We knew in broad strokes what we wanted to do, but it is not result-oriented. The result is evolving with us.

In some ways it's more like a scientist experimenting in the lab, right? They have this hypothesis, this guess, but the outcome could still be failure. Or the outcome could be they changed the world.

And even in failure you've touched all these people. You've had all these people look at your work, and say, "I want to go forth into the world working like that." There's a scholar

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at Sacred Heart who works at the intersection of Catholic studies and theater. He said, "My students want to do this untitling process with everything. They want to know why we can't sit down and have a week's worth of discussion about anything that's on the table." That is a shift. The students looked at this and said, "We want to do that with everything." And those are successes.

What's a question that you've never been asked and you wish somebody would have asked you?

That's a tough question. I've been asked what's your favorite role? I've been asked what would you most like to do in your life, your career? As an artist I'm chronically dissatisfied. And for all I know, Sean Penn is chronically dissatisfied, too. He probably is. I guess the question I never really get asked is, "Why aren't you happy? What is it? You seem somewhat of a melancholic," and it's true. If I were to answer the question directly, it is because for me, for whatever reason, this that I have manifested in this life is not enough. I haven't done what I wanted to do. I haven't gained the recognition that will allow me to do it. I have not gained the financial support that would allow me to do it. So life has been a struggle, not a bad struggle. I don't think there's any reason to be ungrateful for it. But any number of struggles, the struggles within the entertainment industry, the struggles of being a Black person navigating America at this time—different than at an earlier time, where the struggle might very well have been much greater—are struggles nonetheless. And a desire to create, you know, to leave something indelible on this, on whatever this is. I don't know how much that has actually happened and I'm not recognizing it. I never got to play Romeo and never got to play Hamlet. You know, I was out there. I was interested. I was learning to be a good actor and there were places in all that work where the competition was high, and there were just people who were better. But I lament all those roles that were so amazing to me and not having the space to do that. Creating pieces for television that people say they remember as iconic is exciting. If you give an actor the opportunity to do that work, and they make something that is memorable, that is exciting. But that's the question that doesn't really get asked. "What's wrong with you? Why are you blue?" I'm dark, you know.

Notes

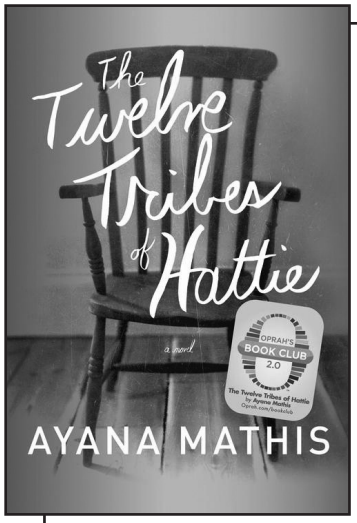
1. Learn more about the We See You White American Theater manifesto at https://www.weseeyouwat.com/.



David W. Hartwig is associate professor of Medieval and Early Modern British Literature and graduate director in the Department of English at Weber State University. His teaching and research focus upon modern performances and adaptations of Shakespeare in response to changing socio-cultural and aesthetic demands. His work has been published in *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *The Journal of the Wooden O*, and *Cahiers Elisabethains*.

“I BEGIN WITH HUMAN BEINGS”

MICHIKO NAKASHIMA-LIZARAZO



A Conversation with AYANA MATHIS



Ayana Mathis's first novel, The Twelve Tribes of Hattie *(Knopf, 2012), was a* New York Times *Bestseller, second selection for Oprah's Book Club 2.0, and a 2013* New York Times *Notable Book. It was also an NPR Best Book of 2013, long listed for the Dublin Literary Award, and nominated for Hurston/Wright Foundation's Legacy Award. Mathis's nonfiction has been published in* The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Financial Times, Rolling Stone, Guernica, *and* Glamour. *Her work has been supported by the New York Public Library's Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, and the Bogliasco Foundation. She was a 2020-2021 American Academy in Berlin Prize Fellow. Mathis received her MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and went on to become the first African-American woman to serve as an assistant professor in that program. She currently teaches at Hunter College's MFA Program and is working on an essay series, "Imprinted by Belief," on American literature and faith, for* The New York Times. *Her newest novel,* The Unsettled, *has just appeared from Knopf.*

This interview took place when Ayana was a featured speaker at Weber State University's National Undergraduate Literature Conference (NULC) in March 2022. It has been edited for length and clarity. Thank you, Ayana!

Coming here has been two years in the making. I'm so grateful to be here. Thank you.

Would you be willing to share an opening statement or something that resonates with you?

Sure. I thought I might read very briefly from *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*. This chapter is called "Floyd." Floyd is one of Hattie's children. He's an adult, but he's a very, very young man when this story takes place. The story takes place in the 1940s. He's a jazz musician, he's gay, and he's not particularly at peace with that. He's left home, really for the first time, and he's traveling around the South to make a name for himself in juke joints. He is also struggling with confronting his sexuality. The other thing to know is that Hattie, the title character in this novel, has lost her firstborn twins to pneumonia early on. So, the novel is sort of prompted by the loss of those twins. (Reads, followed by applause)

So, I actually marked that section. Your imagery is vivid and very descriptive. It made me feel as if I was a part of Floyd and what he was going through and experiencing. I love how you said he was the only person in this world whom Hattie was serene with, because she wasn't described that way with the other kids. So, they had a special bond. Can you talk about that bond, the social mores of being gay, being a Black man, a talented jazz musician, and not being able to share his love?

Sure. This story takes place in 1948. At that time, he wouldn't have had a name for—or the names that he would have had, would have been pretty nasty—for his desires and for his sexuality. The way we would talk about these things now would not be anywhere near the way he would have understood himself or anything about himself at that period. Within that excerpt I just read, there's a line that says he finds himself "drifting further away from reasonable desires." So, I think a good way to think about it is that he would consider himself, and his desires, to be absolutely out of the realm of reason, or decency, or what is even imaginable. Certainly, beyond random moments of sex that he has with folks that he meets when he's on the road, any furthering of those relationships would have been absolutely impossible for him to even conceive of. In fact, later in the same chapter, he meets a young man, Lafayette, in a town that he stops in. He's traveling around with this woman with whom he's having sex—which would have been quite standard—when he meets this guy, and part of the grappling between them, and one of the central questions of the chapter of the book, is that this young man is the first person with whom he thinks, well, maybe I could be with this person, and we could have a thing—which he doesn't even have a name for, actually. Of course, he realizes that for him that would be absolutely, utterly impossible. They would be pariahs. They would be objects of violence, and he can't deal with that, either from the perspective of what would happen to him, or from the perspective of what he would think of himself. So, it's a difficult moment for him. When he has this reckoning with himself, he concludes that he is both abhorrent because of what he wants and a coward because he is unable to act on it or to accept it. Your point about Hattie, his mother: yes, she is aware of this on some level, but she's just kind of, like, we're not discussing this; I'm not going to acknowledge this about you. But they do have a special bond because at that moment, right after she has lost her children in the first story, she is approachable in her grief.

It was gut wrenching to read that relationship – Floyd not being able to connect with his mother in so many ways, but then also not being able to connect with a possible partner. Lafayette was persecuted, too. He was courageous, he was kicked out, and people already knew about his sexual preferences. I wondered, with all the tribes and the

beautiful words you attach to their description, how do they continue on? Are you going to continue with them in another series, taking each one of those tribes and expanding to see where they're at? Floyd had a long-standing jazz career afterwards, but maybe not. Will you let us know where they ended up, or will you leave them as is because it's already an incredible novel?

I always feel terrible when people ask me that question. (Laughter) Because of the way they arrived in my life and psyche, we had our time together, then they went their way, and I went mine. But never say never, right? Perhaps, one day, long down the line. But I don't think so. These folks are dear to me, although now they seem like people that I knew a really long time ago and I don't really remember them. One of the things that I was interested in while trying to write this novel was to ask questions about what a family of people would look like who do not in any real way rely upon each other. They're not, in any real way, in relationships with one another, certainly not on the page. So, I was interested in this idea of being "alone in a crowd." When you meet each of these folks, they're in some sort of "moment of crisis." And I was interested in what these people would be like in this pressure cooker. So, you meet them in a very particular, singular moment in their lives. This novel veers between characters, and we move through time in that way. And so I don't think I was interested in knowing how their whole lives unfolded, or who they were in the long-term. I was interested in knowing where they had come from, who they were in that moment, who their difficult and complicated relationship with their mother would make them, and how their family life would impact who they were at a particular moment. Their class moment, their moment in history. I was really interested in compressing them into these moments of action or reaction, but I wasn't necessarily interested knowing them in the long-term, if that makes any sense.

One of the things that I was interested in while trying to write this novel was to ask questions about what a family of people would look like who do not in any real way rely upon each other. They're not, in any real way, in relationships with one another, certainly not on the page. So, I was interested in this idea of being "alone in a crowd." When you meet each of these folks, they're in some sort of "moment of crisis." And I was interested in what these people would be like in this pressure cooker. So, you meet them in a very particular, singular moment in their lives. This novel veers between characters, and we move through time in that way. And so I don't think I was interested in knowing how their whole lives unfolded, or who they were in the long-term.

As a reader, I can, of course, fully respect that, but am still going to wonder and make up their life stories in my head. (Laughter) There are also some common themes that impact underrepresented minorities, such as intergenerational poverty and trauma. Can you talk about wealth, or lack thereof, and intergenerational poverty, and their effects on your characters? Alice, for example, "married up" intentionally, and she did so for her brother, and she wanted to drive and invest in her family. That theme is still with us today.

That's a big question. I'll start off by saying certainly those themes are there, certainly there is an inherited pain, both on a psychic level and in the body. There are a lot of physical things also happening with characters in this book—their bodies are very important, and what happens to their bodies is very important. There's the moment in which these folks live—Hattie is born in Georgia, in the early part of the 20th century, as is her husband, August. They migrate to Philadelphia; they are a Great Migration family. When I begin writing my characters, I don't begin with historic history—capital H. I don't begin with trauma—capital T. I don't begin with sociological situations—capital S. I begin with human beings. And so, what I was interested in was creating human beings who were as believable, as real, as full, as I could possibly make them. Certainly, at the same time, if that is your aim, then you are inevitably thinking about their racial situation, their historical situation, their class situation, their gender situation, and their sexuality situation. But those things don't become capital letters; they become the components of who a person is. We can make one of two dreadful mistakes. As a nation and as a people, we tend to believe that history is this thing frozen in time, like a statue, and we look back at it and isolate who we have been and what has happened from who we are now and what continues to happen. So that's massive mistake number one. And then there's another massive mistake on the opposite side of it. I'm probably going to get myself into trouble, but I'm saying this anyway: sometimes in literature, when we want to address these things, we reduce people to their historical categories. And we end up in the sort of place where we freeze people, flattening them into non-entities. We create ciphers of historical realities instead of people living inside of history. History is small-age, a long story about what people did and what they didn't do, how folks reacted to it and how they didn't, who tells whom what, and when they told them. History lives inside of our bodies and our experiences. So, if you start with the body and the experience and the people, you can expand out and talk about history—capital H. Race—capital R. The sociological reality—capital S. That is the sort of way that I think about these people and the way that I think about writing.

There are no white people in this novel. There are no white people in the novel that I'm currently writing. To quote Toni Morrison, "When I think of people, I think of Black people." That comes out on the page. But I also don't identify people by race. Often in novels, there's John, Jim, Sally, and Kim. And then there's a Black woman named Marjorie. My grounding in how I think about characters, and who I think they

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are, is deeply rooted in an African American way. But the project was not to make African American characters, it was to make people.

Going back to and reflecting on common themes – there's a strong theme around mental health and the lack of healthcare. There is also the issue of child mortality – the characters don't have access to penicillin, but instead use herbs and folklore. That's what embeds us as a culture. I love how you share that it doesn't have to be contemporary medicine that helped them, yet that's what kills them off. Then there is the whole complex of World World 2. How much research and time did you spend researching those topics? What was your approach to making sure that you got it right?

I tell the story about the writer Edward P. Jones. He has written two incredible collections of short stories and also a novel called ***The Known World***, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. When I was a student at Iowa, Jones came and gave a talk. ***The Known World*** is set in the Antebellum South, and someone asked him about his research for the novel. And he said, "Well, the thing is, if you tell the reader that you are in Virginia, and it's 1855, and you're on a lonely road, as long as you describe it well enough, they'll believe you until somebody's cell phone rings." (Laughter) I thought it was funny, but it was a way for him to describe his research. Every writer I've ever known has been a great big procrastinator. They will do almost anything except write things, myself included. I'll do almost anything except actually writing, so research can become this act of practical, pragmatic, lengthy procrastination. So, to get back specifically to this book, and the process of this book, if I was going into one of the chapters where I felt like I didn't know anything about the topic at all—for instance, I have a chapter that talked about tuberculosis—I would look into symptoms, what kind of medicine was needed, really minimal research, and then I would write it. We all have these immense pools of other kinds of knowledge and things inside of us that we don't really know that we have until we're sort of forced to draw on them. And then this knowledge comes to your aid in ways that I find miraculous sometimes. So, I just write and then, more than research, I fact check. Because I find that if I research too much, then I'll just research and I will not write. Sometimes, I can get caught up in attempting to recreate facts in a way that is not necessarily helpful to me as a writer. My imagination gets a bit frozen if I know too much going in. So, I sort of try to know the bare minimum, enough to not make an absolute fool of myself or to make plot errors based on absurdly incorrect facts, and then I fact check.

You are transporting readers into a fascinating, horrible, and oppressive world, which is marked by an impressive resiliency and intergenerational hope. Patty at the end of the novel, for example, is as much resigned as she is vested in caring for her granddaughter. What was your intent in representing this intergenerational family bond, with grandparents taking care of this fourth or fifth generation?

The simple answer is that it just worked to end it there. The more complicated answer would be that one of the things that I was interested in while writing this novel was that it spans the greater part of the 20th century. There's some movement in Hattie, from a kind of extreme hopefulness of youth to the despair of adulthood: she's very young when she gets married, she has her children, the twins die. She's come from a pretty bad situation in Georgia. When her father is killed, they go to Philadelphia. She's kind of amazed by Philadelphia, she's amazed by the sort of differences between Philadelphia and Georgia. And then she gets married, and she has these children. And so, she names them Philadelphia and Jubilee—sort of these hokey names, but names that a 17-year-old-girl who was

filled with hope, who was very naive, might actually give her children. And then that's all dashed and the chapters turn into many years of difficulty and sadness, being afraid, and seeing the kind of pressures that are exerted upon her as a human being. She was not very good at accepting help or relying on people. The rigors and realities of her history in that moment speak to the realities of this Black family in this period of time. She kind of rides out sixty years of her life in that way. And then she gets toward the end of life, she's in her 70s in that last chapter when we leave her, and I don't think that she's anything like what you would call "hopeful." But what I do think is noticeable is that she begins to think that there is some possibility that things could be different. She does think it's possible to reject the pain of the past. At the same time, I think that she has a kind of reverence for the past and what has happened to them all. There's not a sort of throwing out, or a "we're moving on," but the path widens a little bit for her.

The book ends in 1980. And I was sort of interested in the way that her journey might loosely reflect the journey of Black people. I hesitate to say that because that's really generalizing. There's sort of a movement from Jim Crow through the Civil Rights Movement. You're coming out of the Civil Rights Movement into the Black Power Movement. This is not to say the problem is solved, or to say that everything's better now, but I know that my generation, compared to my mother's or my grandparents', is able to see that there is a possibility that things can be different in a way that perhaps my grandparents wouldn't have been able to see. My mother is sort of toeing the line about being able to see. That movement of "Blackness" through the twentieth century was me trying to reframe those two things—Hattie's movement as a character and that larger movement—they kind of reflect each other in a certain way.

Thank you. Let me please open the floor for questions from audience members and our livestream attendees.

(Audience Member) I'm wondering where your inspiration comes from for your different characters?

I didn't actually intend to write a novel at all. I didn't intend to be writing short stories, which is in fact what these are. I'm a terrible short story writer. I was in grad school, and I was stuck on a thing that I had been working on. So, I said, I guess I'll write some short stories, but it was kind of embarrassing because I wasn't very good at them. That was the beginning of this book—short stories that weren't complete enough, but they had some characters that were compelling and were in situations that had some juice and were compelling. The chapters in the novel sort of mimic short stories, but they are not in that they are not complete. They're not entirely autonomous—that's sort of their power, if the book has any. These stories work in concert, not as individuals. In terms of the characters themselves—Hattie and August, her husband, are sort of inspired by my grandparents who left the South—not Georgia, but a different place—and came to Philadelphia in the early part of the twentieth century. That said, the book is not them. The book is, in certain ways, a kind of re-imagining. These are first-generation immigrants. We don't think very often of the Great Migration as an immigration movement, but in fact it is. It parallels immigration stories from outside of the country—people who are fleeing untenable, violent terrorism in which their health and wellbeing are completely compromised at every turn, to go to a place where there's the possibility that their lives might be better. The only difference is that this is an intranational movement instead. Many of those first-generation immigrants mimic the story of many immigrants. There's a silence to them. My grandparents did not talk about the South, they did not talk about their experience there. They did not talk about the lives that they had, they didn't talk about the people they knew. My mother knows nothing about the

South, absolutely nothing. She was born in Philadelphia. There's a lot of silence about where folks came from, and I think—just to expand the conversation out, or actually just to link it to other larger conversations about immigration—you find the same kinds of patterns. The first generation is silent. There's a gap in historical knowledge, there's a gap in cultural knowledge, for the second generation. You were born in the new place, but because of the silence of the first generation—a silence born out of a trauma and a desire to protect, to help that second generation assimilate and integrate and thrive in the new place—one of the things that happens is that the second generation finds itself really unmoored, and sort of afloat. They're in this new place, and there's no roadmap; there's no way to understand yourself, there's no way to understand who you're supposed to be. We find this in the Great Migration over and over again. So, in many ways, to go back to your question, there's a lot of stuff about my grandparents that I don't know. In some ways, this book was kind of me trying to imagine my way into what their experiences could have been, and who they actually were beyond what they were willing to tell me. And then a lot of it's just me making stuff up. (Laughter)

(Audience Member) You talked about Hattie's emotional relationship with her kids. Was that born from the trauma of losing her twins? Or did you already decide to develop her character that way?

That's an excellent question. So much of writing in novels makes it appear as if one knows a whole lot more than you actually know. When a novel arrives to people, finished, and some lovely editors have brought their incredibly big and smart helpful brains to it, and you've done all this stuff, it looks as if, surely, you knew the whole thing. And very often, you have absolutely no idea. You know, Hattie started as a character who appeared in one of my short stories that I was writing. She was an unnamed, older woman who was tending a sick child who was a grandchild, and she was remembering it. And she was lamenting the fact that she had spent so much of her life tending sick children. And she then had a kind of memory of her own firstborn children who had passed away. At that point, I didn't know she was Hattie. I didn't know where she came from. I didn't know anything about her life. But the story had legs, so I kept it, and I wrote different characters, different stories, and it began to be clear that she was sort of the through-line in these other three or four stories that I wrote out afterwards. I began to understand that if indeed she was the through-line, I needed to understand more about who she was and where she'd come from, and what had happened to her. And it also became very clear that the death of those children had shaped her in a profound way that she would never be able to talk about, that she would not be interested in talking about, because she's a very private woman. Her grief is her business, not yours. But she had this fear of losing subsequent children and had an expectation that the world would deal harshly with her and with her other children. So she had a desire to toughen her other children up so that they would be pre-

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pared for this world that would deal harshly with them. It begins to characterize her mood of motherhood. So, yes, the death of those children, very early on, is really important.

So much of fiction writing is about *you*. When you have shop-talk conversations with an editor about something you're beginning, you've got irreverent ways of talking about things. I was talking to my editor before the book was published, and we had this long conversation that was precipitated by an email with the subject line, "Dead Babies, or No?" (Laughter) There was a huge conversation about: can you kill babies in the first chapter of the novel? (Laughter) But at the end of the day, macabre jokes aside, I did have to kill the babies in the first chapter. Otherwise, you would never understand why Hattie is a hard woman, why she's angry, why she's really difficult. The fact that her children die is not an excuse. I've never been interested in making excuses. But I think that what it does do is give you some context for her, and for her state of mind and how she understands herself in the world and her other children. And I don't know that you would have gotten that context if that had happened later in the book, like a flashback. Dead babies are worth more than a flashback. I mean, if you're going to murder infants, then you need to do that some justice, however difficult that may be.

(Audience member) What advice can you offer to aspiring Black female authors?

Let's see, so much. First of all, I will say, read and read widely. We're in a moment, forgive me—I'm going to sound like an old, annoying woman who is terribly analog. We live in the reign of the algorithm. There is a rhythm where we are told you read this, so now read this. You listened to this song, so now listen to this stuff. And it has this narrowing effect on what we read, what we listen to, and what we think—most importantly, what we think. So, read outside of the algorithm. Read outside of what the algorithm is telling you to read, and where it is directing you to go, and what it is directing you to think. So, that's the first thing. And understand that what you may encounter outside of the algorithm may sometimes be painful, may sometimes be triggering, may sometimes be traumatizing, may sometimes be beautiful, may sometimes be joyous, may sometimes be unexpected. I think that to write and to write well, we have to consume as much art in general as we possibly can. So that's the first thing that I would say. The second thing I would say is—I went to this great talk by Theaster Gates, the amazing visual artist, which he gave at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, one of the largest African American libraries in the country; it's in New York City, in Harlem. So, the audience was largely Black and Theaster Gates is Black. Someone in the audience, an art student, said, "I'm trying to think about what to do about art and representation," and Gates said the most incredible thing, which was: "We [meaning Black artists] are not beholden more than anyone else to represent anything." And

We live in the reign of the algorithm. There is a rhythm where we are told you read this, so now read this. You listened to this song, so now listen to this stuff. And it has this narrowing effect on what we read, what we listen to, and what we think – most importantly, what we think. So, read outside of the algorithm. Read outside of what the algorithm is telling you to read, and where it is directing you to go, and what it is directing you to think.

I think that's really, really important. Because I think that there is a "you," right? Where you are led to write, and what you want to write, and you write what is beautiful to you, or what is ugly to you, or you read your obsessions, whatever those might be. My obsessions are Black people, so that's what I keep on writing. But my obsessions also are things like what a psyche does under pressure, how we understand, there's all these sorts of things. I think that it's very important to not feel that you are limited in any way in your subject matter. Because I think those limitations that are placed on Black artists, and artists of color, in general, are absolutely as racist as the things that we sometimes think we are writing to combat. I am allowed to think whatever I want. And in fact, I do, that is my freedom. And that is also your freedom as an artist. So, I would say, think widely, read widely, write widely. Whatever it is that you want to write, and wherever it is that you want to be. Yeah, those are the two things.

Thank you so much. This was a great conversation.


Zac Williams

Michiko Nakashima-Lizarazo is the former director of the Center for Multicultural Excellence at Weber State University.

ON MEMORY & MEDIA, MEMOIRS & MENTORING

MICHAEL WUTZ



A Conversation with VIET THANH NGUYEN

Writing as power; writing as memory and representation; writing as a medium within an increasingly complex media ecology; and writing as a, still, formidable instrument to inform and to help shape public opinion – these are among the central concerns of author Viet Thanh Nguyen, who has emerged as one of the literary world's most prominent public intellectuals in the United States and beyond. If most readers know him as the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his astonishing debut novel, The Sympathizer *(2015), he has since released an equally astonishing cluster of works that have remapped the American literary imagination in the same way they have helped reframe global discussions about what it means to be an immigrant, how to retrieve repressed histories, and how to recognize the age-old art of storytelling as an epistemological exercise of the first order. Erudite, empathetic, and profoundly personal and public at the same time, his work – from his fiction and academic writings to his columns for the* New York Times *or his Twitter posts – reminds us to put the human at the center of the humanities, largely conceived, and to recognize the genuine plight of refugees the world over, as they search for stability and security, home and peace. His writings are especially urgent at a time of mounting xenophobia and anti-refugee sentiment throughout much of the so-called First World.*

To say that Nguyen is a storyteller at heart is also to say that he possesses the gift of blending fiction with memoir, and cultural criticism with critical theory, into a narrative fabric sui generis. The Committed *(2021) follows the hero of* The Sympathizer *into Paris – the seat of Vietnam's onetime colonizer – where he continues to reflect on capitalism and his own kind of schizophrenia. Written over a span of 17 years,* The Refugees *(2017) is a collection of short stories looking at the lingering effects of the Vietnam War through the eyes of first- and second- generation survivors, who are each in their own way traumatized by what is often unspoken or repressed, and hence paradoxically sitting too close to the surface to be remembered.* Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and

the Memory of War *(2016), a finalist for the National Book Award in nonfiction, continues that focus by spotlighting, in a more critical vein, the mechanisms of memory production in Hollywood and the publishing industry. The study demonstrates that classical American cinema and literature – from* Apocalypse Now *and* Full Metal Jacket *to* The Things They Carried *and* Dispatches *– push particular narratives of American heroism, while Vietnamese people in them are largely rendered unvoiced and invisible, condemned to the status of insignificant extras without reaching anything like human fullness. The study, similarly, reaches beyond the American-Vietnamese binary to consider how South Korea, Laos, and Cambodia commemorate a war that has affected their countries as well, and makes a case for a new ethics grounded in "just memory" as a precondition for peace.*

Dr. Nguyen is also the author of Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America *(2002) and founded diaCRITICS, a blog dedicated to a new generation of Vietnamese American writers. More recently, he has edited* The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives *(2018), a collection of essays that offer fleshed-out counter narratives to the generic headlines of migration in the news industry. His forthcoming blend of memoir and criticism,* A Man of Two Faces *(2023), echoes in the title some of the central concerns of his oeuvre and points to the uneasy double-facedness of the narrator of his novels. HBO and studio A24 are currently adapting* The Sympathizer *into a drama series with a Vietnamese cast, which should contribute to Dr. Nguyen's hope of offering a more nuanced representation of the Vietnam War, and of Vietnamese people living in Vietnam and in the diaspora, to an international audience.*

Dr. Nguyen is University Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity and Comparative Literature, as well as the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, at the University of Southern California. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, he has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship, among numerous other honors. In the following conversation, Professor Nguyen engages with questions about media, memory, and representation; form, gender, and style; and critical theories and critical practice, including the responsibilities of being a writer and teacher. I would like to thank Viet for his time and generosity in fielding my questions, and my colleague Abraham Smith for facilitating this meeting of the minds, which happened via Zoom on December 8, 2022. This interview can also be accessed on Professor Nguyen's homepage at https://vietnguyen.info/home.

My sincere congratulations on your forthcoming book. I have seen it being referred to as Seek, Memory *and described as "a blend of memoir and criticism." How did you blend the two? Can you give us a preview to coming attractions?*

Well, the title is probably going to be *A Man of Two Faces*. This is what my publisher and editor want. It does connect this book very explicitly to *The Sympathizer*. I never wanted to write a memoir—the only way I could do it was through combining it with criticism and thinking about the individual story and the lives of my parents, which is what it's also really about, in the context of the mass experiences of people like us, people who are refugees, people who are Vietnamese, people

who had to flee because of the war, who were affected by the war. The only way I could write this book was to imagine myself as the Sympathizer writing the book. For me, writing *The Sympathizer* was a really liberating experience because I could tap into a voice inside of me that I didn't really know I had. And likewise, with this new book, *A Man of Two Faces*, I use the voice of the Sympathizer to again liberate another part of me that I knew that I had, but I had a very hard time talking about. With that is the experience of growing up in my family, and with my family as refugees in the United States—for all the obvious political, historical reasons, but also for very personal reasons dealing with the traumas that my own family experienced. I really hesitate with the genre of the memoir, especially from people like me, because typically the way that these memoirs get published and marketed and received is as the memoirs of individual people overcoming individual hurdles. And so, the genre of the memoir, in the United States at least, is a deeply individualistic and privatized mode of memorialization and of writing. I'm deeply opposed to privatization as a political or economic idea, or as a narrative device or narrative approach. And so, there's a lot of my family and myself in this book, but always in relationship to these larger historical forces that I think made our arrival in this country possible.

From the very beginning of your career as a writer, you have been writing with a great deal of responsibility for the Vietnamese American community. And over the years, you've been recognized with numerous awards, beginning of course with the Pulitzer, a Guggenheim, and a MacArthur "genius" grant, among many others. Have these public accolades increased this sense of responsibility for your constituency? Have they become liberating by allowing you to probe ideas with greater latitude, or have they, perhaps, become burdensome because of the expectations that might come with these awards? I imagine this might be a weighty ethical concern for a writer of your standing.

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Yes, absolutely. You're very familiar with the idea of the burden of representation that writers of color and basically any minority writer faces. And you know, *A Man of Two Faces* addresses that, because part of the narrative of the book is about how, for me, there is no such utopia as being the great American novelist or the individual writer. I think that kind of idea, that kind of mythology of American literature, only comes about through the possibility of great structural privilege that gets masked behind individuality. I don't have that privilege, I think. And I don't want that privilege. So, for me, the meaning of these awards and recognitions is twofold. One is that they *are* liberatory. One of the reasons

why *The Sympathizer* won the Pulitzer Prize is because I wrote that novel, paradoxically, for *me*, not for anybody else. And then, paradoxically, it found an audience. So, when it won the Pulitzer Prize, my reaction was, I don't want this prize to make me feel like I have to repeat some kind of formula that I might have accidentally discovered, and instead I felt the prize only came about because I wrote what I wanted to write. The prize, it should liberate me, continue to liberate me, to do exactly the same thing. And so, *A Man of Two Faces*, this memoir, is written exactly from that same space. My wife has just read it, and last night she asked me, "Well, aren't you frightened about how some people will react to this, to what you say in this book?" And honestly, no. When the book is going to be published, and when I have to go talk about it, I probably will be worried about people's reactions. But in the space of writing the book, honestly, I was not thinking about that at all—I suspended that fear. But then, the other part of the response to your question is, yes. I feel that responsibility because I have achieved more visibility, people expect things from me. People who are not Vietnamese or not Asian have a certain set of expectations, and also people who are Vietnamese and Asian American have a certain set of expectations. Those expectations do weigh on me in my role not only as a writer, but as some kind of public person who voluntarily picks up the task of doing things like writing essays for magazines and newspapers, and all that. That is a related, but separate, task from being a writer. It is something that I feel is important, that being a writer has made that possible for me. And that has its own set of ethical challenges and responsibilities.

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The narrator of The Sympathizer *and* The Committed *is an eager reader of theoretical and postcolonial texts. In both novels, his range of readings is impressive and certainly chronicles his intellectual reach. (It may also be a kind of map of your own readings, in grad school and beyond). My point is that you integrate postcolonial theory and fiction in an elegant and meaningful way where we see an evolving narrator who is part revolutionary, part spy, but also part thinker, perhaps even a political philosopher. Could you speak to that?*

Yeah. I think that the narrator of these novels is not what many people would consider to be a representational narrator. That is, whenever people think of what the Vietnamese refugee is supposed to be, or a Vietnamese person, or an immigrant, and so on, a lot of readers would not think of this kind of a person. I think American literature in general, when it comes to these kinds of immigrant or refugee narrators, has a certain mindset about what to expect, and that fits in with the general formulas of middlebrow American literary fiction, and so on. So, according to this, to my perception, and what this formula is, the narrators are supposed to be resolutely focused on individual experience. To speak in the realm of, the register of, realism, and realism somehow seems to preclude people from having political or theoretical ideas. And so, number one, I think that's a formula that precludes the possibility of the exception. Why shouldn't we have the exception? My landmark when I was writing ***The Sympathizer*** and ***The Committed*** was not to think about whatever ***The New York Times Book Review*** is rewarding, but to think about the landmarks of American literature and world literature that I respond to. Talking about American literature, let's say ***Moby Dick***, or ***Absalom, Absalom!***, or ***Beloved***, these are books that have really exceptional kinds of narrators or protagonists at their center. That to me was a standard, not the standard of whatever is considered normal or representational. So, given that, then I wanted to create a narrator who would have the possibility of being an agent, both in terms of his physical actions, but also his intellectual actions. And I wanted to make use of this intellectual training that you and I have had. It's a delicate position, because, you know, I think that there have been writers who have been trained versus academics who never could quite get over their academic training, and that manifests itself in the writing. So, could I try to write fiction that would incorporate some of this theoretical thinking, but not be overwhelmed by it at the same time—that's a subjective issue left to the reader to decide. But that was the ambition in writing these books, finally, with the idea that these books are both like action novels. But action is not only the action of violence, and people doing things on the street, and so on, but action is also intellectual action because the underlying principle of these novels is that the worlds of these characters have been upended, not just by wars, but by philosophies and by theories.

