



Notes on the Galvanization

Daniel Uncapher
duncaphe@nd.edu

It's fair to say that I'm feeling pretty galvanized since the election.

It doesn't feel like an adequate response, of course. It doesn't feel like much of anything at all. Why aren't we still in the streets? Just shut the whole thing down. I've discovered the power of the body and voice for myself. It's the simplest thing in the world to exercise your power: you just show up. That's what my grandmother used to say as a member of the Board of Selectmen in Eliot, Maine: *Eliot is run by those who show up*. She made it part of the Eliot vernacular—appearing everywhere from tote bags to her obituariesⁱ.

That's not to say I have a family history of grassroots political action. My uncle picketed the Iraq war and my father joined him once, and he still references that solitary experience at least once a year. It sounded so impressive, once, until the moment suddenly arrived where nothing seems important except for the simple personal imperative of *showing up*, and now it's difficult to understand why my father didn't keep going; putting his body in the street with other bodies, speaking with his voice, raising the body count for the headline estimates whether the galvanizer wants to believe them or not. How can you stand up only once and then sit down forever?

It doesn't take that many people to shut down an airport, I don't think; it sounds like a brilliant idea to me. I'd shut down a highway too, of course. Of course I'd strike, I'd punch a fascist any day of the week. It's hard to have much sympathy now for the skeptic,ⁱⁱ for the white moderateⁱⁱⁱ. Not that I have anything against white people here; the March in Chicago was white^{iv}, the University of Notre Dame is white, I'm irredeemably white. But it was different in South Bend. The mayor showed up. He's ostensibly a progressive man, a true anomaly in Pence's Indiana: an openly-gay^v Rhodes scholar and veteran of Afghanistan re-elected with over 80% of the vote. He's running for DNC chair^{vi} but I don't know if he'll get it, despite being the only candidate to have joined the Women's March^{vii}; but I didn't know if Brexit would happen^{viii}, or that America would elect a galvanizer, so I must consider the possibility that I don't know anything whatsoever anymore.

Yet I refuse to concede the one, honest fact on the ground: our bodies and our voices in the streets^{ix}, airports^x, squares^{xi} and beaches^{xii} of our country. It's so stupidly easy that it must keep going, a Woman's March every weekend—why not? Occupy (how much work that word does!) the country, shut the whole thing down; it belongs to us, not to him. Anyone can take the country back; even I, handicapped from my spine to my ankle from a car accident almost a decade ago, can sustain the necessary action to resist. Yet I have able-bodied friends who still don't bother to stand up; that's one thing I can't understand. Nor can I understand how he won

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college-educated whites by four points^{xiii}. That's one demographic I thought I knew; of course, I know now I know nothing. My intelligence was compromised all the way down.

Part of me wants to take the fight back home to Mississippi, where storied arts programs are under constant threat^{xiv}, education is consistently underfunded^{xv} and legalized discrimination against gender and sexual minorities is aggressively pursued^{xvi} by a governor whose own son has met homophobia directly.^{xvii} That's something I can empathize with, and why the hypocrisy is so egregious. Not that I'd ever use someone's sexuality against them—but then again, I'm not the one making sexuality a political issue in the first place.

So what does galvanization look like here from the Rust Belt, then? At the very least I must occupy physical space in my world. It's the simplest thing imaginable and it works. I am present; I persist; I resist. It's no exaggeration to say that I'd give up my life before I stepped down from whatever new duty is speaking out to me now. I'm too ideological to live with myself in a world where I opted out of a resistance against fascism in my own time^{xviii}. I know people who are leaving the country. Where can they go? What else is there to do, at the most experiential level? The list is short: chairs, movies, beds, shoes, games, salt and starch and sugar; what is all that? There's not much to look forward to if you've abandoned the first principle, the Archimedean point, of a free and open social contract—and all its attendant obligations, inconvenient though they are.

I've read stories like this before; history is full of them. What if the time really has come again? The time for flying to Spain and becoming a partisan,^{xix} for moving to Paris and joining the French Resistance^{xx}, for trekking through Finland and interviewing Trotsky,^{xxi} for venturing blindly into Wadi Rum^{xxii}, for joining the anti-Soviet underground press,^{xxiii} for a year or two of house arrest in Semipalatinsk?^{xxiv} What moment in time galvanized Gertrude Bell to write "Self-Determination in Mesopotamia?"^{xxv} Something changed for them, whether or not they had any anticipation of being part of change, and something has changed for us. The moral imperative has shown its face and the only intellectual option now is to embrace it, whatever that entails, or to pretend not to have seen it and continue to further the interests of Ur-Fascism^{xxvi}.

