



## The North Meridian Review

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# The North Meridian Review

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September 2020

Volume 1

Issue 1

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A Journal of Culture and Scholarship

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## Editorial Statement

In 2018 a group of academics in Indiana began discussing the possibilities of launching a new humanities journal that would serve as a place for the many voices, outlooks, and works of the state's and the Midwest's thinkers, artists, and activists. It is with great pleasure now in 2020 that I formally introduce the result of those efforts. Taking its name from both the geographic concept of the meridian line, as well as the street that runs through Indianapolis connecting north and south to Monument Circle, *The North Meridian Review* strives to be a humanities journal for a disturbingly inhumane age. In the midst of a global pandemic, alarming climate change, needed social protests, and volatile political actors, it is now more important than ever to call upon the power the humanities have to positively affect the world. Ours is a world of endless technological innovations, and ever-increasing efficiencies. Yet innovation and efficiency are not automatic positives for society. If the George Floyd protests, or the burning of Australia, or COVID-19 have taught us anything, it is that we must consciously examine the foundations of our social and cultural existences if we are to direct our society toward needed change.

In this issue, Ricardo Quintana Vallejo examines the concepts of belonging and nationality in his study of Turkish poets in Germany. Benjamin Balthaser reflects on the meaning and significance of the collapse of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the history and future of third-party left-wing movements. Deonte Osayande explores the meaning of disability in a period of pandemic. Valentina Concu provides the first of a two-part translation project, providing English readers with the first translations of Italian Holocaust survivors' testimonials. The journal also sits down with Indianapolis business owner, poet, and activist Elysia Smith to discuss the state of the city. Michael Baumann provides a fantastic edited poetry section featuring multiple voices and pieces. And last but not least, the journal is pleased to publish its first book review section.

Moving forward, the journal hopes to publish two issues annually, one a general issue made up of scholarship, prose, poetry, and reviews; and a second issue centered on a special topic. For our first special issue, Mark Latta will be editing multiple pieces on the concept of powers to create and destroy. Given the state of the world, from changes to city boulevards to alterations in the planet's climate, one could hardly ask for a more timely and needed focus.

Let this be the first of many issues. A humanities journal for the humans. Thinking grounded in the practical application of the humanities, not knowledge rarified in marble museum exhibits.

Instead, let this be concrete slabs for peoples' feet to walk and stand on, the base of a meridian line connecting voices from one point to another.

Wesley R. Bishop  
Managing and Founding Editor  
*The North Meridian Review*  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
September 2020

## I. SCHOLARSHIP

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# Outgrowing Gastarbeiterliteratur: Germanness Redefined in the Poetry of Zafer Şenocak and Zehra Çirak

Ricardo Quintana Vallejo

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Due to the massive migratory movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the borders that outline the definition of German national identity are now strikingly fluid. Efforts to define “Germanness” in terms of a single common language, religion, ethnicity, or restrictive literary canon fail to encompass—and at times even acknowledge—the complex identities, artistic productions, and experiences of cultural hybridity of at least 20 million Germans with *Migrationshintergrund* [migration background] and the 11 million people that compose the *Ausländische Bevölkerung* [foreign population] of Germany in 2018.<sup>1</sup> In the *de facto* multicultural nation that Germany is now, Zafer Şenocak, born in Ankara in 1961, and Zehra Çirak, born in Istanbul in 1961, use (and purposefully misuse) German to subvert the aesthetic expectations of classic German poetry. The unusual German structures and the themes of migration and cultural hybridity are both key features of the poems and means to skillfully rebel against the strict rules and definitions of syntactic and identitary Germanness. In addition to their forceful disregard for traditional punctuation and capitalization, they “employ a variety of [. . .] textual strategies such as allusion, code-switching, interlanguage, neologism, and syntactic fusion, [. . .] characteristics of postcolonial discourse.”<sup>2</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Destatis, “Bevölkerung und Erwerbstätigkeit,” [Population and Employment] *Destatis Statistisches Bundesamt* [Destatis Federal Statistical Office] (April 15, 2019): 23, Accessed September 17, 2020, [https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Publikationen/Downloads-Migration/auslaend-bevoelkerung-2010200187004.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Publikationen/Downloads-Migration/auslaend-bevoelkerung-2010200187004.pdf?__blob=publicationFile).

<sup>2</sup> Petra Fachinger, *Rewriting Germany from the Margins: “Other” German Literature of the 1980s and 1990s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 46. Fachinger uses these terms, borrowed directly from Bill Ashcroft’s *The Empire*



doing so, they “abrogate the ‘centrality’ of standard German and [ . . . ] inscribe difference.”<sup>3</sup> In reshaping the German language, the poets use aesthetic means to symbolically open the boundaries of Germanness. This study builds on Petra Fachinger’s observation of the abolishment of standard German by illuminating why abrogation is necessary to German poets with *Migrationshintergrund* in the process of carving their space in the contemporary canon and in voicing their unique experiences of alterity and hybridity.

To illuminate the relevance and urgency of the poets’ language and themes, this study first describes the societal context in which Şenocak’s and Çirak’s poems were produced. The subsequent close readings of selected poems enable the analysis of language use as a deliberate engagement with, and subversion of, the prescriptive rules of German. In turn, this language play redefines what German poetry can be and shows how German poets have used their medium to represent contemporary struggles of belonging—an important task in a country where a substantial portion of the population must reflect on their own Germanness since the term has only recently started to encompass their experiences and cultural identity. Through contextualization and close readings, I demonstrate that Şenocak and Çirak use language play to enable readers to rethink the limits of how German language can be structured. Specifically, language play in their poetry can be a key site for the problematizing of identity, nationhood, and most importantly, belonging in a multicultural society containing xenophobic sectors that regard ethnic and cultural difference with contempt or distrust.

The history of Germany in the second half of the twentieth century accounts for how two poets born in Turkey can be read within the contemporary German literary tradition. A great influx of foreign workers during the 1950s and 1960s changed Germany’s body politic. According to Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, “temporary guest workers recruited to work in West Germany between

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*Writes Back* to inscribe her own discourse in postcolonial studies, a framework I employ later in this study. Bill Ashcroft, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Fachinger, *Rewriting Germany from the Margins*, 46.

1955 and 1973 became de facto immigrants, thus transforming the Federal Republic of Germany into an immigration country.”<sup>4</sup> Klusmeyer and Papademetriou likewise assert that “between 1950 and 1994, approximately 80 percent of the increase in the West German population resulted from migration.”<sup>5</sup> In 2006 the Federal Statistical Office reported “that nearly one-fifth (19 percent) of the population in [reunified contemporary] Germany had a migration background (*Migrationshintergrund*),”<sup>6</sup> a number that excluded the “approximately 12 million ethnic German refugees and expellees, who came to Germany as a result of World War II and its aftermath.”<sup>7</sup> In the early 1990s “the introduction of *jus soli* [right of the soil] granted former guest workers and their children greater access to German citizenship and, in so doing, transformed the boundaries of German nationhood.”<sup>8</sup> As a consequence of the guest worker policy, “the continuing crisis of German identity since unification and the de facto settlement of Turkish and many other ‘Other’ Germans make it imperative to rethink Germanness.”<sup>9</sup> The picture painted by these statistics is of a de facto immigration land, despite continuous reactionary efforts to define it otherwise.

The length and social impact of the guest worker program restated the emergence of what has been termed *Gastarbeiterliteratur* [guest worker literature]. This taxonomy “was coined in 1980, simultaneous to the founding of two publishing houses *PoLiKunst* (Politische Literatur und Kunst) and *Südwind Gastarbeiterdeutsch*,” which made accounts of guest workers’ experiences available to a larger public.<sup>10</sup> These publications documented “experiences of culture-shock and problems of

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<sup>4</sup> Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, *Becoming Multicultural: Immigration and the Politics of Membership in Canada and Germany* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas B. Klusmeyer and Demetrios G. Papademetriou, *Immigration Policy in the Federal Republic of Germany: Negotiating Membership and Remaking the Nation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), xii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Triadafilopoulos, *Becoming Multicultural*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Cheesman, *Novels of Turkish German Settlement* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), 32.

<sup>10</sup> B. Venkat Mani, “Phantom of the ‘Gastarbeiterliteratur,’” in *Migration und Interkulturalität in neueren literarischen Texten*, ed. Aglaia Blioumi (München: Ludicium, 2002), 113. *Polikunst* was an association founded by foreign artists and writers to protect their interests and promote their work. To clarify, B. Venkat Mani is referring to the *Polinationaler Literatur und Kunstverein (Polikunst)* in the context of his analysis of Aras Ören’s literary work. It is relevant to note that Luise von Flotow describes *PoLiKunst* not as a publishing house, as does Mani, but as “an association founded primarily as a

integration, exploitation at work and social discrimination, domestic clashes due to conflicting social values, and financial and emotional hopes and aspirations of guestworkers in Germany.”<sup>11</sup> While originally useful, *Gastarbeiterliteratur* is no longer a fitting term because subsequent generations of migrants and their children now identify as Germans and feel the label marginalizes their artistic production, creating the undesirable effect of niche literature. *Gastarbeiterliteratur* thus falls into the category of inadequate labels. As Jennifer Marston William has likewise noted, “the past few decades have seen several unsatisfactory labels for the diverse body of creative works produced by minorities in Germany.”<sup>12</sup> William argues that although critics have come to “realize that multicultural writing has changed and enriched the German literary canon [ . . . ] the tendency to marginalize the works as ‘Other’ persists.”<sup>13</sup> *Gastarbeiterliteratur* paved the way for a now-complex literary corpus that challenges its subcategorization and has broken into mainstream contemporary German art and literature. While many of the themes in the poetry of Şenocak and Çırak fall into Mani’s list of common themes, these authors also expand this list, pondering the German political situation at large. The works of Şenocak and Çırak have won multiple awards, are now included in syllabi across Germany and abroad, and populate the shelves of bookstores and libraries alike.<sup>14</sup>

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movement of foreign artists yet also designed to represent their interests [ . . . ] which in an attempt to avoid the usual patronizing treatment (*Bevormundung*) accorded foreigners, restricted its membership to foreign writers/artists.” See Louise von Flotow, “Preface” in *Fremde Discourse on the Foreign*, ed. Gino Chiellino (Toronto, CA: Guernica, 1995), 8. Rita Chin further explains that *PolLiKunst* “aimed to use literature to build a grassroots movement of laborers brought together by the shared sociohistorical experiences embedded in the very language (*gastarbeiterdeutsch*) that guest workers used.” See Rita Chin, *The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 115.

<sup>11</sup> Mani, “Phantom of the ‘Gastarbeiterliteratur,’” 113.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Marston William, “Cognitive Poetics and Common Ground in a Multicultural Context: The Poetry of Zehra Çırak,” *German Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 173, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41494747>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Zafer Şenocak was awarded the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize in 1988 and was a featured author in the 2007 PEN World Voices Festival. His work was anthologized in the Contemporary German Writers series of the University of Chicago Press. He has been writer-in-residence at the University of Wales Swansea, M.I.T., Dartmouth College, Oberlin College, the University of California at Berkley, and Lafayette College. His work is used to teach German worldwide by the prestigious Goethe-Institut in their “Migration and Integration” module. Zehra Çırak was also awarded the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize in 1989 and 2001, and she is the 1994 recipient of the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize.

*Gastarbeiterliteratur* is a particularly invalidating term for Çirak, who has expressly rejected this classification and the label “Turkish German,” as Marilya Veteto-Conrad explains in her 1999 article “Innere Unruhe” [Inner unease].<sup>15</sup> Çirak finds this taxonomy synonymous with the flattening of culture implied in full integration and assimilation. Instead, Çirak argues for the celebration of a multitude of cultures intermingling and sharing spaces. In her poetry, she depicts the significance of everyday mundane experiences when lived in the body and subjectivity of the proverbial Other. The objects of everyday life become extraordinary in Çirak’s work as they signify the experiences and categorization of Otherness in daily practices and interactions, expanding the experiences of Germanness to include multiple cultures. Şenocak does not expressly identify or reject the label “Turkish German” but likewise opens the boundaries of Germanness to include bilingualism. Şenocak depicts bodies split between planets and cultures and brings attention to the pain this causes to culturally hybrid people. The poets focus on two different themes to voice their experiences of Otherness in their multicultural society. Çirak underscores the mundane, while Şenocak is more concerned with language itself.

Çirak’s celebration of multicultural conviviality in mundane life inscribes her into the project that Paul Gilroy proposes in the context of postcolonial studies as a national vision to welcome the changing composition of post–World War II European national bodies. Gilroy affirms that this project does not come from the top, “not the outcome of governmental drift and institutional difference but of concrete oppositional work: political, aesthetic, cultural, scholarly.”<sup>16</sup> It emerges “from below,” as “a mature response to diversity, plurality, and differentiation. It is oriented by routine, everyday exposure to difference.”<sup>17</sup> Çirak represents this routine in her poem “Stadtgrenze”

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<sup>15</sup> Marilya Veteto-Conrad, “‘Innere Unruhe’? Zehra Çirak and Minority Literature Today,” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 53, no. 2 (1999): 59.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 99.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

[City borders], where people in low-income suburbs use different exotic spices and find a common solidarity in the metaphor of salt which, Çirak explains, knows no national culture.

Şenocak's focus on language is reminiscent of *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's seminal work in postcolonial studies. Şenocak, as Ngũgĩ once did, ponders how to use and rework the hegemonic language of a powerful majority culture to express his own experiences of pain and marginalization. Şenocak thus addresses Ngũgĩ's famous question, in his own context, about how a borrowed tongue (English, in Ngũgĩ's case), "can carry the weight of our African [or, in this case, a marginalized] experience."<sup>18</sup> Şenocak pays tribute to Ngũgĩ's famous assertion that "language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture."<sup>19</sup> The influential Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe explains how it is possible to express these marginalized experiences in a borrowed hegemonic tongue but adds that "it will have to be a new English, still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings."<sup>20</sup> In an analogous way, both Şenocak and Çirak dismantle some of the key rules of the German language, specifically punctuation and capitalization, to make it a new German. The strangeness that ensues enables the poets to bring attention to their own eccentric experiences of learning German as a second language outside the home. Şenocak, in particular, uses this strangeness to foreground the pain of bilingualism.

The fact that *Gastarbeiterliteratur* was once a useful term but now meets resistance is evidence that the identities of Germans with *Migrationshintergrund* are in constant flux. Stuart Hall argues that "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."<sup>21</sup> Because these identities are now a substantial part of the

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<sup>18</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey Heinemann, 1986), 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Chinua Achebe, "English and the African Writer," *Transition* no. 75–76 (1997): 349.

<sup>21</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* no. 36 (1989): 80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111666>.

German experience in general, Germanness is also in a state of flux. As expected, both poets depict Germany in contrasting strokes: at times a convivial intermingling of cultures, at times bigoted and longing for a pure and homogeneous nation that never existed.

To illustrate the poets' need to push against societal contempt, carve their space in German literature, and frame their experiences as a key aspect of Germanness, this study cites two examples of bigoted rhetoric that have gained momentum despite, and in reaction to, the success of these authors. These examples are from 1977 and 2016, and demonstrate the xenophobic efforts to assert a monocultural, homogeneous German national body politic where Germans with *Migrationshintergrund* are unjustly excluded from Germanness. The first is the West German stance officially adopted in a "1977 policy report of a joint commission of the federal government and the states on migrant workers."<sup>22</sup> This report claimed that West Germany was "not a country of immigration" but instead a "country in which foreigners reside for varying lengths of time before they decide on their own accord to return to their home country."<sup>23</sup> The report identifies a national vision dissimilar from the reality of the guest worker program, which facilitated the permanent settlement of workers primarily from Turkey and changed the traits of the German body politic: "Germany did not practice a true guest worker policy during this period because policymakers never implemented a mechanism for ensuring the consistent rotation of foreign workers."<sup>24</sup> Thus, Triadafilopoulos asserts that by the end of the twentieth century, Germany had "developed into [a] de facto multicultural societ[y]," because by the time of the "recruitment stop" in November 1973, "German was host to some 2.6 million foreigners."<sup>25</sup> The second and more recent example of bigoted rhetoric comes from the right-wing

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<sup>22</sup> Klusmeyer and Papademetriou, *Immigration Policy in the Federal Republic of Germany*, xii.

<sup>23</sup> Peter J. Katzenstein, *Policy and Politics in West Germany: The Growth of a Semisovereign State* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987), 239–40.

<sup>24</sup> Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos and Karen Schönwälder, "How the Federal Republic Became an Immigration Country: Norms, Politics, and the Failure of West Germany's Guest Worker System," *German Politics & Society* 24, no. 3 (2006): 1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23742736>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

political party *Alternative für Deutschland, AfD* [Alternative for Germany], the “third-largest group in the Bundestag,” the German Parliament.<sup>26</sup> In their online *Manifesto for Germany*, the AfD explains that because “identity is primarily shaped by culture,” it is the “statutory duty of federal and state governments” to “preserve German Culture, Language and Tradition.”<sup>27</sup> They further assert their stance against conviviality, explaining that multiculturalism—

is blind to history and puts on a par imported cultural trends with the indigenous culture, thereby degrading the value system of the latter. The AfD views this as a serious threat to social peace and the survival of the nation state as a cultural unit. It is the duty of the government and civil society to confidently protect German cultural identity as the predominant culture.<sup>28</sup>

The AfD rhetoric nefariously distinguishes between German *culture* and imported *trends*. While the local culture is characterized as millenary and still, foreign cultures and traditions are simultaneously diminished as temporary and characterized as attacks. In the xenophobic view of the AfD, foreigners are rendered superfluous and dangerous Others, imposing banal trends that degrade Germanness. The xenophobic anxiety over loose demarcations of the national literary canon reveals the importance that nationalist right-wing ideology ascribes to rigid and conservative ideas of the canon. Indeed, as Ankhi Mukherjee argues, “the canon has historically been a nexus of power and knowledge that reinforces hierarchies and the vested interests of select institutions, excluding the interests and accomplishments of minorities, popular and demotic culture, or non-European civilizations.”<sup>29</sup> The AfD thus argues for the preservation of an exclusionary canon antagonistic to changes in the political body of the nation (and that considers artistic products created by Others to be trends rather than culture), not realizing

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<sup>26</sup> Jefferson Chase, “AfD: What You Need to Know about Germany’s Far-Right Party,” *Deutsche Welle*, Sept. 24, 2017, <https://p.dw.com/p/2W7YF>.

<sup>27</sup> Alternative für Deutschland AfD. *Manifesto for Germany* (Stuttgart: AfD, 2016), 45–46, Accessed September 17, 2020, [https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12\\_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch\\_web.pdf](https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>29</sup> Ankhi Mukherjee. *What Is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 8.

that, rather than replacing the canon, contemporary Other Germans expand it and, by adding myriad voices and experiences, celebrate it.

The contemporary German context is characterized by a tension between xenophobic sectors of society and a general conviviality. This context urges the literary foregrounding of the redefinition of Germanness to include and voice the experiences of marginalized Germans. Although one cannot imagine this context as a geographical border, such as the hybrid space between Mexico and the US Southwest, the definition of “borderland” by Gloria Anzaldúa proves helpful in imagining the cities of Germany as places where “two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.”<sup>30</sup> The living space that Çirak describes in her poem “Stadtgrenze” underscores this intimacy when the different smells produced by exotic spices of culturally relevant foods intermingle. And, importantly to Şenocak’s imagery in his poem “Doppelmann” (Doubleman), Anzaldúa famously describes borderland as “una herida abierta” [an open wound].<sup>31</sup> For Şenocak the wound is not a geographical space but a split in the tongue, a physical border between languages. The poets thus dwell in what Mary Louise Pratt terms a *contact zone*: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”<sup>32</sup> *Borderland* and *contact zone* are useful concepts to imagine the spaces where the poems of Şenocak and Çirak occur. The setting is not in a stable or homogeneous nation-state, but a zone of constant negotiation with identity, power, and intimacy.

Turning attention to Şenocak, readers encounter the experiences of language and bilingualism that his dwelling in a contact zone beget. In Şenocak’s poems, the impossibility to feel whole when a

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<sup>30</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007), 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 34.



person is split between languages becomes the key feature to understanding the experiences of Otherness and marginalization. The languages split tongue and body alike, rendering the reconciliation of multiculturalism with Germanness a challenging project.

Şenocak's "Doppelmann," available in different versions and titles, depicts the painful experience of code-switching cutting through the poetic voice's tongue. The one cited here is a longer version published in 1993 without a title (later versions are shortened to dismiss the first and last stanzas and include the title "Doppelmann").

*ich habe meine Füße auf zwei Planeten  
wenn sie sich in Bewegung setzen  
zerren sie mich mit  
ich falle  
ich trage zwei Welten in mir  
aber keine ist ganz  
sie bluten ständig  
die Grenze verläuft  
mitten durch meine Zunge  
ich rüttelte daran wie ein Häftling  
das Spiel an einer Wunde<sup>33</sup>*

I have my feet on two planets  
if they set themselves in motion  
they drag me along  
I fall  
I carry [bear] two worlds in me  
but neither is whole  
they bleed constantly  
the border runs  
through the middle of my tongue  
I joggle it like a prisoner  
The game on a wound

Rather than being merely a line on a map, the border cuts through the people who bear two worlds. It cuts the tongue because that is where languages reside and thus crystalizes the idea of a bilingualism that aches. The metaphorical site for expression is hurt by the wound of a culturally hybrid identity: a body divided. Neither Germany nor Turkey exist entirely in the speaker. The voice is partially heir to both world views, as they bleed into one another. The result is a split subjectivity and a feeling of almost belonging to the nation's social body. Being a "Doubleman" is an uneasy ordeal where a single subjectivity overflows and is unable to contain worlds that could perhaps fit better in two distinct subjects.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Zafer Şenocak. "Untitled." *Der Deutschunterricht* 46, h. 5 (1993): 102.

<sup>34</sup> I capitalized the first-person pronoun "I" in the English translation even though it is not capitalized at the beginning of sentences in the original German. Because it lacks conventional capitalization and punctuation, the original German

Multiculturalism is thus a painful fact for the poetic voice. The voice cannot help but experience the split in body and its forms of expressions. Rather than a joyful experience of conviviality, multiculturalism appears as a violent imposition carried unwillingly on the backs and tongues of those who matter-of-factly bear clashing cultures. As multiculturalism is often the burden of the children of diasporas, the speaker cannot choose to be a “singleman.” Şenocak shows how multiculturalism is often a taxing duty not of the host majority but of people who must constantly balance between two planets and assert their belonging in the political home.

The striking image of the wounded body in pain, split by language itself, is framed in the aesthetic strangeness of the lack of capitalization at the beginning of sentences and in missing punctuation. The poet calls readers’ attention to these conventions of language by eliminating them, rendering them unnecessary for effective communication. A possible reading of this decision is the poet expressing that the strict and correct Germanness of capitalization and punctuation are unnecessary to communicate, that Germanness does not need the rigidity of rules to remain intelligible. Instead, the sentences lack clear beginnings and endings and thus bleed into each other, mirroring the worlds the poetic voice painfully inhabits.

Şenocak builds on the theme of pain that linguistic hybridity causes on the body in his poem “Spielsachen” (Playthings). The poetic voice asks a vague *Herr* why it could not have two mouths and two tongues:

*Sind das meine Beine Herr  
warum gabst du mir nicht vier  
ist das mein Kopf Herr  
warum gabst du mir nicht zwei  
sind das meine Augen  
warum sind es zwei*

*hätte eine Nase nicht genügt  
hätte ein Mund eine Zunge nicht genügt  
  
sind das meine Münde Herr  
sind das meine Zungen*

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has a sense of strangeness. This strangeness is still conveyed in the English translation with the lack of punctuation. Further, I included two possible meanings for the word “tragen” in my translation to illustrate the complexity of the language of the poem and how it resists a single interpretation. Where “carry” may not necessarily have a negative connotation, “bear” does, which makes the sustainment of two worlds a more clearly painful experience. The poetic “I” seems to have no identity or ground of its own but rather is pulled and torn by the worlds that inhabit and wound it.

Are these my legs Lord  
why didn't you give me four  
is this my head Lord  
why didn't you give me two  
are these my eyes  
why are there two

as if one nose wouldn't do  
as if one mouth one tongue would do  
  
are these my mouths Lord  
are these my tongues<sup>35</sup>

In the first line the poetic voice is not able to recognize its own body. The sensation of dissonance is consistent with that of “Doppelmann,” where both of the worlds carried feel incomplete and not entirely familiar. Here, there is an uncanny element about the body itself. If the voice had double the legs and heads, perhaps the dissonance would be solved. But since the subject has only one body, a sensation of foreignness ensues. “Spielsachen” imagines the body multiplying (rather than sustaining wounds, as in “Doppelmann”) to accommodate the hybridity of two worlds inhabiting one consciousness. The inferred idea of Germanness in this poem, imagined as a single national body, cannot accommodate the multiplicity of languages and cultures that exist within it, thus advancing a pessimistic evaluation of national identity. By the end, the voice is even confused about whether tongues and mouths, the sites of language, are part of itself.

A note on the translation is here relevant since the English version translated by Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright narrows the meaning of the line “hätte ein Mund eine Zunge nicht genügt.” She translates the antepenultimate line as “as if one mouth one tongue would do.”<sup>36</sup> An alternative translation, “would one mouth one tongue not have been enough,” slightly changes the meaning of the poem’s conclusion. This translation readily denotes the existence of double mouths and tongues, a metaphor of bilingualism, that the *Herr* does not seem to have planned, but that the poetic voice nonetheless has and is showing to the *Herr*. If this *Herr* is the societal expectation for citizens of the nation to have but one set of a mouth and a tongue, the poetic voice breaks away from the *Herr*’s

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<sup>35</sup> Zafer Şenocak, *Door Languages*, trans. Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2008), 140–41. <sup>36</sup> Ibid.

expectation and implies the possibility that the German national body can have more than one tongue despite the *Herr*'s planning and expectation.

Şenocak continues to ponder the issue of multiplicity of cultures coexisting painfully in one person, a synecdoque of the national body, in the five-part poem “Flaschenpost” (Message in a Bottle). The striking insight of this poem in parts I and IV is that multiculturalism is not as painful for the unquestioned members of the host society, so-called ethnic Germans (which, the AfD warns, have a birth rate much lower than that “among immigrants”) —as xenophobic nationalists often claim.<sup>37</sup> This poem shows how multiculturalism is rather distressing for the Other Germans who learn conflicting cultures and traditions at home and in their larger social environments. The multiple—and often-conflicting—expectations and codes of conduct of these sites of development cause tears in the tongue, voice, and subjectivity. The poet portrays a split and confused person as well as a split and confused concept of Germanness that has not successfully intermingled languages and heritages. The failure to communicate is the key feature of the experience of non-belonging:

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<sup>37</sup> Alternative für Deutschland AfD, *Manifesto for Germany*, 41.

<p>I  es ist kein geheimnis  heute wirft man seine flaschenpost ins meer</p> <p>das große meer ist klein auf der welt  unterhält sich in geheimsprachen  mit anderen meeren  die sprachen sind seekarten ohne inseln  in uferlosem blau  verschwindender farbe  rätsel sind in ihnen aufgegangen  lieder sprüche wortfetzen  auch befehle wie  bleibe  gehe  liebe</p>	<p>I  it's no secret</p> <p>today you throw your bottle message in the  sea  the great sea is small in the world  converses in secret languages  with other seas  the languages are charts without islands  in boundless blue  of vanishing color  riddles are dissolved in them  songs saying scraps of word  also commands like  stay  go  love<sup>38</sup></p>
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The image of the bottle lost at sea is the archetype of a vital personal message: often the last word and hope of a castaway. The sea, vast but *klein auf der Welt* [small in the world], is the means through which that message travels. Vital messages exist in the sea of our language. They are not secret to those who can understand us; they are secret to other seas, other languages. The motif of split languages persists in this poem, as one single sea, no matter how vast, cannot cover the whole world. Seas are but small sites of possible communication within great unfamiliar oceans. While nouns are normatively capitalized, the lack of punctuation and capitalization at the beginning of sentences continues to destabilize the propriety of language.

Languages are portrayed as sea charts without islands; one may get lost in their immensity. The feeling of being adrift in an ocean of language without firm land on which to stand is possibly reflective of the early experiences of young migrant children in new social settings. It is possible that these are the experiences of the poets themselves, as Şenocak's family moved to Germany from

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<sup>38</sup> Şenocak, 2008, 52-53.

Ankara, Turkey, in 1970, when he was nine years old, and Çirak's family moved from Istanbul to Germany in 1963, when she was three years old.

Taking this biographical context into account, the last stanza of the poem becomes particularly powerful. Although the words “bleibe, gehe, and liebe” [stay, go, and love] can be combined to create beautiful songs, they are here transfigured into imperatives. The word “Befehle” suggests a command that comes from a figure of authority, perhaps military, and therefore conveys a possible cruelty in these three words. The first two commands, bleibe and gehe, (stay and go), are contradictory messages that ethnically and culturally marginalized people experience in their mundane lives and at the levels of national and international rhetoric from political figures who uphold or reject multicultural conviviality. In the task of understanding Germanness, people with *Migrationshintergrund* are instructed to stay and go by different sectors of society which figuratively pull them in different directions, ultimately splitting their metaphorical bodies.