My landmark when I was writing The Sympathizer *and* The Committed *was not to think about whatever* The New York Times Book Review *is rewarding, but to think about the landmarks of American literature and world literature that I respond to. Talking about American literature, let's say* Moby Dick*, or* Absalom, Absalom!*, or* Beloved*, these are books that have really exceptional kinds of narrators or protagonists at their center. That to me was a standard, not the standard of whatever is considered normal or representational.*

In The Committed*, a number of Marxist and theoretical texts enrich our narrator more so than they do in* The Sympathizer*. There is talk of Louis Althusser and Walter Benjamin; he quotes Eugène Ionesco; Hannah Arendt and the French feminists make an appearance (Hélène Cixous/*écriture feminine*, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva); there are references to Aimé Cés-*

aire, and the narrator quotes several passages from Frantz Fanon, in particular. That's no doubt because he lives and breathes French intellectual culture, and I am wondering how that is affecting the narrator's thinking, particularly with a view toward living in his fatherland/father's land in the diaspora and (what I understand may be) the final installment of your trilogy.

I think I started off as "the scholar," but I think I'm probably a better fiction writer than a scholar or theorist. A lot of these issues that get raised in the novels are things that I've dealt with in my scholarship, but I'm never going to be able to write about them in a scholarly or theoretical way with the same effect that I could in fiction. The first two novels, and also the third novel, are my attempt to work out and work through and deploy these theories at the level of fiction and see what they can do to these ideas, but also to the fiction. *The Committed* is, I think, positioned in the middle of the three novels of the trilogy, and it's a novel where he is really hitting bottom in all different ways. He has the opportunity to think through the ideas that have made him, which are also the ideas that have made *me*. Some of the debates and things that he's working through at the level of fiction are some of the things that I've been thinking about since I went to college and graduate school. And so, *The Committed* is not only about him working things out; it's also me working things out. I think the third novel—because I do think of the trilogy as a dialectical trilogy—the third novel won't do the same things. I think he won't need to dwell as much on these ideas, these formative theories and principles; he has worked through them. In the third novel, he's going to have to try to implement them. The first novel was about action without really him reflecting about the way that he's been shaped and conditioned by his political intellectual heritage. The second novel is about him working through that heritage. And the third novel is about what's next, or what is to be done—the question of what continues to drive him. I haven't written the novel yet, but there's tons of ideas in there. Obviously, the challenge for me again, as always, is to try to figure out how to implement the ideas into a narrative form that will be informed by these ideas. But hopefully it won't be bogged down by them.

So, it sounds like it may be going to be more of a synthetic novel in terms of dialectical materialism, moving those two previous books into a third "synthetic" stage, something along those lines?

Yes, but there's also some kind of boundary of realism for the trilogy. I think the trilogy operates at a level of surrealism as well. I really like this idea in Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend But the Mountains*, where Boochani, the author, and his translator, Omid Tofighian, come up with the term "horrific surrealism" to describe the experiences of refugees, and then how to write about refugees. For me, that's a fairly apt description of at least some dimension of these three novels—except mine also try to be funny and satirical as well. They operate in this register of surrealism, but at the same time there's a frame of realism in there. There are certain time periods as events are taking place. The third novel takes place beginning in about 1985 in the Americas. So, not just the United States, but other places as well. It's bound, to a certain extent, by that realism, which means that even though it's supposed to be a synthesis, there is also the stage for another dialectic that will not be realized in the trilogy. He's going to reach some kind of conclusion for himself, but another world opens up beyond the scope of the trilogy.

When I'm hearing South America, or the Americas, and surrealism, I'm also hearing "magical realism." Is this the wrong direction to follow?

No, this is pretty much the right direction (Laughter).

What I'm inferring from what you say is there is "theory" underlying the novels and there's theory articulated in them through the narrator…, but your short stories, The Refugees*, are fictions that execute embedded forms of theory, such as postcolonialism. That's when the theory doesn't rise to the level of discursive surface, but it's fully there in the narrative action. Would this be an apt distinction to make?*

Yeah, I think so. The short stories are working through or dealing with all kinds of political and personal histories that are quite familiar to the readers of American fiction. They can be read through the lens of multiculturalism as well as postcolonialism. I'm always happy when people read the short stories and have very positive reactions to them because it was such an agonizing experience writing the book. I'm gratified that they deliver an emotional and narrative experience; that's important for some readers. But as a writer, I also feel that those stories were my attempt to work through both the aesthetic demands of writing—just trying to write a short story is really, really hard—but also trying to work out those aesthetic demands at the same time as I was trying to work out the complications of things like multiculturalism and postcolonialism when it comes to narrative and fiction. To that extent, I think that the short story collection is limited aesthetically and politically in terms of what it's able to do in working through those concepts, both at the secondary formal level and also at the political level. I'm glad that some people don't agree with me in my own assessment of my works, but that is my own idea about them, which is why I don't think I'll ever write another book like that again.

I have to say, I've taught The Refugees *two or three times now, and the stories are really sitting well with the students. I feel it's an extraordinarily coherent collection, where each story works on so many levels within the larger ensemble. Plus, each one of them is a little jewel within itself. So, I think you may be a little self-deprecating. Those stories work really well, and my students would say the same thing.*

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I'm obviously very pleased at that. You know, my models for writing the stories as a whole, as a collection, were books like *Dubliners* and *Lost in the City,* by Edward P. Jones, books that I felt rose to a greater sum than the parts. So, if it works for the course students, it's fantastic.

As you said in a previous conversation, it's available at Costco.

The American dream. I'm in Costco! (Laughter)

When I first read The Sympathizer*, I was immediately taken by the narrator's/your beautiful prose. There are elegant phrases leaping off the page, constructions that sparkle like precious stones. That sense of style continues in* The Committed*. There, our narrator almost deliriously crafts sentences that extend into several pages (as if he were imitating Proust). I would liken it to what the French critic Roland Barthes many years ago described as* jouissance *– a kind of exhilarating drunkenness with words, an aesthetic pleasure for the writer and reader alike. That language is of course reflective of your skill, but also part of the character(ization) of the narrator. Could you speak to the linguistic play and complexity of your style? What are its "politics"?*

You know, one of the best things someone ever said to me is, a few weeks ago, there was a Vietnamese American reader who said, "When I read *The Sympathizer*, I could hear the Vietnamese language in there, the formal structure of the language." It was really interesting to me because I'm not fluent in Vietnamese by any means, but I grew up hearing the language and being shaped by it at a deeply emotional level and understanding, intuitively, some of its style and structure. And so, even though my grasp of Vietnamese is imperfect, what that meant is that I was always looking at Vietnamese from the inside and the outside at the same time. And then, when it came to English, I felt that by the time I wrote *The Sympathizer*, I had achieved what I wanted to achieve, that same relationship to the language. Up until writing *The Sympathizer*, I think my relationship to English was one of attempted mastery. You know, it's a very common Asian American experience; we were, and are, perceived as outsiders and foreigners. And, you know, we're demeaned for our accent. So therefore, part of the battle to become an American is to master the English language. And so, I felt that my place in American literature was to demonstrate mastery, and to prove without a doubt that we belonged here in English and in American literature. This is also the claim to the entire world, because of American cultural power, that if you became an American novelist, you were also a world novelist for very problematic reasons. When I wrote *The Sympathizer*, there was that ambition behind it. I mean, immodestly, *The Sympathizer* is certainly written with the ambition to try to go up there again, not against, but in conversation with some of the names that I've already mentioned. There was no modesty about the novel. But in writing the novel, I also felt that the demonstration of mastery of the language—it's complicated—the ambition was also going to be a mastery of the language from the outside. I think it's one thing to be a master of the language when you're raised as an American and as a white person; it's another thing when you're coming from the outside—both as a non-white person in my case, but also as someone who wasn't born here. And so, the mastery to me felt like I had a kinship with someone like Nabokov, who was also coming at it from the outside. That line from *Lolita* was really important to me: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." I thought that that was a perfect expression of what *The Sympathizer* was trying to achieve. That was the character of the Sympathizer himself, but also of someone like me. The book I'm writing now,

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A Man of Two Faces, is partly about writing as an act of betrayal. So, there is a kind of violence for me in being a writer—maybe not murder exactly, but violence that I'm doing to the people I'm writing about. Whether it's my criticism of Americans, or it's the way that I treat the Vietnamese people, or, in ***A Man of Two Faces***, the way I treat my family. It's a mastery that I think is a self-conscious one. I'm just going to speculate: if you're a white man who's grown up in this country, you take your mastery of the language for granted in some ways as *yours*—you *own* that. For me, I feel like I *do* own it because I've earned it. But there's contingency, and that contingency is being from the outside.

In Nothing Ever Dies *and elsewhere, you've told the story of your awakening to the racism in American culture while watching* Apocalypse Now. *Coppola's film deprives Vietnamese soldiers of any voice – they become silent bystanders without verbal agency, decorations in the mise-en-scène. And you have of course written about that, too, in* The Sympathizer, *which is not only a terrific novel, but also a terrific piece of film criticism. So, your primal scene as a writer, if one can call it that, is grounded in film. I wonder how you see the fault lines of print and post-print media, especially, say, streaming video and social media, shaping up in the near future? In your fiction, in particular, I sense a kind of visceral and affective power in your language that exceeds the spectacular quality of film. What's your take on that?*

That's a great question. Well, one thing to say is that a film like ***Apocalypse Now***, but also the Vietnam War movie genre in general, was certainly a primal scene for me at the level of racism, but also sexism. There is a critique of racism in my work, obviously. ***The Committed*** and then also ***A Man of Two Faces*** is my attempt to grapple with the sexism of these scenes and how I participate in those things as a man. So, there's a complicated relationship there when we talk about the primal scene, and that's magnified by the visual dimension that you're referencing. Literature can be very brutal in these ways of depicting racism and sexism, but also in interpolating us and generating pleasure or pain. The visual medium is able to make it so much more graphic—visually. But, as you say, these are different advantages. So, the visual medium has that graphic advantage, but the literary medium has a different capacity with language that can't be translated literally into the visual medium. And so, I'm getting a very good exposure to that in the adaptation of ***The Sympathizer*** for TV, because I'm reading the scripts. I'm glad that I did not want to write scripts for this TV show, because they're changing my story. I'm, like, why are you doing this? Why aren't you using some of my beautiful lines? I have to give up the

ownership of the story because the visual medium is a separate thing. The complexity of the language that you're talking about cannot simply be put into the visual medium. It may not work to hear people saying the lines from *The Sympathizer*. Instead, what happens is, and hopefully in the hands of the right people, we have a collaborative mechanism where the spirit of the language somehow becomes transmuted into the spirit of the visual graphic dimension. That's why Park Chan-wook was crucial in directing it. His film *Oldboy* (2003)—its weirdness, its violence, its style, its panache—actually were really quite important to *The Sympathizer*. And in my way, I try to adapt what he achieved visually there into the language. So, there's a nice circularity to that, but also a recognition that these are two very different media in which adaptation entails a capturing of the spirit of the first medium into the second one. But, you are going to make changes; it's inevitable.

I just recently watched the adaptation of Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad*, directed by Barry Jenkins, where the same thing happened. The miniseries rewrote key moments in the novel and realized them visually in a totally different but equally powerful way. The spirit may be still the same, but it goes at the expense of the literary quality of the novel.*

You have often talked about the way in which memory depends on the control of the means of production and distribution. Now that HBO and studio A24 are adapting The Sympathizer *into a drama series with a largely Vietnamese cast, I wonder how close this series will get to influencing, if not controlling altogether, the means of production and distribution. How do you hope this adaptation will lead to a more refined representation of the Vietnam War, and of Vietnamese people living in Vietnam and in the diaspora, to an international audience?*

Well, you know, *The Sympathizer* is about getting screwed over by Hollywood (Laughter), and now we are participating in Hollywood, so who knows what's going to happen? But I think that there has been a significant change in the way that Hollywood operates. When I was growing up, Hollywood was pretty much the uncontested global cinematic power. And now, because of global capitalism and many other complications, that's no longer solely true. You have other powerful national cinemas and media industries out there, including South Korea. You also have domestic changes within the United States. The cumulative effect of all these social and political struggles around diversity have had an impact to some extent on how Hollywood operates and how it imagines things. I can see this working from inside of HBO. They've been super sensitive, maybe oversensitive, to certain things like casting. I've written long memos to HBO around a couple of the casting decisions. Maybe, someday, some scholar will write about it if they ever bother to dig into the archives and look at these really long memos that I had to write, and you'll see that popular entertainment has changed.

I'm watching *Wednesday* right now, which is a lot of fun. I did not expect it, in the third episode, to have a very strong anticolonial take about the Pilgrims being genocidal. So, there's been a shift in the popular cultural idiom that was not there when I was watching things like *Apocalypse Now*. I'm not being utopian about this. It's still a gigantic industry that is, for the most part, still operating in conjunction with the military industrial complex—but there are openings. I hope that the TV series will fit into one of these openings in the same way that, for example, Raoul Peck was able to do in HBO's *Exterminate All the Brutes* (2021), a four-episode series on white supremacy that's really explicit about that. The representation of the Vietnamese, I think, will inevitably be affected by this simply because it's going to be an HBO global production. And there's all this cultural, and

political, and economic capital that goes with that. Even a good novel will be lucky if it sells tens of thousands of copies. Even a bad TV series will have millions of viewers, that's what's inevitably going to happen. Whether the series is a success or not—aesthetically or commercially—it's still going to have millions of viewers. There's going to be some impact. If the series is successful, the impact will obviously be tremendous. Even if the series is not so successful, what it does is it advances the struggle one step further in giving people more opportunities. The creatives involved here—in front of and behind the camera—shift the possibilities of stories. Every kind of achievement we can make here opens the door further to other possibilities. And again, I'm not trying to be utopian here, you know, because you can see that with things like ***Wakanda Forever***, which I just watched as well. Opportunity for Black, creative people, right? But the messaging is still containable within the imperatives of American imperialism, even though there's an anticolonial take in that. But anyway, one step at a time. I think that's what ***The Sympathizer*** as a TV series will do.

Last year, I had the privilege of talking with Ramin Bahrani. You wrote the liner notes for his film Chop Shop *(2007), "American Hustle," in which you noted that the film's spotlight on the immigrant working classes is in itself a political act. It is a film, like Ramin's earlier* Man Push Cart *(2005), that rewrites the dominant narratives of Hollywood by taking a close look at the Global South within the Global North, of large swaths of Third World living within the First World of wealth and health, money and power. Have you worked with or written for other film makers?*

I actually have also written a set of liner notes for another Criterion DVD, ***After Life*** (1998), by the Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda, which is an amazing movie that had a deep emotional impact on me. I welcome the opportunity to write more liner notes. I think it's the appropriate medium for me, because, as I implied, I think my days as a scholar are pretty much over, so I'm not going to be able to write a scholarly study of film. But that film had such an enormous impact on me aesthetically, politically, emotionally, and so on. And so, as a writer, I try to borrow, not just from writing and from literature, but also from other media as well. And film is certainly very important. But visual art in general, installations, text-based art, all that has been important. I'm grateful to have had the chance to be able to comment on the works of filmmakers like Ramin and Hirokazu Kore-eda simply to recognize what they've been able to achieve in their own media.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I watched Leon Le's film Song Lang *(2018). It's a beautiful and meditative film about a subdued homosexual relationship. I'd like, in that context, to ask you about how memory, trauma, and the body form a kind of thematic triangle in much of your work, both long and short. I would like to revisit those links with you and add another term: gender and gender identity. In the first story in* The Refugees*, "Black-Eyed Women," we have an unnamed, traumatized narrator whose gender is revealed only gradually. And she retains the boyish haircut given to her by her brother as a marker of her conflicted gender role into middle age, and only then, perhaps, opens herself up to the possibility of a long-term relationship and a family. For her, her boyish hair becomes a form of concealment, or gender camouflage. It also prefigures the second story ("The Other Man") about gender identity: about a gay couple and their sponsored Vietnamese houseguest, Liem, who allows his repressed homosexuality in Vietnam to come to the fore in San Francisco. Then there is "Someone Else Besides Me," which is structured around several layers of complicated gender inflections. Could you elaborate*

on this, what I feel, is a rather crucial link, in your fiction?

Yeah, absolutely. As I was growing up, I was wrestling with all kinds of things, from my American identity to my racial identity, but also my gender identity too. And I think that the questions of gender and sexuality were the ones that I least understood, or was least articulate about, and wrestled with throughout my college years and graduate years. It's through my writing, as it always is, that I deal with these kinds of complications. And so, one of the great things about writing *The Refugees* was writing realistic short stories that demand a lot of empathy. If one creates a lot of different characters, and it's very deliberate in *The Refugees* for me to create a lot of different characters, even though most people in the book are Vietnamese, they all come from different kinds of backgrounds. It was very deliberate, on my part, to make sure that I was writing about women, or about queer people, both as a sort of a technical demand on me to try to figure out if I could do this at the level of fiction, but also with a demand about empathy and imagining other people who were like me, and not like me, in some very crucial ways. This would allow me to deal sensitively with some of these issues of sexual and gender identity and difference. It would also challenge me to figure out how to write about those things. So, just to use the "Black-Eyed Women" story for example, that took 50 drafts over 17 years, because it was so difficult to try to figure out how to not just empathize with somebody, but how to aesthetically represent them. The challenges of writing about a Vietnamese woman—and, in fact, in the original draft she was a lesbian, explicitly in a lesbian relationship—the challenges of how to write about that were enormous. That's why it took 50 drafts, as I tried to figure out how to do it. In the end, what happened is that the story that you have is not about the fact that she's a lesbian. It's not even there in the story. I mean, in my mind she still is, but it's not manifested in the story. So, that's part of one example of how the intersection of aesthetics and empathy happen. You know, I think that a potentially clumsy way of dealing with these kinds of things—writing about people who are not like you—is to foreground that difference. Whereas if you yourself embody that difference, for whatever reason, it's a normal experience that's only highlighted when other people see you as different. But when you look at yourself, you don't talk about those kinds of things, so she has no reason to talk about herself as a lesbian. It's not the primary issue of the story. And yet, nevertheless, I think that, knowing that she's a lesbian was really crucial in writing the story in the way that it happened, and also dealing with the sexual violence and all that. That story taught me an important lesson about how to deal with difference at the level of fiction.

I want to congratulate you on recently receiving the Inspiring Writer Award from the American Writers Museum. Looking back on your work as an educator, and as a father (and husband and brother) perhaps, what is your mentoring practice for students, both

It was very deliberate, on my part, to make sure that I was writing about women, or about queer people, both as a sort of a technical demand on me to try to figure out if I could do this at the level of fiction, but also with a demand about empathy and imagining other people who were like me, and not like me, in some very crucial ways. This would allow me to deal sensitively with some of these issues of sexual and gender identity and difference.

undergraduate and graduate? Do you have strategies that have worked particularly well for students?

I think I've gotten better as I've gotten older. When I began teaching undergraduate, I was 22 years old. The thing about being a teacher and mentor is that it's partly about some kind of knowledge and expertise about the subject in question, but a lot of it is also about other things, especially when it comes to mentoring. You know, it's like psychology—it's about counseling; it's about wisdom; it's about persona; and it's about affect. None of those things came easily to me, especially when I was in my twenties. And so, it's only been through trial and error, and life experience over three decades, that I think I've become good at it—not with everybody, but with some among my students, the general public, and other writers. For me, with parenting, there's a huge question about balance—how much expectation and how much nurturing needs to be put in play with each other. When it comes to writers—how harsh should you be, or should I be, with a writer when it comes to my criticism of their writing? Should I just try to be supportive and give them the space to do what they want, what they need to do? I have no easy answer for that. It partly depends on the class, on the chemistry of the class. It depends on the student, the individual. It depends on how I feel in a given semester, how much time that I have. But I think in general, the principle that drives me is something my colleague David Roman in the USC English Department wrote in one of his books. He's a drama critic, a theater scholar, and he coined the idea of "critical generosity." To be a good mentor or teacher, it's partly about generosity—thinking about my time and my experience as gifts that I can give to students, and they are gifts that do not require reciprocity. I think of Lewis Hyde's book, ***The Gift***. He says that art is a gift given without reciprocity. If you give with the expectation of reciprocity, then it's not really a gift. It's something else.

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So, as a writer, when you put your art out into the world, or as a teacher or a mentor, when you try to give something of yourself to your students, the recipients take the gift and incorporate it into their own spirit, and then they themselves will give to somebody else later on. And that's, I think, the spirit that drives what I do outside of the individual active writing, when I think of myself as a public person in the classroom, or working with other writers, and so on. The idea is to try to create conditions for them to find their own gift.

Recently, there has been a nationwide effort to bring EDI – equity, diversity, and inclusion – back into universities. The academy is being invited to rethink the canon once more (which many of us have been doing all along anyway). The idea is for underrepresented minorities to see themselves reflected, and genuinely so, in curricula and teaching materials, and to make higher education more accessible in general terms. This is of course a most laudable goal. How far do you think we have come in this endeavor? Have we arrived? Could you give us, from your point of view, a report on the condition of the country?

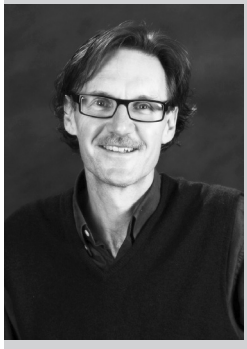
In 1990-1991, my fellow students at Berkeley and myself were campaigning on campus and getting arrested for doing protests about things that we would now call EDI. Back then, we called it diversity and multiculturalism. That was part of a time period of the so-called "culture wars" where people were opposed to these kinds of things. They thought we were threatening Western civilization, which I thought was ridiculous. Thirty plus years later, we've seen the successes of the movement of diversity and multiculturalism, so much so that it is now part of the public parlance and corporate speak of the university. It's still seen by some as a threat against civilization. Now, the term "critical race theory" is what people are frightened about—what's happening with books and book banning. So, I think that the idea of "diversity, equity, and inclusion" is simply the newest language that we put into a struggle that's always been with us in the United States, since the very inception. Again, it's always the proper balance between the unity of the culture and the recognition of the many kinds of diversities and differences that we have as a nation. There will be people on either end who will see the struggle as apocalyptic in their own ways. My reading of the contemporary university, and these kinds of issues, is that it's a positive. We need to address this and try to make the university more inclusive at every level. But the reality of it also is that all of this diversity, equity, inclusion work takes place within the context of corporate universities and military industrial America. We are trying to make life better and more equitable and so on for people within the context of these negating kinds of institutions and nations, right? It's a very complicated thing. And, on the other hand, there's the possibility that diversity, equity, and inclusion in its own way silences people. That's the fear around "wokeism" and "cancel culture" which, I think, is overblown. But nevertheless, I think there is some element of truth to that, and part of what my work is directed at is the perils of orthodoxy and that orthodoxies exist in all kinds of ideology. It's not just the people I'm opposed to that are orthodox, and try to suppress diversity, and all of that. I also fear that on the progressive side, and on the left, there are some of those tendencies as well. Not because they're progressive or left, but simply because they're human beings. And anybody who's invested in power struggles, there's always a tendency towards orthodoxy, and we should be worried about that.

You are a scholar of memory and continue to think through the various machineries of memory production and representation that shape a culture's record of itself. Being from Germany – a country with an extraordinary sense of historical guilt and responsibility – I couldn't help but notice your reference to James Fenton's "A German Requiem" at the beginning of The Refugees, *and in* Nothing Ever Dies *you cite the German writer W. G. Sebald's notion of "secondhand memory" – the impact of war and trauma on those "seared at too young an age to know exactly where the scar is." I am also reminded of Clint Smith's recent piece in* The Atlantic, *"Monuments to the Unthinkable" (December 2022), in which he reflects on the way Germany, in particular, has processed, and continues to process, the Holocaust. What similarities – but more importantly perhaps, what differences – I wonder, do you see in the way particular countries are working through their, often complicated, history? How do you get from acknowledging guilt to something like just forms of memory (and forgiving)?*

I think that question, and the set of problems that you brought up, are true for many countries. I, in my own work, reflect a lot about how this happens. In Vietnam, for example, or Cambodia or Laos, and then, obviously, in the United States, I think that violence is carried out at many levels—at the symbolic level, and then also at the level of institutions and warfare. Violence can be individual; it can be

collective; it can be microaggression; it can be mass murder. So, there is this whole spectrum of things that happen at the level of subjugating people and eradicating them from their lives to their memory. Therefore, the work of remembering also has to take place at many levels as well. That means that the work of memory has to take place at the individual level and has to take place at the collective level. It has to be symbolic. It has to be material. When we talk about the micro level, how each of us tries to cope with memories, it also has to take place at an institutional level. Now, all that being said, the United States is struggling, imperfectly, in this way. I think we have many centuries to go before we ever will reach an adequate, "just memory," "just forgetting," or what Paul Ricoeur calls a "happy forgetting." I think there are many examples of unhappy forgetting that we can point to. Well, a "happy forgetting" is sort of utopian, because I think happy forgetting takes place only when we have adequately addressed the collective and institutional, material consequences of the terrors of the past. So, here in the United States, I take a little bit of encouragement. The idea that we're starting to talk about reparations and Land Back, for example, at least in conversation, has reached a national level. We actually have to make the material commitments, which means dollars and space, in terms of our psychic space and our physical space, building the necessary memorials and museums, and transforming the curricula, and so on. When I think about Germany, and I've been there a few times, I've seen some of the efforts. I would say that I take heart that Germany, as imperfect as its memorial efforts may be, has certainly done more to address its central sins in recent memory than the United States has done to address slavery. I think that we can look at different examples globally to see different ways that these imperfect efforts—"just memory" and "happy forgetting"—have taken place. I don't think any country right now has achieved that. But there's different efforts that have been really crucial—from some of the things that have happened in Germany to the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum in Japan, to small museums that are underfunded in different places that have gone against national or collective memory, to the individual efforts in classrooms and educational projects. And then, of course, art and literature. We have a lot of work, collectively, that we still need to do.

Thank you very much for your time, Viet. It was a pleasure, and an education.



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A CONVERSATION IN WATER AND IN OCHRE: WHERE HOPE LIES

A conversation among
NAN SEYMOUR
ELPITHA TSOUTSOUNAKIS
& HIKMET SIDNEY LOE

Over the course of several weeks in early 2023, Nan Seymour, Elpitha Tsoutsounakis, and I engaged in unscripted conversations centered on place, ecological and environmental concerns, and how these issues are reflected in our lives and work. We live in Utah and Nevada, and while privileged through mobility each of us has a center (or two) we consider home. Our orientations to land encompass micro and macro views through activism, work, and the passions held for the myriad ways we move through the world. Complicated by capitalistic forces, we engage and find unique ways to consider how hope – as a beacon and as an action – can be a positive force in our lives.

> **The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps as indistinct, as possible (188).**
>
> **— Allan Kaprow**

Our conversation recalls artist Allan Kaprow's pronouncement and acknowledges lives lived without distinctions. The commonality we share is the dissolution among art, activism, and the daily stuff of life. Our output varies in frequency and format, while our communities shift and grow. Here I give a brief introduction to our individual work, which may serve as a prelude to our conversations, which have been folded together and edited for length and clarity.

The decline of Great Salt Lake was more urgent by 2021, years into the devastating Western drought that began in 2002. Great Salt Lake is a terminal, saline lake impacted by human intervention, extractive industries in its waters, and the climate crisis. Throughout the 2022 and 2023 Utah state legislative sessions, Nan Seymour served as poet-in-residence on Antelope Island, leading seven-week day-and-night vigils on behalf of the Lake. During the first vigil, she assembled over 2500 lines of poetry and praise. The resulting poem, "irreplaceable,"[1] is a collective love letter to the Lake, containing over 400 individual voices from a myriad of perspectives. The size of the poem symbolically exceeds the square mile area of the Lakebed and is a communal cry for the Lake's restoration. Her poetry gives voice to the community's inherent right to live, flourish, and evolve in a natural way. The work emerges



Antelope Island, Utah, February 2018, Hikmet Sidney Loe.

from Nan's devotion to repairing the breach between humans and the beyond-human world.

Elpitha Tsoutsounakis is a recovering architect and reluctant academic. Born and raised in an immigrant family in Salt Lake City, her experience in between worlds/homes shapes her teaching and creative practice. A lifelong attraction to geology and preoccupation with the mining history of the Greek community in Utah intersect with her training in architecture and current practice in design. As a founding faculty of the Division of Multi-Disciplinary Design (MDD) at the University of Utah, she dedicated the first ten years of her unusual academic career building curriculum and community in what has grown to become a thriving and singular approach to design education. She established the Field Studio Geontological Survey (FSGS)[2], which is a design research collective working with Ochre – a multivalent material combining iron with oxygen in an endless number of geological and biological forms – through community practice and critical making.

I work at the intersections of writing, teaching, and curating exhibitions. Most of this work is centered in ideas of place and how we consider the land we move through and the places we hold dear. For over thirty years I resided in Salt Lake City and developed an affinity for the deserts of the West and Great Salt Lake. While working on my book on Robert Smithson's earthwork Spiral Jetty *(1970), located on the north shore of Great Salt Lake, I began exploring this unique and vital body of water. I moved to Las Vegas in 2021 during the COVID pandemic to expand landscapes and to continue teaching art history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Rather than giving up one state for the other, I embrace a life that moves north and south along and beyond 115 degrees longitude. A writing residency at Montello Foundation in the summer of 2023 provided time to explore the geology of northeastern Nevada and northwest Utah through deep time and the cultural constructs and consequences of borders. This writing will make its way into my next book,* The Sun Tunnels Encyclo: Exploring Nancy Holt's Earthwork through Perception and Site *(University of Utah Press, 2026).*

– Hikmet Sidney Loe

Our introductions began with the consideration and merits of sharing our land acknowledgements.

(Elpitha) I'm in a strange place with land acknowledgments where I struggle not to make them feel like they're just a checkbox. Sometimes I've tried to embed them in what I'm saying or writing in a more organic way, but maybe this is an opportunity for us to begin the conversation, instead of just acknowledging the places and tribes, like the traditional thing. I recently started reading Max Liboiron's Pollution is Colonialism *(Duke Univ. Press, 2021). The book has a beautiful citation practice that expands the text in the footnotes to have a whole conversation. Instead of just marking when they cite Indigenous folks, they identify everyone. It's this interesting version of land acknowledgment where you're acknowledging the land of the body or the person in their positionality. For those who don't identify themselves, they note "(unmarked)" to acknowledge there is no neutral. I thought it was an interesting practice that relates to that idea of land acknowledgment.*

(Nan) I understand the feeling about land acknowledgements being a checkbox, but I also experience that they're important to the Indigenous peoples I work with. It is worthwhile to acknowledge the people of the land. Something that's often missing, that I care about bringing to this conversation, is the acknowledgement of beyond-human life and lake life. When I do a land acknowledgment, I start with the people—the Shoshone, Goshute, Paiute, and Ute people of this land—but then say that the Lake herself made this land. To me, that's also a part of the land acknowledgment that matters. You can't catalog every life form every time, but to begin speaking about birds, brine shrimp, and microbialites as part of the acknowledgment is also important.

> **Land is more than the diaphanousness of inhabited memories; Land *is* spiritual, emotional, and relational; Land *is* experiential, (re)membered, and storied; Land *is* consciousness—Land *is* sentient. . . Land refers to the ways we honor and respect her as a sentient and conscious being (27).**
>
> **—Sandra Styres**

(Hikmet) This passage by Indigenous author and educator Sandra Styres broadens that idea of land so we can position ourselves within it all. I like the direction of a land acknowledgment that is holistic, literally from the ground, then from the ground to us. I'm thinking "up to us" as far as wisdom is concerned, but you know, there may be desert tortoises out there smarter than me.

