

The Heart Where I Have Roots¹

FRANKIE CONDON

University of Waterloo

Indeed, conceit, arrogance and egotism are the essentials of patriotism. Let me illustrate. Patriotism assumes that our globe is divided into little spots, each one surrounded by an iron gate. Those who have had the fortune of being born on some particular spot consider themselves nobler, better, grander, more intelligent than those living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone living on that chosen spot to fight, kill and die in the attempt to impose his superiority upon all the others.

- Emma Goldman, "Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty"

On 7 November 2016, as Donald J. Trump's election as the next president of the United States was announced, America broke my heart. On 6 January 2021, my son, who had recently completed a Congressional internship, texted with terrified friends and former colleagues who were hiding in the Capitol Building during the right-wing assault orchestrated by then, clearly, former President Trump. America broke my heart that day too. In 2022, when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*—heart broken. How long would it take me to list the Black men, women, children, Queer and Trans peoples murdered by American police officers in the last ten years (let alone since the nation's founding)? Heart broken. Some sixteen states have passed or have pending legislation aimed at prohibiting the teaching of Black history, ethnic studies, critical race theory, 2SLGBTQ+ literature and history: anything that might cultivate pride among historically marginalized and oppressed students or cause raced-white, cis-gendered students to wonder, if only for a moment, whether America really is the best country in the whole wide world. America has broken my heart over and over again.

The house that I grew up in stood atop a hill at the intersection of Road One and Highway 322 in Clarion County, Pennsylvania. Its walls, made of stone hewn from the foothills of the Alleghenies in the mid-nineteenth century, were two feet thick. Once upon a time, we were told, the house had served as an inn for travellers making their way across the mountainous, heavily forested regions of western Pennsylvania. On either side of the front hall were two large rooms, each warmed by giant fireplaces, and these, we thought, had served as the communal areas for guests. My father had claimed one of these rooms for his own. He was a pianist, a composer, and a teacher, and the room he chose was large enough to hold his pianos, his music, and his books. There, he created a solitary space into which we children were seldom permitted to enter.

During the years my father was the faculty advisor for the Gospelleers—a choir on campus organized by Black students—the group would gather at our home for their annual picnic. Encouraged by my brother and me and with a nod from my dad, invariably at some point during the celebration, two students would take their places at his pianos and the others would crowd around them to sing,

To be young, gifted and black,
Oh what a lovely precious dream,
To be young, gifted and black,
Open your heart to what I mean. (Simone and Irvine)

My brother and I would race to the basement to listen while we watched the beams holding up the floors tremble as the singers kept time with their feet.

On other days, when my father was practicing, the music room was off-limits: its borders closed to children like me. But, I would creep in ever so quietly, curl up on the rug under my father's piano, and let music rain down on me. Mozart, Schubert, Bach—the tempestuousness of all the music—shaking my very bones.

Once, when I was very small, I was invited into the room with my brother and sister. My Dad had brought home a reel-to-reel tape recorder, and we had been tasked with making a birthday recording for my grandmother. I sat, legs folded criss-cross applesauce beneath me, while my sister played her flute, and my brother read a story about Snoopy and the Red Baron into the microphone. I could not yet read, but I loved stories—loved hearing them as well as telling them. And so, my choice was to tell the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table by looking at the pictures in a big yellow book that covered my lap when I opened it. I imagine my grandmother sitting at her kitchen table listening to that recording and wonder what she must have thought. For in the story I told, Arthur was Ho Chi Minh. The marauding knights were American soldiers, and Guinevere ... I don't remember anymore.

The stories that permeated my consciousness as a child were more confusing than illuminating. They confused because they failed to explain to me in any compelling sense either my own experience or my witness of the world and my relations. I was nearly three years old when Malcolm X was shot down, five years old when Martin Luther King was assassinated, ten years old when members of the American Indian Movement and citizens of the Oglala Nation in South Dakota occupied Wounded Knee, surrounded by over a thousand FBI agents, U.S. Marshalls, and representatives of various law enforcement agencies. With my family, I listened to the nightly news reporting on the American war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia for years. I could recite the numbers of casualties in that war, explain what napalm is and what it does to the skin of a child fleeing from the fighting. I could tell a dinner guest all about the My Lai Massacre, about why it was a war crime, and about how blaming William Calley without calling his superiors and fellow officers also to account was a travesty of justice. But I could not figure out nor could I explain how a nation founded on principles of equality, freedom, and justice could justify or defend its myriad failures to manifest those principles.

