

## **Longing, Loathing, and Nostalgia for Community: Human Rights and a Politics of Reckoning**

*Debra L. DeLaet\**

### **Introduction**

Years ago, very early in my teaching career, a student asked me why I became interested in human rights.<sup>1</sup> It was a fair and simple question, but I found it surprisingly difficult to answer. I had never experienced the sorts of gross violations of human rights—genocide, torture, arbitrary detention—that are the primary focus of much human rights scholarship and activism. Although I took a course on refugees and humanitarian issues in graduate school, I have never had any formal training in the subject of human rights.

Yet, when I had an opportunity to develop my own course in my final year of graduate school at the University of Notre Dame, I developed the first iteration of my human rights course. After coming to Drake University in 1995, I continued to teach this course and started to

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<sup>1</sup> In 2012, I had the honor of giving the annual Luther W. Stalnaker Lecture at Drake University. The Stalnaker Lecture series honors the memory of Luther W. Stalnaker, dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Drake University from 1940-1954. I decided to devote my Stalnaker Lecture to a deeper reflection on that straightforward question, posed by one of my very first students. Why did I become interested in human rights? This essay is an updated version of my Stalnaker Lecture. My parents, Jack and Sandy DeLaet, are an important part of this narrative, and it is noteworthy that my father died as I was giving this lecture. After learning about my father's death, my dean told me that my lecture took on an elegiac quality. I like to think of this essay as an ongoing elegy for my father and dedicate it to his memory. It brings me some comfort to acknowledge that I began writing revisions to this essay on April 12, 2017, on what would have been his 84<sup>th</sup> birthday.

develop a coherent research agenda primarily oriented around the topics of gender issues and human rights. More than twenty years later, the subject of human rights remains one of my primary teaching and scholarly interests. Despite my passion for the subject, when that student, at the very beginning of my career, asked me why I had become interested in the topic, I formulated what was likely an unsatisfactory, minimal response that I no longer recall.

I have continued to struggle with this question over the years. What brought me to my interest in human rights? I have confounded my own effort to answer this question by adding questions of my own. What qualifies me to speak on issues that are so fundamentally connected with the dignity and well-being of others whose experiences are vastly different from my own? Why is it easier to discuss competing perspectives on human rights with students or colleagues than it is to encounter disagreement about human rights with friends and family? Why is it easier to write about potential remedies to human rights violations, at home or abroad, than it is to challenge denigrations to human rights in our daily lives?

Clear, lasting answers to these questions have eluded me. I've identified plausible if fleeting answers that dissipate when they run into cold, hard political realities. The 2016 U.S. presidential election represents one such political moment, a moment that, for me, was a politically traumatizing event that has unsettled my beliefs about the possibility of progress on human rights. A year out from this election, and I still have not found solidity. I can discuss human rights issues with colleagues and students. We bring divergent perspectives to these discussions, but we share a common language that usually allows us to navigate our disagreements and differences. In the case of family members, friends, or neighbors with whom I have political disagreements, the chasms are harder to traverse. Invocations of rights can be received as assertions of superiority or signs of disdain for community values. Disagreement is sometimes interpreted as disrespect. Even acknowledging disagreement can be seen as a breach of civility. The injunction against talking about religion and politics (unless, of course, we agree with prevailing views) is the price we agree to pay to preserve community. But at what cost?

Scholarly discussions of human rights tend to take place in abstract, conceptual spaces where law and institutions serve as the dominant epistemological frameworks. In this view, human rights violations reflect legal gaps and imperfect institutions; improving human rights becomes simply a matter of expanding the rule of law and perfecting institutions. When considered carefully, such accounts of human rights can appear strange in the sense that individual human beings are excised from the analysis. In the real world, actual people are being killed, tortured, violated, deprived, or in some way diminished when human rights are violated. Actual people are doing the killing, torturing, violating, depriving, or diminishing. Reflecting on this reality, I turn not to abstract laws of governing institutions in faraway places but instead to the people and places I know best as I search for understanding about the problem of human rights. I also search for hope, perhaps in vain, in what seems to me an increasingly hopeless time as I consider the questions that animate this essay. This search for answers and for what seems an unlikely hope leads me, as it often does, to my past. I return home.