In the fourth part of the poem, the possible hopefulness of throwing the bottle to the sea is replaced by the unlikelihood of the message reaching its destination:

IV  
man stirbt auf der Straße  
auf der einem laut die Nachricht überbracht wird  
  
man stirbt mit der Flasche unterm Arm  
  
ohne sie geöffnet zu haben  
mit allen Worten die man hätte wollen  
  
das Wort das dicht ist  
behält man für sich allein

IV  
you are dying on the street  
where the news was delivered to you  
aloud  
are dying with the bottle under your  
arm  
that you never got to open  
with all the words you had wanted to  
say  
the sealed word  
you keep to yourself<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Şenocak, 2008, 54-55.

This stanza is impersonal, using the active-voice alternative in the original German that, similarly to the passive voice, diminishes the grammatical and semantic importance of the subject. “Man,” often translated as “one,” dies; “one” is given news, but not by anyone in particular. The one with the message, unable to deliver it, *is* the one who dies, with the message’s words still sealed, heard by no one. Here, to die and to keep silent seem synonymous, as though one could exist (at least in terms of the relationship to others) only through and within the seas of languages, as they mix. Whether it is an open wound along the tongue, or a wound that annihilates the person, language is a source of anxiety and non-belonging in the dimension of the migrant experience.

Şenocak’s exploration of the effect of bilingualism on the body and psyche enables the redefinition of Germanness to include several languages, tongues, and mouths that, although painfully tearing through the body, are an undeniable experience of alterity for many Germans. Shifting the focus away from language, Çirak foregrounds the manifold meanings of mundane objects. Çirak underscores the shifting connotations of bicycles, trains, or food items in marginalized experiences, showing just how different everyday life can be for Germans with *Migrationshintergrund*. Like Şenocak, Çirak disregards traditional punctuation and capitalization, thus opening the limits of intelligible German. Unlike Şenocak, Çirak depicts experiences of pain caused not by bilingualism but by socioeconomic marginalization and nationalist violence. This is the case of the poem “Kein Sand in Rad der Zeit” (No Sand in the Wheel of Time).

*Ich stehe in der U-Bahn an die Wand gelehnt  
 schweigend schauke ich in der U-Fahrt  
 fünf Jungs und zwei Mädels kommen auf mich zu  
 schwankend im Laufe der Geschwindigkeit  
 festen Blickes fixieren sie mich  
 und grinsen sich immer näher  
 ich versuche die sieben zu ignorieren  
 die anderen Fahrgäste sind alle  
 mit sich selbst beschäftigt  
 die sieben stehen nun*

I stand in the subway leaning on the wall  
 silently I sway in the metro  
 five boys and two girls approach me  
 faltering because of the speed  
 firm grins are fixated on me  
 and sneering ever closer  
 I try to ignore the seven  
 the other passengers are all  
 busy with themselves  
 the seven now stand

*kaum noch einen Schritt von mir  
 der eine und die andere holt aus  
 zum Schlag  
 noch einmal noch mal  
 die anderen johlen begeistert  
 jetzt bin ich Neger — Jude — Ausländer —  
 Penner — oder anderswer  
 nein sie sehen nicht was ich wirklich bin  
 jetzt nur noch ein geschlagenes Ding  
 ich höre noch ein kleines Kind  
 das ängstlich Mama ruft  
 und die anderen Fahrgäste machen sich  
 bereit zum Aussteigen  
 ich falle um  
 ich bin ein Fahrrad  
 mein Besitzer ist  
 ein Neger — Jude — Ausländer  
 der mit Vorausabnungen  
 schon eine Station früher ausgestiegen war  
 von nun an bin ich  
 nicht mehr — nur ein Fahrrad*

hardly a step before me  
 one and the others wind up  
 to hit  
 once again and another time  
 the others jeer excitedly  
 now I am a Negro–Jew–Foreigner–  
 Bum–or some other  
 no they do not see what I really am  
 now just a beaten thing  
 I still hear a little kid  
 who anxiously calls mama  
 and the other passengers  
 make themselves ready to deboard  
 I collapse  
 I am a bicycle  
 my owner is  
 Negro—a Jew—a Foreigner  
 who with premonitions  
 already deboarded a station earlier  
 from now on I am  
 no more—only a bicycle<sup>40</sup>

Çirak's poem plays with the identity of the poetic voice as it degenerates and ultimately becomes an object. The poem starts with the voice as the subject of every line. The speaker stands, leaning on the wall, doing nothing in particular, and sees just a mundane scene of riding on the subway. But then, the five boys and two girls approach the speaker. Although the poem does not state it, readers are inclined to imagine these boys and girls being white, certain of their belonging to the German social body, their Germanness. They hit the poetic voice time and again for no other reason than its Otherness, reminding the poetic voice of its condition of non-belonging. The voice becomes first a "*Neger — Jude — Ausländer — Penner — oder anderswer,*" and readers hear these words as slurs that the boys and girls inflict during the attack. The physical cruelty of this violence tears the body apart while the slurs explain it. The seven children define beyond doubt what Germanness cannot encompass. They use

<sup>40</sup> Zehra Çirak, "Kein Sand im Rad der Zeit, Stadgrenze," [No Sand in the Wheel of Time, City Borders] in *Fremde Flügel auf Eigener Schulter* [Stranger Wings on Your Own Shoulder], by Zehra Çirak (Hamburg: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994), 44–45. For the translation, see Erin Trapp, "Zehra Çirak and the Aporia of Dialogism," in *Poetry and Dialogism: Hearing Over*, ed. Mara Scanlon and Chad Engbers (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 93–94.



their fists and screams to write their definition on the broken body of the Other. The poetic voice understands that violent pain on the body is a shared experience by those who are poor and historically marginalized. It becomes then a *geschlagenes Ding* [beaten thing], robbed of its personhood.

The other passengers are concerned with continuing their lives, unencumbered. They seem oblivious to the violence. Or, if they witness it, they do not care to prevent or address it. The train becomes a metaphor of the nation. It is always moving, with a wide array of people riding inside—perpetuators, witnesses, and victims. The poem warns of the danger of passengers who accept this vicious scene as normal. By listing the people who have historically been the victims of cruelty, the poem reminds the nation of its historical identity and implicitly asks whether brutality inflicted on Others' bodies is a desirable vision for the project of nationhood. In the last lines of the poem, the “I” is no longer a human, just an object meant to transport.

Çirak's foregrounding of mundane experiences as key sites to ponder the definition of Germanness importantly includes the representation of domesticity in her poem on “Stadtgrenze.” In this poem, Çirak draws attention to the significance of everyday household objects in migrant experiences:

*Am Stadtrand die Klage:*

*Meine Stadt ist voll mit Häusern  
meine Häuser voller Leute  
die ihre Kopfkissen einrichten  
mit Bedürfnissen jeder Art  
unsere Leute sind genug  
uns genug die Unsrigen  
für die Zahl der Teller  
wir würzen nur exotisch  
doch essen ein und heimisch*

*Das Salz kennt keine Nationalgerichte  
wer will nun wem  
die Grenzen*

On the edges of the city the complaint:

my city is full of houses  
my houses are full of people  
who arrange their head room  
with needs of every sort  
our people are enough  
ours are enough for us  
for the number of plates  
we spice only exotically  
however we eat alone and locally

Salt knows no national dish  
who wants now to throw  
the borders

*in die Augen streuen?*

in whose eyes?<sup>41</sup>

The poem is set at the edges of the city, probably a low-income suburb where a multiplicity of cultures share the tight spaces of large buildings and projects. In this space, one can smell all sorts of sweet, sour, and savory national dishes emanating from the windows and hallways. The poem starts with a disembodied complaint: those who are jarred by this multiplicity of smells; and further jarred by the people who arrange their *Kopfzimmer* [head space] in different ways, world views, religions, and structures of social organization.

Multiculturalism in this poem happens in the tongue. But, unlike Şenocak's poems, the tongue is not the place for language, but for culture conveyed through flavor. And although a wide variety of spices exist, people eat locally. The first line of the second stanza signals the possibility of finding common ground regardless of national ancestry. Indeed, *Das Salz kennt keine Nationalgerichte* [salt knows no national dish]. Unlike the division between the One and the Other in "No Sand in the Wheel of Time," "City Borders" finds a space to assert that the experience of people is more similar than categorizations and borders would suggest, regardless of their cultural origin. The final question, *wer will nun wem/ die Grenzen/ in die Augen streuen?* [who wants now to throw the borders in whose eyes?] is an assertion that borders between peoples are artificially created, dispersed by those who benefit from feelings of division and difference. The ways people prepare food, eat, and live, have more in common than imposed city borders might imply.

The portrayal of multiculturalism is cautiously optimistic, but not because the host society joyfully tolerates the multiplicity of cultures in this poem. Instead, it is because multiculturalism is shown as the shared experience of the different groups at the geographical margins of the city and

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<sup>41</sup> Çirak, "Kein Sand im Rad der Zeit, Stadgrenze," [No Sand in the Wheel of Time, City Borders] 51. For the translation, see Trapp, "Zehra Çirak and the Aporia of Dialogism," 189.

social margins of the nation. Germanness can include these people because their shared experiences eliminate the borders between them.

These selected poems portray the difficult processes of identification for migrant communities, as migrants struggle with violence, the pain of multilingualism, and partial belonging. The poets and their poems contain several worlds, and the scenes and struggles may not be common to all German people. However, these poems depict the lives and concerns of German citizens and residents intersected today by multiculturalism, expanding the delimitations of national identity. Germanness pondered and redefined in the poetry of Şenocak and Çirak can be an experience of pain and violence, but it is also one undeniably shared by many people who have lived in Germany for generations and irrefutably belong in the contemporary definition of Germanness.

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## II. PROSE

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# A Socialist Horizon: Crisis, Hegemony, and the Promise of a New Party

Benjamin Balthaser

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Of the many epochal changes sweeping American politics, one of the most poignant, if least reported, was the dissolution of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) this past year. The ISO was never a large organization—at its peak perhaps 1200 members, and averaging 600 to 800 members. But its activists like to say that they “punched above their weight,” and it is true: in few strikes or social movements were the organization’s banner or its paper—sold by members as much as a sign of their loyalty to the organization as of any practical notion of political efficacy—absent. And ISO activists have been instrumental to U.S. social movements, from the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike to the Palestine solidarity movement to anti-death-penalty campaigning in the 1990s. I was never a member of the ISO but attended their yearly conference in Chicago and experienced it as an almost ritual performance of the Marxist Left’s collective memory: from singing “The International” to staging ongoing debates about the legacy of the Bolshevik Revolution to keeping books by Rosa Luxembourgh, Leon Trotsky, and V. I. Lenin in print. I got the sense that the ISO was not just an organization but a living archive of the Marxian left—not so much a fossil as a porous tribe bent on continuing their vital traditions “in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness,” to borrow a phrase from W. E. B. Du Bois.<sup>42</sup>

It is often said that the ISO formed just as the New Left was collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, while the resurgent Right rose in the late 1970s. But that is not entirely accurate.

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<sup>42</sup> W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 12.

While debate surrounds the origin myth and the exact lineage of ISO, its roots are both in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and later in the International Socialists (IS). These Trotskyist groups saw themselves as the true inheritors of the Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin's vanguard party, a revolution and a movement they felt was sold out, crushed by a Stalinist counter-revolution. The SWP's crowning moment in the United States was the Minneapolis Teamsters strike they helped organize, a militant labor battle that shut down the entire city for days in 1934. The strike not only saw workers effectively control large parts of the city but also helped build a new labor movement against both a bureaucratic leadership it saw as prefiguratively Stalinist and an increasingly concentrated monopoly capitalism: the birth pangs of what could be a new workers' movement, if not a new revolutionary moment. This vision of a Leninist party was briefly revived in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the New Communist movement, but its social base and concentration in urban working-class self-organization was absent. Despite thousands of dedicated cadre members across various Trotskyist and Maoist organizations, this party model seemed, by the 1980s, to have played itself out. The ISO's collapse could be seen as the final closing of the twentieth century, the last chapter of the Bolshevik Revolution that had, comet-like, illuminated the hopes and fears of human liberation for the better part of a tumultuous century.

And yet it is hard to miss the fact that the ISO's collapse—triggered if not constituted by an alleged sexual assault cover-up—coincided with the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), now the largest socialist organization in the United States since World War II. While some members of the DSA have gloated over the collapse of the ISO as proof of their organization's non-Leninist structure and history, that is, to me, a far too glib expression of the historical transitions we are now witnessing. After all, the DSA has done little to recruit these new members into its ranks, and for much of its history the DSA, like the ISO, was a small organization on the margins of the Left. I would go so far as to say that the DSA is not the same organization it was five years ago. Nearly all



local and national leadership has been replaced by new members, and many of the new resolutions adopted at local and national conventions have also radically changed the DSA's direction and its structure, pushing it to the left, embracing the boycott against Israel and the creation of an Afro-Socialist caucus, while moving the organization away from its long-held "realignment" strategy inside the Democratic Party. Rather, I would suggest, the collapse of the ISO and the radical transformation and explosive growth of the DSA are both contradictory signs of a new historical conjuncture.

What strikes me more than the differences between the ISO and the resurgent DSA are not their differences (which are many) but rather their singular similarity as socialist parties. While the DSA is not formally a third party in the sense of the Labor Party or Green Party (it is technically a nonprofit); it is far more party-like than any of the social movements of the last few decades. Even a glance at its last national convention suggests that the DSA is a far cry from the horizontalist social movements of the 1990s and early 2000s, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Global Justice movement, with their consensus decision making, affinity groups, and lack of formal leadership structure. Unlike the social movements of the last decades that have focused on creating decentralized networks, unencumbered by unifying demands or an articulated base, the DSA is a class-focused organization intent on engaging state power through elections and placing concrete demands on the state for large social policy transformations through grassroots campaigns, such as Medicare for All and the Green New Deal. This realignment not only toward socialism but to a socialist organization is perhaps the most dramatic historical rupture that I, as a writer and activist who came of age during the affinity groups and consensus decision making of the Global Justice Movement, have witnessed. A person wandering into the 2017 DSA national convention in Chicago might be forgiven if they felt they were witnessing a ritual from a previous century: mostly clean-cut young people electing new national leadership, forwarding motions from various formal factions, voting by card and by proxy, deploying the Anglo-Saxon strictures of Roberts Rules of Order. There were T-shirts, buttons,

candidates, and dues. Despite the end of the Leninist party, the convention made the DSA look very much like a political party.

### **The Party Fordism Built**

So what to make of this end of the end of history? The collapse and rebirth within a year of a socialist party? Perhaps the best place to look would be the last time a mass-based Socialist party existed in the United States— the “red decade” of the 1930s. Much like the rise of the DSA, the rise of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) did not initially seem very promising. Small and marginal, the CPUSA was located among isolated enclaves of Russian and Jewish immigrants and a tight cadre of African American and bohemian intellectuals clustered in New York City and Chicago. How then did it evolve from a tiny party of a few hundred members to an average membership of 100,000 throughout much of the 1930s and 1940s? Not only did the CPUSA grow exponentially but its influence extended well beyond its membership base. At the peak of CPUSA power, party members were elected to leadership of over a dozen major labor unions, organized the largest nationwide student strike the country has seen, and established the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (the only socialist army to fight overseas), and nearly all major African American intellectuals and numerous writers, directors, actors, and artists were counted in the party’s orbit. While the support, and yes, even prestige, of the Soviet Union was not, at times, insignificant, Soviet support cannot alone explain the rise of the CPUSA nor its broad influence. Indeed, focus on the Soviet or Bolshevik nature of the CPUSA hides far more than it reveals about the party’s stunning growth and brief, hegemonic sway over the cultural life of the United States.

Counterintuitively perhaps, Michael Denning’s 1997 *The Cultural Front* is the most helpful text in understanding the rise of the CPUSA, precisely because Denning locates the party in the larger

cultural and political transformations of the Popular Front era.<sup>43</sup> It is not that he thinks the CPUSA was insignificant; indeed, he suggests that “it was the most influential left organization of the period.” Rather, he argues, to understand the CPUSA’s growth and influence in the era between the late 1920s and the Cold War, one must look beyond its membership rolls to the “condensation” of social forces that cohered to allow it to flourish.<sup>44</sup> Taking a Gramscian approach, Denning looks at the “long Popular Front” as the emergence of a “historical bloc,” a new constellation of social forces that, for a time, were hegemonic.<sup>45</sup> Calling it at times the “Age of the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organization]” and at other times the New Deal coalition, Denning conceives of power less as something one party or class holds (or does not hold) and more an alliance of social forces— parties, unions, social movements, cultural actors. Such blocs do not seize the forces of production so much as gain consent and influence through multiple forms of representation, whether they be political, cultural, or economic. Significant in this approach is that it avoids nearly all of the tedious pitfalls in most histories of the Communist Party that focus on party line and schisms, the Comintern and the Soviet Union, to understand how the party wielded such unprecedented influence in the United States.

It is doubtful that, without the Great Depression, the Communist Party would have risen to a stature of influence. It may seem to go without saying that the Depression was a crisis for capitalism. Yet for Denning, it was not simply that the crisis laid bare suffering under the free market and that people awoke to its ills to become Communists; it was a crisis of representation, in all forms. A crisis, as Antonio Gramsci notes, occurs when political parties and the people they represent are “detached” from one another, when “the men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognized

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> Louis Althusser suggests that the multiple and even contradictory social antagonisms in Russian society were “condensed” into a single demand for “bread, peace, and land” Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” in *For Marx*, by Louis Althusser (New York: Penguin, 1969), 49–86.

<sup>45</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 6.

by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression.”<sup>46</sup> The schism between representatives and represented for Gramsci leaves “the field open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces.” It must be remembered that Gramsci was arguing with the so-called “orthodox” Marxists who understood the state to be merely the “central committee of the bourgeoisie.” He was also arguing with Marxists who felt workers would respond spontaneously when their objective conditions were revealed to them. Rather, for Gramsci, political parties, and the cultural field, as a whole, are complex acts of “articulation,” not simply a one-to-one correspondence. A sense “the ruling class has failed” and a “‘crisis of authority’ is spoken of,” not an objective increase in the level of suffering, ignited a new political class formation.<sup>47</sup> In the 1930s, this meant that the entire idea of the “working class” was up for grabs, realigned, in motion, no longer content to be represented by the Democratic Party, the American Federation of Labor, or Hollywood. The Depression was a crisis of hegemony, a cultural and political crisis, because the elite were not able to comprehend, much less address, the economic crisis of their own making.

Jodi Dean argues that the CPUSA grew in the 1930s because it was able to bind people’s affective needs, organizing their desires within a coherent program and a cadre of comrades and fellow-travelers.<sup>48</sup> While that was true for individual or even collective members, it does not explain how and why the CPUSA became the vehicle for a larger social imaginary. One of Denning’s more profound insights about the movements of the 1930s was to note that the nature of the working class was in a profound state of change. Not only were working people realigning their political allegiances across racial and regional lines, the working class itself was in process of radical transformation. As Gramsci was one of the first to note, Fordism was not just a new means of production but also a

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<sup>46</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 217–20.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2018), 218.

cultural system. It produced “a new type of worker,” and new types of social, cultural, and sexual relations.<sup>49</sup> For the first time, second-generation immigrant workers and African Americans in urban and industrial centers shared a common condition of labor, a common language, and a common mass culture, from factory work to radio plays to swing music to gangster films. Working-class urban heroes such as James Cagney, Duke Ellington, and Barbara Stanwyck were as much a part of a shared mass culture as boxing and jazz. One organizer recounted white and Black members listening to a Joe Louis fight on the radio before going to recruit members for its integrated locals, and Richard Wright famously wrote of the Louis-Baer match as leading to a jubilant, spontaneous uprising among working-class African Americans on Chicago’s South Side.<sup>50</sup> The Popular Front, Denning argues, was not just a movement about the realignment of a political Left, but a counterculture of Fordism, a way to reimagine the modernity of the machine age. Taking over factories and stopping the machines during massive sit-down strikes could be seen as not just a labor tactic but a metaphor for the movement: not to leave modernity, but to subject it to a working-class, democratic will.

Within the midcentury cultural and material matrix of Fordism, the Communist Party, unlike the Democrats or Republicans, built an entire way of life, vertically and horizontally integrated, with softball leagues, newspapers, dances, and activity groups such as Friends of the Earth (camping) and the John Reed Clubs (writing) that provided not only for the political needs of its members but also for their social and even romantic needs. “You could live an entire life within that world,” one former Communist related in Vivian Gornick’s oral history of the movement.<sup>51</sup> The Communist Party, like the centralized and Taylorized mass culture of the period, was constituted by a sense of totality and organization that marked both work and leisure. The Communist Party was not just a political

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<sup>49</sup> Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 289–91.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2, 333; Richard Wright, “Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite,” in *Richard Wright Reader*, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 31–35.

<sup>51</sup> Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 36.

organization but also a cultural one that demanded of its members not just activism but a new cultural sensibility. Mike Gold wrote for the *New Masses* that party members should attend Harlem jazz clubs; interracial dating was not only sanctioned but officially encouraged. The CPUSA emerged as the radical organization of the Great Depression precisely because it so closely resembled the culture in which it operated. As capitalism's "other," Communism organized much like the Fordist corporations it opposed. In other words, it is not that the CPUSA hit upon a correct strategy by design so much as that it was the organization that formed a structural homology to its cultural and political moment.

The CPUSA's power was not primarily discursive or based on its ever-shifting proclamations. The CPUSA's rhetoric and strategy changed dramatically through the 1930s and 1940s, from its revolutionary Third Period in which it formed independent radical unions and denounced the New Deal as "social fascism" to the Popular Front period during which it forged alliances with liberals and other leftists against the far Right at home and fascists abroad. Nothing exemplifies the shift better than Kenneth Burke's speech before the 1935 Writers' Congress, in which he suggested that the party abandon its alien-sounding language of the "worker" for a more populist and familiar democratic language of the "people."<sup>52</sup> Burke was denounced by none other than Mike Gold for being a "nationalist," and his speech was panned. Yet as Denning notes, Burke spoke for "the vast majority of the Depression left," and his language of popular democracy was officially adopted by the party later that year.<sup>53</sup> While the party and much of the organizing of the Depression left may have been class-based and internationalist, much of the rhetoric and imagery was conjunctural: redefining a popular subject of sovereignty.

### **"Democratize Everything": The Populist After Party**

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<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," in *American Writers' Congress* (New York: International Publishers, 1935).

<sup>53</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 102–3.

Flash forward a half century and, in many ways, we traverse similar cultural and political ground. The organizations that represented the working class (i.e., large bureaucratic unions of the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party) are either in decline or in crisis; the working classes themselves have “detached,” in Gramsci’s words, from their membership and their leadership. In addition, inequality is at the highest rate since before the Great Depression; racial segregation is at an all-time high; our planet is in a state of fundamental rupture in its ability to sustain human life; the far Right is again on the march. The thirty-year consensus around neoliberalism seems to have crumbled; this is a crisis of hegemony in much the same way the Great Depression threw all ruling-class institutions into disarray. People are again in the streets. A long twenty-year chain of spontaneous and horizontalist uprisings against the harsh classed, raced, and gendered contours of neoliberalism has occurred in the United States: the Global Justice movement, the direct actions against the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the mass marches of the immigrant rights movement, Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, and the Women’s March. Whether the ruling classes have the legitimacy or the self-confidence to restore order, much less to solve the multiple crises facing them—primarily a crisis of legitimacy—is unclear. It is not surprising that “socialism,” in such a conjuncture, has reemerged.

And yet, the landscape of both capitalism and the Left have radically changed. As Chilean activist and writer Marta Harnecker notes, the rise of globalization, neoliberalism, and the end of the Cold War have led to what she calls the “social disorientation” of both the working class and the Left.<sup>54</sup> The organization of workers into giant Fordist factories in urban centers, the growth of social and cultural institutions, such as massive schools and state colleges, also did the work of organizing people into shared sites of social production and reproduction. Globalization and neoliberalism have not only widened the gap between the rich and the poor within and between nations but they have also dramatically reorganized the economy away from large-scale urban manufacturing to

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<sup>54</sup> Marta Harnecker, *Rebuilding the Left* (London: Zed Books, 2017), 7–27.

decentralized and increasingly mobile just-in-time production. While this shattered what was left of the large AFL-CIO unions and sent union membership into a free fall, it also disrupted the material basis for social, even socialist, organizing. White flight, suburban sprawl, strip malls, the spread of automobile culture and online micro-communities have not only changed the way social life is organized but have also disrupted the forms of organization on which the Old Left was built. If the counterculture of modernism was based on the chance encounter on the city street and the collective anonymity of the factory and rail car, suburban sprawl and the post-modern cubicle entered a new form of fragmented alienation, as isolated as it is subcultural.

While “socialism” and “the party” may have reemerged, they have done so on radically different terrain than when capitalism previously faced such a crisis. As Ernesto Laclau, perhaps the foremost writer on Gramsci for the current age, writes in *On Populist Reason*, “we can no longer understand capitalism as purely an economic reality, but as a complex in which economic, political, military, technological, and other determinations . . . enter into the determination of the movement of the whole.”<sup>55</sup> While one could argue whether capitalism was ever “purely an economic reality” governed by the “contradictions of the commodity form,” his description of “globalized capitalism” covers, if not the experience of exploitation, the affective terrain of its contemporary subjectivity. Despite people’s common experience of working for wages, the end of the twentieth century has witnessed a critique of capitalism along multiple intersecting fronts: the biosphere, the racialized state, the national border, the predatory logic of financialized capitalism, and sexual violence. Rather than attempt to unify the multiple factors of exploitation at the point of production, Laclau suggests the term “populism” should condense the shifting antagonisms that shatter the “harmonious continuity of the social” into a series of constitutive demands. Unlike Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s concept

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<sup>55</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), 230. See also Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985).



of the “multitude,” in which they imagine a “nomadic, rhizomatic” unity without demand or claim to hegemony, Laclau’s formation is decidedly political: demands on the state are what unify the new class logic of the “99 percent.” In other words, the DSA has reemerged as an organization to engage with the state, precisely because the working class has been historically disorganized by three decades of neoliberal assault.

The often-criticized “vagueness” of socialism since the rise of the DSA is not a weakness of the movement but rather a constitutive element of its populist nature. As Laclau writes of populist movements, they are not the stereotype of a “people” against an “elite” but rather a democratic “social demand” that produces itself discursively to define an irreparable social antagonism. Populists redefine democracy from a cohesive consensus to a constitutive state of conflict. Society functions, as many liberals like to argue, through debate, discussion, compromise, and mediation; populists redefine the social totality as riven by irreparable “frontiers” of contestation. Laclau includes in his idea of populism not just popular democratic movements such as The Levelers or Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution but also the Bolshevik’s slogan “All Power to the Soviets” and Mao Zedong’s construction of “the people.” For Laclau, populists’ “vagueness and indeterminacy are not shortcomings of a discourse about social reality, but in some circumstances, inscribed in social reality as such.”<sup>56</sup> In diverse, uneven movements, such as the Bolivarian Revolution or the Popular Front, “populism” articulates a rupture in the ruling hegemony that can bring together a new political subject around demands for the state. While the DSA may be for the working class, it is not necessarily of it, at least in the same way the second-generation industrial working class of the Communist Party could easily define its class roots.<sup>57</sup> Most of the DSA’s membership is not organized around a shared identity or form of exploitation, but

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>57</sup> As Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin point out, the Bernie Sanders campaign and much of the new “socialist” Left is “class-focused” rather than “class-rooted.” See Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Sanders, Corbyn* (London: Merlin Press, 2018), 43.

rather around a shared set of demands that unify a heterogeneous subjectivity under capitalism. The DSA's major campaigns— for rent control, socialized medicine, and a Green New Deal— are class demands, but they are also demands that bring together, by their nature, broad constituencies that are determined by many points of structural violence and exploitation by capitalism. Such campaigns are not attempts to seize the means of production but rather to seize hegemony and usher in a new consensus about democracy.