The place where I grew up was overwhelmingly white. Many folks lived in poverty. Most folks were working class. As the child of liberal parents and the sister of an Ojibwe brother (taken from his birth family and tribe and placed first in foster care and then for adoption by my white parents) I do not remember a time in my life when I was not acutely aware of the quotidian forms racial injustice takes: the toll it exacts in the lives of Black and Brown peoples and the wages and benefits it confers on raced-white peoples. How, I wondered, could people who professed their patriotism so loudly and frequently live with the contradictions between what they claimed their nation stood for and what they and their nation actually did on the daily—to a Brown-skinned boy? I could not reconcile the idea of America with my experience of growing up American and I still can't.

In his book *Power and Love: a Theory and Practice of Social Change*, Adam Kahane writes that

a challenge is *dynamically complex* when cause and effect are interdependent and far apart in space and time; such challenges cannot successfully be addressed piece by piece, but only by seeing the system as a whole. A challenge is *socially complex* when the actors involved have different perspectives and interests; such challenges cannot successfully be addressed by experts or authorities, but only with the engagement of the actors themselves. And a challenge is *generatively complex* when its future is fundamentally unfamiliar and undetermined; such challenges cannot successfully be addressed by applying “best practice” solutions from the past, but only by growing new, “next practice” solutions.

What sense can a child make of challenges in which one's family, one's community, and one's country are embroiled and that are tough in all three ways at once?

I have lived with my nationality as one lives with an abusive lover, staying long past the point at which it was clear there was no love to be had in the relationship.

It seems to me that I have spent my career trying to understand how it is that the stories we have been told and have repeated about America's relationship to equality, justice, opportunity, and political empowerment have failed both to account for and to enable the redress of lived conditions of injustice, inequality, lack of opportunity, and disempowerment suffered, by so many of us, so profoundly, for so long. I have turned to critical and rhetorical theory as well as to storytelling and the study of story to make sense of this failure: a failure for which I, too, am responsible, as are all of us who have historically benefitted from the multiple, manifest failures of the United States to enact the principles it professes.

I have come to believe that the stories that shape the identifications, affiliations, and agency of individuals within a nation—any nation—and the communities that compose it are confirmed and legitimated more by ideological investment than by the lived experience and material welfare of its peoples. Those stories take on the qualities of the normal, the commonsensical, the truth beyond question, regardless of the degree to which the truths that compose the material conditions of our lives exceed, transgress, or belie the national narrative. Never is this reality clearer to me than when I am confronted by stories of the stranger: the other either in our midst already or who appears to be seeking entrance to a space, time, and relation that by virtue not only of nationality but also and more so by virtue of race (white), gender (cis-male), sexual orientation (straight), class (rich), and ability belong to an infinitely insouciant We.

I believed and probably still believe in certain principles that I now think are not unique to American political philosophy but are tightly woven strands of the fabric of American political and civic rhetoric. But it seems to me that the trajectory of American political

rhetoric in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first has been epideictic rather than deliberative: aimed at claiming and celebrating an imaginary achievement of those principles² rather than at enabling the imagining of a world we have never seen before, but hope to create together. This seems a most perverse form of cynicism to me when I perceive that such national narratives are offered for the sake of political expediency, or a pernicious pessimism when I perceive that they are offered as a substitute for thinking hard, carefully, and deeply about how we might collectively address such wicked problems as income inequality, systemic and institutional racism, Queer and Trans-phobia, and white nationalism.

Like many unhappy lovers, my heart was not broken once but over and over again in multiple catastrophic ruptures. While drafting this essay, I tried to count the number of times during my lifetime when my home country has violated national and international law by interfering in the democratic processes of other nations to serve its own interests, even when to do so cost the lives of thousands of innocents; attempted to assassinate foreign leaders; participated in genocide or stood idly by pretending even in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary that it wasn't really happening; or justified failures to provide humanitarian aid by claiming that state interests are the only reasonable determinant for intervention.³ Too many.

My family and I left the United States in June of 2013 so that I could take up a new post and we could all begin a new life in Canada. While I still believe I have a responsibility to use my knowledge and my skill as a teacher, scholar, and writer to labour for justice in the U.S. as in the world, my ability to do that work well, I felt, was compromised in some critical way by being in-country. I wanted something of both the deliberativeness and the hope that James Baldwin ruminates on in the introduction to *Nobody Knows my Name*, when he describes his experience as an ex-pat:

The questions which one asks oneself begin, at last, to illuminate the world, and become one's key to the experience of others. One can only face in others what one can face in oneself. On this confrontation depends the measure of our wisdom and compassion. This energy is all that one finds in the rubble of vanished civilizations, and the only hope for ours.
(12-13)

