



Writing Grabs Back: Creativity, Resistance and Activism in the Trump Era

Deborah Cohan, University of South Carolina-Beaufort, debcohan@comcast.net

As this special journal issue urgently grapples with the global impact of the election of Donald Trump, I try in this article to demonstrate, through using a sociological and feminist imagination, both the worldwide impact and the personal and social-psychological impact. As daily measures have been taken to erode institutions, laws, policies and values I cherish (like education, the arts, science, healthcare, ending hunger and violence against women, etc.), here I explore issues of human agency and how individuals can push back against these destructive social forces and draw on creative processes like writing, art, and meditative practices to agitate for change. Drawing on a series of articles I have written since August 2016 about the election, I quote from these and use them as a backdrop to discuss resistance and activism.

My partner, Mike, who adds much levity and laughter to all matters large and small, likes to joke that I should be thankful for the election of Donald Trump for the writing material it has given me. He's right. Last summer, I took to writing about my observations of the gendered dynamics at play. "If Hillary Clinton were a man with the political prowess she possesses, he would be seen as not just qualified but more likely overqualified."

<http://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/Gender-matters-in-the-presidential-election-9111255.php>) And within a day of the election, I found myself back

Submitted on 1st March, 2017

1

Accepted 30th March, 2017

Published under CC-BY 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



to writing, to try to make sense of this new world order, unable to simply “get over it” because “...*the prevailing ‘carry on’/‘move on’/ ‘get beyond’ rhetoric and the unification/reconciliation narrative is not helpful.*”

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/social-lights/201611/when-you-just-cant-get-over-it>)

On the Saturday morning of the women's marches across the globe, Mike asked me if I wanted to head to one of the nearby towns to protest. I turned down the offer and said I preferred to write. The truth is, I get claustrophobic and hate crowds and especially more so now living in the conservative and gun-happy state of South Carolina. I had gone to hear Bill Clinton speak in the fall when he was campaigning for Hillary, and a man had to be removed from the crowd when he became abusive and disruptive. I didn't want to deal with more of that. And, the truth is, I have been too upset and too afraid. “*I wonder if Trump Slump will wind up as an official disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual...I have never felt so scared and outraged and sad about the world on such a global scale and feel this within my body.*”

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/social-lights/201701/resisting-the-trump-slump>)



In college and graduate school, I loved participating in marches and protests, especially for promoting reproductive rights and ending violence against women. I think I also felt freer then and more invincible. Seeing the pictures all over social media of the marches deeply moved me though---particularly the shots of the women in the cancer ward and the fifteen people marching in a small village in Nova Scotia. I felt kinship with, and tremendous gratitude for, all the women, men and children who marched. Students, colleagues and friends asked me how the march was, naturally expecting that I would have gone.

Instead, I have felt a tug to go inward, to harness my own creative resources, strength and well being, and to meditate on a different world from within. For me, this sort of meditation involves getting quiet and writing. In his poem, “Keeping Quiet” Pablo Neruda writes:

*“If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.”*

Submitted on 1st March, 2017

Accepted 30th March, 2017

Published under CC-BY 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



We know that the process of writing forges a pathway to clearer thinking and especially when we intentionally use it for that purpose of analytical reflection and connection. Writing, like all art forms really, is about seeing with fresh eyes, and I knew that what I needed more than signs and hats and marches, however liberating those would feel, was breathing room, space, solitude, new angles of seeing the world, and the chance to make meaning out of a dangerous political time in which sacred and life sustaining elements are being rendered meaningless on a daily basis by Trump, his cronies, and his supporters.

As a feminist writer, professor and activist, my entire life's work has been devoted to everything Trump wants to strip away, annihilate, colonize, and destroy. *“With an outgoing president and vice-president, both of whom have shown themselves to be pro-feminist and with an incoming president who has demonstrated misogyny on steroids, it's crucial, maybe now more than ever, to consider what feminism has offered all of our lives and our planet.”* (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/social-lights/201701/we-can-thank-feminism>)