That such campaigns address their grievances to the state as a radical series of reforms should not be understood as the DSA's liberalism against a more radical Communist Party, as some charge. Rather, such demands and such modes of organization are a sign of the current DSA membership's materialism, a sign that they intuitively or strategically understand the historical conjuncture. As Gramsci wrote after the defeat of the Bolshevik Revolution to bring Communism to Europe, our "situation is 'democratic,' because the broad working classes are disorganized, dispersed and fragmented into the broad undifferentiated people."<sup>58</sup> In a fragmented and heterogeneous working class that often aligns its own subjectivity along multiple intersecting identity formations—gender, race, religion, class—the DSA offers an anticapitalist populism, a political articulatory process by which a new kind of movement can cohere. Such a political formation is expressed "discursively," as Laclau suggests, not "empirically," in so far as it recognizes itself not by region or workplace, but by the program it puts forth. The DSA's campaigns are not simply ways to achieve victories for a broad working-class struggle but, rather, are ways to articulate a constituency, to challenge the hegemony of neoliberal governance. It is crucial to point out that demands for a Green New Deal or socialized medicine are bids not only to save the planet but also to expose the gap between the Democratic Party's claim to representation and its ability to represent its constituency's needs. Hegemony, as Laclau states, is not a "re-ordering of things"; it is, rather, "a partiality that can become the name of

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<sup>58</sup> Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 140.

an impossible totality.”<sup>59</sup> Socialism is the expression of a new political subject that can say it represents the whole, by challenging the state to change its class orientation. When Maria Svalt, the national director of the DSA, said she wanted to “democratize everything,” it was a revolutionary demand to include the economy and the military implicitly, subjects off limits to democratic control, and to redefine “democracy” as a source of class conflict, not harmony.<sup>60</sup>

The vagueness of socialism does not run counter to Jodi Dean’s claim that a new party is needed. As Dean suggests in her manifesto, *The Communist Horizon*, radicals have never taken the claims of horizontal democracy as seriously as they proclaim. All movements, she argues, are vanguard acts; they make claims of representation: *We are the 99%*. *The Movement for Black Lives*. They claim to represent “the people,” however they are defined against an elite or a class or an institution. Yet the question Dean poses is not so much whether we will commit acts of representation but rather whether we will build organizations that can contain difference and the multiple gaps, omissions, and divisions within capitalism.<sup>61</sup> The DSA, by that logic, is a party, yet it is a very different kind of party than the one organized by the CPUSA. While the DSA has elected officials and votes on resolutions governing the organization, the chapters and branches are all almost entirely autonomous—the centralized structure of the National Political Committee (NPC) can do little to direct what chapters work on. That said, enough structure and unanimity exist to allow the DSA to coalesce around a few central campaigns and principles, such as mentioned above: the Green New Deal, socialized medicine, electoralism, and rent control. This form of flexibility, cohered by a discursive unity of key demands, marks the DSA as the party form for a post-Fordist, “globalized,” mode of capital accumulation.

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<sup>59</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 226.

<sup>60</sup> Gregory Krieg, “We Want to Democratize Everything’: Inside DSA’s Rise with Its Leader,” CNN, accessed June 19, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/17/politics/democratic-socialists-of-america-interview-maria-svalt/index.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012), 217–20.

That is not to say no contradictions exist. Just as the “democratic centralism” of the CPUSA allowed it to resemble and to challenge the centralized corporations it organized against, so too did its centralism make it vulnerable to sclerotic sloganeering, top-down decision making, and state repression when its leaders were eventually imprisoned under the Smith Act (1940).<sup>62</sup> While the DSA may at some point come under assault by the state, that is not its main challenge at the moment. Like the CPUSA, the contradictions faced by the DSA are embedded within the cultural contradictions of the current conjuncture. As a hybrid democratic party, the DSA constitutes itself discursively and symbolically through demands made on the state. It has no empirical base, as did the CPUSA, in the giant factories and ghettos, large industrial unions, and immigrant neighborhoods of the modern period. This is not a critique but rather an observation of how the terrain of the working class has changed. Yet these articulatory acts naturally lend themselves to replication: Who is to say who represents the “true” DSA? The DSA is not governed by a centralized NPC, thereby allowing a proliferation of discursive mobilizations.

Concretely, numerous ideological caucuses have sprung up, each with a narrow interpretation of what “socialism” should mean. These are distinct from “identity caucuses,” such as the queer caucus, or Afro-Socialists, which form to address historical exclusions and hierarchies that continue, even in a socialist organization. The ideological caucuses are discursive platforms representing programmatic definitions of socialism. While real debates occur on either end of the spectrum, revealing for the most part latent and perhaps receding strains within the DSA’s history (among the “horizontalists” or libertarian socialists or the social democrats), the vast majority of the DSA’s tens of thousands of members agree on the broad outlines of the DSA’s programmatic goals and organizing tactics, and they are unified around the central demands mentioned in previous paragraphs. In the same way the rapidly changing party lines of the CPUSA revealed the political limitations of

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<sup>62</sup> Smith Act, 54 Stat. 670 (1940).

democratic centralism, so too does the proliferation of ideological caucuses (there are roughly a dozen now, and counting) represent the political limitations of discursively constituted forms of populist organizing. Already, whole chapters have split over what amounts to relatively minor ideological differences when it would seem abundantly clear that the DSA's entire purpose is to find broad common ground among working people. In a party organized nodally, much like the web, the temptation for further fragmentation and subcultural differentiation may prove too great.

Still, the prospects seem hopeful for the moment. Unlike in countries with large far-right movements among the young, such as India, Italy, Brazil, and Hungary, young people in the United States seem like they are moving to the left in what looks to be a generational realignment. The Bernie Sanders campaign and the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib have moved the ballast of the Democratic Party far enough to the left so that Kamala Harris, Nancy Pelosi, and Elizabeth Warren have had to respond to the question of whether they are “socialists”; six socialists were recently elected to the Chicago city council; the *New York Times* recently endorsed a socialist candidate for Queens district attorney; and New York State just passed the first progressive rent-control law in over a half century—a campaign in which the New York DSA played a large part. It would seem that the DSA, like the Communist Party, is not the entire story of America's current move to the left, at least at the grassroots, but it has emerged as an ideological and organizational center for this moment of transformation. Of course, it is impossible to know where the current crisis of hegemony will take us. Donald Trump is also a sign of shifting alignments and a crumbling political order no longer capable of summoning the self-confidence or mass support necessary to effectively rule. And it seems that the Democratic Party, along with its superstructure of media outlets, nonprofits, think tanks, and affiliated union leadership, has been more capable than the GOP in maintaining a grip on power, even as its base falls away. Indeed, it may very well be the effectiveness of the Democratic Party and its aligned superstructural support that provides an opening for the far

Right, if it is successful in containing movements to its left. Much remains to be seen. But the return to the party and thus the return to the state in this moment of crisis may be what saves us from the combined nightmares of fascism, economic ruin, and ecological collapse.

*Benjamin Balthaser is Associate Professor of Multi-Ethnic U.S. literature at Indiana University—South Bend. He is currently working on a project about internationalism, diaspora, and the U.S. Jewish Left.*

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# Language of the Ill: Observations on Disability in a Time of Pandemic

Deonte Osayande

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I am no longer as passionate about performing poetry as I am about writing it. I realize that, as I sit in my house, having not performed a poem in months. It brings me anxiety, and although my concern is relieved moments later, the world of poetry slam has now become too much for me, where it was once everything. I do not even remember any of my poems. And, strangely, I am not entirely sad about this new development.

I never considered myself part of the land of the healthy. Even before COVID-19 I knew I had narcolepsy and depression. These were accepted facts that I recognized within myself. I thought I knew the language of the ill, how we are struck down when we least expect it, how illness speaks in a particular fashion. I had long felt the effects of being chronically sick before the global pandemic. I knew how health, private and public, could (and does) change instantly. Like realizations about poetry preferences, things that are permanent never really are.

I sit in an empty classroom at the end of the semester, a semester cut short by social distancing. I find myself facing one of my greatest fears. It is not some sort of apparition, or creepy ghoul, but it is a simple reality for many of us. It is the specter of MS, otherwise known as multiple sclerosis. It first appeared in October of this past year, after a normal weekend. I was running to work, but then, oddly enough, my balance appeared off. I used to run track, so it was a strange sensation to have steps



become more and more wobbly as I moved forward. At first, I thought it was vertigo, so I went to work, taught my classes, and waited for it to go away. The thing is, it never did.

In the coming weeks I would be fitted for glasses and given a prescription for dizziness. I was never dizzy and I had not worn a pair of glasses since I was a child. Now, it seemed that I was severely nearsighted. Then I started noticing my forgetfulness and how the poems I wrote for my live performances were all lost in the thick layers of brain fog. I could not recall more than the first few lines of any poem, and that is when I knew something was wrong. I consulted the one person I know who had fought MS and won—my mom (biologically my grandmother).

I confessed to her about my struggles, and she was one of the first people to suggest it might be MS. My father also suffers from the disease, and it has completely debilitated his life. Once a funny, outgoing man, he now stays in the confines of his room, often just to his bed, an almost complete exercise of social distancing. He occasionally comes out in his wheelchair, like he did to meet my wife, but his speech is barely above a whisper. His words are hardly audible. I remember he was saying something to us at the time, but I could not make it out. I just tried to guess what he wanted, and most of the time, through piecing together this dialect of the ill, I was able to. For the instances where I was unable, where fluency stopped, I had to ask his wife or my younger siblings to translate what his illness had turned his language into. Now more than ever I could see that he spoke the language of the ill.

As the years have gone by he has become thinner and thinner and thinner to the point that I am afraid every time his wife calls that the news will be he has passed away.

Multiple Sclerosis is an ailment that progressively eats away at the nerve cells in your brain and spinal cord.

Think about that.

It starts in the place that controls thought and action. *The center of our being.* Then it radiates outward, hitting all of the other parts of ourselves as it goes. It can cause numbness, impaired speech, blurred vision, and severe fatigue. And those are just the physical impairments. Eventually it starts to affect our social being too: how we work, how we play, how we relate to the world in our bodies.

I have known these things since I was a child, watching family members fight. As intimately as I knew it, though, I never thought I would have to face it. But that is often the way with disease—always a risk, but typically something happening over there, to others, separated from ourselves by oceans and bodies and lived experiences. Yet that assumption is no vaccine, and when I saw a neurologist after symptoms persisted, he confirmed that it was one of two things— either MS (that skeleton stumbling in my closet) or just a pinched nerve (oh, to hope). I wanted, of course, for it to be a pinched nerve. But what I feared was that my genetics were finally catching up with me. Like a rival in a track meet, or a competing poet in a slam, slowly gaining, gaining while I was fumbling more and more.

I tried to run from it for so long, but maybe that was my problem. I spent so much of my life running from my genetics. I was so busy blazing my own trail that I neglected the roles that the past plays within all of us. My biological father played football in college, and I did not consider that in my athletic background; rather, I ran track and field, focused on the type of athlete I wanted to be. My mother (grandmother) was an English teacher, but I did not think about how that fed into my background as a writer or as an English professor. We all come from somewhere, and maybe it is important to acknowledge where that is to see where we are headed.

I was initially tested several times, and everything came back negative. I had an MRI on a Thursday. The neurologist called me that Friday and confirmed that the shadow following my whole life had finally caught me.

I have MS. No denying it.

There is inflammation on my brain and spine, and they just needed to determine what kind and the severity of my condition. I am not afraid, not like I was before. I knew fairly quickly what it was, and the neurologist complimented me on coming in because it might be early enough to be treated. In any case, it will be difficult. At least in knowing what you are up against you can take progressive action to fight it. I am not going to quit, as I have not with any of my other health issues,

I'm just at the starting line.

Feet in the blocks.

The gun is about to go off.

But then we shift gears.

Let's begin with the date and the time, the pandemic filling our screens and flying through the air on conversation started in Wuhan, China, around November of last year. Scientists are calling it the "novel" coronavirus. The epidemic has spread globally to the point that every nation is dealing with numerous fatal cases of it. The United States has barred travel from all of Europe, and conversely Canada, (the nation bordering my city) has made travel to and from the United States illegal. Flights are really cheap nationwide, but we are all advised to quarantine ourselves in our own homes until further notice. Although many people are disobeying that order, I am not.

This is an epidemic on a scale that modern society has not seen for quite some time. And I am not just talking about the spread of an infectious disease. A few days after the New Year started the president of the United States launched an airstrike on an Iranian diplomat and killed him. There are even conspiracy theories that the United States engineered this virus as a weapon to be unleashed

on rival nations. This idea comes after Trump has suggested that China is responsible for engineering the virus.

It is just a war of words. The words are there just to distract us from the fact we are living in an uncertain present, with an uncertain future, with leaders who cannot agree on what has happened in the past. The war of words is meant to distract us from the fact that a virus unleashed is not in the realm of science fiction but a reality in a world where diplomats are killed, where racist reality television stars reign as temporary kings, where reality succumbs to the viral sting of Twitter.

This all leaves us in quarantined isolation in a country with a leader that I, and most Americans, did not vote for, combatting a disease no one expected. Speaking, in a way, the language of the ill.

To say it is an uncertain time is an understatement. Yet as I sit at home, writing, always writing, and come to terms with how my career as a poet will change now that we live in a world of social distancing, and I personally deal with MS, I see that these new developments can be mourned, can be feared, but ultimately must be absorbed into the lexicon of our work as writers. We are starting another journey with the same voices we had prior, but with a new language. We can only hope that it carries us as far as we previously wanted to go.

*Deonte Osayande is a poet and nonfiction writer from Detroit, Michigan. He is the author of three collections of poetry.*

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## Interview with Poet and Business Owner, Elysia Smith

Wesley R. Bishop and Elysia Smith

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Part of *The North Meridian Review's* mission is to create a space where both academic and nonacademic writers, activists, and artists can read, share, and engage one another's work. Currently, *NMR* is housed in northern Indianapolis, and to launch its first annual issue the journal's managing editor, Wesley Bishop, met with Indianapolis poet and business owner Elysia Smith at her book and vinyl store in July 2019. Smith is currently the owner and manager of *Irvington Vinyl & Books*, and discussed with *NMR* the history of the store, its relationship to the Irvington neighborhood, and the issues of gentrification in Indianapolis.

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**Bishop:** Could you tell us a little bit about yourself, your business, how it came to be, and what you want to accomplish with *Irvington Vinyl & Books*?

**Elysia:** Well, I never expected to do anything like this. I have a really hard time with rules, and was never a good employee myself. So being in this position is a different perspective. I expected to teach college, and had a lectureship at UMass but got pink-slipped when they suddenly reduced their faculty right before school was supposed to start in 2016. And I got pink-slipped before [the term] began, which was tedious, and I ended up moving to Michigan, and then moved to waitressing for a year, because that's what you do with a poetry MFA. And then moved here, because all my friends were here, and I already had connections here. And then I worked for a marketing firm, and in that time, it was a really conducive environment for me to learn because they hired exclusively creative writers, so they understood our schedules could be different and sometimes needed to be different to be effective. I also learned a lot about the marketing industry, which has become helpful. And I learned a lot about how different businesses are structured because I was writing business-to-business content, so things from marketing software, to accounting services, to payroll, to whatever I had to write about. So, I gleaned a lot of information that made this more possible. The shop started, I was brought here on a date, and loved this place. I had just kind of started getting into collecting records again, which I did a lot in college and grew up doing with my dad. So, we came here, and I was completely mesmerized and then went to gossip with one of my friends Kelsey, who now works here, and found out that [the store] was closing because she knew the owner. And she

dared me to find out why it was closing. And so, I showed up here, a hound for gossip, per usual with two cups of coffee, and was like, “What’s the scoop?” And [I] got to know the owner pretty quickly, Rick Wilkerson, and became really good friends with him immediately. And through that rapport, [we] brainstormed a lot. I’d been itching to have a project, and I had been trying to turn the empty room—there was a big empty room behind my marketing office that I turned into an art and poetry venue.

**Bishop:** Nice.

**Elysia:** So, I was already kind of doing this stuff, minus managing the business part of it. And I’ve been running large-scale events anywhere up to 5,000 attendees since I was nineteen. So, I could manage this on a small scale. And then I wrote a business plan, because... I kept telling people, “I know it seems impossible, but I feel that there’s a... possibility here, and if anyone can find a way to climb into that, I can.” So, I just did all the research and wrote everything out and made sure... [to have a business plan]. When you write it out first, you can ensure that what you’re saying is consistent to everyone who might want to invest, or might be able to connect you, or might be able to do whatever. So, I made sure that I knew that business plan forwards and backwards so that I never said something that was contrary to a person. And I just started talking to people as much as I could. I found a couple of local investors, and each one seemed like they were going to be the done deal, and I would get excited, and then they would back out. The last investor that I found before I left for AWP was the guy who used to own the coffee shop across the street. And that really seemed [to be promising], we had four meetings about it, we looked over contracts, I was going to manage it and have a partial stake of ownership, and he was going to own it more fully. And I was going to be allowed to do whatever I wanted with the space. And then, and I know this is silly, but I believe in it, Mercury retrograde hit. I’m not even kidding you. And he ghosted me for two and a half weeks, ghosted me, and it was leading right up to the date that this place was supposed to close. They were doing their clearance, 40-percent- off sales, lines out the door. And I was getting more and more stressed, because I thought that there wouldn’t be anything left, and I wouldn’t know what to do to fill [the store]... I started researching how to buy books online and all this different stuff because I’d never done any of that. And then the day that it was supposed to be closed... Rick was going to just sell it off in pieces to his different record collecting buddies. Kathleen, who used to own the bookstore part, actually cornered the coffee shop owner in the street, and yelled at him until she got some information. Then Rick called me, I wept for fifteen minutes and then I sat up and I was like, “Who do you know? Who do you know? Who do you know?” ... So I did the whole family phone tree, [found a very distant relative], got his number, lit a cigarette, called him and he’d given me \$70,000 by the end of my cigarette. And it was because I knew that business plan forward and backward, I recited to him everything I was going to do on my own, and I had edited it to reflect sole proprietorship of myself.

*Customer enters the store.*

**Elysia:** Hey!

**Customer:** Hey, how are you?

**Elysia:** I’m good. Just let me know when you’re ready to check out, okay? I’m doing an interview.

**Customer** *jokingly*: I'm ready to check out!

**Elysia** *laughing*: Shut up, brat!

*Customer heads to the vinyl section of the store.*

**Elysia**: Let's see. Oh yeah, that's what I mean, that's why it worked. And then I called Rick, and Rick cried, and then I called Kelsey and screamed into her voicemail, and then I had to hit the ground running because I wanted to reopen as close as possible to Rick's opening date, just for some continuity. So I had given myself—

**Bishop**: Rick, as in the previous owner, correct?

**Elysia**: Yeah, the previous owner. So he opened this store on June first. And so I was trying really hard to go for June 1st, but by then I only... had a month. And it was insane in here. Kathleen claimed Rick was a hoarder. Rick claimed Kathleen was a hoarder, in reality both were hoarders. It was a disaster. So, I ended up taking two months to do the build out, which is half of what's in here now... And then I researched software, and I like to do info sessions, and I recommend this to other people who are trying to start things. If you need to learn how to do QuickBooks, ask a friend who runs a business if you can take them to lunch and pick their brain. Ask an accountant friend to walk you through things. Which all goes back to: be as nice as you can to everyone who could help you, because you never know when you might need their help. Because I had worked for over two years to build up relationships in Indianapolis I didn't [necessarily] know what I was going to do, but I knew I was going to do something at some point. So, I wanted to make sure I socked away all of those contacts that I had...

**Bishop**: Great advice. Just to clarify, are you from Indianapolis originally?

**Elysia**: I was born in Southern California. I moved to Indiana when I was thirteen, and I lived in Oak Park County in Nappanee until I was seventeen, and then I went to Ball State.

*Elysia pauses to think.*

**Elysia**: And then I went to [the] University of Massachusetts Boston, and then Michigan, and then I came back.

**Bishop**: So, this may be an obvious question, but the previous business was a book and vinyl store, run by two different people.

**Elysia**: Yes, Rick Wilkerson owned the vinyl shop, and Kathleen Angelone owned the book store portion.

**Bishop**: But why continue the books and vinyl? I understand that it grew out of these two different people, but why not get rid of the vinyl or get rid of the books and just focus on one?

**Elysia**: I mean, in my darkest, most desperate nights, I wish I never would have kept the vinyl, because it was so much to learn, and it is so much to learn constantly. [Its also hard] because

[customers can] come in... [and not appreciate]... The act of uncovering that which is buried, and [not] appreciat[e] and enjoy... something in a quiet, simple way. I hate it when someone comes in and is like, "I have the 13 pressings of this one album, but I missing this 14th pressing. And you can tell which one it is because of the way the cover is." Or whatever. And they ask me if I have that, and I'm like, there's fucking ten thousand records in there. Maybe I have it, but I'm not going to go in there and look for it, because part of the reason you're coming here is to look through shit. It is an experience. I'm not a *Barnes & Noble* with a computer system where I can just be like, "Oh, yeah, we have that" and that annoys that fuck out of me.

**Customer** *returns holding old vinyl record*: This is real artistic talent!

*Customer holds up the vinyl record in pride.*

**Elysia** *nodding approvingly*: Thank you!

**Bishop** *laughing*: Okay, I will make sure to put that in. Okay, but why the vinyl specifically? What do you think it does to have a place to buy original vinyl records in town?

**Elysia**: Because it functions in the same way books do to me, which is, it forces us to take an intentional moment for ourselves to have an experience, to listen to the music, to maybe change our mood or read a book to escape for a little bit, or learn something. And you have to be within twenty feet of your record player.

**Bishop**: Right.

**Elysia**: It's more intentional to me. It's a different thing, a totally different thing that you feel, I think, when you're listening to a record as opposed to listening to your headphones on the bus. And same thing for having a hard-cover book. I hear so many people come in here and be like, "I love the smell of old books." And you miss all those details, you miss engaging the senses in that way. And that adds to and shapes your experience. It's an utterly different thing to read a mystery novel on the beach than it is to read a mystery novel at your grandmother's kitchen table. Both are experiences, both inform how you take in the texts. But when it's portable and we can take it wherever, we lose that extra layer of meaning and of intentionality, I think.

**Bishop**: I agree with you. My father was into vinyl when I was younger, and that was the main way he listened to music. It was back before CDs or even cassette tapes. I remember he would come home after working, right? And every once in a while, we'd get records off the shelf and he would play them, right? And it was a lot of fun as kids because we would just dance. But you couldn't jump up and down too much. So, it was like this weird thing of dancing and having a lot of fun, but you had to be really careful at the same time, because it was a... how do I want to put this...

**Elysia**: It's an artifact.

**Bishop**: Exactly!

**Elysia**: It's an artifact of that memory... And I think that's why vinyl is coming back. I think people are not as trusting of things they can't touch. And especially in this super digital age where we might



not even be able to touch money anymore. Having something like this that connects you to your father, to your future, because you might pass them down.

*Group of customers walk into the store.*

**Elysia:** Hey friends!

*Group says bello.*

**Elysia:** Give me a minute. I'm doing a little interview right now.

*One of the group looking at Bishop, who thinks it is an interview for a job: Great! Kill it.*

**Elysia:** Thanks.

*One of the other people in the group to Bishop: Do good work!*

**Bishop** *laughing:* Thank you.

*Group begins looking throughout the store. Bishop turning back to Elysia:* Yeah... so... where were we... Do you remember when vinyl started to really come back in? Because I was working at a bookstore a few years ago, when I remember we started carrying it again, and my manager, who was an older guy, he was amazed by this. He thought vinyl had died and gone out. But all of a sudden it was like coming back with a vengeance.

**Elysia:** I think it was 2013, but you'll have to double check the statistic. But Rick kept repeating this to me, 2013 was the best year for vinyl since 1991. I mean I loved experiencing Christmas last year, because afterwards we'd have an influx of new customers who'd gotten record players for Christmas, and nine times out of ten it was someone under the age of thirty-five. Lots of kids, lots of teenagers. I have a whole gaggle of teenagers. All the boys come in and kneel to the Jimmy Hendrix poster, and they'll dig through the records and listen to them together and then pick one that they want. I'll hold it for them, and they'll come back in a week and they'll work off whatever the record costs. So, if it's a \$20 record, they have to spend two hours filing.

**Bishop:** Right.

**Elysia:** And it's fucking great. I love it. And they're thirteen!

**Bishop:** Right, right.

**Elysia:** And they're into making out and records... it's just awesome.

**Bishop:** Very cool. So, does your shop do more than sell books and records? It also does quite a bit in fostering local writers.

**Elysia:** We do a publishing workshop, usually once a month. I'm kind of reconfiguring it right now though, because attendance has dropped, and I think it's because it's all focused on too simple stuff.

The audience that I grew got what they needed, and can do it on their own now. So why are they going to come in?

**Bishop:** That's good.

**Elysia:** So, but that was called *How to Stop Being Scared and Start Getting Published*. We do *Poets Attack*, which tries to bring writers from out of state to read alongside local writers, and I try to pair them really conscientiously so that they'll like each other. The work will resonate with each other and then they'll network. Because the goal is to help get our stuff out of the state so people stopped skipping us in favor of Chicago.

**Bishop:** So it's a way to put Indianapolis on the literary map?

**Elysia:** On the map.

*Elysia thinking.*

**Elysia:** Yeah. And I do a lot of community work outside the shop. I'm collaborating with some really important people in the poetry scene to hopefully, fingers crossed... put on a poetry festival at Central Library where each of the different poetry events in the city will be able to do a mini event, and you can take a tour and see what it's like at *Vocab*, and see what it's like at *Iconoclast* and see what it's like at the *Room of Requirement*, and see what it's like at *Poets Attack*. And there'll be a bunch of local poets signing books... and [eventually] we would like to get a city laureate. That's on our agenda.

**Bishop:** That'd be awesome.

**Elysia:** Yea, and the people I'm collaborating with are Chantel Massey, Gabby Patterson, Mat Davis, TooBlack, and Manon Voice.

*Elysia thinking some more.*

**Elysia:** Let's see. I think that's everyone. Oh, Gizelle Fletcher! So, but check in with me about that, because we've just met for the first time to start figuring out how we're going to fund it, and who's going to do what, but everyone is incredibly excited, which is really cool. I didn't expect that. I fully expected it to be, I mean, there's a lot of big personalities in the organizing space, and so I expected it to be more like, "Well, I want to do this. I think we should do that." But it was just like, "Yes, we need to make poetry the central focus of the city for one day." And everyone came together super quickly over that idea.

**Bishop:** Very cool.

**Elysia:** And then we do 'zine workshops. We just got a huge industrial printer to start allowing monthly subscriptions for 'zinesters and artists who want to use it, or people who do shows and need to print posters, or wedding invitations, or whatever the hell they want. And it's just a hair more expensive than the library. So, it's pretty affordable, especially when you do a subscription service. Yep, and then we'll start printing chapbooks to represent Indiana writers. The press for that

is *Caliban Press*, and it's about being uncensored in Indiana and reminding people that you can be uncensored in Indiana.

**Bishop:** So you are starting a press too?

**Elysia:** Yes.

**Bishop:** Where are you in the process with that?

**Elysia:** Guinea pigging the copy machine right now, learning how to use it myself, figuring out how to publicize it... right now, DIY grassroots.

**Bishop:** Could you explain what a 'zine is?

**Elysia:** It's basically a small magazine. It's an eight and a half by eleven piece of paper folded in half, [and] you got a 'zine. And they're designed to be printed, easily distributed, low cost, handmade, DIY. Often they're traded, rather than sold. I mean a 'zine and a chapbook can be the same thing. They don't have to be, but the production of them is pretty similar. They can be only drawings, only photographs. They can be clip outs [clippings] from magazines collaged in. I've seen everything. And that's kind of the cool thing about them. Whatever you want, as long as you made it yourself and it's out of paper, it's a 'zine.

**Bishop:** And so how does the 'zine process work? Because they're very individualistic, right? People produce them, get to do whatever they want with them— It could be poetry, it could be art. How does that process work? How's that look for a 'zine writer?

**Elysia:** I mean, I don't make 'zines, so I think it's hard to answer that question. But one thing that I have witnessed is a lot of 'zinesters start with found objects. They start with textures. I had a friend come in and scan a bunch of lace and different fabric panels so that she could use those in the 'zine that she made. Kelsey tends to cut little words out of magazines and build poems out of them, and then wrap imagery around the poems. I didn't know I was making 'zines, but I used to . . . make my own chapbooks [by hand], which I think are more like a 'zine. I would illustrate them with Sharpies and then just Xerox them. And I made one every semester all throughout college of my poetry for that semester. But I think they were way more 'zines than chapbooks, although it's hard to make that distinction.

**Bishop:** So in your opinion, what are some of the major trends you're seeing in Indianapolis in terms of local literature?

**Elysia:** Well, I will say one thing for sure. Our poetry scene here is queer, and it is black. And that doesn't get said enough, and it doesn't get lifted up enough. There are academic poets here as well, but they're kind of the old guard. There's a major slam scene. Slam is one of the biggest things in Indianapolis, which is another thing that doesn't get recognized enough. Just that slam is poetry. And granted, one thing that all those poets I'm working with and I have come to agree on, because I'm stringently academic. My poems are transgressive, but I come from an academic background. I'm not going to memorize them, I'm not going to go on stage and recite them. We've come to this

agreement that slam poetry needs to perform on the page as effectively as it performs on the stage. And—

**Bishop:** My apologies, but who is “we”?

**Elysia:** The poets that I’m working with for the poetry festival. They are primarily slam poets.

**Bishop:** Gotcha.

**Elysia:** I’m the only academic poet that’s in that group.

**Bishop:** Right. So, you were saying that it needs to be performed on stage as well as on page—

**Elysia:** And that’s what we’re trying to bring back. Right now, Indianapolis has a lot of open mics. It doesn’t have a lot of featured readings. There’s Butler series and there’s *Poets Attack*. And outside of that it’s [mostly] open mics... And at an open mic, a skilled poet who’s been writing for a long time and publishing... it doesn’t feel like they’re going to grow when they get up on stage. So they don’t demonstrate their talents. So we see a lot of new people who are awesome and amazing, definitely. But we also see a lot of people who are still learning and still growing. So the scene has been, I think, it’s been hard for people who reach a certain understanding of their work, and of collaboration and of success, and they don’t feel like there’s any flint and steel. They don’t feel like they can rub up against any part of the scene and get better. And that’s one of the things that we’re trying to change, and one of the things that I’m talking with those other poets about. We want to bring back featured readings. We want to make poetry hip again. We want people to choose to go to a poetry reading on a Friday night rather than a dance party or a bar. Because it would be cool to be there. And in Indianapolis, if you ask any of the old heads from the slam scene in the [19]90s and the early 2000s, that’s what people did. Poetry was a huge part of this city. And that’s kind of what the goal of the poetry festival is, and part of why I’m collaborating so much, because I don’t know the history of this city. I’m new to it. So, anything I do can’t just be something I made up in my head that I think the city needs. It actually has to be something the city needs...

