

EST 1983

WEBER

THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

Spring/Summer 2025 | Volume 41 | Number 2

EST 1983
WEBER
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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.

A note
from the editor's desk

We dedicate this issue to Megan Marie Hamilton, who served as an assistant professor of STEM education at Weber State University at the time of her passing in June 2024. Megan was a citizen of the White Earth Nation and honored her Anishinaabe heritage. The Megan Marie Hamilton Indigenous STEM Scholar Endowment Fund at Utah State University extends her work and legacy, and recognizes her contributions toward increasing access to STEM education for Indigenous peoples and other historically marginalized groups. (Please see p. 44 for a fuller biographical note.)

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference –
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

— Emily Dickinson,
"There's a certain Slant of light"

I couldn't distinguish the symptoms from my heart. It was polarizing to be told there was a diagnosis for the behaviors I felt justified in having.

The way being healed is never real unless every moment of every day you remind yourself of your progress and remind yourself not to go back, or hurt someone, or do the wrong thing—it's not healing unless you keep moving—you're never done.

— Terese Marie Mailhot, Seabird Island Band First Nation,
Heart Berries (2018)

A voice said, Look me in the stars
And tell me truly, men of earth,
If all the soul-and-body scars
Were not too much to pay for birth.

— Robert Frost,
"A Question"

Cover art: *Perpetual Ceremony no. 01 (Limpia for Zina Horteska)*, 2024. Charcoal, beads, beeswax, feathers, glitter, clay, maize, cobija San Marcos, on osb. 17" x 14." Ogden Contemporary Arts. Photo credit: Mariah Johnson



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Colum McCann



Jason De León



Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion



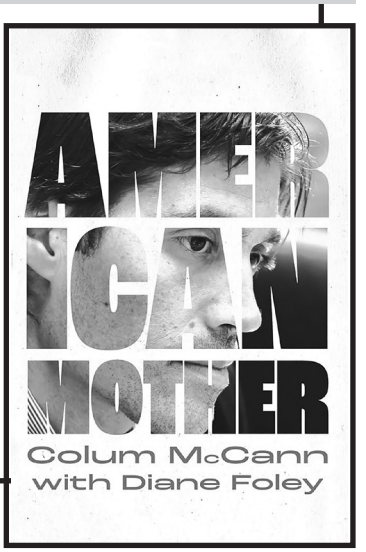
Luis Álvaro Sahagún Nuño

Otherness, Empathy, and the Power of Writing

Siân Griffiths



A Conversation with
Colum McCann



In this interview, we hear from a man who has explored the power of narrative in its most profound form: the power to create empathy, and through that empathy to engender peace. Colum McCann is the author of seven novels, three story collections, and two works of non-fiction. He's earned many accolades, including the 2009 National Book Award for his novel Let the Great World Spin, *and his work has been published in over forty languages.*

In his novels, McCann shatters the singular narrative plot line, and from its pieces he offers individual but interconnected stories, tucking us briefly into each life, allowing us to inhabit, among other places, the cockpit of the first transatlantic flight, the impoverished streets of the 1970s Bronx that form the beat of mother/daughter sex workers, the grief of a Palestinian father who lost his daughter, the grief of an Israeli father who lost his daughter, the borrowed rooms of an enslaved writer as he first visits Ireland, the frozen midwestern lake turned ice farm from which an immigrant family hoists their living, the line on which a tight rope walker balances, Trade Center-high, over Manhattan.

As McCann writes, "The thing about love is that we come alive in bodies not

*our own." It heartens me to know that his books have been read and quoted by presidents and statesmen. Of McCann's latest work, the musician and activist Sting writes, "*American Mother *is a book that will shake your soul out." I suspect all of McCann's books could be described this way. Which is to say that, if you read with an open heart, the work of Colum McCann just may make you a better, more compassionate human being.*

McCann's humanitarian work extends well beyond the page. He is president and co-founder of the non-profit global story exchange, Narrative 4. *This organization brings students from vastly differing backgrounds together to swap stories and find within them their shared humanity. As McCann writes, "It's an act of radical empathy. . . . You tell my story and I'll tell yours."*

It has become commonplace to despair at our world, its politics, its hatreds. Though he does not flinch from writing of profoundly sad events, McCann's work is nothing short of a miraculous balm against cynicism. As he has said, "We have a duty to hope – despite all the evidence in front of us." This is the brave work we must shoulder. His writings show us how.

In previous interviews, I've heard you tell a story about watching your father write his first book. Will you share that story again here?

Sure. I grew up in a house filled with books. My dad was a professional football player; he played for Charlton Athletic in England. My dad took a job as a newspaper reporter and then became a features editor. Writers used to come to our house all the time, looking for a few bob so they could go down to the pub. Taxis would pull up outside of the house, and out would come people like Benedict Kiley, or Con Houlihan—famous literary figures. Back then, there were no "drink links," what we called ATM machines back then, and the banks would all be closed. So, they came knocking at our door, looking for twenty pounds to go out on the town. My dad would give them the twenty pounds and say, "I want an article from you next week." And they would, inevitably, do the article for him the next week. I can almost hear the taxi slushing its way down the street, on the way to the pub.

My father wrote books, so the sound of my childhood is the sound of typing coming from our garden shed. He started to write kids' soccer books when I was about seven years old. He would come inside with these big reams of paper, and he would give me the stories that he was working on and ask me what I thought of them. I would just tell him, "I don't know" at that stage. I was his first editor, you know. Those stories eventually got published. The first one is called *Goals for Glory*, another one is called *We are the Champions*—they're quite popular in England and Ireland. In my school, Mr. Kells was my third-grade teacher. He said that if we behaved ourselves, on Friday afternoons, he would, over the course of a number of weeks, read one of these books aloud to the class. I was a bit embarrassed by all of this, but secretly very proud. I remember that on the last day, when he read the last chapter of the book, there was a moment when the character of the book,

Georgie Goode, scored a goal and won the championship at the end, against all odds. A kid who sat in front of me, Christopher, jumped up out of his desk in excitement. I remember thinking, that's really odd. That story came from my father's head; it came from my father's fingers; I saw that story on paper, and now it's being transferred, not only into the air, but into somebody's body. I remember thinking that was a very peculiarly wonderful thing. I think that was the first moment when I realized the power of writing. I was beginning to think that I wanted to write, too.

What was the *moment that you first thought of yourself as a writer? I feel like that's a big step for a lot of writers – going from, I'm a person who* wants *to write, to I* am *a writer.*

You know, I was published at a very early age. I was a soccer reporter at the age of twelve. I'd get on my bicycle and pedal to various games, and then go back home to phone in my reports. I was a journalist right up until the age of twenty-one-years-old. When I came to the United States, I rode a bicycle across the United States for a year and a half. I wrote two books, and they failed miserably—they're still in a drawer somewhere. My mantra is, "No matter, try again, fail again, fail better."

It's originally Samuel Beckett's mantra, obviously. I *felt* like a writer when I was going through those years and years of rejection slips. I suppose it wasn't until I had my third book out that I actually had the gumption to go to a party, and when people asked me, "What do you do?," I'd say, "I'm a writer." And then they'd say weird things to me like, "What do you write?," and I'd say, "I write fiction," and they'd say, "Oh, I hate fiction," and I'd say, "Oh, thanks."

I've been writing now, more or less full-time, for almost thirty years. I've had all sorts of jobs. I was a bartender for a while— I probably made more money bartending than doing anything else. I dug ditches; I was a teacher; I've done all sorts of odd jobs as well. I feel very lucky to be able to make a living as a writer now.

It's become popular lately to cite studies that show that reading encourages empathy. I don't doubt those studies; I'm sure they're correct. But, I've also read a lot of books that seem to reduce people and their characters, making easy heroes and villains, and asking little of the reader in terms of empathy. Those books may offer rollicking plots, but they don't do much in terms of expanding our humanity. Your work seems to embrace the inverse of this. You go deep into each of your character's minds and really inhabit them. You write from hugely varied points of view – from historical figures like Frederick Douglass, or Alcock and Brown, to lesser known people like Rami and Bassam in Apeirogon*, or invented figures like Corrigan, the radical Irish monk, or Tilly, the Black sex worker, in* Let the Great World Spin*. Including that variety of experiences and voices seems fundamental to your writing and is a core part of your art. What draws you in that direction?*

This is a very contemporary notion—who gets to write what and why—and I think it's incredibly important to confront it. I have written about a variety of topics, in all sorts of different directions. People are talking a lot these days about cultural appropriation. This all started at the university level in the 1980s—back then, it was considered a rarefied thing. All these people were speaking from ivory towers, and people thought it was a bit of a crazy notion, but it wasn't, because there was truth in it. The idea has filtered down into popular culture. And it's a good question, because writers have gone in, artists have gone in, corporations have gone in, and plundered different cultures. They've condescended, and patronized, and done all sorts of things. I have to give kudos to people who say, "You've got to be careful about what sort of territory you step into, and what sort of story you tell."

But on the same hand, and this is really important, the *exact same* hand, *not* the other hand; it's *not* the *opposite* argument. There is a way to go into a topic, or into a culture, or into a place, or into a character, with your head bowed, saying, "I need to know." Approaching a topic in that way will help it become an active cultural celebration, because it will increase my own engagement, my own community, my own nationality, by allowing us entry into the story. I talk a lot with my friend Marlon James, the Jamaican novelist, about this. We actually did a public debate about this, and we both came up with the notion that it's all about honesty. It comes down to how honest you are with the character and with the stories. I've written novels from all sorts of different points of view. Like with my last book, I went into Israel and Palestine and some people said I have no right. In fact, I questioned myself in doing so. But we write towards our obsessions. I think every novel I've written is actually an Irish novel, even if it has taken place outside of Ireland.

I would counsel younger writers out there not to be afraid, not to be limited, not to let these lanes of narrowness that are occurring in certain cultural circles limit you. It's a fad, and it will go away. I like the world. I'm interested in other people. I really like listening to other people's stories. One of the things that I learned when I was traveling through the U.S. on that bicycle was that the value of the art of listening was actually much more profound than telling the story. I like to live my life and my stories out loud.

What kind of research do you do to get into the voice of your characters so that they feel authentic, and believable, and lived in as fully as your characters always do?

Always go for the most extreme detail. They say, "God is in the details." The devil is in the details, too. I wrote a book called *Dancer*, which is a fictionalization of the life of Rudolf Nureyev. I knew nothing about dance when I wrote the book. I mean, honestly, you should see me dance, you'd laugh. I'm Irish, I can't dance. Anyway, I was researching this book while my daughter Isabella was going to ballet school. I remember taking her to the ballet, *The Nutcracker,* at Christmas time. We were sitting there in the seats, and snow was coming down on stage during the performance. Isabella leaned across me, took my hand, and said, "Oh, Daddy, it's so beautiful, is it real?" There were fifty dancers up there on stage, and I'm thinking, I'm going to go talk to these dancers next week, and I'm going to tell them what my beautiful little daughter said about the performance.

And so, I went and told them the next week, and they said, "That's the moment we hate most in the ballet." I asked why, and they said, "The snow that's coming down as we're up there looking angelic, and beautiful, and totally at ease. . . well, that's actually Styrofoam. That Styrofoam gets swept up every night and put back up in the net, with

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little bits of dust, and little bits of mouse poop, and pegs of earrings. It's all coming down on us, and all we want to do is stand there and sneeze." It was such an extreme thing, such an extreme detail, it seemed so absolutely true that only a dancer would know it; it would be almost impossible to imagine that sort of detail. So, sometimes you go for that sort of detail to get in behind your character. And that sort of detail can take care of a lot of other details that go before it. Am I talking smoke and mirrors? Well, kind of—you want to have all the truth and all the honesty at the same time. I promise you, if I only wrote about myself, and the world that I lived in, I would bore myself to tears. I like waking up in the morning, looking in the mirror, and saying, "Thank God, I don't have to spend the next twenty-four hours with *you*." I like escaping into other places.

For me, writing a book is almost like going to university again. I generally spend three or four years on a book. My most recent book, ***American Mother,*** my first nonfiction book, was a little quicker than that.

I want to come back to that, because I'm curious how it was to work with another person while crafting a narrative. But before I do, I want to explore the idea of detail. One of the things that I love about your writing is that you don't hesitate to stretch out a small moment. You pay particular attention to minute details. I'm thinking of the sweatshirt that falls off the tight rope walker at the beginning of the opening scene in Let the Great World Spin. *Some might think that level of detail is boring, but it never is in your work. When describing this falling sweatshirt, for instance, the people who are watching think, at first, that it's a body falling, which creates a heart-gripping moment.*

I'm also thinking of the moment in Apeirogon *where the focus is on a child's candy bracelet as her father is traveling with her in an ambulance and she is dying. It's a devastating scene, paired with such careful description. Each written moment is so closely observed that your writing never feels overwrought; it feels spare and concise. The simple physical objects convey incredible depth of emotion. How do you approach finding the* right *detail – the one that feels unexpected and yet rings with truth? Do you find yourself writing and then discarding details? Or, does the image come first and help you create the scene? Or, is it something radically different?*

My new favorite phrase is, "I don't know." It's a good phrase to arm yourself with—particularly in these times when we are all so certain of things. Often, as a writer, you don't know what it is you're doing. You're flying by the seat of your pants and you're hoping to God to get through the day. When you're creating a novel, there are times when you just enter into the mystery and you're hoping to pierce through and get to the other side. The one thing that I *do* know is that the tiny can reveal the great; small can become epic. If we try to be *too* epic at first, and only epic, it falls and becomes pretentious, or declaratory; it just doesn't feel right. And if it remains ***only*** tiny, unless it has a real intention to reveal something epic about human nature, it won't work either. But, a little bit of both, working together, help the details of the real world reveal the other world—the world that we all want to know about. And the other world that we all want to know about is in the ineffable things, the difficult things for us to actually put a map on, issues like love and pride; pity, sacrifice, and compassion; all of these different things, even violence and hatred. It's hard to talk about them as ideas unless you're a philosopher, and I'm certainly not a philosopher. I can find a moment that reveals these things and then allow the reader to step in somewhere.

The other important thing is, the writer should not attempt to ***tell*** the reader anything. I think you have to treat your reader as somebody who's much cleverer than you are. They

My new favorite phrase is, "I don't know." It's a good phrase to arm yourself with – particularly in these times when we are all so certain of things. Often, as a writer, you don't know what it is you're doing. You're flying by the seat of your pants and you're hoping to God to get through the day. When you're creating a novel, there are times when you just enter into the mystery and you're hoping to pierce through and get to the other side. The one thing that I do *know is that the tiny can reveal the great; small can become epic.*

will get more out of the book than you are able to tell them. You prepare the landscape, but you don't *tell* people anything, you *allow* people to *feel*. One thing I've tried to do is to enter the pulse of the moment. I want my reader to go in and feel like they're at the very beating heart of what's going on. I want them temporarily removed from the world. I'm also very interested in the inexecutable, the thing that people say you *can't* do, that you *can't* write.

I was very scared to talk about Israel and Palestine. But most books that I go into, I go into scared about. I always abandon a book at least once. Mostly, it's because I want some self-pity, or I want pity from my family; that "poor you, you don't have to wash the dishes, love. I know you're going through a hard time" kind of attention. But also, it's partly because I want to test how much I love my characters. I want to leave them for a while, because when I leave them and then come back, I realize that it was worth it after all. If you embark on a new project halfway through the project that you're in, it's not necessarily a bad thing, because you realize this is not as good as what you were doing before, so you go back to it.

I think you said something similar in a recent BBC interview. You said something like, "To be a writer, you have to be reckless; you have to be ready to leap off the ledge."

Kurt Vonnegut said, "We should be continually jumping off of cliffs and developing our wings on the way down."

It makes me think, because so seldom when I'm sitting at my desk, is there a cliff, right? But, I feel that call to bravery, to do something different. In a book like American Mother*, when did you feel those moments where you had to be courageous when facing the page?*

American Mother, for those of you who haven't read it, is my most recent book; it just came out two weeks ago. It's a nonfiction piece about Diane Foley, who is the mother of James Foley, the journalist who was killed in Syria, in 2014.

In order to prepare for the book, I went to a courthouse in Virginia with Diane to talk to her son's killer, a British jihadist who had been part of an infamous torture group. I knew this was going to be my first book of nonfiction, and I wanted to capture her story. I wanted to take myself out of the story; I didn't want it to be like Truman Capote in *In Cold Blood*—which is a great book, by the way; I didn't want to become a character in the book. I wanted the characters to concentrate around Diane and her son, Jim.

In doing so, I had to do a number of things. For instance, Diane is a woman of deep faith. I had to put myself into her shoes. She finds it very difficult to articulate what that faith is. Because faith is a difficult thing to articulate anyway, putting a language around what you believe, and then to try to convince others of its truth, is a difficult thing. So, I had to put words to the thoughts that

she had and then show them to her. Saying "Prayer is the bread of the soul" is not something that I believe, necessarily, but it is something that Diane believes in. That was a huge challenge for me—being consistently honest to her and yet also consistently honest to the reader at the same time.

Occasionally, she would tell me that I was pushing it. She'd say, "You're a good fiction writer, Colum." Even sometimes in ***Apeirogon***, there were times I pushed the "truth." For example, if any of you read ***Apeirogon***, it's about an Israeli and a Palestinian; both men have lost their daughters. One of the characters, Rami, the Israeli, drives a motorbike. He's seventy years old. He drives a motorbike; he drives very fast, and very well. In the first scene, he's on a motorbike going through the streets of Jerusalem. After he read it, he called me up and he said, "Colum, I love all this, but you have me on the wrong bike." I said, "I know." Then he said, "What do you mean, you know?"

In the book, I put him on a bike with gears. I didn't want to put him on an automatic, because the bike with gears has words like "clutch," "gear," and "revometer." You can physically put the reader on the bike using language and terminology so that they actually get on the bike with Rami. That was the most important thing—I wanted the reader to be on the bike with him. If I changed his bike in order to get the reader on the bike, on the *real* bike, that's a form of manipulation of the truth, but it gets to a deeper honesty that's going on there. While working with Diane to write this book of nonfiction, I wasn't allowed to do that. She wouldn't allow me to do that. My father used to say, "A good marriage is feeling easy in the harness." And I think with the truth, there's some similarities in that phrase; but sometimes I just want to break free of the harness.

Creative writing is often heralded as self-expression, but when I'm writing, part of the challenge is to enact a kind of self-erasure so that I can fully inhabit another person's experience. You write, "We step into the shoes of others in order to be more able to step back into our own." And, in a recent BBC interview, you said, "I sometimes think that by not writing directly about myself, I might, in fact, be writing more directly about my own particular experience." I think it's because it removes the temptation to lie. It made me wonder, are those seemingly contradictory ideas of self-expression and self-erasure actually linked? What are your thoughts on that—how do you feel yourself negotiating those two things?

That's a great question. First of all, never believe a writer, especially when they're on the spot and they're being asked questions; all sorts of answers will come up. I once said, "Writing about *real* people shows an absolute failure of the imagination." I said this to ***Atlantic Monthly Magazine***. About six months later, I embarked on the book about Rudolf Nureyev, so, take everything with a grain of salt. Of course, you've got to find your own salt; you've got to find your own water, shake it out, evaporate it, and make it for yourself.

I feel much freer when I'm not writing about myself. I have become *way* too conscious, and I would lie *way* too much if I was writing directly about myself. Now, I do some journalism and have written about my father, but, in general, I find a real liberation that comes with going outside of myself. The questions become, what is biography? What is autobiography? Can you write beyond what you know? Is it philosophically possible to write what you don't know?

I think my main argument for young writers, in particular, is not to write what you know, but to write what you *want* to know, or to write towards what you seemingly don't know. And in doing that, you will write what you *knew*, but you weren't entirely *aware* of. It's a process of leaping through your consciousness and finding the story that really speaks to you. Sometimes, we don't

even know what that story happens to be. It's about excavating your imagination and coming up with that little piece of ice, that Márquez piece of ice. It's like discovering ice in a very warm climate. For me, the liberation comes from being free to go into other people. So, even if you're writing about *a* mother, like I wrote about, my *own* mother is inevitably going to come into that equation, or certainly the thoughts about my own mother. So why just be limited to that? Why doesn't it become something that you can expand outwards?

Like I said, I really do like the world. I know it's a tough, dark place right now, and we're living in really dark times, but I'm reminded of Bertolt Brecht, who said, "Will there be singing in the dark times?" And he said, "Yes, we will be singing *of* the dark times." So, it's the job of the writer to get in there, or the artist in general, to get in there and figure out what's going on.

It makes me imagine the character as a kind of pitcher, and you (as the writer) are pouring yourself like water into this pitcher and taking its shape. Do you find your thoughts shaped in different directions than they otherwise would be if you were writing about a character who was more fully just a mirror for yourself?

I don't know. I mean, did I change because I wrote about Rami and Bassam? I certainly learned a lot about the world. Did I *personally* change? Did I change my viewpoints about humanity? I have certainly shifted somewhat, but I don't think it was a complete, fundamental change. I try not to write too much about really bad characters. I suppose that scares me a little bit. If you look at *Apeirogon*, there's a lot of evil that is going on there, but I tried to just get in there and be as honest as possible.

How was it different when you were working with Diane Foley — in the moments when Diane's beliefs or politics might have been different from your own?

Diane's son was kidnapped, tortured, and killed. He was in a cell with Spanish people, French people, Danish people, British people, and other Americans. The French paid to get their people out. The Spanish paid to get their people out. The Danish allowed the families to pay to get people out. Diane was told that she would be prosecuted if she tried to pay the hostage money for her son.

Can you imagine that? Just think about that for a moment. You are a mother, your son is in Syria, and the government tells you that you will be prosecuted if you try to give them money. And she's saying, "Well, what are you doing to get him out?" And they're saying, "No, we don't negotiate with terrorists." Can you imagine?

I think my main argument for young writers, in particular, is not to write what you know, but to write what you want *to know, or to write towards what you seemingly don't know. And in doing that, you will write what you* knew, *but you weren't entirely* aware *of. It's a process of leaping through your consciousness and finding the story that really speaks to you. Sometimes, we don't even know what that story happens to be. It's about excavating your imagination and coming up with that little piece of ice, that Márquez piece of ice. It's like discovering ice in a very warm climate. For me, the liberation comes from being free to go into other people.*

Later, she sat with President Obama in the White House. Obama had a cup of tea, and she didn't. He said, "Your son was my absolute priority." And she said, "With all due respect, sir, my son was not your absolute priority." She told me that story, and I said, "Diane, please don't tell me that story, because I'm going to have to write it, and I really like Obama." As it turned out, she shifted him somewhat, and his policies *did* eventually change.

That is the wonderful thing about Diane Foley and what she has done in the world. She's an *ordinary* woman in her 60s when her son is kidnapped. In her 70s, she starts changing the whole landscape of hostage taking and wrongfully detained people. She is a nurse practitioner; she lives in a little house in New Hampshire with a white picket fence; and yet, she has the power of her conviction to change things. She has faith, yes, but she also has courage—a moral courage that she inherited from her son. I want the reader to be able to understand everything about her.

Now, Diane originally didn't want anybody to write the book; she wanted to write the book herself. But just because you have a story doesn't mean you have a book. When you get there, and you try to put language down on the page, everything that was in your mind and your heart doesn't necessarily translate through your fingers. You know the feeling when you get frustrated because you know what it is you want to say, but you're just not able to say it. It is about stamina, desire, and perseverance on the part of the writer to get readers to understand the moral courage of the characters at hand, and to let them know that it's hard work. Sometimes, people will say, "I wish I could write a book," or, "I wish I had the time to write a book." Well, "I wish I had the time to be a brain surgeon." Imagine saying something like that to a brain surgeon. It's tough to write a book. You have to put all of yourself into it and you have to be present for the actual moment, even when it's going badly. You have to keep your arse in the chair. When it's going well, you can get up and go down to the park, and walk the dog, and wash the dishes, and do whatever else you want to do. But when it's going badly, you stay there and you fight. I used to think that there's no such thing as writer's block, but now I do. But, it doesn't matter; you sit and you face it, and you tear your hair out. I've obviously done that!

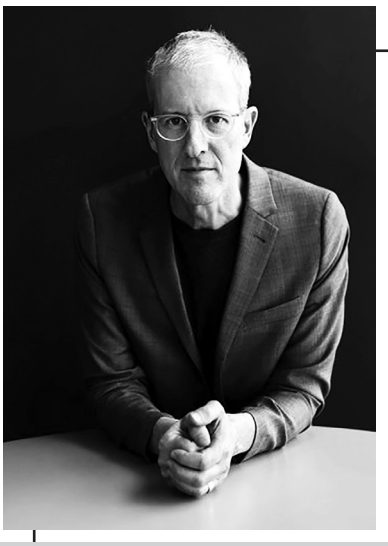
Thank you, Colum. This was a wonderful and heart-warming conversation.



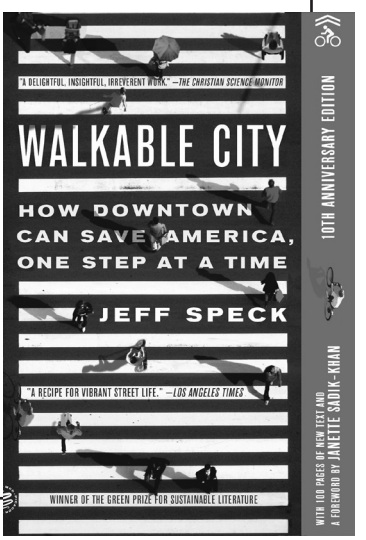
Siân Griffiths lives in Ogden, Utah, where she serves as a professor of English and creative writing at Weber State University. Her work has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Prairie Schooner, American Short Fiction*, and *Booth,* among many other publications. She is the author of the novels *Borrowed Horses* and *Scrapple,* and the short fiction chapbook, *The Heart Keeps Faulty Time*. Her essay collection, T*he Sum of Her Parts,* appeared from University of Georgia Press. Currently, she reads fiction as part of the editorial team at *Barrelhouse*. For more information, please visit sbgriffiths.com

The New Urbanism: Reframing Idea(l)s of City Walkability

Jeremy Bryson &
Jeffrey Montague



A Conversation with Jeff Speck



Jeff Speck is an author, city planner, and advocate for better urban design. His book Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time *(2012) transformed urban planning practices by demonstrating the vital benefits that accompany cities designed around walking instead of automobiles. The book became the best-selling city planning title of the past decade, and its continued relevance is demonstrated by the recently-published and updated tenth anniversary Edition, wherein Speck shows how the principles of walkability continue to apply to today's urban challenges. In addition to his work on walkable cities, he is the co-author of* Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream *(2010) as well as* The Smart Growth Manual *(2009). Throughout his career, Speck has continually pushed the boundaries of planning thought and practice. He helped establish the New Urbanism movement as director of Town Planning at DPZ & Co. As Director of Design at the National Endowment for the Arts, he oversaw the Mayors' Institute on City Design and created the Governors' Institute on*

Community Design. Since 2007, he has been a founding partner of Speck & Associates, now Speck Dempsey, an international design firm serving municipalities, non-profits, and private developers. Speck Dempsey's project portfolio includes numerous downtown master plans, transit-oriented developments, and new towns, including Utah City, a 300-acre development on Utah's urbanized Wasatch Front. Following his keynote address at the Intermountain Sustainability Summit at Weber State University in March, 2024, Jeff Speck participated in the conversation that follows. It has been edited for clarity and length.

Jeremy Bryson (JB) *For more than a decade, your* Walkable City *book, and really the ideas and concepts behind walkable cities, have had continued and important relevance in the planning profession. What makes walkability so special?*

For me, the big accidental discovery that's now my story, and I'm sticking with it, has been to reframe good city planning through the window of walkability because it's a more effective way to communicate good planning. But also, to my surprise, when I adopted that framework and went back to doing planning jobs, I found it made me a better planner, to think of things through that window. So, we first called this concept "neo-traditional town planning," but that title turned off the liberals. And then we called it "New Urbanism," which turned off the conservatives. We still call it "New Urbanism" because it has been an effective moniker. It's really just "best practices in city and regional planning," but when you call it "walkability," people can associate it better with their own lives. People may have different opinions about how car-centric or conventional they want their planning to be, but everyone likes walkable places. Everyone. Then, it has the bonus outcome of forcing planners like me, in doing our daily work, to always ask the question: will this proposal make a place more or less walkable? And when that's the question you're trying to answer in the affirmative, you end up making better choices. And that's where I could get into some of the details of the books, which discuss the useful, safe, comfortable, and interesting walk. How meeting the mandates of each of those four categories simultaneously is the only real path to making a place walkable, and how, for example, thinking about the mandate of truly achieving something like an interesting walk has caused me in my planning to make certain decisions I would have not necessarily made had I not used that framework. For example, you don't want people to be bored, so let's introduce demise lines. A demise line, as covered in one of the rules in ***Walkable City Rules*** (2018), is a trick to making a giant building look like multiple smaller buildings, so that you're not walking past the same thing for 600 feet. I don't think I would have been suggesting something like demise lines if I hadn't thought about that concept of the interesting walk in my work.

Jeffrey Montague (JM) *In an interview you did with Radio Boston earlier this year, you mentioned that it's a good thing that the book* Suburban Nation *didn't release in the 1990s because people were not ready for it then. What do you think has shifted in American culture that has people ready to discuss sprawl and walkability issues?*

I heard Andres Duany's talk that became much of ***Suburban Nation*** in 1989. I think I, and anyone else who heard that talk, was ready for it. And certainly, there have been diatribes against sprawl for almost as long as there has

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been sprawl, from the "ticky-tacky houses" onward. But I can say with some confidence that what I've witnessed—perhaps in part due to the labors of my colleagues and me, and thousands of people who've been doing this work now since the '80s—is that these concepts that were once outside or *outré* are now mainstream. And it's been rewarding and delightful to have lived through three decades of bringing these exact same ideas to city after city, and going from resistance and disbelief to not only acceptance and cooperation, but arriving on the scene where people already know what they're doing. And that's more the case in some professions than others; I think traffic engineering has lagged way behind. The big difference between 2000 and 1990 is the same as the big difference between 2010 and 2000, or between 2020 and 2010: namely, that these ideas have started to disseminate through the culture, and people don't stare at you quizzically when you share them anymore.

I showed up yesterday in Eden, Utah, and met with John Lewis, who developed most of the town. He has a plan for what's called Eden Crossing, which is going in a block from the main intersection that defines the heart of Eden. As I've done two hundred times, I sat down, the plan was placed in front of me, and I was asked to critique it. Well, I was able to make it better, but it was already a pretty good plan. It had rear alleys. It had parkable streets that were not thought of as parking lots because there were trees on the edge of the sidewalk between the building fronts and the edge of the road. It had a central square for farmer's markets. It had at least four different building types from commercial to single family—through the spectrum. It had a street network, it had pedestrian streets. Based on the history of what's built there, if a conventional developer in an out-of-the-way small city is, before I arrive, already making projects that are so much better than what was being done in the twentieth century, that gives me tremendous satisfaction. Partly because I may have played a role, but more because it's just an improvement in the standard of practice.

Now, I should say a million impediments still exist. Lewis's project is being fought by NIMBYs—people who categorically stand for "not in my backyard"— who don't understand that no growth is not a choice. They don't understand that the choice is between planned growth or unplanned growth. They're going to get growth eventually, and they need to understand that planned growth will be a better outcome than unplanned growth. Planned growth always looks worse because it's bigger. If you're going to plan a neighborhood, or town, or region, then it's naturally bigger than one person coming in with a Kwik-E Mart, but that's a message that needs to be better communicated. As a result, for example, of the neighbors' opinions—and I believe the planning board—the retail that is surrounding this town square—which is a broad square that needs buildings of some substance to hold its edges so that it is spatially contained and therefore an outdoor living room and therefore comfortable—is being required to be one story tall. One-story

buildings, no residential above, no balconies or windows to give eyes to the street or life to the street space. Socially, it's a disaster compared to what would happen if they were even allowed to go as tall as the nearby single-family homes, which are two stories tall. And so, there's as much frustration still as there is satisfaction that folks just don't understand that height can be a good thing.

(JB) *I was really pleased to hear during your keynote address today about the familiarity you have with Utah, Utah issues, and your broad sense of what's happening along the Wasatch Front and beyond. On that, we have a couple of questions about* Utah City*, the large urban development in Vineyard on the shores of Utah Lake. Your company, Speck Dempsey, was involved in the planning and design of that city. I'd like you to speak to* Utah City *as a large development, but also more broadly on other developments around the American West. For example, along the Wasatch Front you have* The Point*, a large development on the site of the former Utah State Prison site in Draper, and then there is the large development known as* California Forever*. So, I'd like to speak about Utah City, specifically, but also these large developments that seem to be popping up. How do these types of developments advance walkability in the American West?*

You have to think regionally. It's almost like what you learn when you put bike lanes in, in a downtown area. You can add a bike lane, and add a bike lane, and add a bike lane, but you won't fundamentally change the size of the biking population until you have a comprehensive, safe, low stress network. I always have to tell cities: don't be discouraged; don't give up, because you may not see that uptick in cycling. In fact, many of them *do* see an uptick in cycling, but you won't see that major uptick in cycling until a mom feels comfortable letting her kid truly get somewhere useful on the bike, which means a comprehensive, low stress system. Similarly, I'm sure the sustainability goal of the whole transit effort here in Utah has been about replacing the dispersed auto-oriented system with a more nodal transit basis. It's important to understand what the car does to the landscape, which is that settlement historically has always been nodal—it's always been based on transportation hubs, from the port of New York City to the Golden Spike in Utah. The transit nature of transportation lends



"Utah City Civic Plaza." *Utah City*, https://utahcity.com/about/#slider-4-6.

itself to nodal development around stops, which generates concentration and results in walkability. What the automobile does is, it equalizes the entire landscape, because anywhere you can paint a thin strip of asphalt all of a sudden becomes just as valuable as anywhere else, and that was the principal component in allowing us to disperse. Looking systematically at a place like the valley, as we are able to accrete more TOD [Transit Oriented Development] of true critical mass and mixed use around these stops, every one is going to help, but only when you have a significant population living in these communities who are able to park and ride—so that the one end of the ride is walkable—do you start to see the impacts on quality of life and therefore on climate that one is hoping for. But it's a long game. It's an important game. The only disconnect here in Utah is your simultaneous doubling down on the highway infrastructure, as money is potentially wasted on a train infrastructure that people won't take if driving continues to be subsidized in that way.

(JB) *So going back to* Utah City*, you've said that* Utah City *has more automobile parking in it than any other project you've worked on?*

Yes. For two reasons. One, it's bigger, and, two, the public and the municipality's greatest fear about the project was that it would not handle its own parking. Most of the talks I give around the country, and I give about one a month, are evening talks, and usually there's a dinner after the lecture for the funders, so maybe twelve people around a table. About half an hour into that dinner, I stand up and say: "Now can we talk about something besides parking?" Because, literally, my experience in Vineyard and everywhere is that we continue to ask the wrong question about parking. As Donald Shoup, the author of ***The High Cost of Free Parking***, says: "The question isn't, can we have enough parking. The question is, how can we provide, design, and manage parking in a way that our cities and neighborhoods will thrive?" And if you ask that question, you get an entirely different answer than if you ask, can we have enough parking? And of course, the answer is Shoup's three-legged stool of eliminating the onsite parking requirement, pricing parking in line with its value, and creating the parking benefits district, which is the political step you need to take to get merchants and others to support the other two legs of the stool. What I'm pleased about in Vineyard is that the zoning that we've managed to wrangle with the city requires us to start with a good amount of parking, but as

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experience demonstrates that we need less, we can reduce the amount that's provided.

(JM) *How does parking function in walkable design?*

In walkable design, all the parking lots are hidden from the street, typically behind a thin crust of residential buildings or some other use. If my plan is followed with any faith whatsoever, there will not be a single surface or structured parking lot visible from a public street or paseo. However, what they're doing in the short term to make it affordable to build and gain an audience is leaving one of the many super blocks (that consist of three or four blocks of housing and other uses) vacant and offering, temporarily, cheap parking on surface until the time, hopefully soon, when they can replace that surface lot with a hidden, structured lot. But when you go there in the next couple years, you're going to see some surface parking. My clients insist that it's temporary, and I insist they not be lying to me.