Submitted on 1st March, 2017

Accepted 30th March, 2017

Published under CC-BY 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



As a survivor of violence and attempted assault, my gut instinct has been to be protective of these core beliefs and values so my very existence would feel less violated and obliterated. *“My core values? I believe in the arts. I believe in the power of nature. I believe in ending violence against women. I believe in Mother Earth and the planet. I believe in the power of feminism and the joy that feminism has brought to my life and so many others' lives—whether they want to call themselves feminists or not. I believe in climate change. I believe in evolution. I believe in freedom of the press. I believe in the media as a cornerstone of our democracy. I believe in women owning and controlling their own bodies ... no exceptions, not some of the time, ALL of the time. I believe in the power of ideas and the pursuit of real knowledge. I believe in cultural exchange. I believe in public education, both as a student who attended public schools and a professor in them. I believe in the complete separation of church and state. I believe in ending every form of oppression that harms and reduces the humanity in all of us both when we are on the side of the oppressor and the side of the oppressed—and yes, even when oppressing others, the oppressor is not fully human. I believe in everything that Trump does not.”*

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/social-lights/201701/resisting-the-trump-slump>)



In a recent article in *The Nation*, Toni Morrison validates this instinct I have had, to retreat to, and find solace in, my art, my writing: “This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal. I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like art.”

[\(https://www.thenation.com/article/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear/\)](https://www.thenation.com/article/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear/)

I came across Morrison’s essay well after I had written the articles quoted and cited here, exposing my outrage with the election of Donald Trump. I wish I had found it earlier. I might have felt less crazy and less alone in those frightful, despairing and hopeless hours writing and thinking through what is likely the biggest political catastrophe and scandal of my lifetime. “*With Trump, like with pornography, any gains are fleeting and fragile, momentary and miniscule, short-lived and seductive. But, can we sustain the human losses from each? Probably not. Not by a long shot. Some years ago, I attended a lecture given by Robert Jensen in which he said, ‘Pornography is what the end of the world looks like.’ With each new cabinet pick, with each raging, cruel, infantile tweet, and with the overwhelming violence that has emerged by people emboldened by Trump’s message,*

Submitted on 1st March, 2017

6

Accepted 30th March, 2017

Published under CC-BY 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



critics of Trump are rightfully worried about the very same thing.”

<https://drylandlit.org/2017/01/12/the-pornography-of-trump-by-deborah-cohan/>

The writer, Anne Lamott says that “Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavor, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives...” (p. 19) The late actress, Carrie Fisher echoes Morrison and was known for saying, “Take your broken heart and make it into art.” This idea of the light and wholeness of creativity vanquishing elements of darkness and brokenness is not new but it is certainly life affirming. Lamott writes about the necessity of telling the truth and exposing the unexposed, specifically in writing personal stories and memoir. We can use this line of thinking even when we transcend personal experiences and apply it to writing in intensely dark and difficult times as a constructive way to grapple with the larger social and political landscape. *“The resistance some may show is the resistance to trauma, to terror, to silence, and to awareness for the potential of much more trauma, terror and silence. It is resistance borne of self-preservation. In fact, the resistance that is being cultivated now may very well be needed in the years to come. It is resistance that could save our lives.”*

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/social-lights/201611/when-you-just-cant-get-over-it>

Submitted on 1st March, 2017

Accepted 30th March, 2017

Published under CC-BY 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Lamott urges us: “Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth. We don’t have much truth to express unless we have gone into those rooms and closets and woods and abysses that we were told not to go in to. When we have gone in and looked around for a long while, just breathing and finally taking it in---then we will be able to speak in our own voice and to stay in the present moment. And that moment is home.” (p.201)

Writing, then, can be a pathway and practice of freedom and part of the journey toward wholeness and home, both on personal and collective levels. By weaving together a tapestry of words that honors my own innermost voice on issues most near and dear to me, I can then share these perspectives as the basis for a dialogue, emerging and unfolding across time and space. At no time in history could this be more vital and critical than when issues of free speech and the freedom of the press are at peril. It is through the power of writing and active, engaged listening from which social justice activism is borne and from which we can cultivate deep connections---back to our core, to other people, and to a sense of identity and home deep in our bones and, it is with that, that I hope these pieces speak to readers.



References:

Lamott, Anne. 1994. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and On Life*. Anchor Books: New York.

Morrison, Toni. March 23, 2015. "No Place for Self Pity, No Room for Fear," <https://www.thenation.com/article/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear/>

Neruda, Pablo. 1993. "Keeping Quiet," in *Extravagaria*. University of Texas Press: El Paso.