Protesting as an act of presence is easy; what seems much more difficult is reaching people with words, especially when the very basis of language and truth is being deliberately undermined;^{xxvii} as it stands now the lions are roaring^{xxviii}. As a member of a creative writing program this problem is a flash point for the limits of language and logic. Words are too finite and shifty to contain the conflagration we're facing today, and it's not clear that a combination of syllables exists that could appropriately communicate the gravity of the situation to someone who has hitherto failed to appreciate it. How many people must fear for their lives before those who remain unmoved, ungalvanized, can be galvanized into movement? As a white man, my fear is on behalf of all women^{xxix} and people of color^{xxx}; as a handicapped bisexual, my fear is on behalf of my own well-being^{xxxi}; and as an American, my fear is strictly constitutional^{xxxii}.

But what more do words have to do with it? Rhetoric is not to be trusted^{xxxiii}. Slippery, promiscuous and exhaustingly permeable, they're like combat with weaponized foam and sponge. One response is to become vocally political on social media. I believe in this response

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entirely, but even within a creative writing program I know people who belittle the practice, saying things (on Facebook, of course) like *the revolution won't happen on Facebook, comrades*. Social media is a complicated machine^{xxxiv}, but to categorically dismiss real voices like that, composed and published in a public forum, is something I can't understand it. And then the anarchist excused himself from the protest because he had too much homework! Well, I still love him, and besides—the organizers cancelled the demonstration.

Not that I understand any part of the process yet. But I can at least see why my father talks about the one time he did anything at all, and I love him all the more for it. What I need now is for him to join me in the street. I told him to march on Jackson, Mississippi^{xxxv}. He has his own reasons to be personally engaged in all this. He'd never do it, of course. He has gout in his ankles, and a blood clot in his leg. Frankly he's a mess, and if I found out he intended on marching I'd probably expend every effort in preventing him from doing so, talking him down from the ledge as it were. Besides, my father voted for the galvanizer. That's no secret. Maybe he abstained, I don't know; in this election there was no difference. How do you engage with someone like that? That is a question that millions of us, sons and daughters, have had to face. How do you re-establish a framework of mutual understanding between two ostensibly loving, intelligent people, one of which endorses the systematic dismantling of your personal rights^{xxxvi}? At least my father respects me enough not to speak well of the galvanizer in my presence. It's harder to reconcile life with the rest of the Mississippians, the people I have loved and respected above all else who have, in some hitherto inconceivable abandonment of all standards of love and respect, cast their lot with the white nationalists^{xxxvii} and accelerationists^{xxxviii} of the so-called alt-right^{xxxix}.

But the problem with Mississippi is the problem with America^{xl}, and it's nothing if not a call to action. As a writer, I believe that writing is re-writing; as a demonstrator, I now feel that demonstrating is re-demonstrating. We must continue to resist until resistance is no longer necessary. And insofar as the problems with America are the problems with the Women's March, we must remain more attentive to our own shortcomings than we've proven willing so far^{xli}. In our push for colorblindness we disrespected the singular, personal, and broadly institutional problems facing women of color.^{xlii} And while the Women's March was the ultimate expression of peaceful mobilization, we shouldn't categorically dismiss the possibility of non-peaceful protest^{xliii}, especially when peaceful engagement is a concept controlled by the system responsible for enforcing it^{xliv}. We shouldn't waste time disparaging other methods—shutting down highways, labor strikes, blocking bridges—as though we've already forgotten Selma^{xlv}. Our disparagement needs to be focused to the fullest extent on the galvanizer now; the Women's March is Black Lives Matter^{xlvi} is Standing Rock^{xlvii} is Badlands National Park Twitter^{xlviii} is Black Bloc^{xlix} is Interstate 80 outside of Iowa City^l, and none of us are with the president. And, as the three or four million^{li} of us demonstrated with perfect, beautiful, spontaneous clarity on January 21, we *are* the majority.^{lii}

I just wish my father would join us again.

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