In the years preceding my exodus, I felt stuck in America: my intellectual vitality, creativity, and spirit beaten down. I have not left my studies of American political rhetoric behind, nor have I abandoned my concern and my sense of responsibility to address and to resist the particular forms racial and economic injustice take in the United States (for recent examples, see Condon 2016, 2014, 2012, 2011). I continue to realize the truth of Baldwin's insight that "even the most incorrigible maverick has to be born somewhere. He may leave the group that produced him—he may be forced to—but nothing will efface his origins, the marks of which he carries with him everywhere" (22). And so, I continue to contend with my brokenness as well as the ways and degrees to which I continue to love that which has broken me.

I hope that I am also learning to love well this new place where I am making my home. I love the town I live in now and its people. I love the landscape of the Saugeen Peninsula; I love the Saugeen River that I walk beside each day; I love Lake Huron where I find peace in the most beautiful sunsets I've ever seen. But I do not delude myself that Canada—and its raced-white settlers—are not also invested in unjustly policing the boundaries of belonging. As I watch events unfold in the U.S., attempt to come to terms with the American in me, and learn to offer myself and my work to my new community, colleagues, and students, my conviction grows that the very idea of nationhood and of nationality is irremediably flawed. I think the study of rhetoric to which I have dedicated myself is also necessarily the study of how human relations are forged in and through language. We make and claim our relations as we compose

our lives. In my imagination—but not in any homeland I have yet found—there lies within human reach a world in which all our affiliations, our love and care for one another whether friend or stranger, cannot be contained by the borders of any nation. This imaginary is the heart where I have roots.

NOTES

¹ The title of this essay is taken from a poem by Pablo Neruda.

² For example, in a weekly radio address delivered in January of 1986, President Reagan invoked Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech to argue against "racial quotas" and for a "colour-blind society." Reagan did not claim that all the aims of the Civil Rights movement had been fully realized. Instead, he argued that they had been sufficiently realized. Specifically, Reagan argued that the prosperity of White and Black Americans was so thoroughly linked that to consider the economic effects of racial injustice on Black Americans would lead inevitably to economic injustice for White Americans—a claim that has since been taken up and widely circulated in American post-civil rights discourse about race and racism. Thirty years later, Donald Trump organized his campaign around the slogan "Make America Great Again," solidifying his base through a well-crafted if ineptly delivered narrative predicated on the claim that America's achievement of its principles had been systematically undone by liberals, foreigners, Muslims, and people of colour within and beyond the nation's borders.

³ See President Clinton's address on 27 November 1995 following the Dayton Accords for an example of this argument.

FRANKIE CONDON

WORKS CITED

- Baldwin, James. *Nobody Knows My Name*. Corgi Books, 1965.
- Clinton, William Jefferson. "Speech on Bosnia." *CNN*, 27 Nov. 1995, http://www.cnn.com/US/9511/bosnia_speech/speech.html.
- Condon, Frankie, "Bold: The Everyday Writing Center and the Production of New Knowledge in Anti-Racist Theory and Practice." Co-Authored with Anne Ellen Geller and Meg Carroll. *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*, edited by Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan, Utah State UP, 2011, pp. 101-23.
- . *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric*. Utah State UP, 2012.
- , and Vershawn Ashanti Young, editors. *Performing Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing and Communication*. Ebook edition, WAC Clearinghouse and UP of Colorado, 2016.
- . "A Place Where There Isn't Any Trouble." *Code Meshing as World English: Policy, Pedagogy, Performance*, edited by V. A. Young and A. Y. Martinez, NCTE, 2011, pp. 1-8.
- . "Stories to Live and Die By: In Memorium." *Survive and Thrive: A Journal of the Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*, vol. 1, no. 1, fall 2014, repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol1/iss1/10/.
- Goldman, Emma. "Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty." *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, edited by Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, Seven Stories Press, 2014, pp. 270-71.
- Kahane, Adam. *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change*, Kindle ed., Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010.

Neruda, Pablo. "If You Forget Me" ("Si Tú Me Olvidas"). *The Captain's Verses*, translated by Donald D. Walsh, New Directions, 2004, pp. 76-79.

Reagan, Ronald. "Presidential Radio Address – 18 January 1986." *Wikisource*, 18 Jan. 1986, en.wikisource.org/wiki/Presidential_Radio_Address_-_18_January_1986.

Simone, Nina, and Weldon Irvine. "Nina Simone: To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." *YouTube*, 21 Feb. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hdVFiANBtk. Transcription of lyrics.