(JM) *So, because it's 2024 and we're in the United States, I'd like for you to speak to your sense of the politics of walkable cities. What political challenges and opportunities have you seen, or do you foresee, in regards to creating more walkable cities?*

So, I've been very disappointed to see only recently the red/blue divide manifesting itself in city planning on the national political scene. I hadn't seen that happen before Trump. I made my reputation in red cities in red states, or at least blue cities in red states. My most impactful project early in my career as an independent practitioner was Oklahoma City. It's very easy to sell walkability on a pro-business platform. I've been on a private beach in Michigan with some billionaires, and they get it. They understand that walkability is good business, and they also like the free market to be able to function. You've probably seen in the recent literature a lot of libertarian support for eliminating single family zoning and for eliminating arbitrary parking requirements and allowing the market to function. There's also the whole Strong Towns movement, which comes from a more libertarian and right-wing perspective. Chuck Marohn, the leader of the Strong Towns movement, is a good friend of mine. I claim he's not truly a libertarian because any sort of planning is to guard against the "tragedy of the commons," which is something that libertarians don't seem to grasp. What the tragedy of the commons is, is that if everyone allows their cows to graze as much as they want on the commons, eventually there will be no food for anyone. Planning exists for that reason. What Trump and his colleagues did with the MAGA movement, and I guess it probably characterized the Tea Party as well, is that there has been an overt embrace of automobility, an overt embrace of "rolling coal," of fighting electrification, and then Trump claiming: "suburban housewives, I've saved your single-family lot." Urbanism, which from a planning perspective is about walkability and livability at the city, town, village, and hamlet scale, has come to be or continues to be associated with urban environments as in cities, which tend to be blue and diverse. And now that you have a right-wing agenda, which is openly anti-diversity, anti-immigration, and in some cases outright white nationalist, there is a clear political divide between the "poorly managed Democrat cities" (which, by the way, have lower crime than most red states) and this right-wing rural ethos that unfortunately has come to associate good urbanism with diversity. I'm working right now in a town in Indiana, another red place, and the city council actively says: "we don't want apartments because apartments bring Democrats." So, yes, it's become very politicized, and it's unfortunate because everyone still loves walkability. That's another reason to call it walkability and not New Urbanism. The latest

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preposterous QAnon theories surrounding fifteen-minute cities are a prime example of how off the rails these conversations can go. I've been at public meetings where people show up, almost in a tinfoil hat, handing out literature about how we're trying to lock people in their homes by somehow making a place more walkable. But that's just the crazies.

(JB) *The original* Walkable City *came out in 2012, with a 10th anniversary edition coming out in 2022. So, looking forward to a potential 20th anniversary edition, what are the emerging topics that you're expecting to address? What do you see on the horizon?*

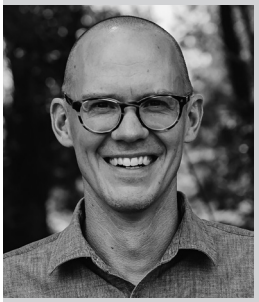
There are no new topics, because the 10th anniversary edition is only one year old! The main point I would make when asked a question like this is that the fundamentals do not change. It's like Jarrett Walker—the notable transit planner—talking about transit, but I don't want to talk about your rolling stock. The rolling stock will change, but the fundamentals, geometry, and math, do not change. Having a lot of people in a vehicle on an efficient route, doesn't matter whether it's a BRT (Bus Rapid Transit), or a light rail, or something else. Similarly, there's going to be a lot of unexpected developments in the next decade—like Covid and Zoom—but they will not change the fact that cities exist for a reason, that we come together at higher densities because it makes us more productive. The bigger the city you come from, the faster you walk, and the bigger the city you are in, the more patents per capita, not period, but per capita. There are fundamentals about what it means to be human, about being in the presence of other humans—physically and not just on Zoom—that mean that the theories we share will be just as relevant. I do want to say, if you ask me what's next, that you'll find in the back of *Walkable City* the concept of the Planner's Pledge. My colleagues and I, Emily Talen and Anne Phillips, along with a lot of helpers, are about to launch the Planner's Pledge as a national movement. It's become much more instrumental and less nitpicky. It's no longer directed as a critique at the American Planning Association, but in six months it will be out there for anyone to sign trying to create the equivalent of a Hippocratic Oath for planners. I find it fascinating that planners have existed as a profession for centuries, and as a certification for many decades, but while there's always been a heavy emphasis, appropriately, on ethics, there's never been any kind of *design* ethic. Now we know as planners that designing around the automobile is not healthy or sustainable. And yet, planners aren't asked to acknowledge that in any way in their work. We know that the history of the planning profession has been a history of

government-enabled and subsidized white flight and segregation. If you read Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, you know that whole story. The first person I'm going to ask to sign the Planner's Pledge is Richard. We're already in communication, but I haven't officially asked him yet because it's not ready. I think that if planners can't in their work, or don't want to in their work, as a personal statement, say that they will encourage and discourage certain types of planning, then they shouldn't be planners. And we're very careful to use the words "encourage" and "discourage," because when we were shaping this concept at the last Congress for New Urbanism, a number of municipal planners stood up and said: we love this, we agree with it, but actually we would lose our jobs if we were compelled to comply with many of these pro-pedestrian measures. So, the language has become not compulsory, but is at least providing an ethical direction that will add meaning to the title of being a professional planner. So, I'm excited about that.

(JM) *What role do you see students and young professionals playing in the development of a more walkable America?*

That question is irrelevant to me because, wherever you are in your career or age, you have a voice. It doesn't really matter whether someone's a student or not, or young or old. And in that context, I'll say that one of the trends I've seen in public meetings that has delighted me to no end in the last few years, or really the last decade, is that we used to have just two types of people showing up at public meetings when a developer needed approval to do a whole bunch of housing, for example. There were the FoDs, the friends of the developer, who either had some family, friendship, or financial interest in supporting the project. And then you had the NIMBYs, who—whether or not the project was the right thing for the city and the region—believed that it was the wrong thing for them and their neighborhood, and they might have been right because there might have been localized impacts that caused them to suffer, while the society as a whole improved. And the question was, was the city council strong enough and confident enough in their next election to do what was best for the city, as opposed to what everyone was shouting in the room, which still happens today, every day. In my experience, over the last decade, particularly within the last five years, there's a third group that shows up at these meetings which has neither a connection to the neighborhood or the developer and wants to see more equity in the community, wants to see more diversity in the community, wants to see more housing in the community, wants to see more multimodal transportation in the community, and they are often the voice that sways the council. You have people with personal interests on either side duking it out, and all of a sudden this disinterested but very interested group of people show up, and the city council acknowledges that this is a movement, and that someone has to speak for the people who can't afford to live in the neighborhood, people who might be displaced from the neighborhood, all of that in a way that's compelling.

(JB/JM) *Thank you for your time and this insightful conversation.*



Jeremy Bryson (PhD, Syracuse University) is a professor in the Department of Geography, Environment & Sustainability at Weber State University. His research and teaching explore environment-society interactions in urban places. He values collaborating with undergraduate students and has recently published articles with these emerging scholars on topics such as planning efforts to protect dark skies, the place-branding strategies of Utah's technology corridor, and the challenges of urban wildfire smoke in an era of changing climates.



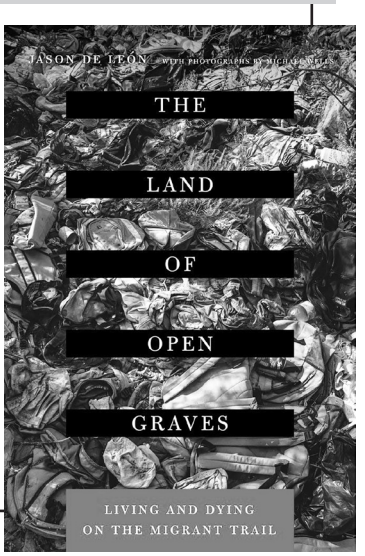
Jeffrey Montague recently graduated from Weber State University with a BS in geography with an emphasis on environment and sustainability, as well as urban planning. He is now working as a planner for the city of Layton, Utah. In this role, he seeks to facilitate socially responsible development within the community. As he continues his career, Jeffrey hopes to participate in shifting American city planning toward more sustainable practices that prioritize human and environmental health.

Accessible Anthropology

Abigail Mack &
Mark A. Stevenson



A Conversation with Jason De León



Jason De León is Professor of Anthropology and Chicana/o Studies and Director of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is also the founding executive director of the Undocumented Migration Project, a research, arts, and education collective that seeks to raise awareness about migration issues globally while also assisting families of missing migrants to be reunited with their loved ones.

A 2017 MacArthur Fellow, De León is the author of the award-winning book The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail *(2015), a trailblazing work on the human toll of undocumented migration in the U.S. borderlands of the Sonoran Desert, combining archaeological and ethnographic methods to document life and death on the migrant trail. De León's innovative work breaks new ground in combining all the tools of anthropology to create a gripping and profoundly moving account of the violence faced by migrants as a result of border policies. His latest book,* Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling *(2024), is the result of years-long ethnographic fieldwork among migrant smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico border, providing a unique and harrowing account of the actors behind the human smuggling industry. It won the 2024 National Book Award for Nonfiction.*

Abigail Mack (AM) *People often respond defensively when it comes to critiques of any institution they may align with or support. It translates productive critiques into something else: instead of reading what is actually there, the person assumes the critique is an attack on their community – on themselves – in a way that is really unproductive. I'm thinking about potential negative responses to your analyses of border policies – can you reflect on some of those responses?*

Part of it, too, is that some people have never had to question a system, especially if that system works for them. If you've never had a problem with something like police brutality, when it's brought up, it's easy to say, "Well, that's not been my experience." Somehow, questioning those things becomes "un-American." Or, the idea that the law is the law, and if you're breaking that law, then you are ***obviously*** in the wrong. We have a long history of laws that were unjust. I think it's hard for people to think about that and ask, "Oh, am I living in the Jim Crow era, but a different version of it?" I tell students, "I'm not here to change your mind. I'm just here to give you something to think about in a different way and give you some more information. If you walk away and you still hate migrants, or whatever it is, at least you know more about it; at least you have a better understanding of this thing, even if our interpretations don't align." There is this fear that "You're trying to brainwash me; you're trying to indoctrinate me." And to that I say, "All I can show you is what I know; this is a learning process for both of us." For some students, it's the first time they are dealing with some of these issues. If you haven't gone far from home, you don't really know that most of the world suffers in all kinds of ways.

Mark A. Stevenson (MS) *How have you seen the way immigration is talked about shifting since you started doing this work? It doesn't seem to have evolved in any particularly productive direction. And when you add political polarization into the mix – which is the shorthand for a lot of things going on right now – how much harder is it for you to engage in that work in terms of research and teaching?*

For a long time, I was always trying to drive home to folks—maybe in more subtle ways—that this is not a Republican issue or a Democratic issue. Democrats are equally as dirty in this whole process. President Biden is making it very clear that this issue tran-

Some people have never had to question a system, especially if that system works for them. If you've never had a problem with something like police brutality, when it's brought up, it's easy to say, "Well, that's not been my experience." Somehow, questioning those things becomes "un-American." Or, the idea that the law is the law, and if you're breaking that law, then you are obviously *in the wrong. We have a long history of laws that were unjust. I think it's hard for people to think about that and ask, "Oh, am I living in the Jim Crow era, but a different version of it?" I tell students, "I'm not here to change your mind. I'm just here to give you something to think about in a different way and give you some more information."*

scends political parties. In some ways, it has made it easier for me to make some of these arguments. Nothing has changed for the good; but I never expected it to either. Same thing is going on, and I'll keep doing what I'm doing. All I can do is try to educate. People can do whatever they want with that information. President Trump helped me realize that there was so much wasted energy around the Thanksgiving dinner table. For a time, I was convinced that if people only knew how much others suffered, then they would feel differently, but no, clearly not. I tell students I just walk away from those situations. There are some conversations I just can't have anymore. I'd rather focus on people who just have questions. It's a "meet the new boss, the same as the old boss" kind of thing.

(AM) *My anthropology students are really excited about doing anthropology, about writing in a way that allows them to be less afraid of being attacked based on any biases. They are interested in the work of showing humanity. There will always be people who are invested in a particular way of thinking, who get defensive and don't see or hear what's actually going on. You've done so many interviews – are there questions that are your favorite type of questions to answer, or questions that are your least favorite type of questions to answer?*

My least favorite questions are about policy. I don't have good answers for those questions, and I tend to give responses that frustrate people. If I had a good policy, one that was realistic, I would offer it. No "one size fits all" policy is going to fix things like climate change or political corruption. People tend to get frustrated by that response, and then I get frustrated because I wish I had a better response. Because people want answers. When I published my first book, there was a negative review that stuck with me. It said, "You don't give us any policy recommendations." Any policy recommendation I would have had would have felt dated within two years anyway—it all feels short-sighted. What is the problem? Is the problem capitalism? Is it climate change? It's a million of those things. As anthropologists, we're expected to tack on recommendations at the end of our books. I've kind of refused to do that, and that makes some people unhappy, including the press.

One of the questions I like is, "What are your influences?" Because I think about all this as music. I got asked that once. We were doing an exhibition as part of an art festival where they were interviewing all the artists, and I get thrown into that category occasionally, where they were asking me questions that you would typically ask an artist, and not an anthropologist, and they asked who my influences were. I thought, "That's interesting," because it's not really anthropology, or other anthropologists whose work I find interesting. My influences are basically punk rock and the band Fishbone. Punk rock is a big influence, because it's this whole "do it yourself" kind of thing. I wanted to be an anthropologist, and I wanted to do it my way. I come from a punk rock background. In the '90s, they made a print magazine called *Book Your Own Fucking Life*. It was a manual that told you things like, "Some dude in Japan has a garage you can play in if you can get there." You could call them up or send them a postcard with your demo. My band decided to go on tour; we had a sack of quarters and this book. We'd just make a phone call and say, "Hey, we're in Biloxi, Mississippi, right now. We're going to be in Mobile, Alabama, tomorrow. Can we play in your coffee shop?" They'd say, "Sure, come on in." If we needed things like band T-Shirts, we made them in our backyard. I've always believed in that kind of approach to things. With exhibitions, you don't need to be a fancy artist, you don't need a fancy art space to work in, you can just do these things. I think that has always been my approach to everything—if you want to make it happen, let's just do it. You don't need permission, you don't need approval

from the powers that be. Make a record; make a screen-print; do whatever you want.

Anthropology is like that, too. We were doing work in Arizona, and I had these forensic questions. Why can't we just do it? So I took a deep-dive into forensic science. I wanted to know how they did it. I knew how to run an experiment; I knew how to record field data; I went out and did it. And that was really just me wearing the punk rock hat. I tell students that if you want to do an exhibition, do it. If you want to make a podcast, do it. They have the technology; they just need the time and the energy. I bring that approach into all of my work. That's where the band Fishbone comes in. When I was a kid, I was getting into music, into punk rock, and I was introduced to this band. It's a Black, rock, funk, reggae, metal band. They put everything into one pot and mix it all up however they see fit, and then they add in politics. For me, it was like, here's this band doing crazy, genre-bending stuff. They're not asking permission, and they're being really outspoken about the issues that are important to me. I loved that melting pot— taking influences from everywhere and putting them into this new thing and trying to make something new out of it. For me, anthropology is like music. It's art, it's literature, it's science, it's all these things, putting them together, trying to come up with something new. But also something that speaks to things I'm really excited about. I think that's why the idea of interdisciplinary research speaks to me—it feels like a Fishbone thing. What happens when you combine art, film, music, and forensic science? It's like the band gave me a blueprint for putting it all together, mixing it up, and not apologizing for it.

(MS) *How would you describe your relationship to academic writing given other creative inputs that you have in the work that you do? Anthropology is expected to be public-facing and to talk to the rest of the community about society, what's going on, and the problems we are faced with. How do you meld that academic role with the academic mission?*

I think we overthink it. We worry that we won't sound smart enough, or that we have to sound a certain way. I really tried to fit into that box at one point. I gave a job talk at a private institution once. They basically said, "We need you to come in and read a formal fifteen-minute paper." I said, "That's not what I'm going to do. That's not my approach to things." They said, "You really need to do it if you want this job." I said, "If I do this, I'm going to come in and give you something that's not real. Maybe you'll hire me, but you're going to be really disappointed that I'm not really this person." There was a lot of pressure to be a certain kind of way, and I just didn't have it in me. I said, "This work is hard enough without me selling myself out to do it." I just want to do things on my own terms in a way I can feel good about myself and happy about the direction my work is going in. It wasn't until I was forced to write a book that I really started to experiment. I brought in little elements of articles that I'd written—prior to my first book—it was like half my old way of writing, and half little vignettes, and then right back into that old formula. With *The Land of Open Graves*, I felt like I was never going to finish that book if I had to follow that old formula.

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So, I thought, "Let's just write it sort of how it feels true." I didn't want to suck the life out of the stories that I'd been told, and I felt like it might be the only book I'd ever write, and so I wanted to make sure that I was true to myself. That's what I did. I just went in there, even though I had no idea what I was doing.

I read novels that inspired me. I listened to a lot of Bruce Springsteen and Jason Isbell—those guys could tell amazing stories, rich in meaning and depth, though sometimes sparse or implied, without hitting you over the head with stuff. I really pulled from those songs when I wanted to be more lyrical if I could. Anthropology is all storytelling. We're just oftentimes not trained to tell a story that flows well. We're trying to tell a story that is for a particular audience. We would all benefit from narrative nonfiction training or just even thinking about a storyline—What's your plot? Who are your characters? What's the story arc? You can express all these interesting theoretical things you want to, but still lose your reader if you aren't kind to them. Be kind to your reader; no one ever said that to me as a graduate student. Once I started thinking about it in those terms, like a reader, I thought about things like, "Would I want to stick with this story?"

Once I was having lunch with my editor at University of California Press before the book came out. She said to me, "Do you think this book is academic enough for you to get tenure?" I said, "Why are you asking me this now? It's already done, and that's a rough question." But I also said, "I don't really care anymore. I'm so tired, and even if I don't get tenure, I won't ever regret kind of finding myself in this thing." That first book was partly about finding out who I was as a person and who I wanted to be as an anthropologist. I benefitted from the fact that it wasn't based on a dissertation; I didn't have a blueprint for it. In some ways, I think it gave me a lot more freedom because I know how hard it is to go back and revisit something you've already written. I tell my students that if they're working on a book manuscript, they should throw their dissertations away and then take from there what they can bring into this new thing, and include all the things they've learned since finishing it. That way, at least they won't have a committee breathing down their necks—it's just about them. I have a former student who wrote a great dissertation on environmental degradation and toxicity. It was meant to be an anthropology book, but it morphed into a horror story. The villain of the story is the toxins in the air and in the soil. He's writing about it from a new perspective, which has been invigorating for him—to move from the dissertation stage to now wanting to sit down and write.

For me, as someone who always hated writing, I got to the point where I said, "There's nothing I want to do more than sit down and write." I never thought that would be a possibility. It wasn't until I had to rethink my whole approach that that happened. I wish I discovered that a lot sooner, but I love it now.

(AM) *In my own writing, I know the struggle of navigating an emotionally intense topic. Do you have a writing routine, or a particular approach you take as you're writing, especially when writing on heavy topics?*

My routine, when I'm *really* writing, is to get up and go running; I run and I listen to music. My new book has a soundtrack associated with each chapter. Some of those songs were songs that were playing in the background when those things were happening. Other things included music that I needed to be in that space when I was writing those things. My normal day would be to get up, go for a run, and listen to music. Then, I would sit down and write for eight hours a day. Now, because I have kids, and because my brain doesn't work like that anymore, I probably write from 8 a.m. to noon, and then I'm done and I'll read. While working on both book proj-

ects, I read a lot. I read all of Steinbeck again; I read all of Hemingway; I read all of Cormac McCarthy; I read all of Jasmine Ward. I wanted to be with books that inspired me, and they all inspired me for different reasons. Some of them—like Steinbeck or Hemingway—showed me how to put six words together and say something super heavy. Jasmine Ward works in a kind of terse writing, but she can break your heart in a way that I find to be so powerful. I'd re-immerse myself in those things and say to myself, "You can do this; these are your friends, and they are here to support you and give you some inspiration."

Regarding the "heavy" topics of my writing, I do think that writing is therapeutic. As I am writing and difficult things come up, I feel a lot better once I've said them. In my new book, the moment my friend Roberto dies was difficult for me to write; it was killing me. And when we did the recordings for the audiobook in the studio, the sections where he was dying were just so painful to relive again and to say out loud. But then, when the book ends, and he comes back to life for one funny moment, I love that so much. For me, it's like he gets to live on forever now. Despite all of the heaviness, I got to bring him back for a moment and have him be present in a way that I hope he would appreciate, in a way that makes me laugh. The writing really helped me to work through a lot of that stuff. I didn't have any good guidance for these things, at least not from anthropology. I could have used a graduate course, or even someone to talk to, who would have said, "If you want to be a better writer, you should read more good writing." No one ever said that to me. You can't be a musician if you don't immerse yourself in music, right? It was the same with writing; it was kind of an awakening for me.

(MS) *Regarding academic writing, how did you think of the audience when you wrote* The Land of Open Graves*? Academic writing can be a bit fear-based. As you said earlier, we worry about sounding smart enough, or hitting the right notes, or achieving tenure—all those pressures. I'd imagine that part of the process of freeing yourself from those constraints is about thinking of who you're writing for.*

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I'll never forget. I gave a full draft of this book to a buddy of mine at Michigan, who already had tenure. He said, "I don't have time to read this whole thing, but I read the first two pages, and I don't think you can write this. I think it's too much. I don't think you should go in that direction." And I thought to myself, all right, I'm going in the right direction. This is good. (Laughter) Regarding the audience, I wanted to please a little bit of everybody. I wanted to give everybody something to latch

on to. But also, I wanted someone like my mom, who's not an anthropologist, to be able to read it and get something from it, and feel like she could learn about anthropology without dumbing it down or without taking out the richness I think anthropology can have.

I look at *The Land of Open Graves,* and there are different moments I revisit and think, "Maybe I could have done this a little bit differently." There was a lot of experimenting in the book. For example, Chapter Two is a kind of semi-fictionalized ethnography that is basically the historical background section. When I started that chapter, I sat down and started to say, "In the desert, temperatures average between 100 and 120, and you have *this* many snakes. . . ." I said to myself, "Nobody wants to read this, and I don't want to write this. How can I tell people about this without making it sound like a laundry list?" I decided to just tell a story, a story based on realities that I've put together, and see if that gets us to the same spot. It was straight-up experimentation.

(MS) *That was one of the most powerful chapters of the book.*

It was probably the most fun chapter to write—that was where I felt like I was really writing. I tried to bring that same feeling to the new book as well and expand it all the way through. There are parts where I look back and say, "I could have done this. . . ," but you can do that with anything. I think anthropology is inherently fascinating. We're the most interesting people in the room. We have all these interesting ideas that we are thinking about, and yet, the discipline doesn't really encourage us to be the most interesting people in the room, right? Academia in general is pulling us back, asking us to be something else. I think it's a real disservice, both to us as individuals of the discipline and, more generally, to the public. We constantly have to justify our existence to the world. We're the people who study people. We should be the most important people in the room. Our discipline, for a variety of reasons, doesn't see it that way.

(MS) *You're held up as an avatar for what we ought to be as anthropologists. It's hard to do, because institutional constraints are running in the opposite direction. I think that calls back to the creativity that you mentioned, saying, "Here are some tools, I'm going to use them."*

Taking risks is scary. I mean, people were worried I wouldn't get tenure at Michigan. There were people who were actively ready to deny me tenure. It got to the point where I was just like, well, I'll go someplace else,

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because I want to keep doing what I'm doing. And if it doesn't work out, I'll become a recording engineer or do something else; I'll follow my passion. I feel very lucky that things worked out. I have a lot more flexibility now; I can kind of do whatever I want. I feel really grateful because it has freed me up to do more experimenting. It shouldn't be that way; there should be a lot more support for people doing different kinds of things. We should be nurturing difference within the discipline.

(MS) *The recognition you've received for this work has certainly magnified your impact, in the same way that anthropologists say, "We want the discipline to be impactful." How has it changed the way you do things?*

Everything I do is public-facing first. I try to think about how to engage with the public while maintaining as much of the anthropology as I can. Even with ***The Land of Open Graves,*** I wasn't thinking, "Here's my academic stuff, and then here's my public-facing stuff." I ended up realizing that I don't have the energy to do both; it's twice as much work. I decided to try to do both of them together and see if it stuck. The first question is, "Will people be able to engage with this?" Then I'd figure out how to keep it interesting, and anthropological, and true to the discipline, while simultaneously being seen and experienced more broadly. We don't encourage that enough. One of the things I greatly benefited from at Michigan was a time when a curator contacted me and wanted to do an exhibition with me. I was really apprehensive; I wanted nothing to do with exhibition work. She asked, "Why not?," and I said, I think the ethnographic museum is really problematic. She said, "Well, this will be in an art space." I said, "Well that's even worse, because now there's no context." She was very convincing and helped me to realize that being in an art space frees you up to do a bunch of other stuff and gives you a creative flexibility to explore different things. Once I realized that, I thought, "Man, I want to do this all the time." I want to do anthropology that is experimental, not in the sense of making a fourteen-hour film on a boat, but in the sense that you can draw on different things with the same kind of goal of educating the public and making anthropology accessible.

(AM) *I love what you said about art and narrative. It speaks to me personally because I made up my own major as an undergrad called "narrative and ethnographic technique" because I was specifically questioning and curious about these things. I still don't have a lot of answers, and I still write really bad academic articles.*

This is a hard thing to unlearn; it's beaten into us.

(AM) *I think one of the things that becomes apparent when you break it down is the bias that's inherent in an academic perspective – having to force a human story into a particular formula with a particular theory and then use a particular concept to understand that theory; it really sucks the air out of a thing. I'm encouraged by the way you talk about different methods of writing because it is also a method – also a theory in practice – writing and showing people as people in this particular way. One of our*

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students asked how do we do this if we're not anthropologists? How do we apply this to other disciplines? Despite the critique about scientific perspectivism being precisely that – a perspective – it has been around for a very long time, there's something about the institution that really prevents that shift from opening up; that prevents people from feeling safe about that.

I have two siblings. One of them spent most of his life incarcerated, the other has died in part because of her experiences while incarcerated. When I went to UCLA for anthropology, I wanted to explore their experiences. I said, "This is what I'm doing." And the first reaction was, "Don't do that; it's too personal, it's too close to home. You're not going to be able to get the right *perspective." I'd read Zora Neale Hurston. I'd read Ruth Behar. I'd read all these people who had shown that there's power in the personal. There's a way to upend the pretense of objectivity that keeps us in one particular lane. And it's not actually objective when it comes to the social world, the realm of life. So, I'm interested to hear more of your thoughts on this, because I think I have a deep, lifelong vendetta about this.*

Rightfully so. The Academy people think they know what's best for folks. In writing about some of these things, you're going to get advice from people who have no understanding of these things. There is a lot that comes from being close to a subject; it gives you a different kind of perspective. People are afraid of this in the Academy for various reasons, or they kind of push back because that's not been their experience with it, right? And then there's this worry that, if this person does this, maybe that's a more real ethnographic engagement than whatever I'm proposing as actual anthropology.

I just read Angela Garcia; she has a new book coming out. If you read *Pastoral Clinic* versus her new book, you can see that *Pastoral Clinic* is about addiction; it's about her family, but the book still has some things that are required to get tenure. You can see the framework is there, that it's been kind of imposed, and the new book is not that. You see that with a lot of people who start writing about their own communities, about their own families. There are these guide rails. It's like there are these barriers; you have to stay there until you get over this hurdle and then you can do whatever it is that you want to do. I don't think that's healthy for the discipline; I think it sets a bad precedent. I think there should be more openness about what ethnography is and what ethnographic writing is. We talk about stylistic writing, but ethnographic writing has its own style. Academic writing has its own style, right? We learn to write in that style, without questioning what that style is, or what it does to the discipline, or how the people we write about, think about these things. There's this assumption that writers say, "Give me all this information, and then I'll put it into the format for the other person or some other audience." When you enter graduate school and you want to be an

The question should be, "What kind of writing do you want to do?" And then, maybe, more importantly, "What is ethnographic writing?" We should be questioning that in a healthy way. I'm not someone who wants to burn the discipline down every ten years for some reason or another, but I think that we need to have more serious questions within our conversations about what it means to write ethnographically, and why we do what we do.

ethnographer, the question should be, "What kind of writing do you want to do?" And then, maybe, more importantly, "What is ethnographic writing?" We should be questioning that in a healthy way. I'm not someone who wants to burn the discipline down every ten years for some reason or another, but I think that we need to have more serious questions within our conversations about what it means to write ethnographically, and why we do what we do, and the pros and cons of working far away or close to home. I think they both have their pros and cons. But I definitely have seen people be dismissive of that. "Oh, you can't write about that," and I say, "This is the person who should be writing about those things," because this person has a better understanding in a lot of ways.

Are you familiar with the sociologist Randol Contreras? He wrote a book called *Stickup Kids*, which is about drug dealers who turn to robbing drug dealers—they're all people he grew up with. He has a pretty interesting take on what happened when he went to graduate school and then came back and tried to write about his relatives and his community. He does a good job of talking about the experience. He says, "People said I was going to be too close to this, but I went to grad school and came back and it was so different. I was close to it, but not as close as people were imagining I was. I'd been changed by the training, and I don't think in a bad way, but in a way that I think makes the work really, really fascinating."

(MS) *How do you impart that to students? It can be difficult to get students to see their own experiences as valid or worthy of ethnographic attention. How do you get them to think about research projects that are close to home or familiar?*

I tell students that when I was a graduate student, I was told that in order to be an academic, I needed to overcome being a working class, first generation, bilingual person of color, Latino—all those things were working against me—and that I had to transform into something else in order to progress. When I started doing work with migration, I realized that all these things people considered to be an impediment suddenly gave me a different kind of access, a different kind of perspective that in a lot of ways opened up so many doors for me. So, now I tell students that personal experiences are a huge resource. They put you in a place to be able to ask better questions and to be able to adapt to different sensitivities. I tell them to embrace looking inward and asking themselves, "Who am I as an individual? What's my place in the world?" And then, "What kinds of questions can I ask in these situations that I'm familiar with?" I have seen students doing amazing work lately when these things that they're kind of ashamed of now become empowering in these new situations.

Part of that, too, is that a lot of these kinds of questions can be a source of embarrassment, such that you don't want to take ownership of some of these topics publicly. For me, it's taken a while to get to a point to admit, "Why am I hanging out with a bunch of maniac smugglers?" and it's like, "Well, because I used to be a maniac myself." I had this weird kinship with super self-destructive young people because I was a super self-destructive young person. When I gave my mom a copy of *Soldiers and Kings*, she told me she didn't want to know a lot of those things. But I was like, "You know, that's the *reality*. I don't want to be ashamed of those things. I think it's helpful to be able to talk about this stuff." There's a scene in the new book where this kid who I work with was super high on drugs. He was running back and forth on top of this train, and he was doing all this crazy shit. I was kind of worried about him, but I also was kind of laughing about it, because he was trying to entertain me. And then, I go on to list all these things that I used to do that were equally stupid. And then I have this line that

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says, "I never drunkenly ran across the top of a moving freight train, probably because I never had access to a moving freight train." (Laughter) I think my mom was just, like, "Oh, Jesus Christ." It's important to let students know that those experiences shape us. In the end, I think writing about them forced me to reflect. Back then, I didn't question why I was hanging out with these folks. That didn't come out until the writing process.

(AM) *I'm glad that's in the book.*

I knew there'd be a question of "How could you hang out with these guys? What do you see in them?" Rather than answering that question a million times, I put it in the book. You want to know why I'm here? It's because of this. Those things are important to know who I am as a narrator, what's my skin in the game.

I had a pretty interesting talk recently with Laurence Ralph at the triple A's (American Anthropological Association) annual conference. He has a new book coming out about his murdered stepson, and we were talking about this idea of letting people know up front what your investment is. That's a personal kind of thing, and it can open you up to critique or make you vulnerable in some ways. But it can also be liberating.

Working with people is hard. It's really difficult and messy. They're vulnerable and you're vulnerable. For me, part of ethnography is asking a lot from folks; asking them to share with me. I try to give back as much to them as they are giving to me, so they know why I'm here. It creates a different kind of bond where the conversations end up having a lot more meaning because they know what my investments are. Everybody tries to create rapport, but oftentimes don't want to say that out loud. It's not in the Russ Bernard ***Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology***, but I think we all do it in different ways, right? We're trying to find ways to relate to people, and so we share parts of ourselves, but we never let the reader or students know that. Bronisław Malinowski's diaries are probably more interesting and insightful about what ethnography could look like than the actual descriptions themselves are.

(AM) *On the other side of this process is the reception in academia. In academia, in particular, one thing that has been a struggle for me, in terms of staying in it, has been not just the fetishizing of academic writing, but the fetishizing of certain topics and certain research. For example, human smuggling as a topic of research is "so hot right now" in a way that is disgusting. Given the accolades of your writing and the topics you are writing about, how do you navigate that? What are your thoughts on that process?*

I never intended to pursue topics like human smuggling. One kid dies, and that event puts me on this path. And when it came down to thinking about the book, the press liked it because human smuggling is a hot-button, seemingly salacious topic. There's a push behind it. My response is, yes, maybe I get you in the door because you think it's going to be about this one thing. But now that I have you, I'm going to break your heart in another way and have you just leave feeling not well about the whole thing. I gave a talk on smuggling once, and someone came up to me afterward and said, "I didn't like that talk that you just gave, because it made me feel weird. It made me feel sympathy for these smugglers, and I don't think people should feel sympathy for them. Are you trying to humanize smugglers?" I said, "I'm not trying to humanize anybody. What I'm trying to do is start from this premise that they are, in fact, all human." We complicate all of these ideas and just leave you feeling weird about the whole thing in some ways, and hopefully I can get people thinking about these topics in a different way. Here are all these backstories of the abusive childhoods these smugglers come from; here are all these complicated things going on their lives; nothing is black and white in this whole thing.

One of the reasons I also gravitated towards the topic was because I knew writing about smugglers would be challenging for me—intellectually and ethically. It's easy to write a sympathetic book about migrants because they're kind of the good guy in this whole story. It's a lot harder to write a story that can bring moments of sympathy or empathy to a topic that is supposed to be cut and dry. I did it, partly, because I wanted to force myself to try to do something different in the hope that it would create new ways of thinking about this stuff. People are interested in these difficult topics for different reasons. One, because it's a voyeuristic kind of thing. But the other part of it involves the global crises of addiction, smuggling, migration, and violence. I think it's our job as anthropologists, not journalists, to tell that story in a different kind of way.

Part of me gravitates towards this stuff because the difficult subject matter speaks to me in a variety of ways. But also because I feel like I'm better equipped than a journalist or someone else to tell a story about things you haven't heard yet; I like that challenge. That's when I get really excited about the potential of anthropology. People ask, "How is anthropology different from journalism?" We spend a lot more time there, and we also spend a lot more time worrying about what we're doing and why we're doing it. Not all of us. There are some people who write about these things, and they can be super problematic, and maybe they end up doing more harm than good. That is concerning.

I don't know what I'm going to do next, maybe write about guitar pedals, or something lighter for a bit. Everyone jokes that, if I were to do that, I'm sure I would find some dark, horrible thing about guitar pedals, and then just ruin that for myself and for other people. I'd dwell on who's making them in

That's what I appreciate about the discipline—we're dealing with these difficult topics. We're not just doing the work and writing about it, we're also trying to have these conversations. A journalist would say, "This is an important story. Why wouldn't I write about it?" In anthropology we say, "It's an important story, but how are we going to write about this and not make things worse?"