## **Longing**

I grew up in a small, rural town in central, western Ohio: Versailles, Ohio. As in the French “Vair-Sigh” but with nothing remotely French about either the pronunciation (Ver-sales) or the culture of the place. I don't know if all small towns have mottos, but Versailles has one: *People-*

*Pride-Progress*. City officials came up with the motto sometime during my childhood, and it is prominently displayed on the town's water tower. It is a running joke in my family. Are there people in Versailles? Sure. About 2,100 of them when I was growing up and 2,700 at last count. What about pride? You bet. Some might even say excessive pride, largely surrounding the high school football team. And progress, you ask? This is where my family always got stuck. After I left, the village built a new YMCA. Versailles finally passed a school levy that had been on the ballot for years, so there's a fancy new school in town. There is an exceptionally nice, new public library adjacent to the school. Midmark Corporation, which is a major supplier of healthcare equipment both nationally and globally, is headquartered in Versailles. Aside from agriculture, Midmark is the largest employer in the area, and the company's success has helped to buffer this small town from the effects of the economic downturn that has hit much of the rest of Ohio so hard. Courtesy of Midmark, there is a small winery outside of town and an updated golf course. Midmark flies customers into the small but renovated county airport on its private jet. So, progress? I will concede the point for now.

My family's ongoing joke about the town motto is, at least in part, an affectionate one. Versailles is the kind of small town that serves as a perfect target for parody. When I watched the film *Waiting for Guffman*, a 'mockumentary' about small town community theatre, I laughed so hard in recognition of the characters that I fell off my couch. I participated in our community theatre, the Towne and Country Players. When we put on *Oklahoma*, I was a dancer and once ended a dance with precisely the same choreography with which Libbie May Brown (played by Parker Posey) and Corky St. Clair (played by Christopher Guest) end their dance number, "A Penny for Your Thoughts", in the film.

Their dance was a joke. Mine, sadly, was not. When I fell off my couch in laughter, I was laughing at myself. Not *with* myself, mind you. *At* myself. And that's not an easy distinction to make. But the 'mocking' in *Waiting for Guffman* is gentle and affectionate. It is one of my favorite movies of all time.

There are many, many things I love about the small community in which I grew up. I could go back to town this weekend and visit with my father's best friend from kindergarten, Jerry Paulus, otherwise known as Chunker Paulus. I could tell countless stories about Chunker and other people who have lived their entire lives in this town. Here's my favorite: After my father developed Parkinson's disease and his health began to deteriorate, Chunker would take my dad on a weekly breakfast or lunch outing in a nearby town. Driving back on a country road after one of these outings, Chunker abruptly stopped his pick-up. He got a shovel out of the back and proceeded to walk up in front of the truck to scoop up some road kill – a dead squirrel. My dad said, 'Please tell me you're not planning on eating that for dinner.' To which Chunker replied, 'Why not? It's still warm.' The fact that the squirrel *might* be warm because it was a 90+ degree day in the middle of summer seemed to bother Chunker not a wit. You have to have a little bit of love in your heart for a place where a man named Chunker can eat a dead squirrel that has been baking on the road in 90-degree heat and live to tell about it.

When I go back to town for a visit (something I do much less frequently since my parents moved away), I sometimes ache – physically, palpably – for the past. My friend Kristen once said that she thinks that the landscape that surrounds you as a child is imprinted on you in such a way that no other landscape can evoke feelings of 'home' in quite the same way. That idea resonates with me.

Versailles is not by most objective measures a beautiful place. It is generally flat. The overwhelming visual image I have of the area surrounding my home town is of farms and fields – poultry farms, dairy farms, lots and lots of corn fields. As you drive south of town on country roads, you encounter some land with gently rolling hills and deeply wooded areas. But the area cannot, by and large, be characterized as one of grand, obvious beauty. The Main St. – I constituting a ‘down town’ of three or so blocks – has its small town charms. But it is not particularly distinctive. Yet, if I am back home in Versailles, and perhaps taking a walk, and the breeze blows in just the right way, or it’s night and I hear the crickets chirp or a frog croak in our neighbor’s pond, it can evoke such powerful memories of my childhood home that I stop dead in my tracks and want to cry. What is it that I’m longing for?