(Nan) There's a Lake that's smarter than me. I mean that in the sincerest way. Part of what we're talking about is subverting the hierarchy, this habitual hierarchy of humans on top. I think it must be part of the heart of this conversation. I'm excited to talk about sentience.

(Hikmet) I spend time on the website What Is Missing?[3] *by Maya Lin, the architect, artist, land artist, and environmentalist. It is about extinction, and deep time, and it covers all geographies. It's also a site where people can add information. It's something that I use as a teaching tool in the classroom.*

(Elpitha) I want to antagonize that issue of "what is missing" because I feel we can't hold everything all the time, and it can't always be the same. While human-inflicted capitalism, colonial-inflicted erasure, and violence, dispossession, and extinction are not what

I'm excusing, I do wonder, does everything have to be the same? Do we have to have everything that's missing? Maybe there are things missing that go through flows that we can honor. Things are going to change; things are going to come and go. I do a lot of work with cataloging and archiving, and I wonder: is the purpose to capture in time this pristine or idealized notion of what was there? Or how can the archive map plurality and multiplicity of current existence, and how can it map alternative ways of doing things, an alternative future?

> If landscape is a way of seeing, there are potentially as many landscapes as individual ways of seeing, or at least as many as cultural ways of seeing—although some people seem threatened by this degree of multiplicity. Otherness and familiarity are reinforced by impressions of landscape (61).
>
> — Lucy R. Lippard

(Hikmet) When I was teaching for the Honors College (University of Utah) in 2022, student engagement was focused on vertical and horizontal mapping. If we look out on the horizon, we see only one truth at that moment. If we think vertically, we can consider deep time and invite all people who have traversed the region we're viewing to come into focus – all creatures, all the ways that land has been used, all migrations. It's a much more compelling way to think about land. We hiked to the top of Ensign Peak in Salt Lake City for a 360-degree view of the valley: looking west we saw the Great Salt Lake's edge where it shouldn't have been, the recent and ongoing expansion of the airport, all the highways and sprawl. We saw the thickness of the air pollution. It was a very sad sight to have this horizontal view. Part of why I engage in vertical thinking is that it gives me hope. I can research and ruminate on the past: at different points in time, for different peoples.

(Nan) The other thing that it does is right-size humans. It puts humans back into the size that we are. It's one of the shifts of thinking I hope is happening, the understanding that the Lake is the center, and we are the periphery. We're these little people on the edge, related to cataloging extinction and the rhythms of deep time. People speak of the ebb and flow of the Lake that is actual, especially over deep time. But it often gets brought to the forefront, to distract human harm from the real harm and the part we could address and change. That's real, too. I lean towards the cataloging and noticing what is missing and noticing what is leaving, what is on the way out. We're causing that. It might happen in a different way over deep time, but we humans are hastening the demise of many life forms.

invocation to irreplaceable
an excerpt

when praise began to flow
we felt the genesis of our feathers
we felt the water return to the sea of ourselves,
we felt a swell in the lake of ourselves
we felt the surge of our rivers
we felt tidal
we felt primal
we fell with the snow
we grew ocean-hearted.
we began to know
we had never been seperate
and thus could not be parted
when praise began to flow.

—Nan Seymour

(Nan) There's a way that writing is like a seed bank, recording what is here and what could be. Our writing could become a trail of breadcrumbs or a map for restoration. There's a powerful example in Darren Parry's book, *Bear River Massacre: A Shoshone History* (Common Consent, 2019). The book retells his grandmother's telling of the massacre; her telling came from her grandfather who survived it. I grew up in Utah, learning Utah history, but we weren't taught anything about this. Yes, it took place over the border in Idaho, but soldiers were deployed from Salt Lake City. It was the worst massacre in American history of Indigenous people. It's very important, very dire. In the appendices, Darren includes his grandmother's handwritten guide of native and medicinal plants, drawings with notes about how to use them. This part of the book is now being used by Utah State University in the restoration project at the massacre site. For the actual restoration of land, this is their map. The work we're doing now that could be called cataloging is devoted to future beings.



Darren Parry's grandmother's handwritten guide of native and medicinal plants, drawings with notes about how to use them, detailed in *Bear River Massacre: A Shoshone History.*

It won't be during my lifetime that it will be useful in this way. I love the example of this book, the way it holds both the terrible truth that wasn't told and the beautiful map to a restoration that's being utilized, which I find incredibly hopeful.

(Elpitha) I was talking with somebody recently about the experience of longing that I have for Crete when I'm here in Salt Lake, and for here when I'm in Crete. This feeling of never being at home and always being at home, and where I exist in between those two places. Being on the island is so amazing because it's my ancestral home; my family and friends are there. It feels like everything aligns. But the entire time we're there, it's also bittersweet. I know I'm going to leave. When I'm on the island, I'm not in the West, and when I'm in the West or in Salt Lake City, I'm not in Crete. I constantly feel that ache. It makes me think of that ancestral connection, too, in terms of archive. This hope for the future that you were talking about, Nan. If we're going to think about relations to the past in relation to ancestors, that goes forward and backwards, because we are someone's ancestor.

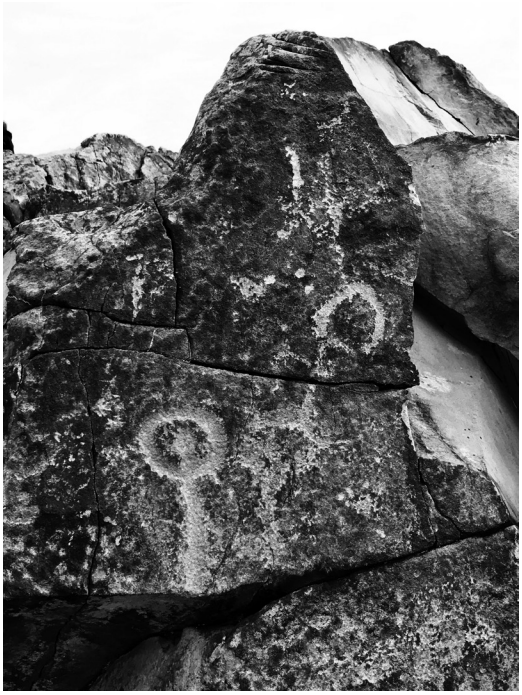
(Nan) My experience is that my home is leaving me. When the day is clear —no inversion, no toxic dust blowing around— sometimes I say: "playing the part of the unruined world is the world." Even the most beautiful day carries this pain with it. It's flashing in front of me all the time: ruined and unruined; here's what it is, here's what it was. My primary mentor is a woman named Deena Metzger. She teaches something she calls literature of restoration. An essay I love so much, even for the title, is called "Not Hope But Possibility: The Literature of Restoration." I think of that phrase often because "hope" is a word that sometimes makes me squirm. We get asked: "What can we hope for?" It's a big part of the conversa-

tion and the activism I'm involved in. I feel a call to be responsible in relation to that word. I don't hold anything I call hope, but I believe in possibility, and I think I'm responsible to the possibilities I can influence.

(Hikmet) When you were talking about that sort of flickering, Nan, I do that with the idea of hope. Is it there, is it not? If it is, who holds it? Last year during the Utah legislative session, there was a helicopter ride over the shrinking Great Salt Lake, the legislators claiming, "we have to do something," and I'm sitting in Las Vegas agitated about their inaction. We've been talking about this Lake issue for decades. Not days, not minutes: decades.

(Nan) I watched them fly over; I was on Antelope Island. I don't want to be Pollyanna, but I was super glad they were flying over, at last. I can't point the finger about being a latecomer because I grew up here in the culture of apathy and disdain for the Lake. I grew up a bird lover, thinking the birds I love so much were from Idaho because that's where I saw them on the Snake River at my grandparents' cabin. I didn't even know the nesting grounds of American White Pelicans were on the Lake. It wasn't until Bonnie Baxter was on *Radio West* ("The State and Fate of the Great Salt Lake, Part IV") a year ago that it hit me: I have been oblivious. I just felt like falling on my knees. So, are these guys more oblivious than me? Maybe. But I'm glad they flew over. Everybody knows the science is there. There is a moment of possibility. The governor could coordinate an emergency rescue of this water body, the legislators could fund and facilitate it. I absolutely expect them to do so, I will hold them accountable if they don't do it. I invite them to come to the shore, walk to the water with me. It takes a while. You've flown over, now come walk.[4]

(Elpitha) What strikes me about your memory of seeing them fly over is that there are these politicians trying to see the problem



Great Salt Lake, Utah, May 2018, Hikmet Sidney Loe.

and understand and relate to the problem from a distance, from a place where they could point and measure from their objective truth, so to speak, whereas you are there on the ground in the community of the Lake and embodied in your activity. I grew up in the same way next to this Lake thinking it's this stinky wasteland, not knowing until artists and poets and writers introduced its beauty to me. I think the power of your work is in that embodied entanglement, being a part of the care, but also that it can change people's understanding so profoundly. People could see those politicians on the news and see them fly over–it's not going to change the way they feel, the same way a poem might.

(Hikmet) Does it seem that women often do the heavy lifting?

(Nan) There are plenty of women doing more than their share, but it's also important to me to look beyond binaries. I identify as queer; my daughter is transgender. Much

of the leadership in this advocacy is coming from trans folks. I wouldn't exclude people that identify as men because many show up with genuine care and intimacy, willing to be embodied in the present and in community. I think the invitation from the Lake, and the invitation at this time, is to constantly queer the conversation in every way that could be meant. That's what's necessary. And so, every time it leans towards a binary, I just feel like the Lake wants me to queer it up.

(Hikmet) Can you define what that process is for you, Nan, "to queer it up"?

(Nan) To me, it's to be wary of binary energies and positions, to be willing to align with spectral possibilities. It also has something to do with stepping past our identity in our speech and understanding. This is hard for people to do; we're attached to our identities. What if we leave our identity at home and go to the Lake just to be a listener and be curious? To me that's queer and alive, not fixed. One thing the Lake is queering for me is the question of life and death. When we say the Lake is dying, the truth is, that's not true. It's too simplistic. The life of the Lake we know in human time is ending and we are causing that. But will the Lake die? Maybe, but then she will return in another form. Even life and death are not binary, and the Lake will teach you that. She's had many lives already, well beyond what we know. The language "the Lake is dying" or "save the Lake" rubs a bit, although I'm very active in an organization called Save Our Great Salt Lake.[5] *Who are we to save anything? It's a bit arrogant, that proposition. Maybe we should call the campaign "Stop Harming the Lake."*

(Elpitha) There is an interesting contrast and comparison between how we each relate to the more-than-human in our work. Me to Ochres, Nan to the Lake. There are these binaries that I like to think of as flows of potential (calculus not algebra) rather than dialectical opposites: iron/water, Ochre/Lake, geology/biology, life/nonlife, small/big, a body having no discrete edge/a body perhaps doomed by its edge, and so on. But in similarity we are all drawn physically to the more-than-human, as though it was always destined and impossible to escape. It just makes sense and makes sense of everything.

> **'Queer' not as being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.**
>
> **—bell hooks**

(Nan) I love that quote. I'll respond with one from Alfred Kinsey, who said: "The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects"(639).

(Elpitha) I've been reading a lot of Elizabeth Povinelli's work and have been influenced by her scholarship. The research collective for Ochres I've assembled is "Field Studio Geontological Survey."[6] **I get that term from *Geontologies: A Requiem for Late Liberalism*. She talks about the relation between life and non-life. For me, it's expanding human/non-human to think about life/non-life. She speaks beautifully about this precipice or edge. Where is the actual boundary between life and nonlife? You need non-life to have life; non-life is not necessarily the end.**[7] **There's this notion that the desert or Great Salt Lake returning to non-life is a potentiality of its own, a start or beginning of its own. It's a place where life comes from; no life just spurs or spawns by itself. Those ideas between the two are interesting. For me, it's also connected to this arbitrary distinction between geology and biology, or this idea**

of restoration. Which is meaningful to me thinking about Ochre, because iron oxides as Ochres are essentially rocks that are breathing: there is respiration there. I was thinking about this when we were thinking about what sentience is and whether geology is sentient.



Pigment and swatch extensions from Temple Mountain Ochres, 2022, Elpitha Tsoutsounakis.

(Hikmet) Barbara Nash is professor emeritus, Geology & Geophysics at the University of Utah. She posted the first photograph of Spiral Jetty *on the Internet in the 1990s. We had a conversation in her office, which has a view of the Wasatch Front. She said something that I'll never forget: "the mountains are alive. They're growing, they're shifting, they're changing. They're not static: nothing is static." That idea is so life-affirming, and I don't mean just human life. It goes back to vertical thinking, of being open to the possibility of thinking in different ways. For example, the stars I'm looking at in a recent photograph are from a distant galaxy.[8] The light emitted was from how many billions of years ago? Making those connections, thinking about our capacity to see what is out there and what is in front of me, what is in and on the ground and how it's all shifting and changing, is very exciting. What is true?*

(Elpitha) "What is true" makes me think about a time I was having a conversation with a friend, and I remember asking that same question. I don't remember what we were talking about, but I questioned if I dreamt something—or even daydreamt it—how is that different from a memory? What's the difference between my memory and my dream? Or my imaginary memory? It's a feeling that I often have as a designer, and perhaps as a woman, or as a first-generation college student, or having been raised in an immigrant family: what do I do that is legitimate, or scientific, and then, what do I do that's fiction? Are they fiction: my imagination, my passion, my intuition? I have the same ambivalence regarding my work with geology or "nature" or the West, or a place that isn't mine—not my home, not my ancestors, not my origin story. I think about the hegemony that science holds over "fact" or "rightness" and lament often how my realms of confidence are dismissed—design or poetry or intuition or emotion. I talk a lot about Ochre and the science of Ochre and ancestral iron. The idea that the star you saw—not only was that so long ago, but then that star exploded and the iron from that explosion could now be in your blood, or in the Ochre I'm holding. When I tell these stories, sometimes I must remind myself: "You read this by a scientist. It's true." I must justify or make sure that I'm not being some quack academic, and someone isn't going to come down and kick me out of this office because I just made this all up about iron and stellar corpses and involve it in some kind of witchcraft.

(Hikmet) Was it Carl Sagan who said we are all made of stardust? I thought he was being poetic and a little fanciful. Turns out he was being literal. When I think about that statement now, I believe all things in my life are equal to the reverence that I should show to myself and to everything and everybody. Because we're all – everything is – made of the same star-stuff. And the shortness of time doesn't matter within that big, cavernous expansive time.

> The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself ("The Shores of the Cosmic Ocean" 6:15).
>
> —Carl Sagan

(Nan) I want to underline the word reverence. Reverence is essential to the work of relationship and intimacy with land and water. We deemed the Great Salt Lake wastewater, then we acted as if it were true. We put every prison and every port and every polluting . . . we lined the shores with the worst of our worst. Suddenly we're hurt that she's leaving. This question of reverence is important. We're misguided by an idea that we can revere only what we haven't messed up yet. We're just so slow to notice that there's something to revere everywhere.

(Elpitha) It makes me think of this question of when nature is nature. And how we tend to – especially in the West – have this idealized romanticism about pristine nature, which is just completely not a thing. It's a myth. Where can nature be found? How much nature does it have to be before its nature, or not?

(Nan) When we use that word nature, we usually mean something apart from ourselves. We're not including ourselves in what we name as nature, and that's part of the rift, right? That's part of the trouble, this breach.

(Hikmet) I wanted to circle back to Indigenous belief systems and something you said, Nan. You and Darren Parry and others have been instrumental in my understanding of what that means.

(Nan) Do you know about the Bluff Council and the Bluff Principles (Water & Tribes Initiative)? It's a collective work of ten tribes meeting over the years, and then giving policy briefs about Indigenous ways of being with the Colorado River. I hold them up because I think they're so beautifully articulated and clear, and everything that is written could apply to the Great Salt Lake and the Great Basin as well. I don't know of an equivalent document to hold up for Great Salt Lake.

(Hikmet) Darren has talked about the ancient Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) philosophy that every decision should be made with the knowledge that it will impact seven generations. So, every decision made now would encompass the future and future ancestors. That's an interesting way to think about time, with intent, intentionality, and consequences. I work from day to day; I've never thought about my action's impact on seven generations.

(Nan) I totally respect that teaching. I also wonder, what if we could even think one or two generations ahead? At this point regarding Great Salt Lake, I feel like saying: "pick a kid." Doesn't have to be your own kid, just pick a toddler on your street. Then consider their life in ten years. I think most people can imagine ahead ten years. Someone already born will ask you, "What was it like when there was a Lake here?" Or they will say, "Tell me again what you did to save the Lake." It's going to be one of those two conversations. This is what we're deciding right now. And yes, I hope we can start thinking seven generations ahead, but first let's get our training wheels on.

the earth-given rights of a great water body

great salt lake,
we proclaim your rights!
we uphold your right to echo to the heavens
we hallow your right to swallow the sky
you have the right to bear islands,
to parent rookeries, to protect saline reefs,
to chant canticles of light,
to beckon wings.
great neighbors,
beloved water body,
these are your rights—
to be enlivened by rivers,
to orchestrate migrations.
to slumber under the lullaby
of silk and stars in the darkest night.

we avow your right to change your mind,
alter your imprint, refine your design—
we confirm your right to flourish
we proclaim your right to more time.

—Nan Seymour

(Nan) What do you know with your body, or how do you talk or think about that? I'm interested in the language you all have to offer around that.

(Hikmet) I've taught a graduate seminar on theory and criticism at UNLV for MFA students with a focus on phenomenology. I think about embodied experience. What can I learn about the history of this thinking, which is through philosophers? How does embodied experience then translate into art marking and art viewing? Who are we as we use our bodies to create art? Personally, that's also being in landscape, considering what is my bodily relationship to the world around me. These thoughts extend as I share a photograph of my experience. What is the viewer's experience when they look at it? It's a fascinating way to consider embodied experience and works of art. How do people interact with art within the space that it's situated in?

(Elpitha) I also think of becoming when I am generating knowledge through practice in an embodied way with material; it's about becoming with. I collaborate with a lot of different people thinking with Ochres. The introduction to Ochre is: humans have evolved through their use of Ochre from the beginning, quote unquote. But I like to think about it as we have evolved with *Ochre, we are becoming with Ochre. And if we could*

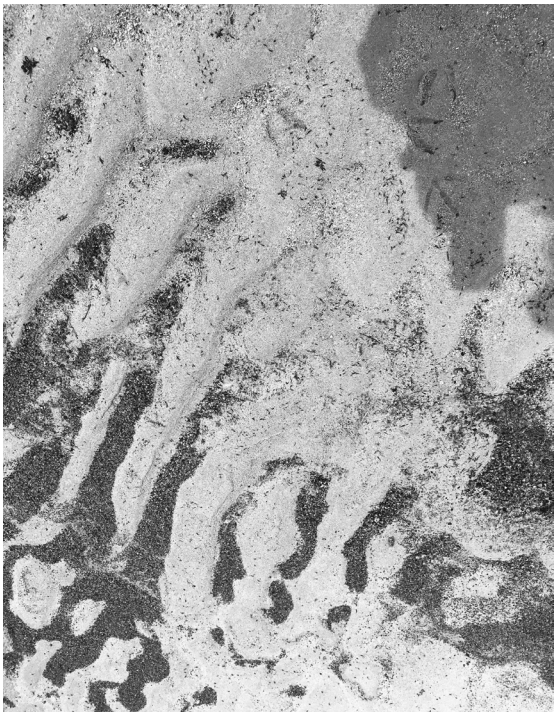


Great Salt Lake, Utah, May 2018, Hikmet Sidney Loe.

expand that relation to all more-than-human beings and materials and be thinking in that way. I guess it's a need that I have, to be doing something with the body. I use a printing press because it's a physical manifestation of the printed word; these shapes on paper and dealing with Ochre is amazing because it's sort of the opposite of the abstraction of color. I think that in our modern lives, there are so many ways in which we become abstract in our interactions. I work with material color so that my experience is not an abstraction. It's not owned by Pantone. It's not a code on the computer. It brings me back to the relation that I have to the world it comes from, the place that it comes from.

(Nan) The word abstraction is bringing me to something that I care about, that the intimacy and the right relationship—repairing relationship or coming into right relationship with what we call nature, the Lake included—is a work of specificity. A quote from poet activist Robin Morgan, it's only four words, is foundational for me: *hate generalizes, love specifies*. Specificity and intimacy are more available in a physical place, but not everyone can get to Antelope Island. We make other offerings available to people. We have a morning meditation online, people can come from anywhere to sit with the Lake. But the point of being on Antelope Island is to have specific experiences: oolitic sand running through your fingers, hearing the cries of gulls; a blast of frigid wind—that's the stuff of relationship. The experience I'm having, an intimacy with the Lake that I am hoping to bring others into, is in the body. It's a listening and a knowing, and it's a feeling of thirst. I physically experience thirst, almost perpetually. I know it's not just human thirst. Thirst is everywhere in the West. I experience it especially in the Colorado River Basin. The part of me that is connected to all of the life around me is thirsty.

(Elpitha) That reminds me of the work that I do in the field. So much of the practice is walking and assembling Ochres. People often ask me: "How do you identify Ochres?" as if there's this formula. There are things about finding the right pigment: you don't want sand, you don't want a lot of silica, there are certain Ochres that are suitable for pigment, certain materials for pigment. But I often have a hard time describing to people the way that my body feels in relationship to the iron, in relationship to the Ochre. It's like that feeling you get when somebody walks into a room and you don't see them yet, or when you think someone is in the room and you think, "Oh, there's someone here." Maybe there is, maybe there isn't. Maybe it's a spirit, maybe it's a wind. You know something from your body. It's not in your brain, and it's not something that your immediate, literal senses tell you, but your body knows it. I don't know where I've come up with this idea: I must have known it when I was born, or when I was young. And somehow it has been unlearned out of me. The challenge is getting back to it and trusting it.



Great Salt Lake, Utah, May 2018, Hikmet Sidney Loe.

(Nan) The word *noticing* helps me. What am I noticing? What I like in the Lake work is that scientists are also noticing. The way poetry and science are working together is exciting to me. I notice so much poetry in the science and I'm trying to bring more science into my poetry. Noticing and intimacy have everything to do with each other.

(Hikmet) Absolutely. It is all part of the embodied experience. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed because that's how I exist now, but I'm also grateful this is my normal. I wouldn't have it any other way: all the embodied experiences.

(Nan) You notice what you feel. And we're feeling a lot, including grief. But that's much better than numbing everything. I'm in favor of feeling it, ultimately.

(Hikmet) And there's a lot to see. I tell my students: "I was trained as an art historian; we're trained to see." From training in seeing to identifying, little by little it grows. This new way of seeing started when I first saw Great Salt Lake in 1977, flying over it after my family moved to Utah. I'd never seen a landscape like that before. It truly terrified me; it took me a long time to embrace it. Now I consider our bodies are one with everything. I feel much more at peace with the world, rather than seeing landscape as separate and terrifying.

(Nan) Part of the project for me is remembering what was obvious to me as a child. I'm learning that unlearning has so much to do with it.

(Hikmet) Do you think we have evolved so that relearning happens more quickly?

(Elpitha) I just wonder if it's more that we're not doing it well. We're not distributing things well or organizing things well: we don't have the right systems. It's not that there's just too much or too little.

(Nan) Well, capitalism isn't friendly to anything we're talking about. The existing system is working against us. I am tremendously privileged to be able to get to the island or to be there at all. Not everyone has capacity to even get outside. The structures we have created are largely working against us. We're going to have to undo a lot to come into the right relationship with life. I believe



Ochre bodies and pigments from the San Rafael Swell, 2021, Elpitha Tsoutsounakis.

in our capacity to evolve. I don't know that we are evolving fast enough yet, but I do think we can change.

(Elpitha) Hikmet, you made a point to ask if you were using my correct pronouns, she/her, and I replied yes. I was quiet for a minute because I was thinking about whether or not my pronouns are she/her. I suppose I only thought I had that option, as someone who does indeed identify as a woman, but "not-only." I'm comfortable thinking of myself as a multiplicity—them—not as in "nonbinary" but as in not-only one thing. More-than, potential, everything at once. Deleuze and Guattari begin *A Thousand Plateaus* with the line, "Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd" (3). Ochre is several. I want to be several, too.

I am large, I contain multitudes.

—Walt Whitman

(Elpitha) As we end, I should disclose that my name, in fact, does mean hope.

Coda

I drove out to see Nan on the eighth day of her vigil at Antelope Island, January 23 – 01/23/23, or one, two, three, two, three, like a lapping of water at the Lake's edge, except with the current water level I never got that close to know.

I had carefully selected gifts, since, according to my ancestors, one cannot possibly show up empty handed. I assembled an Ochre lamp with a special Ochre from Tintic to light the vigil with warmth and power, and I packaged some malotira (Cretan mountain tea) and honey from the rugged, high mountains in the west of Crete above my husband's village. The tea is medicinal and sweet and life sustaining, and I thought Nan would appreciate this gift since she mentioned a family member that had relocated to the island (of Crete, not Antelope) part time. I began making the Ochre lamps as a physical manifestation of my research – as a form of critical making to produce knowledge – but also as a further exploration of Ochre as sign or signifier. I think of the Ochre lamps as votive offerings, channeling Ochre vibes and wisdom. What better outpost for an Ochre lamp votive offering than the shore of the Great Salt Lake, or the heart of a poet.

– Elpitha Tsoutsounakis



Nan's Ochre Lamp with swatches of the Tintic Ochre it contains, 2023, Elpitha Tsoutsounakis.

Notes

1. Read the poem "irreplaceable" at https://nanseymour.com/blog/item/141-irreplaceable-a-1700-line-praise-poem-in-the-making.

2. To find out more about the Field Studio Geontological Survey, visit https://www.unknownprospect.org/.

3. See the website *What Is Missing?* at https://www.whatismissing.org/.

4. With gratitude, while still engaged in our conversations, we learned the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints made a public and generous permanent water donation to bolster Great Salt Lake. For more information, visit https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/bishop-waddell-great-salt-lake-water-conservation-church-jesus-christ#:~:text=Those%20efforts%20include%20the%20donation,that%20Utah%20has%20ever%20received.

5. For more information, visit https://www.saveourgreatsaltlake.org/.

6. See https://southwestcontemporary.com/the-sentience-of-sediments-elpitha-tsoutsounakiss-alchemy-of-ochre/for more information about Elpitha's research.

7. See https://www.unknownprospect.org/fsgs-1 for more information.

8. https://www.nasa.gov/image-feature/goddard/2022/nasa-s-webb-delivers-deepest-infrared-image-of-universe-yet.

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Alex Adams

Nan Seymour (she/her) is a Lake-facing poet and facilitator. In 2015, she created River Writing (www.riverwriting.com), a community-based writing practice, to foster voice and authentic connection. The project challenges the tyranny of perfectionism and breaks through walls of isolation. Her debut poetry collection, *prayers not meant for heaven*, was published by Toad Hall Editions (2021). Nan's story "lake woman leaving," a modern myth, was awarded the 2022 Alfred Lambourne prize by FRIENDS of Great Salt Lake. Nan advocates for Rights of Nature, legally defensible personal rights for ecosystems, including Great Salt Lake. Her poetry gives voice to their inherent right to live, flourish, and evolve in natural ways. For more information, visit www.nanseymour.com.



Elpitha Tsoutsounakis (she/her) is a Cretan American designer, printer, and educator based in so-called Salt Lake City. She is an assistant professor in the Division of Multi-Disciplinary Design at the University of Utah. She completed a BS in architecture at the University of Utah and a masters in architecture at the University of Texas at Austin. Her creative practice with Ochre engages design ethics and materiality through feminist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist relations to more-than-human worlds. She is preparing an upcoming installation in the Time Space Existence exhibition hosted by the European Cultural Centre in Venice, Italy.



Austen Diamond Photography

Hikmet Sidney Loe (she/her) is Visiting Assistant Professor in art history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her first book, *The Spiral Jetty Encyclo: Exploring Robert Smithson's Earthwork through Time and Place* (Univ. of Utah Press, 2017), won the *15 Bytes* annual Art Book Award (2018) and became the template for future books on singular works from the land art movement. She is currently writing *The Sun Tunnels Encyclo: Exploring Nancy Holt's Earthwork through Perception and Site* (Univ. of Utah Press, 2026). Loe's curatorial practice focuses on ideas of place, most recently in the exhibitions *The Center Can Not Hold* (Granary Arts, 2022-23) and *Modern Desert Markings: An Homage to Las Vegas Area Land Art* (Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, UNLV, 2023). For more information, visit hikmetsidneyloe.com

A TRUE ORIGINAL: MAYNARD DIXON'S ENDURING LEGACY

ANGELIKA PAGEL

A Conversation with SUSAN BINGHAM



Paul and Susan Bingham. Photo Credit: The Thunderbird Foundation for the Arts.

California-born Maynard Dixon (1875-1946) traveled extensively in the American (South)West during the first thirty-plus years of the twentieth century. Disillusioned, as so many artists and writers were, by the rapidly growing industrial society and its accompanying modernity, he was drawn to the epic landscapes of the West and its Indigenous Peoples. World War I and the Great Depression exacerbated Dixon's desire to abandon the city for the desert. For the last decade of his life, he settled in Utah (wintering in Arizona), and when he passed, he left behind an oeuvre that firmly established him as the archetypal twentieth-century painter of the American West.

By the time Dixon began traveling throughout the Southwest, around 1900, the West had been "won": in 1890 the U.S. Census Bureau declared the official end of the western frontier, and during the same year, the last of the "Indian Wars" – the Massacre at Wounded Knee – relegated Native Americans to "the past" once and for all. This paradigm shift in the perception of the American West resulted in a rush by painters (and photographers) to document the "last frontier" and its "vanishing race," Native Americans.

Dixon's landscapes could be seen to conclude the romantic depiction of the West by such artists as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. His portrayals of Native Americans seem grafted onto the, by his time, well-established stereotype of the stoic "noble savage" – permanently fixed in an idealized

yesteryear and "in touch" with nature and the sublime – while governmental oppression and forced assimilation of Indigenous Peoples were in full swing.

This complex context does by no means devalue Dixon's oeuvre, nor is it meant as a judgment on Dixon's artistic merits. Indeed, it makes his work even more charismatic and compelling. His landscapes emit a seductive beauty achieved via his remarkable handling of light and shapes; Indigenous Peoples are portrayed with respect, dignity, and reverence (as are the destitute urban Americans of the Depression era). It has even been suggested that Dixon's admiration for Indigenous culture comes from "a place of envy," whether in his poetry or paintings.[1] Art never exists in isolation; it is always a product of its era.

Susan Bingham and her late husband, Paul, are from the greater Ogden area and became art dealers specializing in Dixon's work beginning in the 1980s. Eventually, they created the Thunderbird Foundation in Mt. Carmel, on the property in Southern Utah where Dixon and his third wife, Edith Hamlin – an accomplished artist in her own right – resided for a good many years. I had the privilege of interviewing Susan in Mt. Carmel in February of 2023. As she observes, Dixon lived the changing West during the early twentieth century and found his soul in the desert, the only place where he ever put down roots. Cliché it may be, but there has always been that transcendent and harsh beauty of the desert. This is the beauty Dixon's work captures so well. The radiant, hard-edged abstract realism of his paintings (as well as the muted light and darkened palette of his lesser-known California Depression-era work) will remain significant for both their artistic integrity and as silent signifiers of the changing West.



Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

I would like to express my gratitude for your hospitality and for giving me the time to talk to you about Maynard Dixon and your and your late husband Paul's Foundation. As stated on the Thunderbird Foundation for the Arts *website, Paul left corporate America in the early 1980s to follow his love for art and became an art dealer. The site mentions that "he liked selling art more than he liked selling Xerox machines!" A few years after this career change, you and your husband met Edith Hamlin, Maynard Dixon's third wife and a renowned artist herself, then 80 years old. Could you please tell me how you met Edith and how that led to the subsequent exhibition, in 1987, of Maynard Dixon's work, installed at your gallery in San José, California?*

Let me back up a bit. We're both from the Ogden area. Paul graduated college with degrees in history, French, and German. He also spoke Scandinavian languages because he'd been on an LDS mission there. He went to Washington, D.C., for a job interview translating patents into Danish but decided that wasn't what he wanted to do. On the flight back, he noticed a Xerox Corporation advertisement for job openings in their sales department. Back in Salt Lake City, he interviewed with Xerox—they hired him, we packed up our little two-month-old baby, and drove to California. It was the first time that I had been to California. As we came down the Sacramento Valley, I thought, "Oh, my goodness, this is the land of milk and honey!" We settled in Sunnyvale.