*Elysia thinks for a moment.*

**Elysia:** Which means listening, as much as possible. So that’s... yeah... I don’t know if that answers your question.

**Bishop:** No, it really does. Thank you. What kind of themes do you see many of these poets working with?

**Elysia:** It’s so political. It’s largely political poetry, largely confessional poetry, very imagistic. I see a lot of nature imagery in the poetry scene right now, and longer poems.

**Bishop:** Do you think that’s markedly different than, say, Chicago?

**Elysia:** Yes, absolutely. I used to be a part of the poetry scene in Boston, and poetry there was highly academic. If you weren’t using thirty pounds of white space on the page, are you even a poet? Super avant-garde. I didn’t feel like I fit in there. I feel more like I fit in here, because my poems are,

like I said, transgressive. So they fit into the kind of the vulnerability that the Indianapolis scene has. Someone will get up on stage and tell you a poem about how they're losing their housing. I get up on stage and tell your poem about a bad sexual experience. If I did that in Boston, it wouldn't go over super well, unless I was in the right basement.

**Bishop:** Last set of questions, as a business owner, what concerns do you have in the city and state?

**Elysia:** I want to see—it's my business model to do this—to provide education and resources to the community. In my mind that means that we help them grow and learn and improve their livelihoods maybe. And then they come back and spend with me. So, I think about the lifetime of the consumer. I want someone who's going to choose my shop over and over and over again whenever they do have money. And the more people that I can connect with in that way, the more consistent business will be over time. And that's because I'm providing them a service, not just a book, not just a record.

**Bishop:** Right. I know there are a lot of questions and concerns right now, especially in Marion County and Indianapolis. Especially with the changes to downtown real estate.

**Elysia:** Yep.

**Bishop:** Specifically, with gentrification, but also the high density of corporations in downtown proper.

**Elysia:** Oh, yes.

**Bishop:** So, as a small-business owner, how do you see yourself interacting in that business landscape.

**Elysia:** So, I actually have been thinking about this, and went ahead after a couple of months in business and took over the Earnings in Business Association as their president, because within five to eight years, the Blue Line is going to be making its way down Washington Street, which means—

**Bishop:** Can you explain what the Blue Line is?

**Elysia:** The Blue Line is our new high-speed bus system. It's the first kind of rapid transit that Indianapolis will see. The Red Line's already been built and that connects Broad Ripple to Fountain Square, essentially. But when that Blue Line comes here, we're going to be getting more tourists, because Irvington has such an interesting catchy legacy. And it's also just going to be more accessible for people who work downtown and live in Irvington and vice versa. So, as that change starts happening, it looks more delicious for developers. And so I wanted to get in with the businesses here, work to create a unified voice so that we can speak up for ourselves when major development comes here. I would really like to put a question on the 2020 ballot, but I don't know if that's going to happen. I came up with this thing called Neighbor Engaged Ethical Development, which essentially would mean that, a banded-together business association or community council for whatever neighborhood. Whenever developers come in and are going to spend over a million dollars in your neighborhood, they need to have a mediated conversation mediated by a lawyer with the development association, or the business association or whatever the major decision-making body is and community body of the neighborhood is. And they have to subsidize 30 percent of their

investment to meet those needs, and then they receive a tax credit. So that's something that I've been fumbling around with, with some people on Mayor Hogsett's campaign.

**Bishop:** Do you think it's doable?

**Elysia:** Well, I don't know anything about politics outside of the basics and where I'd be able to vote responsibly. So, this is a new world. Writing legislation or inciting legislation, maybe, is something I wanted to do for a long time.

**Bishop:** Right.

**Elysia:** So, I would like to figure it out.

**Bishop:** So, I'm assuming that you wanting a ballot question, then would basically mean using the popular referendum? That way as developers move into Irvington they have to deal with local ordinances and a community that is already engaged. Correct?

**Elysia:** Yes.

**Bishop:** I think you would get support for that in the community. It's a big concern I'm hearing around town. And also, I think it would actually impact the community, right? Force some of the larger corporations down to the table in the community so they have to deal with small businesses and the residents of the city. But what's the temperature that you're getting from activists? From city council and from the mayor's office?

**Elysia:** Well I mean, so I've been talking to someone in Mayor Hogsett's campaign, a couple of people. And I mean, it's been positive, but I haven't officially written anything and done any research. I have been bringing this up to the IBA, the Irvington Business Association, since the get-go. So they would know me for the communist that I am.

**Bishop:** That's good.

**Elysia:** I want to be transparent. I also was very transparent about the fact that the Far East side is primarily people of color, and then you look at Irvington and it's a little white bubble of prosperity. And there's a reason why that happened, and it's because the [Ku Klux] Klan was here. And so now, we receive all of these perks, and it is our responsibility to try to bring some equity back to the East side. To elevate our neighbors, to make sure that our neighbors aren't being booted out of homes they've lived in for years. So that someone can come in and turn it into a fucking \$2,000 apartment. And that's what's going to happen.

**Bishop:** Well, I think you are right. I mean look at North Meridian Street, right? It's already seen that. My spouse and I lived on North Meridian, and we moved in, and it was already kind of going through gentrification. It was right across from the Children's Museum. But once they put the Red Line in, the property owners, they basically made a very calculated decision. Since the Red Line was going to disrupt traffic so much they shut down the building for a year, renovated it, kicked everybody out, and then jacked up the rent prices. And they're like, "If you want to come back in over a year, that's great." But the rent's going to be higher. And that's because literally you could

walk out onto North Meridian, jump on the Red Line, and you're connected to the entire city. So this public transportation is great, but without protections for communities in the city...

**Elysia:** Yep. And I mean, we have time. We have the luxury of that on the East Side to actually talk to each other and to start building these connections, and using what we've seen in the city to help the other communities.

*Elysia Lucinda Smith is an Indianapolis poet, community organizer, and owner of Irvington Vinyl & Books. The store serves as both a business and a space for writers to meet and perform their work. Smith's work has appeared in Pank, The Indianapolis Review, Calamity Mag, and Voicemail Poems. Her first book of poetry was published in 2017 by Blaze Vox Books.*

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# Memories in Translation, Part I: Oskar Gerber Testimonial and the Italian Holocaust

Edited by Valentina Concu and Wesley R. Bishop  
Translated by Valentina Concu

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## **Introduction:**

Studies of the Holocaust have always been fostered by testimony from survivors of Nazi Fascism. These survivor accounts have helped scholars with the unpleasant, but vital, task of giving shape to the horrific death machine put in place from 1933 to 1939 by the Nazis behind the gates of numerous death camps. Because of Germany's role as the main perpetrator of the genocide, the history of the Holocaust often overlaps with the history of the German nation, and with the destiny of countless Jewish people whom the Nazis imprisoned and killed in the many concentration camps scattered throughout central Europe. Any discussion on the Holocaust can, however, benefit from the stories of those survivors who experienced the waves of discrimination and persecution in different contexts, as fascism spread in Europe in the early twentieth century. Many of these non-German stories come from the instances where the Italian fascist regime confined and harassed its own Jewish people during the Holocaust era. According to historian Simon Levis Sullam, much of the historiography of the Italian war era selectively focuses on the Italian people who fought in the Resistance on the side of the Allies, while very little attention has been dedicated to the persecution of the Italian Jewish population.<sup>63</sup> Despite this attempt to ignore and avoid the Italian fascist Anti-Semitism during the

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<sup>63</sup> Simon Levis Sullam, *The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews in Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).



period between the declaration of the first racial laws in 1938 and the fall of [Benito] Mussolini in 1945, Italy's role in the Jewish Holocaust has been well documented.<sup>64</sup> As Michele Sarfatti claims, "at a moment still not properly identified between the end of 1935 and the summer of 1936, the anti-Jewish question became for the regime an issue of internal policy they could no longer put off."<sup>65</sup> From that moment on, the Italian Jewish community became the center of numerous attacks aimed to disrupt the lives of many. Not long after that, the fate of many Italian Jews under the Fascist regime meshed with that of those foreign Jewish people who had entered Italy while trying to escape the Nazis in central European countries such as Hungary and Poland. The testimonies that we will present in this section, "Memories in Translation," recount the journeys of two of those non-Italian Jews: Oskar Gerber and Hertha Gerber. Although their stories started in two different cities (Budapest and Bielsko,<sup>66</sup> respectively), they both ended up confined in the southern concentration camp of Ferramonti. The Shoah Foundation in 1998 first recorded their testimonies in Milan and have since made the documents available to the public through the foundation's website. To our knowledge this is the first time that these interviews have been made available to the public in English. The English translations were commissioned in 2019 by one of Oskar's relatives, and were initially meant for private use only. However, the significance and relevance of their testimonies called for the present piece. We at the *North Meridian Review* offer these stories, slated for publication in the first two issues (Oskar in 2020 and Hertha in 2021) to contribute to the field of Italian Holocaust studies.

The testimonies of Oskar and Hertha are part of those stories that highlight the two faces that Italy displayed during wartime. According to an article in the *New York Times*<sup>67</sup>, many Italian and

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<sup>64</sup> Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews: German-Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy 1922–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue and Survival* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Renzo De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History* (New York: Enigma Books, 2001); Liliana Picciotto, *Il libro della memoria. Gli ebrei deportati in Italia (1943–1945)* (Milan: Mursia, 2002).

<sup>65</sup> Michele Sarfatti, *Jewish in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> Bielsko is today the western part of the city Bielsko-Biala in Poland. It used to be an independent town until 1951.

<sup>67</sup> The article appeared in print as "Scholars Reconsidering Italy's Treatment of Jews in the Nazi Era," *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 2010, p. A28.

foreign Jewish people experienced firsthand the puzzling behavior of the Italian Fascist regime. Italy enforced its own racial laws in 1938. This meant Jewish children were expelled from school, Jewish people lost their employment and property, and Jewish people could no longer hold public office. Despite this, the regime did not encourage any physical abuse against Jewish citizens and did not commit any executions in its own concentration camps. There was also a very strong anti-fascist resistance movement, the Partisans, which fought not only against the Fascists, but also against the Germans when they occupied northern Italy in 1943. Further, many Italians often risked their own lives to hide Jewish people in their homes and brought them much-needed supplies such as food. Many scholars have recognized the ambiguity of the Italian regime, and this ambiguity is also present in Oskar's and Hertha's testimonies. Oskar's testimony, specifically, sometimes depicts Italy as a benevolent society that helped him and his family escape certain death in the German concentration camps. Hence, while his testimony should be seen as a valid recounting and as a valuable resource to better understand Nazi Fascism, one should not forget Italy's responsibility in taking away the freedom of many of its Jewish citizens. Oskar's and Hertha's testimonies should, therefore, be read keeping in mind Italy's explicit collusion with Germany's horrific anti-Jewish policies. Oskar's resentment for the Hungarian government is also still very present in his words, and while it is important to recognize the role of Hungary in the persecution of Jewish people, the complexity of the situation should make anyone refrain from labeling entire nationalities as guilty or innocent, as Oskar does when talks about Hungarians (guilty) and Italians (innocent).

Oskar's and Hertha's testimonies are, ultimately, collections of memories in which the voices of those who experienced these events guide readers on a journey of resistance and hope during one of the darkest periods of European history. It is essential to see both their experiences as broader stories of humanity because they belong to a time when the humanity of many was consistently and systematically denied and annihilated. For this reason, Oskar's and Hertha's testimonies are also

relatable to our own moment, as the issues of persecution and discrimination are very much present in our modern society. Therefore, this interview is a document that offers lessons for readers in the present, especially now when many of the modern European nations are on the verge of returning to authoritarian right-wing rule.<sup>68</sup>

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**Interviewer:** I'm Lisa Sacerdote, we are in Milan, in Italy, and today we are interviewing Mister Oskar Gerber. Today is April 14th, 1998 and the interview will be in Italian. Could you tell me your name?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oskar Gerber.

**Interviewer:** When were you born?

**Oskar Gerber:** March 12th, 1911.

**Interviewer:** And how old are you?

**Oskar Gerber:** 87 years old.

**Interviewer:** Where were you born?

**Oskar Gerber:** In Budapest, Hungary.

**Interviewer:** How big was your family?

**Oskar Gerber:** I'm the firstborn. There was my mom, my dad, myself, and my sister who died last year, Rosi, Elena, and then Ladislao, and then Agnese.

**Interviewer:** Could you tell me the names of your parents?

**Oskar Gerber:** My dad's name was Salomone. My mom's name was Enzia.

**Interviewer:** And the last name of your mom?

**Oskar Gerber:** Rosenberg.

**Interviewer:** Do you know how your parents met?

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<sup>68</sup> The following translation has been edited for clarity and length. For the original document in Italian, please see the Shoah Foundation's archives at the University of Southern California.

**Oskar Gerber:** They met in Budapest. My mom was one year old when she came to Hungary; she went to school in Hungary. My dad came to Budapest when he was 20–21 years old, and he met my mother. He got married, they got married.

**Interviewer:** At home, which languages did you all speak?

**Oskar Gerber:** So, at home, at my grandmother's place, Swiss German—so German from Switzerland—or Yiddish, because they didn't speak Hungarian well and with my parents [they spoke] Hungarian. Hungarian, German, [and] Yiddish, as we needed.

**Interviewer:** In which part of Budapest did you live? Do you remember that?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, the city, in Budapest, and the street, so I was born at 25 Dobosi-úta-- úta means street. Then 31 Színháza-úta, úta means street again, in Slavic "uliza."

**Interviewer:** In the part of the city where you lived, were there other Jewish people?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yeah, it was a part where a lot of Jewish people lived. And in Budapest, 300,000 Jewish people lived there. Of those, almost nobody is still alive. Because of those 'good Hungarians,' they were so good that they exterminated all the Jewish people.

**Interviewer:** What was your father's job?

**Oskar Gerber:** Furs, but also tailoring, for men and women. In Hungary, you would work three or four months with furs, but the year has twelve months, you need to live, so he also added tailoring, tailoring for both men and women.

**Interviewer:** Did your father travel for work?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yeah, of course, he had to.

**Interviewer:** To which school did you go to?

**Oskar Gerber:** So, I went for the first two years of elementary school to a district school. The rest, the other four years of elementary school, and middle school, to a public school. And then to high school, to a business academy that wasn't founded by the State, although it was public, but [which was founded] by some Jewish businessmen.

**Interviewer:** So, you didn't go to a Jewish school the first years of school?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no. The first years I did not, and then it didn't work because, you know, every day, scuffles here and there. My mom saw that too. Sometimes I was the victim, sometimes I was the perpetrator. One couldn't go to school anymore, for every little thing you would hear "dirty Jew." And then one would get into fights right and left. Then [at the Jewish school] it was only Jewish people, it was home.

**Interviewer:** What were the differences between a 'normal' school and a Jewish school?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh well, the no-Jewish, but the Christian school, in one week they would teach one hour of religion. A rabbi would come and teach us the first basic things of Judaism. There [in the Jewish school] everything was based on the Bible, the Old Testament, and then the others, you know?

**Interviewer:** In Budapest, when you went to the Jewish school, did you see other non-Jewish people?

**Oskar Gerber:** Sure, but not in my class. In my first two years of elementary school, and in the high school, in the business academy.

**Interviewer:** How were the relationships with these people?

**Oskar Gerber:** Terrible. Terrible. I told you, every day with scuffles, scuffles. One of my dearest friends, during the war in Spain, before World War II, he was there and he worked with his uncle, now I don't remember if it was in Barcelona or in Madrid. He was a... how do you say it?... he was a disabled person because a trolley had cut one of his legs. And he would lean on me, he would take [his prosthetic leg] out because it was a piece of wood from a broom... [and he would hit the bullies in these fights].

**Interviewer:** Mister Gerber, how was the Jewish community in Budapest?

**Oskar Gerber:** Very active. In Hungary, there were 1 million Jews in total, and three hundred thousand only in Budapest, the capital, the rest was all over Hungary... five thousand; three thousand; ten thousand... depending on the city. In my district, where I was born and I lived, there were five synagogues. And then in all the districts, the entire city of Budapest, I think, there were seventy or eighty synagogues, bigger and smaller ones.

**Interviewer:** Did you go to the synagogue?

**Oskar Gerber:** Of course, a little bit less after I was done with school because I didn't have time, I had to work. But we went there on Friday evenings. We would finish early, at 3 or 4 pm, and then we went to the synagogue.

**Interviewer:** Which synagogue was that?

**Oskar Gerber:** Mmm, the progressive ones, because there were two types of synagogues. The Hasidic ones and the progressive ones. We went to the progressive ones.

**Interviewer:** Did you also do Shabbat at home?

**Oskar Gerber:** Shabbat at home...my mom had the candles. My dad would say the Kiddush, or my grandparents [would while] they were alive. The food was exactly how [it was] prescribed by the laws, the hygienic laws of our region, you know? Meat could not be eaten with dairy, and vice versa, because if you eat dairy, butter, milk, you have to wait two hours until you can eat meat. But, if you eat meat, you have to wait eight hours to eat the other.

**Interviewer:** So, your parents were practicing Jewish people?

**Oskar Gerber:** Practicing, yes, at home the food was strictly orthodox. There were two sinks, one for the dairy and one for the meat, and they would not mix anything. You could not do that.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember your Bar Mitzvah?

**Oskar Gerber:** Of course, yes.

**Interviewer:** What do you remember about it? Could you tell me?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh well, all our friends were there, relatives and friends. But I did it at school... No at the Hasidic temple, I remember. But also Christians, my Christian friends came too, to assist me, to visit me, they attended for the entire time until I was done with my prayers. And then my father's friends, there were a lot of Christians, customers [from my dad's business] also. The temple was full.

**Interviewer:** Who helped you prepare for the Bar Mitzvah?

**Oskar Gerber:** That was Doctor Krener Abraham, he was the one who prepared me, also for Italian, the basics, the first ...steps for Italian, for German, and for English. He helped me a lot, also, with Hungarian.

**Interviewer:** How long did you study for the Bar Mitzvah? Do you remember it?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, one year, one year more or less, except for the rest days. On Friday-- on Friday and Saturday-- I did not study. [I studied from] Sunday until Friday.

**Interviewer:** How old were you when you had your Bar Mitzvah?

**Oskar Gerber:** 13. You cannot do it before that, or after. After you can, maybe if you were sick, or... I don't know... someone died in the family...

**Interviewer:** Mister Gerber, do you have any memories from World War I?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, yes, when I was a child, the misery. The misery, it was terrible. There wasn't any bombing like in World War II, because of the shortage. My mom back then rented a cart with two horses, and she would go to the farmers to buy stuff, there was the black market, she went to buy stuff for us, for the grandparents, for my aunts and my uncles... but after that, there wasn't anything to buy. At least they would sell bread, 200 g of bread per day, butter, meat, so, nothing special, so one would not starve. Then I remember, the 'Spanish flu,' it was terrible. And every morning, the garbage trucks would come to collect the bodies. And I saw from my balcony how they would pick them up and throw them on top of each other, like old rags, nothing, like old rags, all piled up. fifty, sixty, thirty.<sup>69</sup> And these trucks would go around until they were full. And then they would burn them. It was terrible.

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<sup>69</sup> Due to Oskar's age, and also the informality of spoken language, sometimes during the interview he jumps around with numbers and dates. Part of this is, undoubtedly, due to trying to remember and recount his life in Italian which was not his first language.

**Interviewer:** Did you always live in Budapest?

**Oskar Gerber:** During the war, yes. But after that, Communism came, 1919... until 1917, the Hungarian communists were getting together, especially those that were more active. Russians that spoke Hungarian, because they were from those parts in Hungary— Satmar— where my grandfather from my father's side was from. And... wait... I lost my train of thought--

**Interviewer:** So, what we were saying, you didn't always live in Budapest, right?

**Oskar Gerber:** After the war, Communism came to power in Hungary. So, my dad was rich, you could not stay there, because they would take all the rich people, all the well-off people, and they would deport them. They would kill them in the forests, and in their prisons. Then we went, on foot, from Budapest to Vienna, 250 Km. We would walk in the night. Further, my mom was pregnant with my second sister, you know? Elena. And during the day, we would hide in some caves. I think we arrived almost at the border, then my dad gave a lot of money to a boatman because there was... [the Leitha River]... my dad paid this man that brought us to the Austrian side. And so, we saved ourselves. I also went to school in Austria, in Vienna, one of [the Jewish] schools.

**Interviewer:** The trip from Budapest to Vienna, how long did it take?

**Oskar Gerber:** On foot...ah, I think 10 days, because we would walk only at night when people could not see us. There was a lot going on, on the streets and in the countryside. We could not take trains because they would take us off the trains immediately. And then, when we arrived in Vienna, my dad had a lot of customers there, so he started working as soon as we got there. Then, during the war, during World War I, my dad worked with some Austrians, and then also with some Italians, from Trieste, a banker, [named] Castiglioni, and then...wait, another one... I saw his last name because it is the same as a big fur seller around here... Meloni... he was a banker. They financed my dad back then because he would do some services for the state, for the military, you know? For instance, for the Hungarian alpine, the alpine hunters, they needed the interior parts for their clothes, so they would need to buy it, they would buy the raw material to be tailored. After the war...who knows, he stayed and he still worked. It was our luck to be able to go to Italy and get help from them.

**Interviewer:** What did you feel when you left Budapest?

**Oskar Gerber:** A great pain. I spent almost all my childhood there. There were some breaks in between, but always in Budapest. A lot of friends, Christians, and Jews, female friends, such as Goldstein, Magda, Rose... I don't remember... it was seventy-five years ago, almost eighty.

**Interviewer:** Where did you live in Vienna?

**Oskar Gerber:** We went to live in the second district, it was called "Hotel New York" in the Kleine Sperrgasse, from Tabostraße, on the side. We stayed in the hotel for the entire time of our stay in Vienna.

**Interviewer:** How long did you stay in Vienna?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh well. Wait, so... we escaped from Budapest in... May, from May until November, November or December. So by staying among Germans, Austrians, I forgot Hungarian. Because there, they would always speak German, I mean, it was a German dialect, but it was more German... Viennese, the dialect of Vienna. So, I forgot a lot of Hungarian, [which] I needed to learn again.<sup>70</sup>

**Interviewer:** To which school did you go in Vienna?

**Oskar Gerber:** The Jewish school. Always the Jews school, it was religious.

**Interviewer:** Was it different from the one in Budapest?

**Oskar Gerber:** Of course, it was different, because it was more German than Yiddish. More than anything it was Viennese, the dialect from Vienna. But the teaching was in German, pure German, with some dialectal traits.

**Interviewer:** Did you go to a synagogue in Vienna?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, on the Seitenstettengasse.<sup>71</sup> On the other side of Vienna, because the second district of Vienna it was on one side of the Danube. After crossing a bridge, you arrive at the Rottenturm-Straße, the first street on the right, going up the stairs, there is... or there was, now I don't know... the biggest temple of Vienna, the biggest Jewish temple in Vienna, and it was called Seitenstettengasse-- Seitenstettengasse Temple—in which the main cantor was the father-in-law of my uncle. He was an ex-opera singer, and then he became the major cantor of the temple. There was also a smaller temple where I went to school, like a chapel, Seitenstettengasse. The ritual bath for the Jewish women. You know, before getting married, women must go through this ritual.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember when you went back to Budapest?

**Oskar Gerber:** In 1922.

**Interviewer:** Were you happy about going back to Budapest?

**Oskar Gerber:** Of course, it was my hometown. And there hadn't been any murders yet. Everything changed afterwards. But I did not speak their language anymore. But after a couple of months, I learned it again. I remembered it again.

**Interviewer:** When you came back, did you go back to school?

**Oskar Gerber:** Went back to school...

*Tries to remember exact year.*

.... Oh yeah, the Jewish school.

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<sup>70</sup> Oskar is referring here to the eventual move back to Hungary he would make, and the need to relearn the language he had forgotten during his family's forced migrations.

<sup>71</sup> The Stadttempel (in English "City Prayer House"), also called the Seitenstettengasse Temple, is the main synagogue of Vienna, Austria. It is located in the Innere Stadt 1st district on the Seitenstettengasse 4.



**Interviewer:** How old were you when you finished at Jewish school?

**Oskar Gerber:** When I was fourteen and a half. In the least year, the fourth year of middle school, I went to high school. I wasn't quite fifteen yet.

**Interviewer:** And how long was high school?

**Oskar Gerber:** Four years. I graduated when I was nineteen.

**Interviewer:** Did you like this school?

**Oskar Gerber:** No. No. I did not like the professors.

**Interviewer:** What was it you did not like about it?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh well, every opportunity they would have, they would use it to attack me. 'You Jews,' you are the 'others.' You are the others, because we were 'different' from them. I don't have good... I have very bad memories of Budapest.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember anything in particular?

**Oskar Gerber:** We would fight and beat each other almost every day. What more do you want to know?

**Interviewer:** And the professors?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh no, the professors no. One of them told me because I would always eat a lot... I think he taught stenography and dactylography. It was very boring, the way they would teach, it was a one-hundred- or 150-year-old system. Gabsberger was his name. So, I got bored and I had my snacks I brought from home, and I would start eating them, and the newspaper about sports was on the shelf in front of me, so I would eat and read. But he noticed, so he came behind me, going through the chairs in the room. He saw what I was doing, and I did not notice it. He beat me twice in the back of my head and I could not hear anything for half an hour.

**Interviewer:** Did any of your professors ever mention the fact that you were--

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, the class leader, he taught... I think he taught... French and Hungarian history. There were others too, one who taught Mathematics and Physics. The others were neutral, we can say that, no pro-Jews, but neutral.

**Interviewer:** How old were you when you finished school?

**Oskar Gerber:** Almost nineteen. Eighteen and a half. Eighteen and a half, yes, March...so, July..so, March, April, May, June, July, so five months after that.

**Interviewer:** Did you go to college?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, I couldn't do that; it is not that I didn't want to. There were racial laws back them.

**Interviewer:** But you would have wanted to continue?

**Oskar Gerber:** Business and commerce, you know? And the commerce is connected also to the languages. And I had already an advantage, actually two, because if I went to the commerce academy, I would have skipped the first year at the university, you know?

**Interviewer:** Did you like your job?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, I did, I knew that I had to learn if I wanted to survive, you know? And that is why when I arrived in Italy... but this is another long story. So, after two months I had already thirty-six employees. Not only internally, but also externally, they would get paid based on how much they would work. And it went pretty well. They arrested me when the war broke out. My dad, my mom, and my sisters, they all stayed at the shop, as I was still there. Nobody would bother us, everybody would help....until the Germans came. Then it was a life threat.<sup>72</sup>

**Interviewer:** Could you tell me when did you and your family decide to leave Budapest?

**Oskar Gerber:** In 1938.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Oskar Gerber:** Because it became impossible to stay there. It was dangerous even to go out. Pogroms after pogroms. Do you know what 'pogrom' means? Everybody knew me, everybody knew that I was Jewish and not Christian. What could I have done alone by myself if four or five people would attack me and maybe take out a knife? I couldn't have done anything. I was alone...with my parents... my brother was younger than me, he still went to middle school, second year. He was a young boy still. And my mom? There was nothing we could do.

**Interviewer:** Had the situation in 1938 become worse for Jewish people?

**Oskar Gerber:** Day by day. It was impossible.

**Interviewer:** Did something bad happen to any of your relatives or friends?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, when I came back, I didn't find anyone anymore. The dad of someone would tell me 'Oskar, is that you? Pietro is gone, they burnt him, I would run home and cry. I couldn't stand that anymore, you know? I went back in 1948 to see what was remaining, because we left our shop there, we hid our goods, gold, gems, everything we could hide. We sold all our goods before leaving with nothing. There wasn't anything anymore. The counters of the shop were gone. They found our stuff, and I know who it was. But I could not do anything.

**Interviewer:** Why did you decide to come to Italy?

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<sup>72</sup> Here Oskar jumps ahead in time and begins discussing his memories of Italy in World War II.

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh well, my dad worked with Italian customers, in Trieste, in Fiume, in Padua, and in Mestre. He had customers [there]. He wanted to try it out in Italy, otherwise, we would have gone somewhere else. In Switzerland, but I didn't like that idea, because Switzerland was too close to the Germans.

**Interviewer:** Was it possible to leave Hungary?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, by buying some passports... not fake ones, true Polish passports, paying what we had to pay, you know? With them, we were able to leave, not as Hungarians but as Polish people. In Italy, we went to the Italian embassy in Budapest for a visa, and they said, 'You don't need one. Why do you want to go?' [We said], 'To take some baths,' I didn't say that I was going there to work. [I said] to take some baths because I had rheumatism arthritis...and they said, 'Yes, you can go.' And we all came to Italy.