I remember my childhood in this small community as fairly idyllic. There is no McDonalds. No Walmart. No shopping mall. The town hasn’t changed a great deal since I lived there. In fact, the central part of town has not changed much since my father was a child. You can still get the best cream-filled donuts in the world at Brown's Sweet Shop on Main Street for forty cents apiece. You could walk into the Sweet Shop and feel like you are walking back in time. It still has the original booths. The same counter and bar stools. The same red vinyl. The same chrome. The same display cases. I’m pretty sure the same grease has been accumulating on the tile floors for decades.

The borders of my world may have been small, but my freedom within this world felt expansive. From a very young age, we were free to roam, ride our bikes, explore, or spend entire days at the swimming pool with our friends almost completely outside of parental scrutiny or control. Despite my perception that I was free, there was a strong sense of community where, for better and worse, everyone knew everyone and their business. Knowing that you were being watched by all of the adults in town – even if from a safe and respectful distance – kept you in line. Living here, I developed a sense of place, of community, that I always felt even if I didn’t always welcome it.

My father had grown up in this town. We lived in the house – a modest ranch house – that my grandparents built in the 1950s and where my sister raised her kids and still lives with her husband. When he was a child, my father lived with his parents in a small bungalow not more than a half mile away.



*My grandparents, Leona and Edward DeLaet*

Grandpa DeLaet was a small business person. During prohibition, he was a bootlegger, providing moonshine to the locals. He and his partners even decided to try to expand and started supplying alcohol to corporate elites at NCR (National Cash Register) in Dayton, until they were hijacked once on a delivery trip. My grandfather, a pragmatic man, decided he was not cut out for the bigtime trade in illicit alcohol.

Subsequent to his bootlegging career, my grandfather owned the Dairy Bar in town. After that, he and my grandmother bought and ran a small bar and restaurant on the Main St. – DeLaet’s Café – that was their livelihood for twenty years or so. He worked the bar, and my grandmother cooked bar fare and baked homemade pies to sell. It was a local gathering place for members of the community in the days before television. People would come and get a meal and

a beer and talk politics. After they sold the café, my grandfather went in with a friend, Vernon Miller, to buy the local bowling alley, known then as DelWin Lanes.



*Old placemat from DeLaet's Café*

My childhood in Versailles can read like a sentimental, idealized rendering of small town life that would not ring true to me if I had not experienced it. My parents were in a bowling league. My brothers and I were even in the junior bowling league. My parents participated in a bridge club. My dad was in the Lions Club and the Rotary Club. My mother was in the Garden Club. My mother, a nurse by training, volunteered with the local life squad. This part of my childhood reads like the kind of vibrant civil society lauded by political scientist Robert Putnam,<sup>2</sup> political theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain,<sup>3</sup> and others as inculcating a spirit of connectedness and community-mindedness they view as essential for functioning democracies in which disagreements are mediated and settled through democratic deliberation rather than through power and violence. We did not bowl alone.

The experience of having such a strong sense of place, of rooted history, and of connectedness helps to explain why returning to a community where I have not lived for decades can evoke such powerful feelings of longing. Yet, when I was in high school, I couldn't wait to leave. I left my home town after high school graduation and, despite frequent visits home during college and graduate school, have been happy to see Versailles in the rearview mirror when I've looked back. I am very close to my family and have missed living near them, but I would never live in my hometown. Ultimately, leaving was liberating and empowering and soul-saving.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

## Loathing

My most idyllic memories of my home town are from my young childhood. These memories reflect a pre-adolescent, pre-political consciousness. Upon reflection, I wonder if the longing that I sometimes feel in respect to my home town has more to do with nostalgia for a time before disillusionment than it does for a sense of place or community. For every memory that elicits a sense of longing, experiences that I faced in my home town evoke equally powerful feelings of loathing. My loathing is primarily a reaction to undercurrents of racism, sexism, and homophobia that profoundly shape the culture and sense of community there. My experience and observations of these oppressive dynamics within the community are the reason I experienced leaving as deeply transformative and liberating.

If Versailles is an appropriate target for a gentle parody, it also provides the perfect setting for a darker, more biting satire of the underbelly of small town life. As it so happens, the town of Versailles, Ohio is the setting for Fred Willard's short-lived comedy web series – aptly titled Versailles – about a brother and sister who launch a public access show from the basement of the local library. The biting promo for this satire captures some of the tensions that can arise in seemingly idyllic communitarian settings.