China or something. But, that's what I appreciate about the discipline—we're dealing with these difficult topics. We're not just doing the work and writing about it; we're also trying to have these conversations. A journalist would say, "This is an important story. Why wouldn't I write about it?" In anthropology we say, "It's an important story, but how are we going to write about this and not make things worse?"

(MS) *How do you instill hope in your students and in yourself? What is your general outlook on teaching and your practice as a scholar?*

One thing that gives me hope is seeing a student get really excited about anthropology and about their world, but also what they can do in this world. There's something really empowering about someone saying, "Hey, your experiences are really important. You can do these things. And you can probably do them really well, or better than folks coming in from the outside. Embrace that, own that." It's back to that whole DIY thing—go and do it. Getting to see students do that and get excited about research in general, that gives me so much hope. I was a student who didn't know what I was going to go out and do. It wasn't until someone helped me along and said, "You can do this, and this is how you do it. You've got the gumption; you've just got to keep going to persist."

I don't know what else I would do, other than migration. I don't think I would be able to, in good conscience, walk away from these questions. As hopeless as it can feel in different moments, we need anthropologists to bring attention to these topics, to ask questions, and more importantly, to get our students and the world to ask these questions. I've had colleagues in different institutions who have a complete disdain for teaching. I think it's because they're doing it wrong. When you do it right, you walk out of that classroom thinking, "That was fucking great!" I joke that the older I get I keep thinking I'm in my 20s. I keep thinking I'm a college student because I'm just around them so much. I'm like a vampire who's taking all their energy and putting it into myself.

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Sometimes, you walk out of a lecture thinking, "Oh, man, that sucked, that was not good." For me, that's the most demoralizing thing when I give a lecture—I wasn't there, I wasn't present. I tell my students that my approach to the classroom is like music. I come into this place, and I think, "I could be dead tomorrow and this is the last thing that I'll ever do." I don't want people to say, "He came in here and totally dialed it in. You could tell he didn't want to be here." So, when I come to the classroom, I dance around; I do whatever I can to get students to pay attention and to get excited. I want them to know that I really want to be there. I went on sabbatical for almost two years while working on a book. During that time, I had really gotten away from teaching. When I finally started back to teaching, I realized that I just needed it so much.

(MS) *I was going to say one last thing. I really loved the chapter featuring the two men you were friends with [Manuel and Lucho] and the whole thing about humor — I just loved that.*

Oh, yeah. When I started writing that stuff, people said to me, "I didn't think I'd

laugh out loud while reading a book with a title like *The Land of Open Graves* and with this type of subject matter." For me, with ethnography, and even in that world, there is so much humor all the time.

(MS) *The way they narrativize their experience, the sarcasm, the irony, the self-deprecation. . .*

People will start telling you about the worst thing that ever happened to them, and then suddenly they're laughing in the middle of the story. With migration, people will either edit that out because they think it's inappropriate or it's going to undermine the story, or the rapport is not there enough for people to trust them enough to be open.

(AM & MS) *Thank you for your time.*



Abigail Mack is a medical and linguistic anthropologist and an assistant professor of anthropology at Weber State University. She is a systems-impacted researcher (i.e. a person whose immediate family members are or were incarcerated). She draws on her personal experience to investigate how people provide and access care for psychiatric and substance use disorders in the United States. Currently, she has active fieldwork programs in Los Angeles and Central Appalachia.



Mark A. Stevenson is an associate professor of anthropology at Weber State University. He has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Ireland and Germany, including studies of the process of German unification in public broadcasting and film institutions, and the intersection of labor market policies, education reform, and professionalization in the non-profit arts sector. His field research in Utah focuses on activism and environmental policymaking in relation to air quality and climate change.

“A Fusion without Confusion”—
Merging Classical with Native American Music and Dance



A Conversation with the Ensemble of *Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion*

Megan Marie Hamilton

Weber State University had the privilege of celebrating Native American culture and heritage with a once-in-a-lifetime performance by Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion, *an ensemble of Native American and classical musicians, dancers, and poets combining music, words, and dance into a unique symphony for the eye, ear, and spirit. Sponsored by the Telitha E. Lindquist College of Arts & Humanities under the auspices of its signature event series,* Browning Presents, *the performance introduced the audience to a line-up of world-renowned performers sharing their gifts. Among them were Navajo singer Radmilla Cody, GRAMMY nominee, multiple Native American Music Awards winner, the 46th Miss Navajo Nation, and one of NPR's 50 Great Voices; flutist Hovia Edwards of Shoshone-Navajo-Okanogan heritage, who performed at the opening of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City; Menominee and Oneida singer and Native American Music Awards Best Male Artist, Wayne Silas, Jr.; and powwow dancers from the company Indigenous Enterprise, who performed for Jennifer Lopez's World of Dance and the virtual presidential inauguration parade. The ensemble also included jazz, Latin, and classical percussionist and conductor of* The Lion King, *Rolando Morales-Matos, and one of the world's most versatile cellists and member of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Udi Bar-David.*

On the day before the concert, I had the opportunity to converse with some of the ensemble members about their evolution as artists and performers, their desire to blend various traditions and art forms, and their motivation to share cultural knowledge not only with the audience, but also with younger generations of aspiring dancers and musicians.

(Megan Hamilton) *I have both Anishinaabe and Swedish ancestors. I come from Minnesota – the White Earth Nation – and I'm also a military brat. That's how we ended up in Utah. Will you please introduce yourselves and describe your backgrounds?*

(Udi Bar-David) My name is Udi Bar-David, and I'm a classical cellist. I live in Philadelphia and play with the Philadelphia Orchestra. For over twenty five years, I've had a passion for producing, blending, and performing cross-cultural activities—cross-over performances with ethnic musicians who come from different parts of the world. I'm also very interested in using the arts as a means of conflict resolution. When we talked about the theme for this project, and tonight's event, I was enthusiastic about presenting indigenous culture in music and dance.

(Hamilton) *Thank you, and welcome.*

(Hovia Edwards) My name is Hovia Edwards. I'm a member of the Shoshone-Bannock tribes in Fort Hall, Idaho. I play Native American flute; I've been playing that instrument for pretty much all my life. I am a Grammy-nominated musician. I am currently working on a few different projects, one of them being an opera titled "Nu Nah-Hup: Sacajawea's Story" with the Opera Theatre Oregon. I'm very grateful to be working with all these beautiful people on ***Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion***; it's been a wonderful experience.

(Hamilton) *Welcome. Thank you.*



Hovia Edwards, Udi Bar-David, and Rolando Morales-Matos playing "Retrouvaille" during a performance of *Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion*. Weber State University Browning Center, 2024.

(Wayne Silas, Jr.) My name is Wayne Silas, Jr. I come to you from the Menominee and Oneida nations of Wisconsin. I belong to the Bear Clan. I would like to start by saying that I'm very grateful to be here today and to share this time and experience with so many wonderfully talented people. When I was approached about this show, I immediately got excited and didn't hesitate to say, "Yes, I'd love to be part of it." It's been an amazing experience so far, collaborating with musicians and dancers. I think we are building something unique, fantastic, and healing. I hope that when everybody leaves the auditorium tonight, they take something good with them from what we've put together. I'm a singer and a dancer. I am happy to contribute a little of what I have to this performance in a good way.

(Rolando Morales-Matos) Hello, my name is Rolando Morales-Matos. I am a percussionist and the assistant conductor of Broadway's *The Lion King*. I have played classical music with many different orchestras at different venues. I was invited here to participate and share because I have participated in concerts with many different cultures. To me, this is very important because it brings us together. Through music, we can open dialogues. Moving through music, opening dialogue is very important. In the time we live in now, we need music. It's a huge privilege to share the stage with this group of beautiful people.

(Nanabah Kadenhii) Hello, my name is Nanabah Kadenhii. I'm twenty-two years old. I live in Garden Grove, California, and am originally from Arizona. I'm a hoop dancer. I've been hoop dancing since I was ten years old, but I've been dancing since I could walk. Thank you for having me and including me in this project. I've never done a project that combines different musical genres, cultures, and dance. I'm happy to be here.

(Dominic Pablo) Hello, my name is Dominic Pablo. I am Navajo from the Navajo Nation, and I live in Lake Valley, New Mexico; it's near the Four Corners area. I've been dancing for most of my life—since I was about five years old—and am thirty-two now, so, that's twenty-seven years of dancing. I'm also part of the drum group Calling Eagle Singers from Wonder Rock, Arizona. I've been singing with them since I was seven years old.

(Jamal Isaac Jones) Hello, my name is Jamal Isaac Jones. I am also Navajo, from the Navajo Nation, in the small town of Chinle, Arizona. I've been dancing since I was about six years old. I come from a family of dancers. My mom

and dad used to dance, and my grandparents on both sides used to dance as well, so it was passed down to me and my siblings. I'm also a singer; I represent the Calling Eagle Singers. We've been singing together since we were really young kids. We are out here representing Indigenous Enterprise. I grew up in the powwow circle doing my own shows from a young age. Over the years, I progressed and connected with people who did the same thing. When Kenneth Shirley created Indigenous Enterprise in 2013, he approached me, my cousin, and my brother, and asked us to be a part of his dance troupe. Since then, we've been traveling the country, doing small shows, and sharing our dance styles through education and workshops. It has allowed us to travel the world while doing what we love. This is my first experience combining an orchestra with dancing. It has always been a goal of mine to perform with different genres of music and different types of music. I dance the grass dance. The grass dance is part of a warrior-society dance; it originated in the Northern Plains. It is a privilege and honor to carry on those ways. You have to be given the right to carry on those ways. I was blessed enough, along with my dad and my brother, to carry on this tradition. I'm very happy to be here. And I'm excited to see how this performance turns out.

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(Hamilton) *All of you have wonderful talents and gifts as artists and performers. Where did you nourish your gifts, and who helped you develop your gifts?*

(Bar-David) I was born and raised in Israel; that's where I received my primary education. I learned to play the cello when I was seven years old. Later, I came to the U.S. to study at the Juilliard School of Music. After that, I moved to Philadelphia to join the Philadelphia Orchestra.

(Edwards) I started playing because my father, Herman Edwards, introduced me to the Native American flute at about age three. I have my first flute to this day. I've had numerous teachers—Native flute players—who taught me to play traditional songs. I continue to learn from many different artists.

(Silas, Jr.) I have been singing and dancing for as long as I can remember. One of my first teachers was my father, especially for singing. He taught me a lot of protocol, a lot of etiquette, and also a lot of styles, patterns, and songs. From a young age, I remember being inspired by and in awe of the style of music that I now practice. I looked up to a lot of older people. Some of those people have adopted me into their families—such as the families of Ben Bearskin, Jr., and Herman Logan. They have taught me a lot about singing. I have been inspired by the teachings they passed on to me. From singers of the past and the accomplishments of other singers to the directions our style of Native Indigenous music is heading in, I have always wanted to be a part of that. I passed my knowledge on to my children. Hopefully they will do the same for generations to come.

(Morales-Matos) I was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I received my education in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. I've been playing music since I was very young. I am one of six siblings—we are a family

of musicians who played together. Music has always been part of our family.

(Kadenhii) I mostly taught myself to hoop dance, though I did have some teachers who helped me along the way. Luckily, I grew up in a world with the internet, so I watched a lot of YouTube videos. I was at a powwow when I was about eight or nine years old, when I saw the two-time world champion hoop dancer Jasmine Pickner Bell perform; that's when I knew I wanted to start hoop dancing. Seeing a female dancer out there inspired me. I met other hoop dancers along the way who inspired me, like Macy Bilanga. I also had family members—Jones Benally and Nakotah LaRance—who helped me to improve my hoop dancing.

(Pablo) I've been dancing since I was five years old. I have older cousins who danced, and so I started out doing the grass dance. I learned from watching them dance, and then I transitioned into becoming a fancy dancer and started doing that. Basically, I would watch older dancers dance and try to copy their moves until I could form my own way of dancing and my own style. I was mostly self-taught; no one actually showed me anything. My singing also was self-taught. I'd listen to powwow cassette tapes or CDs and sing along to those and learn how to sing from there. That's basically how I learned, and how I have been doing it ever since.

(Jones) My father taught me to dance, but we didn't dance the grass dance, or powwow, right away. It was just something we kind of discovered, because our grandmas, on both sides, would do it. When I was growing up, my dad used to breakdance; he would teach my brother and me breakdance moves. We also learned dance moves from TV and stuff like that. My dad was really good; he had a dance crew and everything. When my younger brother found out that my grandma used to dance when she was young, he wanted to



Musicians and dancers led workshops with Weber State University students before a performance of *Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion*. Weber State University, 2024.

carry on that tradition. She stopped when my mom was born, and my mom stopped before I was born. My dad used to dance when he was a kid, but stopped before he went to high school. My brother was the one who got our whole family back into the powwow circle. Since he wanted to do it, I had no choice but to do it. My dad trained us. He had been in the military, so he would give us these crazy military-like regimen training styles. We'd also watch VHS tapes of powwows that happened in different parts of the country. We would sit for hours just watching them and creating our own style, our own moves, based on the breakdance style we had started before. We got really good, really fast.

We needed the correct protocol to get us into the circle so that we could be legitimate. My dad reached out to some friends, who reached out to other people to help us. There happened to be a powwow in our hometown of Chinle, Arizona, coming up. They

used to call it the Kenny Nichols Powwow. A legendary grass dancer from the '70s and '80s, Jonathan Windy Boy from Rocky Boy, Montana, happened to be the arena director at this powwow. My family did everything they could leading up to that point to get us ready for that initiation. When he came down to Arizona, Jonathan Windy Boy initiated my brother, myself, and my dad. Ever since then, we have been carrying on those grass dance ways. During that powwow, we were approached by our brothers, Jared, Malcolm, and Dom from the Calling Eagle Singers. They had just formed the group about two weeks before, so that's how we started singing with them. Everything just came together at that point for us as dancers and singers, and we just carried on from there. A lot of the credit goes to my father, obviously, but it also goes to people I looked up to in the circle. They gave me the motivation to try to be the best. Now, it's part of my discipline to better myself and to try to get to the next level as a dancer, performer, singer, and human.

(Hamilton) *What do you hope the audience will take away from your performances?*

(Morales-Matos) If you look around this room, these people bring Indigenous music and dance with them. I'm privileged to be a guest here and to learn, be inspired, collaborate, and introduce my sounds as a bridge. These eight people fill up the space tonight with Indigenous sound and dance. You asked, "What can people take away from this?" Many people, myself included, may think of Indigenous culture in one way. Two days ago, I met Hovia and tried her Native American flute sounds with the cello, a Western instrument. The audience is hearing a Western instrument; some of them may only be familiar with Western instruments. Hovia is bringing at least four different kinds of flutes, all tuned differently. So, there is an adjustment there. And it's not just a technical adjustment; the audience hears different sounds, different combinations, and different registers. I'm not trying to be technical, but it's a different expression. It's a different soul that comes with each different pitch of the flute.

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Then, Wayne gets on stage. The first time Rolando saw Wayne on YouTube, I got a text from Rolando, shouting "Wow!" (Laughter) I knew he was the real deal. I couldn't wait to meet him. I've loved performing with Rolando; I've known him longer than anyone else in this room. He comes from classical jazz, Latin music, and improvisation. Wayne brings his own form of art. When someone asks me to describe Wayne, it's hard because he's so unique. Wayne, what you bring is not just an art form—it is an



All performers enter the stage for the grand finale of *Indigenous Soundscapes in Motion*. Weber State University Browning Center, 2024.

identity. Maybe it's in your voice, your throat singing—it doesn't have a terminology.

The audience tonight will be introduced to something that many of them have never seen before, never heard before. We're bridging many elements here tonight with Indigenous Enterprise. When I watched your videos, Wayne, for the first time, I wasn't watching a typical powwow—you go places, you merge. So, in a way, what you do as dancers is what we are doing tonight on stage. I don't know how many times you've played with the cello on stage, a classical instrument. Maybe this is the first time you've played to "Spain" by Chick Corea. The audience is being taken to broader and broader spaces with these many elements. This is a fusion without confusion, because we all bring our own individual identity to the performance. We put it together into something that has a lot of harmony to it.

(Hamilton) *This process has really fascinated me because I work in science education. I was trained with a Western perspective. My mom was a botanist; she taught me to collect plants and make offerings of tobacco and things like that. I'm trying to work with colleagues to bridge these two opposing systems. In reality, those forces can work in concert with one another; it's like a parallel experience. Thank you for sharing. That was a beautiful answer.*

You all seem to travel quite a bit. What piece of home do you carry with you during your travels?

(Collectively) Our children.

(Silas, Jr.) My family back home. There are obligations at home, like education, sports, and creative activities; I get lonesome for them quite a bit. But I've learned to remind myself that I'm doing this for them; it takes a little bit of the loneliness away.

(Jones) I would also say my family. Over the years, I've lost quite a few family members. They're always in my thoughts and my prayers. I try to think about the journey, how far I've come, and what we're representing. We're representing our tribes, and we want to do that to the best of our abilities. I want to be a positive role model, a person to look up to for our younger generations, if they choose to go down this path.

(Pablo) I carry my name with me and where I'm from. My last name is Pablo, which is my grandma's maiden name. My middle name is my grandpa's last name. I always carry Bear with me. I always tell people where I'm from. I always say that I'm from Lake Valley, New Mexico.

(Kadenhii) I have to agree with Dom. It's important to represent yourself and your family. We're taught to be well mannered, because you're not only representing yourself— you're also representing your family members and your bloodline. I feel happy when people recognize where I'm from. They know how sacred that place is and how sacred it is to me and my family members. Material items that I like to travel with me are my stitch doll and a spirit rock that my partner gave me. I also bring integrity and commitment. I try to represent everything that I am and where I come from.

(Edwards) I bring the thought and representation of my ancestors, the people who are no longer here. Their prayers and what they represent are still with us to this day. I have been fortunate enough to work with a lot of elders, and I've heard their thoughts; I've heard what they have to say about our Shoshone culture. I carry their teachings with me as well as their knowledge that they have passed on to me. When I go to performances, I keep them in my thoughts and prayers, because they had the patience to sit down with me and tell me their knowledge. I do my best to represent my family and my tribe—not only my tribe, but Indigenous people in general. I do this in the hope that we can be positive role models for our future generations, someone that our kids can be proud of, and look forward to, being a Native American person. The beadwork and regalia that I wear has been made by various family members, from my great grandmother all the way down to my mother. I keep them in my prayers, because they cared enough for me to give me those items to remind me to be proud of who I am.

(Hamilton) *All of you are quite prolific. You are extraordinarily skilled in your art forms. How do you keep going? How do you stay in shape?*

(Kadenhii) Exercise! You have to make sure you're in shape. We're kind of dying here in Utah, because the elevation is so high. We've got to start training out here or something. The key factor of continuing to dance is that we are dancing for others as well. I'm dancing for a guy in a wheelchair who used to dance. My dad loves to see me dance. It heals them, so we dance extra hard.

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(Jones) You have to stay in shape, eat right, and meditate a lot. We're not out there dancing for ourselves. We dance for those who can't dance. We dance for our ancestors, our grandparents. I try to keep my loved ones in mind. We also have a duty as young Indigenous peoples to carry on these traditions in a positive form. We don't want to be ridiculed or canceled, so we have to be on point with everything. I want to inspire younger generations. It's cool when a kid comes up and tells me I'm his favorite, or, when a young girl comes up and says, "I love the way you dance." I've gotten gifts

from people because they love my dancing. I never take that for granted. I always take time for someone who wants to take a picture with me, or just talk and get to know me; it puts what we do in perspective.

(Silas, Jr.) **Our health is what keeps us going, not only physically, but also having a healthy mind, body, and spirit. What we're doing isn't just for us, it's for other people. We're singing, dancing, and making music for people who need to see it, need to hear it, and need to feel it. Keeping ourselves healthy, in all aspects, is what keeps us going. It helps us to inspire others in the ways we are inspired.**

(Hamilton) *You've all talked about the "next generation." What words of wisdom would you like to pass on to the next generation of performers and artists?*

(Collectively) **Just do it; and be a good human.**

(Hamilton) *Very wise. I'm going to bring my family to the performance tonight. I hope they will be inspired. Thank you so much for your time and insights. It was a pleasure.*



Megan Marie Hamilton (PhD, Utah State University) was an assistant professor of STEM education at Weber State University. She was a citizen of the White Earth Nation. She honored her Anishinaabe heritage and dedicated her work to increasing access to STEM education for Indigenous peoples and other historically marginalized groups. Megan was the first doctoral scholar in the Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences program in USU's Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services. She served as treasurer and vice president for the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science Utah State Chapter. She received the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services Legacy of Utah State Award in 2019. Megan passed away in 2024. In honor of Megan's extraordinary contributions to scholarship and teaching, and her unwavering passion, The Megan Marie Hamilton Indigenous STEM Scholar Endowment Fund was created. The scholarship will support students studying a STEM field or STEM education who are members of a federally recognized Native American Tribe.

Remedios y sanación The Art of Collective Healing—

A Conversation with Luis Álvaro Sahagún Nuño

María del Mar González-González

Luis Alvaro Sahagún Nuño (b. 1982, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico) is a multidisciplinary artist based in North Carolina. His practice confronts the palpable inescapability of race and transforms art into an act of cultural and spiritual reclamation. As the grandson of a curandera *(healer), and himself a practitioner of* curanderismo, *when Sahagún Nuño makes art, he conjures indigenous spiritualities to embody the aesthetics of personal histories, cultural resistance, and colonial disruption. He has a unique voice which helps him to shape, shift, and touch the world through radio, podcasts, and television networks such as MundoFOX, NBC, UNIVISION and WBEZ-NPR. Sahagún Nuño is a 3Arts awardee and a 2023 United States Artist Fellow.*

In the spring of 2024, Sahagún Nuño served as the artist-in-residence at Ogden Contemporary Arts (OCA). During that time, he engaged with the community through a range of activities, including tea ceremonies, site visits, workshops, open studio hours, and an artist talk. Sahagún Nuño's residency at OCA culminated in



a solo exhibition titled Healing Palette of Mystical Mestizaje (Paleta sanadora del mestizaje místico). *This multimedia exhibition invited the local community to explore the intricate interplay between cultural identity, healing practices, and contemporary art.*

It featured site-specific works, including a mobile botánica *studio, where Sahagún Nuño made herbs, spiritual objects, and* remedios *(remedies) accessible to visitors. This interactive element provided a tangible connection to traditional healing practices of* curanderismo.

Also included in the exhibition was Sahagún Nuño's limpia *(spiritual cleansing) portrait series, which featured sketches of local community members, including several students from Weber State University. Through this combined act of art-making and spiritual work, Sahagún Nuño facilitated paths for healing, as well as cultural and spiritual reclamation for his sitters. This ongoing portrait series illustrates how art can serve as a conduit for personal and communal transformation. By engaging participants in the creation of* limpia *portraits, Sahagún Nuño not only documented their likenesses but also captured their spiritual and emotional states. This process enabled a deep connection between the artist and the subjects, fostering a sense of empowerment for his sitters. By combining these various elements and artistic works, Sahagún Nuño's exhibition provided a rich, multifaceted exploration of how traditional and contemporary practices can intersect to foster healing and cultural reclamation.*

My students at Weber State have been enthusiastically discussing your work and their experiences during our studio visits. Today, I would like to discuss the projects you undertook in Ogden and the various communities you engaged with during your time as the artist-in-residence at Ogden Contemporary Arts (OCA). I am particularly interested in learning about your initial proposal and how, if at all, it evolved over the course of your residency.

As you know, there is an application process. As an artist, it's really important for me to connect with the space, the organization, and with the people to create something that feels right. My proposal was about finding ways to facilitate or incorporate *limpias*, spiritual cleansing, and healing to foster civic engagement and connection within the community. For the most part, I stayed true to the proposal and to the exhibition.

You frequently use the term "civically engaged" as a way to describe your work. How do you distinguish between civic engagement and social engagement in your practice? Do you perceive these terms as interconnected, or do they represent distinct approaches within your artistic framework?

I've been thinking about terms like "social justice" and "socially engaged" a lot lately. Terms like "community engagement" or "civic engagement" as a whole, for me, means interacting with the community. The easiest example of these terms is how artists get together and decide to paint a mural. Artists usually incorporate ways of listening to the community, at least a *good* muralist does. The idea is that you work together, developing the concept and the image, and then you build and create the mural—it's a beautiful way to work. I like to engage with the community through my own critical lens. However, I've worked with people who have participated in community engagement projects where an element I call "the artistic lie" emerges. People end up doing whatever the artist wants. For example, when you start work

on a mural, some people might say, "I want to buy stuff; I want to paint some beautiful flowers," or "I want to paint dogs and cats;" then, the artist finds a way to make it political and speak for a big group of people. I think sometimes there's a facade to that.

For me, civic engagement adds a layer of transparency that says that my work engages in the racial, gender, and political concerns of undocumented and Brown folks. I am asking people who can relate to those experiences to come and help me and to be a part of my project. I have a set of goals I want to accomplish together. There's reciprocity in the project. From the start, the participants are met with full transparency of what the project is going to be about. It connects back to my artistic practice. I like the honesty that comes with civic engagement. I think civic engagement is about connecting with the community in a political way, typically by engaging with the community that we live in. The question is, "What do we want our community to look and feel like? How can we participate in it?" You're not an individual until you connect with the community. There's a bit of psychology to that: when we're alone, as individuals with our ego, our self, and our bodies, that's just who *we* are. Once we interconnect, interpersonally, with the community, *that's* when we become an individual. I'm interested in transparency, honesty, and making sure that I create civically engaged work under the "expertise," for lack of a better word, that I am aware of. For me, the process is spiritual healing portraiture.

I connect to Chicanx or Latinx empowerment. When I started making art, I didn't even know that I was considered a socially engaged artist, or that I was a community engaged artist. It was a label that was given to me because I worked with the community so much. Oftentimes, I think about reclaiming that label. Something that comes up in my work from time to time—when I'm around other Chicanx artists—is that we confront a lot of guilt: the guilt of being successful, the guilt of making it in ways that our communities haven't, and the guilt of feeling like we have to give back. That's why a lot of our successful Chicanx artists are rooted in community; it's a conflict of who we are as people. I want to make it clear that I think it's really empowering to be able to say, "I'm choosing to do this because it's who I am." It's not because it's what I feel I need to do, and it's not a label that has been projected onto me.

You have a complex, multifaceted identity. You've embraced the term Chicanx to describe yourself. The "X" may be divisive within the Latino, Latine, Hispanic communities – some embrace it, while others reject it. How do you personally define your identity in light of these complexities?

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Chicanx is a reclamation of Indigeneity. Understanding the historical context of the United States, the colonial paradigm of not belonging, of not being Mexican but not being American either, helps define labels and moves us toward our Indigenous selves. The term feels political and like a rejection of the colonial paradigm. There's a new identity, like the new *Mestizo*. Until W.E.B. Dubois talked about Latinx culture, it didn't feel like it was Latino or Latina. And then, for some reason, Latinx got really popular. But, the term was also attacked because it broke up gender constructs. I find that personally interesting as someone who is in the art world and who has a certain family history.

When I say, "I'm Mexican," it's also an erasure for me of Indigenous folks in what we now call "Mexico." I can't call myself Indigenous because I'm not affiliated or registered with a tribe. Oftentimes, I like to say that it's like being a cultural shapeshifter. Sometimes, I do feel Mexican. Sometimes, I wake up and my language kind of changes—I have the accent of my family in Mexico. Sometimes, I am a different version of Luis on that particular Tuesday. I'm really just embracing my Mexican-ness—listening to Mexican music, saying Mexican slang, and feeling proud of the Mexican flag—because I grew up with it. And then, I'll wake up the next day feeling this rejection of that colonial border; I'm Indigenous, and I feel spiritually connected to the duties of different tribes and the Mexican or Maya traditions. I think one of the powers of "otherness" is that I get to decide who I am and how I choose to identify. I think that's why I lean more towards Chicanx, because it resonates the most for me.

Oftentimes we are confronted by the imposition of labels, identities, expectations, and stereotypes on us, particularly when perceived as "other" and not fully understood in terms of our identity, background, or positioning. Personally, I often experience this when people react to my PuertoRicanness with uncertainty or confusion. Therefore, I deeply appreciate your assertion that you get to define who you are. I am curious, has this belief always resonated with you, or is it something that you've grown into as you've matured and found your artistic identity?

I think that's a great question. I think it has a lot to do with age and my experiences. When



Echoes of Tlālōcān, Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024

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I decided to become an artist, it was like opening a portal that led me to thinking critically about who I am as a human, about race, and about politics. It was a new beginning of becoming aware of societal forces that I didn't know about before. It made me ask questions like, "What the heck is patriarchy?," or, "What is white supremacy?" When I started learning about who I am, one of the first books I read was *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Octavio Paz. I felt like I was finding my identity; it was life changing. Octavio Paz made me feel seen. But then, there was also this sense of toxic masculinity. I felt good, but there was still something missing. I went on to read Queer Chicanx writers—that felt *really* good—but there was *still* something missing. I discovered things through my elders, through books, through writers, through people who theorized in more ways than I was used to. I was in love with reading these books. I started realizing it was more about power—who I choose to give power to. When I taught students, I would talk about stereotypes, and I would say, "One of the things about stereotypes is that stereotypes are funny. Why are they funny? Because they are often true." It facilitated a conversation. I'd continue, and say, "Well, then why are they wrong?" We always landed on the reason why stereotypes are wrong or why they're hurtful: they just tell *one* story about us. And when you are "other," it makes you feel like you're not a nuanced and complex human being. By saying, "I have the power to shapeshift," I'm saying, "My identity *actually* changes." It might change by the second, by the minute, by the day. I get to feel free, and liberated, and decide how I identify at any given moment. Nobody else is going to put me in a category where I'm going to feel like I don't belong, or that I don't measure up to something. For me, it's about taking that power away from hegemonic cultures. It's about being introspective and understanding that all human beings are dynamic, and we have multiple origin stories. We can think differently, we can change our minds, we can change our bodies, we can change our spirits. It's self-awareness, and that's where self-actualization can begin. Once you realize that you have a good idea of how the world works, and how society interacts, then you have self-actualization, or at least the beginning of self-actualization.

You have mentioned various literary works that have influenced you, including Octavio Paz's The Labyrinth of Solitude *and Gloria Anzaldúa's* Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, as well as* This Bridge



Detail of the mobile *botánica*, Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024

Called My Back, *the feminist anthology on radical women of color edited by Cherríe Moraga and Anzaldúa. In previous conversations, you also discussed concepts like* rasquachismo *– figures like Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and other Mexican and Chicanx writers – who have shaped your thinking. Could you elaborate on how you initially discovered and engaged with this literature, and how it has contributed to your thought processes?*

It was through art. In 2008, I was a successful designer; I was successful financially, but I was going through an existential crisis. I didn't know what was wrong, or why I wasn't feeling fulfilled. It was because I wasn't connecting to community; I didn't feel like I had purpose. I was really isolated and lonely. Obviously, capitalism and having money wasn't bringing in happiness. Happiness is something you have to engage with. You have to build and work toward it through connection, through selflessness, and through finding your purpose. I didn't learn that until I found art, until I found this group of people who were in love with splashing paint and drawing with pencil. In the studio, I started to ask questions like, "Why am I drawing this? Why am I instinctively drawing this bird? Why am I drawing on cardboard?" I used to draw on cardboard because I *felt* like a piece of cardboard. What does that mean? I feel discarded, but I have a lot of potential; there's a metaphor there. Why am I attracted to birds? Why am I attracted to sparrows? Sparrows are often seen as pests. These brown birds make a connection with my own Brownness; all these things were little epiphanies. I started to think I can't be the only one experiencing this. Around the same time, I went back to art school. I had access to JSTOR at school. I would search for the goofiest things. I'd search "Mexican Brown identity" or Mestizo writers like Karen Mary Davalos. I started following her on Instagram. She recently did a studio with me; she's amazing. She was one of the first people I read articles by. My mom passed away not too long ago. I went home to clean out my room, and I found a folder containing all these articles—research articles by Karen Mary Davalos and articles about Mexican identity. Karen Mary Davalos

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is an advocate for the Mestizo concept. The concept can be seen as problematic because it's originally rooted in white supremacy; it's been reclaimed through a Chicanx narrative. When I first started reading about the Mestizo concept, I was cautious about using the materials. I went to an art school where all my teachers were white. I talked about this stuff, and they just didn't have the language for it. I wish I could tell you that I was smart enough and hardworking enough to say that I was going to teach myself and I was going to be a scholar, but that wasn't the case. Somehow, I slowly crawled my way through. I say "crawled my way" because I grew up in Chicago, not L.A., where all this stuff is so clearly evident. There are so many Brown artists there, of all identities. I was in the Midwest, without mentors to be able to show me and tell me about all this stuff. I think that's how I started—knowing that there was no way I was the only one going through this.

In my Latinx art history class the majority of the students identify as Latinx, and having you meet them truly made a difference. Meeting an artist who not only shares their cultural heritage but also thrives in their artistic practice was deeply impactful. I am eager to discuss your interaction with students further, as it felt like a meaningful contribution to both class discussions and their own perspectives on who can be an artist.

I think representation matters a lot, but I also think that the ***right*** representation matters. I've seen a lot of Brown faculty members perpetrating harm in academic spaces because they're colonized in their hearts. They're in competitive and hierarchical establishments that support that kind of thinking. I appreciate you saying what you said, because as someone who works, it hasn't come easy for me. It's taken a lot of hard work to engage with students in that way, especially BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] and Chicanx students; I've been met with a lot of resistance. And it's not until they actually see me teach, or see the potential, that they start to respect or accept me. When I first started teaching college-level classes in Chicago, the first class I taught became a collective that fostered belongingness. They were a diverse group of art school students who felt they were in competition with each other. They felt that nobody wanted to be friends because of the competitive environment. The way that I facilitated this class led the students to realize that they all wanted to be friends, and that they ***could*** be friends. It was really beautiful.

The reason I talk about this is because there is an ethics of care, or ethics of love, that needs to be addressed. When I work with young students, I think of my own family, and I feel like I need to take care of them. I don't think that's widely accepted in academia. Academia can be transactional—you're the teach-

er, you give them knowledge, and you leave. That's not how I function. I care about my students. I look at them as colleagues; I don't think that I know more than they do. It's more of a horizontal relationship in an academic space. As an artist, I don't consider myself to be an *academic* teacher. In spaces like OCA, I can function a bit differently. I don't have to worry about the pressures of tenure track.

It's important to engage with the students and community in discussions about healing and about identity – they're very serious subjects. I admired how you skillfully balanced seriousness with playfulness and beauty, which seemed to encourage many students to step out of their comfort zones. By prompting dialogue and encouraging active participation through posing and discussion, you effectively prompted them to engage deeply with these topics. Witnessing this approach has inspired me to explore integrating similar methods into my teaching practice.

Something that came up for me was the energy I felt from the students. That's something that I think about on a universal or cultural level. The work I do is about going into communities that are historically marginalized, and healing them. It's not about saving anybody, and it's definitely not about looking at these communities through a lens of, "These poor kids, they need help." It's more like, "Holy shit, these students are really powerful and they're incredibly smart and talented. They have resilience through adversity." Undocumented students and undocumented people have to translate for their parents; they have to navigate uncertainty; they have to work harder than most people. They build these beautiful layers of strength and intelligence, and are persevering. All of that is just to remind them that they are already some of the strongest people. They may not believe it, because they're students and they're young, but they really are. I take pride in working with them. This work isn't just about saying these communities need healing. These communities need a reminder of the strengths they have. We live in a society that has constantly been beating on them. They need a little bit of assistance, a little bit of confirmation. They're already in academic spaces, they're already in your classes, they're already coming up with really great ideas. We just need to let them know that we are there to push them a little bit more, to be an ally to them. It's an important narrative about their strengths. You and I are people who can help them see their strengths in a world that doesn't value them as much as I think they should.

It sounds like you were purposefully disrupting conventions in a meaningful, positive way. While there's importance in cultivating an academic sense of culture, it's also essential to recognize that culture is deeply personal – resembling a familial collaboration rather than a competitive environment.