**Interviewer:** Where did you buy those passports?

**Oskar Gerber:** Because with a Hungarian passport, I would not be allowed to leave. First of all, I needed to show that I had paid all the taxes I needed to pay, that I served in the military, but then, knowing that I'm a Jew, that would have been impossible. A lot of my friends who died were deported to collect landmines in Ukraine, and they would be blown away, you know?

**Interviewer:** Mister Gerber, from whom did you buy these Polish passports?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh.. They were... what were they called... lawyers and they would do that, of course, they would make money, and not just a little. They probably would split 50:50 among them. Do you know how much money my in-laws paid for four passports? My wife told me, 25,000 gold dollars for each passport. 100,000 gold dollars for four passports. And today, one dollar back then is 20 dollars today. Do you know what that means?

**Interviewer:** What about your passports?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, ours weren't that expensive. I don't remember, all together it was 10,000 dollars.

**Interviewer:** But you don't know who did these passports for you, right?

**Oskar Gerber:** Well no, but I know one thing. I could have gone to the embassy to renew them because they were legal. Probably the embassy in Budapest knew about it and it was ok with that.

**Interviewer:** So, with whom did you leave Budapest? You and then, who went with you?

**Oskar Gerber:** My entire family. Mom, dad, my three sisters, and two brothers. I mean, my brother and me.

**Interviewer:** What did you and your family take with you?

**Oskar Gerber:** The things that we wore. Maybe we had like 800,000 dollars left. A little bit of gold, a gold watch, a gold cigarette holder. My mom had some jewelry, earrings that my daughter wears today.

**Interviewer:** What did you leave in Budapest, what did you hide?

**Oskar Gerber:** We hid stuff underground. Gold, jewelry, and then the goods of the shop, we sold a little bit of them, and some we brought them to Italy, as personal items, my mom and my three sisters did that, and those good were valuable because they were furs, Persian goods, mink furs, and fox furs. With that, we started our business again.

**Interviewer:** Where did you go to live in Italy?

**Oskar Gerber:** In Milan. First in a hotel. In Agnello Street, there was ... at the corner with... how do you call the street close to the Milan Cathedral? Venice Avenue... yes... Venice Avenue. There was a hotel there, Agnello Hotel. We stayed there for two to three months until we met a Hungarian that was going back to Spain. He had sold his house, he had sold actually his severance pay because he couldn't sell the walls, those were owned by the landlord. And we stayed there even after the war, during the war, and after that, in 1948 or 1949, my parents found a house to buy on... wait, it is close to here.... My three sisters and my little brother still live there. Well, when my wife comes, she will tell me the name of the street.<sup>73</sup>

**Interviewer:** How was the trip?

**Oskar Gerber:** The trip was twenty-four to thirty-six hours. It wasn't a direct trip, it was a local one, it would stop in Budapest. When we were arriving at the border with Yugoslavia, in Kotoriba, the train would stop everywhere. Also when we were traveling through Yugoslavia. Then in Trieste, we changed the train and it was a direct one. We arrived there in the evening, and in the morning of the day after, we arrived [in Milan].

**Interviewer:** How was the trip?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh well, we were very anxious because we were afraid that they would take us off the train, you know? In Hungary. In Yugoslavia, we were more relaxed, but you never knew. The Croatians, they were Jews-haters, you know?

**Interviewer:** Did you speak any Italian at all?

**Oskar Gerber:** I didn't know much, I used what I had learned at school first. I would use a lot of infinitives.<sup>74</sup> I did my best. And then, after 4 months, I started speaking correctly.

**Interviewer:** Did you start working again in Milan?

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<sup>73</sup> Oskar seems to have trouble here remembering due to his attempts to recall the street names and buildings.

<sup>74</sup> In Italian, verbs need to be conjugated for every form of the pronoun. Using the infinitive forms with the personal pronouns is incorrect but still understandable. For instance, the infinitive in Italian of "to speak" is "parlare." The correct conjugation for "I speak" would be "io parlo," instead of "io parlare."

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes. So, when we found the house, we rented all the backyard and the first floor. We were like thirty-six workers. We made it into an article in the newspapers. Back then, the fascist government didn't give money to import goods. All the goods that arrived came through the black market. Goat and sheep's fur, material from Abyssinia. The quality was average, but we had to work with that. Bunny and hare fur, everything that we could put our hands on. But after we opened...a couple of days after, two or three weeks after, I had already thirty-six employees. They buried me with orders, and I would travel to Genoa, to Bologna, to Turin, to show the samples we made, and customers would put the orders in.

**Interviewer:** And what did your sisters and your brother do?

**Oskar Gerber:** They would help in the shop. The oldest and my younger brother. Agnese was still going to school. The oldest...no, she worked at the shop... the second oldest was a dental technician, and she worked during the war, all those years, she worked at the Vipla. They knew she was Jewish, but she was unreplaceable.

**Interviewer:** What about your mom?

**Oskar Gerber:** My mom... well, she was a housewife. She was too old, and she started getting sick.

**Interviewer:** What about your dad? Was he still working?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, yes, he did. In the administration, because he was also old, you know? My mom had a paralysis, you know, her mouth was on the side here. I didn't want to see it...

**Interviewer:** When you and your family arrived in Italy, did you go to visit the Jewish community in Milan?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, right away. We signed up as regular members. We reserved the spots at the temple, the big temple there.

**Interviewer:** Were there some differences between the Jewish community in Hungary and the one in Italy?

**Oskar Gerber:** Of course, because we were Ashkenazi Jewish people. So, we would pray and speak in Hebrew, not in Yiddish, in Yiddish was the translation... Austrian-Hungarian-German. Here they were like the Sephardi Jews. But they would also depend on German.

**Interviewer:** Were there any other Jewish Hungarians in Milan?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, yes. There were a lot of them. But almost nobody could leave Italy.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember what happened in 1938 when they introduced the racial laws?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, of course. First of all, my younger sister and my younger brother, they were expelled from school. Everyone. I wasn't going to school anymore, one of my sisters was working, the other one was working at the shop. Then all my Jewish friends lost their jobs. They were CDOs

in the banks, professors at the University, singers at the Scala.<sup>75</sup> There was this [man named] Veneziani. Venenziano or Veneziani, I don't remember, he was the director of the choir at the Scala. And then singers, Ghildingorin, who was a famous bass player. Now, if he is still alive, I'm sure he works in the Netherlands, in Ajax or Amsterdam. I saw him twice while I was going to London with the train... back then you would take the train because the Jewish people were powered by propellers, and not by reactions.<sup>76</sup> Once I saw a memorial for the fallen Jewish people here in Linate. But the thing that I saw there, it was terrible. Hands all over the place, I felt I was about to pass out at some point. But a lot of them have died there. Only a few survived. Then I started going to London by plane, because, you know, with the train, it would take twenty-three or twenty-four hours. You have to go through Switzerland, northern France, or through western Germany along the Rhine. Then the Netherlands, the port of Rotterdam, the Baltic Sea, and then you would arrive in Harwich.<sup>77</sup>

**Interviewer:** When they introduced the racial laws, did your work change? Could you still work?

**Oskar Gerber:** Nobody would bother me. I would tell my employees 'keep working.' Once a federal employee from Milan came to visit us. Our neighbors, and the owners of the shops around us, they would care for us and they would give us great information. And they came to see and what they found was almost a factory, and we would work night and day. And they would say 'good people, good people.' And so, we worked, we worked for all the duration of the war, until the Germans came.

**Interviewer:** But when they passed an ordinance to expel all the foreigner Jewish people...

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, that was only on paper.

**Interviewer:** What happened?

**Oskar Gerber:** They decided on a census.

**Interviewer:** And nothing changed?

**Oskar Gerber:** Nothing. On the papers, you wouldn't have any rights, but practically nothing really changed.

**Interviewer:** But weren't you afraid that something would happen?

**Oskar Gerber:** I was afraid when we would see a lot of Germans. I told my mom, 'Look, this doesn't look good, come up, bring the goods and we will do what we can.' And they came, unfortunately not with all the goods.<sup>78</sup> My dad would say, he was annoyed, that we couldn't leave a shop without goods. At least we should have left the samples. But those samples, in 1943, there were those famous bombings all over Milan, you couldn't leave them there, because the roof of the

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<sup>75</sup> La Scala is an opera house in Milan, Italy. The theatre was inaugurated on August 3, 1778, and was originally known as the Nuovo Regio Ducale Teatro alla Scala.

<sup>76</sup> It is not entirely clear what Oskar means by this phrase. Perhaps he is being poetic to make a larger point? Perhaps it is a phrase or idea lost in translation as he recounted this story in Italian?

<sup>77</sup> Harwich is a town in Essex, England, and one of the Haven ports, located on the coast with the North Sea to the east.

<sup>78</sup> It is not clear, entirely, who Oskar is referring to with "they" and "goods" here.

house would burn, and we were also on the last floor. Nothing happened but they could not survive at all. Then they were afraid. My mom, my dad, and I... we were already in Gandino.<sup>79</sup> And my 3 sisters and my little brother, they came immediately.

**Interviewer:** You never thought in 1938 to leave Italy?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no one could do that.

**Interviewer:** Even with the ordinance?

**Oskar Gerber:** Listen... yes, there was this ordinance... and they would give 3,000 or 4,000 liras to everyone with a foreign passport, with five or six passports, that would have been a lot of money, but nobody would do that because people would know that we were Jewish. The Swiss, France, let's not talk about France. England, nothing.

**Interviewer:** No country wanted the Jewish people?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no. It was impossible.

**Interviewer:** So, Mister Gerber, you were saying that in 1938 Italy introduced the racial laws and the decree of expulsion.

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And you remained in Italy?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, we couldn't go anywhere else. But nobody would touch us, we had more than thirty-six employees, internal and external. There was no reason for us to leave.

**Interviewer:** Did the relationships with the non-Jewish people change?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, they did not. Look, Italy was an exception, like Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. See, the king of Denmark, when the Germans invaded Denmark, he was the first to put a Star of David on his chest, a yellow one. And nobody could touch him. And the Danish people helped Jewish kids to escape to Sweden during the night with the ferries. And Italy was the only country in southern and central Europe that did the same, maybe even more than them.

**Interviewer:** Mister Gerber, do you remember what happened in 1940?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, well, I remember that the war broke at 10 am and at 11 am they arrested me.<sup>80</sup>

**Interviewer:** Do you remember that day? Could you tell me more about it?

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<sup>79</sup> Gandino is a commune in the Province of Bergamo in the Italian region of Lombardy, located about seventy kilometers northeast of Milan and about twenty kilometers northeast of Bergamo.

<sup>80</sup> When the war broke, the Fascists started arresting those Jewish people which they considered the most "dangerous" for the regime. That is why Oskar's mother and sisters were not deported to a concentration camp.

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, well, the Jewish people were treated like the other prisoners and put in those cars and you couldn't really see anything. You could see through the bars, the normal people, and [then] we arrived at San Vittore.<sup>81</sup>

**Interviewer:** Where were you on the day that you were arrested?

**Oskar Gerber:** At home. At 4 am they came to take me. For five minutes. But those five minutes became five years.

**Interviewer:** What did they tell you?

**Oskar Gerber:** 'Come with us,' they said, 'it is just a formality, five minutes.' Then I said, 'But now? I can come in the morning, or at noon, as you want. Or you can come to pick me up.' 'No, no, come now.' Then I knew what was about to happen.

**Interviewer:** So, you weren't expecting to be arrested...

**Oskar Gerber:** When they came home, yes. But before that, no, I wasn't.

**Interviewer:** Who arrested you? Who was it?

**Oskar Gerber:** The guards from San Fedele... I don't remember the name.

**Interviewer:** How old were you when they arrested you?

**Oskar Gerber:** thirty... no, I was twenty-seven.

**Interviewer:** Where did they take you?

**Oskar Gerber:** I was in San Vittore for twenty-three days.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me what happened as soon as you arrived in San Vittore?

**Oskar Gerber:** They took us first to take our fingerprints, then we had to change clothes, take a shower. After that, we could have our clothes back. They brought us to the second area, where the political prisoners were imprisoned. Among us there were a lot of anti-fascists and Christians already incarcerated. And we stayed there until they deported me to Eboli, in Campania.

**Interviewer:** But these twenty-three days in San Vittore, how were the days in there?

**Oskar Gerber:** We called each other 'comrade.' We talked to each other, they were British people, Germans, French people, Austrians, other Hungarians, and Polish people.

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<sup>81</sup> San Vittore is a prison in the city center of Milan, Italy. Its construction started in 1872 and opened on July 7, 1879. During the German occupation in World War II (1943–1945), the prison was partly subject to German jurisdiction, with the SS in control of one of the wings. The prison gained notoriety during the war through the inhumane treatment of inmates by the SS guards and the torture carried out there.



**Interviewer:** How many Jewish people were there?

**Oskar Gerber:** Almost everybody was Jewish. And three or four Christians. French and Polish people, and two British people.

**Interviewer:** In San Vittore, what did you eat?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, I ate in the tavern, paying, I could not eat what they gave to us.

**Interviewer:** Whom did you pay?

**Oskar Gerber:** The tavern. I had money with me. I had to deposit all my valuable things, my watch, my ring, little gold things. A Parker Pen, and another golden pen, that was also a Parker Pen.

**Interviewer:** So, that was the black market in San Vittore?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no, you didn't need it. I would buy all the things that I needed at the tavern. Paying. I didn't write a check, but I signed an authorization that they could take the money from my account, you know?

**Interviewer:** Was this tavern authorized to sell food to you?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, it was. The prisoners could go there, pay, and eat.

**Interviewer:** What did you buy?

**Oskar Gerber:** Things you could eat. Meat, bread, beef, pork, and veal. And then pasta, but they did not do it like that in the prison. It was made normally. White bread, everything. Wine.

**Interviewer:** Were there a lot of people who could afford to eat at the tavern?

**Oskar Gerber:** Not many. But for those who could not afford it, we would give food to them. We collected some money, or I would authorize them to get money from my account for someone else.

**Interviewer:** What about the restrooms in San Vittore, how were they?

**Oskar Gerber:** It is better to not talk about it. In the beginning, we were in a cell where only up to four or five people were supposed to stay. We ended up with twelve. When you had to do your thing, you had to go to the corner, and everybody would see you. You can picture for yourself how bad it was in there.

**Interviewer:** How would the guards in the prison treat you?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh well, one was [*pauses to think*]... but the partisans killed him afterward. Because some of us spoke up and told them that this one guard ... he did speak to us like prisoners, he had a southern dialect, he couldn't even speak well. But when we arrived in Naples, we were all in chains. Then the people working at the port asked about us: Who are they? Oh, you had to see all the money, the chocolate, the cigarettes, and the oranges raining down. I could never understand the

hate between northern Italians and southern Italians. Then, on the way from Ferrammon... from Eboli to Ferramonti, we were again in chains, and then I told one of the guards "Sorry, but I didn't eat anything in the last twenty-five hours, because when I'm cold, I can't eat, because I'm sick in the stomach. We went to the restaurant in the station, where you would change the train to go to Ferramonti, and they said, "Eat, we will pay for everything." I talked to the others, and they were all like, "Yes, sure, no problem." We went inside with the chains, but once inside they took our chains away. Then the owner asked, "But who are they?" He heard us, and they told him, "Those are Jewish people going to a concentration camp." Then he let us eat all we wanted and he didn't want any money for that. I had never seen stuff like that.

**Interviewer:** In San Vittore, did someone ever interrogate you?

**Oskar Gerber:** Once, the director came, he was a very good person, and he asked, "Why are you here? What is your name?" There were Polish people, there were people who were Christians, the same for French and British people, and we said, "[We are here] because we are Jewish and there are racial laws." And that was pretty much it. But we were never officially interrogated. I can say that they treated us well. Afterward though.... The Germans have taken a lot of money away from me. I could buy half of this street [with] all money that the Germans had stolen from me. Because we were from the San Pietro dell' Orto Street, there were four people, or six I think. And they were seven people. They were there, it was a big block, Germans, SS soldiers. And when the bombing started, we were already imprisoned back then, the air pressure made the store, the warehouse, and the laboratories explode, they got blown away. The windows and the glass were all broken. And the Germans inside. They took everything away. And the things they could not take away... there were so-called Blendmaschine (mixing machine), those were machines to take the grease away, to clean, and to iron the skins. They took pieces away using the stock of the rifles, and back then that would happen only in America. And I needed those machines....we came back with nothing, we lost everything. But then I heard that in Zurich, I read in the newspaper, in big letters, in the Züricher Zeitung (Zurich newspaper), that the Germans voted to offer a refund for sicknesses, imprisonment, damages to properties, stores, and laboratories. Then I said "awesome!" I was home and I wanted to find out more about it. I went to a notary with two Italians that lived close to me and witnessed what the Germans did, how they took everything away. I made a request in German and delivered to the German embassy and they said that I needed to get it signed by the central police station. And I went there, and they told me that they had to destroy everything after five years. And I was like, "How can I do it now? I don't want anything from the Italians, they didn't do anything to me, I don't have any requests from them." And they said they couldn't give me anything. Then I went to San Vittore, a couple of years ago. The director of the prison was Doctor Pastore. I told him, "Doctor Pastore, I was here twenty-three days, they took my fingerprints." And he said, "There is nothing we can do," because they had to do the same after five years. And I said, "How do you [keep records], if there is an old criminal, from where do you get the information if you destroy all the documentation after only five years?" And he replied, "Oh, I don't know about it." And there was nothing I could do on that end. And I'm not talking about a little bit of money, but millions that I lost there! Not only mine but also my dad's. And that is how it went. Because Italian authorities are masters in running away from their own responsibilities, you know? I wasn't asking anything from the Italians because the Italians didn't do anything to me. But they shouldn't have incarcerated me at all, because Hungarians and the Polish people like my wife were never at war against Italy. The only thing they could do is to send me away, you know? But no, they arrested me, they incarcerated me, and sent me away.

**Interviewer:** Mister Gerber, when you were in San Vittore, did you keep in contact with your family?

**Oskar Gerber:** They came to visit me once a week. My dad came first, and I told him to not let my sisters and my little brother come. For all the duration of my stay, they came two or three times.

**Interviewer:** Did they bring you anything?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, they did. They would send me all the things I needed from outside. And in prison, they would check everything. They would open the boxes and look inside. The Hungarian bread, which is so delicious, I can't even. They would cut it up.

**Interviewer:** Did they inform you about your departure [from San Vittore to the concentration camp at Ferramonti]?

**Oskar Gerber:** No. That was that guard in San Vittore at 3 am who told me. "Abraham, take you chains," and I said, "What? Why?" And he answered, "You are going to Germany." He didn't say we were going to Southern Italy. Because you know, Germany meant death, with Auschwitz and Birkenau. And so the Partisans killed this guard. It was one of us that gave the signal to the Partisans. My friends and I, right after the liberation, we didn't go home, we went to San Vittore. We went inside and looked for [this cruel guard], but they had already killed him. I don't know if it was true or false, but it was a big satisfaction.

**Interviewer:** You didn't know about your departure?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no, he had told us that we were going to Germany. At the central station, we were on the first platform, and it wasn't a freight train, but it was a normal one, and it would stop in all the stations. The trip was thirty-six hours long, thirty-seven or thirty-eight hours. On the train, they took our chains away.

**Interviewer:** When did you notice that you weren't going to Germany?

**Oskar Gerber:** The guards told me. We were two prisoners and two guards on our sides. But they were good people, very good people.

**Interviewer:** How was the trip?

**Oskar Gerber:** It was hot, I would sweat a lot, and not sleep at all.

**Interviewer:** Did you meet anyone on this trip?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, a lot of people. Carlo Levi.<sup>82</sup>

**Interviewer:** What do you remember about Carlo Levi?

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<sup>82</sup> Carlo Levi was an Italian painter, writer, activist, anti-fascist, and doctor. He is best known for his book *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Stopped at Eboli), published in 1945, a memoir of his time spent in exile in Lucania, Italy, after being arrested in connection with his political activism.

**Oskar Gerber:** I have very good memories of him. He had a degree, and he was a doctor, and he was also a painter. He was already incarcerated in southern Italy and he asked to be sent again to Eboli because every little town in the Eboli province was all for the incarcerated, the antifascists, and the Jewish people. But unfortunately, they separated us. I didn't get the chance to see him again.

**Interviewer:** Where did you arrive at the end of the trip?

**Oskar Gerber:** Somewhere in Eboli, in a little town that was more than one thousand years old.

**Interviewer:** How many people were with you during this trip?

**Oskar Gerber:** Between five hundred and one thousand people. All foreign Jewish people. But there were a lot of Italians too, anti-fascists.

**Interviewer:** Where were you exactly in Eboli?

**Oskar Gerber:** We were incarcerated in the San Bartolomeo police station. Before the war, the soldiers would stay there. But during the war, they transformed it into a prison because all the soldiers were sent to Russia, Albania, Africa, South Africa. And they made room for us.

**Interviewer:** What would you do during the day?

**Oskar Gerber:** They would wake us up around 6 or 7 am, now I don't remember. Then we would take a shower in the courtyard, half naked. Then we ate, everybody would eat what they wanted to because the tavern was inside. It was owned by a hotel that was close to the prison. And then we would chat, play cards, swim. There was a little stream a little bit further up, and I would stay there almost all day to swim... Then we would sunbathe and play cards, you know?

**Interviewer:** Were you free to go out whenever?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, yes. Free, very free.

**Interviewer:** And nobody would control you?

**Oskar Gerber:** In the morning and in the evening. Nobody wanted to go away because it was convenient for us to stay there. We knew what was waiting for us outside.

**Interviewer:** Were you able to contact your family?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, yes. I would ask permission to call or I would send a card asking them to send me stuff, money.

**Interviewer:** How was your family doing in Milan?

**Oskar Gerber:** They lived like nothing had changed for them. Like before the war.

**Interviewer:** How would they treat you all in Campania?

**Oskar Gerber:** I was among the few people that could speak Italian, you know? Then the priest, I was like an interpreter for the Jewish and Polish people. I met a priest and he said to me, “Mister Gerber, do you want to see something interesting?” and I said “Why not?” and he told me, “Come see me tomorrow.” And he told me the time, it was in the afternoon when he was free. And he showed me where they would record every birth, death, wedding, and baptism. He showed me recordings from 1600 and there were a lot of Spanish Jewish people that had escaped from Spain during the inquisition. And he said, “I’m showing this only to you because I don’t want to get in trouble with my authorities, the bishops and so on.” I saw how the people of the town were of Jewish descent. In fact, they would do the evening services earlier, as I saw in Milan, like the Maariv. They were all descendants from the Marranos, which were the Jews who converted to Christianity to save themselves from the Inquisition.

**Interviewer:** Would you do any Jewish religious activities in Eboli?

**Oskar Gerber:** Among us, yes. Because for us, you just need ten adults to hold a service. The religious ones would do that. Myself, I would go only if I felt like it. But I would try to avoid them. I didn’t want anything to do with them. All the bad things they do, fanatics, they are integralists<sup>83</sup>, as bad as the Muslims. The poor Rabbi, he got killed by them.<sup>84</sup>

**Interviewer:** Were there any women?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no. But in Ferramonti, yes. I met my wife there.

**Interviewer:** How long did you stay in Eboli?

**Oskar Gerber:** Three or four months, I don’t remember. Like around fifty people got transferred with me to Ferramonti di Tarso.

**Interviewer:** Why did they transfer you?

**Oskar Gerber:** I don’t know; nobody knows.

**Interviewer:** Did they give you any notice about the transfer?

**Oskar Gerber:** Two days before that, I think. When they called our names in the morning, they told us that in two days you would have been transferred to Ferramonti di Tarso, close to Cosenza.

**Interviewer:** So, did you know what Ferramonti was?

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<sup>83</sup> Broadly speaking, the Jewish community can be divided into “Orthodox” and “Reform.” The Jewish Orthodox group strictly follows the Torah and its rules. For the Reform group, the Torah is still a holy document, but it is seen as rooted in the past and understood as a product of the times in which it was compiled. Thus, they do not observe some of the rules the Orthodox Jewish community follows.

<sup>84</sup> It should be noted that Oskar is clearly demonstrating his bias against the devout religious communities of both Jewish and Muslim populations. This is of particular note since this document is as much a reflection of late 20th century attitudes as it is a recollection of mid-twentieth-century historical events. Italy is if nothing, a culmination of several cultural influences including devout Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures, as well as secular humanist ideas.

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no. We knew it was a concentration camp, but they told us we would have the same freedom there too. In fact, inside the camp, we could do what we wanted. We shouldn't disturb the authorities, the guards, the directors and vice-directors of the camp. There was also a doctor and a vet.

**Interviewer:** How was the trip from Eboli to Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** So, it was shorter... because it was not as slow as the other train. One day and one night. We arrived the following day around noon. We left in the morning.

**Interviewer:** You weren't happy to leave Eboli, were you?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, because I didn't know what was going on there in that camp. Because in Eboli I could eat at the hotel, play cards, tell, call home. Also, the food was good, the room was clean.

**Interviewer:** Were you handcuffed during the trip?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, always... No, only when they brought us to the station... Then yes. When you have to get off and change trains, then yes. Once or twice.

**Interviewer:** Did someone try to escape from Eboli?

**Oskar Gerber:** Nobody. We all knew that it was better to stay there, even if we didn't have all the comforts. We were very thankful to be there.

**Interviewer:** What was the first thing you saw when you arrived in Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** There weren't too many people there, because they were still finishing building the camp, the barracks, and the fences. There were some streams there too and that was land that had just been reclaimed from malaria.<sup>85</sup> Also, my dad got malaria and then he died because of that; he could not get rid of it. It was terrible. When he had some episodes, he would get such a high fever, between 40 and 41 °C (104–105 °F). And he would get cold and hot, cold and hot. We would give him three or four blankets and he was always cold. It was a horrible thing. But then he used quinine. They would give it to us every morning. We had to take two doses daily. I would take it too, then I didn't do it anymore.

**Interviewer:** Did your dad get sick there?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, and he could not get rid of it. He was already old. He wasn't that strong anymore.

**Interviewer:** What did you see in Ferramonti as soon as you arrived there?

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<sup>85</sup> For a detailed account of the fight of malaria in Italy, see Frank Snowden, *The Conquest of Malaria: Italy, 1900–1962* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

**Oskar Gerber:** My father wasn't there though. I saw around one hundred prisoners, barefoot all over the place. There were people playing soccer, chess, who would go to the temple to pray. But then we got more people because new people were arriving every day.

**Interviewer:** Where did they take you when you arrived there?

**Oskar Gerber:** They brought me to a barrack. They assigned you to a barrack, I got assigned to the first one. The first and the second were standing next to each other. You would enter in the front and people would go left or right.

**Interviewer:** How many were you in every barrack?

**Oskar Gerber:** Thirty, thirty-five, thirty-six people.

**Interviewer:** How many barracks were there in Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** In Ferramonti I would say fifty. Maybe even more. Especially when the illegal group from Bengasi<sup>86</sup> came. My [future] wife and her family were there too. There were women also there.

**Interviewer:** When did you arrive in Ferramonti exactly?

**Oskar Gerber:** At the end of July or at the beginning of August, I don't remember.

**Interviewer:** Which year?

**Oskar Gerber:** In 1940.

**Interviewer:** You went to the barrack and then, what happened?

**Oskar Gerber:** I could choose to sleep or go out, always inside the fence, not outside.

**Interviewer:** What would you all do during the day?

**Oskar Gerber:** People would learn, I would learn Italian and other languages. I would also play soccer, or I would go to the stream and swim. The water was deep enough, so you could swim there.

**Interviewer:** But you couldn't leave the camp?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, absolutely no. The stream was inside the camp. There were guards all over, on the corners, in the middle, and in the middle, the guards would walk, they were two or three, they were from the fascist militia, but they were good people. They would say to me, "I'm wearing a black shirt<sup>87</sup> but I'm red (for communist) inside."

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<sup>86</sup> Bengasi was the name in Italian of Benghazi under Italian rule. The city was promoted to the status of capital for the Italian province in 1937.

<sup>87</sup> The *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN, "Voluntary Militia for National Security"), commonly called the Blackshirts (Italian: *Camicie Nere*, CCNN, singular: *Camicia Nera*) or *squadristi* (singular: *squadrista*), was

**Interviewer:** Do you remember who was in charge of the camp?

**Oskar Gerber:** He was the vice chief of the police from Naples. I don't remember his name, but he was a gentleman. And there were many doctors among us, they went to school in Bologna, Milan, Turin, Siena, and Rome. [These doctors who were imprisoned] even treated one of his sons. He didn't know how to pay us back, because he did not get any money. He tried to favor us in every way possible.

**Interviewer:** Did you work in the camp?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, I did not.

**Interviewer:** But was there someone who would work?

**Oskar Gerber:** The people who wanted to work could go out escorted and come back in the evening. You had to apply for it. But they would allow us everything. For instance, I saw that the elderly people and the kids didn't have any vegetables. Then I asked the director—actually I asked the sergeant first—I told them that I wanted to buy some greens for the elderly people and the kids to improve their meals. The sergeant told me that he would talk with the director. I could go out to San Marco and eat at the hotel. And there were a lot of potatoes, onions, other vegetables, and bread. All the things that I wanted. Nobody would control me.