Paul did very well at Xerox, which allowed us to make several trips to Europe, including Denmark and Norway. But after 13 years of sales, and then management, the pressure of corporate life was difficult. You always have to be better than you were the year before. By this time, we had started collecting art.

We had friends in Salt Lake City who owned a gallery. They were both BYU graduates; one was an artist, and the other was a collector of Dixon's work. Through them, we became acquainted with the art of Maynard Dixon. Maynard's work led to us being interested in all kinds of art from that particular period, early 20th century American.

While still at Xerox, Paul had two partners who owned an art gallery called Tivoli Gallery. With them, we opened a gallery in Los Altos. After a couple of years, Paul decided that he wanted to be on his own and broke ties with his partners. During that process, Paul was introduced to Edith Hamlin, who was then living in San Francisco and, in 1963, had sold the Mt. Carmel property to Milford Zornes.

When Paul met Edith, he became quite a good friend of hers. Oftentimes, he would take one of our kids with him to San Francisco to pick up works by Dixon that she would consign to us to sell. We'd sell the work, take her a check, and get more of Dixon's work. She had a tremendous amount of his drawings and even some oils. She also would refer people to us if they had a Dixon to sell.

Paul became known for loving Maynard Dixon paintings, and of course, in the Bay Area—where Maynard lived most of his life, this was 30 years after his death—there was quite a bit of it that people had collected during his lifetime. The stories that we were able to unearth through that process are great stories. Many times, what comes with the painting, even what's written on the back, is almost as interesting as what's on the front, because there's a whole history there.

That's how I met Edith. The years passed, my children were getting older, and eventually Paul decided to be a full-time art dealer. We needed extra income, so I got a job with Nordstrom—I was always into clothes and makeup; I was kind of a girly-girl (Laughter). But eventually, Paul wanted me to come into the business with him. So I did. And we never looked back.

We each had our roles. I did the gallery displays. He was the guy who was grinding out various ways to promote the business—he was really great at selling, having learned some high end sales techniques by



Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

working with Xerox. He knew how to deal with people. We also involved our children—folding brochures and handing out this and that. People think the art business is a glamorous business. They don't understand what artists go through or the work galleries have with shipping, storing, pricing, rehanging, insurance, and all the rest of it. Nevertheless, it's a great business and you meet wonderful people. Many collectors and artists become your friends.

On one occasion, we took a large Dixon painting we had acquired to the LA Art Show, which was attended by Diane Keaton and Steve Martin, who were both interested in Dixons. There was also a Dixon painting titled *The Grim Wall* [1923], which we had sold before, but the collector's wife didn't like it, so they brought it back to the LA Art Show to resell. We resold it —and it went to Diane Keaton. I think she still has it. We've had an exciting time in this world of art. The art that came to us through the years—pieces by Stuart Davis and others like him—we were really fortunate to have. In the Bay Area, everybody came from somewhere else and brought "grandma's paintings" with them to make some money from them. So, they came to people like us and we would find a buyer for them.

Are there any particular anecdotes you could share about that first exhibition of Dixon's works at the San José gallery?

Well, the way Paul told it, he always went to see Edith, and she'd have boxes of things set aside for different dealers who dealt with the same art we did. Edith had boxes set aside—marked for Kerwin Galleries, Maxwell Galleries, Paul Bingham, A.B. Hayes, and Mark Hoffman, and others. Paul remembered going to see Edith, who said: "I'm thinking about getting out of the business, I'm getting older; but here's the box of the paintings, the drawings, that I'd like you to sell," to which Paul retorted: "I want to see what's in those other boxes too!" (Laughter)

She let him look, and they came to an agreement about selling the Dixon works inherited by Edith. We also acquired a three-panel screen at that point—a dressing screen painted by Dixon. It had been in the possession of a woman in San Francisco who was a model for Maynard. The woman was now elderly, and she called up my husband one day, telling him that she was thinking about cutting up the screen into several pieces! Paul said, "No, don't do that! I'll be right there." (Laughter) That piece would become part of the resolution of Edith's Dixon holdings, and we had a really nice show. So many people came to see it!

There was a Mexican restaurant right next to our gallery and a plaza out front. Edith had always loved Mexican music, so we hired a mariachi band. Edith was out there dancing to the music and we had a great time. We *sold*—all I did was sit at the desk and just write up things! I've never had a show like that since. There were so many wonderful drawings and oil paintings—people were

happy to get them. After the show was over, Edith came up to Paul and said, "Oh, Paul, that was just wonderful. Maynard would have loved this. This is just the way Maynard would have done it." That was in 1987.

Edith and Maynard moved to Mt. Carmel Junction, Utah, in 1939. As I understand it, they spent their summers here and their winters in Tucson, Arizona, until Maynard's death in 1946. Edith brought Maynard's ashes to Mt. Carmel and continued to live in Mt. Carmel for a while until she eventually sold the property to one of her artist friends. I'm curious how the opportunity arose for you and your husband to acquire the Dixon-Hamlin home in 1998. I'm also keen to know more about the various buildings that make up the property. Was extensive restoration necessary?

When Maynard fell ill, during his Canoga Park Post Office mural project [completed in 1941], they hired "California Style" artist Milford Zornes and Dixon's artist friend Buck Weaver to install that mural for him. That's how Zornes got to know Maynard.

They kept in touch over the years, after Maynard and Edith bought the property here in Mt. Carmel, sometime in 1937-1938. They planned the home to build and then moved in late 1938 or 1939. Milford Zornes bought the property in 1963. He happened to come through here and saw that it was for sale, but Edith was renting it out to a family at the time. According to Milford, there were tricycles on the lawn, and the doors were open, but nobody was there. He decided to just walk in—and there were Maynard Dixon paintings on the walls! That evening, he and his friends went to a girlie show in Las Vegas, and he said, "We were at a show where there were all these naked girls, and all I could think about was the place in Mt. Carmel." (Laughter)

One thing led to another, and Milford and his wife, Pat, purchased the property from Edith. Milford started doing workshops every year. Many artists still come to us who have studied with Milford on this property. Anyway, late in 1997, Paul had gone to Southern California to sell a Dixon painting titled *Mountains in Sunset Light* [1927]—it was beautiful. The sale provided him with some money. At the same time, I'm in the gallery in San José where I get a call from Milford Zornes. In his big voice he asked for Paul, and since Milford was also in Southern California—he had a house in Claremont—I gave him Paul's cell number and didn't think a thing of it.

So, I'm about to lock up the gallery and the phone rings. It was Paul and he said, "Well, I just bought the Dixon property." My jaw dropped, and I said, "I'm not moving to Southern Utah!" (Laughter) I agreed to at least go and look at the property.

We didn't get up here until January of 1998. The property was in very bad disarray; Milford really hadn't lived here much. He was 90 years old at the time, finding that his and Pat's life in Claremont was a much better place to be. He would come to visit Carmel but didn't stay at the property. There were big cobwebs and mouse droppings and dead mice everywhere. It was scary. I kind of kicked the mice out of the way when I looked around. (Laughter) The bunk house was packed full of furniture, boxes, and all kinds of stuff. The same with the studio.

People think the art business is a glamorous business. They don't understand what artists go through or the work galleries have with shipping, storing, pricing, rehanging, insurance, and all the rest of it. Nevertheless, it's a great business and you meet wonderful people. Many collectors and artists become your friends.



Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

We looked at the property and then drove around the area, up towards the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. As you drive back toward Mt. Carmel, it's so beautiful. By this time, all these thoughts were going through my head: I could fix the house, I could make a flower bed, I could make a patio. . . you know, *Country Living Magazine* ideas. I thought, maybe I could become a country girl. (Laughter)

But because the property was in such bad shape, there was no way we could get a loan on it, so Paul made a deal with Milford. They agreed on a price, we pressed forward, and everything fell into line. We had a lot of paintings come to us at that time that we were able to make nice commissions on. There are times in your life when things fall together in the right way, so much so that it makes you think there's some kind of intervention. That's how we felt about it, that maybe we are supposed to be stewards of this property.

By this time, we were so deep into everything about Maynard Dixon. We knew Edith; we got to know Milford; we heard all the stories; we sold work for Daniel Dixon—Maynard's oldest son; we knew his younger son John well. When Don Hagerty wrote his book on Dixon [*Desert Dreams: The Art and Life of Maynard Dixon*], we helped find images—so we were pretty deep into the Dixon world. We weren't sure what we were going to do with the property at that point, but decided that at the very least it could be a summer home for our family. Once we got into it, we realized it was an important, historical property.

The recent Maynard Dixon exhibition at BYU [October 2022—September 2023] is called *Searching for a Home*. People are surprised to learn that Maynard never owned a home until he moved to Mt. Carmel. I often think about all of the changes that he saw in his lifetime because he was born right after the Civil War, in a little settlement that wasn't even called Fresno. Maynard Dixon was a true American painter. He was born in the West. He grew up painting and drawing the West. He drew the Mexican cowboys, the *vaqueros*, who worked on the property that his grandfather bought. He loved American lore. His mother encouraged his reading of novels, and he knew all the illustrators of those books. Maynard was a sickly child and hospitalized a few times with asthma, so he was basically homeschooled. He learned to draw (with his left hand) like nobody can draw! His sons said that he would take a pencil and draw a fluid line, where his hand would hardly come off the paper. By the time he was 16, he sent his drawings to Fredrick Remington for encouragement. Remington told him that he could become a great artist if he continued to observe, paint, and draw. Maynard took that to heart. He got

his first illustration job at age 18. He was a natural talent and mostly studied on his own, though he did attend the California School of Design, now the San Francisco Art Institute, where he studied with Arthur Matthews.

I would like to have known Maynard. I get the feeling, through everything that I've read, that because of his supportive mother, he really loved women. I think the women in his life took care of him. Dorthea Lange took care of him. Because of her success, he was able to travel to the West and stay for months at a time. Edith, in his older age, took care of him. Of course, his first wife, she was not able to take care of anyone. She had a hard enough time taking care of herself.

What motivated you to preserve Maynard Dixon's legacy with such unconditional commitment? I think you already answered part of that – you were so fully involved and engaged with Maynard Dixon and his life. Is there anything else you want to add to that?

Well, I think because we are originally from Utah, it made a difference. I don't think that there are many other people who would do what we do. They would come into this culture and say, "My goodness, you came from the Bay Area to this out-of-the-way little hamlet, tucked away on the east side of Zion, a sleepy little town. What made you think you could have an art gallery here? You're crazy people." Well, we are! (Laughter) It's not an easy thing to do, but Paul was a visionary. We aren't the kind of people who planned to retire at 65. . . What were we going to do? This was our life. If you die hanging a painting, that's a good life. (Laughter)

We wanted to make a living history museum; we wanted to share it with artists so they could get the same kind of inspiration that Maynard Dixon did. We tried to restore it in a way that, if the Dixons came back, if they could, they would still be comfortable here.

Within a year of purchasing the property, you made the decision to open it up for workshops, internships, and retreats by establishing the Thunderbird Foundation for the Arts. *Artist residencies are of course prized opportunities in today's world. I admire your decision to continue the foundation, with its opportunities, even after your husband's passing. What has been your experience for the past twenty-some years hosting artists, photographers, and writers, here at the Maynard Dixon property?*

We've met so many wonderful people. My husband had an interesting personality. On one hand, he would appear to people as arrogant, even a little grumpy sometimes. But anyone who got to know him well knew that there was a big generous heart underneath. It was not about money at all. It was about a vision; it was about doing something that mattered. We got the Utah Heritage Foundation to help us get the property on the National Historical Register of Historic Places.

I don't think that there are many other people who would do what we do. They would come into this culture and say, "My goodness, you came from the Bay Area to this out-of-the-way little hamlet, tucked away on the east side of Zion, a sleepy little town. What made you think you could have an art gallery here? You're crazy people." Well, we are! (Laughter) It's not an easy thing to do, but Paul was a visionary. We aren't the kind of people who planned to retire at 65. . . What were we going to do? This was our life. If you die hanging a painting, that's a good life.



Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

We've met wonderful people who came into our lives and became our friends, such as Russell Case, whose career we kind of launched. In about 2001, we started a show called *Maynard Dixon Country*. We built outdoor walls with awnings over the top and lighting inside. The artists would come for about 4 or 5 days, paint for a few days, then hang the wet paintings in the outdoor space, and eventually the paintings would be inside the studio on all the walls.

We had a very successful run of *Maynard Dixon Country* for about 17 years. Once a year, in August, all the artists would come. Paul would cook for everyone, and the wine flowed, and they'd sit up by the bunkhouse singing all night. It was wonderful networking for the artists; it was wonderful for the collectors to meet the artists. The paintings were pretty affordable—there was a lot of collecting that went on. Many were young artists like Russell Case, Josh Elliott, Skip Whitcomb, Dan Young, it goes on and on—we helped them launch their careers. Conversely, invited artists recommended their friends—for instance, Ray Roberts suggested Robert Goldman, and we've done extremely well with Robert Goldman's beautiful work.

The collectors that we've met have become friends. Those are the rewards of what we do. This is not an easy business, there's always competition, or artists who are not happy that they didn't sell—*we're* always unhappy that they didn't sell. There's stress and pressure that comes along with it. We stopped doing the Dixon show—there are so many plein-air shows now, everywhere; it has become such a diluted market. The collector base has changed too. There are now young rich people in California and elsewhere who are starting to buy these younger plein-air artists, but don't recognize the roots of this type of art. For Paul and me, and our generation, Maynard Dixon was innovative.

Impressionism was radical and shocking at the time, and now it has become mundane and loved by everyone.

Well, even further back: Van Gogh didn't sell a painting during his lifetime. He had an innovative, new approach. He was that bridge between Impressionism and Modernism.

But, back to Maynard Dixon—he was a true original. I'm finding now that I see these contemporary paintings—they're big, they're beautiful, they make a statement, but they are derivative. I heard Wayne Thiebaud give a talk at the San José Museum of Art stating, "I've borrowed from everybody in history." People do borrow. I enjoy seeing what people today are doing—even though they are borrowing from artists like Dixon, or some of the Taos art colony founders. Sometimes I see a painting and think, wow, that looks like a Victor Higgins! Many young collectors don't care, or don't know, but they probably could be collecting the real thing [Victor Higgins] for the prices they are paying

for contemporary art. That signifies a change in the market. However, it's important that we have a viable contemporary market.

Could you please speak a bit more about Maynard Dixon's art? What attracted you to his work, style, and subject matter? Though his depictions of Native Americans as stoic and passive are romanticized, I am the first to admit that during my early California college years a large poster of his Earth Knower *[1931-32] decorated my apartment – and resurfaced on the walls of my office at Weber State University. Dixon's western landscapes are undeniably seductive – I enjoy the stark lights and shadows, the simplified, cubist-inspired shapes, and the expansive panoramas – not to mention his urban realism, perhaps less known, when he painted the hardships of Depression-era San Francisco.*

What I have learned, not only from Maynard Dixon's paintings, but from his life, through living here, on this historical property, walking in the same footsteps, looking at the chinking between the logs and the colors he chose, is that I wish I could have known him. You have to understand that we were driving back and forth from California to Utah all the time, but I never paid attention to the desert. It was a big, hot, dry place. It didn't appeal to me. Of course, once I started living in the desert, ***understanding*** the desert, Dixon's work meant more and more to me. I started seeing the shadows, and the light, the vastness, and the clouds. His thunderbird logo—did I understand it until I moved to the Southwest? Not really.

I'll tell you what made me understand it. We had just restored the property, so we decided that we would open it up to the community. We invited the mayors and councilpeople from all the little towns around. We sent out invitations, prepared hors d'oeuvres, and it was a beautiful day. Just before everyone arrived, there were a bunch of clouds in the sky. As everyone had gone into the studio, where we were going to give a presentation, the sky let loose. We couldn't get the food from the house to the studio without getting wet. Paul and I were both drenched. The studio started to flood; all the women had nylons on, but they took off their shoes and started grabbing towels. I called Eddie at the Thunderbird Hotel and said, "Eddie, we need towels up here, we're flooding!" Paul was outside shoveling (Laughter); we had to put boards down so people could get to their cars. Anyway, we finally had this little, drenched presentation, and then everyone got out of there. We thought, what just happened? Was this a bad omen? What are we doing?

Then the sun came out, and it was a lovely evening. I thought: that is the thunderbird!

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You can understand why Native Americans believed the sky was falling. Their explanation for these storms was that a large bird caused all of this. I gained a greater appreciation of the drama of this area, how all of this was formed. Maynard, as a young man, knew about the thunderbird legend and decided to design a thunderbird as his logo.

You mentioned that Maynard painted Native Americans passively. A lot of artists from the East Coast who came to paint in the Southwest were city people. This area was a novelty—the color of the clothing, the textiles, the pottery, the flora and fauna of the desert, the architecture—it was all intriguing. Here is what I came to believe: that Maynard Dixon appreciated Native Americans as people, a living culture—which is also reflected in his poetry. They had this creativity—their pottery, their weavings, their resolute spirit. I think that's what he tried to portray—the spirit of these people.

You also mentioned *Earth Knower*. It was one of the very first paintings by Maynard Dixon that really touched me—I've thought about it a million times since. I thought, what is it about that painting that touched me? Now, I know. Dixon knew everything there was to know about composition—he studied dynamic symmetry. There were so many angles and geometric shapes in the way he composed, and he simplified all of that. *Earth Knower* is a perfect example of that, because here is this Native American draped in a blanket, and the color of the face, the color of the blanket, the color of the earth, they are all coordinated. The shadows of the blanket, the folds of the skin—Dixon seems to say, as Native Americans believe, that they come from the earth and they go back to the earth; they are a part of the earth. The way Dixon put it all together, it's just genius. And when you see something that is genius like that, you don't always know why it touches you. Maynard Dixon painted the spirit of the West. A lot of young painters are painting nostalgia, but it doesn't have the spirit.

His was a lived experience. He lived here; he lived among the Indigenous Peoples, he spent time with them.

Exactly. When you have a painting like *Cloud World*, with the tiny Navajo riders across the bottom—he again explained it in the title, *Cloud World*—there's a world above us that is so vast and so unknowable, and here we are, these small people. When he went to the desert, he would find his soul. That was where he realized that all his little problems—politics back in San Francisco; an artist who got a commission and he didn't—they weren't important to him anymore.

Maynard's poetry is wonderful. One of my favorite poems is called "The Years," written in the late 1930s. He writes, "Now as the years pass more quickly,/ and I become better acquainted/ with the slowly approaching visage of death. . . / I must hold myself up, above petty disputes and



Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

distinctions,/ keeping some largeness of heart/ alike for those who trust me and those who distrust me. . . ." He goes on to say that, if all he did while on this earth was to create beauty, he would be satisfied: "Yes, this is enough. So unhurriedly I will pass/ peacefully, content under the desert stars." It's a fabulous poem. He came to Mt. Carmel during the last part of his life, and he had a lot of things to resolve. He'd been through a lot—divorced twice, the Great Depression. He had great times in the 1920s, he'd seen WWI and then WWII right before he passed away. He saw the cowboy, the automobile, and everything in between.



Photo of Maynard and Edith Dixon on display at the Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

Maynard painted Native Americans passively. A lot of artists from the East Coast who came to paint in the Southwest were city people. This area was a novelty – the color of the clothing, the textiles, the pottery, the flora and fauna of the desert, the architecture – it was all intriguing. Here is what I came to believe: that Maynard Dixon appreciated Native Americans as people, a living culture – which is also reflected in his poetry. They had this creativity – their pottery, their weavings, their resolute spirit. I think that's what he tried to portray – the spirit of these people.

What do you think his legacy is nowadays? Why do you think he is still important?

I think he is still important as far as his art goes because he was innovative. For example, if you look out at that mountain, look at those trees, look at all those branches. He was able to zoom in and tell a story. He might just want to talk about the clouds; he might just want to talk about a cabin. He knew how to focus on a subject both in his paintings and his poetry. That's why he is often called a "poetic painter." His paintings tell a story but they are not literal. There's nothing literal about *Cloud World* whatsoever, they are just shapes. And yet, it tells a story. He was a genius in his ability to edit. I was told long ago that a good painter knows that it's not what you put *into* a work of art, it's what you leave *out,* and Dixon knew how to do that.

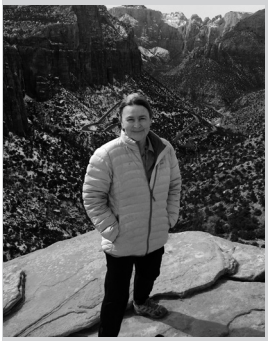
As mentioned before, it's interesting to watch the contemporary market now, with so many wonderful, big landscape paintings. Some of it is getting to the point where it rivals Dixon's work. There are purists in the art world who will say that these newer pieces are derivative and nostalgic—because that isn't their world, really. But the West is still here, and the West is still vast. There are

still wonderful things to paint, and to feel. Maynard's original experiences here, to tell it like *he* did, that's still worth something.

Thank you. This has been a wonderful conversation.

Notes

1. See "Indigenous Life Through Dixon's Eyes," exhibition label *Maynard Dixon: Searching for a Home*, BYU Museum of Art, October 28, 2022—September 23, 2023.



After teaching 37 years of art history at Weber State University, Angelika Pagel (Ph.D., UC Berkeley) is now happily retired. Her most recent publication was the exhibition catalog, "Buster Simpson: Constructs for the Anthropocene," that accompanied the artist's retrospective at Weber State University's Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery in the fall of 2022. Though she may have closed her office door to her career, Dr. Pagel will continue to pursue her art historical passions, but with all the leisure of a professor emerita.

MAYNARD DIXON



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *High in the Morning*, 1933, oil on canvas, 40 1/4 x 40 1/4 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Flathead Tepees*, 1909, oil on chipboard, 4 11/16 x 7 7/16 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art,1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Yonder the Navajos*, 1921, oil on canvas, 25 1/8 x 30 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1974.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Blind Hopi*, 1923, oil on canvasboard, 19 3/4 x 15 15/16 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art,1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Beef Herd, Sandhill Camp*, 1921, oil on canvasboard, 15 1/2 x 20 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art,1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Diana's Throne,* 1934, oil on canvas, 16 x 19 3/4 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Val Tait*, 1933, oil on canvasboard, 19 3/4 x 16 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Navajo Gamblers,* 1902, oil on canvasboard, 4 15/16 x 7 15/16 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Mesas in Shadow*, 1926, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 40 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Hopi Man*, 1923, oil on canvas, 20 3/16 x 16 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Merging of Spring and Winter,* 1930, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 1/8 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Night Ride, Sandhill Camp*, 1921, 15 7/8 x 19 7/8 inches. Brigham Young University, 1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Roadside*, 1938, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 40 1/4 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1974.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Old Homesite,* 1937, oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 40 1/8 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, gift of B. Darrel and R. Reed Call, 1977.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Lonesome Journey*, 1946, oil on canvas, 26 1/8 x 36 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, gift of Dickman Investment, 1974.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Mojave Desert,* 1945, oil on board, 25 x 30 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, gift of John H. and Jean S. Groberg, 2010.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Mormon Home,* 1940, oil on canvas, 25 1/4 x 30 1/4. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1971.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Hopi Woman Grinding Corn*, 1923, oil on canvasboard, 16 x 19 13/16 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.



Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), *Flathead Cabin and Tepees*, 1909, oil on canvasboard, 7 13/16 x 9 3/8 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1937.

NANCY HOLT/ ALWAYS IN MOTION

HIKMET SIDNEY LOE

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

— T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*

I.

In 1968, artists Nancy Holt, her husband, Robert Smithson, and Michael Heizer traveled from the East coast to the West. They visited Las Vegas first, taking in a show by musician Waylon Jennings. They spent time at Jean Dry Lake, an endorheic dry lake twenty-five miles south of the city, assisting Heizer as he dug his temporary work *Rift 1*, the first of his Nine Nevada Depressions earthworks. The trio continued farther west to Mono Lake, documenting their time on the lake's shores through photography, film, and narration. Holt revisited the raw footage from 1968 to create the film *Mono Lake* in 2004.

Born in Massachusetts and raised in New Jersey, this was Holt's first trip to the West. She recounted the visceral, life-changing hold the desert cast upon her:

> In 1968, I went to the western desert for the first time and had an overwhelming experience. It was as if my inner landscape and the outer landscape were identical, there was a pervasive sense of oneness. It was like a nirvana experience. For three days I didn't sleep, I was euphoric. It was really the beginning of my art. Everything evolved out of that, to this day that experience is the root of everything I do (Holt and Loe, 575-76).



Jean Dry Lake, Nevada. Center for Land Use Interpretation photo.

"The beginning of my art." From 1966 until her passing in 2014, Holt's work spanned concrete poems, art writing, sound works, drawing, film, video, photography, earthworks, and site-specific sculpture. Through her prodigious output, her interest in the perceptual qualities of art emerged, along with her fascination with systems and their ability to inform in unique and individualized ways. Landscape and individual cultural perceptions of place (and space) played a significant role in her art.

The foundational experiences of mobility and travel were vital to Holt's work. Movement was a crucial aspect of her life; her site-specific works are found across the United States and in France and Finland. The mainstay in Holt's ability to create depended on the freedom and ability to travel, serving as the anchor as she moved across the earth's surface. She was an avid explorer, arriving and starting again; her myriad destinations create arcs and circles as patterns in her life. Trajectories to places real and imagined pushed through boundaries.

II.

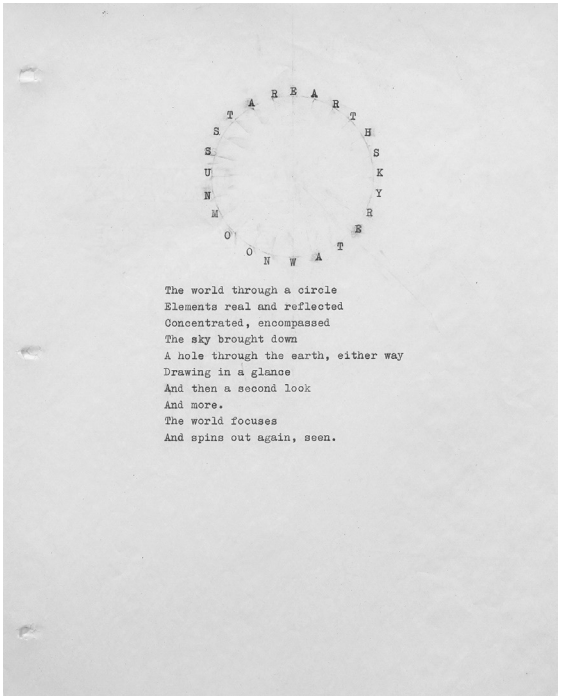
Holt's artistic output began in 1966. Through the work of Holt/Smithson Foundation (willed into place by Holt upon her passing in 2014), the public has expanded information about her artistic trajectory's origins:

> Holt was attentive to language as a system structuring perception and understanding of place. In the mid 1960s she worked as an assistant literary editor at the magazine *Harper's Bazaar*, and in 1966 began creating concrete poems and text-based works of art (Holt/Smithson Foundation).

Words and land combined as Holt created *Stone Ruin Tour*, two tours for friends in New Jersey as they wandered the little Falls-Cedar Grove area, presented in 1967-68.[1] Her first in the *Buried Poems* series (1969-71) was cre-

ated for Smithson. She described it as "a concrete poem, made for a particular person. . . buried in the earth. Certain physical, special, and atmospheric qualities of a site would evoke a person I knew" (262). These artistic modes embed movement, engaging her audience as they move from one place to another.

Holt's interest in the literal structure of language led to additional concrete poems, as she positioned words both visually and aurally on the page, forming a discrete work of art. In *The World Through a Circle* (1970), words forming the circle—sun, moon, water, sky, earth, star—are made of and include circles and orbs, the stuff of the cosmos.



Nancy Holt, *The World Through a Circle* (1972). Typewriter ink on paper 11 x 8 1/2 in. (28 x 22 cm). © 2023 Holt/Smithson Foundation / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

These works reveal Holt as an artist very much of her time. During the 1960s and 1970s, the converging artistic movements of minimal, conceptual, performance, and land art collided to pose unique questions for artists and viewers. Circles are potent images found in Minimal art, a movement that saw artists paring down to present basic, foundational ideas through shape.

Holt employed circles throughout her career as configuration and as carrier of signs. It is the abstraction of form to its most essential gesture, a form devoid of meaning outside of its essence. The closed circle is a portal to everything, and nothing; it holds everything, and nothing. Metaphors apply to Holt's circles, which elicit imagery "from the human eye, to a pool of water, to the lens of a camera."[2] A circle implies movement, its shape beginning and ending in infinity. It also implies a center, a concept Holt would expand upon throughout her career.

Holt began creating visual art using light in 1970, casting circular shadows on interior spaces and on the rooftop of her New York City building. Holes allowed for cast light; mirrors projecting light resulted in circles and ovals shone on walls. While the use of light to create these patterns was new to Holt's oeuvre, the circular form was transformed from two-dimensional pages to three-dimensional spaces. After working in her Manhattan loft, Holt claimed: "it only seemed natural that the next step would be to go out into the landscape and actually work with the sun" (Holt and Loe, 576).

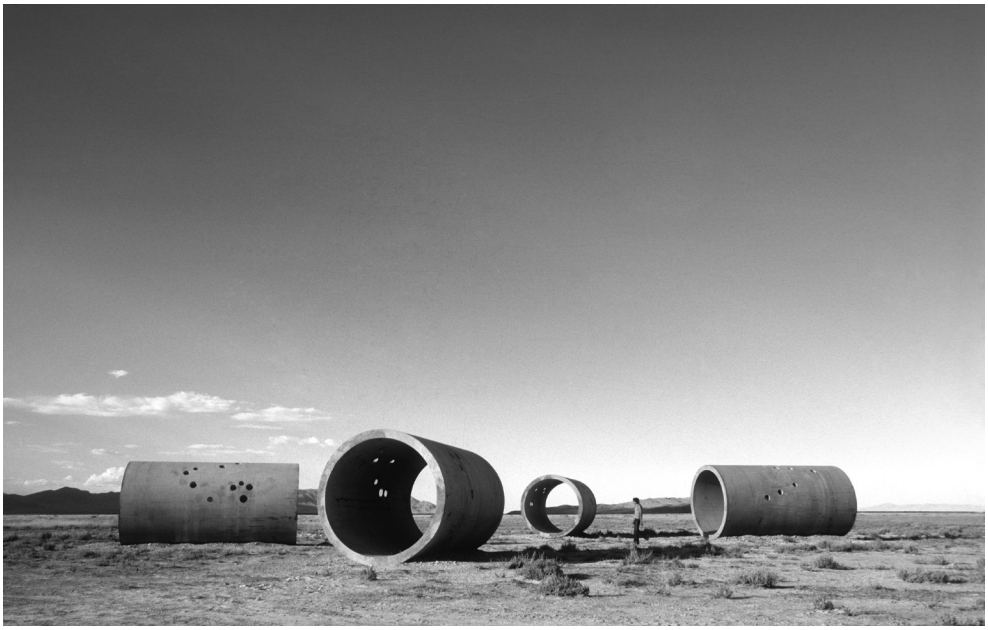
III.

Holt's exterior works—earthworks and site-specific installations—relied upon light for their effects; it was a potent medium within her conceptual skills. In 1972, she traveled the country,

creating two works in the landscape. *Views Through a Sand Dune* was created on the East Coast, in a sand dune at Narragansett Beach, Rhode Island: a tube placed through a dune permitted the viewer to experience alternative landscapes from either side. *Missoula Ranch Locators: Vision Encompassed* (since dismantled) employed galvanized steel viewing objects created by Holt, positioned on eight compass points in a verdant landscape. In each instance, circular optical devices provided the viewer with directed environmental experiences. Visitors had access through these works to fully embodied experiences of directed sight while enveloped in all the immediate atmospheric and geological occurrences embedded in and on the land.