My classes had the opportunity to visit your studio, and you also worked individually with some students on portrait limpias. *Could you elaborate on what the*

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Perpetual Ceremony No. 5 (limpia for Priscilla Molina Hernandez), 2024. Charcoal, beads, beeswax, seashells, feathers, glitter, clay, maize, over cobija San Marcos, 14" x 17" x 2." Ogden Contemporary Arts

limpias *entail – specifically, the materials used and the process? Additionally, I'm interested in discussing the impact of these class visits.*

Limpia **portraits are a series of works that I started around 2021. They are portraits that merge *curanderismo*, Indigenous philosophies of healing, with contemporary art. They started through my own experiences of suffering within my spirit, suffering and feeling lonely. During COVID, I experienced a lot of death—I lost my mother, I lost an aunt, I lost an uncle. There was also another portal of pain in 2018—the portal that got me into art. It made me realize there was another layer to life that I wasn't understanding. I thought that Indigenous philosophies, or epistemology, could help me see the world in a new way. I needed to go back to old ways of seeing.**

I had three mentors who I started working with to progress toward my own healing. There is a history in my family, a gift of healing. That gift has been placed on me since I was a little kid—that might be a whole different interview in itself. I was ready to embrace that gift through my own healing, and then through contemporary art. I started mixing the two; I started working for my own healing with my mentors. My healers said, "You have this gift. We would like you to be one of our apprentices." And so I did. I felt like it was confirmation when people from different parts of the country started reaching out to me. It just made logical sense to combine these ways of healing with contemporary art. When we think of a studio as a place to discover, a place to feel safe, a place of imagination, a place of visualization, a place of manifesting, it made perfect sense to combine that with this type of healing, which also embraces those ideas.

So, I started combining portraiture with these healing modalities. First, I started with my immediate family, in order to feel more comfortable and to practice. Afterwards, once I had some success with those portraits, I began working with local community members. Ogden was the first place where I worked with folks who I had no previous connection to.

You've worked with more than just Weber State classes, right?

Yes, students from other Weber State classes and other institutions came in as groups to see my exhibition. I talked to them about the work I do and about a few cleansing techniques.

I worked with some Weber State students to create *limpia* portraits. It was beautiful that the students were willing to engage with me, and were open enough to do so. I appreciated the level of trust, care, and willingness they had to do these portraits and connect with a stranger. Getting to know the students and what they were going through was great. It

was empowering for myself, too, as I'm working to develop as an artist-healer. I loved seeing how they engaged with the final product, how happy they were to see their portraits at the opening being celebrated. It was like a final ritual, when people came to the opening, took pictures, and celebrated the work. That attention contributes to the healing for the individual, too.

Thank you for your time, for your beautiful energy, and for your investment and kindness to the students and to the community.

I appreciate you taking the time and trusting me to work with your students, and writing about my work, and for everything that you do for the community here.



María del Mar González-González (Ph.D., University of Illinois) is assistant professor of art history at Weber State University. She specializes in modern and contemporary Latin American and Latinx visual culture, with a focus on the intersection of art and politics. Other interests include socially engaged practices, decolonization, and the history of collecting and art biennials. Her work has been supported by grants from the Smithsonian Institution, University of Utah, Salt Lake City Arts Council and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), among others. González-González's writing has been published in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies, Caiana: Journal of Art History and Visual Culture of the Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte,* and in numerous art exhibition catalogs. She has also curated multiple exhibitions, most recently *Beyond the Margins: An Exploration of Latina Art and Identity* (2023) at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art and Boise State University's Blue Galleries.



Luis Álvaro Sahagún Nuño

The Healing Palette of Mystical Mestizaje

Echoes of Tlālōcān, The Healing Palette of Mystical Mestizaje (Paleta sanadora del mestizaje místico), 2024. Ogden Contemporary Arts.
Photo credit: Cassidy Eames

Mobile
Botanica



Alivio y Asilo Mobile *botánica*, 2024.
Ogden Contemporary Arts. Photo credit:
Luis Álvaro Sahagún Nuño







Details of the mobile *botánica, 2024*. Ogden Contemporary Arts

Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024

The idea behind creating this *Botanica* for OCA was that the community could use their intuition to collect medicinal herbs, crystals, and plants to receive a spiritual cleansing led by myself. All of the herbs in this pop-up are popular Mexican herbs that can be used as spiritual talismans—for protection and cleansing.

I like to work in academic spaces because Brown folks have internalized a lot of shame, guilt, and a loss of identity in these spaces. This is a way to educate and combine Indigenous ancient traditions with contemporary making. It is also a way to introduce self-care and offer connection and community.

For the opening, I made a call to the community to bring in what they consider sacred in their own traditions. I wanted to turn these objects into an altar space as an introduction and reminder to honor ancestral traditions. For me, this is a way to connect with Indigenous traditions and secure their continued value and relevance.

The altar was divided like a medicine wheel, according to cardinal spaces. I imagined students coming up to the medicine wheel and asking, "What's going on? What is this?" I would then give them instructions or help them along.

Each cardinal direction on a medicine wheel represents an element. In the particular practice I study, west is connected to water; north is connected to ancestors; east represents fire and what fire brings to the land; and south is the direction of wind.

It's really intriguing to think about how these elements connect to nature and our life essence. Artistically, thinking through these connections lends itself to teaching people about medicine, Indigenous traditions, and symbolism. We're relying on the symbolic representation of certain things, but we also attach private meaning to particular objects, which to me is a form of art. This art asks, "How do we create meaning between objects? How do we see the world? How can we change, adapt, and learn about ourselves and the world as we continue to make art?"

Latinx Class & Tea Ceremony



Luis engages during a tea ceremony with Kasey Lou Lindley at Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024



Altar display, Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024

Luis interacted with WSU students during a class visit with a *limpia* at OCA, 2024

For me, this interaction with students is about education and self-care. I understand the guiding principles that facilitate healing. I have learned from my mentors and from my grandma what it means to teach Indigenous medicine to future generations so that they can use it for themselves. Because of colonization, Brown people were made to believe that you have to have superpowers to be able to engage in this type of work. But the reality is, we all carry this medicine within us. We can all meditate and go into our spirit. Our ancestors' medicine is in our blood; it's in our mind, and in our spirit. We don't need permission from anyone to access it. I want to share what I'm learning so that others can take it with them and hopefully start the process of curiosity.



WSU students visit Nuño's studio at Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024



WSU student Aislyn Whitney poses in front of her *limpia* portrait at Nuño's studio, Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024



Perpetual Ceremony No. 4 (limpia for Aislyn Whitney), 2024. Charcoal, beads, beeswax, seashells, feathers, glitter, clay, maize, found objects, over cobija San Marcos, 14" x 19" x 2." Ogden Contemporary Arts

Limpia Portraits



Perpetual Ceremony no. 02 (Limpia for Kat Nix), 2024. Charcoal, beads, beeswax, seashells, feathers, glitter, clay, maize, cobija san marcos, on osb, 14" x 19" x 2." Ogden Contemporary Arts. Photo credit: Cassidy Eames

There is an overlap between the act of creation as an artist and the healing modalities I work with. I wanted to explore that, so I started working with *limpias* (portraits made while conducting spiritual cleansings). The series focuses on folks who are immigrants, undocumented, or refugees. As I draw these portraits, I receive information about the sitter's history and what's happening in their lives. I let the sitter know what I'm hearing, and then I open a spiritual space for them while I call in their ancestors and their spirits to help with whatever they are asking for. When the portrait is complete, I include it in my exhibit. If the portrait sells, I give a portion back to the sitter. It's a kind of recycling.



Perpetual Ceremony No. 5 (limpia for Priscilla Molina Hernandez), 2024. Charcoal, beads, beeswax, seashells, feathers, glitter, clay, maize, over cobija San Marcos, 14" x 17" x 2." Ogden Contemporary Arts. Photo credit: Cassidy Eames



Luis Álvaro Sahagún Nuño's studio and mobile botánica with *limpia* sketch. Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024. Photo credit: Cassidy Eames



Perpetual Ceremony no. 01 (Limpia for Zina Horteska), 2024. Charcoal, beads, beeswax, feathers, glitter, clay, maize, cobija San Marcos, on osb. 17" x 14." Ogden Contemporary Arts. Photo credit: Mariah Johnson

Oftentimes, people are really busy, so I will use WhatsApp or other platforms to work with my sitters. If there's something heavy in their heart, or they just want to bring love and positivity into their lives, we can talk about that. It's all confidential, of course. I either use a picture that they've taken in the past, or they send me a selfie. Then, I set up a schedule, and I say, "Open up your heart to the energy." We all carry this medicine within, but not everyone really believes that. Some think these gifts are only possessed by certain people, but we can all tap into our spirits, our ancestors, and they can help us heal.



Perpetual Ceremony no. 04 (Limpia for Vicki Lowe K'ulub), 2024. Charcoal, beads, beeswax, feathers, glitter, clay, maize, cobija San Marcos, on osb. Photo credit: Mariah Johnson



Alivio y asilo (Healing and Shelter) portrait wall, 2024. Ogden Contemporary Arts. Photo credit: Cassidy Eames



Detail of *Alivio y asilo (Healing and Shelter)* portrait wall, 2024. Ogden Contemporary Arts. Photo credit: Cassidy Eames

A world that sometimes thinks of Indigenous cultures as inferior is often accompanied by a dismissive rhetoric. Reclaiming the power of Indigenous cultures is where it started for me. Pain was my teacher. I figured out a way to tap into my ancestral medicine to help me. I have no chronic pain anymore.



Luis Álvaro Sahagún Nuño poses with *Echoes of Tlālōcān, The Healing Palette of Mystical Mestizaje (Paleta sanadora del mestizaje místico)*, **2024. Photo credit: Cassidy Eames**



Alivio y Asilo Mobile botanica, 2024. Ogden Contemporary Arts. Photo credit: Cassidy Eames

About The Artist

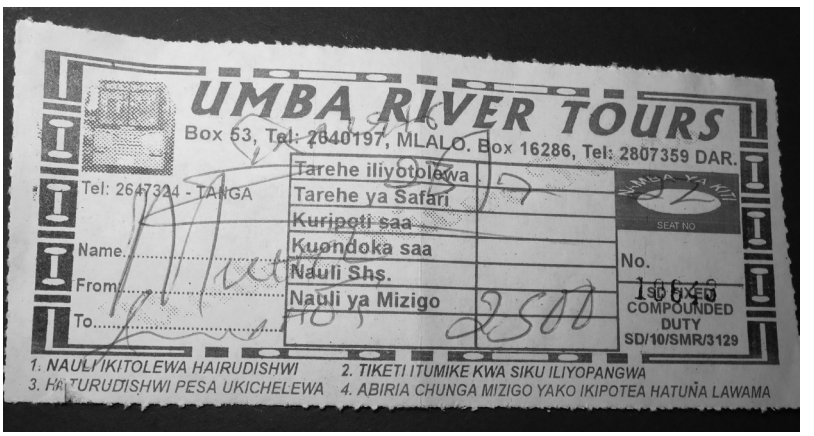
Luis A. Sahagún Nuño creates paintings, performances, and sculptures that confront the palpable inescapability of race, transforming them into acts of cultural reclamation. Like DNA strings of *mestizaje*, his practice sits at the intersections of contradictions — indian/conqueror, violence/unity, and ancient/contemporary. As the grandson of a *curandera* and a practitioner of *curanderismo*, Luis makes art that conjures Indigenous spiritualities to embody personal histories, cultural resistance, and colonial disruption. As a formerly undocumented immigrant and laborer from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, Luis addresses migration and transgenerational trauma by utilizing building materials such as silicone, lumber, drywall, concrete, and hardware—symbols representing working class immigrants.

He has exhibited at venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, IL); The Bronx Museum of the Arts (NYC); Latchkey Gallery (NYC); Charlie James Gallery (Los Angeles); Arvika Art Gallery (Sweden); The National Museum of Mexican Art (Chicago); and the Chicago Cultural Center, among others. His artwork has been covered in publications such as *Artforum*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newcity*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.

William Snyder

How a Pee Stop Saved the World, a Bus Became the Holy Grail, and a Driver Lived Forever and Ever Amen

On the Arusha-Dar highway, Tanzania



Bus ticket from the Tanzanian bus trip. Photo credit: William Snyder

This is a buses' bus, a traveler with a capital T's bus,
an absolutely no-nonsense bus—canonic, fundamental,
functional, a bus you see in movies, though this one
from Japan, a bargain-auction-buy Isuzu, ancient there
before its Mombasa resurrection. Our driver—smooth
and agile and dark. And muscled—so many—arms,
legs, neck, chest. And callused too—fingers, toes, arches,
eyeballs even—to see this road—two lane
and curvy and walkers and trucks and washouts,
potholes, speedbump zones, and how many days a week?

Our boss—calculating, concentrating, careful. Our
Captain. Our God come down from Busolympus
to live among us, to drive, this winner
of the Steering Wheel Timed Turn and the Clutch Mash
competitions at the East African Open. I can't
keep my eyes off of him. Or his bus. Or his passengers.

Or his land we're passing through—arid fields
of sisal and maize, red beans drying by the road, squarish,
purply mountains in the distance. We're a third
of the way down a nine hour journey, Mambo to come,
three hours away, then two more up the mountain road
the Germans built, its twists and brakes and steep-
sided cypressy drops to oblivion. And children, mothers,
fathers, suits, ties, kangas, t's, scarfs, Taqiyah caps,
a cornucopian assemblage of reds greens blues oranges
purples yellows. And umber, ocher, penny, carob, and
whitepink pink—us—Prof and students on our way
to the Usambaras, Lushoto, Saint Eugene's Hostel.

A roadside boarding this morning near Arusha, and we've
passed Kilimanjaro, and Moshi, and down, our
legs and backsides kerfed and scribed by hard, lumpy
seats, our faces pumiced by wind and grit, our brains
and guts and inner ears butted about by rumble and sway
and mechanical jounce—best I divvy our lunches
later on. But now we've coasted, slowed, doubleshifted
down, braked and turned into Same, this thirsty
market stop, its vendor stalls of funnels ropes

baskets chickens sneakers trousers dresses for
every age and shape, and who needs to pee? I ask.
Our three women say, no, they don't have to and even after

I say it'll be a while, they say no—imagining, I know,
the squats and drains. But I run, and Mark
runs to the cinder block building, the tile-wall
urinal, lady collecting coins at the door, and now I'm back,
and Mark, and we sit, and Jennie says, oh, she'd better
go and I say okay butforGod'ssakeshurry and give her
a coin and point and ask Mark to guide her—we need
speed—and he does and returns and sits, but jeez,
our driver engages his clutch and we roll ahead,
ten meters maybe, but stop (whew), and I watch
the toilet house and the mazy perplexity of tables
and stands, for Jenny, and the driver engages again,
presses his pedal and we wheeze toward
the exit gate. To keep his schedule? For amusement?

Or he's finished his kabobs and is ready to go?
So I duck out the window into sun and dust and chaff,
and yell, *Jenny. Jenny*. Mark yells too. And Beth.
Jenny, over engine and goat and whistle
and people beneath the windows hawking gums
and waters and chips and peanuts and eggs—hard boiled—
corns on the cob, white-loaf breads, cashew nuts,
composition booklets for government schools.

Then a woman behind me, in her Swahili-tinted
English, those soft, Swahili flavors, calls, *Jee-nee*,
Jee-nee, and then a man in front, a woman beside,
and others around and all of us—*Jee-nee*, *Jee-nee*
out the windows and laughing and smiling everyone
and that four-year-old in her dress and bows who's stood
between her mother's knees for this long duration
dances through her shyness and into the aisle.

Jee-nee, *Jee-nee*. And there she is, Jenny, running
toward us, all of us, all of us calling, waiting there
on the cusp of the world. She places a foot
on the front door step, reaches for the hard rail steel,
and we cheer, congratulate, confirm. Our driver
tosses his skewers out the window, looks back at us,
his face intimating forbearance, the imperturbability
of Perseus, or Job, and with the tiniest tick of a smile
itching at the corners of his lips, cascades us toward
the gate. Another shift, another press, another turn,
and we belch away down the road in a burst
of black exhaust and wonder-full. With a capital W.

Stickily Lickily

After, *The Pink Peach Tree*
Vincent Van Gogh, 1888

This peach. He'll do this peach, he says.
And every orchard in the world—none will
slip him by if he can help it. Always, when
we find an orchard, or find a tree alone, he'll
praise those farmers patient enough
to grow a tree, a God-damn tree, then pick
the fruit, once a year—for people who love
the juice, the pulp, the bits and pieces
baked gooily and sugarily (it's what he says—
gooily, sugarily) and lovingly into
tartes and melbas and clafoutis—(that last one
a mouthful, but a wonder to eat). Which, now I
think of it, I'll suggest we try one, or two,
or all, later, with our lunch. As our lunch.
I'll spring, I'll say, my treat—no pun
intended. Then I'll ask him if he got it
(you know, 'get it?' Blossom. Spring), and he'll
look at me for a moment, then turn
to his barky tree, go back to work (I guess not).



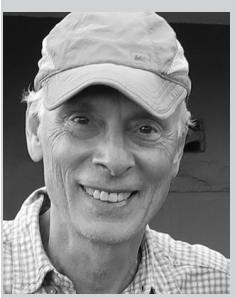
Vincent Van Gogh, *The Pink Peach Tree*, 28.7" x 23.4," oil on canvas, 1888

I too, will turn to the tree, look up and into
the branches and blossoms there, everywhere,
and understand—that tree a halo before the sky,
a moon on earth, a whistling wheel of white
and pink, a shiver, a frisson, a charge. And I'll
hold my arms in the air, pulse them up
and down, palms wide, in a sort of prayer, or
praise for this gift, this tree, for God who said,
let there be peach—to be baked (Star baked?
Sun baked? Moon pied?) into heavenly clafoutis.

And, damn. There-was-peach. Peaches.
Zillions. In orchards. On great big trees
like this one. And His Personal Tree, growing
way up there above, all cotton-cloudy-like,
and light-like, and forgiving-like beside
his very own Champs-Élysées (no pun intended.
Hint. . . Elysium. Get it?). So, praise be
for peaches, and for God's mysterious appetites,

and too—I know it—I'll stand before
the canvas tomorrow, or next week, or next month,
and praise it, mightily, more passionately,
certainly, than my praise for God, for peach—
how that flat thing—fabric stretched on wooden
slats, then slathers of thick, pigmenty oil worked
with brushes into ridge and groove and never
flat—and voila! A tree. A peach tree. That
peach tree. And those blossoms, and that blue
he's imagined for his sky make my head tingle
again, but without the smell of blossomy peach,
thank you God (and forgive me God, your
paean, your scribe, your patron).

And in the bakery now, at lunch, I say, Ah,
this melba, and this clafoutis, are so wonderful,
marvelous, mercifu. . . but then, in a slack, tiny,
ephemeral moment of clarity, all stuffily
stuffed, a belly buttonly breath away from being
sick, I say I'll have to forego a tarte today, even
in its sugarilyness, its gooilyness, its peachilyness.



William Snyder has published poems in *Tampa Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Salamander*, among others. He was the co-winner of the 2001 Grolier Poetry Prize; winner of the 2002 Kinloch Rivers Chapbook competition; the CONSEQUENCE Prize in Poetry, 2013; the 2015 Claire Keyes Poetry Prize; Tulip Tree Publishing *Stories That Need To Be Told* 2019 Merit Prize for Humor; and Encircle Publications 2019 Chapbook Contest. He is retired from teaching writing and literature at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN.

David Hargreaves

New River

Coos County, Oregon



On the edge of the wetland, neon-yellow skunk-cabbage shallows, conifer tips
puncture the mist, deflating its ego with first light—this is what comes from reading
too much. Seems I don't know how to write nature minus metaphor, pathetic fallacies
rather than new, post-human epistemologies, critical and climate-aware.

It's an odd sort of river, ten-mile long estuary and mudflat running parallel
with the ocean, two bodies divided by thirty yards of grassy dune. The cold here,
even in spring, can be bitter; today it's bitter, resentful, vengeful even—
personification. Yes, the workshop calls me out. The wind is already slapping up

white caps. Each year during this short April window, migrating shorebirds,
tens-of-thousands per day, race this corridor shielded from the incessant
Pacific northerlies. I've come to witness this up-close as they funnel between
dune and coastal forest, low along the water, running a gauntlet lined

with supersonic peregrine falcons, and patriarchal bald eagles—the workshop
cringes at my diction, says I'm pandering hints of lurid predator-on-prey action,
no better than cable TV, orca-on-penguin or polar-bear-on-baby-seal. I get it,
but here they come—the shorebirds, racing a few feet above the water for safety,
in waves of fifty, a hundred, or more, towards their sub-arctic breeding grounds.

A falcon dives into the flock, talons snatching one mid-air. Western sandpiper,
mostly, but also, dunlin, dowitcher, red-necked phalarope, plus the occasional
fling of whimbrel, or distinctive marbled godwits—even more exciting,
the exotic long-billed curlews—it's wrong to play favorites, but some birds

just seem cooler than others, like the Caspian tern, fighter-jet sleek—
my writing group tells me "too militaristic"—but I double down…
terns wearing black, Franco-fascist hats, like MAGA caps, except for the shape,
color, and their bright orange beaks squawking as if gargling nails—

OK, mixed metaphor, anthropomorphic. But along with the black, brown
and white shorebirds, a small flock of teal, florescent green-winged, and late
in the day, sauntering by, Alaska-bound, a lone Brandt goose, healthy, plump,
luxuriant black, seems to prefer its shorebird peeps over park-shitting,

bread-bingeing, Canadian cousins camped out in Portland parks—
OK, I'll quit. I get your concerns, post-humanist, yeah, but. . . damn!
what to do with this albatross of language around my neck?—
By late afternoon, I'm awed, immersed in the spectacle, not the self-same

person as this morning, walking the funky-smelling marsh. I concede
a romantic, human bias, ego-craving for nature to privilege my precious
awareness, my craving for just one tessera of Self to be transcendent.
Shall we say death reunites us with Nature, the Universe, The Oneness?

Should I be relieved? They all seem synonymous—I'll end up as zilch—
as if using capital letters makes it real—and me—just one more wanna-be
god, pretending I'm not mere animal matter who, rather than knowing
how to fly, just happens to know how to type.

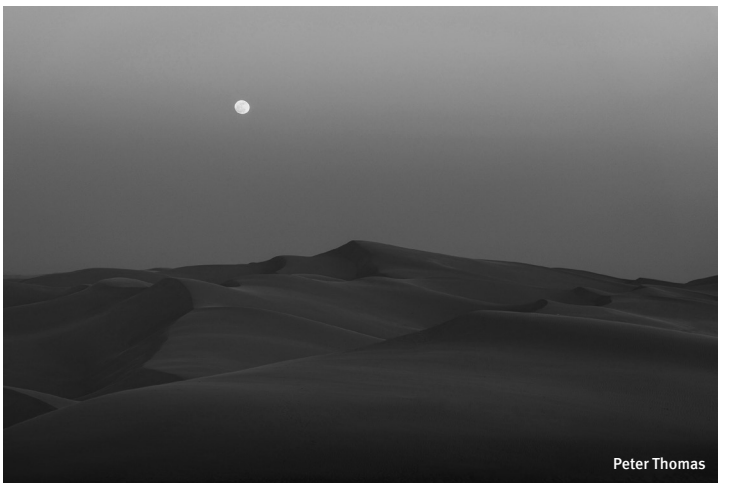


Born in Detroit, but a long-time resident of Oregon, David Hargreaves is a poet and translator. His translation of Chittadhar Hṛdaya's "River" (from Nepal Bhasa, the language of the ancestral people of the Kathmandu Valley) appears in the anthology *River Poems* (Everyman's Library Pocket Poet Series), and his translation of the *The Blossoms of Sixty-Four Sunsets*, poems by Durga Lal Shrestha, Nepal Bhasa's most famous living poet, was published in Kathmandu in 2014. His own collection of poems, *Running Out of Words for Afterwards* (Broadstone Books), appeared in 2022. His poems can be found in a wide variety of journals, including *American Journal of Poetry*, *Passages North*, *Naugatuck River Review*, and elsewhere.

Laura Sobbott Ross

Camping near the Great Sand Dunes National Park

Sangre de Christo Mountains, Colorado



The earth has knuckled up and locked
inside an ancient geologic era, now gone
cool and blue. Centuries have pleated
sandstone inclines, swept them wide
enough to trace shadows of clouds.

You and I drink jalapeno infused beers
and witness the landscape
of clouds, sticky and disentangling
to drift solitary like everything else here—
a route we'd read about in travel magazines,
a drawl raked in boot scuff and rawhide,
the stains between an old storyteller's teeth.

There's not a single store on the map,
you lament later while we walk fence lines
corralling sage and tumbleweed,
our bare ankles conjuring rattlesnakes.
Even the weeds are pretty.

Sand dunes anchor mountains that silver,
throw shadows over campfires.
The sky we never knew is honed in galaxies,
swirling star-foam of the Milky Way.
Constellations that open and breathe us in.

I won't tell you until tomorrow
how I lost my glasses, felt my way to the latrine—
my sandaled feet crunching over salt grass.
How I stumbled through darkness like a zombie
or a drunkard or someone who's been
blinded by the vast beauty of it all,

by sand and stars, and what is certain
and what is not, how August can be wind,
and love is a word you can never say
without using your teeth.
The desert night, a descending clarity,
a current that saturates and chills,
thrums our marrows like a morning bell.



Laura Sobbott Ross has worked as a teacher and writing coach for Lake County Schools in Central Florida and was named Lake County's poet laureate. Her poems have been featured on *Verse Daily* and have appeared in *Meridian*, *32 Poems*, *Blackbird*, *Main Street Rag*, *National Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. She was a finalist for the Art & Letters Poetry Prize and won the Southern Humanities Auburn Witness Poetry Prize. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks and three full-length poetry books.

Joseph Powell

Holy Cross Cemetery



My relatives' feet point east
as if the morning sun still warms their soles
like the lands they came from.
Couples sleep beside their children
as in their first pioneer houses.

The larger headstones proclaim
an importance we've mostly forgotten.
Angels and little saints are perched
to carry our stone souls aloft.
Some stand like Moses's tablets
before he saw the golden calf.
Most are rectangular slabs
the size of cookie sheets.

My father reclines in a moldering suit,
hard to take seriously,
so rarely out of his work clothes.
His brother must be sober now.
His kind, deaf mother hears as well as anyone here.
Her mother, who used to hook me with her cane
and give me a quarter, asleep since '59.

Mother, in a brown box of ashes,
outliving him and caskets by twenty-one years,
is no longer driven by work
or the seven names of their children
carved on the windy, west side of the stone,
mountains and a deer etched on the other
as if to lead our contentious memories
into an evergreen forest, benign
as their afterlife.

Over time our symbols confuse us,
various crosses rise out of the stone,
a lamb, a rosary in folded hands, flowers, deer.
Sometimes no one returned to fill in the missing year,
finding others to love perpetually.

Now, an angus calf stands rubbing
the white fence separating death
from life. The fence doesn't know which way to lean.
A pheasant crows from the cattail swamp in the next field
looking for love, some answer.
Two boys fling a frisbee in that wide strip
of grass that waits for the rest
of us, for that floating disc
to spin its lit way to the holy ground.

Popcorn

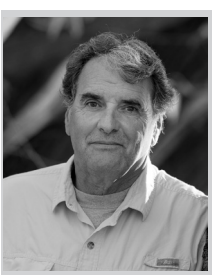
The last in line on the school bus's route,
late because of a fight, two boys kicked off,
parents called. She walks the long lane home,
the last of seven, both pampered and poked
for being the youngest, a good sport.
Her mother finally able to work in town,
her father working late, again.

She picks a small bunch of Concords,
spits out the seeds, the slip-skins,
kicks the gravel under the weight of her bookbag.
The fruit trees are yellowing,
taking back that green so easily given.

When she arrives at the door,
it's locked, two of her older brothers,
now in Morgan Junior High,
have made popcorn and are watching
the Disney channel, a western,
her favorite. She knocks, yells.
They pass the bowl, laugh, wave.

Maybe ten, fifteen minutes go by, more knocking,
before she sends her fist through the diamond
shaped window-glass of the door.
She unlocks it, throws down her bag of books,
sits on the sofa, dripping a little blood
into the popcorn, cooling her still jagged anger.

The boys sit silent, schooling themselves
in the measurement of time, especially
in that long lane it will walk down
before their father comes home,
and that small hidden heat inside the kernel
before it leaps into another shape.



Joseph Powell has published seven books of poems and five chapbooks. His book of stories, *Fish Grooming & Other Stories*, was a finalist for the Washington State Book Award. He received an NEA in poetry in 2009. He is professor emeritus of English who taught at Central Washington University for thirty years.

Jim Tilley

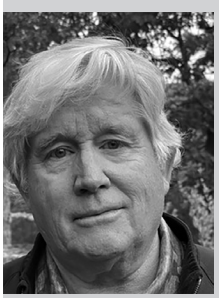
Carpenter, Hunter, Fisherman



He was happy to go, that slight man who showed me
how to tie flies as we sat together on the living room sofa
in the house he had built with his own hands, braiding
together my long-gone days teaching knots to scouts
with those of his preparing to catch trout. At his service,
people asked why, but praised him for having the good
sense to check himself into an institution. How they wished
he hadn't been allowed to return home, to keep the key
to his hunting cabinet. I sat on the hard pew, remembering
how often I had listened to his wife prattle about the ills
of her everyday life, but the quiet, blue-collar carpenter
must have wondered how her arthritic, misshapen hands
still had the strength to hammer nails into his head.
I finally understood why he so often hunted and fished.

House across the Street

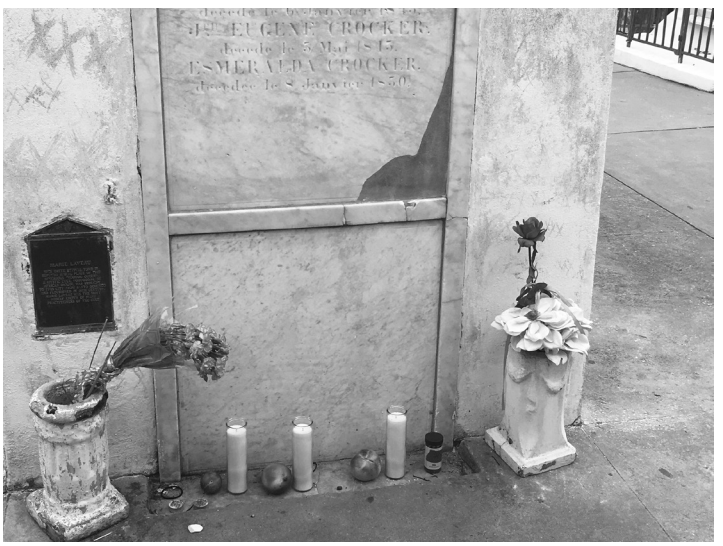
My new neighbor had lost her husband in the tower collapse,
then moved several times before settling into the house
across the street. She repainted it from the churning gray
of that September day to the hue of an August dawn. Workmen
cleared the side yard for a jungle gym, the air clogged with
sawdust, the ground piled with branches and leaves instead
of steel and glass. When they set upon the backyard and kept
on cutting, I half-expected her to don a hardhat and gloves,
pick up a chainsaw, finish off the trees herself. Mornings,
she waited with her two boys for the school bus, afternoons
for their assured return. On my walks, I never stopped to talk
with her. Then one day, they moved away. New neighbors
settled in. Mornings, the mother waited with her two boys,
afternoons for their return. I'd stop to talk until the bus came.



Jim Tilley has published three full-length collections of poetry *(In Confidence*, *Cruising at Sixty to Seventy*, *Lessons from Summer Camp*) and a novel (*Against the Wind*) with Red Hen Press. His short memoir, *The Elegant Solution*, was published as a *Ploughshares* Solo. His work has appeared in more than sixty journals and magazines, including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Southern Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. He has won *Sycamore Review*'s Wabash Prize for Poetry. His newest collection, *Ripples in the Fabric of the Universe: New and Selected Poems*, appeared in 2024.

Lisa Bickmore

St. Louis Cemetery No. 1



Marie Laveau's tomb in New Orleans, Louisiana. Photo credit: Gerald Shields

Because visitors used to scratch three Xs
in the white paint of her tomb, and leave
hairpins as offerings in the hope of a granted
wish, one must now secure the services
of a guide to visit the grave of Marie Laveau,
priestess of vodou and maker of gris gris
for those who needed luck or protection: the guide

wears a hat, carries a parasol for the sun,
urges us all to drink water to countervail
the hurricanes, ordered up at the Voodoo Lounge
where the tour starts. It's only eleven,
but the plastic cups, pink with passionfruit
and hazy with rum, are permissible, because
in New Orleans, the drinking starts anytime at all.

The guide tells us, because she knows her death rites,
that the tombs aboveground were like ovens:
after a year and a day, only dust and fragments
of bone would remain, to be swept into
the receiving pit that underlay the next coffin
and its brief period of state. As a lady
of her time, Mme Laveau went to weekly mass.

She dressed rich women's hair, heard
their idle talk, their secrets. She'd know,
for instance, who was pregnant and who
hoped to be, she'd hear what trouble
another carried, what remedy she sought.
Vodou is a religion like any other, the guide
should note: so it isn't, perhaps, too strange,

when we stand at the doorstep of Marie Laveau's
last house, tall, narrow, almost like a cabinet,
that I wish she could bundle a cure
for you, my daughter, carrying the new
grandchild, a charm that you could wear during
the birth and even after. It's said
Laveau could tell a fortune, and I want

to know what she'd say about your bile
moving out of its proper course, your doctor
having diagnosed, listening carefully
to the baby's heartbeat. When she is born,
I will not yet have returned: I will come after,
to cook you dinner, to hold the child
while you sleep or bathe. I consider

this future, just weeks away, and wonder
if it is comfort or despair I feel,
thinking of the bodies turned so quickly
to dust here, where the creole, the once enslaved,
those who called themselves masters, all sift
into the dirt, in this cemetery
the size of a city block, that had to be

claimed bit by bit, like all of New Orleans,
from swamp. The archdiocese watches
over the cemetery like art
in a museum (once in the night,
some devotee painted Laveau's tomb pink).
The inscription on the grave beseeches:
passants priez pour elle. From here, the river's

unseeable. The levee holds it ten feet
above the streets and squares. When we entered
St. Louis Cemetery, an officer
outlined my body with his wand: I pray
for the new lungs to open like a bellows,
for her ragged cry, for the garments you've assembled
to shield her tender body from this world.

Machine

Up north, on an island cut from land,
a hum has returned, sub-sonic, felt
deep in the body along the nerves,
as yet unexplained: not the foundry

whence it seems to derive, in slow waves
reaching the stoops, the walls, rattling
windows in their casings, disrupting
infants' sleep in houses fifty miles

away. In the morning, I'll return
to watch you sleep, your monitors singing
their monotone contraption songs.
I think of the heat we've made of only

flesh and skin. Think of the meals I've made
for us from soft ripe fruit. For weeks
I've demonstrated, to anyone who
asks about your heart, holding up one

fist, fingers from the other hand
the branching arteries. Each hand
implying an architecture of
the danger. Now the real work's enisled

inside you, a barely perceptible
drone, and we're alone in this room,
the only sound your peripherals,
their ping and glug.

Dragon Bell

After following the garden's rough map
we make our way back down the hill,
trying this time to discern what the low

sprawl of shrub is, with its little pommes,
both green and yellow, and end, finally,
at the shop again, with its garlands

of paper frogs and swallows, and glass eggs
that I want, strung on wire, though the glass would find
a dozen ways to break in my bag:

the basket of brass bells, though, from the desert
in China—a strand of these I know I could
carry, that their low music would please me when

even a hot wind moved the clapper, that I
will think of the day I spent with my son
in the Qionglai range near Four Girls Mountain,

where he showed me a river winding
as if in a picture, wind moving through larches:
and even though I am in this garden

in the vineyards of Sonoma with my
oldest friend, the bell will remind me of
both places: *mountains mean earthquakes*, she says

of the hills she loves: though any landscape can mean
almost anything: in the valley below,
her son, just older than mine, is buried. In China,

we drove over roads, broken to rubble by the quake
six years prior, to reach the Balang Pass: we posed
for a photograph as if we had climbed there.