**Interviewer:** What about the food in the camp?

**Oskar Gerber:** Every barrack had his own kitchen. It was a shared kitchen.

**Interviewer:** Who did the cooking?

**Oskar Gerber:** Well, there were some chefs among us; they could cook. The food was okay. If I didn't like it, I would go to the tavern to eat other stuff, like ham, raw ham, sausage, bread, and sweets. I could have all I wanted.

**Interviewer:** Where did the food for the barracks come from? Who would give it to you?

**Oskar Gerber:** We had the kitchens and the chefs that every day would cook something different. Every day they would ask us what we would like to eat, and they would do what the majority wanted. We would vote so that they didn't cook only what they wanted, but what we wanted.

**Interviewer:** Did these chefs get paid somehow?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no. We would get 4 liras every day as an aid for prisoners.

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originally the paramilitary wing of the National Fascist Party and, after 1923, an all-volunteer militia of the Kingdom of Italy under Fascist rule.



**Interviewer:** Everybody would get some money?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, yes, up to 50 liras and the rest would go into the account.

**Interviewer:** Did you all get some sort of financial aid?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, it was 4 liras, then 6 liras, and at the end 8 liras. Because of inflation.

**Interviewer:** Could you go and eat in another barrack?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no. And I didn't want to. I wasn't interested at all. You know, in prison you are on your own, otherwise, it doesn't go well. With trust and everything, it is better to have only a couple of friends but good ones. For the most part, they were all doctors with degrees. For instance, they let my brother-in-law go and defend his thesis in Pisa with two guards. He was a veterinarian. He had his defense, he went back to the police station, and then back to Ferramonti di Tarsio. But they let him finish his degree.

**Interviewer:** Where did the prisoners in Ferramonti come from?

**Oskar Gerber:** From everywhere in Europe. Even from Asia. The Italians had captured them and sent them to prison. The majority were from Central Europe: Polish, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Rumanians, and Yugoslavia. Then French and British people too.

**Interviewer:** Which languages would people speak?

**Oskar Gerber:** All of them. Sometimes, if someone didn't speak Italian, we would ask if he spoke Yiddish. And that was it, the Yiddish language was what kept us united, that saved us and showed that we were still Jewish people. Those integralists, though, with their rigor, they saved us too, that is the only merit I recognize for them.

**Interviewer:** Would you have any religious service in Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** Secretly yes. Almost every day we would get the *Baseler Nachrichten* (a newspaper from Basel), *Neue Züricher Zeitung* (a newspaper from Zurich), and the *Stürmer*<sup>88</sup> also, the journal of the Nazi party, you know?

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Oskar Gerber:** Because we wanted to know. I got it from someone in the camp and paid for it, of course. They wouldn't care; they would send them to us. Sometimes we would get Hungarian newspapers, Slavic ones too. I wanted to read the German ones. In English...once I got to read the *Times* in Hungarian. Back then I didn't know all the bad things that the Hungarians were doing.

**Interviewer:** Were you aware of what was going on?

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<sup>88</sup> Der *Stürmer* was a weekly German newspaper published by Julius Streicher, the Gauleiter of Franconia, from 1923 to the end of World War II. It was a significant part of Nazi propaganda and was vehemently anti-Semitic.

**Oskar Gerber:** No, we were not. We did know that Jewish people were incarcerated and treated very badly. But we didn't know about all those people dying. Afterward. We knew that some cities at the border were free, such as Gandino and Clusone. The son of my landlord lived in Gandino and he was part of the armed forces that fought with the Germans against the Russians and the Slavs. He was invalid at some point, and he would cry continuously, so he saved himself. And he was the one who provided us the newspapers and all the things we wanted to read.

**Interviewer:** Was there a temple in Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, there were different temples, Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish temples. And then the temples of the integralists.

**Interviewer:** Did you go there sometimes?

**Oskar Gerber:** I would go to the Ashkenazic temple, and to the Italian one, the Sephardic temple. But not to the temple of the integralists, I didn't go there at all.

**Interviewer:** Did people get married in Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, very often, not only once.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember any Jewish festivities taking place in the camp?

**Oskar Gerber:** We would celebrate all of them. Kippur, Rosh Hashanah and then.... All the others, how is it called... the festivity of Purim, but before Purim there was....I don't remember now... and then all the others...

**Interviewer:** Would they let you do everything?

**Oskar Gerber:** Everything. They wouldn't do anything. Once the Bishop of Cosenza came to visit, and he asked us what you are asking me now, "Are you allowed to celebrate your festivities and recite your prayers?" He knew all our festivities. That is because all the Catholic priests, before becoming priests, had to study Hebrew, you know? Because Jesus Christ was Jewish. I was in Jerusalem, and I went to the temple where Jesus did his rabbinic studies, he got a degree and he was called Rabbah. I was exactly there. I was told by a representative of the temple there, in Spanish.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember the first time you saw your wife?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh, when they arrived, I saw her and I said, "Her or nobody else."

**Interviewer:** When did you talk for the first time?

**Oskar Gerber:** My uncle introduced me to her. I started wooing her and I said to her, "If you want, we can wait" because nobody knew how it would end. You don't want to add even more misery to your own situation, you know? And this is the story.

**Interviewer:** In which language did you speak?

**Oskar Gerber:** A little bit in Italian, because my wife knew Latin. She learned Italian earlier than me. Or German. She didn't speak Yiddish very well. So, we would speak in "pure" German, Hochdeutsch, the German of the literate people.

**Interviewer:** When did she arrive in Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** At the beginning of August, the 10th, the 15th. I don't remember.

**Interviewer:** Did you get together soon after that?

**Oskar Gerber:** Not officially. We started talking though.

**Interviewer:** How often did you see each other?

**Oskar Gerber:** Every day. We would take walks inside the camp, we would go to the library, to the kitchen to eat.

**Interviewer:** Was there also a school?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, for the kids. It was a kindergarten more than a school. There was also an elementary school, always for the kids because the kids that were older, like fourteen or fifteen years old, were only a few. There were a lot of little kids, four, five, or six years old. And they would go to kindergarten.

**Interviewer:** How would you spend your days in Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** The first thing I would do in the morning was pray. Not everything but what I could or wanted to. Then I would get cleaned up, I would eat, and then I would read or study, you know? I would play soccer, or I would work out lightly or more intensively. I would go swimming and then read. I read a lot.

**Interviewer:** Would you sleep all in the same place?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, we were in the middle of the barrack, the beds close to each other. A bunk, some straw, that was it.

**Interviewer:** Were there only Jewish people in Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, also Christians. French and Polish people, Slovaks. There weren't any Hungarians or Serbs.

**Interviewer:** How long did you stay in Ferramonti?

**Oskar Gerber:** More than a year. So, 1940 and 1941, July. And then they transferred me in October 1941. Mid October.

**Interviewer:** Why did they transfer you?

**Oskar Gerber:** Because of a transfer order from the fascist party, I think. The families could not go to the *confine libero*.<sup>89</sup> My dad and I, we were a family, but my uncle couldn't come.

**Interviewer:** Did you ask to be transferred?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, as soon as possible. We didn't know about this order, so we asked for it as soon as possible. And they agreed right away.

**Interviewer:** Did they accept all the requests?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes. And my wife's family was transferred to Clusone,<sup>90</sup> in the province of Bergamo, in the Seriana Valley. We were separated for a couple of months. So, I did another request for Quero Vas,<sup>91</sup> to the Belluno's police station, with that justification that I wanted to marry my fiancé. And they agreed immediately.

**Interviewer:** How was life there in Quero Vas?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh well, Quero Vas was a very small town where there were horrible battles during World War I. That is why one of my forms of entertainment was... I had an uncle who fought with the Polish people against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Veneto region was full of cemeteries for soldiers who died during the war. We went from one cemetery to another because so many died, millions—captains, soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and graves with no names on them because all the things they wore got lost or burned. There was a town called Schievenin<sup>92</sup> and during the German counteroffensive, all the people died there because they bombed everywhere. I went inside an abandoned house, on the table, it was a simple table, there was still the rest of someone's lunch that had stayed there for twenty years.

**Interviewer:** Where did you sleep in Quero Vas?

**Oskar Gerber:** We rented an apartment, a sublease actually.

**Interviewer:** Were you free?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, completely free. In the town. If I wanted to leave the town, I would go... the closest town was Valdobiadene,<sup>93</sup> I had customers there, from before the war, in Padua too, but I could not go to Padua. To Valdobiadene yes, to Belluno yes, I could visit them, and I would do some businesses there. They placed some orders and I called home, and they would send them the stuff.

**Interviewer:** How was the relationship with the people of the town?

**Oskar Gerber:** It was great.

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<sup>89</sup> A form of internment for prisoners during fascism.

<sup>90</sup> Clusone is an Italian town in the province of Bergamo, Lombardy, Italy.

<sup>91</sup> Quero Vas is a town in the Province of Belluno in the Italian region of Veneto.

<sup>92</sup> Schievenin is a town in the Province of Belluno in the Italian region of Veneto.

<sup>93</sup> Valdobiadene is a town in the Province of Belluno in the Italian region of Veneto.

**Interviewer:** Did they know that you were Jewish?

**Oskar Gerber:** Of course, they knew. They had never seen Jewish people before, they thought we had horns or something [*Laughs*].

**Interviewer:** Were there other foreign Jewish people in Quero Vas?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes. Austrians from Wien, two or three families, then Germans.

**Interviewer:** Where was your fiancée?

**Oskar Gerber:** She was in Clusone.

**Interviewer:** Were you in touch with each other?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, I would call or write her a letter. We always stayed...in the attic, I have a basket full of my and her letters. We exchanged them that year that we were separated.

**Interviewer:** Did you have to go and check in [with the authorities]?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, we need to check in with them once a week, on Sunday, at the police station. We had to sign a register, and that was it.

**Interviewer:** During the time in Quero Vas, you did also have money, you were doing well, right?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh yes, we had everything. We also had this financial aid, there was already 6 liras daily. And then our money.

**Interviewer:** For how long did you stay in Quero Vas?

**Oskar Gerber:** Seven or eight months, more or less. And then they transferred me. We had to check-in in Clusone. First, at the police station of Bergamo, wonderful people. You know, when Germany invaded Italy, all the officers took our papers and hid them under a bunch of anthracites, and then on top of that, they put some wood they would use in the winter. So, when the Germans came and they asked "Do you have any Jews," they answered "Yes, but they are all in Switzerland now, they all escaped."

**Interviewer:** Did you ask to be transferred again?

**Oskar Gerber:** We knew that we were going to Gandino,<sup>94</sup> but at the police station, they asked us when we wanted to go. And I told them, "First of all, I want to see my fiancé in Clusone, then we will see." "Ok, that works, all right then." We went there by train. We took the last train at midnight, we went there, to Clusone. We went to a hotel, and there we started to look for a house, for an apartment.

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<sup>94</sup> Gandino is a town in the province of Bergamo in the Italian region Lombardy.

**Interviewer:** And in Clusone was your fiancé there?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, yes. I would see her every day. Then I started working, after a couple of months, after I got used to the place, and to the priests, others also. So, my mom would send me the raw material, and then I would work there. My wife helped me, she learned the job. My brother-in-law, too, was also still able to work.

**Interviewer:** How was life in Clusone?

**Oskar Gerber:** I would work all day, in the evening we would go to the movies or take a walk, or we would go to the hotel to eat, because we were accommodated by the hotel, we would always eat there at noon.

**Interviewer:** How were the people in Clusone?

**Oskar Gerber:** There were a lot of fascists that would try to hurt us, but they weren't able to do that because the police, the carabinieri, the public officers, they all were on our side. The major too...wait, he wasn't called that... What was his name? ...wait...the podestà.<sup>95</sup>

**Interviewer:** Did something bad happen there?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, nothing. Also, my brother-in-law was a vet, so he would work under the table with the farmers, and he would bring eggs and butter. He would also bring meat because he went also to the slaughterhouse. He would always bring a piece back because he didn't take any money, they would pay him with goods.

**Interviewer:** How long did you stay in Clusone?

**Oskar Gerber:** In Clusone...almost a year. Yes, more or less. And then they transferred us to Gandino, Gandino Valley. The people there were also fantastic. Look...in January 1945, the SS were quartered in the public school. They started deporting the young population, but not to Germany. There was an organization called "Tod"<sup>96</sup> that would repair roads, railways, bridges, and stuff like that. And they asked if there were Jews somewhere, and they didn't say anything, also those people whose sons were taken away to work. Nobody said, "Why are they taking our sons away if there are Jews here from all over Europe." There were also French, American, and English soldiers, hidden, of course, because after September 1943 all escaped, but they couldn't go to Switzerland anymore. So, they stayed there hiding.

**Interviewer:** Did the people of Gandino protect you?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh yeah, those were people, you can't even imagine. Everybody knew, but nobody said anything when they took their sons away. And I will never forget that. And I said to myself, "If

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<sup>95</sup> Podestà is the name given to high officials in many Italian cities beginning in the later Middle Ages. The Fascist regime created its own version of the podestà. In February 1926, Mussolini issued a decree which abolished the autonomy of the municipalities. Instead, all communes except for Rome were to be headed by a "podestà", an authoritarian mayor with executive and legislative powers.

<sup>96</sup> Tod means "death" in German.

I survive, I will get Italian citizenship.” Because what I saw there, I didn’t see anywhere else in the world. I traveled a lot, 20 or 22 years traveling, I was always traveling, to Lipsia, to Vienna, to London, you know? Also to Paris, you know? But I have never found people like that.

**Interviewer:** When did you arrive in Gandino?

**Oskar Gerber:** In Gandino... it was still winter...but at the end of the winter... in November 1943...no...yes... October or November. We stayed there until the end. Because before I did....the Germans tried out some stuff, they went from one house to the other, and if they found a young guy, they took him away. But people would know when, so they would tell us to run away. I hid seventy or eighty meters away from where the SS were. I hid inside a gap with my dad. They wouldn’t take the women because they didn’t know who they were. But it didn’t happen often, the SS came to raid maybe twice to take the young people away. Until the end. Then the young people that got deported, at the end, when we knew that the Germans surrendered, they wanted revenge, so they with the older people of the town, with the vet, with the doctor, with the mayor... but we didn’t let them, because the Germans, for every German killed, they would kill thirty Italians or thirty Jews, you know? We told them to let them go away.

**Interviewer:** Did you hide your Jewish identity?

**Oskar Gerber:** We had fake IDs. We got those through a Partisan. I got an ID from a town close to Pavia. They would call me....wait...they would call me Bari. Dari Battista, and they gave me thirty years more than my age. Anyway, I...well, there was no place to take a bath, to wash you would use the snow. I couldn’t take it anymore, I wanted to go to Bergamo. And I went there, to the public baths. I was there, drying myself, then I heard the Germans coming inside. I heard them talking in German, “March there, give me that!” I thought it was the end of the world. I waited until they went to get undressed, I didn’t even finish drying myself, and I ran away. And the lifeguard was like, “Mister?” and I asked her to remain silent. She understood and she let me go. I went directly to the city center of Bergamo—it is very beautiful. But I was hungry. But I went to the movie theater first, to hide, so that they wouldn’t see me on the street. What happened? The Germans blocked the movie theater, and they came inside to check the IDs. They were from the Black Brigade<sup>97</sup> and they asked for my ID. I gave them my ID, but I, still today, I don’t look my age, and back then even more. So, I gave him my ID, he looked at it and then he looked at me, he made a smiley face and then he gave me the ID back and went away. As soon as I got my ID back, I got up and went away. I ran away and went downtown. There was a tram line that brought me up to the old town. I was afraid to walk into a restaurant. Then I walked into a butcher, and I asked him if he had some food that I could buy. “What do you want?” he said, and I replied, “A little bit of ham... four or five sandwiches.” But he didn’t want the money because he understood that I wasn’t Italian because of my accent. I wasn’t able to lose my damned Hungarian accent, because Hungarian has the accent on the first vowel, you know? They don’t say “dománi” (tomorrow in Italian), they say “dómani.” He understood, but he let me go. He didn’t want any money, and I asked, “Why? I have money, I’m not here to beg, if you don’t want the money, I will give it to charity for the Church.” But he didn’t want it at all. I will never forget that.

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<sup>97</sup> The Corpo Ausiliario delle Squadre d’azione di Camicie Nere (Italian: Auxiliary Corps of the Black Shirts’ Action Squads), known as the Black Brigades (Italian: Brigate Nere) was one of the Fascist paramilitary groups, run by the Republican Fascist Party (Partito Fascista Repubblicano, PFR) operating in the Italian Social Republic (in northern Italy), during the final years of World War II after the signing of the Italian Armistice in 1943.

**Interviewer:** When did you arrive in Gandino, were the Germans already there?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no, they weren't there. They arrived in January 1945. They arrived, they quartered in the public school at the entrance of the town and kicked out the students. When they would raid the town, I hid in a gap in the yard of a friend of mine, well, he then became my friend.

**Interviewer:** What did you do when the Germans arrived? Where did you go?

**Oskar Gerber:** Close to my house. Because I had two apartments. The street was called Vicolo Ferretti. On the third floor, I had an apartment where I also worked. My laboratory was there. And he lived two houses next to mine with a big wall and a big gate, a fortress. He was a butcher and he would make all the sausages at home. He has....how do you call it... pigs, everything, ham, everything. And he would keep the food in a warehouse. Behind that, there was a gap that you could access from outside. But you couldn't see it from the outside. When the Germans would go on a raid from house to house, I would go there. They wouldn't go to him.

**Interviewer:** Was there another family in Gandino that helped you?

**Oskar Gerber:** All the families. When I went up there, now I don't go there anymore because of a heart condition, and I'm afraid. And all my friends have died because of sickness and stuff like that. Only the widows survived, not all of them. Their children are different because of communist propaganda. So, I don't find any pleasure going there, some widows now, yes. They also come to visit me. Anyway, unforgettable. If I go up there, they would all say, "Oskar, let's drink, let's have a drink together!" In the evening then I would be drunk. Then I stayed at the hotel, I slept, and I departed the day after.

**Interviewer:** When the Germans arrived, did you stay in the town?

**Oskar Gerber:** No. The same night, I took two families from Yugoslavia, then I had a Hungarian friend, his dad was a notary, he worked with antiques, he was very famous from Milan. He let us stay in his villa in the mountains, in the Bergamo's mountains. I took my parents, and these families from Zagreb, they were old and sick, and then small children, they couldn't walk. The oldest son and I took a donkey and we went up at 1500...1600 meters. We started at 550 meters. Anyway, that was hard. And we stayed there. Then the Germans went away because they were afraid, then they came back. We came down then because my mom and my dad were sick. I put them on the donkey, but then the Germans came back.

**Interviewer:** For how long did you hide in the mountains?

**Oskar Gerber:** Six or seven months, until it got better. Then I brought my parents to the hospital, where they were clandestine. There were Germans there too. The hospital took care of them and then they returned to the apartment.

**Interviewer:** Did you keep hiding in the mountains?

**Oskar Gerber:** No, no. I stayed with them. I did not go back.



**Interviewer:** When you were in the mountains, did you ever have contact with the Partisans?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, yes. I was the interpreter among them. There were some Hungarians that fled from the SS because they saw how bad things were and wanted to be Partisans. They died because, during the fights against the Germans, the commander put them on the front line. The others did not die. There were also Germans, Yugoslavians, Russians from the Vaslov's Army. They were able to survive because they knew how to run away.

**Interviewer:** How did the Partisans contact you?

**Oskar Gerber:** Oh well, they knew that I could speak many languages. And they could not speak any Hungarian, or German, or French. They contacted me. When they wanted me, they sent me someone and he said to me, "Come." And I went with him, [it took] five hours to arrive there, and another five on the way back.

**Interviewer:** Where did the partisans hide?

**Oskar Gerber:** In the mountains and they did not stop. Maybe two or three hours during the night and then they would go away.

**Interviewer:** Did they ever ask you to participate more actively?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, but then I explained to them, "The risk is too big for me. You fight against the Germans, you lose people. If they get me, they will kill me on the wall immediately. If they catch you, you are a soldier, even if you are a Partisan. What they can do to you is to deport you, and you will always have the hope to save yourself because you are young and healthy. I'm neither young nor healthy. Back then I was thirty-three. Do you know that after the war I had five surgeries? One in my gallbladder, once I had an ulcer in my duodenum, two [surgeries] on my feet, and [surgery for] my eyes because of cataracts. First on the right, then on the left. One and a half years ago I had my last surgery. [These health problems are] all a present from the Germans. They are responsible. If they would not have come, I would have had to flee. Because in the mountains I smoked, but I didn't have any tobacco anymore. Do you know what I smoked? The leaves from the trees, the yellow ones because those were already dry. And I would put them in the paper from a newspaper, which was a grey paper. And I smoked that. And that is why I got an ulcer.

**Interviewer:** While you were in the mountains, did someone ever find you there?

**Oskar Gerber:** There were the Germans and the fascists that went on searches in the mountains. I saw death fifty meters away from me. Then I took a gun, a gun that I had and there were six bullets inside. Five for them, and one for me, because I wouldn't survive, but I wouldn't give myself to them. Then the son of a shepherd from there told me that he had a hiding place where his ancestors kept the cheese hidden because when the Austrians were there...you know that all North Italy was under the Austrian[s]. So, his ancestors hid the cheese there and nobody knew about it. And I asked him, "Where?" and he brought me there. You could not see it. And there were a lot of thick bushes. But I saw death coming close, the Germans and in front of them, the fascists. And the guy told me to not shoot because they won't see us. But the Germans spent like two or three days going around. I was afraid to leave, then sometimes I wanted to know where they were or if they were there at all. And I had to hang on at the entrance because it was a hole, like a cave, a hole. But then he would tell

me to not do that because he knew and he was born there. So, he tried to look out but as soon as he put his hand out, a snake bit him. That snake was for me, you see, the hand of god. But he did not die, because we were young, we had good teeth. We took turns to suck the venom out because the venom of the snake stayed in between the skin and the flesh. Then we put there the sulfur matches, the Swedish one, they were big, the matches. We took eight heads from the matches and we put them in the wound and put them on fire. He was screaming because of the pain, but it disinfected everything.

**Interviewer:** How long did you hide there?

**Oskar Gerber:** five days. And we had food. And we ate what we had.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember when the war ended? The liberation? How did you know that the war had come to an end?

**Oskar Gerber:** From the radio, at midnight. We woke all our friends in the town up. Shepherds, intellectuals, everyone. Revelry! In the hotel next to us, the one with the restaurant, I paid for two barrels of wine. And then for numerous bottles of dessert wine.

**Interviewer:** Had the Germans already left?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, yes. As soon as they heard about the armistice, with a truck, in two hours they were gone. They went towards Edolo because they wanted to go to Switzerland. Tonale, that is. But I don't know if they arrived there because after Clusone, after...wait...Lovere, Clusone, Tonale... the Germans did terrible things there, killed people, hanged people. [So, the Partisans] took revenge, I heard. There was a very famous hotel for skiers, Franceschini, even the boys that were fifteen years old that were part of the fascist militia... [were put against a wall by the Partisans and shot]. Did you know who ordered the execution? The archpriest of Roveto, where the parents of my fiancé were hiding. He was an ex-captain of the Bersaglieri.<sup>98</sup> And he saw all the things that the Germans [and fascists] did and said, "There is no forgiveness for them." And immediately on the wall, in the cemetery, but not inside the cemetery, on the outside [of the] walls they put people in rows of three or four, and they used the rifles [to shoot them].

**Interviewer:** Right after the war ended, where did you go? What did you do? Did you go back to Milan?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, to Milan, I had to make a living. There weren't any goods. I did that job for six or seven months. Then I wrote.... when the situation was quiet... I wrote to our ex-suppliers, and I told them about my situation, that we lost everything, and if they remembered my grandfather and father. I also told them once I came there in 1937. Then they answered, "Please come as soon as you can, our warehouse is available to you. If you don't have money," because they suspected that, "go and talk to our agents, our representatives in Lugano, you will find everything you need to come to us." I didn't have the money for Lugano, I didn't have anything. Only the clothes I was wearing. Then I asked some of my friends to lend me money, 10,000 liras, that was a good amount of money back then. Then I went to Lugano, they were waiting for me. I had the ticket already, they had

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<sup>98</sup> The Bersaglieri, singular Bersagliere (Marksmen in English) are a special branch of the infantry corps of the Italian Army.

bought it, and then one hundred pounds, that was a lot of money back then. I thanked them, then I took the last train to Calais. The morning after I was at Calais maritime, then I took a ferry to Dover, and from Dover to London. They had also booked a hotel for me. The concierge told me, “Mister Gerber, please call Mister Isic, he has an important communication for you. If he doesn’t answer, call his home.” In fact, he wasn’t there anymore because it was, I think, Friday, Friday afternoon, and they don’t work there, he was one of the Hasidic Jews. He told me to come on Sunday morning. And I said, “Yes, yes, I will be there.” I took a shower, I changed clothes, I went down to eat. Then I went to the movie theater. On Sunday I went to the major Temple... no, on Saturday. Close to Cumberland Street, which is close to Hyde Park, Hyde Park corner. And I was there at the temple, I went there in the afternoon, to go around and refresh my memory because I was away from London for seven or eight years. And the day after, on Sunday, I went to Mister Isic, and I took the material. And he asked me, “Only this? Why don’t you take more?” And I told him, “Listen, I don’t know if I will be able to sell this right away, I have to pay you, and I don’t know if my clients are still alive, you have no idea,” and he replied, “Of Course I do, I saw the bombing in London, it was terrible.” Anyhow, I took material for what is today 30,000 pounds. In three weeks, I had sold everything, you know? Then I went to London again, and I bought double the amount I bought the first time, I paid one half, and the other half not, and then I started again.

**Interviewer:** When did you get married?

**Oskar Gerber:** So, that was during the Christmas of 1945. Because I didn’t have any documents, they were all back in Hungary, lost, burnt, who know? But we got married with a ritual. But then they called me to say it was invalid because there wasn’t any automatic transcription between the Rabbi and the town hall. Then we had to get married again in the town hall. Then we took two people to be our witnesses, people that did that for a living.

**Interviewer:** Mister Gerber, have you ever thought about going back to live in Budapest?

**Oskar Gerber:** No. After everything I learned after the liberation, I didn’t even want to see them. After learning about what had happened, I don’t read Hungarian and don’t speak Hungarian anymore, only with those who don’t speak any other language during auctions in London. They also come because they live in Germany, in Switzerland, or France. So, if they don’t know any English, they come to me to ask for help. Only then I speak to them, with the others I do not do that at all. I have completely erased it, the Hungarians, the Hungarian language, the Hungarian literature, no more! I don’t want to have anything to do with them anymore. And I wish that what they did to the Jews happens to them. Because what they did...from a million Jews—245,000 didn’t come back—the Germans also did that.

**Interviewer:** Mister Gerber, is there any message that you want to leave to your children and grandchildren, concerning the things you have gone through in your past?

**Oskar Gerber:** Yes, to avoid the Germans, the Hungarians, and the Slavic people. Only the Latino.<sup>99</sup> They should avoid the French, too, since they didn’t do good things during the war. They captured the Jews in Drancy<sup>100</sup> and gave those people to the Germans. Now they commended

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<sup>99</sup> He is referring to people who speak languages derived from Latin, such as Italian and Spanish.

<sup>100</sup> Drancy is a commune in the northeastern suburbs of Paris in the Seine-Saint-Denis department in northern France. It is located 10.8 km from the center of Paris.

Papon,<sup>101</sup> an ex-secretary general for the police-- he was a minister for Da Gaulle-- they gave him a life sentence. But they let him free because of his age, eighty or eighty-five years old. So, in Drancy, I also lost the husband of one of my cousins, she escaped alone. The children, all lost in that Drancy transportation.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything you would like to add, Mister Gerber?

**Oskar Gerber:** To avoid the Hungarians, the Germans, and the Slavic people. For us, the sun doesn't rise on the east, but on the west, you know? Never again. Oh well, I don't want to damn anybody anymore.

**Interviewer:** Very well. Thank you very much, Mister Gerber.

**Oskar Gerber:** Thank you.

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<sup>101</sup> Maurice Papon was a French civil servant who led the police in major prefectures from the 1930s to the 1960s. During World War II, he was secretary general for the police in Bordeaux and participated in the deportation of more than 1600 Jews.

### III. POETRY

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## **Introduction:**

We consider *The North Meridian Review* a journal of scholarship and culture, and I can imagine no better expression of this pairing than poetry.

Once, I attended a poetry reading by Lauren Haldeman. During the discussion following her surreal, spectral stanzas, the room asked about her poetry research process. Haldeman exploded my understanding of research when she described it potentially as so much more than books: research as sitting in a graveyard, reflecting on death and on your ancestors, for instance. Any time we revisit memories on purpose or by accident, record our observations, and then examine those field notes, the result can be a poem.