In 1973, Holt conceived of a work to amplify these experiences within a desert environment. The resulting work, *Sun Tunnels*, was completed in 1976 in Utah's west desert, immediately gaining status as an iconic work of land art. It serves as a viewing device comprised of four concrete tunnels (each 9 feet in diameter x 18 feet long) that capture the rising and setting sun during each summer and winter solstice. Its size envelopes visitors who move inside and out of each tunnel, experiencing the landscape as Holt desired: "The work becomes a human focal point, and in that respect it brings the vast landscape back to human proportion and makes the viewer the center of things" (34).

Holes were drilled into the top half of each tunnel—ranging in size from 7 to 10 inches—forming the constellations Draco, Perseus, Columba, and Capricorn. These additional portals provide seemingly endless views of the sky and desert landscape populated with rugged mountains, hills, and buttes, the ground peppered with saline-loving plants such as pickleweed and the



Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76). Great Basin Desert, Utah. Concrete, steel, earth. Overall dimensions: 9 ft. 2-1/2 in. x 86 ft. x 53 ft. (2.8 x 26.2 x 16.2 m); length on the diagonal: 86 ft. (26.2 m). Photograph: Nancy Holt; Collection Dia Art Foundation with support from Holt/Smithson Foundation. © 2023 Holt/Smithson Foundation and Dia Art Foundation / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

alkaline soil underneath, and the sky a canopy of color and clouds strewn with an untold number of planets and stars.

When asked about the significance of this work, Holt stated: "I am interested in the perceptual questions that arise. The work isn't just about the sun. It's important to keep in mind that the work comes out of my concerns with perception" (Holt and Loe, 577). As with other earthworks, these questions begin with the journey—the place and landscape of origin that commences the experience. We perceive through our own realities; we see what we deem to be important. It is determined by the visitor when the experience fades (if ever). Perceptual aspects of the work lead beyond what we can imagine. At the same time, these trajectories are grounded through the center of the work and the sun: "By marking the yearly extreme positions of the sun, *Sun Tunnels* indicates the 'cyclical time' of the solar year. The center of the work becomes the center of the world" (35).

After completing *Sun Tunnels*, Holt followed the earthwork with an eponymous essay (1977) and film (1978). Each provides layers of knowledge, imparting information about artistic processes (Holt identifies and thanks all who assisted her in this work) and furthers viewers' understanding of their place on the earth (real and perceived) and relationship to the cosmos.

IV.

Holt's practice and place in the world was—and continues to be—extended through exhibitions of her work (along with lectures, interviews, teaching, and writing). The group exhibit *Time Frame* (MoMA PS1, 2006) included ten artists "exploring the compression, extension, and mirroring of time."[3] The curators featured Holt's work along with that of contemporary artist Roni Horn. Both shared an affinity for the work of poet Emily Dickinson.

Holt's interest in Dickinson became known to the public through research conducted on the artist's personal library.[4] With over 2,500 items codified and placed in either Holt/Smithson Foundation's Santa Fe office or in the Archives of American Art's Washington D.C. collections, each item proffers a unique lens on the influences Holt learned from and thrived upon. Her collection of poetry books includes multiple items by and about Dickinson, including *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson*. (Higginson was a nineteenth-century politician, abolitionist, and writer who formed a literary relationship with Dickinson. At first unsure of her writing style, Higginson eventually supported and promoted her work.) Holt was particularly drawn to a statement Dickinson wrote in a letter to Higginson: "My Business is Circumference" (2: 412).

In geometry, circumference forms the boundaries of a circle; it is the distance around the circle. Circles, as mentioned above, have an interior and an exterior. Yet a circumference can also be considered as a metaphysical construct. Multiple interpretations have been posited concerning Dickinson's fascination with this concept: "circumference" appears in multiple poems, along with mention of circles and centers. Dickinson scholar Robert Gillespie provides this succinct analysis: "circumference. . . demands expansion: consciousness, absorbing the event, swells out to encompass time and space" (256).

This reading is an expanded view, taking the reader (or, in the case of a

work of art, the viewer) beyond expectations or imagination. Dickinson's interest in circumference provides a way to acknowledge change and transformation, to embrace time and space beyond what is immediately known. In "The Poets light but Lamps," the poet may be the wick, the light may be the lamp *and* the poet, and the circumference pierced by unending suns is renewed by each generation.

> The Poets light but Lamps—
> Themselves—go out—
> The Wicks they stimulate
> If vital Light
>
> Inhere as do the Suns—
> Each Age a Lens
> Disseminating their
> Circumference—

The correlation between Holt and Horn—through their mutual fondness for Dickinson—is found in these intersections. Horn has also traveled extensively, most famously to Iceland beginning in 1975. Her chronicle of these visits was recently published in *Island Zombie: Iceland Writings*. The book is in turns informative, mystical, evocative, and meditative; the landscapes of Iceland fill one's senses through her prose. Short essays include a rumination on the writings of Jules Verne, who sought the entrance to the center of the earth (Horn claims he discovered it in Iceland). Her essay "When Dickinson Shut Her Eyes" describes the poet's solitary life that afforded her the richness of imagined travels and expanded ideas. Horn concludes observing that "Dickinson stayed home to get at the world. But home is an island like this one. And I come to this island to get at the very center of the world"(66). The center of the world may indeed be a circle. Throughout Holt's career, she placed centers in multiple landscapes, asking viewers to stand in her centers to gain their own centers, metaphorically closing their eyes to experience what is beyond.

V.

Let me return and conclude with Holt's travels in 1976. The first image from the film *Sun Tunnels* is a map of North America. The camera cuts to a closeup of the East coast, then pans west from New York to Utah, following Holt's lead as she takes us from her home to her work. Western landscapes unfold as she documents how her earthwork was built, then placed in the Great Salt Lake Desert. Time lapse views of the summer solstice sunrise and sunset—from the tunnel's first encounter with them—complete the film, the orange glow of the sun igniting the tunnels, then dissipating.

Holt's time in Utah was completed shortly thereafter. In September, she embarked upon a solo road trip from Utah back to New York City, leaving her work in the rear-view mirror as she drove home. The car's spinning wheels provided the means of transportation: four wheels on the car, four circles left behind in the desert.

She was driving by herself during the trip and, rather than relying solely on the radio to keep her company, turned the trip into a work of art.[5] Holt used an audio cassette player—recording on one side, then the other—to capture her thoughts as she traversed Interstate 80. Holt transcribed a portion of her journey, titled *U.S. 80 SOLO: NEBRASKA* a few years later, in 1979.[6] It is prescient that the Nebraska portion of Holt's trip is the first to make this sound work into the world: the first



***INTERSTATE 80*, Lincoln Nebraska, May 1973. National Archives at College Park Collection. Photo credit: Charles O'Rear.**

section of the new interstate system was completed in 1974 in Nebraska.[7]

Holt's monologue is sparse considering the distance she covered in one day (455.27 miles) traversing the state. She alternates between first and third person, a solo traveler acknowledging her car and the broader relationship of the highway system filled with a community of travelers.

The state's landscape is described in bits of dialogue, creating a mosaic of color and shape. Cultural markers are noted along with hills, trees, the bright blue sky, the reddish soil. Two passages are of note. Four hours into the trip, Holt states: "I feel like Sissy Henshaw making her way across the country and back again. Always in motion"(*U.S. 80 Solo: Nebraska,* 04:04). Holt was a reader of her time: this reference to the main protagonist in Tom Robbins's 1976 novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* aligns her with a modern experience of women on the move.[8]

Over six hours later, she claims: "Sun is setting directly down the highway in the back of me. I'm truly going east. It's very bright and very yellow tonight. But since there are no clouds, it's not an extraordinary sunset by any means. This should be the equinox now, so that I know I'm going due east"(*U.S. 80 Solo: Nebraska,* 10:37). Due east, back home, but not for long. Holt was truly always in motion, continuing after her accomplishment in Utah to place centers in communities and around the world as she reached finite and infinite destinations.

Notes

1. With thanks to Lisa Le Feuvre, executive director of Holt/Smithson Foundation, for editorial adjustments to this essay.

2. Find more information on Nancy Holt's poem "The World Through a Circle" on the Holt/Smith Foundation website: https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/world-through-circle. Accessed 2 March 2023.

3. For more information on the group exhibit *Time Frame*, see: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/4861?. Accessed 19 July 2023.

4. As inaugural research fellow for Holt/Smithson Foundation (2021), I identified items in, then organized Holt's extensive personal library. This experience is gratefully acknowledged.

5. Holt/Smithson Foundation promotes all of Holt's work, including her little-known sound works. See the 2022 exhibition here: https://thewarehousedallas.org/artists/nancy-holt/. Accessed July 6, 2023. The exhibition was accompanied by the catalog: *Nancy Holt: Sound as Sculpture*. Dallas: The Warehouse, 2022.

6. *U.S. 80 Solo: Nebraska* aired on Fine Art Broadcast Service for A Space, Toronto, as part of the series *Radio by Artists,* curated by artist/producer Ian Murray. For an expanded essay on this work, see: James Nisbet, "Moving/West," in *Nancy Holt: Inside/Outside,* edited by Lisa Le Feuvre and Katarina Pierre, The Monacelli Press, 2022, pp. 46-79.

7. For more information on the initial construction of I-80 in Nebraska, see: http://www.nebraskatransportation.org/i-80-anniv/index.htm.

8. Robbins's book is included in Holt's personal library.

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Austen Diamond Photography

Hikmet Sidney Loe (she/her) is Visiting Assistant Professor in art history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her first book, *The Spiral Jetty Encyclo: Exploring Robert Smithson's Earthwork through Time and Place* (Univ. of Utah Press, 2017), won the *15 Bytes* annual Art Book Award (2018) and became the template for future books on singular works from the land art movement. She is currently writing *The Sun Tunnels Encyclo: Exploring Nancy Holt's Earthwork through Perception and Site* (Univ. of Utah Press, 2026). Loe's curatorial practice focuses on ideas of place, most recently in the exhibitions *The Center Can Not Hold* (Granary Arts, 2022-23) and *Modern Desert Markings: An Homage to Las Vegas Area Land Art* (Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, UNLV, 2023). For more information, visit hikmetsidneyloe.com

TRIVIALIZING ENGLISH: PAKISTANI LITERATURE TODAY

SRI CRAVEN



A Conversation with FARAH ALI



Farah Ali is from Karachi, Pakistan, and currently lives in Dubai, UAE. She holds a master's degree in Business Administration from the Institute of Business Administration, Karachi. Ali worked at Colgate-Palmolive while beginning to write fiction. She now teaches creative writing courses as a freelancer and conducts workshops at the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance. Her short stories have been anthologized in the Best Small Fictions *and* Pushcart *series.* People Want to Live *(McSweeney's, 2021) is her first collection of short fiction. Ali's writing is informed by her observation of everyday life as it unfolds amidst the changes of urban Pakistan and the immigrant lives of Pakistanis. Her novel,* The River, The Town, *is forthcoming in Fall 2023 from Dzanc Books.*

This interview engages Ali's short stories in People Want to Live. *The conversation delves into Ali's motivations for exploring contemporary everyday Pakistani life in terms of psychological processes, on the one hand, and through/in English on the other. The city is never far from these conversations, and Ali speaks about the changing urban landscape as an inevitable part of the psycho-social exploration of life in contemporary Pakistan.*

You've published quite a few stand-alone short stories and one collection. Where did you start as a writer; how did you come to writing fiction? What personal philosophy motivates your writing – a place, an instinct, or a social identity?

I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan. I have always been writing, in my head or on paper. When I was a kid I filled pages with stories, and if I was doing something else, playing with my friends or doing schoolwork, I was making up stories in my head. And I was reading a lot, whatever I could find—Urdu magazines for children, abridged novels, unabridged novels. Probably very early on I found fiction, reading it and writing it, the ultimate place from which to understand the world and its people, as well as a place of incomparable rest. So, it is an instinct, a compulsion.

Let's talk about your first collection of short stories, People Want to Live. *The title could suggest a poignant/wary kind of emphasis that human life occurs in the context of or despite the state of the world and of humanity. Many of the stories strongly suggest an interest in mental health struggles that inevitably accompany everyday life, but are just as inevitably overridden in the context of philosophical understandings of life in Pakistani culture. This focus on mental health allows you to draw a portrait of Pakistan – especially cities like Karachi, but also far flung areas mostly unknown to the west – as a place and space where the human condition of struggle and enlightenment, pain and grace, are so clearly exemplified. Do you see your representations of individuals' inner lives as situating Pakistan differently from its overwhelming representation in western geopolitical terms in the global arena? And, what might be the result for western and Pakistani audiences who might read* People Want to Live*? For Pakistani English literary culture?*

I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan. I have always been writing, in my head or on paper. When I was a kid I filled pages with stories, and if I was doing something else, playing with my friends or doing schoolwork, I was making up stories in my head. And I was reading a lot, whatever I could find – Urdu magazines for children, abridged novels, unabridged novels. Probably very early on I found fiction, reading it and writing it, the ultimate place from which to understand the world and its people, as well as a place of incomparable rest. So, it is an instinct, a compulsion.

When I was writing these stories—which in no way were written with a design to turn them into a collection—the only thing I was thinking about was, "What does this person, in this story, really want?" That's what I always want to know, and looking into the causes of that want and the resulting actions of seeking fulfillment of it are what create—or show—the story to me. This is an exploration of the effects happening inside a person from causes both external (weather, riots, potholes, money) and internal (hunger, love, etc.). So maybe this has made the people in these stories multidimensional as opposed to the overly simplistic cause-and-effect way people from Pakistan are generally shown. And viewers and readers who look at Pakistan only through those simplifying, generalizing lenses are being willfully ignorant. If they want, they can find out more about these people,

their histories, the contexts of their actions. But I don't write to intentionally provide that context and deepen understanding. I write because I am curious about how people get by.

There are a lot of writers from Pakistan whose work is not centered around a particular lens, or around wondering whether they please or displease readers, or widen a western reader's understanding.

Can you offer some examples of such writers? Do you see them as part of a community that might challenge western and non-Pakistan perspectives about Pakistani culture and society?

Mahreen Sohail writes amazing fiction, as well as Hananah Zaheer and Dur-e-Aziz Amna. Iqra Khan and Hera Naguib are incredible poets. There are so many more. If they are challenging perceptions of Pakistan, it's not always intentionally done. But I want to add here that the west does not get to say that a culture is good or bad, backward or with the times. Whose times? From whose position of standing is it seemingly "backward"? The west can go on having perspectives about Pakistan and its culture and society, but we shouldn't have to worry about what they think of us. That's not a good place for writing to come from.

The first-person singular narrator who represents the voice of individual women or men whose educational and class statuses vary is key to many stories in People Want to Live. *You evoke these individual characters and the circumstances they represent with a very sharp eye, tracking how individual agency and choices are constrained by social circumstances. (As a non-Pakistani South Asian who came of age in India and lives in the United States, I found myself reading these stories and immediately recognizing and identifying with many of their experiences.) What does the choice of narrator mean for you in telling stories about contemporary Pakistan? In your imagining/craft, does the first-person narrator voice a culture, a place? Or, does it offer an intimacy that readers can enter and identify with? Can the first-person narrator alienate a reader, whether from the same or a different culture?*

I was surprised by the number of my stories that were in the first person. It all comes down to the right narrative distance, how much space is needed between the story being told and the protagonist. Sometimes, to me, it was a fine line between a close third person and first person. And where I really wanted to be in the very mind of the protagonist, where I wanted to see from their eyes, I chose the latter. Also, maybe where I wanted no distance between the things that were happening to the character and their immediate thoughts and reactions. So, it's more about choosing an extreme closeness with the narrator, and I think when we are readers of a first-person story we get pulled into that closeness as well. As for alienation, I think it might do the opposite. It does rely on a reader's willingness to let go of older notions and set ideas and inhabit that character for a few pages and go through a situation or a culture they're not familiar with. They could do the same in a close third-person story as well.

I understand that both narrative voices could offer similar degrees of intimacy and/or alienation depending on the reader's willingness to enter into communion with (characters in) a story. But, I do think that your use of the first-person voice elicits such a rich range of characters, fully exemplifying what a writer observing everyday life can point to — the sheer variety of human experience against forces over which, as you note earlier, humans have no control. When you say you were surprised, is it that you started out intending to write in a different voice, but as the plot developed, the voice automatically changed in your writing, or that you decided to change upon re-reading the story written in a different voice? What would you

tell emerging writers about how to approach the issue of narrative voice?

It happens both ways. Sometimes in the course of writing a story I feel that the third-person point of view is too far from the narrator and there needs to be no distance at all. I would tell emerging writers to be very patient with their stories and not to say, "Okay, this is close enough because we're tired now." Writing is hard, and finding the correct narrative distance between the protagonist and the one narrating the story takes time. So, if necessary, rewrite the entire thing in third person if it was in the first, or the other way around. And making those point of view changes requires other finer changes in how the story is told. It's not only about switching pronouns and names.

People Want to Live *is equitably divided among women and men protagonists and their experiences. It draws on urban dwellers quite considerably, reminiscent of other South Asian fictional works that deal with the different challenges for middle and poor classes in the current century. Urbanity—especially the city of Karachi—is central in many of the stories. Why is the city so central to your stories? Do you see Karachi or other Pakistani cities as different from their counterparts in the rest of South Asia, and, if so, how? Do you see these cities as different from western cities, apart from the obvious differences of global south / north difference?*

Karachi is a city that's in a constant state of movement in so many forms—noise, crowds, growth from migration, expressways, buildings. Living there, one has to adapt, for survival, to all that movement; go with it or around it; live with an infrastructure strained with under-budgeting. I grew up in Karachi, got my first job in Karachi, all the while noting the way people navigated their lives there. So, in many ways Karachi and its South Asian counterparts create a different sort of person because of a different set of necessities. You're not the same person there that you'd be elsewhere because you'd have certain basic concerns managed for you. And then even among similar-natured cities, there would be differences in behaviors that would show up in people because of the unique histories and present conditions of a particular city. For me, the force that Karachi exerts upon people is what kept showing up in the stories in this book.

Who do you consider your primary audience (the one in your head)? Do you see yourself in conversation with other South Asian writers in the diaspora, other Pakistani writers living in Pakistan? Collectively, do you see a shift in the kinds of issues that this new group of writers (age or immigration

So, in many ways Karachi and its South Asian counterparts create a different sort of person because of a different set of necessities. You're not the same person there that you'd be elsewhere because you'd have certain basic concerns managed for you. And then even among similar-natured cities, there would be differences in behaviors that would show up in people because of the unique histories and present conditions of a particular city. For me, the force that Karachi exerts upon people is what kept showing up in the stories in this book.

cohort) is interested in? Are the interests more a kind of individual in a changed society where colonial violence is no longer the interest/concern/influence? There is so little conversation about the political situation in Pakistan and much more about society and family and the insides of individuals' heads.

I think I see myself in conversation with the people in my book and with writers of fiction who might be dead or alive. And that conversation ranges from the how of writing a sentence to the how of unearthing a story, wherever in the world that story takes place. As for the general direction that work by Pakistani writers is taking now, there is a shift in the themes wrestled with and in the approach to addressing the effects of colonial violence—more and more, among short story writers, I see the latter is alluded to, or briefly mentioned, keeping the main focus of the narrative on the now of a protagonist.

Many stories in People Want to Live *focus on interiority or class relations, not specifically on politics (with the possible exception of "Heroes"). Although, like most stories from South Asian countries, politics is never far from everyday life, I was struck by how very much you turn to the non-political space as the generative space for a wonderful view of contemporary Pakistan that flies in the face of what the west expects to read about the country and its people.*

To this, I'll just add that I tend to write this way because I am fascinated by how people act and react to society, to expectations, to themselves. And embedded in those external and internal causes are the political and cultural histories of that place.

Finally, the Pakistani postcolonial literary canon (of course, a western creation) includes those who are mostly diasporic. These historical greats like Zulfikar Ghosh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri, Hanif Kureishi, Kamila Shamsie, and more recently Mohsin Hamid. Do you see your own move out of Pakistan (to Dubai), your writing in English as a different engagement with the type of postcolonialism that these other writers exemplify? So many writers remain unknown in the west or to the canon. What is your sense of the reason for this absence?

If I'd never moved out of Pakistan, I would have still written in English. I leaned toward writing in that language from a very early age. People whose lands and ancestors were once colonized can only move forward as an altered form, and produce art in that form and play out their politics and write their books and generally live their lives in that form. The legacy of unfair policies and practices by colonizers will keep showing up for some time in the words of Pakistani writers, whether they address it head on or choose to make it inconsequential; and even that choosing to make the colonizer trivial is a reaction. And these are things that writers get obsessed with solving and understanding, and that changes as new writers come on the horizon.

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What we're all doing is using the language and making it our own, altering the shape of it sometimes, or using it to tell stories a different way. What the west chooses to pick from our writing to hold up as examples is fine, but it doesn't reduce the value of other writers who have been writing for a long time. We should work on our own methods of getting to know them better ourselves.

I love your response! How does living in Dubai – a very multicultural place – shape further your decision to write (only) in English? How, in this case, does English help you to tell the story of Pakistan in a different way? How does the use of English "trivialize" (what a potent idea!) the power of the colonizer in your collection?

I write in English because it's a language that I enjoy writing in, irrespective of where I live. When I say using English to trivialize a colonizer's power, I mean that we own the language and we write our stories, poems and essays in it, to talk about our people and our cities.

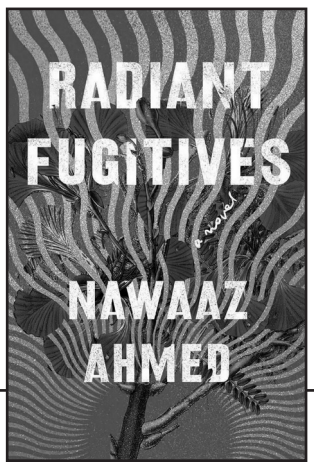
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PUTTING KEATS AND THE QURAN IN THE SAME SENTENCE

SRI CRAVEN



A Conversation with NAWAAZ AHMED



Nawaaz Ahmed was born and raised in Tamil Nadu, India. Ahmed's first degree is in computer science, and he worked for many years in the Bay Area researching search algorithms for Yahoo. Subsequently, he earned an MFA from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and turned to writing fiction full time. Ahmed is the recipient of residencies from MacDowell, VCCA, Yaddo, and Djerassi. His debut novel, Radiant Fugitives *(2021), was a finalist for the 2022 Pen/Faulkner Award and the Edmund White Award for Debut Fiction. It was longlisted for The Center for Fiction First Novel Prize and the Aspen Literary Prize, and received the Gina Berriault award. Ahmed currently lives in Brooklyn.*

Radiant Fugitives *is the subject of this interview. Here, Ahmed talks about the themes of religion, politics, sexuality, and race as inseparable facts of contemporary immigrant life in the United States, and that some of these themes might also find echoes in other cultures. The role of fiction in foregrounding these themes is at the heart of the conversation, and Ahmed speaks to fiction's refusal to offer easy solutions to issues of identity and selfhood.*

The novelist and columnist Kamila Shamsie, reviewing your novel Radiant Fugitives *in the* New York Times*, writes, "Ahmed … wants nothing less than to reshape the American novel." I don't disagree, but I'd argue that you might have just written the first full-fledged South Asian Indian lesbian novel, one in which women, women's bodies, women's relationships are central. The bodies are of mothers, sisters, lovers. The relationships are queer, heterosexual, interracial, maternal, sororal. Women's bodily attributes and functions – menstruation, sexual pleasure, illness, pregnancy, even death – are handled without reservation. You describe women's clothes in detail, eliciting sartorial pleasure, including that of the hijab, as a defining feature of women's experiences of themselves. Okay, what gives (I say this with a big smile)? Why a queer Muslim woman protagonist living in San Francisco, a political organizer, dealing with a pregnancy as a result of a previous relationship with an African American man, in a current relationship with a woman, whose mother (from India) and sister (from Texas) are at hand to help, but whose family is fractured as a result of her queerness?*

The answer to "what gives?" is that I didn't know that the novel would turn out that way when I set out to write it. It started with a single image that I woke up to one morning—two sisters having tea in an apartment in San Francisco, their mother pretending to sleep in the next room listening to their quarrel. I knew one of the sisters was pregnant, I knew the other sister was quite religious, and I knew there was a rift between the two sisters. I cannot answer where this image came from, but I was intrigued by the rift—could the difference in religious outlooks explain it fully or were there other factors? My own extended family has seen many such rifts, including relatives excommunicated from the family for marrying non-Muslims, but I never fully believed that there were no personal motives involved. We are human after all, and we are open to using any tool that will further our interests. I intended to explore the scenario initially as a novella, to be one of two novellas exploring Muslim identity in post 9/11 America. The other novella was to be about a fresh-off-the-boat Muslim man dealing with a crisis of faith as a result of his sexuality.

Why did I choose to make a novel of the story about the two sisters, instead of the one about the gay Muslim man, closer to my own experience? I can only say that I felt I knew these two women much better than I knew the gay man. (Also, James Baldwin had already treated faith and sexuality so masterfully in his *Go Tell It On The Mountain*.) Growing up I had been reared by and amongst many female cousins, and had been more comfortable in their company than the company of boys and men. I was that clichéd gay kid—small, non-masculine, and non-athletic—who played with dolls and miniature cooking equipment and games traditionally reserved for girls in 1970s-80s India, instead of engaging in the more masculine pursuits of cricket and hockey and other rough-and-tumble contact sports. I was the official taster haunting kitchens. I was the willing escort accompanying my female relatives on clothes-shopping sprees. I was the willing listener to their tales and dreams and complaints.

Even so, I couldn't commit to the novel until I "realized" that Seema was a lesbian. I did not want to write a novel with no major queer characters. The realization raised questions that I would have to answer: why did Seema marry a man, why was she single and pregnant at the start of the novel, etc.? These were questions that I could answer only by writing the book. The book became also about the choices we make and the forces and events that constrain them.

Many reviewers have commented on the link between politics and the complexity of family and love/desire in the novel. You quote and cite extensively from historical record – you

take on Obama's eventual complicity in war mongering, Howard Dean's message gone awry as a result of media slander. Seema works for the Kamala Harris campaign in the Bay Area, marries Bill at an Obama rally announcing the latter's Presidential candidacy. Seema identifies as lesbian, and Bill is aware of this and is her sole male lover. Seema is estranged from her father on account of her queer identity. Her sister, Tahera, is an observant Muslim, who is angry at Seema's power to dominate family concerns, and is struggling with accepting Seema's sexuality. Nafeesa, their mother, is caught between her feuding family members and an illness that is slowly killing her. Bill, who is African American, struggles with the discovery that his father was a Muslim convert Black Panther whom he never knew as a result of the father's death in prison. Your exploration of romantic and sexual love against the backdrop of U.S. American politics and in the context of family relationships puts you in line with many American novelists. What do you see your centering of the queer Muslim American Indian diasporic experience doing within American literature? Are there obvious influences for your exploration of politics/sex/family? Importantly, do you see your centering of the South Asian experience in queer Muslim womanhood a call to re-think Indian literature in the current moment?

I think my novel was more a call to rethink American literature. (I do like the Kamala Shamsie quote you mentioned in the previous question, with respect to this one!) The dearth of novels that actually included politics as one of their concerns seemed to me an oversight peculiar to American literature, considering how much our lives are governed by the outcomes of the political process, and how much our world-views are molded by them.

An entire country seemed to have participated in the presidential election of 2008: the voter turnout was the largest it had ever been until then. And so much was made of its outcome—America was deigned to have entered a post-racial period, with a majority-minority electoral populace that would go on to topple existing power structures. The resulting backlash was swift, with the meteoric rise of the Tea Party. Power is never readily handed over.

Of immediate interest to me was how this affected the two communities which I belonged to, which had become punching bags during and after the elections, the LGBT and Muslim communities. The Proposition 8 ballot initiative had enshrined LGBT discrimination in the California constitution, with similar initiatives being pushed aggressively in other states. And protests had sprung up across the country against the construction of the so-called Ground Zero mosque, with states beginning to vote on ballot measures banning the use of Sharia law in courts, whipped up by the hysteria that Islam was poised to infiltrate America. There was no way I could conceive of my characters, especially Seema and Tahera, being ignorant of and unaffected by these drives. Neither of them is a stranger to feeling overrun by

The Proposition 8 ballot initiative had enshrined LGBT discrimination in the California constitution, with similar initiatives being pushed aggressively in other states. And protests had sprung up across the country against the construction of the so-called Ground Zero mosque, with states beginning to vote on ballot measures banning the use of Sharia law in courts, whipped up by the hysteria that Islam was poised to infiltrate America.

a patriarchal world, though they respond to the lack of power differently. Tahera seeks refuge in her work, family, and faith, hoping that these will keep her protected, while Seema feels she needs a seat at the table to gain some measure of control over her life.

Let's talk about your choice of narrator. An unborn and, later, newly born child – Ishraaq, meaning "radiance" as the novel notes – narrates the novel. He – your choice of pronoun is clear – is born of a queer woman, is Muslim, Christian, Black, South Asian Indian. He draws the map of the characters' relationships and rifts, their backstories and actions. What is the hope with a narrator who as a consciousness is impossible outside of fiction? Why a boy born of a woman who does not survive? Some might argue that the death of the queer Muslim woman who steps outside the boundaries of culture and religion is problematic.

When I set out to write the novel, I gave myself a few directives—it should move with the power of poetry and it should include the universe. Poetry, because I started with poetry as a writer, and I am always impressed with the quickness with which it moves and admire the spaces it opens for the readers to inhabit. Poetry and the universe, because the voice that arrived along with the vision of the three women sounded like a poet-prophet. Initially I did not know who that voice belonged to—it seemed too authoritative to be the voice of any of three women.

I began the novel assuming the voice to be authorial omniscience. But I found myself and my feelings (being at the receiving end of both Islamophobia and homophobia) getting in the way. I could not find sufficient distance from the three main characters to treat them all objectively. So I cast around for a specific consciousness that could provide me the distance. When I hit upon Seema's newborn baby as a narrator it felt right. A newborn baby is curious and open, eager to learn about the universe he's entering. And being innocent, he is still untainted by preconceptions and prejudices. He would treat all the characters, including America, with kindness and gentleness. Through the discovery of the events that led to his mother's death, I envisioned him growing into the voice of a poet-prophet by the end of the novel. When I had to choose a name for him, I chose Ishraaq, to capture the hopes of a new beginning.

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The baby arrived masculine. My own conditioning by patriarchy surely has a role here, which is ironic in a novel that also seeks to critique patriarchal structures. I let the irony stand, as something for a reader to contend with—an enactment of patriarchy. I, a male writer, was giving voice to these three women, and I did not want my novel to pretend otherwise.

Did Seema have to die? I'm very aware of the trope of punishing the character who transgresses. I can only justify the death narratively—the baby needs an urgent and pressing reason to set out on his voyage of discovery, and how better to explore the random and unpredictable ways of the universe?

And, now, language! It is safe to say that I haven't read a novel that so fully imagines what bilingualism looks like from the vantage point of Urdu and Islam. The many, many instances where you use Urdu words, words and phrases from the holy Quran, at times without English translation, captures the experiences of devout Muslims and unsettles the English language reader. Your use of Urdu not only centralizes Muslims in Indian culture, but also recalls its rich history in South Asian literature before, during, and after colonialism. (In fact, alongside John Keats's poetry, which Seema and Tahera recite, and Tahera reads voraciously, Urdu also seems to remind us of the contact of cultures that makes up contemporary life.) Does your use of Urdu, and an Urdu so intimately connected to Islam, unsettle the idea of "Indian English," which in literature and everyday life usually borrows from other Indian languages? And, of American literature, where Urdu joins Spanish and indigenous American languages to challenge the imperialist hold of English?

The way I was looking at the book was to centralize Islam and Indians in American culture. The novel is set in America against a backdrop of American politics, describing events and a period that most Americans would be very familiar with. I wanted to take something in the margins and place it squarely in a setting and context undeniable as current America. I wanted to foreclose the possibility of readers dismissing the America the novel depicts as fictionalized. I dared the readers to read this Indian Muslim family as a fictionalized other when the family is clearly situated here and impacted by the central thrust of American politics.