In this garden, we walk to the highest point,
which is, as the shop's docent had pointed out,
not all that high, and there, just as in Sichuan,

are prayer flags, strung on the trunks of trees,
in a figure like a rickety clothesline that could
at a moment collapse in on itself, parasol

threatening to turn inside out, the flags
in all stages of wear and tatter: we turn
to look into the valley, and beyond it,

Sonoma Mountain, its slow rise from an ancient
seabed singing in thin air, its twisted backbone
a bronze chime underwritten by fire.



Lisa Bickmore is the author of three books of poems. The second, *flicker* (2016), won the 2014 Antivenom Prize (Elixir Press). She won the 2015 Ballymaloe International Poetry Prize for the poem "Eidolon," which appears in her third collection, *Ephemerist* (Red Mountain Press). She is the founder/publisher of the nonprofit Lightscatter Press (lightscatterpress.org). In 2022, she was named Poet Laureate of the state of Utah, and in 2023 was awarded an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship.

Richard Robbins

The poem I would write if I were you

knows the names of the flowers, crescent-bottom and priem
wears its mourning band for only half a day

tastes an orange from the first tree
hears the ocean in your ears

tastes all the flavors of grief
tastes joy at the thinnest altitude, that summit in the Cascades, the fog lifting

remembers the first girl you loved, your small hand on hers
remembers sand and the smell of creosote, the car broken down on the shoulder
    50 miles from a desert town that might help you

watches the mountain lion lying down in shade under its overhang of stone
smells ocean salt 100 miles away, over a divide and down into the valley

isn't afraid to ask basalt for directions
goes unafraid to the giving-up place

wants trust to be like music
wants to hope like fashioning clay

knows all your relations walk across the earth held by invisible strings
loves the elders, their crooked hands

loves the enemies
loves who they beat down

kneels down in the field where the battle happened
kneels down where the wheat grew

sees me coming your way
knows the river just beyond us, the names of fish swimming upstream

sees the city and wilderness, their layercake dream
sings the song we don't yet know the words for

loves the elders, their crooked hands

A Small Offering, Then

The day we walked the rainforest garden
in Vancouver, waiting for a friend. We
were bits of color in our coats weaving
under mist through giant fern and hemlock.

What could we ever come to know about
this world: fawn lily, hedge nettle, betrayal.
We walked as if on a closed loop, as if
our friend was never arriving. It was

a strange country. Ravens spoke their own
dialect beyond the gray. Later, we came
to call this joy. The salmonberry blur,
trilliums at our feet, moving inside

that easy quiet—then, from some great
distance, someone calling out our names.



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From the State to the Market

Changes in Literary Production and Style in China's Late 1980s

从国家到市场 中国八十年代后期文学生产和样式的嬗变

Sandy Zhang

For most of the high official literary magazines, China's turn toward capitalism from the mid-1980s brought about a crisis. The magazines which were originally state-funded and part of a planned economic system were now required to be financially self-sufficient (自负盈亏zifu yingkui). However, they had no prior experience in surviving in a market economy. As the primary venue for high literature, some literary magazines shifted their focus from experimental literature to works that represented the new economic reforms. For instance, following the reputable *Shanghai Literature* 上海文学 (Shanghai wenxue), which began publishing works representing the everyday life of the urban middle class as early as 1987, *Bell Mountain* 钟山 (zhongshan), a Nanjing-based high literary magazine, created the concept of the so-called "New Realism" 新写实 (xinxieshi) and published a significant number of realistic works in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Focusing on everyday lives of common people, the troubles and desires that are part of their daily existence, the New Realism forsakes both grand narratives and metaphysical tendencies that had informed the mainstream literary field in the past four decades and the elitist literary experimentation of the avant-garde. To a large extent, the emergence of this new literary style was a product of Chinese society's commercialization.

Chinese scholarship of contemporary Chinese literature has extensively touched upon this new literary style through its narratological features and existentialist nature. This essay takes a different approach by examining literature in a socio-economic context and aims to investigate how the change of economic systems in postsocialist China impacted literature. I argue that, among many other reasons, China's turn toward capitalism in the second half of the 1980s led to the emergence of the New Realism in official literary magazines. On the one hand, the market orientation of literary production subjected most official literary magazines to what Jason McGrath calls "the

imperatives of market competition"; literary magazines were no longer just a venue for literature but also a commodity.[1] The publication and promotion of the more readable New Realism was a survival strategy for many high literary magazines. On the other hand, the rapidly commercializing Chinese society itself rendered prominent the issue of the daily life of a rising middle class. Consequently, in official magazines, the New Realism began to outpace experimental literature, whose obscurity and formal complexity impeded understanding for many common readers. As China's economic reform developed and became embedded in ordinary people's lives, the depiction of everyday life in literature replaced the discourse of the New Enlightenment.[2]

Thirty years after the Chinese Communist Party abolished private property ownership in 1956, the People's Republic of China (PRC) began its transition from state socialism to a market-oriented economy. On a policy level, the economic reforms began with the Reform and Opening-up Policy at the end of 1978, which was followed by the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on Reform of the Economic Structure" in October 1984. After a few years of experimentation, Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992 reaffirmed the Reform and Opening-up Policy as a fundamental state agenda, despite intense ideological debates. In October 1993, the "socialist market economy" was constitutionally recognized as a legitimate economic system of the PRC. Yet, the production of high literature had already begun to undergo "a basic market-driven rupture" in the second half of the 1980s.[3] In these circumstances, a new literary trend, New Realism, was "invented" and promoted by the official literary magazines *Bell Mountain* and *Literary Criticism (*文学评论*,* wenxue pinglun*)* at the end of the 1980s; this trend continued to develop until the mid-1990s. The trajectory of this new literary style was the product of China's economic transition from a socialist planned-economy to a capitalist market. China's turn toward capitalism in ideology and economics is interrelated with a shift toward realism in high literature.

In the language of the New Enlightenment in the first half of the 1980s, capitalism was tentatively justified by Chinese intellectuals as an engine of economic development, although it remained ideologically controversial. The famous book series *Walking Toward the Future* was among the first to introduce John Maynard Keynes (one book each in 1985 and 1987) and Max Weber (1986 and 1987) to Chinese readers. In the "Foreword" (*yizhe de hua*) of the Chinese translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the translators state that "due to China's long-term isolation, Weber was hardly known to Chinese readers […] The formation of capitalism had profound social-cultural foundations […] As a political and economic system, capitalism is conducive to the elevation of productive forces."[4] The subsequent Weber fever in the second half of 1986 among Chinese intellectuals triggered a serious discussion on whether Confucianism could play the same role as Protestantism in the West to lay an ethical and ideological foundation for capitalism in China. Capitalism was not only taken as an economic system toward material affluence, as was demonstrated by the West, but also as a symbol of freedom, democracy, and superiority.

In particular, during the postsocialist era in China, intellectuals created

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a utopian discourse that favorably connected capitalism with democracy. Wu Liang's groundbreaking article, "Literature and Consumerism," published as early as February 1985 in *Shanghai Literature*, enthusiastically endorsed consumerism. Wu celebrated consumerism by arguing that it would "bring about a more open, flexible, and efficient future, which values individuals' wisdom, demands, and capacities." He also expressed unbridled confidence in high literature's ability to solve potential problems that consumerism might bring, such as "calculative commercial practice, extravagance, spirit degeneration, apathy to freedom."[5] The author regarded consumerism as a way to subvert the producer's absolute authority in the planned economy and as a symbol of cultural democracy. This optimism toward consumerism was typical among intellectuals in the 1980s, who uncritically celebrated capitalism and eagerly incorporated China into the Eurocentric global modernity without anticipating the devastating impact this sharp economic turn would have on high literary magazines and literature in general.

During the early Reform Era (1978-1989), highbrow literary magazines enjoyed consistently high sales with the establishment of a market economy. However, popular fiction and other media, such as TV dramas, surged in popularity and led to a decline in readership of high literature. To illustrate this point, compare the sales figures between two major magazines issued by the same press in Shanghai: *Shanghai Literature*, a highly respected magazine known for ambitious, serious literature, and *Story Session* 故事会 *(gushihui)*, a popular literary magazine known for its appealing stories. Sales of *Shanghai Literature* decreased from "480,000 copies at the beginning of the 1980s to about 40,000 to 50,000 copies in the mid-1980s."[6] In contrast, the sales of *Story Session* increased from 267,933 copies in 1979 to over 6 million in 1985.[7] It sold 76 million in 1985, and its high sales remained steady after 1988.[8] Both magazines experienced a decline in sales after the mid-1980s due to inflation, which caused an overall increase in magazine prices. However, *Story Session* continued to generate considerable profits, and its "sales aced all other literary journals nationwide," while *Shanghai Literature*'s profits barely covered its basic costs after 1985.[9] When the state gradually reduced financial

support for magazines, *Story Session* was "very proud to subsidize government agencies, something [that only] the rich *Gushihui* could afford," while *Shanghai Literature* faced unbearable financial pressure.[10] This financial difficulty was not unique to *Shanghai Literature*, as almost all high literary magazines experienced similar problems from the second half of the 1980s onward. The situation was even worse for many less reputable magazines.



Figure 2: Cover 3 & 4, *Shanghai Literature* 7 (1985).

Meanwhile, the process of marketization in literary production necessitated that state-funded official literary magazines become financially self-sufficient. This resulted in high literary magazines making various literary and non-literary changes to adapt to the market. For instance, *Shanghai Literature* established an Entrepreneurs' Association 企业家联谊会(*qiyejia lianyihui*) and a "company of literary creation and development" 文学创作发展公司 (wenxue chuangzuo fazhan gongsi) to build connections with entrepreneurs who were identified as the magazine's target sponsors. Additionally, the magazine sold the space originally used for publishing artwork to commercial advertisements. After the first advertisement appeared on the back cover of the fourth issue of 1985, over half of the remaining issues in 1985 contained ads for enterprises such as a cement factory, an elevator factory, a railway service company, a glass apparatus factory, and a fan factory (figures 1 and 2). Starting in 1986, the year when *Shanghai Literature* became financially independent, ads in each issue increased from one page to three,



Figure 1: Cover 3 & 4, *Shanghai Literature* 6 (1985).

typically featuring pictures of products, workshops, and people in charge of the factory or company. As most advertisements were not for everyday commodities that readers would consume, Kong Shuyu argues in her analysis of *Beijing Literature*'s advertisements—which was also true for *Shanghai Literature*—that due to the large (what Pierre Bourdieu famously called) symbolic capital applied to literature and the official literary magazines in the 1980s, "the reward for buying the ad space is not greater sales for industrial products, but rather kudos for the company's managers and presidents. Hence, their prominently displayed photos."[11] The new market economy forced *Shanghai Literature* to exchange its symbolic capital for economic capital. This kind of "trade" increased with the deepening of economic reforms in the following years. Moreover, the Shanghai Soap Industry even obtained the right to name the essay column of the magazine after its brand, *Bees and Flowers*.

Shanghai Literature was by far not the only literary magazine facing sales pressure under the economic transition and pursing commercial cooperation with entrepreneurs. However, *Shanghai Literature* stood out by initiating the reforms to adapt to the new situation. While many scholars attribute the magazine's market responsiveness to Shanghai's commercial tradition and character, it's important to note that the new chief editor of *Shanghai Literature* in 1987, Zhou Jieren, played a decisive role in literary selection. "Zhou favored literature that represented ongoing life and society, rather than high-end idealism."[12] As a result, *Shanghai Literature* intensively published, in 1988 and 1989, literary works that often discussed how the market economy impacted people's morality and beliefs, as well as the lives and mentalities of self-employed business people. In contrast to literary magazines that focused on literary experimentation, such as *Harvest* 收获 (shouhuo), *Shanghai Literature* under Zhou's leadership focused on literature of the quotidian, making it more accessible to common readers.

While the previous editor of *Shanghai Literature* ignored "average readers," Zhou prioritized them. In contrast to experimental literature, which was largely exclusive to avant-garde writers, critics, and literary scholars, the reader of the New Realism was the rising urban middle class, which was also the target reader and consumer of *Shanghai Literature*. Although official magazines retained the socialist propaganda of serving the people, the notion of the reader, like the notion of people, had remained an abstract concept. The reform of *Shanghai Literature* not only brought to the fore a new realistic literary style, but also created visible individual readers. Following the publication of the first New Realistic work, which Zhou titled "Trials and Tribulations" 烦恼人生 (fannao rensheng), in August 1987, literary authority began to shift partially from writers and literary critics to readers. Yu Minhua describes how readers, who were previously invisible and collective, began to play a role in the circulation of literary works:

> The emergence of New Fiction signaled the growing participation of the market and readers in the creative process of writers. The recognition of China's work, in particular, epitomized the power of the 'market' […] Before "Trials and Tribulations" was published in *Shanghai Literature*, it had been rejected by several literary magazines. However, the then-chief editor of *Shanghai Literature*, Zhou Jieren, "realized with intuition that this was an extraor-

> dinary work" and "published it with passion and prudency." [Apparently], editors and critics had failed to properly interpret the novella, but it was well received by readers. It was subsequently reprinted in *Selected Fiction*, *Short Stories Monthly*, *Novellas,* and received awards from all three literary magazines. Circulated through these magazines, "Trials and Tribulations" brought its author Chi Li widespread fame. As she recalls, "what shocked me the most in the 1980s was the acceptance and affirmation I received from readers." […] In this sense, the final popularization of New Realism was directly related to the market's selection […].[13]

As one of the first literary spaces subject to commercialization, Shanghai and *Shanghai Literature* saw the emergence of the reader as a new factor in determining literary selection, alongside the editor. A reader-oriented literary value began to undermine elitist literature based on the small circles of writers and critics. While the official literary field was still celebrating the boom of experimental literature, *Shanghai Literature* began to publish the New Realism, not only to boost declining sales, but also to balance the magazine's professionalism and readership.

How does the New Realism incorporate literary innovation and depth, while also appealing to *Shanghai Literature*'s readership? "Trials and Tribulations" serves as a good example through which to explore this question. The narrative begins with the protagonist Yin Jiahou being awakened at 3:50 a.m. by his son, who has fallen out of bed in a crowded room. From that moment on, to the time he retires to bed at 11:36 p.m. at night, the plot unfolds in great detail about how trivial everyday matters such as housing, wages, bonuses, and bringing up a child cause great anxiety, frustration, and a sense of defeat.[14]

Along with a photo of the author wearing an apron, this story focuses on the everyday troubles and trials of an urban nuclear family (figure 3). If writing of everydayness had largely disappeared from mainstream literature for over thirty years, Chi Li's novella portrays urban, disconnected, and detail-centered scenarios, and in so doing disturbs not only the grand narratives of the previous decades, but also the coded ideologies of revolution and enlightenment. Yin's portrayal of the everyday is by no means a "typical image" supposed to guide people's behavior in socialist realist literature.[15] Instead, by truthfully narrating the minute occurrences in a single day, the novella portrays the life of a middle-aged intellectual who, like countless others, is baffled by various problems


池莉中篇小说

CHI LI ZHONG PIAN XIAO SHUO FAN NAO REN SHENG

烦恼人生

池莉

·作者近影·

Figure 3: *Shanghai Literature* 8 (1987), 4.

of daily life. For Chi Li, as well as for other New Realist writers, the everyday becomes the starting point of literary exploration and allows writers to delve into the emotional and psychological world of characters in the context of their social and cultural realities. Moreover, unlike experimental works, this novella conveys immediate meanings through a series of simple plots, making it more accessible to inexperienced readers. In this sense, the New Realism can be regarded as a kind of democratic literature fostered in a commercial society.

For Henri Lefebvre, "the everyday [is] the decisive category linking the economy to individual life experiences."[16] Indeed, the New Realism, which represents the everydayness of middle-class individuals, is a literary phenomenon peculiar to a society when economic agency becomes important to individuals. If capital is "of minimal importance in state-socialist societies," a commerce-centered society converts that capital into a crucial determinant for its citizens.[17] "Trials and Tribulations" explores the material, psychological, and mental impacts of China's capitalist turn on ordinary people. As shown through Yin and his wife, a young couple experiencing China's economic transition, both consumer desire and consumer anxiety grow as a result of the elevated materialist values in their life. In particular, by depicting a single day in Yin's life, the novella effectively portrays the evolving mindset and lifestyle of an urban intellectual in an emerging consumer culture. Compared to his wife and son, who openly express their material desires (his wife wants a home, his son a color TV), Yin struggles between the desire for fulfillment in a new commercial society and deep frustration over his sense of economic impotence as an intellectual. This loss of power is heightened when Yin hears about the high income of a professional athlete. At the same time, Yin bitterly observes the diminishment of cultural capital, which was highly valued in the not-too-distant era driven by the mainstream ideology of the New Enlightenment on the one hand, and the increasing importance of economic capital on the other.

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This troubled and tiresome daily life presents a sharp contrast to the utopian younger years of the antihero characterized by ideals, passion, confidence, freedom, and first love, which Yin now realizes are nothing but a dream. The transition from his twenties to thirties is not just a matter of maturity—as, according to the author, "the young

man's idealism elapsed when he grew mature"—but the collective experience of Chinese intellectuals in the wake of China's economic reforms that transformed their capitalist idealism into cynicism and despair.[18] In a bitterly sarcastic way, the novella inserts a poet named Little Bai and moments when Yin and his colleagues discuss literature amidst his daily trivialities. Once a symbol of great cultural value before China's capitalist turn, poets and poetry are now ridiculed as mere "dreams" in the face of a burgeoning consumer culture. The novella registers the conflicting values of culture and consumption, what Jürgen Habermas described as "two irreconcilable entities.''[19] Yin represents the devalued culture and disillusioned idealism, his wife and son a new generation of zealous consumers. In the end, the couple reconciles and Yin falls asleep, seeking refuge in his dreams and completely surrendering his intellectual idealism to the pressures of material consumption. The ideals projected onto capitalism by a generation of intellectuals turn out to be illusory, thwarted as they are by the coarse commercialization that aroused people's material desires. While deconstructing the grand narratives of Enlightenment and idealism in form, the novella in fact expresses a deep nostalgia for them.

To conclude, the economic reforms of the mid-1980s compelled official literary magazines to become independent from the state. Ostensibly, the marketization of literary production forced the magazine industry to shift from reclusive experimentalist forms to the so-called secularized New Realism. In reality, China's capitalist turn reshuffled the power relations within the field of literature and changed the expectations of readers, leading to a general degeneration of intellectual culture and literary commodification. The New Realism was not merely an outcome of economic reform, but also a reflection of the ideological and ethical debates accompanying it. Intellectuals who had, previously, uncritically celebrated capitalism as a means of subverting the country's socialist ideology, now began to realize how the new economic system deflated their aspirations for a cultural utopia and led them to develop a profound sense of nostalgia for the pre-capitalist idealism that yet continued to haunt them.

In a bitterly sarcastic way, the novella inserts a poet named Little Bai and moments when Yin and his colleagues discuss literature amidst his daily trivialities. Once a symbol of great cultural value before China's capitalist turn, poets and poetry are now ridiculed as mere "dreams" in the face of a consumer culture.

Notes

1. McGrath, 3.

2. According to the rationale of the New Enlightenment of the 1980s, the period from the 1950s to the 1970s was equated with feudalism (and therefore considered pre-modern), while the 1980s symbolized a New Era progressing toward modernity. This ideology, though not grounded in truth, facilitated the rapid and largely uncritical Westernization of China.

3. Ibid, 2.

4. Huang Xiaojing 黄晓京 and Peng Qiang 彭强, "Foreword" to *Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* 新教伦理与资本主义精神 (Xinjiao lunli yu zibenzhuyi jingshen), translated by Huang and Peng, 1986, 1-5.

5. Wu Liang 吴亮, "Wenxue yu xiaofei" 文学与消费, *Shanghai wenxue*, February 1985, 75.

6. Jin Luyao, 靳路遥, Zhou Jieren yu Ershishiji Bashiniandao Zhonghouqi de *Shanghai Wenxue* 周介人与20世纪80年代中后期的《上海文学》(Zhou Jieren and *Shanghai Literature* of the Mid-and-Late 1980s). *Mang Zhong* 芒种 15 (2017): 79-88.

7. Ma Yuanyuan, 29-31, 41.

8. Wang Shu, 41-47.

9. "Bianzhe de hua" 编者的话. *Gushihui* 1 (1989): 1.

10. Kaikkonen, 141.

11. Kong, 154.

12. See note 4.

13. Yu Minhua, 114-121.

14. Leung, 52.

15. The creation of "typical image" 典型形象(dianxing xingxiang) was promoted in China's socialist literature and art.

16. Henri Lefebvre, quoted in Ronneberger, 43.

17. Eyal, 21.

18. Chi Li 池莉. *Fannao rensheng* 烦恼人生. Huacheng chubanshe, 2016.

19. See note 14.

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Life-Writing During and After Socialism in Romania

Translating Ioan Ploscaru's Memoirs in Postsocialist Times

Scrierile autobiografice în România în timpul şi după socialism
Traducerea memoriilor lui Ioan Ploscaru în epoca postsocialistă

Maria Lupas



Bookstore in Romania, 1969. Photo courtesy of the Romanian National History Museum (MNIR).

The practices of creating and receiving literature and the variables connected to these practices constitute literary systems. Who creates and who reads, what they read, how, why, where, and when can all vary considerably by place and by time. Specifically, as Perry Link has noted about the differences between the Chinese and American literary systems, the place of literature in society can vary largely: "how many American writers could see their work occupy central locations in society that the work of their successful Chinese counterparts did?"(9). The start of this project was an observation that the life-writing genres—defined as genres that encompass many types of personal narrative—in postsocialist Romania enjoyed a particularly central location in society and a high degree of media attention. The genre reached wide audiences and was frequently commented upon. I argue that the privileged place of the life-writing genres in postsocialism was still strongly connected to the prior socialist literary system. Under socialism, people often wrote autobiographical and biographical texts, and these became part of the state surveillance system and were used as means of social advancement or political condemnation. Life-writing thus carried higher and sometimes dangerous stakes under socialism. Published biographies were also subjected to unwanted editorial changes by censors. Many of these constraints disappeared with the collapse of the socialist system, but I argue that the life-writing published in postsocialist Romania was marked by some features still connected to socialism: it was marked by the dark humor that had spread under socialism; it poised itself as telling what really happened under socialism; and it deliberately named names in the manner of a police file. Although not proportionally published more in postsocialist Romanian than in North American literary systems, life-writing tended to make a larger stir as a "revelation" of a socialist past that had previously been silenced or constrained. Evidence for my claim can be seen in the case of the memoirs of the Romanian Greek Catholic bishop Ioan Ploscaru. Published in 1993, the text shows features that would appeal to a postsocialist audience irrespective of religion. This article will first review research on the life-writing genre in the years prior to socialism and during the Stalinist terror. It will then situate Ploscaru's memoirs in the relative memoir boom following the end of socialism. Finally, it will look at some features of Ploscaru's text and the difficulties of some translations in attempting to render the passages into other languages.

I argue that the privileged place of the life-writing genres in postsocialism was still strongly connected to the prior socialist literary system. Under socialism, people often wrote autobiographical and biographical texts, and these became part of the state surveillance system and were used as means of social advancement or political condemnation. Life-writing thus carried higher and sometimes dangerous stakes under socialism.

1. From Life-Writing Constellations to Arresting Biographies

In the Romania of the late 1920s and of the 1930s, published diaries were popular as evidenced by those who kept diaries themselves and mentioned the published diaries they were reading. These same diaries referenced the existence of friends' diaries which the authors had access to and which they were reading in turn, a phenomenon that Philippe Lejeune and Catherine Bogaert have called "constellations of diaries" (see also Lupas 19).

Diaries both published and private were fashionable in the Romanian literary system of the 1930s and early 1940s. World War II, however, disrupted many aspects of life including the literary system. When the communists seized power at the end of World War II, the Romanian literary system shifted yet again.

Communist rule and the implementation of socialism required the use of force to eliminate opposition (Hitchens 225). Socialism in Romania constitutes the backdrop of this study, and it helps to understand it through Katherine Verdery's argument that the system of socialist central planning in the Soviet Bloc had inherent weaknesses, which created economic shortages and fomented distrust of management. To prevent the ensuing social unrest, communist parties relied on several mechanisms to create docile subjects, including the apparatus of surveillance (Verdery 23). That system produced files on its citizens. The production of surveillance in socialism paralleled the system for producing goods and was as important if not more so, according to Verdery (24). The creation of these surveillance files employed a large network of people. In Romania, surveillance was entrusted to the state security services known as the *Securitate,* which functioned as a secret police force. They opened files on suspects and recruited informers to document the suspects' lives and actions.

Cristina Vatulescu has noted that secret police files in Romania can be divided into two main categories: pre-arrest and post-arrest files. When the subject of the file (the person being surveilled) was confronted by secret police investigators, the subject would first be asked to write an autobiography. This document became the beginning of the arrest file that would be opened (38).

Obviously, if the socialist autobiography had such punitive and censorious overtones, publishing life-writing takes on a different meaning. Indeed, there were few published autobiographies and diaries during the socialist years. The life writing collections published by the major publishing houses in Romania today all date to post-1989. There are several ways to account for this change, including the fact that writing autobiographies had become part of daily life in socialism since it was required for one's file, where it was used for surveillance. Likewise, censors continued to operate all throughout the socialist period, and it was risky to give details about oneself in public. Conversely it could be required to praise what the powers that be wanted to have praised in order for a book to pass censorship.

Vatulescu points out that the socialist autobiography which was used for surveillance and administration was much like a curriculum vitae, except that the educational elements were played down, while the social class of one's parents and family took on a prominent place (39). Given this particular meaning of the word auto-

biography in socialist Romania, it is not surprising that life-writing ceased to be a popular published genre. After 1989, with the end of secret police surveillance and the end of censorship, several major autobiographical texts that had either been smuggled abroad or kept secret at great peril were able to come to light and be published.

2. Ioan Ploscaru's *Chains and Terror: The Drama of the Church in Communist Prison*

When diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies in postsocialist Romania began to be included in collections of some of the country's large publishing houses (such as Humanitas and Polirom), they often became "events" or "revelations" in Romanian public discourse. Outside of Romania, most of these diaries did not spark "events" of such proportion. I would like to look at the diary of Ioan Ploscaru as one such "event," because it has been translated into three major languages to date (Italian in 2013, French in 2017, and Spanish in 2020) and offers a glimpse into some of the issues that recur with other diaries.

Ploscaru's text deals with the beginning of the red terror in 1948. It describes the outlawing of the Romanian Greek Catholic Church, in which he held a high administrative position, depicts his arrest and detention, and his eventual release and life under house arrest. Ploscaru published the text himself with Timişoara's Signata publishers in 1993—about three years after the collapse of socialism—but writes that the manuscript was completed on November 30, 1985, while the regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu was still in power. A parenthetical note in the texts reads: "Today, in 1992," indicating that he made additions to the text before sending it out for publication (Ploscaru, *Lanțuri şi teroare* [*Chains and Terror*], 74). The book's title is *Lanțuri şi teroare: drama bisericii în închisorile comuniste* [*Chains and Terror: The Drama of the Church in Communist Prison*].



Bucharest, Romania (author's private collection), 1954.

The text begins with a section called "Argument," in which Ploscaru indicates how he interprets his own story: persecution has been a recurring theme in the history of Christianity. He first traces key moments of that history and the types of persecutions that took place, and then gives the parameters of his own experience: fifteen years of detention, of which four were in solitary confinement, followed by years of surveillance and occasional interrogations after his amnesty in 1964. He concludes with the exclamation: for all the sufferings he endured, may God be praised!

The text is organized into sixty-three titled chapters in roughly chronological

The text begins with a section called "Argument," in which Ploscaru indicates how he interprets his own story: persecution has been a recurring theme in the history of Christianity. He first traces key moments of that history and the types of persecutions that took place, and then gives the parameters of his own experience: fifteen years of detention, of which four were in solitary confinement, followed by years of surveillance and occasional interrogations after his amnesty in 1964. He concludes with the exclamation: for all the sufferings he endured, may God be praised!

order, but important people are giving their own chapters. Ploscaru gives thorough biographical information on each of the important figures of the outlawed Greek Catholic Church. His biographical sketches include places and dates of birth, places and duration of education, and major achievements. The last three chapters recount his release in 1964 and the surveillance and interrogations he experienced until 1985 during the last years of the Ceauşescu regime.

Ploscaru's text documents the many coercive measures used under socialism presumably for the benefit of those who did not experience them and might have trouble believing what happened. The following excerpt explains the difficulty of believing what was published in the years of terror because of censorship and manipulation. It begins with "During those years," which suggests the author's concern that young readers, in particular, be made aware of the historical circumstances during which *Chains and Terror* was written:

> During those years you couldn't publish an article without praising communism or attacking those who didn't want communism. Example: Ion Blăjan was cantor in Blaj. After our Church was outlawed, he started composing folk music which he also sung on the radio. He had a very beautiful voice, but he was blind from birth. At the suggestion of Celestin Cherebeţiu, Metropolitan [Bishop] Vasile Suciu made him cantor of the cathedral.
>
> After our Church was outlawed, Blăjan wrote an autobiography entitled *The Man with Black Glasses*. In this book he insulted the bishop. Someone asked him, "How could you write such things given that Metropolitan Vasile Suciu has been your greatest benefactor and named you as cantor for the cathedral? It's the first time an illiterate has been made a cantor." Blăjan answered, "It was not me who wrote these things. It was the censor that made them up so that there was something against the Church. I cannot read and so do not know what they wrote!" (Ploscaru, *Lanţuri şi teroare [Chains and Terror]*, 92, my translation).

Ploscaru's text also chronicles some of the dark humor that arose in those days. A typical example is Ploscaru's lament about how Romania had become Moscow-phile in the 1950s; even street names had changed to reflect Soviet heroes, and he relates this anecdote that was going around:

> Someone from the provinces who had not been back to Bucharest since before the war went now to look for a certain street, but couldn't find it. In its place

> was Stalin Street. He looked for another street, and in its place was Kremlin Street. Another street was called Michurin, and another Popov the Cosmonaut, and so on. Discouraged, he leaned over a bridge looking at the Dâmbovița River. Someone from the state police asked, "What are you doing?" He replied, "I am looking at the flow of the Volga River."

While the renaming of places had not gone so far as to rename Bucharest's main river, the Dâmbovița, major streets had been renamed in the capital and elsewhere. The names of streets would again be changed in postsocialism.

Another feature of Ploscaru's text is to clearly name the people involved, especially for events prior to his arrest. Since he and others had already been convicted for these "crimes," describing the past in detail posed less of a risk than writing about events after his amnesty (Broun 2015). In describing the sham meeting that was organized in 1948 to make the dissolution of the Romanian Greek Catholic Church look legal, he notes the names of those who collaborated and shows the extent of the coercion of all involved. One of the collaborating priests went so far as to simulate an illness so as to be taken to the emergency room. I quote at length to provide some historical context (especially for western readers) and to showcase some of the stylistic features of Ploscaru's text:

> This meeting which was scheduled for October 1, 1948, was a sort of den of thieves. It was designed to be a replica of the 1700 Union in Alba Iulia, but a laughable one at that—not even the material aspect such as the number, date, or place of it were carried out successfully.
>
> Since the bishops had refused any kind of deal concerning a "Unification," the organizers of this nefarious action decided to do everything without them and gave as a pretext that it should be the people who decide.
>
> At first they also tried to impose this "democratization" on the Orthodox Church. Likewise, they started the Democratic Priests' Association which was to be used against our bishops.
>
> From the Greek Catholic Church only two priests signed up for the association: MIRCEA TODERICI from Bucharest and NICOLAE IENEA from Lugoj. The former was able to get a passport and so fled across the border and never came back; he took up residence in the United States.
>
> The "Unification Movement" needed to look like a grassroots movement. After the organizers had gotten the needed signatures from those who would be representatives in the meeting at Cluj, the delegates—there were 38, that is, the same number as the number of protopopes [higher-ranking priests] present at the Synod of "Union with Rome" [in 1698]—had to physically go to Cluj.
>
> Each of them was escorted by the *Securitate* so as to not get lost on the way. And despite all that security, Protopope Simu from Braşov was able to get off at a train station en route and run off into the fields. So, one of the 38 protopopes disappeared. . . .
>
> Ioniță Pop, who was protopope in Lupeni, went to see Dr. Iuliu Hațieganu as soon as he arrived in Cluj. He asked the doctor to schedule an emergency stay in the hospital for him. After taking this precaution, Pop went to see Bishop Iuliu Hossu [under house arrest]. He had to go around the building and hop over the fence in the back. . . .
>
> Ioniță Pop went back the same way he had come in by jumping the fence and went to the Gheorghe Barițiu Lyceum where the meeting was being held in

> one of the classrooms. The meeting was presided over by Metropolitan [Bishop] Nicolae Bălan from Sibiu. He gave the ceremonial address and asked Traian Belaşcu to read the document that all were going to sign.
>
> Pop, who had his place reserved in the hospital, told Father V. Pleşug from Ghelar, "I am going to pass out now; even if they're going to put out one of my eyes, take me to the hospital."And saying that, he fell off his chair like a dead body. . . .
>
> The priest from Ghelar took him to the hospital. He was taken to a room with two beds. When the priest saw that the other bed was empty, he quickly got undressed and lay down. But when Dr. Haţieganu came in, he said that he had authorized only one to stay in the hospital; the other had to go back to the meeting.
>
> So, on the list of signers, the protopope from Lupeni was the last since he signed after he got out of the hospital. The only protopope present to sign was TRAIAN BELAŞCU from the eparchy of Blaj. All the others who were simple priests—and many of them were among the least distinguished—were made protopopes on the spot by the Orthodox bishop N. Bălan (Ploscaru, *Lanţuri şi teroare [Chains and Terror]*, 50-52, my translation, capitals in the original).

Ploscaru's text on this and other occasions details the names of those who were involved. Similar to a testimonial or court testimony he reports on these events, but in a way that is different from the official records in the socialist press or by the secret police at the time. Opposing the falsified documents of the state apparatus, such writing functions as a kind of critical "counter memory" (Bucur 195).

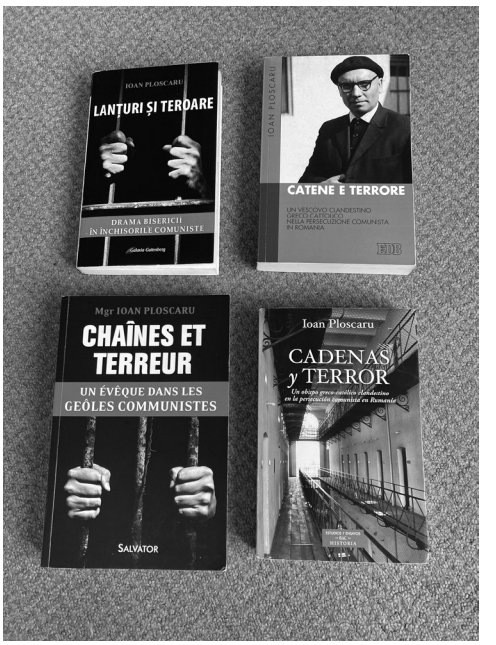
3. Translating *Chains and Terror*

The three translations of Ploscaru's memoirs to date have taken different approaches to the difficult text. Ploscaru's humor—especially his dark humor—poses particular difficulties in translation. The approach of the 2017 French translation has been to omit some of these difficult passages. For example, the passage cited above in which Bucharest's Dâmbovița River is humorously called by the name of Russia's Volga River is absent in the French text. The French text likewise omits most of the names of the 1948 sham meeting in Cluj, reducing the entire account of the event to twelve lines of text (Ploscaru, *Chaînes et terreur* 49). The anecdote about Ion Blăjan's autobiography which the censor had altered is entirely omitted.