The poems in this collection do that; they therefore invite us all in/to all of the places we might practice conducting our own research: cruising country bike roads wide-ruled with bright berries and hazel stars, for example, or perusing unapologetic Circe's island trophy room stash. Littered along these scenes, you'll find many fires, phantoms, lies, broken shells, and good tacos; you'll stumble in and out of other people's homes and childhoods. These poems also ask that we reflect on our relationships—with our families, with our communities, and with ourselves. Race, gender, animal, bully, tourist, lover, relation, goddess, witness.

By evoking both research and reflection, they unite scholarship and culture. Uncork and binge.

Michael Baumann, Ph.D.

2019–2020 Poetry editor, *North Meridian Review*

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**Noelia Young** is a spoken word poet based in Fayetteville, Arizona and received her Bachelor's in English from Westminster College in Missouri. She is currently working on a book of poems discussing her experiences as a first-generation immigrant and a book of essays about the Arkansas prison system. She is a reader for Tinderbox Poetry Journal and a poetry mentor for Pen America's Prison Writing Mentorship program. Her poems have appeared in audio form in Terse. She was most recently the featured poet for Hot Spring's Wednesday Night Poetry event and the Northwest Arkansas Community College's Spring Arts & Culture Festival.

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## Brown

The brown, corporate girl enters the van. Typical, soccer mom van. Suburban staple. Her white boss is driving, while she and three white coworkers discuss the day.

As the conversation fills the air she sits, looking out the window, watching the city roll by aware that she is the only brown girl in this space.

It is not a feeling of fear that fills her chest but one of sadness.

Suddenly longing to look back and catch a flash of brown

or black skin amongst the sea of white. She walks past the storefronts trailing her party, an island locked in the Central US.

The door to the restaurant opens and the beat of the *latino* music wafts out with the smells of seasoned *carne* and cooking onions, Spanish words surround her and she steps into this home.

The cooks are all brown. They turn the *carne* on the fire as they dance to the music and laugh.

It is loud and warm and smells like a *fritanga*.

Brightly colored banners hang in rows spreading across the ceiling the colors warm and inviting. They remind her of the open air markets where the brightly colored shirts hang throughout tents and the smell of cooking meat wafts between the aisles as the street vendors call out to the passersby to enter their stores calling them

queens,

sweethearts, loves,

princesses,

*corazon*

Wicker lanterns are spaced across the ceiling mingling with the colored banners they sway with the breeze casting shadows below

twinkling in the dark room like mother's prayers in the night  
as two parents prepare themselves to bring two little girls to the promised land  
hoping they would not forget the histories in their skin.  
Laughing with her white coworkers the brown girl bites into her carne *asada* street tacos letting the  
flavor fill her mouth and Narcisco Yepes playing Romance wafts through her mind reminding her of  
a time she was a little girl and her father  
would serenade her with his Spanish guitar  
and her curly hair was beautiful, and her brown skin was enough  
and she remembers what it feels like to be proud of who she is  
so she rides back to the office looking out the window, smiling now  
and when she reaches her desk pulls the scrunchy out of her hair fluffs it  
into a frizzy mass of curls lets it hang loose around her shoulders  
puts her headphones in and ends the day with Narcisco  
with wild hair, brilliant smile, looking like the little girl her parents raised.



# Rust

This is how it begins—a slow decay, rust—  
traditions dusty and unused, a film of cultural rust.

I break my spine to display humility as woman  
should. He says “duty.” I see rust.  
To cover and conceal. To cause damage. To break.  
My pride almost abandoned and grown over with rust.  
He said beauty is in the ability to bow your head.  
My mother learned to make herself small, dress in rust.  
My back is iron rod. I cannot bend.  
It will not fold into this mold, won’t yield to rust  
and I am too loud, too quick to raise my voice,  
my questions grenades blowing apart his expectations, rust  
Bowed heads mean surrender and I do not make habits  
of gifting him wars, abandoning my pride to rust.  
My stubbornness will be my end but I dig in  
my heels anyways; his anger will fade. Rust.  
His disappointment will ebb like ocean waves.  
I am battleship. I will break before I rust.  
As water always meets the shore, salt to sand  
I, Noelia, will find my path. I will not yield or rust.

# Tourism and Soda

The tourists  
could never figure it out  
“la bolsita se corta así”  
my father would explain to them  
“cut the corner of the bag, here.”  
They would tilt the bag awkwardly  
and hold it close to their bodies  
spilling the liquid down their expensive clothing.  
The vendors on the sidewalks lined with palm trees  
would sell soda in bags  
from their brightly painted carts to the passersby  
And yet, they could never understand how to drink it  
“Van a botar la soda!”  
one vendor would say  
scratching his head  
in amazement and amusement  
My father shows the tourists  
how to tip the soda  
to the back of the bag  
so that they could cut the corners  
and drink the cold, sticky sweetness from them  
“Why can’t you people just sell them in cups?  
Like normal folks?”  
one woman asked  
We would simply laugh and respond  
“Pura Vida”  
as we watched the soda dribble down their shirts  
and mingle with the dirt beneath their feet  
Dirt that was not good enough  
to soil their Nikes

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**Fred Kirchner's** chapbook, *Platform of an Unacknowledged World Legislator* (Main Street Rag Publishing), won a national literary prize, and his poetry has also appeared in several anthologies—most notably, *The Art of Bicycling: A Treasury of Poems*. He's curated poetry reading series in Columbus and Dayton and led performance poetry workshops for teens in Clark County at the Springfield Art Museum and the Juvenile Detention Center. He works as a Teen Librarian for the Dayton Metro Library, where he offers programs ranging from chess to banned books, to Lego robotics, creative writing, gaga ball, and bizarre cooking demos (like the program called 'Will it Waffle?'). He maintains a stable of 8 bicycles in the garage adjoining a little Hobbit house he shares with his wife. On pretty much any decent Sunday, he'd ride to Richmond, IN and back for good tacos.

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## Gravel Road Downhill Nerves

After traversing the haunted rail tunnel, following  
the switchbacks up the ridge, and then  
ascending to Hanging Rock, I managed  
to climb to the top of Hope-Moonville Rd.

Light rain kept me cool, and I figured  
there was a sweet view off the knife-edge ridge.  
But slick mud kept my eyes on the road,  
weaving around dips and potholes.

Gradient changes and jutting granite chunks  
slowed me even more. Didn't have any lower  
gears left. Just me in my granny, grinding wide

knobbies round in circles up the state forest road.

Was kinda jittery, being out alone this way  
for the first time. But oddly, two dudes in camo  
had put me at ease. Smoking cigars back  
on the bridge next to their truck, they both smiled

and one said *go get 'em buddy*. Part of me  
wanted to have a smoke with those fellows and  
spit into Raccoon Creek. Maybe throw some rocks.  
But I had paid good money in Nelsonville for that  
map saying turn right on Llewelyn.

Came upon a dirt crossroad-T. *Llewelyn's* lettered—  
woodburner and yellow paint—down a wooden  
post hidden in a pine grove. Post about  
the size of something Buford Pusser would  
use to corral the State Line Mob.

Llewelyn follows the ridge for a bit. Lonely yards  
full of grown-over vehicles. Some without hoods.  
Quiet though. Was reminded of riding Cherohala  
Skyway. Where, after 30 miles uphill, two lean hunting  
dogs slunk out of the Smokies sportin' radio collars.

Moments you feel over your head. Just then, found  
the downhill on Llewelyn. Chunky gravel spread  
down a steep, twisty, one-lane ramp. Even wide knobbies  
would chatter over those rocks. Started out squeezing

the brakes, listened for cars, got my nerve up, and

let the bike rumble. That spot of risk between  
letting go and squeezing too hard. Couldn't look  
at the woods, watching for potholes to bunnyhop  
or swerve around. Left bend at the bottom.  
Made it down. Maybe even whooped.

Found myself coasting the flat next to moorish wetlands.  
Black dark trees. Wildflower color traced strong  
creeks cutting oxbows through the fields. There's a graveyard  
where Llewelyn meets 356. Sign says *Bethel* Cemetery—  
Hebrew for *House of God*. I rolled the bike off the road

and found the grave of the area's first settler, fella  
somehow getting out this way in the late 1700s.  
Couple headstones over, someone positioned a CD,  
*Chicago's Greatest Hits*, on top a nearby fence post.  
Was lost for a bit, after that, then rolled into Zaleski.

A dog there ignored me, licking himself in road shade  
next to a stop sign. Took 278 north out of town  
next to a Vinton County swamp. Passed Hope Furnace  
where enough men smelted iron ore 154 years ago  
to support a forest town with 15 saloons and 5 churches.

# Edible Bicycle Sunset

—*seen from road bike, Madison County, Ohio*

Wind pulls clouds like taffy.  
Flavors change from lemon  
through the tangerines to orange.

Orange darkens to strawberry, raspberry,  
boysenberry. The berries become cherry.  
Cherry ripens to grape; finally, everything's licorice.

Even the road, paved Necco wafer  
dusted with powdered sugar and gravel.  
You look east, away from the candy shop

above you and discover a hazy moon setting,  
silver lozenge melting down roughened throat,  
soothing what hurts inside. You're so full of the sky now

it beams from your eyes, shining like hazel dwarf stars.  
You want to lick everything. Instead, you yell.  
Wonder when you swallowed that big farm cat

mewling from your gut. You will pass a graveyard soon.  
There is always a graveyard, always an infant son,  
buried long ago without a name.

You imagine the sweetness of innocent death,

headstones breaking off in your mouth  
like hard wintergreen candy, sparking

against your white teeth in the rural dark.  
It's all about sound and taste out here. Dry corn rustles.  
You inhale the wind's saffron dust.

The darker the sky turns, the faster you go.  
The moon, sky's healing pill,  
spreads its medicine on empty fields.

# Kansas

Fields of dead sunflowers droop  
like shamed choirs. No exit dirt roads  
pass under the interstate  
and stretch toward empty horizons.

Before it warmed to 34 degrees  
the passing lane was thick with slush.  
Semis barreled past, each spewing  
shrouds of dirty slush on the cold glass

through which we view the road.  
Memory, faith, and tight bunghole fear  
kept us from steering into the ditch.  
We're on vacation.

A tattered plastic bag, trapped  
on barbed wire, ripples in the wind  
like a screaming mouth with its tongue  
cut out, muted by the gale. Somehow we missed  
the wind farm we passed driving out:

hundreds of solitary props,  
each facing its own direction,  
turning at different speeds. We've been looking  
for a post office since we left Denver  
to finish the travel bingo game.



Just one more pink window to slide shut.

Just another road sign to read to you:

See the Fick Museum—home of the World's

Largest Prairie Dog and a living 5-legged cow!

Just drive a few more hours until

that Topeka hotel bed.

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**Lisa Bullard** has written ever since she could. She was raised in Montana where she was once bucked off a horse and didn't get back on. She now lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and two children. Before having children, she travelled around the globe on a shoestring, and since children she has found a new appreciation of packing snacks and a change of clothes for all excursions. Besides writing, she enjoys snowboarding, hiking, canoeing, and binge-watching shows while folding tiny items of clothing. She has taught writing courses at colleges and universities in Washington, Montana, and New York.

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## Time

I used to think of time as flowing forward  
relentlessly marching forward  
never to be snatched back  
or bargained back  
even with good deeds or repentance

but in my own mind time travels backwards  
again and again  
to times I crave forgetting  
to people who hurt me  
even to times I feel deep in my DNA  
but cannot place on my tongue

at night especially I fall backwards  
tumbling through time

in the wrong direction  
back through history that is my own and is not  
behind closed eyes and closed doors  
bending the laws  
of time that were laid out  
that say time moves in one predetermined direction: forward

# You've Got to Have a Plan

for when your burned-out flame finds you  
because he thinks the stars you wished on  
together  
the dreams you whispered  
to one another  
meant that you were meant for each other  
forever

he thought the poems he wrote  
would be the only poems  
you would get  
from a lover

you loved him

you've got to know what to do  
if he shows up  
and thinks you owe him

you once nurtured him  
the same way you nurtured  
a new kitten who lost his mother

you've got to know  
how far you would go  
you've got to got to got to  
have a plan  
have a plan  
have a plan

# A Flashback

time clutches me  
with a sudden grip

one second I wait for sleep  
and the very next: ***NO!!!***  
but I can't stop the assault  
on my mind as he looms over me again  
and I am powerless again

raped  
again  
terrified paralyzed  
I leave my body again  
and return again

seconds pass trapped in the memory  
but the anger stays raging  
and the shame  
I want so bad to shake

and I lay awake  
feeling betrayed  
by time and my mind

# You, Papa

Standing by the bank of the Birch Creek

I stoop down and

dip my hand into its icy current

and the water moves past me

I can't hold onto it

I think of you, Papa,

I struggle to grasp you

but again you slip away

and I knew you more in my mind

than not, you always left

away to Texas, away to Nevada,

away to Alaska

you look different from every angle

and when you arrive

you slip through my fingers again

and the slap of my expectations

sting

and I try

to please you, to be your girl

and oh how you are proud of me

but you forget birthday after birthday

you miss most of my plays

you aren't there to screen my dates

but you took me fishing

and we laughed together

and you baited my hook and gutted my fish

and fried it on the fire for our dinner  
and I cling to that memory  
rolling it in my hand like a smooth stone  
but then you leave again and again  
you're always leaving  
then you drink too much again  
you come late to my wedding  
and you leave early  
and we don't dance a father/daughter dance  
but you give me a plaque you made  
when you were a little boy  
a homely looking plaque featuring a hand-painted hunting dog  
and I hang it, cherished, on my wall

# I. Papa: “The Awaited Guests Arrive”

*doop-doop-dee-doo*

A little tune for you, dearest dear dear dear  
dear daughter . . .

oh, okay, so I'm a little just a little drunk . . .

hee-hee-hee

but just hang on, sit tight

and CHECK THIS OUT!

Wooo-eeee! Jeff gave me this harmonica

tonight! See! We drank a little whiskey

to celebrate YOU coming for a VISIT!

Oh you know I miss you kids!

*doop-doop-dee-doo*. Ha ha ha.

And here's a little tune to you

my son-in-law, son-in-law

*doop-doop-dee-doo*

Can you tell I just played harmonica

For the first time in my life TONIGHT!

Wooo-eeee! Am I glad you're here.

I LOVE you two! You know that

don't you? Woweee! I love you!

*doop-doop-dee-doo*. Ha ha ha.



## II. Daughter: “Cotton Candy Land: It’s Where We’ve Always Lived”

the words are  
stones in my belly  
stuck in my throat  
sand in a pipe  
and damned if I’m going to let them out now

*I feel like I’m three years old again and I don’t want to be!*  
*This brings back too many memories. I can’t laugh because it’s not funny to me.*  
*I love you, Papa, but I can’t be around you when you’re drunk. I’m leaving.*

we don’t do that in our family  
we carefully look away  
we forget what we saw  
when we remember, we pretend  
that we don’t

it’s all cotton candy for us  
everything is okay for us  
sweet soft and fun for us

if we can just stuff enough  
cotton candy in a volcano  
maybe it will turn into a candy land  
if we can just get it right

and damned if we won’t try

and damned if we won't go crazy trying

I tell myself to lighten up

it's *just* a fun time dammit

I can laugh myself back to cotton candy land

“Ha Ha Ha! That’s so funny, Papa! Ha Ha Ha! Wow!

What a *frickin’* musical genius! Ha Ha Ha!”

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**Bruce Meyer** has published books of poetry, short fiction, flash fiction, non-fiction, and literary journalism. He lives in Barrie, Ontario.

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## Garage

He kept supplies of pieces of the past  
neatly stocked on wooden shelves.  
He'd pull his car hood close to nuzzle  
elements his engine cast aside.

Tidiness was never about the lack  
of clutter; even I hoard scraps  
of paper, imagining a word or phrase  
will come in handy someday soon.

Fathers save. They collect the past  
because the future remains to be written;  
and having grown up in a home  
where money ran out the door

to feed the hungry wolf, he knew,  
uncannily he knew, what each piece  
was for, as if the future was an open mouth,  
oh not another mouth, needing to be fed.

# Prothalamium

When she was very new, her bald head  
caught the light with the delicate gold  
of a quince. The perfume of morning  
swaddled her in its solemn gift of love.  
Those who looked on her said her gift  
was simply the grace of life, as if life

was something an artist bestowed, a life  
made better by a vision of joys ahead  
of its own laughter. In time, her gift  
was laughter that grew into soft gold  
curls and everyone said she *was* love.  
Her small, perfect hands each morning

reached for pieces of bread. Morning  
fed her because time feeds each life  
until it is full and can eat no more. Love  
was always her second shadow, her head  
rising nearer to the sun each day, its gold  
beckoning her like a promise, its gift

always slightly beyond reach. A gift  
I passed to her was desire. Morning  
brings more to desire each day, the gold  
that turns treasures into kings, the life  
that wants more life, until time, ahead  
of its own hands, runs faster than love

and she is grown. Every morning I love  
how she greets me. I have danced as a gift  
to other brides with her, knowing ahead  
I will dance to celebrate her; the morning  
of dread when she is gone, when my life  
will pause to say goodbye to her, a gold

band on her ring finger, a moment of gold  
that wraps itself around her pulse. Love  
is celebrated when love is sealed, and life  
passes like a secret or a whispered gift,  
and time belongs to some other morning,  
and all its futures, like proverbs in her head

when a child with gold as a gift upon its  
crown will cry for love in the morning light,  
and life will anoint another delicate head.

# Twitch Grass

It stood up like gophers at sunset  
piqued as if it noticed his fury,  
editing his lawn as if a writer urgent  
to take up his pen to tell a tragedy.

The day before, he'd spent hours  
mowing straight lines as if a monk  
with a staved vellum in scriptorium,  
his art, green and thick with words.

Twitch grass reminds me of wild wheat  
growing on shoulders of concessions,  
exclamations of a secret past declaring  
something once ran wild and fecund here.

It does twitch, rattle, and blink,  
each stalk startled as if a shock  
passed through it a split second,  
taken by a leap of surprise:

a man in his Sunday best, kneeling,  
uttering curses no Sunday should hear,  
his hand wiggling the small roots  
from his almost perfect lawn.

Neighbors called it crab grass,  
but inland where water is only rain,  
I could barely imagine green waves  
rolling over hills to drown the world.

# The Thaw

—for Jared Carter

There is a moment in every rural spring  
when snow vanishes from last year's furrows  
and small nothings come again from nothing.

The shout of an open barn door to bring  
in air and chase the months of sorrows  
sounds from that moment in every rural spring

when washing appears to kite on a string,  
and each day leads to longer tomorrows,  
and small nothings come again from nothing.

Flatland and hill farms repeat, and repeating,  
are a prayer of dust only a concession knows  
in that moment in every rural spring

when pane ice is off the brook, and a sleeping  
century of sluices runs in fast, brown flows  
so that something comes again from nothing,

leaving time, and change, and every green thing  
to keep count. Poetry is life, life to interpose  
life and death living in every rural spring,  
so everything may come again from nothing.

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**Nathaniel Hawlish** is a graduate student within the English department at the University of Minnesota - Duluth. As a former foster child, adoptee, and as someone that works within the Social Work field, his poetry is informed by his experiences and experiences that he has heard from others that have been affected by the foster system.

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## No. You're 007

On the evening television drama  
my school sweetheart watched  
surgeons sew stitches.  
Healing hearts.

By the light of a splintered screen  
I watch the same show  
years later.

As the familiar ache of having held  
my phone too long  
recedes

I turn over and imagine  
their love affairs  
juxtaposed over our teenage  
trivialities.

As the characters  
swap switch squander  
their torrid trysts

Each moment  
recalls ridiculed responses.  
Some fashioned  
out of harsh hurts.

I turn over.  
I close my eyes.  
Avoiding thoughts  
of the small-town strangled  
sweetheart



and enjoy my  
healing heart.

# Lessons of the Father

And afterward I walked outside in my father's shoes  
which marked the entrance  
to our home  
like the wooden signs  
with burnt out letters.

I walked behind the house  
plodding through puddles  
placing wood in the furnace to heat our home.

And it was the same  
then that the coals burned orange and bright  
just under the ash  
I raked them forward  
and smiled in their beauty.

I brought the wood from under tarp  
I brought patience under my right arm  
and understanding, my left.  
The rough bark of humility scratched my forearm  
and splinters of support dotted my wrist  
I tucked pride under my chin.

I placed each carefully on this bed I'd made  
watching them flare and tease  
licking at my gifts  
I closed the grate and started  
back towards the house.

# Smiling Helps

The sudden grimace  
of "I think I know your mom."  
Faces falling like the last slushman  
of a five-month winter  
all brown streaks and pointy noses.  
"I'm so sorry what happened?"  
I wish I could show them  
her memory, thrown like the snowbanks  
I used to shove my brothers face into.  
He and I would stand outside  
until our big toes were numb  
just numb.

# Incident Report: Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)

AC giggled in his room and stifled his pain.

The shock left him in darkness,

He called out

“I stuck my dick in the electric outlet.”

Through the barrier door, EZ asked

“Can a shocked dick kill you”

“My Dad would know.

He’s rad, so rad.”

EZ replied,

“So are you, So are you”

# Nephew

Mom was a yeller

like an open window with ears ringing

brother “had to fuck  
with your little dick”

later lying on the pool patio bed  
her explaining about bastards

years later, a similar bed  
the doctors talking  
the next plan  
and the “bastard”  
stood next to me  
sparkled marble eyes  
filled water wobbling  
“when

will Grandma wake up?”

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**David Dephy** is a trilingual Georgian/American award-winning poet and novelist, multimedia artist. He lives and works in New York City, and his poems have been published in multiple international journals. His first novel in English *All the World's Mysteries* is from Mad Hat Press (2019) and first book of poetry *Eastern Star* is forthcoming from Adelaide Books (2020).

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## Watching the East River

Watching the East River from Manhattan's side,  
when silence is floating all around me and no  
seagulls fly, I want to say—let the silence float.  
Maybe I was wrong, maybe you, the East River  
knows. I can say some words and maybe you will  
be happy. I can say nothing and maybe you will  
understand me more. Maybe what you like about  
me can lead me to an understanding myself, and  
maybe what irritates you about me can lead you to  
an understanding of yourself, and maybe we hear  
only what we understand and maybe we know  
much more than we understand, and the East River  
still flows under the silence of our miss, but the home  
is impossible to miss—it's right by every river  
in the world and we are still going, because there is  
no life without movement, there is no prophet in his  
own land and I am still saying—let the silence float.

# The Song of the American Prophet

I can see the cities and subways, satellites and  
news at 9, I see effect without cause, I see you  
right over here, but I don't understand you,

I plant a lot of trees, but don't find rest under  
their shadows. I have a million numbers on my  
cell phone, I sent a million messages to the people,

but didn't receive any answer. I hear the echoes of  
every mother's heart, I know every new generation  
is the new heartbeat of you, I see what hides the night

or Mona Lisa's smile, or President of Russia,  
but I am not going to share it with others, because  
I love them. Is my love a punishment? Is it a sin?

You say you love me and you disappear through  
the centuries of creation, when creation means  
understanding and understanding is condonation,

I miss you, I can bury my feeling in oblivion, but  
I see space between those words, it's a universe  
beyond everything. I taste the light of that universe

it's a vineyard deep within me. I hear a melody  
of that vineyard, it's the DNA within us. I touch  
the heart of that DNA and its magnetic transparency,

it's the ash of history. I smell the ashes, there are  
diamonds of future. I predict future by all my feelings  
and understand myself, and when I understand myself

I understand freedom, when I understand freedom  
I understand love and when I understand love  
I understand the nature of a miracle and I reveal

myself to me—my love is deeper than the abyss of seas,  
my love is stronger than the heights of fire. I exhale the sky  
and all my tears become crystals of high mountains,

I exhale the sky and I transform into the constellations  
beyond those spaces between those words when you say you  
love me and disappear through the centuries of creation,

I kissed American flag right in the blood and flesh,  
I kissed American idea into the hero's breath,  
I kissed American prophecy into the sound of blues,

and I opened all the digits codes, but didn't  
find any trace of time, I found only dust of  
silence there, silence, which speaks for itself.



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**Cindy Veach** is the author of *Her Kind* (forthcoming, CavanKerry Press) and *Gloved Against Blood* (CavanKerry Press), a finalist for the Paterson Poetry Prize and a Massachusetts Center for the Book 'Must Read'. Her poems have appeared in the Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day Series, AGNI, Prairie Schooner, Sugar House Review, Poet Lore, Michigan Quarterly Review and elsewhere. She is the winner of the 2018 Samuel Allen Washington Prize and the 2019 Phillip Booth Poetry Prize. Cindy is co-poetry editor of Mom Egg Review. [www.cindyveach.com](http://www.cindyveach.com)

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## I, Circe

I love swine. It's all I have to show  
for my years on the isle of Iowa.

I like swine made out of anything—  
flesh, glass, stone, fabric, porcelain.

I even count a low-fire, glazed in gold  
warthog in my collection. The male artist,

a transplant from Mill Valley, titled it *Farm Art*  
like an aesthetic dig at the heartland,

at the neighbor lady who taught me  
to make kolaches with prune filling—

at the boy who was my first  
who could dock the tails

of piglets in his sleep  
and two-hand an electric fence.

Sometimes I crave that Grant Wood land  
not flat, not flat at all, but I can't go back.

Is that why I keep adding to my stash?  
Swine ornaments dangle from light fixtures,

cabinets. Swine tea towels, pitchers, butter  
dishes, pull toy, corkscrew, talisman.

## IV. BOOK REVIEWS

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Jones, Clint. 2018. *Ecological Reflections on Post-Capitalist Society*. Stevens Point, Wisconsin: Cornerstone Press, 128 pp. \$9.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0984673957

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Reviewed by Tiffany Montoya

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*Ecological Reflections on Post-Capitalist Society* is an impressive little book of political ecology that accomplishes a lot in so few pages. Clint Jones claims that the ecological crisis must be solved with a reconceptualization of our metaphysical selves in relation to the environment; we must reject the “logics of oppression” and separation of the self from the Other; and have an understanding that the ecological is necessarily political, and thus, necessarily intersectional.

This book came from a series of public lectures geared toward an academic and community audience, so it contains terms that are specific to philosophy as a discipline, but at the same time, it is stylistically relaxed. It strikes that balance of being accessible, while providing a new paradigm of political ecology. Jones recognizes that the underlying metaphysical and epistemological elements of ecological and environmental questions are “underdeveloped, poorly understood, or unrecognized” (p. 1). He takes those metaphysical and epistemological elements as his focus. The questions he raises with this book are ontological: What kind of “being” are we? And where and how does our being fit into the natural world?

Jones argues that the environmental problems we face have an ideological origin—these ideologies are Western, masculine, Judeo-Christian, anthropocentric, capitalist, and colonial. The hegemony of these ideologies grants us permission, or rather, the endowment, to treat nature as a resource and a subordinate to be used, consumed, and depleted according to our needs and desires.

This, in turn, creates a separation, an alienation, a duality, or an antagonism between humans (us), and nature (the Other). So, importantly, he claims, we cannot solve environmental (or social) problems with the same ideological frameworks that *cause* the domination, antagonism, and exploitation in the first place.

Half of this book is a revelation of how the ideologies of domination that permit the exploitation of the *natural* world are the same ideologies as those that cause *social* exploitation and subjugation. Jones also adopts insights from Eco-Feminism and Care Ethics to explain the parallels between patriarchy and the domination of nature. For example, the natural world has often been associated with the feminine, and one of the things that Eco-Feminism suggests is that “where the female or the feminine is oppressed or dominated, a parallel logic of domination emerges in our relationship to the natural world [and vice versa]. In this way, the domination experienced on the one hand reiterates and reinforces the experience of domination on the other hand” (p. 80).

Another connection between environmental exploitation and human exploitation can be seen in environmental racism. Jones gives powerful examples of massive industrial farm operations, petrochemical companies, landfills, and incinerators that are disproportionately located near black communities. These industries pollute the air, soil, and water of the surrounding area with chemicals and untreated waste. One of these areas became known as “Cancer Alley” because of its level of toxicity to surrounding residents. This environmental racism also extends across nations because the United States ships much of its waste to other less developed countries, usually in the “global South,” directly contributing to the region’s environmental and health disasters.

The strategy, then, is to look to the opposite ideological frameworks—those dominated, silenced, and delegitimized. Here, Jones takes his inspiration from the philosophies of the global South and the socially peripheral. For example, he looks to Asian philosophy for comprehension of an

“interconnectivity of Being,” and to African concepts of bio-communalism as a way of understanding “citizenship within a community of Beings.”

The last connection that Jones makes between ecology and social justice is how the particular experiences of the LGBTQ community can be allegorical to nature’s “ways of being.” He goes one by one through the identities that correspond with the acronym “LGGBTQQIA+” and explains how queerness, for example, shares the same ontological traits as nature itself: nonbinary, “being as becoming,” or fluidity. His thesis for this last chapter is that environmental destruction happens by “othering” nature much in the same way that antagonism happens when we “other” alternative lifestyles, genders, and sexualities—“Like sexuality, where existence is, or ought to properly be conceived of as a continuum, our existence in nature is not dichotomous” (p. 92).