I wanted the language of the novel to serve a similar function. Urdu, Arabic, and English are placed side by side, as are the Quran, Urdu ghazals, Keatsian poetry, and Obama's speeches. Towards the end of the novel, I wanted the reader to not be able to distinguish where the language and content is borrowed from, creating a kind of fusion of language and worldview. Keats and the Quran are quoted in the same sentence without attribution, and an entire surah of the Quran is woven into the flow of the novel.

Let's talk about the types of Muslim families in the novel. Naeemulla (the father) is a physician and with Nafeesa lives an upper middle-class family in Chennai, a city notorious for Hindu Brahmin supremacist culture. The parents may be described as less orthodox but normative in terms of ideas about sexuality and family. Tahera lives an upper middle-class life with her techie husband and their son and daughter in Texas, a state known for a rich population of immigrants in a conservative Christian state. Their family is deeply involved in the mosque and with practicing a more rigorous form of Islam, and their son, especially, is struggling with inchoate anger at American Islamophobia. Seema is divorced from Bill, and pregnant with their child. Her partner, Leigh, is "half Chinese, half Irish." Her closest friends include lesbian exes and a gay man. Seema has broken away from religious faith, but retains a respect for language and culture. Are these families meant to render Islam and Muslim culture just like any other—polyphonic and dissenting rather than unified and stifling? Is there a message in it for younger generations of readers both Muslim and otherwise about a new way of imagining Islam, and, therefore, the post-9/11 global order?

There are definitely families and characters with many different stances towards Islam in my book. While I did keep in mind Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's warnings about the dangers of "the single story" and didn't want my novel to contribute to a reductive representation of Muslims (as if there wasn't enough of it already), the polyphony that you see in the novel I think stems from my desire to explore how we come to hold the

beliefs we end up holding, how different these beliefs can be even within members of the same family, and what pressures they exert on the shape of our lives.

I do not explicitly spell it out in the book, but the form of Islam that Tahera practices is very different from the Islam more commonly practiced in India. More than just being rigorous, it is also more Arabized, stemming from an increased influence of Saudi Arabia all over the Muslim world. For example, the phrases Tahera uses are Arabic phrases she would not have used growing up in India. Her marriage to Ismail is definitely a factor in this change, Ismail having come to Islam after moving to the United States, finding community at his local mosque in Texas.

That her mother, Nafeesa, is not very observant, even though Nafeesa's sister Halima is, can also be attributed to marriage—in this case to Naeemullah, whose love for the cultural artifacts of British colonialism (especially romanticism) is surely a factor in his stance towards Islam. As opposed to Tahera, her aunt Halima practices a more Indianized Islam, with her visits to the shrines of various Sufi saints in order to pray for a child, which would be frowned upon by Tahera. It's not a coincidence that Halima is more accepting of Seema's queerness than Tahera is. So, when Seema confronts Tahera's son, Arshad, on the Golden Gate bridge with, "Do we all have to live the same lives? Do we all have to pray the same way?," she is also, I think, referring to the new ways in which Muslims can be separated into good and bad Muslims.

Of course, the same scene also brings up who is considered a good/unproblematic Muslim in the eyes of the secular West, especially in a post 9/11 world—in Arshad's joke "a Muslim who uses swear words and drinks wine and eats pork." Arshad's faith and way of life are prescribed by his parents, but the Islamophobia he experiences could very well lead him to adopt a more political stance. It has been noted that communities that have been subject to pressure from the outside experience increased identification with their ethnic and religious groups.

And, finally, that stunning conclusion: "Coda," the last section of the novel is a series of vignettes about people caught in circumstances beyond their control, which they negotiate differently. The "radiant fugitives" – Ishraaq, radiance, the rays of the rising sun – are but "our shadows" who remind us that in this vast universe where we have so little control over anything, "perhaps we too can – ." The evocation of Obama's campaign slogan, that of philosophers, physicists, and poets is clear. It is, however, not clear if Ishraaq also dies alongside Seema, or if he chooses to take that first breath outside his mother's body that the doctors and his father, grandmother, and aunt are all desperately waiting for. He is clear that "by some grace [he has] been given the power to choose whether. . . to enter this world, or, by holding [his] breath, forsake it." Wow. Shamsie ends her review by writing that the novel's power is its reminder that we are not at all in control of what happens in our lives, and that Americans would do well to heed it. Your thoughts on that sentiment, and on the power of saying "we can" even if it means choosing to not live? There's something profoundly important here from a philosophical standpoint that might engage death more positively.

The question of how much control we have over our lives is something the novel grapples with right from the very first page. The newborn baby complains at the very outset that he's expected to welcome the world by taking a breath. He wishes he had the choice to hold his breath and prolong his connection to his dead mother, the oxygen flowing through him still being the oxygen that once flowed through his mother's body. The fact that the connection remains through the narration of the novel is not, unfortunately, due to any act of willpower, but because his "lungs refuse to

cooperate." The moment the umbilical cord was severed a reflexive trigger should have forced him to take his first breath. That it doesn't is "as if," as he says in the line you're quoting from the end of the novel, "by some grace I've been given the power to choose whether I wish to enter this world or, by holding my breath, forsake it." But he knows it's wishful thinking. Very soon he'll ask, "What real chance did I have?" One way to read the ending is that even if the baby wishes then to live so he can partake of the world, even one that led to his mother's death, the choice is not his to make. And this, as you've noted, is juxtaposed against Obama's campaign slogan: Yes, we can. Obama bases this slogan in "a basic optimism about life and a faith in free will—a confidence that through pluck and sweat and smarts, each of us can rise above the circumstances of our birth" (*The Audacity of Hope*). The novel I think doesn't outright deny the slogan, it merely questions the certainty implied in its construction. "Yes, we can," if the forces that govern the world will allow us, and these forces are mostly beyond an individual's control. The coda, as you've aptly pointed out, is a series of vignettes of people caught in circumstances beyond their control. They do get to respond in their own ways, but perhaps even these responses have been conditioned by "our environment, our upbringings, our histories."

What then to make of life, if we have little control over its contours? I end the novel on an image of beauty—we are shadows cast on fog, circumscribed within a fogbow, even if this image is not fully our own construction and depends on external factors for its existence (a source of light positioned correctly and the physics of light and small particles). If nothing else, we can at least play a part in the creation of such beauty. But the narrator has by then become wary of definitive statements, so he hedges: ". . . *perhaps* we too can—"

Thank you so much.

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ASHA

FEROZA JUSSAWALLA


Sonia Argarwal

Asha means hope. Asha is a name. With what *asha* or hope had Asha requested help from a faraway women's rights agency in New Delhi when she was here in the Rocky Mountain Southwest of the United States? And how had they found me in this faraway and distant country as I sat in my office, an English professor, in the last days of the semester, deleting e-mails?

There was one from a prestigious university on the West Coast with the subject line of "Hello." Wow, I thought! I must be well known! It is a plea for help from *Manaswini,* a women's rights advocacy organization in the Bay Area. *Manaswini* is yet another common Indian name, just like Asha, but it is also an adjective. In Marathi, it simply means "intense, dedicated, one who carries out tasks ferociously."

M-a-n-aswini, in the plural, means "women with generous hearts." In Hindu mythology, Manaswini was a servant of Parvathi, the consort of Lord Shiva. The goddess Parvathi was annoyed that Manaswini had had the gall to breastfeed Parvathi's baby, Vinayaka, known to us as Ganesha, the obstacle-removing God. *Om Ganapathiye namaha*, I pray. Parvathi had cursed Manswini to the life of an outcast. But Manaswini was reborn as Koovalika, the "Beautiful Voiced One." When Lord Shiva heard her voice as he hunted in the forest, he was attracted to Koovalika, who, having learned her lesson from Parvathi once, stayed away from him. She did not want to be the twice cursed one. Perhaps this is what had happened to the good little Brahmin girl, Asha. Had she been reborn to bear the brunt of abuse in a foreign land? Or was she cursed now that she had crossed the Seven Seas? As a Brahmin, she should have been the twice born one—protected.

According to mythology, Brahmins have been born twice as humans in the Karmic cycle, meaning therefore that they are sinless. But they lose their Brahminhood once they cross the Seven Seas! Having crossed the seas, Asha must have lost her twice born-ness, her protection! Hopefully though, she was gaining wisdom.

According to mythology, Brahmins have been born twice as humans in the Karmic cycle, meaning therefore that they are sinless. But they lose their Brahminhood once they cross the Seven Seas! Having crossed the seas, Asha must have lost her twice born-ness, her protection! Hopefully though, she was gaining wisdom.

Indian women, though, even the wise ones, don't seem to have much wisdom about men. Maitreyi, the Indian equivalent of Sophia, found that wisdom is no guarantee of marital happiness or protection. Perhaps we give too much of ourselves to either the espoused ones—or to those we fall in love with. Maitreyi, the wise and scholarly one, fell in love enough to want to be added on as a second wife to the sage Yajnavalkya. How can you fall in love with someone so much that you want to become a second wife? Did Yajnavalkya have so much wisdom, Maitreyi, that he tempted you into becoming subordinate to another wife, a wife second to Katyayani, the many armed Durga, the powerful one? And what does it say of the most powerful woman of ALL mythology, Katyayani, to acquiesce to a second wife? Women, where is our strength or our wisdom? We are just ordinary humans, *manushi,* the ordinary ones, the human Buddhas, *manushi*, the embodiment of all humanity. Yet somehow, even our ordinariness is one of subordinariness, or should I say subordinateness. Manaswini, Maitreyi, Manushi, my god! These are the names of women I should be emulating, names that run through my head as I deal with the notion of rescuing Asha's little bit of hope and play mindlessly on the word *Asha*, hope, *Usha*, dawn, names we heard every day on the playground on the subcontinent. They have become a series of Hindu goddesses invoked by women who need protection from wife beaters! Interestingly, the e-mail to me is from a "*Mukta*." *Freedom.* Is that her real name, or one assumed to help these women beaten in "*phoren*," this land overseas?

Asha is a village girl from the remotest of villages in Bihar. She is thin and wiry, light-skinned and fresh-faced, and clambers into my 1994 white Toyota Camry with one missing hubcap. I can barely see her face in the seven o'clock darkness, which is just light enough to cause shadows across her face from the giant cottonwoods in Netherwood Park. It is an aristocratic, declining, university neighborhood filled now mostly with foreign students and young people in general. The people of the big houses have moved to the northeastern part of the city, or to the edge of the wood in Edgewood!

I receive a call from Bharati, a graduate student to whom I've passed on the e-mailed request from the women's rights agency in the Bay Area. They said that a young woman had come newly from India. She was in an arranged marriage and was being badly beaten-up by a student on our campus. For a young village girl who spoke no English, she had shown surprising sophistication. She called a women's rights organization in New Delhi. They contacted their affiliate on the U.S. West Coast. Her jaw had been broken. Her head had been banged against the wall. She'd been neglected and left without food in the house for days on end!

Now, we just needed to get her some food.

Her husband, however, is not a villager. Ajay was born and raised in America in a strict Bihari Hindu family. He'd gone to high school and college in a sophisticated, artsy community. He is acculturated, he smokes dope, he still dates. When in a pinch, he runs to his parents' home in the nearby fashionable town, a resort for Hollywood film stars wanting to get away from California. She tells us all this as we are driving her around that night. I have a conference paper to prepare, a bag to pack, an early flight to take to another country. What is worse is that I've just come down from a silent retreat in the mountains and have no desire to deal with her problems! She wants me to listen to her story, but I simply pass her on to a graduate student with more immediate sympathy for her cause. I don't want to be bothered. I have a paper to do on Muslim women's rights: The right to stay veiled in the interest of keeping their indigeneity—their right to freedom of religion. I want to argue this case in America and in Canada! I don't want to mess with this wife beating! Her immediate right to and insistence on being heard is irritating me!

But all this evokes a memory. I remember standing in my Aunt's flat on Altamont Road, just above Kemp's Corner, and looking across the street at the large, spacious, fancy, new, flat where a *marwari* (money lender) beat his wife regularly! I watched him do it! He wrapped her hair around the palm of his hand and banged her head against the wall, which, unlike these flimsy American walls, was not made of sheetrock and plywood, but brick. Everybody heard her screams. The *darzi* (tailor) downstairs never batted an eye! He went on stitching, pumping his Usha sewing machine. Surely it didn't make so much noise that he didn't hear her. But I heard her. I heard her over the clamor of the claptrap lift, with those mesh metallic doors you scrunched together and pulled apart and that you had to bang to get the door shut enough that the lift could work! That's when I had refused to have an arranged marriage, even with anyone coming from abroad! "No way," I had said, to my mother's great chagrin. "But our Parsi boys are not like that," my mother would say! But my brother was! I had gotten used to joking about the family's bad temper, which, I realize as I get older was learned behavior. And that aunt? One day, in her old age, as she was yelling at her Goan "boy" (hired help), he brutally murdered her in her rickety flat.

What is that about Indian people allegedly being non-violent and saintly? I read in New Age magazines about Indians being non-violent followers of Gandhi, and of such practices as Reconciliation Day having started in India! We all grew up beating our servants and yelling at them! We lose our tempers and yell at people all the time—colleagues, clerks, caretakers! It is the Indian way. Non-violent India, they say in New Age churches. Besides, non-violent spirituality in India is for the rich and the Beatles. That is not to say that we servant-keepers are from wealthy backgrounds. In India, there were always folks, down to the lower middle-class, that had servants.

Asha wants to call her parents! I also want her to call her parents. I want to put her on the next flight back to them! I don't want to be bothered with this. She tells us her husband has confiscated her passport and the return ticket her parents had given her in the hope that

she would come home for her pregnancy! It is false imprisonment, I think. But she wants to stay in this prison. She refuses to call the police when she is beaten.

I thought I had been called out for a fifteen-to-twenty-minute grocery shopping trip. But Asha wants to talk. We drive her around hoping to avoid being seen by her husband, who, ironically, had just driven into the driveway as we had pulled away. *Dekho, Dekho voh a gaya!* What timing! He's abandoned her for a week and shows up at just that moment, when we are getting her some food? Or, has he been somewhere near enough to be spying on her? He has seen her getting into our car and starts following us. It is hard to hide a white car in the darkening night. We duck into a hospital parking lot, a classroom building parking lot here, the shadow of a tree there. *Dekho dekho, voh buhra Toyota men a ra ha hay! Buhra!* For God's sake what does *Bhura* mean? Is it grey? Is it brown? It is one of those colors they call "cashmere beige" on the lots! Trembling, and with sweaty palms, I manage to merge in with all the cars in the emergency room parking lot!

I tell her it is important to call the police and file a case. She understands this. This is why she wants to stay in America. She doesn't want to go home. She'll be beaten up even more, even by her parents and her community. She is afraid of immigration. She doesn't want to be sent back. I explain to her that the state we live in is an immigrant-friendly state. I have no way of saying that in Hindi. I simply keep saying "immigrant friendly, immigrant friendly." I'm not sure she understands about Hispanics and border states. Police cases are not reported to immigration. Immigrants are protected from any torture or false imprisonment. My Hindi is getting

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shakier and shakier on the legal terms. Her Hindi is some sort of Bihari-Punjabi sounding one. I am using words like *darwaza* (door), which are more Urdu and less Hindi. *Darwaza bandh kar ke soyeh.* Well, dammit, I think! The doors are just as flimsy here! No door is any protection.

Bharati offers Asha her own cell phone to call her parents. Bharati even dials the number that Asha is calling out to her. "Keep it on your memory," I tell Bharati, "just in case we have to call the parents with bad news." But the parents have bad news for Asha: "Stay there," they say in Hindi.

"You've got to make a go of it!" *Ma-an* she wails, calling for her mother. *Yoh nahin ban saktha!* "All men beat their wives," the parents say! "It'll stop in a few years! We've all gone through this," the mother says! *Voh dusri aurat ke sat so raha hay.* I'm waiting for her to get off the phone to her ask if this is an American woman he is sleeping

with. And then comes the shocker: *voh dusri din admi ke sath bhi so raha tha. Ek kala admi.* Bharati had said that to me. She once opened her bedroom door and found him sleeping with a man! A man? Now this complicated matters. *Kala admi.* From what she is saying, I understand that her outrage is not just that he was sleeping with a man, but a Black one at that. Indian taboos! She is light-skinned, a premium in the marriage market in India! Her parents paid a $20,000 dowry with which her husband bought the house in Netherwood Park, to get her to *Amrika*!, seeing that as a passport to freedom, a good life. They don't want her back. They want her to claim the house!

It has been a long time since I have been involved in anything like this. I've been in America for thirty years, mostly in small town America, where Indians are few and far between. I've been used to feeling discriminated against, used to having to defend what a great people and what a great civilization we are, what contributions we make to American society. Honestly, I'm beginning to think WHY are these *jungli* people here? But Ajay has been raised in America and is a successful young man. I want to blame his parents. I want to yell at them. How could you do that? Why did you send him to India to have an arranged marriage? But perhaps it is for just that? To cover up his penchant for male relationships?

A couple of days later, I get a call from Bharati. The call is urgent: "PLEASE get the police over here fast!" Asha had run over to the nextdoor neighbor, and Mike, their neighbor, had finally called the police. But they're unresponsive. It is not an emergency. Mike's had it with her running over to his house. But this is what we had told her to do. We had told her that Americans are generous. She can get help when she needs it. She can go to the neighbor. I am a neighborhood association president. Should I use all my pull to get the police over there fast? Do I want to go there? Bharati, herself a domestic violence survivor, strains to help her.

American police usually don't go out to domestic violence calls in a hurry. In our Southwestern Hispanic cultures, there is a T-shirt called the "wife beater!" It is a baggy, mesh shirt, usually with some sports team logo and number, gang attire banned in the schools. The police here are used to wife beaters! "These things blow over," they say. No point in wasting scarce manpower. In India, police wouldn't even get near a domestic squabble! It is the right of the husband to beat his wife. This is what the Wife Beater tells the Sergeant when questioned. With my one phone call, they have gotten there within a few minutes, and in those few minutes Asha has undone all our work and protection and time spent on her. She instantly denies all. It is her fault; she has made her husband mad. These women, whom she met one day while walking in the university neighborhood, are causing trouble in her marriage. They are something—they call themselves feminists, some trouble like that. Bharati, myself, and Mike the nextdoor neighbor, we are all embarrassed. "This is the usual pattern," the police say.

The Hindu Temple Society is having a *puja*, an Indian occasion, everyone goes—Parsis, Sikhs, everyone! After the *puja* is done, I see a beautiful young woman dressed in yellow chiffon *gharara, kurta,* and *odhni* in the village style, pinned at her head! She holds her head

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up high, but looks angry and annoyed. Could that be her, I wonder. Is that the same person I picked up in the dark? I want to go up and ask her, but I avoid her. I wonder if she recognizes me. Her husband eyes me suspiciously.

Asha continues to deny calling anyone. It is all our fault; feminists trying to influence her marriage! Asha refuses any responsibility for anything. She is scared and I am annoyed. I think of myself leaving India at age seventeen—refusing to get married, refusing to put up with abuse that is so common, refusing to put up with the men all around, getting the hell out of there! I think, to myself, about Asha: if you had the sophistication to call that women's rights agency in Delhi, you have the guts to own up to your own need for freedom. But Asha is more concerned about her material well-being—the money, the house, the security of this marriage—even if that comes at the cost of beatings. She wants class. Status. Pride. We feminists have just become a nuisance. We are coming in there and breaking up her good marriage and her opportunity to make it in America!

Asha has just darkened her own new dawn, *Usha*. She would rather have her comforts and a few broken jaws. Freedom not needed. And the prestige in India of being the "*phoren* returned visitor!" Her hope of becoming American, her hope and wish in general, has chains.

Feroza Jussawalla is professor emerita at the University of New Mexico. She is the author of *Family Quarrels: Towards a Criticism of Indian Writing in English* (Peter Lang, 1984), one of the earliest works on what would become postcolonial theory. She has edited or co-edited *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* (Mississippi, 1999); *Interviews with Writers of the Postcolonial World* (Mississippi, 1997); *Memory, Voice and Identity: Muslim Women's Writing from Across the Middle East* (Routledge, 2021); and *Muslim Women's Writing from Across South and Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2022), among others. She is also the author of the poetry collection *Chiffon Saris* (2002).

Feroza Jussawalla

My Very Special Birthday Cake

For HHD, born on his mother's birthday


Hamid Roshaan

Out of my anesthetic fog, a nurse, who was once my student—
Wakes me, in Memorial General Hospital, Las Cruces.

"Wake up, your baby needs to be fed!" Waking, I crave a feeding too.
Nothing made sense but the pain: Incoherent, I hold a very tiny bundle,
A semian creature, hirsute, eyes shut tight, hands too tiny to hold. I clutch it in fear,
"My birthday cake," I say, fearful it will melt away like an ice cream cake.
Chilled and cold, I try to warm it. It's been a long thirty-six weeks,
commuting, fasting, fighting, thus, and yet, not cooked right. Too premie to be.
But we try. Trembling both of us. I tremble still, at the thought of us.
And even as I hold you, there is not yet a cry. The memory makes me tremble even
today, as I write. "Tremble, tremble. . . "
A birthday, sans cake, thirty-nine years ago, one neither of us was supposed to survive.

The last I remembered, I had woken up in confusion on my birthday
Cramps, vomiting, confusion, a husband who goes to
Walgreens to get a cheap stethoscope to check for a heartbeat,
instead of calling for help. As I call for help, a nurse who has never believed me,
tries to assure me that I should try for a natural birth, hang in there—
as I lay dying. Finally, a doctor relents—

We go to the hospital just in time, and as they triage, all monitors go off
Ding, ding, ding, the baby's heart beat is in distress. An ultra sound shows
an umbilical cord, ever tightening around the neck of a tiny creature in distress,
trying to free itself: squirming: every squirm, threatening to cut its breath.

An emergency cesarean frees him, like a shark, a dolphin, a whale, caught
in a fisherman's net, strangling, when the original impulse had been
to peek out and see the world, like a little mermaid wanting to explore the new world.

And yet my mother life-line, the umbilical cord, kept tightening the noose,
as it still does, thirty-nine years later,
as you shunt aside the placenta, and reach for the wonder you always yearned.
Sometimes, I wonder, wonder. . . the infinite pain, yet joy of mother-love.

How you kick your way out of my life,
like you kicked your way out of my womb.
That memory, I will treasure,
of giving you life and liberty, . . .
as I hope you "behold" your mother
"Woman behold your son." John 19:26

What does freedom mean?

It is seventy five years for my birthland,
and almost seventy for my birth—
I ask myself, what have we accomplished
Motherland and I?

We have survived the years
of violence and trauma,
our individual struggles
for freedom and independence
repeated birth pangs and trauma
and yet we rise again and again,
Phoenix like.

But the poor remain poor
and I remain poor-in-spirit.
Unable to get past the trauma,
of the suddenly sprung
freedom of divorce.

freedom to write,
that which I had yearned for—

Bharat mata uncovered
the palimpsests of colonialisms,
layer upon layer,
Aryan, Moghul British—

She rises,
as I have, from
disasters, deaths and divorces
from colonizers.

Each of which seems to bring
new *Amrit kalash*
nectar from the heavens,
dripping through the full moons
venerated
from the Himalayas
to Cape Comorin.

Though separated by distance and time
Motherland and I
remain somehow together—
limping towards
our aims and goals
our hearts desires
even as the ages of the sages
turn and
Kalabhairav eats our time,
we strive somehow to break from his shackles,
and reach for new horizons,
new dawns.

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Jaspal Kaur Singh

editions and insurrections

sometimes I wake up and wonder
which city am I in?

diasporic septuagenarian—
homes in disparate spaces

bicontinental and transcultural
flightless bird like Dodo

lost visions of food, experiences
of taste, remembering in fragments,

recreating long gone sensations,
overdramatizing old textures and senses

heightened aromas
enhanced sensual desires

to connect with descendants
I recreate nostalgia of hybrid spices

detached from the real
to overwhelm taste buds

and so I say to my American daughter—
the diaspora does it better!



Zakariae Daoui, Unsplash

gray under black

here: loud assertive voices
spiced curries and chutneys
segregated domestic spaces
fear of failures
sweeping tales under carpets
sickness and aging
smell of aches and pains
alternative faces
morning meditations to forget
quick fleeting days
tongue scorching green and red chilies
cooking and cleaning until fingers numb

age, they say, is just mathematics
but not *here*, where each moment
reminds me of quick passing days
months, years, lifetimes

here: sepia gray
is hidden under black
where frenzied activities
are festivities and celebrations
where gender roles
are reimagined and reasserted
where renewals are seen as betrayals
where all things submit
to the transcendental signifier
there: vibrancy was once allowed
loud laughter and jokes by women
were seen as barely sinful—
not an attempt to dismantle
patriarchal constructs—

here: all must return to a sense
of false normalcy and modesty
extra ghee & coarsely ground spices
bright handmade silks southseapearls
temples and shame in closed closets
hiding secrets of pulsating bodies

so, the patriarchy can rest. *in peace.*

mountain goat: *mutare*

Living in a first world bubble for decades
Living only to see the glitter and glamor
Living to avoid poverty and pain
Living to reach individual goals and ambitions
Living to leave pain of scarcity and hunger behind
Living to actuate my potential through knowledge
Living to reach equality of class, race, gender

Ignoring the third world in the first world
Ignoring disenfranchisements of BIPOC people
Ignoring nuances and intersections of gender disparities
Ignoring blatant racism and classism of family and friends
Ignoring implicit and explicit biases towards me
Ignoring paternalism and veiled slights towards minorities
Ignoring feelings of shame and collusions at privileges

I become complicit in the belly of the beast
I become knowledgeable in avoiding accusations of exploitation
I become uneasy and discontent, unable to leave
I become an alienated and displaced individual at home
I become isolated and alone in a crowded metropolis
I become vaccinated while the world hungers for meds
I become angry while violence against Blacks and BIPOC mounts

I pledge awaking consciousness and resistance
I pledge continuation of unlearning internalized colonialism
I pledge exorcising sexism and elitism
I pledge nourishing of identity within community
I pledge working for all human and more-than-human rights
I pledge to become part of the solution for the earth
I pledge caring for future generations through sharing authenticities

I will disrupt and unsettle received notions of BIPOC and the environment.
I will continue to teach and reach and create links with all.

# of paths and homes

sometimes, life flows
& paths are created
or does one create them?

from far, horizons beckon
fall colors, vintage home
a glow in the cold island
an ancient building:

or, surrounded by forests,
a small cottage by the hills
windows overlooking
twittering birds and rain:

do I follow one or the other?
one is for others—
interconnections with generations
immediate and in far lands

one for introspection
of last days on earth
of memories and legacies
and intergenerational reflections—

when the path
of fall leaves emerges—

do I venture further
to find the golden
do I fly to the cold
of dreams and further seeking
or do I seek ancestral linkages
continue to wander the earth in search of the lost?
in search of home?

marking body and home

If I take away imprints *of your footsteps*
from my heart and psyche
will my body be
a clean sheet to rewrite as I please?
footsteps of conquest
footsteps of imposed tongues
footsteps of new learnings?

how do we erase memories
and decades of reeducation—
of hope and alien nightmares—
of New Delhi after our displacement from birthplace—
of Lajpat Nagar where we first arrived from Rangoon—
of Rajouri gardens where we found a small space—
of Wazirpur by railroad tracks where we built a yellow house on donated land

for all 10 of us, a bedsheet partition between beds?
how do I erase my aunt's tortured cries
at night as she pointed to her vagina
labia and clitoris removed due to cancer
becoming split in splintered land?
how do I erase the memories of her words
of lost home and countries?

how do I erase my brother's voice threatening uncle not to touch us?
erase the memory of us sleeping on stringed cots
sheets soaked with tap water to keep cool in hot Delhi nights
while marauders gazed and whistled at our bodies
from flat roofs—as the loo blew over Indo-Gangetic plains
turning the nights into half slumbers?

can I erase memories of hunger after long days
in Delhi buses to come home to empty dishes and pots
erase decades of displacement and missteps
become whole in the land of fragmented dreams
by raking across my body as sand in Japanese gardens
daily becoming renewed in shattered land?

or do I collect them all in my old hands
cradle like baby pigeons and
feed them morsels with fingers of *henna*?
make them over and pin them with pearls
and fake diamonds, gently release them
on the empty spaces of my page
and let them dance to new footsteps?

provide them with a new song
one re-remembered from childhood haunts
in the misty cherry mountains of Taunggyi
the Shan hills gleaming in the evening sun
the white crow lake glimmering like fresh goat's milk
the bamboo village filled with Shan and Pa Oh people
minding cows in strawberry and paddy fields like gautam

as we make our way to the village after
swimming in the Ho Pong Yethwet water holes
our young bodies drying on warmed rocks
Ma and Maci cooking on log fires
eating fried tofu with sweetened Burmese tea?
will these erase the Delhi days
and desert nights of diasporic roaming

with strangers and politicians—
their hungry greedy
hands on our young ignorant bodies,
our minds, our hearts forever altered,
our minds forever contaminated?

four sisters in our ancestral home, our mulk,
four sisters sent by parents to return home,
four sisters told to study and be Indianized,
four sisters gazing at towers of Qutb Minar
four sisters seeking meaning in hybrid locales
four sisters feeding on cold tandoori roti and dal
four sisters cast adrift with a young brother

three sisters crossed over,
while, I, in used cars and used homes,
remained *the last* to join the circus
in the west, driving an old Chrysler voyager

to modern malls, selling American dreams
imbibing subliminal images, wearing high heels
and garish make up, burning lustrous black hair
with acid and chemicals and rollers
dying to own a suburban home with a white picket fence
to feel polished and artificially sparkling

but also: the first to leave the mirage
the first to recreate, the first to rewrite
the first to be reviled, the first to be called a fallen woman
the first to have men in the family make secret passes
molested and mauled in dark corners and in plain sight

to cajole, to threaten, to beg, to give of my untethered
sexuality, as if it is for free if it doesn't belong to a man
there, in the lost land, rewriting dreams and logic//
home becomes a story to tell
home becomes a puffed roti
home becomes a tealeaf laphet tot salad
home becomes a gitanjali

in tropical forests and in Shan mountains
in limpid pools and water holes in valleys
in desert and arid ancestral lands//

here, I grab a fistful of words
from estranged and lost languages
stir them with the imposed idiom
cardamom, cinnamon *and* chili

and create a footpath to my (own) home.



Jaspal Kaur Singh, professor emerita, Northern Michigan University, teaches English Literature at Oregon State University. Her monographs, anthologies, and poetry books include *Representation and Resistance: Indian and African Women Writers at Home and in the Diaspora* (Calgary, 2008), *Violence and Resistance in Sikh Gendered Identity* (Routledge, 2020), and *Exiles and Pleasures: Taunggyi Dreaming* (Finishing Line Press, 2023) among others. Jaspal was born and raised in Burma, lived in India and Iraq, and now resides in Portland, Oregon.

Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt

Spaces


Peter Lindner

Burning bones heaped in piles
over the ignited pyre
an outburst waiting to happen.

Worn and tired bodies
like trunks of trees
being cut into gigantic halves.

Naked children at the edge of the Ganges
tossing the tainted wreaths
of the dead.

Everything has dissolved
leaving barely any traces of recovery
as the burning wood turns to dust.

Another new pyre is ignited
smoke rising up in the air like chariots
to carry the souls of the dead.

Wild swans fly overhead
as gaps grow larger
only to get closer.

until that day

the voice is coming back
the face is coming back
the smell of dampness is coming back
the sound of the dragging blue slippers is coming back
the words of the priest chanting in Sanskrit is coming back
the hands holding the white flowers is coming back
the narrow street beside the post office where lovers
held their hands is coming back
the lamppost that was never lit is coming back
the *Black Diamond Express*
the last journey, the old country
the crossings of the seven seas
are all coming back.

Each piece of the mosaic
small and delicate and large
black and white
misshaped and misplaced
are all coming back.

A face that now is marked by wrinkles
each thin line marking
the boundaries on a map
are all coming back.

Aerogram

A black file in his study.
Dusty. Faded. Parts are brittle.
My mother cautions me.

My very first "letter to the editor" from Minnesota (*Dated, April 1990*)
to the *Calcutta Statesman*.

The letter of my first arrival in St. Paul in January,
a picture of me standing in front
of Florence's 1978 *Ford Fairmont* —
Snow, like dense salt everywhere.