The Spanish and Italian translations, by contrast, have supplemented Ploscaru's text with lengthy introductory essays, appendices, and notes. Both the Spanish and Italian editions, for example, have kept the entire text concerning the sham synod, and each adds a brief note to contextualize the original synods of the years 1698 and 1700 that the event in question was staged to imitate. In other parts of the text, both the Spanish and Italian editions feature translator's notes to explain people mentioned in the text who are less commonly known outside of Romania.

By either adding notes or omitting text altogether, the translations highlight three types of difficult passages in Ploscaru's memoir: passages with dark humor or anecdotes poking fun at the miseries endured during socialism; passages naming names; and passages asserting a counter-memory to "tell it like it was."

While Maria Bucur has insightfully suggested that the media coverage given to postsocialist memoirs in Romania was connected to the material retributions that were being organized for victims of socialism and of the war years (222), another factor for the popularity of memoirs such as Ploscaru's might be precisely the inclusion of the three types of passages that pose problems in translation. A postsocialist readership might connect on a deep level with the dark humor, name naming, and "truth-telling" because such features could not safely be displayed during the years of the socialist regime. In the immediate postsocialist era, the sense of urgency and importance connected to book launches in general, and those of memoirs in particular, might also tie back to the material limitations of the socialist past, when the entire print run of a book might sell out in several days with no guarantee that a second edition could be put out.



Ioan Ploscaru's memoirs and translations.

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In summary, socialism in Romania changed the literary system in multiple ways. Published life-writing underwent a significant change during the socialist regime because of the coercive means that were applied to keep a malfunctioning economic system in place. These included publishing the work of censors and a state surveillance system that required the writing and (ab)use of autobiographies. With the fall of socialism, several publishing houses launched collections of memoirs and other forms of life-writing, which often received much media attention. I have argued that certain features that make these texts difficult to translate might particularly appeal to a postsocialist readership, who had been unable to express or read about some of the difficulties of the socialist system in Romania.

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Voices from the Margins

Vietnamese Literature in Postcommunist Eastern Europe

Tiếng văn bên lề đời: Văn học Việt Nam ở Đông Âu sau thời kỳ Cộng Sản

Bich-Ngoc Turner

Preview

The Cold War geopolitics offered the opportunities for millions of Vietnamese sojourners to work and study in Eastern Europe. The cascading collapse of communism in Eastern Europe (1989-1991) brought profound changes to their lives. While most of these sojourners returned to Vietnam when their work and study terms concluded, many risked their livelihood to stay behind and embark on a new life full of uncertainty and precarity in postsocialist shadow economies. Coming of age during impoverished years of postwar Vietnam, they were determined to find any opportunity to make a living despite facing barriers such as racial discrimination, corruption, and ineffective governance during the postcommunist transition years. Many found prosperity and personal fulfillment, yet painful renegotiation of moral standards and personal values, financial and emotional sufferings, and even premature death, were not uncommon. Through the 1990s, these life stories became known to the public as they gradually appeared in literature, primarily in the genres of the novel, the short story, and autobiographical fiction.

This essay discusses the social and global contexts that inspired the growth of Vietnamese literature during the postsocialist era in Eastern Europe, with a close reading of several outstanding works, and examine the decline of this movement during the early decade of the twenty-first century, once again under a new set of social and global contexts.

On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam, breaking free from almost ninety years of French colonial rule. However, the intricate dynamics of post-World War II Indochina, following Japan's

surrender, led to a complex settlement process. This period saw the French gradually reclaiming control over their Indochinese colonies after brief periods of Chinese and British occupation. These developments deeply disappointed Ho Chi Minh and his newly formed government. Following unsuccessful negotiations and compromises, the first Indochina War erupted between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and France in December 1946, persisting until May 1954. In October 1949, Mao Zedong's communist forces triumphed over Chiang Kai-Shek's Republic of China, establishing the People's Republic of China. This event fueled concerns about the spread of communism in Southeast Asia and globally, prompting the United States to back France, while China and the Soviet Union supported the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).[1]

Against the backdrop of historical geopolitics, the DRV endeavored to construct a modern, socialist nation with the assistance from the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. Consequently, from the 1950s onwards, thousands of Vietnamese students, professionals, and scholars, primarily from North Vietnam, were dispatched to the Soviet bloc nations to pursue studies, engage in professional work, and participate in the transfer of socialist technology and knowledge. The conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975 ushered in a period of significant challenges for the country. The imposition of a U.S. trade embargo, coupled with food shortages, economic turmoil, and extensive infrastructure damage awaiting repair, left Vietnam with no recourse but to align itself with the Soviet Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). Consequently, throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese students and workers were once again dispatched to the Soviet Union and other Eastern European nations in a bid to salvage their nation's economy and alleviate the hardships faced by their families.[2]

The momentous events of 1989, including the democratic revolutions sweeping through Eastern European communist regimes, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the gradual dissolution of the Soviet Union, brought about profound changes in the lives of millions of Vietnamese individuals studying and working in those nations. While many either felt compelled or chose to return to Vietnam by the early 1990s, numerous others, their exact numbers unknown, opted to remain and form a self-imposed "floating community" of refugees. Rather than passively awaiting assistance, these Vietnamese exiles swiftly capitalized on the opportunities presented to them by the transition to postsocialist economies in their host countries. Residents of these nations were eager for consumer goods that had been unavailable during the years of strictly-controlled communist-planned economies. Intellectuals and laborers alike enthusiastically embraced new business prospects, ranging from the wholesale trade of commodities to tobacco smuggling and retail, from food catering to small-scale merchandise vending, and even to illegal activities such as trafficking in humans, hard currency, and gold across borders.[3]

For a decade spanning the early 1990s to the 2000s, Vietnamese residents in Eastern Europe and Russia led transient lives, operating within the shadow economies that emerged in the wake of socialism's decline. They existed under constant threat of arrest, deportation, or harassment by law enforcement, creat-

ing an era defined by utmost precarity and uncertainty for these communities. Despite these challenges, many Vietnamese individuals expressed deep gratitude toward their hosts, including teachers of their children, neighbors, and foreign acquaintances, who offered significant empathy through material, logistical, and emotional support to help navigate those stressful years. This sentiment, however, was often difficult to articulate, and individuals were at times hesitant to reveal it openly. The Vietnamese experience in Eastern Europe during the postcommunist era, therefore, remained largely unknown to the global public until recently, largely due to the community's reluctance to expose the painful truths surrounding their complex transient refugee status, personal hardships, and involvement in illicit enterprises.[4]

This led to a lacuna of scholarly research on the Vietnamese diaspora in postsocialist Eastern Europe. In the last fifty years, whenever the topic of the Vietnamese diaspora came to a scholarly or journalistic discussion table, it would almost always focus on the South Vietnamese refugee experience after the Vietnam War and their migration and resettlement experiences in the U.S. and other pro-U.S. nations during the Cold War such as France, the UK, Canada, and Australia. While their refugee experiences and statuses in their new country of residence differed, these two groups' diaspora experiences also had a lot in common: painful survival and perseverance, posttraumatic stress disorder, sentiments of alienation, endurance of racial discrimination, heartbreaking desires for love, family dramas, social marginalization, depression, the tantamount hardship of trying to fit in and be accepted by their host communities.[5]

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As the physical, economic, and emotional challenges gradually subsided, members of the Vietnamese diaspora community in Eastern Europe began to share their experiences through spoken and written narratives, aiming to convey their stories to both their families back home and the wider world. Many individuals, taking to their pens or keyboards, viewed writing as a sincere obligation: a means to express gratitude to the host countries that had provided them refuge, as exemplified by Van Tat Thang's sentiment of "writing as my greatest thanks to Germany." They also sought to honor the millions of host country neighbors and friends who had supported them in overcoming the "complex emotions of being an indebted refugee," as expressed by Nguyen Thuy Anh, author of *White Wind,* a short story collection depicting the lives of Vietnamese intellectuals in the Russian Federation. Additionally, individuals like Nguyễn Văn Thọ, the author of *Quyên,* felt compelled to "pay

a long overdue debt to all the loved ones I have known during the twenty years of hardship in Germany."[6]

This essay endeavors to address a significant gap in the portrayal of the Vietnamese diaspora experience worldwide through a detailed examination of arguably the three most exemplary novels authored by outstanding writers who have resided and worked in Eastern Europe since the 1980s. These writers are Mr. Nguyễn Văn Thọ from East Germany, Mr. Trần Quốc Quân from Poland, and Mr. Nguyễn Hữu Đạt from Russia. While female authors have also contributed to literature depicting the experiences of Vietnamese individuals in Eastern Europe, their impact has unfortunately been limited, with relatively minor literary and social influence. However, I wish to extend special recognition to Ms. Bui Lan Huong, who has resided and worked in Russia for four decades. She graciously provided me with her collection of nonfiction essays detailing the experiences of Vietnamese individuals in the Soviet Union, which later dissolved into various Russian republics in 1991. Her life experiences and writings have offered invaluable insights into the recent decline in literary output among Vietnamese intellectuals in Eastern Europe.[7]

Reading *Quyên* by Nguyễn Văn Thọ[8]

Quyên marks Nguyễn Văn Thọ's debut novel, focusing on the experiences of Vietnamese refugees in post-1989 unified Germany. A veteran of the Vietnam War, Tho spent nine years engaged in jungle battles. Following his honorable discharge, he worked on an assembly line at a Vietnamese textile factory until 1981, when he was chosen to relocate to East Germany for employment. He later rose to the position of foreman, overseeing other Vietnamese workers. Tho and his family opted to remain in Germany following the country's reunification in 1989.

In the novel, Hung and his gang serve as human traffickers, leading a group of Vietnamese individuals, predominantly intellectuals and their families from former Soviet Union countries, through the forest borders of Eastern Europe into Germany. Amidst the chaos of a police pursuit, Quyên, a young woman, becomes separated from her husband, Dzung, as he proceeds with the others. Tragically, Quyên is left behind with Hung, the leader of the trafficking gang. Over the course of nine months in a remote log cabin surrounded only by snow-covered mountains, Hung kidnaps and sexually assaults Quyên.

During this time, Quyên becomes pregnant, and although Hung develops feelings for her and proposes marriage, Quyên pleads only to be reunited with her husband. In a selfless act, Hung risks his life to fulfill her wish. However, upon being reunited with her husband, Quyên is confronted by a jealous and selfish Dzung. Appalled by Quyên's pregnancy, Dzung cruelly rejects her, casting her out of the refugee camp. Desperate and despondent, Quyên attempts suicide but is rescued by Kumar, a compassionate neighbor originally from Sri Lanka. Despite the challenges she faces, including finding secure accommodation and financial stability, Quyên perseveres. Her husband remains absent, while Hung succumbs to a brain tumor.

The novel concludes with Quyên, accompanied by her daughter, carrying Hung's ashes back to Vietnam. Kumar, deeply devoted to Quyên, decides to join them on their journey,

hinting at a potential happy ending to their relationship. Through Quyên's extraordinary struggles, the novel not only portrays the dramatic and tragic experiences of Vietnamese refugees, but also sheds light on the harsh realities of the internal politics within Vietnamese diaspora communities in postcommunist Eastern Europe, as articulated by the character Phi:

> Người mình ở đâu cũng không đoàn kết, manh mún và chia rẽ. Quyên mà sống lâu ở Đức thì khắc rõ. Khi vào trại ít bữa, nhiều nhóm thành viên trại hình thành. Những nhóm bạn, cánh hẩu, đồng hương, chỉ vài ba dăm người co cụm lại thì rất dễ. Nhưng để trở thành cả một trại thống nhất, biết đoàn kết tương trợ nhau thì hoàn toàn không có thể. Một trại còn khó vậy, nói chi tới người Việt toàn thành phố, toàn nước Đức này. Đi nhiều, ở càng lâu càng nhận ra, người mình cam chịu thân phận kẻ tị nạn, hay rộng hơn là thân phận người ly quê một cách hết sức thản nhiên. Mạnh ai nấy sống! Cách sống bản năng ấy như các hạt cát rời, không tạo nên sức mạnh của một dân tộc.[9]

English translation:

> Our people everywhere are the same, dis-united, fragmented and divided. If Quyên lived a long time in Germany, you will see that clearly. After checking in the camp for a few days, many groups of camp members formed. It's very easy for groups of friends, wingmen, compatriots, and only a few people to gather together. But to become a unified camp with solidarity and mutual support is completely impossible. Just a small camp is already so difficult, let alone the Vietnamese in the whole city, this whole Germany. The more you travel, the longer you stay, the more you realize that you have resigned yourself to the status of a refugee, or more broadly, that of a person who has voluntarily and heartlessly chosen to be countryless. To each their own! That instinctive way of life is like loose grains of sand and will not be able to create the strength of a nation.

Reading "Our people's stories in Russia" by Nguyễn, Hữu Đạt[10]

In contrast to *Quyên,* which primarily delves into the painful experiences of working-class Vietnamese individuals in Germany, "Our People's Stories in Russia" by Nguyễn, Hữu Đạt portrays the poignant ironies faced by thousands of Vietnamese intellectuals. These individuals, driven by poverty in Vietnam and enticed by newfound opportunities in Russia after 1991, voluntarily transitioned into roles as small-scale merchants and shrewd traders within the postcommunist Soviet Union.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was a high demand for computers in the region, coupled with abundant reserves of gold. This environment facilitated the emergence of a significant border smuggling network between Poland and Russia. Vietnamese intellectuals in Poland and Russia, alongside prominent Vietnamese diplomatic and military personnel, as well as elements of both the Vietnamese and Russian mafia, actively participated in semi-official transactions involving gold and computers.

The Vietnamese community in postcommunist Russia was particularly eager to acquire U.S. dollars, and amidst the relentless pursuit of financial gain, their youthful aspirations for intellectual advancement occasionally resurfaced. However, this was juxtaposed against the harsh realities of

cutthroat competition, daily deceit, and moral questioning, leading to moments of both revelry and despair as they grappled with the meaning of their lives.

"Our People's Stories" introduces readers to a diverse cast of characters, including a poet who transitions into a garment merchandise trader and a destitute doctoral candidate in linguistics. This candidate, borrowing capital from a friend to start a business, sees his dreams shattered when an envious Vietnamese guest robs him of everything during the launch dinner party.

Additionally, readers are introduced to several Vietnamese graduate students who exploit their student visas solely as a means to legitimize their presence in Russia, enabling them to partake in local and interstate trading ventures. In this environment, characterized by a constant search for reliable business partners, extramarital affairs and non-marital cohabitation become commonplace. Individuals navigate the harsh social climate and their marginalized racial status by inventing and justifying new moral codes of conduct, albeit without escaping their detrimental consequences.

The Vietnamese community in post-communist Russia was particularly eager to acquire U.S. dollars, and amidst the relentless pursuit of financial gain, their youthful aspirations for intellectual advancement occasionally resurfaced. However, this was juxtaposed against the harsh realities of cutthroat competition, daily deceit, and moral questioning, leading to moments of both revelry and despair as they grappled with the meaning of their lives.

One character, Thu, a female graduate student, succumbs to pressure from a male business partner and engages in sexual activity, subsequently experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder. Initially attributed to her rigorous studies, Thu's suffering goes unshared with friends and family, leaving her emotionally withdrawn and desensitized to pain:

> Cuộc sống bị cuốn trôi bởi bao công việc. Bạn bè đến thăm cô rồi lại phải vội vã trở về để lo toan bao công việc của họ. Việc học hành. Việc buôn bán. Việc đóng gửi hàng. Việc nào cũng bề bộn, phức tạp. Mỗi người ra đi để phải cõng trên lưng bao cơn bão tố của thời cuộc. Nỗi lo thấp thỏm của sự đổ vỡ từ hậu phương. Nỗi lo trả các bài thi chuyên môn. Nỗi lo về các thùng hàng biển bị lật khám ở cảng. Nỗi lo về tình cảnh éo le của các cuộc tình tay ba. Nỗi đau của tình yêu con gái khi phải đối mặt với vợ vủa người tình. Tất cả các góc cạnh, bề mặt cuộc đời bị ném vào một cái túi hổ lô, xóc lên, xóc xuống. Tan nhừ. Nhão nhoét. Cô cứng lại. Lỳ ra. Trơn nhẵn. Vô cảm.[11]

English translation:

> Life is swept away by many duties. Her friends came to visit her and then had to hurry back to take care of their businesses. Studying. Trafficking. Shipping goods. Everything is messy and complicated. Each person who leaves their country has to carry on their backs so many storms of the era. The constant anxiety of breakdown on the home front.

> Worries about submitting professional exams on time. Worries about their cargoes being opened, examined, and investigated at the port. Worries about the precarious situation of love triangles. The pain of a young girl's love when facing her lover's wife. All the corners, the surfaces of life are thrown into a big rough sack, bouncing up and down. Melted. Smashed. Thu felt stiffened. Shameless. Smoothly empty. Without feeling.

Reading *Wild Snow* by Trần Quốc Quân[12]

Trần Quốc Quân, the top graduate of his class at the National Economic University and hailing from a respected intellectual family with notable military contributions to the country, was selected to pursue his Ph.D. studies in economics in Poland in autumn 1987. Like many of his peers, his primary aspiration was to amass wealth to provide a better life for his family in Vietnam.

From the onset of the snowy season, Quân dedicated all his time and effort to selling Vietnamese goods in Poland. He then reinvested his profits into purchasing pharmaceutical products from Poland, which he sent back to Vietnam for a larger profit margin. Over the years, Quân navigated through numerous business ventures across borders, ranging from importing Chinese leather jackets into Poland to exporting computers from Poland to Russia. He transitioned from acting as a carrier of gold and currencies between Western and Eastern European countries to ultimately achieving success as the CEO of a partnership with a Turkish company. Throughout his three decades in business, Quân endured traumatic experiences, witnessing loss of life, engaging in perilous gambling and insider trading schemes, and observing broken families. He also endured daily harassment and bullying from corrupt Russian police, and encountered desperate Vietnamese individuals willing to betray their own kin to escape their own failures.

Wild Snow is a semi-autobiographical work of fiction that provides Vietnamese readers with a glimpse into the harsh realities of shadow businesses, a world in which hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese individuals found themselves entangled. Through the fictional character named Nguyen and his experiences spanning over twenty years in Poland, readers gain insight into the precarious nature of life in Russia and Poland. While some viewed it as a dream life filled with opportunities, the reality was quite the opposite—a life marked by constant uncertainty requiring astute survival skills, and where death was a looming presence, despite simplistic interpretations that attribute their experiences solely to financial ambition.

Like the author, Nguyen traverses the typical highs and lows of the risky shadow economy. However, the author crafts a different fate for Nguyen, one in which he ultimately loses everything and returns to Vietnam with his emotionally depleted wife and the cremated remains of their only son. Departing the "promised land" with scant funds and no degree, Nguyen and his wife come to the realization that, in the end, "the Vietnamese homeland is the safest place for their souls."[13]

The title of the novel serves as a metaphor that invites multiple interpretations. It may symbolize the harsh climate of Europe, the emptiness of human souls following immense pain and loss, or the ruthlessness of wild

capitalism in postcommunist Eastern Europe. The conclusion of the novel also hints at a new beginning for the Vietnamese intellectual diaspora communities in post-communist Eastern Europe: a return to Vietnam to embark on a fresh chapter in life.

The decline of Vietnamese Literature in postcommunist Eastern Europe

The Vietnamese business presence in Eastern Europe traces back to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's entry into the COMECON agreement with the former Soviet Union in 1978. Today, millions of Vietnamese individuals continue to reside in and migrate to these countries, aspiring to become legal residents and contribute to a new wave of migration. However, a notable distinction exists between those who arrived in the 1980s and those who have more recently settled.

Primarily absent among the newer arrivals are the Vietnamese intellectual elites. Instead, the majority of individuals migrating to Eastern Europe today enter on tourist visas, supported by their families and aiming to engage in small-scale trade or business ventures with the primary goal of earning a livelihood. Fewer individuals arrive on student visas with intentions of pursuing higher education. While their business experiences in Eastern Europe remain challenging, they largely adhere to legal avenues, lacking the precariousness associated with the wild capitalism endured by previous generations. Consequently, there is diminished enthusiasm and capacity among this newer generation to document and share their experiences.

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The rise of the internet and social media has played a significant role in the dwindling presence of print literature depicting the life experiences of the Vietnamese diaspora in Eastern Europe. Since 2008, with the widespread adoption of platforms like Facebook, the exchange of ideas and visual content between individuals in Vietnam and those residing abroad has become nearly instantaneous. Consequently, the lives of Vietnamese expatriates no longer hold the same air of mystery and novelty.

Van Tat Thang, a prize-winning short story writer whose work garnered recognition in a writing competition organized by the German embassy in

Vietnam two decades ago, acknowledges this shift, stating, "I have been too preoccupied with daily responsibilities to devote time to writing for traditional publication. For insights into the lives of Vietnamese in Germany, follow my Facebook page."[14]

Another factor contributing to the decline of Vietnamese literature in Eastern Europe is the limited opportunities available to Vietnamese individuals in Russia following the government's decision to close the "Vom" market—the largest commercial hub for Vietnamese, Turkish, and Chinese merchants in Russia—in June 2009. Concurrently, Vietnam has experienced accelerated economic growth. Following the normalization of relations between the U.S. and Vietnam in 1995, Vietnam joined the ASEAN free trade area. Subsequent years saw the signing of free trade agreements with the U.S. in 2000 and membership in the World Trade Organization in 2007. This economic momentum has prompted further trade agreements with major global partners such as China, India, Japan, Korea, the EU, and the subsequent Trans-Pacific Partnership.[15] In contrast to previous generations, successful Vietnamese entrepreneurs are now inclined to shutter their businesses in Eastern Europe and redirect their investments towards the more promising market of Vietnam. Trần Quốc Quân, the author of *Wild Snow*, exemplifies this trend by reinvesting a significant portion of his assets from Poland into the burgeoning Vietnamese market.[16]

In conclusion, the geopolitical landscape of the Cold War era in the mid-1950s, its culmination in the late 1980s, and the subsequent globalization of the world economy and media communication since the 1990s have profoundly influenced the lives of millions of Vietnamese individuals both within Vietnam and abroad. Consequently, these global shifts have had a significant impact on the evolution, decline, and transformation of Vietnamese literature in postcommunist Eastern Europe.

Notes

1. Soddu, Marco. "Truman Administration's Containment Policy in Light of the French Return to Indochina." 1-7.

2. Schwenkel, Christina. "Socialist mobilities: Crossing new terrains in Vietnamese migration histories." 13-25.

3. Hardy, Andrew. "From a floating world: Emigration to Europe from post-war Vietnam." . 463-484.

4. Hoang, Lan Anh. "Migrant immobilities in the periphery: insights from the Vietnam-Russia corridor." 985-999.

5. Nguyễn, Nathalie Huỳnh Châu. "Vietnamese diasporas: An introduction." 1-26.

6. Personal communication with the authors: Van Tat Thang (German Vietnamese), Nguyen Thuy Anh (former resident in Russia), and Nguyễn, Văn Thọ. (former resident in Germany), 2018-2019.

7. Bui, Lan Huong. Đôi bờ thương nhớ.

8. Nguyễn, V. T. *Quyên*.

9. Nguyễn, V. T. *Quyên*. 271-272.

10. Nguyễn, Hữu Đạt. *Chuyện người mình ở nước Nga*.

11. Nguyễn, Hữu Đạt. *Chuyện người mình ở nước Nga*. 160.

12. Trần, Quốc Quân. *Tuyết Hoang*.

13. Trần, Quốc Quân. *Tuyết Hoang*. 730.

14. Personal communications with Van Tat Thang, 2020.

15. Kikuchi, Tomoo, Kensuke Yanagida, and Huong Vo. "The effects of mega-regional trade agreements on Vietnam." 4-19.

16. Personal communications with Trần Quốc Quân, 2016.

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Bound by Revolution, Romance, and Identity—

Shi Huang, Luo Jingyi, and Ji Chaoding

三个革命家在一起的命运：贡献，爱情，献身

Greg Lewis

Introduction

This is a story of three individuals whose lives encompassed nearly the entire 20th century—a century in China, by turns, of nationalism, revolution, war, and ultimately, reclamation. Their beginnings were quite different, but they gathered freely, unencumbered in their relationships due to birth, geography, or class. Their endings, in 1933, 1963, and 1998, mark a kind of symmetry that is both wonderful and terrible to contemplate. They were connected intimately throughout their entire adult lives, bound (as the title suggests), personally and by the historical backdrop that unfolded around them.

Significantly, the three met first on the Tsinghua School campus on the outskirts of Beijing around the time of the student-led May Fourth Movement in 1919. Tsinghua recruited male students from every province in China. Two unlikely but successful candidates in this effort were Shi Huang, from southern Yunnan province, and Ji Chaoding, from the mountainous northwest. Shi Huang's (1900-1933) hard-scrabble upbringing stirred within him an uncommon determination, and he became fast friends with the peripatetic Ji soon after they arrived at Tsinghua in 1916. As with Ji, May Fourth was Shi's coming-of-age watershed experience. Anti-imperial protests followed by three days' incarceration brought a certain notoriety and penchant for danger, and he was not yet twenty.

Ji Chaoding's (1903-1963) experiences intertwined significantly with his classmate. He and Shi formed successive study groups at Tsinghua (in 1918, 1920, and 1923). The last of these, called *Chaotao*, included one female member, Luo Jingyi. Luo (1905-1998) provides the overarching link for this narrative. She met both men as a schoolgirl, sharing their political activism, and married first, Shi Huang, and then Ji Chaoding. Twice widowed, Luo outlived her first husband Shi Huang by an astonishing sixty-five years, and her second, Ji Chaoding, by thirty-five years. Not just

a long-lived observer, Luo too joined the Chinese Communist Party while in the United States, and counted meaningful stops in San Francisco, Moscow, Chongqing, and Shanghai prior to settling in Beijing after 1949.

Shi Huang 施幌

As the catalyst for our story, what are the essentials one needs to know about Shi Huang? Though he came from grinding poverty, he had the good fortune to have a schoolteacher-father who placed a premium on education. Tsinghua School, established in 1911 with U.S. funds, offered free tuition and English language instruction. Although the school was a "political backwater," fast-moving events and its close proximity to Peking University had an electrifying effect on Shi Huang and other classmates who were arrested on June 3, 1919, while protesting Japanese imperial ambitions. A natural and popular leader, Shi led several student organizations and served as student body president.



Shi Huang and Luo Jingyi in Palo Alto at the time of their marriage (1927).

Shi's wife, Luo Jingyi, readily acknowledged his uncertainty and lack of direction after he enrolled at Stanford University in 1924. "Many things we didn't understand," she recalled, adding that "the communist party was thoroughgoing . . . but where were they? We didn't know." Ironically, Tsinghua School's Western curriculum, faculty, and influence had fostered in *Chaotao*'s eight members an anti-imperial attitude, which accompanied them to the United States.

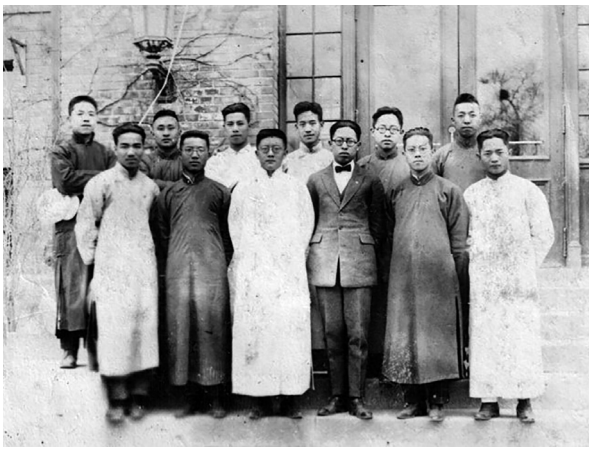
Why didn't Shi Huang and his classmates join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at this time? Although Shi Huang was admiring of party founders Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, the CCP appeared to be a secretive organization to *Chaotao* members, and indifferent to intellectuals. In the United States, meanwhile, what became the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) was unknown to most Americans but welcoming to foreign nationals.

Despite their unfamiliarity with the CCP or CPUSA, seven *Chaotao* members entered the Communist Party in spring 1927. Anti-communist Chinese government violence from April 1927 accelerated Shi Huang's and the others' progression as communists. *Chaotao* as a whole effectively became the core of CPUSA's China Bureau in New York, with Shi Huang as secretary (using an alias).

Shi Huang traveled extensively on behalf of the China Bureau and the CCP in the five years left to him. As an administrator and editor-journalist of *The Pioneer*, a leftist weekly, Shi was the most accomplished Chinese communist

in CPUSA at that time. Shi Huang's "good soldier" phase began in frigid Moscow at Sun Yatsen University in 1929. He was an effective and accurate translator, though he preferred authoring his own articles on contemporary events. Still, his translating ability led him home when CCP Central called in October 1930.

Shi Huang put his knowledge and organizing abilities to work as a union labor secretary in Hong Kong. Despite using an alias and avoiding public places, he was arrested in June 1931. Exactly what *Guomindang* (GMD, the Nationalist Party, established in 1912) intelligence knew about their captive is unknown. Two years earlier they had rescinded his academic stipend because of Shi's political activism in New York, and inquiries were made about him in Beijing and Yunnan. Finally his father bribed his son out of jail, suggesting they were unaware of their detainee's true stature. He ignored his father's plea to lie low to become the CCP's provincial secretary in northern Hebei province. It was to be his last promotion. Within a short time, he was exposed by a double agent, arrested and summarily executed. His wife and seven-year-old daughter learned of his death only months later. Shi Huang was just thirty-three.



Shi Huang (center) with Tsinghua School classmates (1923).

Ji Chaoding 冀朝鼎

Like Shi Huang, Ji Chaoding came to Tsinghua School in 1916 as an academic prodigy. He hailed from a small Shanxi provincial town and was schooled in the Confucian classics by a landlord-grandfather who was a gentleman of leisure. Whereas Shi Huang could be taciturn and aloof, Ji was loquacious and engaging. Ji's physical separation from Shi Huang, beginning in September 1924, proved fateful in terms of his career path. After entering the University of Chicago, Ji made contact with Marxist and Comintern member Charles Shipman (better known by his pseudonym Manuel Gomez). Shipman effectively replaced Shi Huang as Ji's political mentor, and by December 1925 Ji was speaking publicly in Chicago and elsewhere about anti-imperialism and a communist future in China.

Still, it was Shi Huang's marriage to Luo Jingyi that first effected a certain activism within Ji Chaoding. He attended an Anti-Imperialist League meeting in Brussels and became the first *Chaotao* member to join the Communist Party—in Europe. Enroute, Ji started a whirlwind shipboard romance with Harriet Levine, a youthful communist descended from Russian Jewish immigrant parents. They began living together in New York almost immediately, married in November 1934, and produced two sons. When the CPUSA established the China Bureau in New York in fall 1927, Ji Chaoding was well-positioned within the organization, especially with Shi Huang as secretary.



Ji Chaoding with his first wife, Harriet Levine, and their two sons, Shanghai (1946).

His speaking engagements, academic endeavors, and relationships with Harriet Levine, Charles Shipman and other CPUSA figures embedded him deeper into American society and culture than any other *Chaotao* member.

Did Ji Chaoding favor quieter academic study vs. a more problematic political life because of his partner? Harriet was a communist, but with no knowledge of China. When the Nationalist government rescinded several Chinese student visas due to their suspected communist beliefs, he feared he would be deported. Ji had also assumed a higher profile in the wake of Shi Huang's death. Within a month of Shi's arrest and presumed demise, Ji Chaoding met with a group of American leftists to form "The American Friends of the Chinese People" and began publishing the English-language monthly *China Today*, on the Chinese revolution. Always financially strapped, Ji increased his teaching load at CPUSA's New School of Social Research and elsewhere, using an alias and various disguises to avoid detection.

A year after Shi Huang's death, Ji Chaoding finished *Key Economic Areas in Chinese History*, his PhD dissertation at Columbia University. His classmate would have been proud that Ji had articulated in concrete fashion the reasons for China's poverty and backwardness. That this work became the springboard for the entirety of the rest of Ji's career might have surprised Shi Huang, who instead had focused his efforts wherever the party sent him.

Ji Chaoding's skill as a researcher and writer led to successive positions at the quasi-Nationalist governmental Universal Trading Corporation (UTC) and, in 1941, the Sino-American-British Currency Stabilization Board, where he served under Nationalist Finance Minister Kong Xiangxi. He remained with Kong until late 1944 and directed the economic research department of the Central Bank of China until the Communist takeover in 1949.

Ji's marriage to Harriet was irreparably damaged by two longstanding relationships that occurred in the course of her husband's work. He fathered an out-of-wedlock child in Chongqing in 1944 and reunited with Shi Huang's widow, Luo Jingyi, there as well. Two years later, Harriet came to Shanghai with their two sons and importuned her husband to return to New York to resume his teaching and research. Despite his extensive contacts in the U.S., Ji remained in China. He had renounced communism as a prerequisite to joining the *Guomindang* party and Nationalist government in 1941, but came under intense scrutiny in 1944

because of longstanding rumors. A recently grown mustache and the vivid memory of Shi Huang's arrest and execution served as a daily reminder of his vulnerability. His anxiety was somewhat assuaged by the reappearance of Luo Jingyi and her children in Shanghai after Harriet's departure. In 1949, Ji sought a divorce in U.S. court through an intermediary and married Luo in Shanghai that May.

Ji's expertise in foreign trade, banking, currency stabilization, and economic research made him a substantive contributor to the countryside-oriented CCP leadership. He worked successively at the Bank of China, the People's Bank, and finally, the China Committee for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT), always serving with distinction.

The political winds of Maoist-era China were often unkind to Ji. He accepted opportunities that were politically expedient, such as China's effort to promote economic development with its Asian and African neighbors. An undisciplined and overweight diabetic, he died suddenly while working in his Beijing office in August 1963 at the age of sixty. He was survived by his second wife Luo Jingyi, and by Harriet Levine, who never acknowledged her divorce from Ji until her death in 1996.



Ji Chaoding and Luo Jingyi in Chongqing, ca. 1946.

Luo Jingyi 罗静宜

Though she was one of the earliest Chinese women to join the communist party (and in the United States, at that), and was a party member for more than seventy years, little is known about Luo Jingyi. She was born into a cultured merchant family in Shanghai in 1905 and sought an advanced education that her father supported. In 1923 the family relocated to Beijing and Luo enrolled in a school for women. She met Shi Huang and Ji Chaoding through her cousin. As she recalled, "I was *Chaotao*'s only female member . . . . When I first joined they focused discussion on Tsinghua [school] issues which didn't interest me . . . . Later, when I arrived in the U.S. I began to serve a useful purpose."

Service to the Chinese revolution dominated the married life of Shi Huang and Luo Jingyi. A native Cantonese, Luo worked as a speaker and organizer for the Communist Party in both California and New York, so that she was sent to Moscow for study a full year before Shi Huang arrived there, in 1928. Was this due to CCP dictates, or was the couple destined to go their own separate ways because of a fundamental incompatibility? Whatever the cause, another separation occurred when they returned to China. Luo Jingyi left Moscow within three months of Shi Huang's arrival there, to

work as a translator at CCP Central. Shi Huang followed her nine months later to Shanghai, in October 1930, to work in the same unit. Meanwhile, their daughter's grandparents raised her in the safety of Shanghai's French Concessions.

Luo's whereabouts and work in the years after Shi Huang's death remain sketchy. Her official biography notes that she worked in Hong Kong and disparate outposts like Urumqi and Lanzhou, engaging in "underground work" for the party. Personally, these were difficult years. A relationship with another revolutionary produced a son in 1943, who was subsequently adopted by and grew up as Ji Chaoding's son. Late in the Anti-Japanese War (China's war vs. Japan, 1937-1945), Luo arrived in Chongqing under financial duress and without a residence permit, and reconnected with Ji Chaoding. Ji—then drawing perhaps the highest salary of his life in the employ of Kong Xiangxi—arranged for housing and assisted Luo in finding employment as well.