Jones has created a work of Ecosophia—“a wisdom of eco-existence that is normative, political, logical, aesthetic, and contemplative about the natural world and our place in it” (p. 35). Jones recognizes that a large root of the global ecological problem is ideological, so our new ontological orientation must be one of “egalitarian biocentrism and a metaphysical ontology of holism” (p. 34). Our relationship to nature must be one of stewardship and citizenship, since our very *being* as humans is inseparably connected to the earth. To treat this relationship asymmetrically (as it has been) would only be self-sabotage.

*Tiffany Montoya is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at Purdue University. She specializes in social and political philosophy, and normative ethics.*

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Kissling, Elizabeth Arveda. 2018. *From a Whisper to a Shout: How Social Media Activism is Challenging Abortion Stigma*. New York: Repeater Books, 127pp. \$14.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-91224-02-5

Reviewed by Bessie Rigakos

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Driving to and from work over the last six months, I decided to start listening to audiobooks since I had a forty-minute commute each way. During this time, I listened to five books; all were stories told about women, by women, or for women, such as *Becoming* (2018) by Michelle Obama, *Dare to Lead* (2018) by Brené Brown, *Bad Blood* (2018) by John Carreyrou, and *Educated* (2018) by Tara Westover. Sometime in March, I received a copy of *From a Whisper to a Shout* by Elizabeth Arveda Kissling while simultaneously listening to the audiobook *Shrill* (2016) by Lindy , who is a self-proclaimed feminist. Situated on the cover of Kissling's book is the face of Venus de Milo, the goddess of love and beauty. In smaller font reads "Abortion Activism and Social Media" hanging in a large quotation mark over Venus de Milo's mouth. Kissling's argument parallels West's mission to eliminate the shame surrounding abortion by encouraging women to share their abortion stories and/or listen to and support the women who want to share their stories. This book addresses the issue of societal control or policing of women's bodies, specifically women's reproductive health, by focusing on abortion using women's narratives.

Kissling uses a feminist approach to address the issue of how society polices and controls women's bodies through abortion regulation. Her argument is that women experience abortion stigma

and shame because they are not welcome to share their abortion stories. In her previous book, *Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation* (2006), Kissling explored the profound gender bias inherent in the lucrative business of menstruation. She revealed how menstruation is stigmatized and used by corporations to portray women as hindered by their menstrual cycle. Her current work demonstrates the antagonism toward abortion and pushes her argument forward by profiling four organizations that are integrating feminist tactics and political strategies in an effort to eliminate abortion stigma.

In six chapters, Kissling documents the history of abortion through practices, legislation, and regulation in the United States. “Abortion,” Kissling states at the beginning of her book, “Can we finally stop whispering about it” (p. 1)? She explains that she is not celebrating the act of abortion or making a value judgement but is encouraging women to support and listen to women who want to share their abortion stories. In the book’s middle three chapters she focuses on how four organizations, *#ShoutYourAbortion*, *Lady Parts Justice*, *#WeTestify*, and *The Abortion Diary* are utilizing social media to provide women with safe places to share their abortion stories. She concludes that even though one in three women have an abortion, the abortion stigma exists, and women are shamed for this choice. Moreover, Kissling states that because silence surrounding abortion is the norm, challenging and confronting abortion stigma while promoting abortion access becomes impossible unless women share their stories.

One of the great strengths of Kissling’s scholarship is the use of the theory of consciousness raising and the method of subjectivity. She uses women’s narratives to normalize the discussion of abortion and reduce stigma. West, who co-founded the *#ShoutYourAbortion* social media campaign on Twitter also used a storytelling method to share her abortion experience to destigmatize. Kissling uses a similar approach to advance her argument—by profiling the four organizations mentioned above, she shows that allowing women to share freely and support each other’s narratives without shame



helps destigmatize abortion. The method of women sharing abortion stories is also an effective and powerful tool in organizing activists to mobilize an action or movement.

Kissling's book is eminently readable. In the final chapter, she circles back to her thesis and writes, "Silence lets abortion opponents write the story—the wrong story" (p. 101). Her book encourages readers to share their stories, listen to other's stories, and most importantly, to support all women whether or not they share their narrative. Her book favors narrative over argumentation, and, as a result, it is suitable for a wider readership, as the text is accessible. Scholars and students are challenged to explore the shameful issue of abortion through a new lens—perhaps using a shift in consciousness to understand that abortion is not a gift but a fundamental right.

*Bessie Rigakos is an assistant professor of sociology at Marian University in Indianapolis, where she serves as the chair of the Department of History and Social Sciences.*

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Taylor, Ula Yvette. 2017. *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 288 pp. \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4696-3393-0

Reviewed by Olivia Hagedorn

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Ula Yvette Taylor's *The Promise of Patriarchy* examines the complex, and at times contradictory, ways Black women pursued freedom and dignity within the fiercely patriarchal Nation of Islam (NOI) from 1930 to 1975. At the heart of Taylor's book is the question of how "freedom and prosperity comeingle around patriarchy" within the NOI (p. 5). According to Taylor, the NOI appealed to Black women through its "promise of patriarchy," that is, the promise of protection, financial stability, and supportive husbands in the context of a violent Jim Crow nation. Patriarchy's promise held sway precisely because it confronted the devaluation of Black womanhood and inverted the racist belief that Black women were immoral, and therefore unworthy of protection. Simply put, the NOI "provided a space for women who had been disrespected, abused, and who had struggled to find a 'home' in racial America" (p. 5).

Using archival sources, Federal Bureau of Investigation and police files, newspapers, and oral histories, Taylor reveals the centrality of women to the development and sustenance of the NOI. Here, Taylor upends prevailing scholarly narratives, which foreground high-profile male NOI leaders such as W. D. Fard, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X. Instead, Taylor illustrates how women such as Clara (Poole) Muhammad, Bursteen Sharieff, Sister Belinda Ali, and Ethel Sharieff worked to advance

the NOI's goals of an autonomous Black nation. Indeed, as Taylor writes, "what became the Nation of Islam was driven by a woman" (p. 15). Clara Muhammad, known as Sister Clara within the NOI, introduced her husband, Elijah Muhammad, to the teachings of Fard, the mysterious founder of the NOI, after becoming frustrated with her husband's alcoholism and unemployment in Great Depression-era Detroit. In fact, Sister Clara attended her first NOI meetings without him. Moreover, Clara encouraged Elijah Muhammad to accept Fard's call to teach and then tutored him on Fard's teachings. At the grassroots level, early NOI women canvassed door to door spreading Fard's message; organized the Muslim Girls' Training and General Civilization Classes to train NOI women on diet, dress, domestic responsibilities, and motherhood; penned articles for the organization's two publications, *The Final Call to Islam* and *Muhammad Speaks*; and helped establish and run University of Islam schools. Women, Taylor shows, were indispensable to the NOI's daily functioning, even if they could not serve as ministers or leaders.

Throughout the book, Taylor convincingly demonstrates how patriarchy and gender hierarchy infused every part of the NOI and shaped all aspects of NOI members' lives. NOI members were expected to uphold a moral lifestyle rooted in traditional upper- and middle-class gender roles, with husbands financially supporting their wives and protecting them from the racial and sexual violence of white supremacy. Women, conversely, were taught to embrace modesty, marriage, and motherhood. Here, Taylor teases out the tensions between the oppressive and liberatory aspects of NOI membership for Black women. The NOI's strict gender norms threatened to reinforce harmful elements of patriarchy—namely, domestic violence and male domination. At the same time, male leaders' sexual indiscretions and vocal denunciations of Black women's alleged immorality belied the NOI's affectionate rhetoric of love and respect for Black womanhood. Yet Taylor does not rely on a narrow binary of freedom versus oppression to analyze NOI women's lives. Instead, she carefully situates her subjects' actions within the context of low-wage service employment, the 1965 Moynihan

Report, and failed civil rights reforms in northern industrial centers. In one of the most interesting and nuanced sections of the book, Taylor reveals how NOI women defied NOI doctrine by “trumping” patriarchy. That is, NOI wives went against NOI doctrine and worked outside of the home, practiced family planning, and divorced absentee husbands.

Taylor’s *The Promise of Patriarchy* offers the first in-depth, book-length analysis of women within the Nation of Islam. Scholars of African American women’s history, Black Nationalism, and Black religion will find her astute reading of archival sources and deft use of oral histories fruitful. Like Taylor’s first book, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (2002), *The Promise of Patriarchy* complicates simple narratives of gender domination and resistance, revealing the multidimensionality of Black women’s inner lives and struggles. *The Promise of Patriarchy* not only succeeds in answering the question of why Black women would join a highly patriarchal organization; it also succeeds in complicating narratives of Black women’s oppression, resistance, and agency.

*Olivia M. Hagedorn is a Ph.D. candidate in history and gender and women’s studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she studies women, gender, race, sexualities, and the African diaspora in the Midwest.*

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Rotella, Carlo. 2019. *The World is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 284 pp. \$27.50 (hardcover) ISBN 978-0-226-62403-7

Reviewed by John Lepley

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Between 1960 and 1980, Chicago's South Shore neighborhood demographically transformed from 90 percent white to 95 percent black. Some white residents fled; others were indifferent. In 1968, a writer to the *Chicago Daily News* suggested that new arrivals might interpret South Shore residents' earnest preoccupation "with family and career" as unwelcoming, but denied the influence of racism (a revealing gesture in and of itself) (p. 39). The following year, a longtime South Shore property owner wryly recalled the successive waves of English, Irish, and Jewish immigrants who settled into the neighborhood, each time hearing, "The world is always coming to an end" (p. 9).

Carlo Rotella was a toddler in the late 1960s and left South Shore forty years ago, but the neighborhood remains part of him. In *The World Is Always Coming to an End* he explores the notion of community in a place he envisions most other American cities will look like "when we're done reversing the postwar expansion of the middle class" (p. 13). The author's family lived in two South Shore houses between 1967 and 1982. While writing this book, he envisioned passing through "three distinct worlds" walking between the first house and the second (p. 1). His grasp of history, journalism, memoir, and sociology keep this homecoming story free from cliché.

“How do cities change, and how do we live [with] the consequences,” Rotella asks (p. 22). The first chapters explore how residents connect with each other. Rotella writes about local groups confronting the ills that trouble South Shore: drugs, violence, poverty, and unemployment. Touring the old neighborhood, chatting with residents, he notes that signs abound that “collective efficacy” (how a community works together to address problems) is weak. The middle class is shrinking, and activists are at odds over issues charitably described as a “generation gap.” Ava St. Claire, a marketing director, sees a plain line separating different generations of activists: “It’s people protecting their interest. I hate to say it, but we totally have to wait for them to die” (p. 51).

Chicago has spawned giants of literature, journalism, and social science, and Rotella’s work reflects these roots. His analysis of class, race, and space, for example, recalls Sophonisba Breckenridge’s and Lorraine Hansberry’s contributions to social work and playwriting, respectively. *The World Is Always Coming to an End* also features a cast of memorable informants, including David Lemieux and Gerald Hamilton, who are retired African American police officers who belonged to street gangs before going into law enforcement. As Lemieux tells it, the arrival of crack cocaine in the 1980s turned everything upside down. Certainly, these characters inhabit the same irresistible dirty, beautiful cityscape as Nelson Algren and Studs Terkel.

Rotella is alarmed by anemic civil society in South Shore, which Hamilton describes. While discussing the University of Chicago’s developments in nearby Westlawn, “[Hamilton] found it galling that there was no institution like the university to mobilize a similar combination of investment capital and policing in South Shore” (p. 93). It is astonishing that a retired police officer names the University of Chicago as the only institution that can revive a neighborhood—especially one with every reason to distrust government—but is Rotella questioning the university’s exercise of power?

Readers can forgive Rotella for not pursuing the laurels and barbs of the University of Chicago. His parents earned graduate degrees there, and he attended its Laboratory School (and the University

of Chicago Press published this monograph). Thus, *The World Is Always Coming to an End* is about Rotella as much as about South Shore. He conveys these experiences in five brief chapters. Family history, childhood books, pickup basketball, role models, and music: the “equipment for living” that has helped him through life. These chapters evoke another author with Chicago roots, John Dos Passos, and the “camera eye” technique he used in the *U.S.A* trilogy of books (published between 1932 and 1936). The stream-of-consciousness passages, which are partly autobiographical, provide a sharp contrast to the historical “newsreels” and character narratives in the Popular Front magnum opus. Rotella writes in simple prose, but his narrative style evokes the literature that fired his young imagination.

In the latter chapters, Rotella reframes his perspective to South Shore’s spatial dimensions, or what he calls the “neighborhood as container” (p. 21). Homeowners and residents of public housing do not mix, regardless of race, which perpetuates neighborhood divisions. When South Shore began to integrate in the 1960s, a University of Chicago doctoral student, Morris Janowitz, developed the idea of “limited liability” to argue that “sociology should allow for a more partial, optional, multiple, and contingent kind of community” (p. 189). Thus, whites who fled to other parts of Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s may have felt attachments to the area, but those ties were not strong enough to overcome the threats they perceived from the blacks who were moving in. South Shore residents won some fights in the 1970s—such as preventing a community bank from joining the white exodus—but the campaigns emphasized middle-class concerns instead of racial solidarity.

*The World Is Always Coming to an End* ends at one of the homes Rotella grew up in, now occupied by a couple he has befriended for many years. The Obama Presidential Center, slated for construction in neighboring Jackson Park, has raised hopes it will bring investment to the region. Rotella chats with a classmate from the University of Chicago Laboratory School, Arne Duncan, who is a booster for the project. It is ironic that the former CEO of Chicago Public Schools and a secretary

of education appears in *The World Is Always Coming to an End*. Duncan championed charter schools, even though their record of student achievement is dubious. There is reason for hope, though. On October 31, 2019, the Chicago Teachers Union concluded a successful two-week strike that wrested significant concessions from the city.

*The World Is Always Coming to an End* is an enjoyable read, and Rotella is a journeyman writer. However, only time will tell if his concerns come to pass or he is proven wrong. Let us hope it is the latter.

*John Lepley is a union activist in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*



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Enyeart, John P. 2019. *Death to Fascism: Louis Adamic's Fight for Democracy*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 238 pp. \$25.00 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-252-08432-4

Reviewed by Tariq Khan

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In the 1930s and 1940s there emerged from the Left what historian Michael Denning called “an anti-fascist common sense in American culture,” in opposition to the white supremacist, capitalist, colonialist, and patriarchal common sense of dominant U.S. culture and politics.<sup>102</sup> Scholars such as Erik McDuffie, Jennifer Guglielmo, and Kenyon Zimmer, among many others, have unearthed histories of vilified groups in the United States—Black communist women, Jewish and Italian migrant anarchists, and radical working-class immigrant women—whose organizing and agitating is what created that antifascist common sense.<sup>103</sup> One person, largely forgotten, but highly influential in the antifascist movement in the era, was Louis Adamic. Enyeart’s work comes at a moment in which forging the multiracial, multiethnic, working-class-based, transnational antifascist movement Adamic championed is urgently necessary.

Adamic (1898–1951), along with his Slovenian peasant family, was among the South Slav refugees displaced by the violence of the Austrian Empire, to become proletarianized in the United States. Enyeart focuses on Adamic’s political development from a scrappy low-wage working-class

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<sup>102</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 11.

<sup>103</sup> Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Kenyon Zimmer, *Immigrants against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

radical to a leading literary figure and antifascist organizer. Enyeart does so largely through an examination of how Adamic's writing developed over time.

Adamic's writing contrasted with other leading socialist authors, particularly because of his deep skepticism about what the United States is. Themes of alienation, exile, liminality, and displacement pervaded his early work. In contrast with socialist idealism, represented by authors such as Upton Sinclair, Adamic's work was infused with peasant fatalism. For Adamic, the United States was not a melting pot. The melting pot notion was antidemocratic because it treated assimilation into whiteness as a laudable goal rather than what it was: surrender and death. Hard work did not lead to success, and attempts to assimilate were a fool's game. Enyeart writes, "In contrast to Sinclair, Adamic's protagonists could never successfully assimilate, whether they embraced capitalist individualism and Anglo-Saxon values or... converted to socialism. Any effort to become an 'American' resulted in death" (p. 29). Here one can see strong similarities between migrant peasant fatalism and Black radical Afro-pessimist writing.

Enyeart recognizes that Black radicalism profoundly affected Adamic's thinking about fascism. Adamic saw white supremacy as the greatest stumbling block to socialism and antifascism in the United States. While many white leftists praised Franklin D. Roosevelt for taking a stand against Adolf Hitler, Adamic pointed to Jim Crow, Japanese internment, and anti-Black pogroms as evidence that fascism was part of the fabric of U.S. empire. The military under supposed antifascist Roosevelt was racially segregated, symbolizing the hypocrisy of the notion that the United States was fighting fascism. Adamic saw the Black press as the cutting edge of antifascist thought, and urged his audience to read Black newspapers. Adamic recognized that the Black press was internationalist, and connected antifascist struggle with anticolonial struggle. Enyeart observes, "Adamic saw the mostly black writers and activists leading the anticolonial movement as the vanguard in the fight against fascism" (p. 106).

Adamic worked to build antifascist solidarity between South Slavs and other “ethnics” with Black anticolonialists. This work did not survive the repression of Cold War liberalism. Though Adamic was not a party member and was highly critical of Stalinism, his explicit anticolonialism, opposition to white supremacist U.S. policies, and advocacy for the self-determination of colonized peoples was enough for the state to vilify him as a subversive foreign agent. Some South Slav immigrants turned to red-baiting against radicals such as Adamic as a way to access whiteness and become “Americans.” During this same period, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in an effort to appeal to the Truman administration, distanced itself from anticolonial politics and expelled W. E. B. DuBois for maintaining his anticolonial stance. Enyeart observes, “DuBois went into exile, black journalists turned their attention to the civil-rights movement, and Adamic either committed suicide or was murdered” (p. 133). By removing the people on the cutting edge of antifascist organizing, anticommunist repression effectively erased much of the antifascist common sense of the preceding decades.

Enyeart is quite upfront that he intends *Death to Fascism* to be relevant to organizing against fascism in the current era. He discusses some of the major social movements against white supremacy and fascism since 2016. Missing, however, from this discussion is the importance of Indigenous people organizing in recent years. One question for Enyeart, or perhaps Adamic’s focus, is that for all of the critique and analysis of corporate power, white supremacy, and U.S. empire, there is little attention to settler colonialism. What does it mean to achieve democracy on stolen land? How does Adamic’s notion of pluralism hold up in light of radical Indigenous critiques of the United States? Discussions of Adamic’s politics, and antifascism in general, could be deepened with a discussion of how it fits (or perhaps does not fit) within Indigenous antifascist and anticapitalist politics.

*Death to Fascism* is both praiseworthy and relevant to scholars and organizers alike. Enyeart suggests that in this current moment in which the far Right is globally resurgent, the old antifascist common sense must be revived: the common sense that fighting capitalism requires fighting against white supremacy, that antifascism must explicitly aim at U.S. empire itself and not just cartoonish racist outliers, and that “dealing a death blow to fascism clearly requires more than voting. People must directly confront white supremacy, xenophobia, corporate hegemony, and imperialism for democracy to truly exist” (p. 167).

*Tariq Khan is a Ph.D. candidate in history at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.*

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Foster, Thomas A. 2019. *Rethinking Rufus, Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 174 pp. \$22.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0820355221

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Reviewed by Anwar Uhuru

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*Rethinking Rufus* by Thomas A. Foster is a groundbreaking contribution to the study of Black masculinity in particular, and the fields of critical race studies and slavery studies in general. Foster begins by focusing on the subject of the bodies of enslaved men. By doing this, Foster argues, “the ways that dominant American culture denigrated, celebrated and damaged the bodies of enslaved men” is of underappreciated importance in understanding the field of slave studies (p. 7). Foster specifically recounts the life of an enslaved man named Rufus and his wife, Rose. Rufus and Rose were forced to live together by their master in hopes that they would produce more slaves through their forced coupling.

Despite having no free choice of a partner and the threat of being separated from one’s own family, “the ability to develop family relations and to persist in maintaining marriage and family in all their forms and despite physical and psychological barriers erected by enslavement, was a key component of manliness” (p. 32). Foster uses the accounts of enslaved men as a way to illustrate how they fought to choose their partners and create a family, and despite their enslavement, forged intimate bonds and a counter-Eurocentric model of Black masculinity. Thinking of masculinity of the enslaved men pushes readers to consider the difference between the autonomous body and enslaved flesh. For example, Foster notes that “enslaved men had to carefully negotiate the will of masters and mistresses

in the area of intimacy” (p. 43). For Foster, intimacy is the relationship between the enslaved man and his partner, children and kin, as well as the relationship with his master and the master’s wife.

Rose and Rufus were expected to reproduce, but not all reproduction of enslaved men and women was coerced. According to Foster, “forced reproduction divided men along lines of fertility and virility, isolated men who were prolific, and fractured families and communities” (p. 46). Despite slavery and forced reproduction, enslaved men and women did experience moments of pleasure and chose to have children. Yet, Foster does not want readers to ignore that both women and men were forced to breed and states that “the lack of attention paid to the significance of forcing men to reproduce has resulted from a variety of factors” (p. 48). He notes that “the richest source of testimonies of forced reproduction of Black men is the collection of interviews conducted in the early 20th century by the U.S. government” (ibid.). Foster uses the terms *coerced*, *forced slave breeding*, and *intimacy* because he does not want to take away the legacy of those slaves who chose their partners and respect, the intricacies of intimacies between both the master and their slave but also the will of the master regarding with whom the slave is forced or allowed to partner.

By focusing on the roles of white women in slavery, Foster brings a “revised image of the role that white women, slave-owning and not, played in enforcing slavery and racial hierarchies” (p. 69). Foster does not ignore that “white women’s actions were targeted for legal punishments and cultural derision” (p. 73). For example, he points out that the first divorce cases in the states of Maryland and Virginia were on the basis of white women giving birth to mulatto children. The irony of their birth is that those children are born free because slavery is based on the status of the mother, not the father—if a white woman bore a child of an enslaved man, that child is born free. Foster argues, “white women derived power from a variety of social and cultural mechanisms, including the courts” (p. 78). Despite claims of infidelity, if a white woman bore a mixed-race child she could accuse the slave of rape. These accusations would commonly result in executions of the enslaved man. Foster

states that “twelve of the nineteen black men accused of rape between 1670 and 1767 were executed” (p. 79).

As Foster states, “enslaved men like Rufus were also sexually exploited and abused in a range of ways” (p. 113). Yet, “*Rethinking Rufus* allows also for rethinking Rose and the sexual violations of enslaved women” (p. 115). Ultimately, Foster’s project is to “imagine the worries, fears, and attempts of enslaved men and women to protect boys and young men from sexual violations” (ibid.). Arguably, *Rethinking Rufus* not only means “rethinking the community of enslaved people” but also “understandings of gender and sexuality continue to be shaped by the past” (p. 116). Foster highlights that in slave narratives of formerly enslaved men the physical and sexual violence between the slave master and an enslaved woman is viscerally depicted. Yet, only physical abuse between master and enslaved male is described in the narrative. However, the closeness and kindheartedness shown by a white male and a former slave alludes to a much more complicated homosocial bond.

*Rethinking Rufus* is not only an innovative and scholastically rigorous undertaking; it forces readers to reimagine the discourse on slavery and violation. As noted throughout his text, sexual violation and slavery due to patriarchy and abolitionist sensationalism have only been discussed between the slave master and enslaved woman, largely because of the slave laws that stated that to be born a slave one’s mother must be a slave. Secondly, enslavement is a system that protected the virtue of a white woman as long as she does not bear a mulatto child. If so, she can either accuse the enslaved man of rape, commit infanticide, or face divorce from her white husband. However, masculinity and intimacy are not to be ignored because moments of agency and pleasure did exist despite the physical, political, and psycho-social torture that slaves endured. The homosocial and same-sex intimacy between both master and slave, and slave and slave allows for new approaches of defining relationships and pleasure. Lastly, Foster’s book introduces a methodology that includes the full

spectrum of possibilities for slavery studies that are and continue to be excluded from the academic discourse.

*Anwar Uburu is an assistant professor of African American Latinx Literature in Monmouth University's English Department.*



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Montgomery, Jess. 2020. *The Hollows: A Novel, Volume Two of the Kinship Series*. New York: Minotaur Books, 352 pp. \$17.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-250781-69-7

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Reviewed by Betty J. Bruther

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Jess Montgomery's novel *The Widows* is a classic origin story and mystery tale. The novel recounts the events of the year 1925 in fictitious Bronwyn County, Ohio, a part of western Appalachia. The story is told through the words of two women, both widows, as a result of the mining practices and venal corruption of the Ross Mining Company. One is Lily Ross, the widow of the murdered county sheriff (Daniel Ross), and she serves as the newly appointed sheriff of the county. The other is Marvena Whitcomb, the common-law wife and widow of a coal miner and union organizer (John Rutherford), and she works as a union organizer and bootlegger. Each woman confronts the basic conflicts of the age—corrupt government officials, organized-crime bosses, and exploitative mine owners. They discover it is difficult to escape the political and economic chicanery of the era. They are forced to compromise their own ideals, so that the people of their county can lead lives of dignity and peace.

The tale opens dramatically. Ross Mine #9, known as the “widow-maker,” explodes, killing five miners and two rescuers. The explosion is witnessed by a red-tailed hawk. The mine had been closed in the late nineteenth century because over forty miners had been killed due to a methane build-

up and explosion. The mine owners, Luther and Elias Ross, have reopened the mine, so that they can make a profit from its deep veins of anthracite coal. They care very little for the miners and their families who live in the company town of Rossville.

Elias Ross and his nephew, Luther, believe that miners and their families are inferior beings, unimportant foreigners, and “white trash.” As for Daniel Ross, the mining family see him as a useful member of the family, but one who is not truly a Ross, given his First Nations mother. They own the town of Rossville—its school, its stores, and its housing. None of the miners are free to leave Rossville; they have no U.S. currency in their accounts, for they are paid in company scrip, good only in Rossville. Miners in debt to the company lose their housing, and are forced to live in tents near the mine. Since they still owe money to their employers, they cannot leave the company. As for their children, Luther Ross has closed the school, as an unwarranted extra expense. He ignores both the federal and state safety regulations and child labor laws. He is willing to use the infamous Pinkerton Detective Agency agents to enforce his will.

Daniel Ross, the sheriff, works to mitigate their violent intimidation of the miners and the union organizers. He hopes to avoid another Matewan Massacre (1920) or Blair Mountain Battle (1921) in his county. He promises his friend (and former lover) Marvena Whitcomb that he would contact federal authorities at the U.S. Bureau of Mines about the situation in Rossville. Yet before he can contact his friend at the bureau, Daniel is killed. According to Luther Ross, he was killed transporting a miner, Tom Whitcomb, to the county jail. Lily Ross is asked to fill her husband’s remaining term in office as sheriff. Lily Ross enters the office, hoping to discover the truth about her husband’s death. Over the course of the novel, she uncovers a host of mysteries involving her late husband, the mines, and the violence and secrets at the foundation of her community.

Montgomery’s second novel in the Kinship mystery series, *The Hollors*, introduces the Midwestern Ku Klux Klan to readers. The tale takes a deep plunge into the role of virulent racism in

Lily Ross's community via the Women's Ku Klux Klan, returning to a theme of her previous mystery, the importance of women's agency in Appalachian communities, for good and evil. This story concerns itself with the murder of an elderly woman, Thea Kincaide, on September 21, 1926. A long-absent member of the Kinship community, she has returned to her old hometown, as a resident in the Hollows Asylum for the Insane. On a dark autumn night, she escapes from the facility on a mission, one from her childhood in antebellum America. She makes her way toward a home; she remembers a murder, a lynching, and a baby. She must deliver the baby to a safe haven. Her falling body stops a freight train in its tracks. Sheriff Lily Ross is called to the scene—she determines that the unidentified woman was murdered—there are signs above a railway tunnel that there was a scuffle and the woman was thrown down to her death on the tracks. As Lily Ross tracks the woman's journey, she discovers Klan masks and robes (for women) in an abandoned cabin, once used as stop along the Underground Railroad. She is horrified "evil has a way of slithering forth again and again, its old form disguising itself in new masks, its ancient pretexts of hatred rewritten with new justifications" (p. 64).

Each of the characters is haunted in this novel, and their narrative arcs trace the necessary pain needed to address and acknowledge the cancer at the heart of this Appalachian community, both in terms of its hidden specific history of violence and its legacy of white supremacy.

When Montgomery discovered the life of Maude Collins, the first female sheriff in Ohio history, she felt inspired to create the hero of her novel, Lily Ross. She dipped into her knowledge of Appalachian history, creating Marvena Whitcomb, who was loosely based on the famous union activist of the 1920s, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones. She also wrote the novel as a tribute to the women of the region—their quiet courage and endurance in the face of terrible events. She taps effectively into the folklore of the region. Daniel Ross has a totem animal, a red-tailed hawk, which appears periodically in the novel, highlighting his First Nations heritage.

Montgomery's Kinship series introduces readers to a particular corner of Appalachia, its history, its culture and its people with more books slated for the series. Montgomery joins other writers in the regional history genre. Well-researched and well-executed, the Kinship Series will give literary scholars of historical fiction and regional literature much to consider and discuss.

*Betty J. Bruther is an independent scholar and instructor emeritus of history at Marian University in Indianapolis.*