The letter with my dream
the night before *thamma* died.
I knew she had died.
I saw her hands, her face like a moon,
her deformed left foot
painless and floating.

The letter, after I broke my arm
falling on ice. My first fall.
And *that* letter of *becoming* an American.
My last.

A geography of memories,
errors in Bengali, handwritten
neatly tied with my mother's discarded hairband,
her one dark hair still coiled, sitting still.
Each stack, neatly placed
inside a plastic folder
that was once blue.

For Sale

Our new house is on the old street
not red but purple,
not huge, but small,
like minds
absent.

New bricks, new floors,
new flats, new kitchens,
new grills on windows
like soulless souls
living.

And I don't know
how to ever
go back
to that house
that was once red.
(built circa 1835, Calcutta)

Paste-Tense

Ancient coins from the East India Company
handwritten old prayers
and secrets we discovered.
While our mothers
turned their backs
catching the last rays of the sun—
falling against their long dark hairs
like awkward hand gestures
of novice dancers.

—

The musky damp smell of starch
lingering on half dried sarees
with Bengal block prints.
White cotton petticoats
washed with blue *Rin*
swinging in the gentle breeze
in the middle of the courtyard
where we play hide and seek.

Like fire, memory glows,
connecting us across continents,
time zones, and circles and circles
of laughter and sorrow.



Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt (Ph.D., Univ. of Minnesota—Twin Cities) is the Edith Green Distinguished Professor in the English department at Linfield University, where she directs the Critical Ethnic Studies program. She is a former recipient of the Loft Literary Award for Emerging Poets, the author of the monograph *The Postcolonial Citizen: The Intellectual Migrant* (Peter Lang, 2010), and the lead editor of *Civility, Free Speech and Academic Freedom in Higher Education: Faculty on the Margins* (Routledge, 2021). Her creative writing is widely published in literary and scholarly journals such as *The Asian American Renaissance*, *Saranac Review*, *Entropy*, *BeZine*, and others.

Sri Craven

Speaking in Tongues



Human wall for equality, Kollam, India, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

In my father's tongue, I learned
A punishing phrase for things women do
Each accompanied by a corporal accent for effect

A refusal of an arranged marriage invites:
Smirking mouth, raised eyebrows
"A rampaging stallion does not a gentle filly birth" —
I heard: the father is to blame for the daughter's assertiveness

Leaving home to live alone and study invokes:
Side eyes, waving hands
"Why take a snake laying on the fence and put it on your shoulder" —
I heard: female independence is asking for trouble

Hanging out with a man who is not a spouse brings:
Somber throat, shake of head
"Whether a thorn falls on a leaf, or a leaf falls on a thorn, the leaf is in trouble" —
I heard: it is always a woman's virtue that is compromised

These poisonous gifts of tongue growing up
Translated to English for the fun of it, for the balm of it
A lifetime spent imprisoned in words

But, now, a retort I almost forgot:
Flashing eyes, pointing finger
"Let your tongue stay in your mouth" —
I say: shut up!

Ode to Nissim Ezekiel

Now that I am a professor,
Of *English*, no less!
I long for my other tongue
That carefree titter that tapped at the teeth
Of those unschooled in this false grammar
Which unfailingly invokes home.

I once listened at the old teak door, under the bloody *gulmohr*, in a sweaty bus
Heard friends bantering
Verbs residing in unexpected places
What you are doing?
Adverbs a beauteous bouquet
Just like that, thinking.
Articles tossed out like peanut shells
Oh-ho, what, you are professor now?
Adjectives evocative jewels
Better than a goonda politician, I say!
Always, then, the easy guffaw follows, and the walk toward a chai stall
In the dead heat of midday.

Chai is tea—with or without milk, which can come first, last, or not at all
Everyone understands perfectly
Everyone drinks differently.
But, chai has no chance against coffee
Kaapi, kaafi, koh-fee, kaah-fee
Revealing exactly where you're from!

Me?
I'm from here and there
Thinking of Emily Dickinson talking to Nissim Ezekiel
"Tell the truth, but tell it slant"
Well, I say to you then
I am knowing the English very well!
Postcolonial scholar, feminist professor
But, you are not understanding, I presume?

Seventy-five years (1947-2022)

Seventy-five years

To recall two hundred and fifty years of empire and five yearly brutalities of new ones; that show the fiction of time and place and belonging; that create and recreate death in life; and, to survive this, one must remember, it is all just *maya*, designed to feel real. . .

Seventy-five years

To witness endless fights; fights over gods, fights over land, fights over rights, fights over wrongs, fights over language, fights over intent; fights over fights as if a moment's pause might ruin us all with peace; everywhere, a sense of ending; but, then, think, it is all just *karma*, meant to be. . .

Seventy-five years

To find the elderly taking constitutionals in the punctual tropical dusk of shiny new apartment complexes; the *karamchaaris* and *maalis* and *chaukidars* hanging out after a day's dirty work; and everyone knows all of this is just *timepass*, for death is waiting for everyone, standing at the corner chewing a *Banarasi paan*.

Call Center

Hinglish, Banglish, Kanglish, Manglish, Tanglish
These native prefixes
Overwrite, rewrite, write
Seventy-five years hence.
Defeat the rule of accent neutralizers
Armed with Hollywood movies and British TV
Attempting to wipe out
'Mother tongue influence.'

In a thousand fluorescent cubes
This bastard tongue, auntie tongue, *babu* tongue
Joyfully trips and skips quite out of
The lexicon of globalization.
But, then, empire asserts itself
Turning night into day
And a fatigued colony
Goes to work once again.

Poetry

Scan
this low-grade never-ending dull ache
of postcolonial mourning
picking at words, mulching tongue and meaning
to try to grow anew, tired of this colonial inscribing.

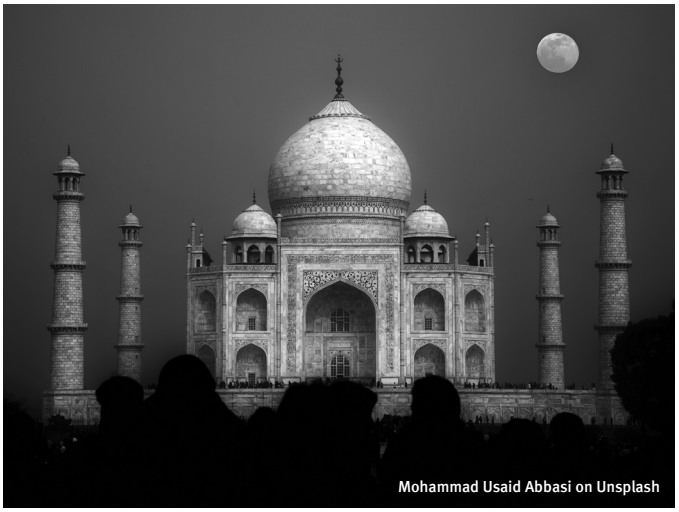
Poetry
does not lie does not care does not do
just names
the faltering between hope and despair
in the national necropolis, now, a new colony.

Scan
this endless variations of stress, caesura, foot, and meter
of postcolonial pain
retelling a story oft told
redrawing the map, centering the periphery.

Sri Craven is an associate professor in the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Portland State University. She received her Ph.D. in English and Women's Studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and is a literary/cultural studies critic in the postcolonial and transnational feminist traditions. Her scholarly and creative writings can be found in leading academic journals.

FATHER AND SON

SAMINA HADI-TABASSUM


Mohammad Usaid Abbasi on Unsplash

Fawad did not want to wake up his father who was sleeping downstairs in the den, most likely curled up on the blue divan near the fake fireplace, breathing heavily like a small animal wounded in a bush. He imagined his father sleeping as a young man with the same rise and fall of breaths and the same curved lines on the ground under a mango tree in his grandmother's orchard, well before coming to Chicago. Fawad made his chai quickly on the stove, added the whole cardamon pods without taking out the green shells, and threw in a blue packet of Equal that was sitting on the counter—steps his mother would have balked at and would have disrupted. After swirling the metal pot a few times like a chaiwallah in Bombay, he poured the hot brew into his metal thermos at an exacting angle and then soaked the pot in the sink to wash it later that evening. He knew that his father would most likely continue sleeping well into the afternoon. Fawad could see out the kitchen window and noticed his neighbor Steve doing the same morning routine in his house across the manicured lawn that separated their suburban homes. Steve had been nice to his father and baked a casserole when he found out that Fawad's mother had left him and moved back into the city with Fawad's older sister, who was in law school. His father was now alone in the three-bedroom ranch house. None of the neighbors in the cul-du-sac asked why Fawad was still at home and not at college and perhaps assumed that he had taken the place of his mother, a surrogate family member who was going to care for the gray-haired patriarch just like the Mughal Emperor Akbar and his son Jahangir.

Steve was a manager at the local hardware store and had to get up early on a Saturday morning like Fawad. Steve's wife, who was a schoolteacher, was most likely asleep and Fawad imagined her long dirty blonde hair creeping up from the top of the covers, their golden labradoodle curled up on the rug beside the bed. A few years after moving into their new suburban home, Fawad's father was so happy that a young white couple had settled in next to their immigrant household. For a

long time, the space in the back of the house was empty and all they could see out the kitchen window was long stretches of sodded emerald-green fields with no trees or flowers. There were no fences between the houses even today, which felt strange to Fawad, who had moved here from his childhood home in Chicago, where everyone had a wrought iron metal fence that was over six feet tall with spiked tips. When Steve and his wife had their first summer barbecue, his father walked right over, sat down on their lawn chair, and started chatting with Steve's visiting parents. Fawad's mother kept eyeing this pastoral scene from the kitchen window to see if her husband would ever reach into the ice cooler and pull out a beer.

The two eldest children would hear stories about Steve and his wife from their mother while away at college, stories of Steve mowing the lawn shirtless and how their dog had attacked her when she was picking peppermint from the back garden. They called in to check on her once a month, mostly because she called them out of boredom several times a week. All her siblings had moved out to an even farther suburb. Fawad was the youngest and still in high school when they made the westward movement from the city. He had to leave his mostly Indian friends behind and sometimes still drove into the city with his parents to meet them at a local park, or he took the Metra train to meet them downtown. When they first moved into the house, Fawad got the biggest bedroom, since his sister and brother were away and his parents slept in the bedroom close to the front of the house. He had enough space for his computer, his baseball gear, and the guitars he started collecting. When his parents were asleep, he started playing "Peace Train" and "The Wind" by Cat Stevens on his twelve-string guitar and started humming the tune to himself, always with the door slightly open. It was only after his senior year started that Fawad noticed his mother was now sleeping in his sister's bedroom and brought her blue janamaz prayer rug into this room as well as her Singer sewing machine. That lasted for a year before she left for good.

Fawad was happy that their haranguing had stopped and that he did not have to call his uncle from Naperville to step in between them when they started clawing at each other's clothes and hair. "Fawad, since you are a boy, I can leave you with your father. If you had been a daughter, then I would have stayed, since I cannot trust that man. But I must now take care of your sister, as she is starting law school, and pray that she does well in her studies and exams. I just cannot stay with your father anymore. We'll come on the weekends and drop off food for you and your father," said his mother, before kissing his forehead and walking out the front door. She did come sometimes on Sundays after visiting their masjid and leaving behind pots of stewed lamb, beef kabobs, and whole wheat parathas wrapped in aluminum foil.

His father never touched the food. Fawad took it to the record store where he worked every day right after finishing high school. Nobody

at work minded the smell of his mother's food, unlike the jerks in high school who would have taunted him in the cafeteria and hallways. He worked long hours at the store, often opening and closing the doors, rearranging the CDs in alphabetical order incessantly, brooming floors, and greeting the regulars. Sometimes he would go see new bands with his manager in the city and come home late on Fridays and Saturdays. Fawad's father drove the sole family car each day to the train station and then took the train downtown where he worked as an engineer at Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, although to Fawad it sounded as if he said, "Said Moor owes me marrow." On the way to the station, he dropped off Fawad at the record store, where he wandered the aisles until they opened.

"When are you going to be home, Abba?" he asked. "Do you want me to bring you food tonight?"

"No, I am okay. I will go to that Chinese buffet at the plaza before getting on the train."

"What are you working on now?" he asked, feigning interest in his engineering projects.

"The new highway over by the lake. They want to keep adding more lanes. These young people are moving back to the city. More high rises. More people running. More dogs on the sidewalk. More overpriced tomatoes," he chuckled.

"Do you ever go see Saima at the law school? Maybe have lunch together?"

"No, I don't want to bother her. She needs to study. But she always loved the buffet at India Garden. Maybe I will ask her to join me on a Friday."

"You should. You can't just stay at home and watch hours of TV. Besides, that concoction you cooked last night in the pot really smells and needs to be thrown out."

"I know, but that's all I know how to do. Throw meat and vegetables into a pot and boil it."

"You never learned to cook right? Ammi probably cooked every meal you had in this country."

"But she did not know how to cook when I met her. She was just sixteen and her mother had died. No one taught her. She had to figure it out on her own when she came to Chicago; she and her Indian friends in the city would learn to cook together. Without any fancy cookbooks."

"Was there any time that you cooked a meal for her?"

"There was one time. We went to visit the Taj Mahal after I got my first job after graduating from Osmania University. We only had enough

money for the train tickets and a small hotel room for three days. She was pregnant with your sister, Saima, and Khurram was three years old. We did not even have enough money for the street food. Could you imagine going to see the Taj Mahal and eating like a pauper?"

"So, what did you do?"

"Your mother was feeling sick from the pregnancy and did not have enough energy. I had brought a small stove from my sister Qaiser for the trip. I went to the market and bought fresh okras, potatoes, eggplants, and rice. We had brought the spices in tiny bags, and a small bottle of peanut oil. Your mother gave me directions from the bed, and I tried my best. Your brother was laughing at me and imitating my poor attempts at cutting vegetables on the newspaper stacks."

"Really? What did it taste like?"

"Awful. It was awful but your mother did not mind. She was so sick anyway. We had brought biscuits for Khurram and that made him settle down. But the view from the window…"

"What was it?"

"We could see the glow of the Taj Mahal. Its white marble under the moon's light was magical. The hunger went away after staring out the window for hours at the end of the day."

Fawad's father stopped talking when they arrived at the record store and said goodbye as Fawad took out his keys, stared up at the morning sky, and picked up the newspaper stacks at the front door. He had packed his lunch that day and went straight to the refrigerator to put it away, taking a small bite of a kebab before stacking the records back in place.



Samina Hadi-Tabassum (Ph.D., Columbia University) is a clinical associate professor at Erikson Institute in Chicago, Illinois, where she directs the Child Development Program and the School and Community Partnership Program. Her research interests include bilingual education, literacy, and language development; racial and cultural identity; and science education. Her newest publication, *Black and Brown Education in America: Integration in Schools, Neighborhoods, and Communities* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), explores the intersection of race, culture, and language, and the ensuing Black-Brown identity politics as well as the role of community organizations such as interracial faith-based churches and embattled school boards. For more on Hadi-Tabassum's work, visit www.saminahaditabassum.com.

THE WAR IS OVER: RECONFIGURING ITALIAN HISTORY

DANIEL R. SCHWARZ

Based on actual events, *The War is Over (La Guerra è Finita)* is a heart-wrenching, eight-episode Italian TV series aired during prime time in 2020 on Rai Uno. It is about the establishment of a refuge for eight hundred orphaned Jewish Italian children returning from Nazi concentration camps after the German surrender. Created by Sandro Petraglia, directed by Michele Soavi, and released in 2021 to a U.S. audience, the series is now available for streaming on Amazon Prime and MHz Choice. Under the caring supervision of adults on an unused estate in the small village of Selvino, near Bergamo, the children begin to recover from malnutrition and abuse while learning about their Jewish heritage and making up for their lost schooling.[1] Ironically, the unused estate was originally a children's school called Sciesopoli, established by Mussolini for the children of Fascist officers.

One purpose in bringing the children back to health was to prepare them for a journey to Palestine—Israel was not a separate state until 1948—where they would be adopted and find a home and a community. A major source for the series is Aharon Megged's *The Story of the Selvino Children: Journey to the Promised Land*, although the visual and auditory resources of film make



Valerio Binasco, Juju Di Domenico, Michele Riondino, and Isabella Ragonese in *La guerra è finita*, 2020.

We no longer hope for an eventual restoration of the old world order with all its traditions, or for the reintegration of the masses of five continents who have been thrown into a chaos produced by the violence of wars and revolutions and the growing decay of all that has still been spared.

—Hannah Arendt,
The Origins of Totalitarianism,
Preface to the First Edition, 1951

The War is Over far more efficient and rhetorically effective than Megged's somewhat choppy book in demonstrating both Italian complicity in the Holocaust and the process of rescuing abused children from the nightmare of the Holocaust.

When Giulia, one of the adult caregivers of the rescued children, naively proclaims, "The war's over," Miriam, a just rescued adolescent from a concentration camp who is haunted by memories of rape, responds, "Are you sure?" (Episode 1). Using that exchange as a crucial reference point, the series asks when and if a war is ever truly over, particularly a war in which genocide and collaboration played major parts.

In fact, the major theme of the series is that the effects of war are never over. Does World War II ever end for those who have been caught up in its midst, particularly a war in which genocide was experienced by Jewish citizens of European countries and in which children and adults who have lost their families survive? Even for viewers who know about concentration and death camps, the scenes of atrocities in *The War is Over* are riveting and elicit tears. Focusing on individual stories, the series dramatizes that the war is not over because traumatized children will carry the effects of the camps for a lifetime. Nor is the war over for those who survived but lost loved ones in the camps, or those whose sons were killed during the war. These people, too, will live with the effects of the war every day of their lives.

The ironic title of *The War is Over* not only stresses the impossibility of leaving behind the lifelong traumatic memories of Holocaust victims, but also emphasizes the continuing effects of the divisions between resistance partisans and collaborators during the period when the pro-Nazi Salò Republic puppet government ruled Northern Italy. For those hunting for war criminals or those perpetrators who are being hunted, imprisoned, or either trying to justify their behavior or to escape to South America, the war is also far from over.

Historical Context

Following its rise to power in 1922 in the wake of Italy's social and economic crisis after World War I, Fascism changed the country's shaky political and social tolerance for the worse, resulting in the anti-Jewish laws of 1938. Italy's 46,000 or so Jews not only lost their employment and were expelled from schools, but were also reviled in the Fascist press and forced to register. Italy's May 22, 1939, alliance with Hitler—the so-called Pact of Steel—may have opened the door to further persecution of Jews, although Italy had already passed its own strong anti-Semitic racial laws a year earlier.[2]

After Mussolini was deposed and Italy signed an armistice with the Allies, the Nazis occupied Northern and Central Italy. Their subsequent puppet regime was called the Italian Social Republic, informally known as the Salò Social Republic because its headquarters were in Salò, a small town on Lake Garda, even though it claimed Rome as its official capital. Mussolini was installed as the nominal head by the Germans with the help of the German army and Fascist supporters who were organized into the paramilitary Black Brigades. On November 30, 1943, the Salò Social Republic Police Order No.5 required the arrest of all Jews except those born of mixed marriages.

Before the German occupation, foreign Jews were interred, but conditions were not like those in Nazi camps. After the occupation, the puppet regime pursued Nazi policies of arresting, deporting, and ultimately liquidating Jews in Northern and Central Italy until it was overthrown by partisans on April 25, 1945. Mussolini and his coterie were shot three days later.

The War is Over never forgets Italy's political history and how Mussolini's Fascism undermined and corroded the quality of Italian life. Fascism turned people against one another, encouraged class and social divisions, and opened the door to barbaric behavior, most notably virulent anti-Semitism, including betrayals by Christians who had lived together with Jews for generations. *The War is Over* challenges the myth of the "Italiani brava gente" (Italians, the Good People) during the Fascist and Holocaust period. The series shows wartime devastation as well as the difficult process of rebuilding Italy politically and morally.

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Jews in Italy

Many Italian Jewish families had lived in Italy for centuries and thought of themselves as Italians who happened to be Jewish rather than as Jews living in Italy. In Ferrara, like Selvino, a place in Northern Italy that was part of the Nazi-controlled Salò Republic and the site of the Jewish writer Giorgio Bassani's fiction, Jews were more central to civic life than in most Italian cities. Yet as much as the Ferrara Jews would have liked to forget, they had been confined to a ghetto from the 1620s to the first years of the 1860s. In Ferrara as well as other cities such as Venice, the ghetto area remained, with many Jews occupying it. According to Bassani, the ghetto also became an image for a state of mind. Lingering always in the imagination and memory of the Ferrara Jews were stories passed down about ghetto times when the Jews were forced to listen to sermons inviting them to convert, or when their funerals had to be held at nighttime. While the experience of Jews was not uniform throughout Italy, Italian Jews in many other places had similar experiences.

During the earlier French invasions, Jews at times experienced more freedom, but that freedom was soon quashed. During the 1802-1814 Napoleonic period in Italy, for example, Jews were briefly emancipated, but even after they were forced to return to the ghettos in 1826, they retained lands they had acquired during the French years of liberalization. In the early 1860s, confinement ended with a unified Italy under a constitutional monarch granting rights to all citizens.

For many Italian Jews the way to escape social isolation had been through assimilation. In *The War is*

Over, Davide Pavia, the principal Jewish character, observes: "For me, being Jewish never meant anything to me. But with the racial laws, I realized I was different" (Episode 1). Paradoxically, within their own community the Jews sought to maintain their own identity as Jews, often with three distinct Jewish communities: German, Italianate, and Levantine. Culminating in Italy's racial laws of 1938, the gradual anti-Semitism of the 1930s became a cause of their renewed isolation.

Some upper middle class and prosperous Jews, including a few large landowners, cast their lot with Fascism in the 1920s and the early 1930s; they thought it would provide social order in the face of International Communism. But these Jews came to realize that, in the minds of the Fascists, they would always be residents of an invisible ghetto.

Except for its requirement that Jewish students attend public school on Saturday, the Law on Jewish Communities of 1930-1933 was viewed favorably by many Italian Jews because it helped organize their communities. But the plight of Italian Jews worsened. Anti-Semitic campaigns began in Italy in 1934, culminating in Italy's collaboration with Germany on the side of Generalissimo Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War. For example, in 1936, anti-Semitic slogans appeared in Ferrara where 800 Jews were a powerful presence. Paolo Orano's 1937 anti-Semitic diatribe, *Gli Ebrei in Italia* (The Jews in Italy), blamed the Jews for supporting "degenerate cultural expressions," for Zionist sympathies, and for a lack of loyalty to the Fascist state; the Fascist government claimed to be the successor to Imperial Rome.

Mussolini was trying to please Hitler, with whom he cast his destiny.

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His anti-Semitic measures began with a manifesto on race prepared by Italian "scientists" on July 14, 1938. Claiming that Italians, like Germans, were Aryans, the Italian government's 1938 Manifesto of Race ("Manifesto della razza") was accompanied by harsh racial laws eliminating Jews in Italy from civic life, depriving them of their civil rights, preventing them from using public libraries, and expelling them from the armed forces. Jews were banned from public schools and universities, although they could finish degrees on which they were working, as Bassani was able to do in 1939. Certain Jews were exempted from various exclusions on account of their membership in the Fascist party or because of prior patriotic service, but those exemptions disappeared when Germans took over after Mussolini was deposed in 1943.

In *The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy,* Simon Levis Sullam stresses Italian collaboration with the Germans and complicity in the Holocaust. Showing how the Italian police—in cooperation with civil authorities and ordinary citizens acting

as informers—hunted down Jews in the 1943-1945 period, Sullam demonstrates that the post-war claim that Italians protected their Jews was mostly a myth.

Rescuing and Rehabilitating the Children

In *The War is Over*, three characters play leadership roles in establishing the refugee operation for the Jewish children who had been in concentration camps. The aforementioned Davide (known as "Barbo" among the partisans) has been—and when we meet him still is—a Jewish partisan fighter and engineer whose wife, Enrica, and son, Daniele, were arrested, deported, and murdered in the camps. He still has his gun and is tormented by the deportation of his family. He has an understandably obsessive need to find, or at the very least learn what happened to, them.

Ben is a former colonel in the British Army's Jewish Brigade, which fought in Italy from March 1945 until the end of the war, May 7, 1945. He is the leader of the refugee operation, whose goals are to restore the children's psyches as much as possible and to inspire the orphaned children to believe in a future; for most of the children, that means a kibbutz in Palestine. With Davide's help, Ben has taken over—really, been squatting on—an empty estate owned by a marchioness who has become a recluse after losing her son in the war. While organizing the children to do chores and to participate in renovating the property, Ben insists that the children adhere to a routine and rules as well as go to school.

The third major adult figure, Giulia, is a gentile social psychologist and daughter of a prosperous, socially prominent, jailed collaborator who manufactured arms for the Nazis. Perhaps the most complex adult, she reminds viewers how, after the Holocaust, Italian media had more difficulty rendering the experience and trauma of Jewish victims than rendering the behavior of both supportive and ambivalent Christians.[3] She is motivated at first by guilt, but soon begins to care deeply for the children who, as she puts it, "have nothing and nobody" (Episode 3). As part of the effort to restore the children's psyches, she meets with them individually and listens with sensitivity and compassion to their traumatic stories of concentration camp experiences, soon learning that, as she tells the other adults on the refuge-cum-estate, "These children are like broken dolls" (Episode 2). Ben, Davide, and Giulia are joined at the estate, on which they have established a school, by Susanna, a pediatrician, and Eugenia, a teacher, who prepares the residents for school exams and helps them make up for lost school time.

We get an ample sense of who the adults are and the opportunities and limitations of their vision before the somewhat reductive conclusion, when Giulia and Davide's mutual attraction results in their pairing off. We see how history has defined them, especially Davide, who is a Jew whether he chooses to be or not. While Giulia escapes on occasion to her parents' elegant home and responds for a while to the expected suitor from her social class—and on occasion exhibits a sense of *noblesse oblige*—she is always compassionate and empathetic with the children. Indeed, her increasing capacity for responding to the children with sympathy, empathy, and love is one of the compelling plot strands.

Davide, who is searching for his deported wife and son, can be faulted

for immersion in his own grief and his desire for vengeance. But he makes the morally correct choice time after time. Jilted by his Israeli lover, Ben, a former school principal who had earlier emigrated to Israel and lived on a kibbutz, is totally committed to creating an orderly world for the children by preparing them for collective farm life in Israel. As he notes, "There's nothing for us in Europe" (Episode 1).

The more times one watches the series, the more it becomes apparent that the Christian Giulia is the focal character. More than any other character, Giulia is depicted with a range of emotions. At first, she is awkwardly interviewing the children, telling Davide, "I don't think I'm ready" (Episode 2), but she gradually matures as a therapist and establishes rapport with a wide range of abused children.

Excellent acting and nuanced directing take the viewer inside the world of the children as well as that of the adults. *The War is Over* effectively presents the perspectives of the surviving children as we watch their transformation from survivors into functional human beings. To be sure, at times the transformation has a magical component belying what we know about the persistence of trauma. While usually sympathetic to the perspectives of the major adult characters, often the director holds them at an ironic distance. One example is Davide's failure to understand his feelings for Giulia even though the viewer does.

Flashbacks and Visuals of the Camps

The War is Over focuses on a relatively small number of orphaned children and what they have been through in the camps. The frequent cutaway shots to flashbacks create a bifocal perspective for the viewer that shows the horrors of the past and the subsequent present efforts to recover from the war. At times the beautiful landscape of Northern Italy is juxtaposed not only to the searing reality of the camps, but also to an Italy scarred by war and by the moral pandemic of collaboration. Reminding us that the past is a continuing present and that the effects of the war have in no way been left behind, brief flashbacks to events that took place in the camps are crucial to the efficacy of the series.

We should note that, notwithstanding the historic source material

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in Megged's book, these are fictional recreations of camp life as it affected specific characters, rather than excerpts from newsreels or films taken by liberating armies. For a considerable time, the director places the viewer within the grotesque world of Holocaust camps and the gruesome transportation system that took the inmates there. While viewers (with the exception of the remaining few camp survivors) can never know what the experience of the camps was actually like, the flashback moments—some, but not all, from a child's perspective—create an effective visual mosaic that enables us to at least approach a strong sense of the camps' suspension of civilized norms.

As we watch these docu-fictional renditions, the horrific scope of Nazi atrocities emerges, beginning with the macrocosmic ones of hunger and deportation. In the first episode we hear the young adult Gabriel's story of people starving to death, especially if they lose the spoon assigned to them. Near the end of that episode, a friend of Davide's named Lorenzo recalls the arrest and deportation of Italian children and how the children were killed after being separated from their families.

One of the most effective and sustained of these flashbacks takes place when Davide makes an unannounced visit to the home of a surviving woman who had been transported with Davide's wife. While this nameless woman tells of her experience of being packed into a freight car with other Jews—she recalls Enrica's caring for his son, Daniele ("She told him stories")—the director evokes the surviving woman's experience with flashback visuals. Along with Enrica and Daniele, this woman was transported to Mauthausen, a notorious camp in which a common thread was extermination through tortuously demanding labor and malnutrition. When the scene returns to the present in the woman's kitchen, she concludes, with Davide holding her hand, "My husband never came back" (Episode 3).

Later in the series we see how specific atrocities affected individual children. Triggering the mute Giovanni's memories of the Nazis' dogs accompanying the guards in the camp, a harmless dog at the estate causes Giovanni to pass out from fear. After we see Miriam's scarred hands, we learn about her being raped and slashing her wrists in shame. When Davide drives to Mauthausen in search of his family, we learn of emaciated inmates who were forced, while carrying stones, to climb up 186 steps—the "Stairs of Death"—with the Nazis' malevolent purpose of wearing out prisoners already suffering from malnutrition. Some of those who could not function any more were thrown down to the bottom of the hill. Davide learns that his wife Enrica was killed in a sadistic game, when women who were told to get laundry were simply shot. A former camp prisoner named Giuditta, who is subsequently reunited with her missing daughter at the estate, tells Davide: "We had been reduced to larvae" (Episode 6).

Another strong example of flashback is when Gabriel remembers the moment his companion, with whom he escaped (after killing an SS captain with the latter's own razor), tells him to take his shoes because he has been injured and can't go on. Gabriel's memory of his desperate and successful escape is haunted by his guilt for leaving someone behind. Once settled in the Selvino estate after the war, Gabriel undertakes a journey to give the shoes to the young man's Italian family.

Beginning: The War Continues After Liberation

The first episode begins with Davide and other armed partisans arriving April 27, 1945—two days after Italian Liberation Day and three days before the German forces in Italy surrender—and entering the apartment of Minister Giovanni Preziosi, Fascist and anti-Semitic theorist. Preziosi translated *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* into Italian in 1921. At one point, Preziosi was Hitler's advisor on Italian affairs and, within the Salò Republic, headed the General Inspectorate of Race. In 1943 Preziosi wrote: "The first task to be tackled is. . . the total elimination of the Jews" (Sullam 16). Expecting to arrest Preziosi, the partisans discover that he and his wife have committed suicide.

In contrast to the color film of the entire series (except for a few flashbacks), the first visual immediately after the title is a black-and-white newsreel of Mussolini's defeat, with the American troops' arrival being cheered. Within the newsreel format, we also see partisans shooting those who fought for the Salò Nazis. The Salò Nazis were as responsible for arresting Jews, if not more so, than the Germans. When the episode returns to color, a young member of the defeated Salò militia named Mattia is running towards the empty estate at which the Jewish children and their protectors will soon arrive. Mattia's purpose is to go into hiding rather than face arrest or execution. After telling his cousin, a caretaker at the estate, that as a Salò soldier he didn't do anything to deserve arrest or worse, Mattia burns everything but an insignia of the Salò army. The suspicious Davide later discovers the insignia in his search to find out who Mattia really is.

This opening episode cuts away to a rainy night on the Austrian-Italian border. Davide threatens to kill a man named Janos who wants money for delivering children, if Janos does not take him to their place of shelter. To emphasize the chaos and confusion of retrieving the children, this scene is filmed in near darkness. When Davide enters the back of a truck full of scared children, he announces: "I'm here to take you home" (Episode 1). Viewers are introduced to some of the principal survivors whose stories are foregrounded in *The War is Over*: Giovanni, the traumatized young child who will no longer speak and pretends to be mute; Gabriel, the orphaned young adult who escaped from a concentration camp and is still wearing camp clothing; and Miriam, who was raped by German soldiers in a camp. Davide takes them to a "collection center," where Italian authorities try to reunite families that had been separated by deportation. Because there is not a place for these orphaned children, Davide takes them to the abandoned estate, which had been a school where his wife had been a teacher. That estate becomes the site of the children's rehabilitation.