Following Japan's surrender, Ji Chaoding moved to Shanghai, as did Luo Jingyi. Ji's spacious European-style villa housed Luo, her son, and sometimes her daughter with Shi Huang, at least until later that year when Ji's wife Harriet brought their two boys to live there. Luo remained nearby, scraping out a living as a small-scale entrepreneur while trying to avoid harassment from the GMD police. Finally, 1949 was the year of light at the end of Luo's very long dark tunnel. After Beijing's liberation in January, she moved north to be with Ji Chaoding and joined the Foreign Trade Ministry, where she worked in communications before becoming a director. She remained with her husband Ji's trade organization after his death and avoided harm in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) due to relationships with powerful leaders like Kang Sheng. After the Cultural Revolution she attended national meetings before retiring in 1983. She maintained a poster-sized portrait of Ji Chaoding in her Beijing residence until her death in July 1998.

Conclusion. It Had to be Revolution

One can be of two minds when contemplating the several memorials dedicated to Shi Huang at Tsinghua University. His school and nation are justifiably proud of a young man of modest means who realized his potential by taking full advantage of his educational opportunities. Nationally, he went "all in" for revolution at a time of extreme peril and counted for himself significant achievements that enhanced CCP prestige and credibility abroad. Another perspective would admit that Shi Huang's life and work represents a "useable" history, shaped by the Chinese socialist state, party, and school after 1949 to affirm and extend their legitimacy. One would agree even today that "seeking truth from facts" leads to better outcomes when professional analysts have more information, conduct more research, and offer interpretations with less fear of consequences.

Yet this narrative deserves more than a simple identification and dismissal of orthodoxy and official history. Among the arresting visual images I found while conducting this research were reunion photos of Tsinghua School classmates, class of 1924, coming together directly after the liberation, 1950-1954, and always including the surviving core members of *Chaotao*. I wondered what brought them to this

One can be of two minds when contemplating the several memorials dedicated to Shi Huang at Tsinghua University. His school and nation are justifiably proud of a young man of modest means who realized his potential by taking full advantage of his educational opportunities. Nationally, he went "all in" for revolution at a time of extreme peril and counted for himself significant achievements that enhanced CCP prestige and credibility abroad. Another perspective would admit that Shi Huang's life and work represents a "useable" history, shaped by the Chinese socialist state, party, and school after 1949 to affirm and extend their legitimacy.

place when New China's economic equilibrium had yet to be realized. Surely it wasn't for the state, or party, or even the school, which by then barely resembled their campus from three decades before. For me, another photo from 1951, including a somber Ji Chaoding and Shi Huang's daughter (Shi Qisheng) under an early Shi Huang memorial in the Tsinghua University library, offered additional clarity.

Shi Huang may have been gone by then, but he seems to have hovered over them as a kind of guiding light. The so-called "Peach Garden" loyalty pledge (i.e., the *Chaotao*) by Shi, Ji, and Luo had a temporal viability that likely surprised each of them. Shi Huang was the unifying element, and all of *Chaotao* recognized that if the group and the era were to be remembered he would be the decisive force. One could argue that Ji Chaoding accomplished more than Shi with regard to the Chinese revolution. He achieved a higher level of education in a discipline that proved to be more useful to his country, wrote at least as fluently (in English) and more effectively than Shi Huang, created deeper ties for China with the United States, so that institutionally, he left a lasting legacy in the areas of foreign trade, marketing, research, banking, and arbitration.

Yet Shi Huang's influence on Ji exceeded anyone else's, and we have the tangible results of that influence. If not for his demise in 1933, one doubts whether Ji would have initiated the English-language monthly *China Today* or its agit-prop arm, the American Friends of the Chinese People. After 1933, Ji's actions on behalf of Luo Jingyi, her daughter and her son, including marrying Luo, make sense only in the context of his relationship with Shi Huang. The agonizing decision Ji made to abandon his wife Harriet, their two sons, and life in the U.S., in favor of service to the Chinese socialist revolution, and his decision to raise Luo's son as his own (so that he later took the Ji name)—it is Shi Huang and the Shi-Ji relationship going back to 1916 that provides essential context for this behavior.

Aside from the complication of adding Shi Huang to the mix, the Ji Chaoding-Luo Jingyi relationship is confounding for its fits and starts over a twenty-five year period before 1949. Neither party wrote much about the other. Luo praised Ji for his brilliance

as a student and orator, and later for absorbing and understanding U.S. political and social culture in ways that no other *Chaotao* member could match. She acknowledged the flaws in Shi Huang more readily than did his male comrades. Luo easily recalled her resentment from six decades prior at being asked to marry Shi Huang in order to serve as his secretary, in sharp contrast to Ji's kindness that she referenced.

Ji may have sensed the tensions between Shi and Luo as a disappointed suitor when they became engaged and married in 1927. How else to explain his enrollment and subsequent abrupt withdrawal from Stanford University over that summer? In the year after Luo was widowed, Ji and Harriet married, and as if to emphasize that the Shi-Luo union should endure after Shi Huang's death, Ji wrote as "Huang Lowe" in five articles he published in *China Today* in 1934 (a pseudonym combining their surnames that he never used again).

Another hard-to-fathom event is the daughter Ji fathered in Chongqing in 1944. A 1948 photograph shows Ji with Luo Jingyi, Huang Ailian (the daughter), the father whose name she took, and the birth mother, all together. How to explain Luo's accommodation of an act and relationship she was undoubtedly aware of? Ji's secretary once intimated to me that the love of Ji's life that got away was "the Chongqing woman," and he was reticent to weigh in when I relayed that Ji's brother had spoken of a "mutual hatred" that existed between Ji and Luo after 1949.

Lastly, we have Luo Jingyi herself, married to both Shi Huang and Ji Chaoding. She was always subordinated to the former even though her accomplishments in California rivaled her husband's. She traveled to Moscow for study a full year before her husband, although whether this was due to her capabilities or tensions in their marriage is unknown. Regardless, Shi Huang's paternalistic attitude was at odds with Luo's accomplishments in the United States, and the Luo family's employment of his father and providing the bribery money that rescued Shi Huang from a fatal episode during his first arrest in 1931 raised her standing still further in their marriage. Luo also sacrificed her academic studies in the United States and the career that would have awaited her in China had she obtained a college education. Even so, she excelled as a translator and continued to use English and to interact with foreigners into her eighties.

A final word. I confess that the orthodox approach to Chinese history makes me reluctant to write on sensitive topics like these. More than once have I refrained from expounding decisively on some critical aspect because of an individual in the room, or a relationship that involves my subject, or merely a vague feeling that the consequences would be discomfiting. In this case we have two out-of-wedlock children that cannot be eliminated from the discussion, nor can the circumstances that produced them be ignored. In one case (Chongqing 1944), the child lives while the parents and everyone immediately affected are gone. In the other (Luo's son), I am reminded of the stakes if I say too much, especially when nothing has ever been said publicly.

Moreover, Luo's son Ji Fusheng (1943-2022) was also his stepfather's son, with as much loyalty and interest in preserving his memory, as had Ji Chaoding with Shi Huang. Several summers ago I met three economic

A final word. I confess that the orthodox approach to Chinese history makes me reluctant to write on sensitive topics like these. More than once have I refrained from expounding decisively on some critical aspect because of an individual in the room, or a relationship that involves my subject, or merely a vague feeling that the consequences would be discomfiting. In this case we have two out-of-wedlock children that cannot be eliminated from the discussion, nor can the circumstances that produced them be ignored. In one case (Chongqing 1944), the child lives while the parents and everyone immediately affected are gone. In the other (Luo's son), I am reminded of the stakes if I say too much, especially when nothing has ever been said publicly.

historians from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for a dinner where we were to discuss Ji Chaoding. One of the historian's fathers had known Ji well, so I hoped for an enlightening evening. Much to my surprise the mystery guest for the evening was none other than Ji Fusheng, who was engaging enough but also hinted along the way at the boundaries to be observed in the evening's discussion. And so they were.

Postscript. A Wonderful, Terrible Symmetry

Let me return to Shi Huang and his decision for revolution, and then the other *Chaotao* members and their legacies. Despite their embracement of Marxism and the CCP, the uncertainty and distant nature of these concepts and what *Chaotao* members thought would be the ultimate political solution makes this as much a pledge to individual and group loyalty as to a political cause. There is also the undeniable influence of years of living in the comparatively make-your-own-way atmosphere of the United States.

As first among equals, Shi Huang was a dutiful soldier and paid the ultimate price. He left several scraps of paper, sketched out in prison, that eschew regrets for his life's path. No tears over the impending loss of his family—in the current hagiography—can be shed, especially as his comrade became the future suitor and responsible party for his wife and daughter. Which returns us to *Chaotao* and the so-called "Peach Garden" pledge of its members. Shi Huang's defiance can be understood best in this context, and so too the actions afterward of Ji Chaoding and Luo Jingyi. Shi's death, shorn of despair or cynicism, seems both wonderful and terrible.

Ji Chaoding's death in 1963 reflects the extraordinary duality of his life. With an activist pedigree like Shi Huang, his resume usually exceeded those senior to him in the CCP apparatus. In fact, for many Ji's funeral in Beijing's Capital Theater in Wangfujing—ordinarily a ministerial level venue for such an occasion—serves as affirmation for his unique contributions to the Chinese revolution. For others,

whether it was the *Guomindang* in 1944 or CCP veterans from the countryside, Ji's varied experiences made him at best unpredictable. Particularly in economic development, Ji's institution-building seemed decidedly American-style capitalist. This skepticism, and the present danger that always seemed to lurk around the corner for Ji, was noted by many interviewees who spoke favorably about Ji's work. To a person, they believed his death spared him from a more humiliating and violent end in the Cultural Revolution (which began in 1966).

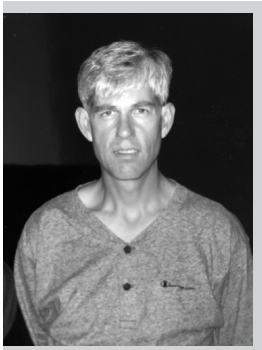
Finally, there is Luo Jingyi, who lived until 1998. She was both a victim and beneficiary of China's historical patriarchy once she became a communist. Her marriage effectively ended her hopes for a university education and put her and her daughter in harm's way even while in the United States. After Shi Huang's demise, she scrambled to make ends meet and—in several close encounters with the Nationalists—to avoid prison and execution for being a communist. Her narrative deserves a fuller rendition than is given here, and not simply to flesh out her liaisons with two husbands and an unnamed partner, whose legacy assisted in the elevation of her second husband in Chinese historiography in the decades after his death. Interestingly, about his mother, her son, Ji Fusheng, said comparatively little, and until additional research comes to light, Luo's legacy will remain the most ambiguous of the three despite her longevity.

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Trinity

Charles Erven



I can't explain you would not understand, this is not how I am. Oil on recycled panel. Photo credit: Kevin Stewart-Magee.

Benny left home after killing his wife. He drove west on Interstate 25 toward Las Cruces as the lights of the borderlands slipped in behind him. Christian sat quietly in his mother's seat holding his phone and concentrating on *Angry Birds*. Benny looked at Christian and saw the terrible thing he had done. This was not the first time Benny had seen blood or killed a woman. Multiple stints in Iraq culminated in his being acquitted of shooting a fourteen-year-old girl—which he never denied.

During an unremarkable visit to a subdued neighborhood, his first sergeant was hit, fatally bisecting his femoral artery. In the ensuing chaos, the girl emerged from a crawl space and Benny shot her, knocking her against the wall and causing her hijab to fall from her like a surrendered flag. Now his wife, Cynthia, lay on the floor of their kitchen in Ft. Bliss, also innocent, also dead.

"Does Tia Teresa have Cocoa Puffs?" Christian asked. Benny assured him that she had every cereal he could imagine. Christian could imagine a lot of cereals and proceeded to list them. He never once took his eyes off the *Angry Birds*.

After killing Cynthia, Benny drove to Juarez and parked on a street that overlooked El Paso. He turned off the car and listened to the clicking of the engine. A horsefly flung itself against the closed window and then circled the cab like a drone looking for a target. A pit bull thrust its head through an opening in a chain link fence and barked at a passing vendor selling *elote*, who cursed the dog and peddled off.

Eventually, the dog retreated to the shade of a plywood lean-to and the fly landed on the dash, where Benny dispatched it with a swat of his hand. He watched the city across the border ripple in the heat and he felt his pulse beat in his temples. "Madre de Dios," he heard a woman's voice say. "O gracious Mother of the gracious God," the voice continued in Spanish. He wondered if the radio was on. "Blessed Mary, the Mother of God, pour the mercy of thy Son and our God upon my impassionate soul." He wondered if he was being mocked. The fierce midday sun reflected off the high-rise buildings in downtown and he couldn't tell if he tasted tears or sweat. He noticed a smear of blood and rolled up his sleeve. To the east, he could see the gates of Ft. Bliss—and, in his mind's eye—his home and Cynthia on the floor. He had intended to blow his brains out but remembered it was his day to pick up Christian from daycare.

As Benny buckled Christian into the front seat, he told him that his mother was in Roswell, visiting Tia Teresa, who was having a baby. Christian loved babies and loved his Tia Teresa even more. The plan, if you could call it a plan, was to drop Christian at Teresa's and disappear. Maybe go deep into Mexico. He pushed his gun farther under his seat and drove out of town.

"Welcome to The Land of Enchantment" the sign proclaimed. Benny grew up in New Mexico so he didn't understand why anyone would call it enchanted. The only *enchantment* Benny could recall was a drive-in theater across the street from the trailer they lived in when he was a child. He and his brother Eliades would sit on the high walls and conjure dialogue to silent kung fu movies and practice "kick-of-death" moves on each other. One time, Eliades kicked him so hard he fell from the wall and cracked his rib. His father told him to ice it and walk it off. On rare occasions, they'd pile into the car and drive across the street to the theater. They'd hang the speakers in the open window and let the breeze flow through. His mother insisted Benny and Eliades watch the screen in front of them, not the screen behind them—which played silent, naked love (which they could still see reflected in the window anyway).

The first time Benny could remember doing a terrible thing was at the drive-in. His father had given Eliades a candy apple red bike with golden spoke wheels. It looked like a bike with enough power to circle the moon. (Mostly it circled the block.) Eliades rode the bike like he was in a parade and Benny was envious. Late at night, when the crickets were busy and the air was thick with sleep, Benny stole the bike and rode it to the drive-in. He rode it along now empty paths—paths still warm from the heat of couples behind foggy windows, paths still littered with the slicks of buttered popcorn and abandoned youth. He leapt over mounds once filled with countless cars but now looked planted with silent posts—posts that hours before spoke the dialogue and music of a generation, posts, like sentinels. And he crashed the bike into the silent sentinels, one after another. And he scraped the candy apple red paint with broken gravel. He snapped the golden spokes and bent the perfect rims. He climbed the forbidding wall and hoisted the bike to the ramparts and tossed the

wounded bike over, where it took flight in a sad arc of relief and regret. Years later, Eliades died in a county hospice and Benny never told him what he'd done.

His mother cleaned houses in the Rio Rancho and Four Hills enclaves of Albuquerque; mansions brushed against the Sandia Mountains. His father died at the rival hands of the Barrio Azteca years before. Benny dreamed of delivering a kick-of-death to his father's killers, but instead he got high. "Madre de Dios" his mother said when he tattooed his father's name across his back. "He's lost to God," she thought, but prayed for him anyway.

After his mother died, Benny flirted with joining the Barrio Azteca, but instead joined the Army. He excelled and moved quickly through the ranks, and in Iraq garnered a Bronze Star with Clusters. After his first tour, he was selected as a trainer for the Army's desert combat center in California. When he married Cynthia, he felt like he was a new person, a better person. And when Christian arrived, he promised himself that he'd never be like his father; he'd be better.

Benny cut across the San Andres Mountains and dropped into the Tularosa basin. He turned onto N.M. State Route 70 as jackrabbits darted across the road. The Sacramento range ran to the east and formed a great barrier, locking in the basin. Yuccas and creosote bushes stood like sentinels in the desert. A jet traversed the sky leaving a shimmering vapor trail in the clear night. Signs warned drivers against stopping or breaching the fences of the White Sand Missile Range, which ran on either side of the highway. He'd often traveled this road on the way to Roswell but had never noticed the warnings. Up ahead, a flashing sign informed drivers of an impending launch and road closure. Benny knew he'd have dropped Christian at Teresa's by then.

Christian said he was going to buy his mother a ring for her birthday, and when Benny asked, "What kind of ring," Christian said, "a bathtub ring," and laughed. Cynthia was to turn thirty-two on Tuesday, and Benny had considered organizing a party of some sort but wasn't good at such things. Since his last return, he'd felt a distance between them. He noticed that when she picked him up at the airport, she didn't cry on his return like she had done on previous occasions. She walked ahead of him in the Albertsons and lingered at the hair products and beauty aids aisle much too long, he thought. She insisted they go dancing at Cantos like they always did, but the loud music made Benny anxious, and he didn't like that she knew so many people. In bed, she now preferred to be top and moved like she was at the club. He wanted to open his chest and show her his confetti heart, but he didn't know how. For years, they had argued like lovers, but lately she had stopped arguing and moved around him like a ghost.

Today, in the bathroom, he *inadvertently* pounded her against the wall, causing her lip to split and her towel to hang from her head like a surrendered flag. She told him that she was done "for good" this time and spit blood into the sink. After an earlier incident, he'd been ordered to seek

counseling. He'd picked up her phone and noticed a text, "Hey Chica." He searched for other incriminating evidence and, finding none, looked at her photos where he came across her with girlfriends, holding a beer aloft and laughing. When he confronted her, she admitted that she didn't stay home every minute he was gone. She had a life, she said. As she turned away, he punched her in the shoulder, causing an almost instantaneous bruise. She locked herself in the bathroom and threatened to call the police. He told her he was sorry, but that she makes him crazy.

He'd only missed a few counseling sessions when she told him for the first time that she "wanted out." She moved with Christian to Teresa's and got a job at the Tastee-Freeze. He called every day and pleaded for another chance, and, after a time, she reluctantly agreed. He moved her home and, for a few months, they reached a quiet truce before Benny stopped showing for duty and was arrested for being AWOL. Only the intervention of his commanding officer halted court martial proceedings. His commanding officer liked Benny and even gave him his personal cell number. Benny never called him. He wished now that he had. When she slammed the door on her way to the kitchen, he heard a shot echo. "Sir, I see feet to the right! Feet to the right!" someone shouted. "Sir. . . there are targets. Targets in the perimeter." Benny pivoted and ran through the house kicking in doors. He grabbed her and held her from behind as she struggled to escape. He covered her mouth as she cried out, and he demanded she tell him where the "Mahdi" are. Where are the insurgents, the killers of his first sergeant, the killers of his father, of his mother and Eliades. She screamed and bit his hand, and as she ran for the door he grabbed a knife and killed her. His heart exploded out of his chest and into oblivion. He let her go and she dropped to the floor. His head pounded and he could hear his breath as he slumped against the cabinets. She was motionless, blood trickling from a thousand cuts into tiny rivulets. He thought he heard a *Muezzin* sing call to prayer.

Christian slept and dreamed of *Angry Birds* while Benny counted down the end of his life. He wondered what will happen to Christian and prayed that Christian will be nothing like him when he grows up. He asked what he should do, but no answer presented itself. He can't go to Mexico, he thought. Only a coward would think such a thing. His Bronze Star said he was anything but a coward. He had to think of Christian, he said over and over. His life was always better when someone told him what to do. It was when he thought on his own that he got into trouble and did terrible things. Benny's father, whose name still ran across his back and whose blood still coursed through his veins, was silent in advice. His mother, who prayed for Mary's intervention in her Benito's soul, was denied. He absently felt the gun beneath his seat. He turned on the radio and a woman's voice drifted in. "Madre de Dios," she said. She was a Mexican radio preacher looking for souls and pesos. He started to change the station when she admonished him to listen. He listened, his hand ready on the button.

"And one night," she said, "I tumbled into the underworld." Music trumpeted like Gabriel in a Mariachi band, and then she continued, "I mysteriously found myself wandering in the desert. And on high, I saw the Trinity. I saw it in the desert. . . like a neon mirage. . . And I walked toward it. I was seeking oblivion, but I wanted salvation." Again, he started to turn the station and she admonished against it. "A little taste of salvation. . . just a little taste on my tongue. I know you. You're out there right now. You're the saddest soul around."

Benny turned the station.

Benny stopped for gas at a place called Atomic Cafe and bought Fig Newtons. When they got back into the car, Christian asked if he was sad, and Benny said, "No." He was beyond sad, but didn't want to upset Christian anymore. He would soon be upset for the rest of his life. Benny reasoned that tonight he must show Christian something good. As they continued north, toward the Ruidoso turn-off, Benny talked about his father, and his mother, and his family all the way back in Mexico. He spoke of Christian's mother and how they loved to dance. Benny asked if he was going to learn to dance, and Christian shrugged. He played more *Angry Birds* on his phone and asked how much further it was to Tia Teresa's?

Benny turned off the highway and drove to the dunes of White Sands. Visiting the dunes was the only reason anyone would willingly come to such a place. When he and Cynthia first moved to El Paso, they visited the dunes and rode down them on cardboard sleds. She was pregnant with Christian at the time, and her sister Teresa joined them. They camped in the dunes and ate hot dogs encrusted with sand. They had sand in their teeth, eyes, and spit. At night, the sands were cold. Unlike the sands of Iraq, the white gypsum was unable to hold the heat of the day. Teresa's boyfriend brought the most potent weed Benny had ever smoked. Each night, they'd hit it and lay on the dunes to watch passing satellites.

Benny took Christian's hand and led him into the dunes. He wanted Christian to experience what he and his mother had experienced before he was born. Christian was tired and the sand was cold. Benny picked him up and carried him to the top of the dunes. The sands glowed blue in the moonlight. They looked for satellites, but none appeared.

Benny's chest was empty and so the wind blew through it. He had no flesh, no bone. There was nothing to impede its progress. He thought he'd heard the whisper of the Mexican preacher blow through his open chest. But he was wrong. "It would be best" he thought, "if I could deny Christian the pain of what I've done." He felt the weight of the gun in his pocket. He placed Christian on the ground. Christian looked up at his father and then pointed excitedly to a passing satellite. Benny looked up and watched it too. While Christian scanned the sky for other satellites, Benny hurled the gun deep into the dunes. He picked up Christian and carried him back to the car and they drove on toward Roswell.

When Benny came to the Ruidoso turn-off, a sign told him that to the right was Roswell and to the left was the road to the Trinity Site. Benny had never noticed this sign before. Christian was asleep in his mother's seat, dreaming of satellites. Benny turned right and drove toward Roswell.

Tia Teresa was both delighted and gravely concerned when Benny and Christian arrived at her front door. When Christian asked where his mother was, Teresa knew instantly that something awful had happened. Benny left and Teresa called the police in pitched alarm.

Benny followed the road back to Trinity, past pinion shrub and onto a vast alkali flat. This, he thought, must be the valley of death. "You seek oblivion but want salvation," he heard his mother's voice say. He arrived at a gate that barred further trespass and so he got out of the car and stared into the darkness. The dome light went on and the pinging open door sounded into the still night.

Benny breached the fence and walked toward the path that pointed to Trinity. He followed a rutted dirt road and ventured into an arroyo. He climbed up onto a low escarpment and looked back. He could see the glow of the open car door and the distant ping of the alarm.

And the darkness surrounded him.

And he thought, "I am the great destroyer. I am become death."



A playwright and screenwriter, Charles Erven has won numerous awards. His screenplay, *Uncle Pisau's Arduous Journey*, a true story of a Papuan farmer's epic journey across New Guinea to save his injured niece, won Best Screenplay at the ENDAS International Competition, the Top Prize at Cynosure Screenplay Contest, and the Beverly Hills Screenplay Contest. His produced plays include *Baggage Check*, *Mulan and the Battle on Black Mountain*, *After Vertigo*, *The Ballad of Chet (On the Eve of His Bliss)*, *Canyon Suite, Glynn's Crossing, and Painting Landscapes. Canyon Suite* won the 2006 David Mark Cohen National Playwriting award. His screenplay adaptation of *Baggage Check* was recently optioned by Hirsch-Giovanni Entertainment Company. He is currently working with Bruce Gilbert, an Oscar nominated producer, on a six-part series about infamous crimes in California's Central Valley. Charles holds an MA in Theatre from University of Maryland, College Park, and an MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts from University of California, Riverside.

On the Road to Zion

Ron McFarland



View of Great Salt Lake City in 1853, sketched by Frederick Hawkins Piercy. Used by permission, Utah Historical Society.

Bad enough to receive orders uprooting him from the easy tedium of five years in garrison, most recently at Fort Adams, where he'd enjoyed the society of ladies from nearby Newport, but the demanding nature of these orders—and their complexity—made them downright irksome. But what could he do short of resigning his commission after seventeen years under arms, not counting his four at the Academy, years that encompassed five in the wretched Florida War and three under fire in Mexico? Would shepherding 800 horses and 450 balky mules halfway across the continent, from Fort Leavenworth to Benicia Barracks near San Francisco culminate in his long-delayed promotion to major? Unlikely. He had been addressed as "Colonel" Steptoe since his brevet to Lieutenant-Colonel following the victory at Chapultepec in 1847, but he'd been stuck at captain's pay for nearly ten years.

Would he ever marry, as his father, never a proponent of his career choice, urged him to do lately? At what godforsaken outpost would he turn thirty-nine? Most likely the Utah Territory among the polygamous Mormons and their prophet-governor, Brigham Young. His orders from the Adjutant General, Colonel Samuel Cooper, dated (ludicrously?) on April 1, 1854, added almost as an afterthought that he should "visit" the "towns" of the Pahvant Utes, "if not lying too much out of the line of march and time will permit," bring them to trial, and hold them "to a strict account for their conduct in respect of this atrocious massacre." The massacre, that is, of his West Point classmate Captain John Gunnison and seven of his men the

previous year. Did these Indians really live in "towns"? Colonel Cooper ordered him, in passing, to "inquire into" the possibilities of building a road south of Great Salt Lake City and come up with "estimated costs" for that "enterprise." Exasperating.

In his shaving mirror, Ned Steptoe witnessed new strands of silver in his dark hair and moustache. He thought of the attractive young woman from Newport who'd urged him to read the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She hoped his family in western Virginia did not own slaves. His father, a prominent physician in the Lynchburg area, referred to the five he kept as "servants." Hedging the truth, Ned assured her his family "did not agree with buying and selling slaves." Not that he fancied novels, nor did he suppose he could sustain a close friendship with this lovely lady abolitionist.

His mother proposed his pretty second cousin, Franny Steptoe, four years younger and still unmarried after a certain "promising match" had fallen through. "Entirely Franny's fault," Ma insisted. But although he and Franny had been childhood friends, they'd never been sweethearts, and though he'd felt drawn to her when he returned from Florida, Cousin Franny seemed content teaching at a seminary for young ladies in Richmond. They enjoyed each other's company that summer of '42, but the Army sent him all over, and a junior officer's pay would scarcely sustain a family, and then he was deployed to the war in Mexico. They wrote occasionally. Recently, Ma had become more insistent and had convinced his sister Nannie to urge him toward the altar. Franny, Ma wrote, "wants to become an authoress, like that horrid Stowe woman!"

Ned laughed when he read that, recalling the words of Mr. Hawthorne, who wrote of that "damned mob of scribbling women." He continued laughing as he packed his trunk for the trip to Fort Leavenworth on the Missouri River, "Gateway to the West," soon to become an important outpost of the new Kansas Territory, part of the Kansas-Nebraska Act that would likely cause as many problems as it would solve. The nation was on edge. No time for an aspiring officer to be nursing a thousand head of livestock in the opposite direction from the approaching maelstrom.

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At Fort Leavenworth, Steptoe renewed his acquaintance with the commandant, Colonel Thomas Fauntleroy, a fellow Virginian. They'd both served during the Florida War and in Mexico. Conditions at Leavenworth that spring were "vexed," Fauntleroy said, the Army being ordered to uphold land claims of the tribes even as settlers swarmed in from Missouri, many of them slavers. There were rumors of impending strife with abolitionists. "We're not officially the Kansas Territory till the end of the month," Tom said, "but we're in for it." They sipped bourbon that May afternoon, the fort's band playing and young officers waltzing on a pavilion outside the officers' quarters.

"How so?" Colonel Steptoe wondered.

"Before this it was my dragoons between Indians and settlers. Next, it'll be us between slavers and free-soilers. There'll be hell to pay." He paused. "Blood will flow."

Before the expedition left early the 28th, Fauntleroy told what he knew about the Utes and other tribes in the Rockies and about the Mormons and Brigham Young: "Beware the Mormons. They're not all saints, no matter what they call themselves. And beware Governor Young. He dreams of empire, and he's equal parts politician and prophet. Better stay on his good side."

What Steptoe knew about the Saints came mostly from Gunnison's book, where they were described as "enterprising" and "industrious," great supporters of education, remarkably successful at proselytizing and spreading their peculiar faith, polygamy included.

"You met Governor Young?"

"Briefly. He's a busy man. Intelligent. . . interesting. You'll see. An imposing presence. He knows how to deal with the Indians. Better feed 'em than fight 'em, he says. Something like that, but they've had run-ins."

"I'd think so. How many wives by now? And children?"

"Countless!" Tom laughed. He wished Ned "all the luck in the world" and advised him to winter the livestock in Salt Lake City if necessary. "Winter can hit early in the Uintas. Don't get caught by snow between there and California."

The memorable date on his orders directing him to lead the "Steptoe Expedition" across the West came back to mind when the colonel met the quartet of recently graduated second lieutenants who'd form the nucleus of his officers' cadre. The brightest, most ambitious, and most obnoxious of them was a Rhode Islander, Sylvester Morton, two years out of the Point and eager for action, but not of a military nature. The night before they left Leavenworth, "Sly" distinguished himself by waltzing a fifteen-year-old girl into his billets, where her irate father discovered her after midnight in a "compromising state," the upshot of which was a fifty dollar fine to be deducted from his pay and a severe reprimand. And how might Lieutenant Morton behave among the maidens of Utah?

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Steptoe knew his expedition would demand less of the strategy and tactics he'd acquired as a field officer, but more of logistics, and he knew any commander's right hand was his quartermaster. "Battles are won by tactics," an instructor at West Point maintained, "but wars are won by logistics." Not that his expedition was intended to involve combat. Fortunately, his quartermaster was Captain Rufus Ingalls, who graduated from the Point in 1843 and had served three years in the Oregon Territory, notably at Fort Vancouver where he roomed with Ulysses S. Grant, "Sam," as his friends called him. The three had met briefly in Mexico. After Rufe

Ingalls, Ned had greatest confidence in his surgeon Horace Wirtz, graduate of the University of Pennsylvania medical school, his father's alma mater.

The expedition would take a well-traveled route through the Kansas Territory via several rivers, notably the Platte, into the Great Salt Lake valley. Major Howard Stansbury had mapped the area in 1850, and John Frémont had explored it ten years before the Steptoe Expedition set out, leaving maps and descriptions used by emigrants to the Oregon Territory and gold-seekers following the Forty-niners' rush into California. Steptoe would need no fabled scout like Kit Carson but would rely on Captain Ingalls and his wagon-masters, former dragoon sergeants.

What most concerned Steptoe was that half his troops, including fifty dragoons and thirty infantry, were raw recruits serving under unseasoned lieutenants. "Fresh fish," an old non-com called them. They were embarking upon what the Navy calls a "shakedown cruise": seventy heavy baggage wagons, each drawn by six mules; seven light wagons to which were attached strings of fifteen to twenty pairs of horses; 150 soldiers, and nine officers, including Steptoe, Ingalls, and Surgeon Wirtz; and 130 civilians—mostly teamsters and herders. "800 cayuses and 450 headstrong mules," he wrote his sister. To Colonel Cooper he wrote that his expedition left Fort Leavenworth well-organized and in "buoyant spirits."

Under good conditions, they would travel fifteen sluggish miles a day, taking twenty days to travel the 250 miles north and west between Leavenworth and Fort Kearny, on the Platte, where they would stay two days before crossing the swollen, muddy South Fork.

As his long column left Fort Leavenworth, Colonel Steptoe felt exhilarated, felt they were marching straight into the sky—its immensity, its vast distance. And he thought how that empty expanse must be daunting, portending a terrible loneness. Severe isolation. How did these settlers dare? Or did this open space signify freedom to roam? Did some settlers see it as blissful solitude? He recalled Franny reciting a poem by Wordsworth, who wandered "lonely as a cloud" and came upon "a host of golden daffodils." This, he thought, is not daffodil country. Emptiness. The tedious blandness, the monotony of it. They'd never get there.

Days passed without a cloud, but the nights exploded with stars. After dinner, sections of the column gathered around campfires and sang, often the popular tunes of Stephen Foster: "Oh! Susanna," favored by the California-bound gold-seekers, and the upbeat "Camptown Races" accompanied by a banjo or fiddle, or the melancholy strains of "My Old Kentucky Home." Rufe Ingalls noticed Sly Morton was gifted with a mellow tenor. At least that could he said for the rascal, Ned thought, as he drifted off to sleep, coyotes yelping in the distance. Ingalls called them song-dogs.

Then it rained. And rained. The dust turned into blonde mud called "gumbo," and the wagon wheels churned it into something nameless. But what happened next proved readily named: cholera. Doctor Wirtz recog-

nized the symptoms at once, but knowing what it was and being able to treat it before the disease ran its ugly course? The massive column came to a halt for nearly ten days during which almost that many soldiers perished miserably. So panicked were some of the young recruits that fear of cholera outstripped their fear of Indians, and desertion swept the ranks.

By this time, notably at Fort Kearny, they'd encountered the sort of Indians that linger around such places, mostly Pawnee, looking to ingratiate themselves or desperate for whatever meager sustenance might be doled out by sutlers at some unspeakable human price. Government rations arrived sporadically, and corrupt Indian agents seized what they wanted. Passing emigrants, trappers, traders, and ex-soldiers often took advantage of the young squaws, whose services were too readily sold, rarely taking one of them to wife. After any such dalliance, the woman was usually banished from her band, often having her nose slit as punishment and warning. Indians huddling near the forts were a sad lot, many of them diseased. Suicidal. The Army occasionally employed Pawnee braves to serve as scouts or Delaware from the east, but often those men were also outcasts. Ned saw no Indians who remotely resembled the noble features George Catlin painted and that he viewed once in Boston at the mansion of an art connoisseur.

Indians mostly distanced themselves from the expedition, but the troops stayed alert, kept close watch over the livestock. If they met in combat, Steptoe knew the battles would differ considerably from those he'd fought a dozen years earlier among the swamps, sawgrass, and palmettos of Florida. Even from a distance he recognized these Indians were brilliant horsemen. The colonel considered himself an accomplished rider, but he could only wonder about the chances of his green dragoons against them. He hoped he would not have to find out.

When they continued west and north toward Fort Laramie, the dry heat of July fastened down, and they spent a torrid Fourth on the lookout for places to ford the South Fork, which ran high from melting snow off the distant mountains. They celebrated briefly with a ration of whisky and firing a few volleys into the air, their ad hoc band playing "Yankee Doodle" and "Hail, Columbia."

"Have you noticed?" Captain Ingalls asked as they sat around the dwindling fire. "No fireflies." They would arrive at Fort Laramie the next day.

"We called them lightning bugs," the Colonel said, staring into the darkness. "Not a one." And suddenly he remembered chasing hundreds of them one summer night when playing hide-and-seek with Cousin Franny, and she dropped from an old magnolia and startled him and his Cousin Henry, who ran back to base leaving Ned and Franny together, and she kissed him. Right on the lips. He was thirteen, she nine or ten. She giggled and beat him back to base, so he was it, but Henry went in, and the game ended.

"Let's catch lightning bugs," she'd whispered. And she caught two or three right away and said "Watch!" And then she tightened her tiny white hand and opened it to reveal a smear of luminescence. She giggled again. He thought it was awful, but that night he couldn't sleep without thinking of her kiss.

"No fireflies out here," Ingalls said. "Strange."

"I'll miss them," the colonel said, thinking not of bioluminescent insects but of Franny.

The trees that once grew near the rivers, cottonwoods mostly, had been harvested by the forty-niners and other emigrants on this part of the Oregon Trail, but ample grasses provided forage for the livestock and for the great buffalo herds they saw in the distance. Occasionally, enlisted men joined teamsters and herders who knew the area to shoot buffalo, supplementing the menu. Ned found the flavor only slightly inferior to beef and preferable to venison.

Even though Fauntleroy had warned about them as "inevitable," the desertions worried him, sixteen recruits not present and not accounted for. He figured he could make up the numbers once they arrived in "Zion," as he had begun to think of it, but the desertions haunted him because these boys of eighteen and nineteen surely had no idea what they were doing, where to go, or how to get there. The monotonous, empty expanse. Some days the colonel wanted to scream into it. "Fools!" Thinking not only of the deserters.

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Of the treaty concocted at Fort Laramie in 1851, Colonel Steptoe knew very little as his command limped in amid the searing heat of July. The fort buzzed with activity. Officers' quarters had just been completed and other buildings were under construction. He was concerned to see many Sioux and Cheyenne permitted ready access to the post, but was assured everything was in order, and his troops spent two mostly agreeable nights in the fort's adobe walls at the confluence of the Laramie and the North Platte. Given the limited forage nearby for the animals, they could not linger.

The fort was garrisoned by a single company of the 6th Infantry, only sixty men, under the command, Steptoe was surprised to learn, of a twenty-three-year-old Pennsylvanian, Brevet Second Lieutenant Hugh Fleming, "a congenial youngster" he wrote to Nannie, but "unready for command." He had graduated in the Academy class of '52 a year ahead of another second lieutenant, John Grattan, a Vermonter also without prior experience among Indians.

Lieutenant Fleming welcomed them, provided good billets, and hosted passable dinners for Ned and his fellow officers. Grattan spent both evenings railing against the barbarity of the Sioux before drinking himself into a stupor. Lieutenant Morton joined him in boozing but proved

capable of holding his liquor. Grattan's attitude toward the Indians struck the colonel as foolhardy. He could envision no solution to the "Indian problem" but believed compromise with the tribes was imperative. The so-called "Indian Territory" was created as a supposedly humane answer to what proved an increasingly insoluble dilemma. Officers like Grattan would surely exacerbate the problem."Give me ten good men and I can lick the whole Sioux tribe," the soused lieutenant declared the first night.

"Absolutely," Sly warbled.

"De-degenerate s-savish-," Grattan stuttered. "Savishes." He struck the table and a fork dropped to the floor. When he leaned from his chair to retrieve it, the lieutenant toppled.

"John," Fleming admonished, then corrected himself. "Lieutenant!"

Curious to see how the young commandant would deal with the matter, Steptoe said nothing. Should he take a hand? He thought not, though he knew a firm reprimand was needed. He understood the lieutenants had known each other at the Point and suspected they'd been friends, not an ideal "command structure," especially given that Grattan had been held back a year. No. He knew too little of the circumstances to intervene, and in any event, he would be leaving the post after another day.

Grattan pulled himself up unsteadily. "'pologies," he slurred.

"Coffee?" Doc Wirtz offered.

Grattan waved off the suggestion. "Bes' get to bed. Way pas' bedtime," he mumbled. Smiled ingratiatingly. "'pologies." He staggered out accompanied by the unsteady Sly Morton.

Lieutenant Fleming cleared his throat. "My regrets, sir," he said, addressing the colonel. "Lieutenant Grattan has been . . . unwell. Bad news from home, mother quite ill." His voice trailed off. "Still, no excuse. He *will* be disciplined. So many . . . problems here, you see."

"Of course." Steptoe nodded. He suspected he should say more but did not. Should he file a report with the adjutant general? Surely a note to Major Mackall in San Francisco. But why make problems for these poor young officers? They had more than enough of those.

He recalled his brief involvement as a fledgling second lieutenant at Fort Payne, Alabama, in 1838 with forcing Seminoles into "Indian Territory." He'd been miserable those rainy months and resented being left out of the action in Florida. "Nothing doing, nothing done," he'd complained in a letter home. But he hadn't yielded to drink, had never made a fool of himself. What he had just witnessed gnawed at him, and what he'd seen already of the Plains Indians underscored the complexity of the problems Hugh Fleming was facing. Lieutenant Grattan was perhaps least among them, after all.

"We're applying basic arithmetic to our problems out here," he wrote Franny, "when the matter requires differential calculus. You'll recall, mathematics was never my strong suit."

He understood little about these tribes, but he knew one should not oversimplify by lumping them into the single category of "Indians." He

might accurately have regarded the hostiles in Florida as "Seminoles," but the situation in the West was more complex and contentious. "One cannot contrive a treaty with the Sioux," he wrote Major Mackall weeks later from the Utah Territory, "and assume it will be accepted by the Cheyenne and the Arapaho or the Utes and the Shoshone or even by any two tribes of the Sioux. One may not assume that a treaty signed by the Brulé Sioux will ipso facto be agreed upon by the Yankton or Miniconjou Sioux. Indeed, the matter is even more complex, as any one chieftain of this or that band might not feel bound by the decisions of another." Would he be heeded?

The morning after their arrival, Steptoe and his officers witnessed a singular event when an elderly Lakota "sub-chief," as Fleming identified him, appeared in the most outlandish attire he'd ever seen. He cantered onto the parade ground uninvited, but a sentry quickly sounded an alert. The chief rode a handsome buckskin and was accompanied by several score of his people—braves, squaws, and children. No one seemed surprised at the spectacle. Fleming informed the colonel that the chief came to pay his respects and from curiosity over the huge expedition.

The old man wore a sergeant's roundabout so small on him that he couldn't fasten it even if any of the dozen brass buttons were extant. On one shoulder he displayed a ragged captain's epaulet. He wore no trousers but was naked below the waist except for a faded red breechclout. He flourished neither lance nor tomahawk, but a dragoon's saber. The finishing touch was a stovepipe hat that might have graced the pate of a Boston gentleman. Into the band of the top hat he'd inserted an eagle feather.

The chief spoke no English, but he delivered an oration translated by an interpreter named Auguste, who was rumored to be often inebriated and rarely accurate. Fleming assured the chief that the "distinguished officer" and his column were merely passing through, intended no harm and would soon leave, and he offered trade blankets, knives, and other items from the fort's stores including barrels of flour and dry beans and a large bag of sugar, but no liquor. The sub-chief complained but was firmly rebuffed. His party departed after a few tense hours.

Steptoe wrote particulars of the event to Major Mackall, but he would not be able to post his report till he reached Salt Lake City. He could not guess how long it would take his account to reach San Francisco.

Nor could he vouch for the usefulness of his observations from Fort Laramie, for although he overheard some mumbled conversation among the children and women, he heard nothing spoken out loud by the braves, nor did he understand one word of Lakota. He saw no more than four or five old muskets among them, and though a few braves carried bows and quivers, they did not appear warlike, and no one, including the old sub-chief, was painted. Only the men, under half the assemblage, rode horses. The women and children walked. In short, it seemed a peaceable, even sociable, gathering, but something about the spectacle nagged at him. He mentioned these details in relating to Mackall what he described as "the

great incongruity of affairs in the West between the savages, as we too often call them, and the whites." But what to make of the curious exhibition Steptoe could not say.

When they left Fort Laramie, Lieutenant Fleming mustered his small garrison uniformed in their blue roundabouts and white trousers. How proud he was, Steptoe noted, and Grattan, too, sober now, his chin uplifted, a good-looking young officer after all, and how young they were, and distant from their homes in Pennsylvania and Vermont. And himself from Virginia, Ned mused, not for the first time. Best not to have mentioned the obstreperous Lieutenant Grattan. Let Hugh Fleming see to that—good test for a young officer. Surely.

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Colonel Steptoe learned about it when his expedition arrived in Zion at the end of August. How could these same Indians, perhaps led by that comically attired sub-chief, only a few weeks after his expedition left Fort Laramie, slaughter thirty of the very soldiers they had visited at the fort in peace and motivated by seemingly innocent curiosity? As with Gunnison's men, the bodies had been stripped and horribly mutilated.

He could not erase the image of a grinning young trooper he'd seen wink at him as his command marched west that morning. Or maybe he hadn't winked. Maybe the boy was simply blinking dust from his eyes. But the image remained indelible.

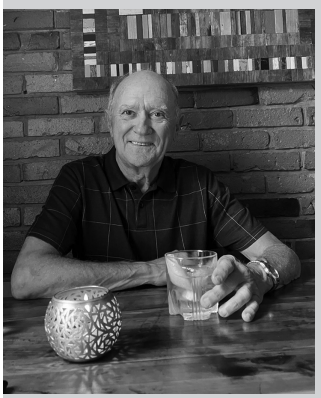
And could that bizarrely outfitted "sub-chief" have been the Brulé Chief Conquering Bear himself, whose death at the hands of a panicky soldier precipitated the massacre? Over a cow stolen from a Mormon farmer, it was reported, and faulty translations by that scoundrel Auguste were apparently involved. Massacred, young Lieutenant Grattan himself among the victims, along with Conquering Bear. Martyrs now, the Colonel supposed, except for the Sioux chief, as "savages," presumably, could not be martyrs. Poor Hugh Fleming would be blamed.

Later, Steptoe would learn that General Twiggs, commanding forces in the West out of St. Louis, invested such confidence in the Laramie Treaty contracted with representatives from major tribes, including the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Sioux, that he'd allowed the garrison to be undermanned. Conquering Bear himself had signed the treaty. Having served under Twiggs during the Mexican War, Ned had never held him in high regard, and given the disaster that happened a month after his expedition moved westward, he held the general responsible.

It struck Colonel Steptoe quite forcibly as he entered Utah Territory that he would turn thirty-nine within three months, still unmarried and with no clear prospects for the future other than to do his soldierly duty, quietly accept his modest pension, retire back home in Virginia, for the sake of his family make no fuss, and in due season die.

But if all went well in Utah and onward to the Pacific, he might be promoted to major, and with that acquire a much-needed increase in pay. If the West appealed to him, he might stay. Or he might return to Virginia and perhaps marry his pretty Cousin Franny and save her from a tedious life as a schoolmarm. Or from the notoriety of being an "authoress."

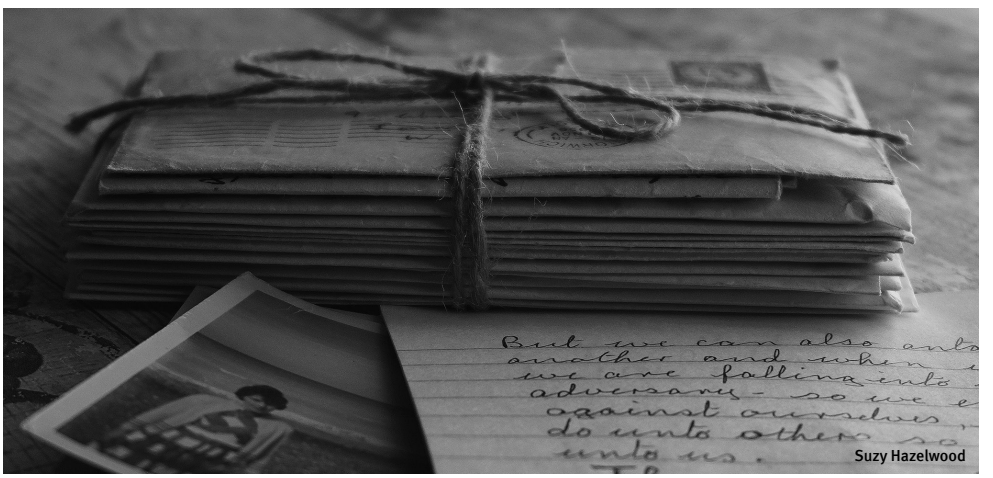
And what if he'd hurried a dispatch to Major Mackall regarding Lieutenant Grattan? Could any action have been undertaken in time to have averted that catastrophe? Those questions would haunt him the rest of his life. But Colonel Steptoe would soon have his hands full with the misconduct of a few obnoxious young second lieutenants of his own, notably Sly Morton, there in Zion.



Ron McFarland washed up on the shores of Idaho in 1970 and taught literature and creative writing at the University of Idaho for forty-seven years. He served two years in the mid-1980s as the state's first writer-in-residence. His biography of Colonel Edward J. Steptoe came out in 2016. A short story fabricated from that biography appeared in the fall 2022 issue of *Weber*. His most recent books are *Gary Soto: A Career in Poems and Prose* (2022) and his fifth full-length book of poems, *A Variable Sense of Things* (2023). "On the Road to Zion" is Ron's second foray into historical fiction.

Life Before Me

Terry Sanville



Suzy Hazelwood

Saturday, August 21, 2004—Diary of Janice Hopkins, San Luis Obispo, California—Hope Hidden In a Chest

While I was growing up, Mom told me only sketchy stories about her first husband, long dead before my father came on the scene. The few times she slipped up and said anything about Mark, her face would pale and she'd mope around the house. I'd find her in the kitchen pouring herself a glass of cooking sherry and weeping. I felt helpless back then . . . still do now when I think about it.

The way Mom told it, Mark MacMillian was her first love, although she'd never really said that, and I was too chicken to press the issue, even after I'd had my own romances. I always wonder how much our proclivity for love is inherited from our parents. My first love proved to be the most thrilling, but I'll never tell my husband that. Men can be so fragile.

During my junior high school years in the early '60s, Mom worked part-time for Bank of America. My father, a corporate attorney, represented Procter & Gamble in Oxnard, California. As a latchkey pre-teen, I had plenty of time to be nosey, to explore the dark recesses of our house and my parents' bedroom. Believe it or not, Mom had kept her hope chest. Who the heck has a hope chest anymore? Not today's Gen-Zers, that's for sure.

Mom's hope chest is made of cedar and used to rest against the back wall of her closet, hidden under seldom-used suitcases and old hatboxes. Inside the chest I found articles of clothing, what looked like a special dress styled for the 1940s, plates and kitchenware, crocheted end table covers, towels, bed linens, and a few pieces of jewelry that looked like they had been handed down by my great-grandmother Edith. God, was Mom THAT domestic?

I found the good stuff near the bottom. I'm going through it again today—once every forty-some years, and two months after Mom passed. Dad asked me to help sort through her things, and I figured he didn't need to read what was in her hope chest. An old-style accordion file holds a couple dozen letters bound by string along with faded snapshots with those artsy deckle edges. The letters look strange, some only a single page that folds in on itself and are marked as "V-Mail." A few others come in those old airmail envelopes with the red, white, and blue borders.

I had just turned twelve when I first read the letters, love notes from Mark to my mother, Ava. They took me back to the early '40s and the war years, the war that was the focus of my mother's generation, the last one America won. Mark was a genuine *Hoosier* from Indiana and was bowled over by Mom's beauty. I got to admit, she was a real looker in 1942, even when decked out in those high-necked blouses and skirts that came two-inches below the knee. What did they used to say—she's a real "bombshell"—good term to use during a war.

And Mark was no slouch: a smallish man with fine features, but fit-looking in his Army Air Corps uniform, the garrison cap tilted at a rakish angle and a broad grin splitting his face. They were newlyweds, married while Mark was stationed at the Smoky Hills Army Airfield near Salina, Kansas. He trained to be a ball turret gunner in a B-17 bomber. Then he got shipped out to Florida, then North Africa, and Mom moved back to Ventura, California, and started collecting his letters.

Reading them, it's clear that good ole Mark was as horny as a bull elk during rutting season. He missed both the comfort and excitement of his bride's embrace. He was sweet about it and never included details about their carnal adventures. But then the letters from overseas were read and censored by women hired by the military. So he probably felt too embarrassed to share those details with anyone.

I remember this line from one of his letters:

> *I've loved you and married you because you are so different from most of the girls I know.*

I had to laugh at that; he sounded like such a player. But I always knew that somehow my mom was different, and even love-struck Mark saw that. Ava had this self-reliant independent streak that he seemed to recognize and respect. He was maybe even a little afraid of it. And he desperately sought her approval for his behavior while waiting to be shipped

overseas with his flight crew. A funny one from Florida I've photocopied and pasted below:

> *We went swimming yesterday and Lenny had a '41 Plymouth he rented and had a girl when he met us and wanted Joe and I to go out with her girlfriends, but we wouldn't. Lenny said, "Mark, I didn't think marriage would make you this way, I don't have anyone to run around with now," and I said "It's simple because I love my wife and know she wouldn't step out on me." Joe and I drank two bottles of beer apiece and it tasted pretty good as it's so hot here in Florida. That's okay, isn't it honey?*

By today's standards, Mark sounds like one whipped dude. But we all know what we write in letters and even in diaries is as filtered as the words we speak. Truth can be so elusive . . . and it changes over time. But Mark's love for my mom comes through over and over, maybe the only thing he could honestly express in his censored letters. And it got more intense when he shipped out to North Africa.

Also stashed in the accordion file is Mark's journal. The Army must have sent it to Mom with a lot of paperwork, letters from other airmen, and an old Elgin Deluxe watch with a gold elastic wristband. The thing still runs but I leave it in the file, letting it keep time for awhile, for back then when things seemed so much simpler—but weren't.

Reading all the file materials almost completes something. As I'm sitting here I feel the weight of the unknowing and my mind begins to fill the gaps in the story of Mark and Ava.

Sunday, May 23, 1943—Journal of S/Sgt Mark MacMillian, near West Palm Beach, Florida—Heat and Secrets

You'd think I'd be used to heat. After all, Indiana summers ain't exactly chilly. But Florida? It's so sticky hot here that when we're not training us guys lie around in these damn tents, naked, trying to catch a few winks. I think maybe they're trying to toughen us up for Africa. The scuttlebutt is that our squadron and a few others are headed south to Brazil, then across the pond to some field in Liberia, then on to North Africa, probably Algeria.

Being stationed near the Mediterranean means we'll be bombing the living hell out of Italy. The story is that half the planes don't make it back. I'll never tell Ava that and the thought of buying it in the sky scares me . . . a lot. I can't possibly leave her alone.

She's probably going to have a baby because she's late. But I haven't gotten any letters from her in weeks. I'm hoping for a boy, but it'll probably be a girl. My mother always says, "Whatever you hope for you'll probably get the opposite." She wants girls. I suppose Ava does too. We'll just have to let the Good Lord decide. He'll decide a lot of things.

But it would be nice to leave all of this heat behind and move to California after the Army. Never been there but Ava tells me that in Ventura,

Pacific breezes keep the town cool and on clear days you can see across the ocean to the Channel Islands. What an adventure, for a hayseed like me to live by the sea. Ava has shown me snapshots of her family's house. I dream about living in some place like that, watching the fishing boats on the water sailing free and easy, watching my son grow up, playing catch with him, both of us learning to swim, watching him look after his little sister (a boy and a girl would be nice), buying a new car when they start making them again.

It's these dreams of being with Ava and feeling her next to me, touching her, loving her, and having a family that keep me going. I've got to think of something other than the war and being strapped into the B-17's cramped ball turret, blazing away with my 50-calibers. They always pick the small guys for that job. There's not even enough room in there to stow a proper parachute. And if the plane has a rough landing or crashes, I'll be the first to get squashed. Lovely thought. Yet another thing I can't tell Ava.

But what I worry about even more is the jodies back there in California sidling up to Ava. Or those wolves that were writing to her. She needs to tell them about our marriage so they know they don't have a chance. She'd better tell them. I don't think I could handle losing her to some creep while I'm stuck in the Army. I'd rather go down in flames. God, I miss her.

Thursday, July 8, 1943—Journal of S/Sgt Mark MacMillian, Saint-Donat Airfield, Algeria—Twenty to Go

These first weeks here have blasted by so fast. I've hardly had time to write anything down. We're living here in baggy tents in the hot North African sun and wind. We don't have cots or anything and the ground is hard on my back that I hurt when I fell out of Uncle Freddy's barn loft. Yet the Army still stuffed me into the most cramped position on a B-17. Nice going, guys.

Fortunately, the chow here is really good and the nights are cool, the ground almost bearable to sleep on. We eat, sleep, write V-mail letters, and fly missions. Sometimes at night we get to watch movies. Last night we watched Abbot & Costello in *Pardon My Sarong*, one of their new pictures. We're mighty glad to get movies, any movies. It takes our minds away from this place and the combat mission the following day.

But everybody has to pull KP—can you believe it, me a Staff Sergeant having to do grunt work. I've had it for two days and I'm exhausted.

They say each crew must complete twenty-five missions over targets before we can go home . . . unless they raise the damn limit. I've been here only a short time and already good ole *Plane Jane* has flown five missions; on one of them we bombed the living hell out of Naples harbor. But the flack over southern Italy was incredible. Parts of *Plane Jane* have more holes than metal. I'm afraid the thing will break up if our pilot, Lt. Farner, tries any fancy maneuvers. But we keep flying missions.

At night as I'm drifting off to sleep I think about life with Ava and having a family. Sometimes I can't tell whether it's a dream or me just lying there awake. But whether dream or fantasy, it's all about living after the war. When I get out of the Army, Ava and I will hole up where it's nice and quiet. I'll never want to travel much; it's all out of my system now, which is a good thing. We'll have us a cottage with a little garden and of course flowers and lots of yard space for the kids to play in.

When I get home I'll get our boy some toys. He might be a little young to use them, but it won't be long before he'll be a big fellow. I'll bet he'll make a big man and, oh yes, he must have a dog. I'm thinking it should be a nice big pup, maybe a Golden Retriever; they're friendly and will get along with Ava's cats. Won't it be something when I can take our boy on camping and fishing trips? I'll make an outdoorsman of him. I hope I get letters from Ava soon.

Thursday, July 15, 1943—Journal of S/Sgt Mark MacMillian, Saint-Donat Airfield, Algeria—Once More Unto the Breach

Reveille always comes too quickly. Dress, chow, briefing, scramble aboard *Plane Jane*, check equipment, and fly off across the desert into a cloudless sky with the blue sea beyond. But the sky won't stay clear for long. It'll be full of flack before we're barely over Italy.

Tonight I finally decided what I'd like to name our child. Of course Ava and I will need to talk and agree. But if it's a boy, Dennis Ray sounds great to me. And if it's a girl, Rebecca is a fine name. I can almost see a curly-headed little Becky bounding around our front yard, playing with Ava's cats, or at least trying to catch them. Most of the crew agrees it'll be a girl, but what do they know! I'm still hoping for a boy. But either one will be great, with all its fingers and toes and no memory of . . . of any of this.

Everybody's working hard over here trying to get this over with. We've flown eleven missions. We're almost halfway home.

Saturday, August 21, 2004—Diary of Janice Hopkins, San Luis Obispo, CA—Hope Hidden In a Chest (Continued)

Reading Mark's last journal entries and letters made me cry. He tried so hard to stay positive, to look toward the future, to create a mental heaven on earth with Ava, as fanciful as it might have been. But alas, their story would end, well almost. Six months after his death, my half-sister Rebecca was born and Mom had a reminder of Mark for the rest of her life. But then she married my dad and I came along in '49. That's a whole other story.

I almost packed up the accordion file and put away Mom's hope chest. But I couldn't stop. It's as if my mind needed closure once again, the same as it did the first time I read this stuff when I was twelve.

Ever since Mom's death, I've been thinking over what I know of her life. What a turbulent time she and Mark had at their short but exciting beginning, then having their lives and love torn apart by war. How brave Mom was to open her heart and find love again, to follow a different dream, one that included me. But it's that phantom life before me that haunts me, makes me think of how different things might have turned out if Mark had survived—the road not taken, but not by anyone's choice.

In addition to Mark's journal the file holds a couple letters, one written by the pilot of a B-17 that was flying next to the *Plane Jane* when it was shot down. This and another letter are really hard to read because they paint an ugly image of how Mark and most of the crew died. I've photo-copied and pasted parts of these letters below:

Letter written by pilot Lt. Robert W. Green describing his friendship with pilot Lt. Farner and the *Plane Jane*'s final mission on July 16, 1943.

> *To begin with I would like to say that Farner was the best friend I ever had in the Army. We started out in pre-flight together at Kelly Field, Texas and were at every field thereafter except one. When we came overseas to Algeria I took fever and had to go to the hospital for two weeks.*
>
> *During this time Farner was assigned and requested that I be sent to the same outfit, which I was. When I was assigned, Farner had six missions to his credit. On his eleventh mission, the Plane Jane was assigned to fly right wing in the lead element. This was on July 16 and we were targeting Messina docks. Before we reached the target the left wing man in the second element pulled out with a bad engine and Farner pulled up in his place.*
>
> *When we reached the target we started on the run from north to south. There were a couple-three groups ahead of us so by the time we got there the enemy's anti-aircraft batteries had really warmed up. It was the worst anti-aircraft fire I had ever seen before or have ever seen since. The sky was full of lead. I felt my ship get hit three times before we dropped the bombs, but it continued to fly good so we kept on.*
>
> *Just as the bombs started away I heard the tail gunner call that our ship was on fire, so I turned controls over to my co-pilot and started to look around. My ship wasn't on fire but I could see that Farner was in trouble. The Plane Jane limped badly and trailed smoke. While I watched, the ship peeled off and started down in a slow spin. I saw three chutes. The plane then went out of my sight so I called the tail gunner and told him to watch it on down. He called saying he saw another chute, then the plane exploded. When the ship hit, it exploded again. It went down on the Italian side of the Messina Straits near the town of St. Giovanni. That was all we knew for a while.*
>
> *Later the Allies captured all of this territory. When they invaded across the straits they captured a hospital. Farner's engineer, Sgt. Genoma was one of the patients, also Farner's tail gunner, Sgt. Armond. Sgt. Genoma was almost well and was returned to the Squadron, but Armond was taken to an allied hospital.*

Another account by Sgt. Genoma of the destruction of the *Plane Jane* on July 16, 1943.

> *I was up in my top turret looking for fighters. I kept noticing smoke but thought it was from the exploding anti-aircraft shells. Finally the smoke got so bad that I couldn't see. I could hear MacMillian blasting away from his ball turret. I climbed down out of my station and opened the door to the bomb bay. A big sheet of flame hit me in the face. I told Lt. Farner that the bomb bay was on fire and closed the door. Farner gave orders for the crew to bail out. The ship went out of control.*
>
> *I started to go out through the nose but it was also on fire. I crawled back to the bomb bay and tried to open the bomb bay doors but the handle had burned off. I went back to get Farner to open them with his lever. Farner and the co-pilot were trying to get out of the window. They were stuck and couldn't get back in. So I decided to try and run to the bomb bay. I saw nothing of MacMillian. He was probably trapped in that damn ball turret.*
>
> *I found a shell hole in the top of the bomb bay and started through it. When I was about half out, the ship exploded and blew me the rest of the way. I saw two other chutes besides my own.*
>
> *I was captured by the Italians and spent time in their hospital along with tail gunner Armond, who was in bad shape, and waist gunner Lucas. The Italians said they found six bodies with the wreckage. But I wasn't sure they told the truth.*

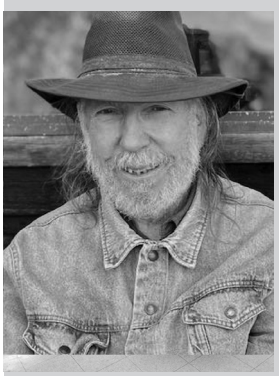
How can anyone live through such tragedy and not be scarred for life? I suppose many of those airmen were. And the violence these letters portray, in matter-of-fact terms, seems so brutal . . . a killing at arms' distance, as if not seeing one's assailant or victim makes it more palatable, something less than horrific. What bullshit! The thought of falling from the sky and on fire is the stuff of nightmares. It's what Icarus must have felt when he flew too close to the sun.

Sunday, August 22, 2004, Diary of Janice Hopkins, San Luis Obispo, CA—Sunday Dinner

After reading through all of that stuff in Mom's hope chest, I was eager to talk with Rebecca. The Great War and what life must have been like during those times made me want to touch base with her, to see if she could fill in more of the holes in Mark and Ava's story.

I invited Rebecca to dinner, and we went over all the details of Mark's letters and his journal. But I knew as much about her father as she did. The only thing she had that Mom had given her was a framed portrait of Mark, done by a Florida photographer before Mark shipped out to Africa. The portrait is hand-tinted to show his blue-gray eyes, tanned skin, and brassy blond hair. Yeah he was a player all right. Both Rebecca and I laughed at that.

But then we too were both suckers, just like Mom, for men in uniform. I married Charles, a lieutenant in our local fire department, while Rebecca married a West-Point-schooled army lieutenant who was killed in the jungles of Vietnam. He left Becky with a daughter, who now has her own daughters. The pattern repeats itself. But Mark and Ava started it all. I should write a story about it sometime.



Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California, with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His short stories have been published more than 575 times in journals, magazines, and anthologies including *The American Writers Review*, *The Bryant Literary Review*, and *Shenandoah*. He was nominated four times for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in Best of the Net anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

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.

STATE PARKS



Kodachrome Basin State Park, Cannonville, UT, 2024. Photo credit: Zoshua Colah on Unsplash

A recent article in *The New York Times* lauded state parks as good alternatives to the National Parks. Cuts to the National Park Service suggest that visitors at many of the most popular destinations may face long waits, large crowds, and unexpected closures.

. . . [S]tate parks, which are run and funded separately from national parks, offer comparable landscapes, wildlife and experiences – often with fewer crowds and lower fees.

There are more than 9,800 state parks, forests, preserves and other sites, said Paul McCormack, the president of the National Association of State Park Directors. In 2022, state-run parks collectively welcomed 877 million visitors, Mr. McCormack said, compared with 332 million at the 433 N.P.S. sites.

. . . And many of them, it turns out, are not far from national parks, making them alternative destinations for an outdoorsy summer vacation. Here are five state parks within a three-hour drive of their national park doppelgängers.

Source: Prevost, Ruffin. "5 State Parks That Feel Like National Parks." *The New York Times*, 21 May 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/21/travel/state-parks-visit-colorado-nc-florida.html. Accessed 28 May 2025.

Three of the five are in the West: State Forest, Colorado; Snow Canyon, Utah, and Hot Springs, Wyoming.

STATE FOREST STATE PARK

This park is in Walden, Colorado, about two hours from Rocky Mountain National Park. According to its website:

In 1965, a tour of the area with legislators, stakeholders and Colorado Game, Fish and Parks representatives started the effort to create a new state park on the Colorado State Forest. In 1972, a lease was signed with the State Land Board to create State Forest State Park.

Known as the Moose-viewing capital of Colorado, the park opened the Moose Visitor Center in 1997. Today, State Forest State Park hosts well over 330,000 visitors a year.



North Diamond Peak, State Forest State Park, Colorado, 2017. Photo credit: Jeffrey Beall

"State Forest State Park." *Colorado Parks and Wildlife,* https://cpw.state.co.us/state-parks/state-forest-state-park.

SNOW CANYON STATE PARK

Snow Canyon State Park is located just northwest of St. George, Utah, about forty-five minutes from Zion National Park. According to its website:



Snow Canyon State Park, 2021. Photo credit: Jorge Salazar on Unsplash

Created in 1959, Snow Canyon has a long history of human use. Artifacts reveal the presence of people in Snow Canyon by 500 B.C. It is likely that humans have used this canyon for more than 10,000 years, from Paleoindian mammoth hunters to 19th-century settlers. Modern-day the canyon has been the site of Hollywood films such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, The Electric Horseman, and Jeremiah Johnson. Originally called Dixie State Park, it was later renamed for Lorenzo and Erastus Snow, prominent pioneering Utah leaders.

"Snow Canyon State Park." *Utah State Parks,* https://stateparks.utah.gov/parks/snow-canyon/.

HOT SPRINGS STATE PARK

Hot Springs State Park is less than 150 miles southeast of Yellowstone. It encompasses part of the town of Thermopolis, Wyoming. According to its website:

The Hot Springs State Park bison herd is the central herd for the Wyoming State Parks. During the late fall and winter months, the park bison are fed a daily supplement to insure good health. This feeding usually occurs at 8:30 a.m., giving the off-season visitor the unique opportunity to view the "Monarch of the Plains," up close.

"Hot Springs State Park." *Wyoming State Parks*, https://wyoparks.wyo.gov/index.php/about-hot-springs.

According to Leo Heit writing for *Wyoming*:

Native American tribes considered these springs sacred ground long before European settlers arrived. John Colter discovered them in 1807-1808 during his winter exploration of the region.



The travertine terraces of Hot Springs State Park in Thermopolis, Wyoming, along the Bighorn River. Photo credit: Acroterion, Wikimedia Commons, 2018

By the late 1800s, settlers had begun developing the area into a health resort. The site became Wyoming's first state park in 1897, marking the beginning of its public stewardship.

Before becoming a state park, the area was known as "Bah-gue-wana" or "smoking waters" by local Native American tribes. The town of Thermopolis itself got its name from the Greek words "thermo" (hot) and "polis" (city). . . .

The park exists thanks to a remarkable agreement. In 1896, Chief Washakie and the Eastern Shoshone tribe sold the land with one important condition: the springs must remain free and accessible to the public forever.

The treaty specified that "when this land ceases to be used as a public park, it reverts to the tribe." This forward-thinking provision has ensured that for over 125 years, anyone can experience the healing waters regardless of financial means.

Source: Heit, Leo. "Thanks to the Shoshone Tribe, Bathing In These Ancient Hot Springs Is Free to the World Forever." *WhenInYourState! Wyoming*, 1 April 2025, https://wheninyourstate.com/wyoming /thanks-to-the-shoshone-tribe-bathing-in-these-ancient-hot-springs-is-free-to-the-world-forever/.

NEWEST UTAH STATE PARK

The Utahraptor State Park is located about fifteen miles northwest of Moab. Within the park's 6,500 acres is one of North America's largest dinosaur bone beds. During the 1930s, it was the site of the Dalton Wells Civilian Conservation Corps camp. For a time during World War II, the abandoned camp was used as an internment camp for Japanese American citizens. The site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. According to a recent report for KSL:

The Dalton Wells bone bed will soon become a major feature of the new Utahraptor State Park. The finishing touches are being made to the park, which sits northwest of Moab.



Utah Raptor State Park. Photo credit: Utah State Parks, https://stateparks.utah.gov/2022/05/06/new-camping-fees-coming-to-utahraptor-state-park/

The Utahraptor dinosaur and the armored Gastonia dinosaur were unearthed in the bone bed and State Paleontologist James Kirkland said there may be many more discoveries there. . . .

The state park designation has been thirty years in the making, Kirkland said. The Utah Legislature created the park in 2021.

Kirkland believes the Utahraptor name will bring people to the park and he hopes it will one day become as well known as the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles.

During World War II, Japanese Americans were interned in the area. Letters from those internees were found that detail how they also looked for dinosaur bones.

"The state park did dig up letters from the Japanese internees talking about climbing up the hill to look for dinosaur bones."

Source: Kikuchi, Tammy, "Utahraptor State Park Will Feature a Big Dinosaur Bone Bed."*KSLNewsRadio*, 11 March 2025, https://kslnewsradio.com/utah/utahraptor-state-park/2191555/.

EDITORIAL MATTER

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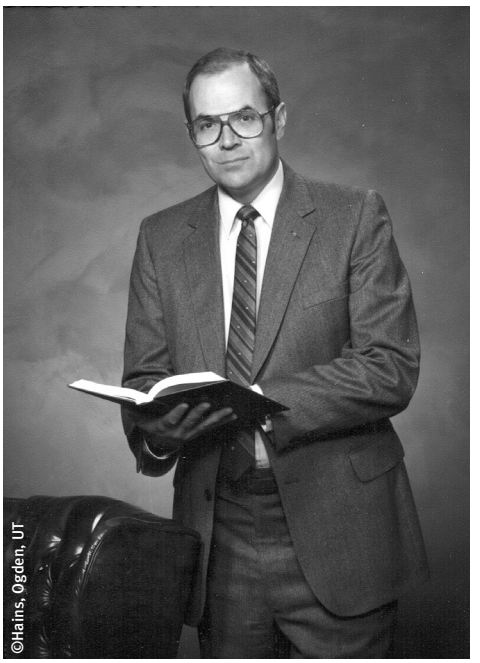
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