The Concluding Episode of *The War is Over*

The eighth and final episode of *The War is Over* brings the main plot to a somewhat sentimental conclusion, one that evokes tears from viewers. The most compelling scenes revolve around Giovanni. By examining his drawings, Giulia figures out that he was in the same building as Davide's red-headed son, Daniele. According to the plotting of *The War is Over*, a handful of young children, including Giovanni and Daniele, were imprisoned in a special

house with a stork's nest on the roof at a satellite camp of Mauthausen called Ebensee. There children were selected one-by-one or in small groups to be taken to the Zyklon B showers—the lethal killing agent used by the Nazis for quick extermination. We see a flashback of Daniele's being selected by the Germans and saying goodbye to Giovanni.

After Giovanni identifies Davide's son, Daniele, being taken away, we see a flashback of the two boys parting. At this climactic moment, the formerly mute Giovanni speaks: "We were friends. It was forbidden to use names. Only numbers. I was two. He was five" (Episode 8). Since in all my reading I have never come across the Nazis' taking children one or even a few at a time to their deaths, I suspect there is an aspect of magic realism to this implausible and touching scene, which stresses once more how each life hung by a thread, and how who lived and who survived depended on arbitrary decisions and chance.

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The concluding episode focuses on the rehabilitated children in their last days at the estate before many leave for Palestine. Their development in the thirteen months since their arrival is striking. The Selvino children for the most part have been brought back to health and passed school exams. That they are now singing and playing exuberantly as if nothing had happened adds a nuance of magic realism to the finale.

The concluding episode of *The War is Over* neatly resolves a great many issues. Gabriel, who seems to be in his very late teens when he arrives functionally illiterate, is now quoting the Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg and will marry Sarah, who has taught him Italian. She decides not to go Palestine and gets off the bus at the last moment to partner with Gabriel.

Having reconciled with her parents, Giulia will marry Davide, and they subsequently adopt Giovanni. Davide will replace his lost wife and son; he discards his gun in a gesture signifying the end of his war. Even before Giulia is fully aware of Davide's interests, she chooses this representative of the middle class over her suitor Stefano, the handsome rich young lawyer of her wealthy social class. Within the cultural norms of 1946 this would have been a bold decision.

Although Miriam is both sad and glad as she leaves for Palestine, she seems to have recovered quickly from the abrupt departure of Mattia, with

whom she had developed an intimate relationship. She seems to know that there is more to Mattia's departure than Davide, who has forced him to leave the Selvino refuge.

Suddenly emerging as sympathetic to those who suffered under the racial laws, the marchioness decides to let the children stay at her estate until the last child finds a home. Indeed, we see a new marchioness, just as we had seen a new version of Giulia's mother, when the latter welcomes the children who had come to her home looking for Giulia. Ben and Susanna, the pediatrician, seem to be well on the way to developing a relationship.

In contrast to the dimly lit flashbacks to the camps, in which we see atrocities and suffering and hear ominous music, the last episode is filmed mostly in light, with gentle music playing in the background. Perhaps the traditional storybook ending that wraps up all the plot strands slightly undermines the depth and profundity of the prior seven episodes. The all-too-neat final episode—and particularly the last half—is a soft landing for a serious series that delved into what happened in Italy during the Salò puppet regime and that eloquently showed that the past is a living present, especially to Holocaust survivors and their families. To be sure, such an ending fulfills the expectations of a fictional television series, even if a contemporary novel or film might have a more open, polyphonic narrative. Certainly, in the twenty-first century, television's tendency to pull loose ends together is easier for most viewers to consume and more comforting. Such soothing, if not escapist, may be even one reason for the attraction of television and streaming platforms in our fraught times.

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That in a June 2, 1946, referendum, Italy voted in favor of a republic instead of a monarchy implies a better, more democratic future, although we know from our 2022-2023 vantage point—and especially if we read Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy—that Italy's political and social problems are far from over.

Notes

1. See Sergio Luzzatto's *Moshe's Children*.

2. I am indebted to Joshua Zimmerman, Robert Gordon, Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, and Elizabeth Schachter for the historical contexts in this essay.

3. See Emiliano Perra's *Conflicts of Memory: The Reception of Holocaust Films and Television Programmes in the Italian Press, 1945 to the Present.*

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Donna Emerson

A Transformation


Donna Emerson

Bicycling on the first day of bright sun,
past ornamental pear trees in full white dress,
orange poppies open earlier this year,
down the new bike path to Olompali,
"southern village" of the Coast Miwok,
who settled here so long ago.

Then I recall the rest: this place a battle site
of the Bear Flag Revolt.
Retreat House of the Jesuits.
Hippie commune, the Grateful Dead,
fire, drowning of two small children.
A place I drove through in the 1960s
and felt death near me, so left.

I have walked but never fully enjoyed these trails.
Felt destruction as well as beauty, eerie air
climbing Mt.Burdell.
.
Today I take in the marshy mounds
below the rebuilt adobe house,

propelled toward a broad necklace
of Cala Lilies. They wind in scalloped fashion,
frame the hills above, the black and valley oak below.

Over several acres, the Calas reach out with full flower,
white trumpets to Spring,
the oaks slowly sprouting new leaves, small and green.
Wrens chirp and fly in arcs. Hawks higher still.
For the first time in many years, instead of made edgy
by man's violence and neglect,
I feel settled, calmed, by new Spring's bounty.

Objects Found

When I worked with a young boy whose IQ
was 184 but who could not learn,

he left notes for me tucked in my office couch,
chairs, underneath table legs.

I never saw him hide his pages,
found them later while cleaning.

Taken together, he made
only sense.
We just had to find it.

We sat and put them together, like a puzzle.

I recall Jacques Offenbach died before he finished
his *Tales of Hoffmann*.

After his death in 1880, bits of his endings
were found, pasted together to make a complete score.

When Emily Dickinson died, she left envelopes
and tickets with poems inscribed,

hundreds more in letters to family and friends,
eventually found, now in a book for us.

I like to think that someone cares
about those scraps left behind,

might find and combine,
make a whole story of our never-finished lives.


Juliet Emerson-Colvin

Donna Emerson received her B.S. and M.A. in Social Work from the University of California, Berkeley. Retired from college teaching and clinical social work practice, Donna's recent publications include the *Paterson Literary Review* and the *London Magazine*. She's been nominated for two Pushcarts, and a "Best of the Net," received three Allen Ginsberg awards (2015, 2017, 2023), and published four chapbooks. Her second book, *Beside the Well*, was released in December 2019. See more of her work at www.donnaemerson.com.

Linds Sanders

Californians Are Moving to Montana

and I am practicing not hating them
for buying houses over the phone,
for outbidding all the ladies in my book club,
for drooling over our dirt cheap dirt.

Priced out of four walls four years ago,
I live behind an engine:
interior sized small enough
to lose,
the yard big enough
to find.

I want to ask these Golden State transplants
what the point is of a second home—

raging
I was here first,
but I wasn't.

It was the Salish,
the Kootenai,
the Kalispel people

who made deer run
and kept streams full;

living on broken shards of land now
in homes even I could afford.

Maybe they hated me at one time,
maybe they hate me still.

For didn't I come off the interstate exit
and kiss the ground cleaved by Hellgate Canyon,
asking no one's blessing to home here.



Hellgate Canyon, near Helena, Montana. Photo by William H. Jackson, U.S. National Archives, 1872.

Hometown Grays

I left for all the same reasons hometowns are left for—
to discover and be something discovered.

I pay the toll for leaving with an annual visit to that flat city
creeping its complexes closer towards the interstate.

I pity my friends who moved back
and my family who never left.

I pity the big houses managerial jobs can buy
and the big yards and big cars, big families with big appetites.

I pity the small-town traffic between trademarked box-stores
and the empty parking lots of the locally-owned and operated.

I pity the galleries featuring wall-to-ceiling western art
and the only Native Americans welcomed into dining rooms are on canvas.

I left for all the same reasons hometowns are left for—

I left to reach into landscapes my graduated class can't pronounce.
I left to stretch my arms out wide until I touched nothing familiar.

I left,

but still wake most mornings listening for that boring mourning dove
nestled on the telephone wire sagging over my old street.

In my absence I worry after her dull gray feathers. Is she still there—
calling over the backyard cottonwoods and grass alleys—

over the graves of my hamsters marked by rings of marbles—
over the strawberries my mother planted against the shallow brick wall.

That content hum soft and deep, spoken through a wooden reed,
rising and falling in such a way it reinvents time to stretch out long

like my old cat soaked in sunlight by the picture window
looking onto the neighbors—
whose names I've forgotten.

I try humming the soft high
and low timbre
and I pity myself for missing a home I never stayed for.

Just a Body of Water

When all this blood I own rises to the surface,
this skin I own thins like an icy veneer
over winter-bellied trout.

Must you always test my strength.

Sliding one foot out,
listening for
fissures
                cracking
open.

Can't we go inside where the fire casts shadows
and throws a hot white halo onto the floor.

With a slow trace up my inseam
you could melt us
into an ʎʇıʌɐɹbıʇuɐ summer.

Watch as the lake I'm hiding
                floats
                to the ceiling,

edges rippling,
but maintaining
a shape-shifting orb

housing clusters of minnows,
who
    scatter
                and regroup
                under your touch,
their scales
glitter silver.

Slider turtles
pumping their legs,
                boatmen beetles
                release their tucked bubble
to sink
        towards
                the center of
                        the room.

Above our heads they all watch
a feast of forgiveness
fill
my waterless frame.



Linds Sanders (she/her) is a multidisciplinary artist in graduate school to learn where clinical mental health counseling and art intersect. Her writing burrows in publications and occasionally fetches a prize. Her artwork darts in and out of art galleries as well as national/international publications. At the end of the day all her work comes home to rest at www.LindsSanders.com and IG @resounding_bell.

Cathryn Essinger

Nettles

Now you know what nettles look like, Dad says,
as I rub cortisone onto my ankles.

He is an expert on prickly things, like how to
pull a thistle without going back for gloves.

He taught me how to get rid of a wasp's nest
(Just don't!) and how to smoke down a hive.

I read online about folk remedies for stinging
nettles—baking soda or saliva—too late for that.

Jewelweed and dock, applied like a salve, but
that would require another trip to the nettle patch.

I stick with the cortisone, which isn't helping
much, although the dog who dragged me

through the nettles is sound asleep on the sofa,
feet moving in some slow motion dream.

Just to show off, I read from Wikipedia about
medicinal uses for stinging nettles which can

be used for treating allergies, eczema and
joint pain, or dried and drunk as a tea, or

"cooked into healthful greens with onions
and bacon." After a long pause Dad says,

*I don't think I've ever been that hungry, but
tell me again. . . . why weren't you wearing socks?*



Another Season

So, here are the seeds I carried
in my pocket all winter long,

the ones I intended to give to you.

Too late now for that small gesture,
for the hope that you might live

another summer to watch the children

pedal their bikes down the drive, to water
the Lantana, or pinch back the marigolds

we carried home in paper cups.

And now this sadness, like another person
in the room. Come in, we say. Please

ignore the wading pool, the children's toys.

Have a seat, here, on the porch and we'll
pretend you are just passing through,

that you do not intend to stay.

Can I bring you something to drink?
The children have Kool Aid in their cups,

which explains the stains on their shirts,

but not the Christmas flag, celebrating
the snow that they love so much

they could not bear to take it down.

Now another season lays claim
to their affection, so maybe they will

not notice if you decide to leave.

Here, take these seeds, put them
in this tray. Let's see if they grow,

or if they simply slip away.

The Cant Hook

I.

My brother puts a wedge under one end
of a 600 lb log that comes up to his waist.

He attaches a cant hook to the other end
and then leans into the handle.

The log shifts almost imperceptibly,
leaving a patch of torn grass behind.

We move the wedge, try again, readjust.
We guide it toward the congregation

of cut logs accumulating in the corner
of the lawn, just above the river bank,

logs so big we hesitate to send them crashing
over the incline. A few more corrections,

and we can roll it to where the others
have been stowed, waiting for the inevitable.

II.

Inside the house, our parents are dying,
each of them making the slight adjustments,

compromises that get us through another day.
Yogurt poured into a cup, a spoon balanced

in someone else's hand, each rising a moment
of accomplishment measured against the inability

to recognize the time of day, the new face
at the door. Yes, a new face at the door. . . .

someone so familiar that we are not surprised,
and yet, a new face at the door. Come in,

we say, but still they linger, welcome,
but not yet. Please wait here, we say,

and they oblige, while we adjust the bedclothes,
say the things we are supposed to say.

"Two For a Penny or Free"

Children are at the door selling buckeyes,
Two for a penny or free. They are beautiful—

fresh from the pod, that tender mahogany
that only September can supply.

I give each child a dollar, buy the whole stash
and then pocket a couple for good luck and

explain that I am going to toss them over
the riverbank and hope squirrels will help me

plant a buckeye forest. I describe the trees—
fingers waving in the sun, blossoms stacked

like candelabra each spring, and hummingbirds
delirious at their good fortune. But one little boy

is having seller's remorse. I can see him weighing
his choices—the cost of beauty versus its potential.

His chin is puckered, his eyes clouded by concerns
that he is much too young to consider.

I want to tell him to choose beauty every time,
to have no regrets even as he gives it away.

But now his friends are tugging at his sleeve,
laughing about how to spend their money,

and now they are dancing down the driveway,
empty buckets swinging from their arms.



Cathryn Essinger is the author of five books of poetry. Her most recent books, *The Apricot and the Moon* and *Wings, or Does the Caterpillar Dream of Flight?*, are both from Dos Madres Press. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, *The New England Review*, *Rattle*, *Ecotone*, *Terrain*, *Calyx*, and other journals. Her work has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes and "Best of the Net," featured in *The Writer's Almanac*, and reprinted in *American Life in Poetry*. She was Ohio's Poet of the Year in 2005 when she received an Ohio Arts Council Grant. She lives in Troy, Ohio, where she raises Monarch butterflies.

Carol L. Deering

Helping Snakes Across The Road

Your kindness to animals was legendary.
You'd catch spiders in a jar,
holes in the lid, to set them free
in daylight.

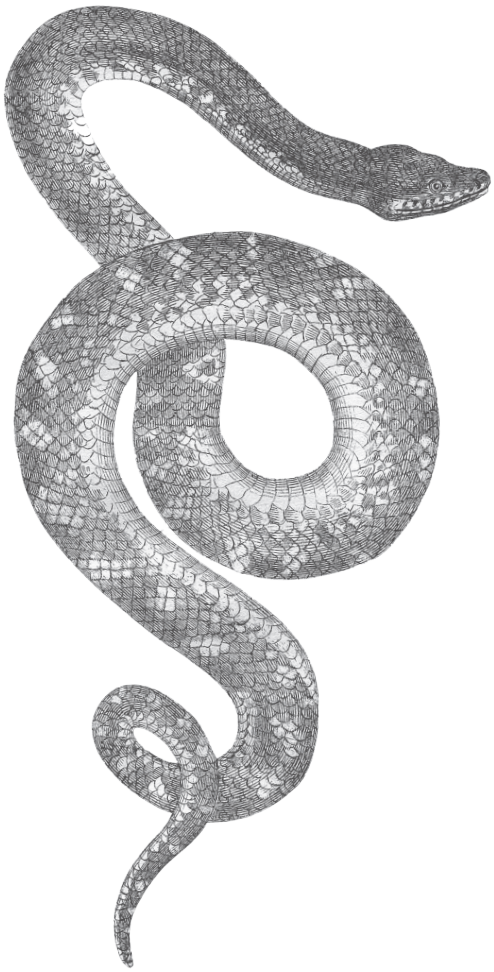
You used your reacher to grip and take
wasps outside, unharmed.

All confidence, you'd stop the car
on a back dirt road,
get out with your walking stick
and nudge a snake to the other side
to protect it from traffic
which might not stop.
I stayed in the car.

Once on a deep sandy road
you opened your door
so we could watch a sidewinder's
sinuous twists as it moved away.

You studied biology,
wanted to be a forest ranger,
but your polio wouldn't let you
tend trails, or help fight fires.

So you kept all that knowledge
and amazement in your heart.



National Treasures

A small doe rises from a valley,
samples grasses, then shies
into the trees.
At forest's edge
a shallow pool tongues
the quivering light.

As ducks flap into the Yellowstone,
crows swarm like leaves, then dive
in concert with the wind.

In Old Faithful parking lot,
the ravens enchant you. They call
and settle, a blue-black dread,
onto the hoods of cars.

One swaggers to our truck
and stares straight up at you, window
down. Tired of using your crutch,
you're having a birthday snack.

You tell it: *You're not getting anything*
unless you can say
Nevermore!

With a flick of her tail, like a fresh idea,
the doe leaps a fallen branch,
then drinks from a cold ravine.

As clouds blow apart, a tattered
smoky lace, quills of midnight black
scale the rungs of the sphere.

How Like a Whisper

The neighbors' smoke-white mare
snorted, her first morning there,
like a pull-string push mower
trying to start. She spooked
as our blinds
whinnied up the glass. Stared
and turned dark eyes away.

She radiated patience
while you struggled to breathe,
contorted with pain.

***

Without you now, her slow walk
across the pasture
feels to me like balm. . .

She's a moving constant I rely on.
Stands firm in snowfall.
Beneath storm clouds
she lights up, a bright moon
nibbling sparkly weeds. Yet
she can slip into a fog,
and leave no trace.

How like a whisper

a life can trail away. . .



Carol L. Deering has twice received the Wyoming Arts Council Poetry Fellowship (2016 and 1999). She holds a masters in librarianship and information management from The University of Denver. She has been published in *Colorado North Review*, *Pinyon*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Owen Wister Review*, *I-70 Review*, and other journals and anthologies. Her book, *Havoc & Solace: Poems from the Inland West*, appeared in 2018 from Sastrugi Press.

READING THE WEST

read-ing [from ME reden, to explain, hence to read] – vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

DEFINING THE SOUTHWEST

The National Park Service posts a series: "Defining the Southwest." It explains that

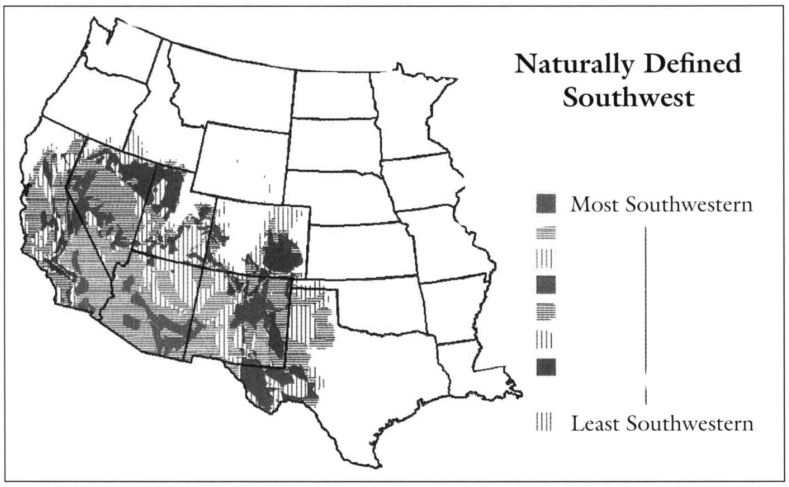
. . . the Southwest is a place without boundaries—a land with its own style and its own pace—a land that ultimately defies a single definition.

The geographical boundaries of the Southwest are so difficult to pin down, in part, because of the variability of both ancient and modern cultures in the region. Also, as the modern population of the American Southwest continues to grow, so do archeological discoveries. With each new discovery, the boundaries of ancient southwestern cultures shift, and our definitions are once again reevaluated.

The Southwest is also definable, to an extent, by environmental conditions—primarily aridity. Aridity is the environmental condition in which the net loss of moisture—through transpiration and evaporation—exceeds the net gain through precipitation.

Source: National Park Service, "Series: Defining the Southwest." 14 August 2015, https://www.nps.gov/articles/series.htm?id=C98B3C2A-0779-F0D4-9531EC2CD76D8132.

The Journal of the Southwest was founded in 1959 as *Arizona and the West*. It began publishing in its current format in 1987. Published by the Southwest Center at the University of Arizona, it invites scholarly articles on any aspect of the Greater Southwest, including northern Mexico. In a 1992 article, a group of scholars used geographical information systems to define the region.

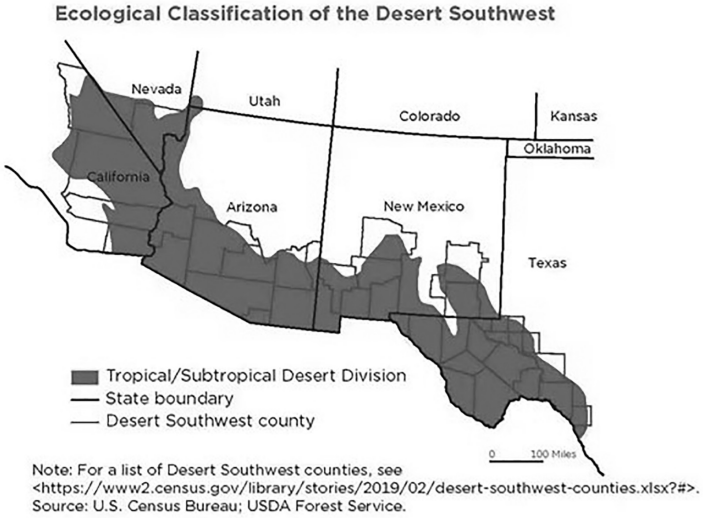


Source: Larkin, Robert P., Carole J. Huber, and Thomas P. Huber. "Defining the Southwest: The Use of Geographic Information Systems for Regional Description." *Journal of the Southwest,* vol. 40, no. 2, 1998, pp. 243–60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40170019.

The World Population Review *defines the Southwest as Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah.*

Source: "Southwest States." *World Population Review*, https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/southwest-states

The U.S. Census defines the Desert Southwest as:



Source: United States Census Bureau. "The Desert Southwest." 25 Mar. 2019, https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2019/demo/desert-southwest.html.

The *What States* website defines the states that make up the Southwest as Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah. However, others define the Southwest more narrowly to only include the core of the region: Arizona, western New Mexico, western Texas, southern Colorado, and southern Utah.

Source: O'Connor, Meg. "What Are The Southwest States? (Info, History & Fun Facts)." *What States,* 8 Sept. 2022, https://whatstates.com/southwest/.

SOUTHWEST HISTORY FOR KIDS

The Children's Hour, Inc. is a New Mexico based non-profit producing kids' public radio programs. It recently created a six-part podcast and curriculum series on the history of the American Southwest. As they explain:

Typically a region of the U.S. that is overlooked in textbooks, the Southwestern United States history begins 23,000 years ago in what is now known as White Sands National Park. Students will learn how the area was settled, from its Indigenous beginnings through the brutal era of colonization by Spain, and then the United States, and finally emerging into statehood. This series highlights the moments that changed the history of this region and this nation forever.

Source: "A Brief History of the American Southwest for Kids." *The Children's Hour, Inc.,* https://www.childrenshour.org/history/.

THE VIRTUAL SOUTHWEST

The American Southwest Virtual Museum is a project of the Arizona State Museum and Northern Arizona University. Updated periodically, the site offers a digital repository of photographs, maps, and virtual tours of national parks and museums across the Southwest.

This growing collection provides access to high-resolution images of archaeological materials and sites, natural resources, and historic photographs, as well as virtual visitor center and trail tours, interactive artifact displays, and fact sheets and overviews that enhance visitor experience in the Southwest's National Parks and Monuments and provide researchers a rich database for exploration.

Source: *The American Southwest Virtual Museum.* https://swvirtualmuseum.nau.edu/wp/. Accessed 26 June 2023.

IT'S HOT AND DRY

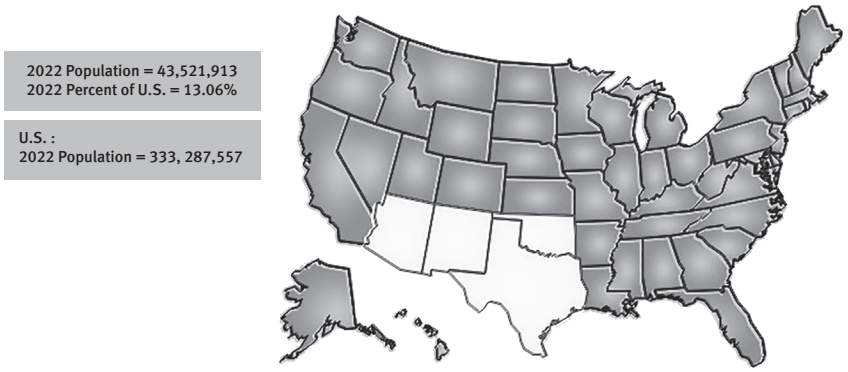
The Environmental Protection Agency recently issued a report, "A Closer Look: Temperature and Drought in the Southwest." It focused on six states that are commonly thought of as "southwestern:" Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. The report defines the area as characterized at least in part by arid landscapes and scarce water supplies. Key points include:

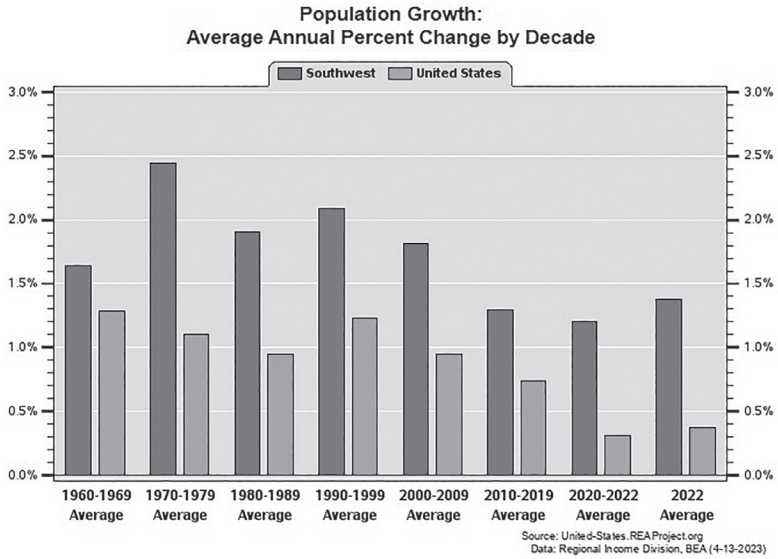
- Every part of the Southwest experienced higher average temperatures between 2000 and 2020 than the long-term average (1895–2020). Some areas were more than 2°F warmer than average. . .
- Large portions of the Southwest have experienced drought conditions since weekly Drought Monitor records began in 2000. For extended periods from 2002 to 2005 and from 2012 to 2020, nearly the entire region was abnormally dry. . .
- Based on the long-term Palmer Index, drought conditions in the Southwest have varied since 1895. Since the early 1900s, the Southwest has experienced wetter conditions during three main periods: the 1900s, 1940s, and 1980s. Drier conditions occurred through the 1920s/1930s, again in the 1950s, and since 1990, when the Southwest has seen some of the most persistent droughts on record.

United States Environmental Protection Agency. "A Closer Look: Temperature and Drought in the Southwest." *United States Environmental Protection Agency,* April 2021, https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/southwest.

POPULATION GROWTH IN THE SOUTHWEST

The Pacific Northwest Regional Economic Analysis Project (PNREAP) is a not-for-profit corporation organized to foster and further regional economic research, analysis, education, outreach, and decision-making. It defines the American Southwest very narrowly. However, the population growth of the region outperformed the nation in every decade since the 1960s.

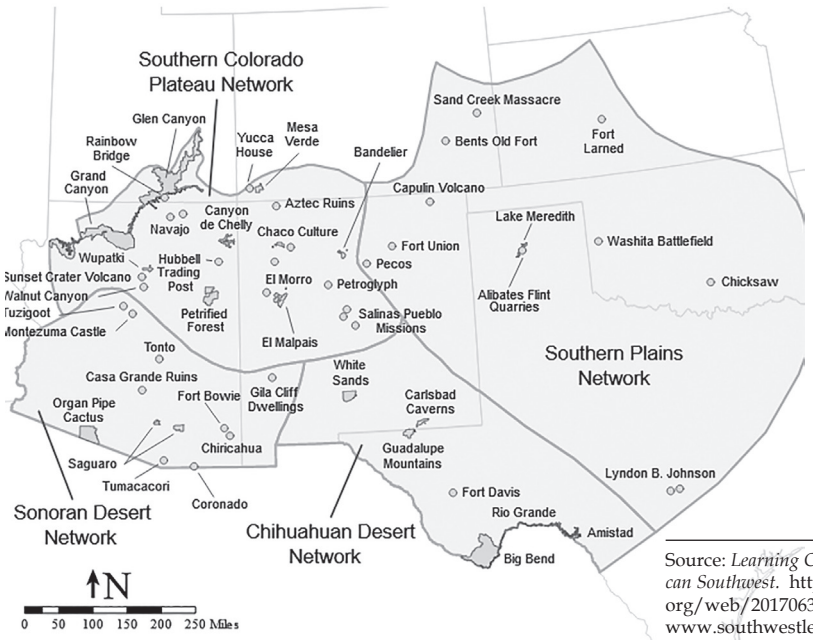




Source: PNREAP. "Southwest vs. United States Comparative Trends Report: Population, 1958-2022." *United States Regional Economic Analysis Project,* https://united-states.reaproject.org/analysis/comparative-trends-analysis/population/reports/960000/0/.

THE NATIONAL PARKS IN THE SOUTHWEST

The Learning Center of the American Southwest was a collaboration among 48 national park units in four NPS Inventory and Monitoring Networks, three Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units (CESUs), and several nonprofit partners. Although no longer maintained, the website has useful information about the area including fact sheets, resource briefs, and project summaries. It has essentially been replaced by the Desert Research Learning Center.



Source: *Learning Center of the American Southwest.* https://web.archive.org/web/20170630230547/http://www.southwestlearning.org/. Accessed 29 June 2023.

COLLABORATIVES

The Southwest Collaboratives Support Network links place-based collaboratives across the Southwest, which they define as Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah. One such collaborative in Utah is the Escalante River Watershed Partnership (http://escalanteriverwatershedpartnership.org/). The mission of the Network is:

". . .to transform how partners work collaboratively to conserve, restore, and sustain large landscapes and their natural and human communities through building capacity and peer-to-peer support among the facilitators and leaders that work with these collaboratives."

Source: *Southwest Collaboratives Support Network.* https://www.swcollaboratives.org/. Accessed 29 June 2023.

EDITORIAL MATTER

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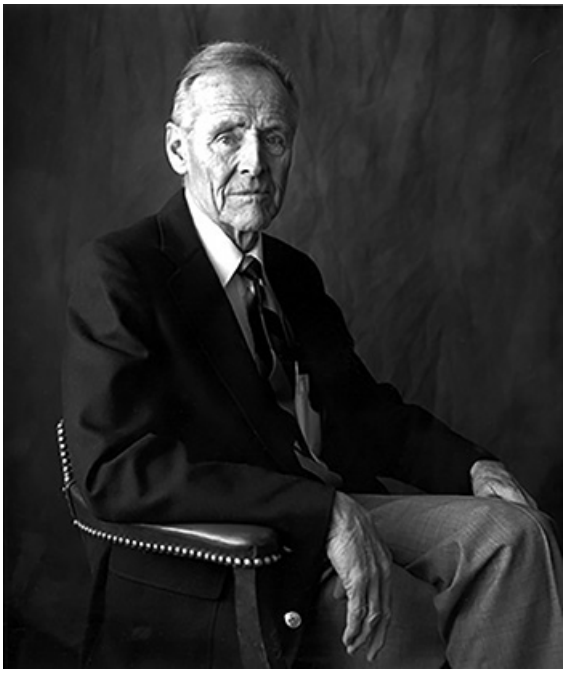
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Art

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Essay

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South Asia Subfocus

Conversation

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