Versailles, Ohio remains an incredibly homogenous place. I can count on one hand – actually probably one or two fingers – the number of families of color that have lived for any length of time in this community. One of my elementary school teachers was from the Philippines, and she and her family lived in the community. I was friends with her daughter and remain in touch with her over social media. A close friend is married to a black man with whom she has two children. They do not live in Versailles. I know of one woman who graduated several years ahead of me who raised her interracial children in town. After I graduated from high school, I heard that a family of color moved to town when the father in the family was hired to serve as the local postmaster. For reasons that are not hard for me to imagine, this family did not stay in Versailles for very long.

Most people who live in Versailles would vehemently resist any critique that racism is a feature of the town's culture. With a few exceptions, I would be reluctant to label specific individuals as overtly racist. Yet, I can recall countless stories that evidence both explicit and implicit racism. One memory from my high school years stands out. One day (I can't recall if it was Halloween or a 'spirit day'), students were allowed to come to school dressed in costume. Two young women from my class came to school in 'black-face.' No one said anything. These young women weren't sent home. No one protested. They didn't have to remove the make-up or their clothing. They went about the entire day in black-face. Not only were they not reprimanded, but a picture of them in black-face was published in our yearbook that year, my senior year of high school.

## Dare To Be Friends

Make new friends but keep the old  
Some are silver, and the others are gold.



2/Opening



The caption for that page says, ‘Dare To Be Friends: Make New Friends but Keep the Old, Some are Silver and the others Gold.’ This sort of behavior was considered normal. Indeed, photo-worthy. It was 1986.

I didn’t have the tools or political consciousness to make sense of the racism I encountered in any effective way. But I rebelled in my own small ways. I *loved* hip hop music in high school in a community where country and heavy metal music ruled. I don’t know when, how, or why I began to identify as different from most of the people in my home town, but I’m fairly certain exposure to popular music and other elements of popular culture had something to do with it. One song in particular stands out. "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

I vaguely recall first hearing this song while watching a morning talk show during a family vacation. My parents had been watching the 700 Club and changed the channel, I think, in response to my brothers’ and my incessant complaining. Was it destiny for me to hear this song? I don’t know. But I do think this change in programs – from the 700 Club to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five – is a metaphor for my political metamorphosis. I must have listened to this song a million times. I could rap the entire thing. (I still could.) For the first time in my life, it made me think about race and poverty and things that seemed to be invisible from the vantage point of a tiny, relatively isolated village in middle America.

I was defiant about my musical preferences. I had my big boom box (not quite as big as the one in the Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five video, but big) and my mix tape with Whodini, George Clinton, Run DMC, the Sugar Hill Gang, Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick, Newcleus, the Time, and, of course, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. On the bus to athletic events, or at practices after school, I would carry my boom box around and play my mix tape. Many of my peers, mostly the high school boys, would yell at me to turn off the ‘n’ music. I just turned it up louder. I was not beloved among everyone in Versailles, Ohio.

The problem in my town wasn’t just overt racism. The problem was the failure to respond among bystanders. Once, during a visit home from college, I went with my parents to some event (the nature of which I don’t recall) at the bowling alley. (Remember, we did not bowl alone.) We were sitting around in the space designated for social events with the group that had gathered. Someone told a blatantly racist joke. Many people were laughing. Some, including my parents, were not. But no one, including me, said anything. I looked around in disbelief and then just quietly left. I waited in the car, reading a book I think, until my parents were finished and came out. That was as much political courage and conviction I could muster at the time.

The dark side of community played out in other ways. Most people who identified as gay or lesbian remained deeply closeted. (We didn’t even know about transgender or queer identity at that time.) I can’t recall a single adult who was out while I lived there. A number of my friends and classmates came out after leaving town. So did my youngest brother. But most young people wouldn’t have risked the bullying and threats of coming out while living in town. In Versailles, it was a tradition for the seniors in choir to choose a song to sing at high school graduation. My senior friends and I in choir selected ‘That’s What Friends are For’ for our graduation song. Our selection generated outrage among many of our classmates. It was the ‘AIDS song.’ Singing it would mean we were endorsing homosexuality. School administrators told us we had to choose another song.

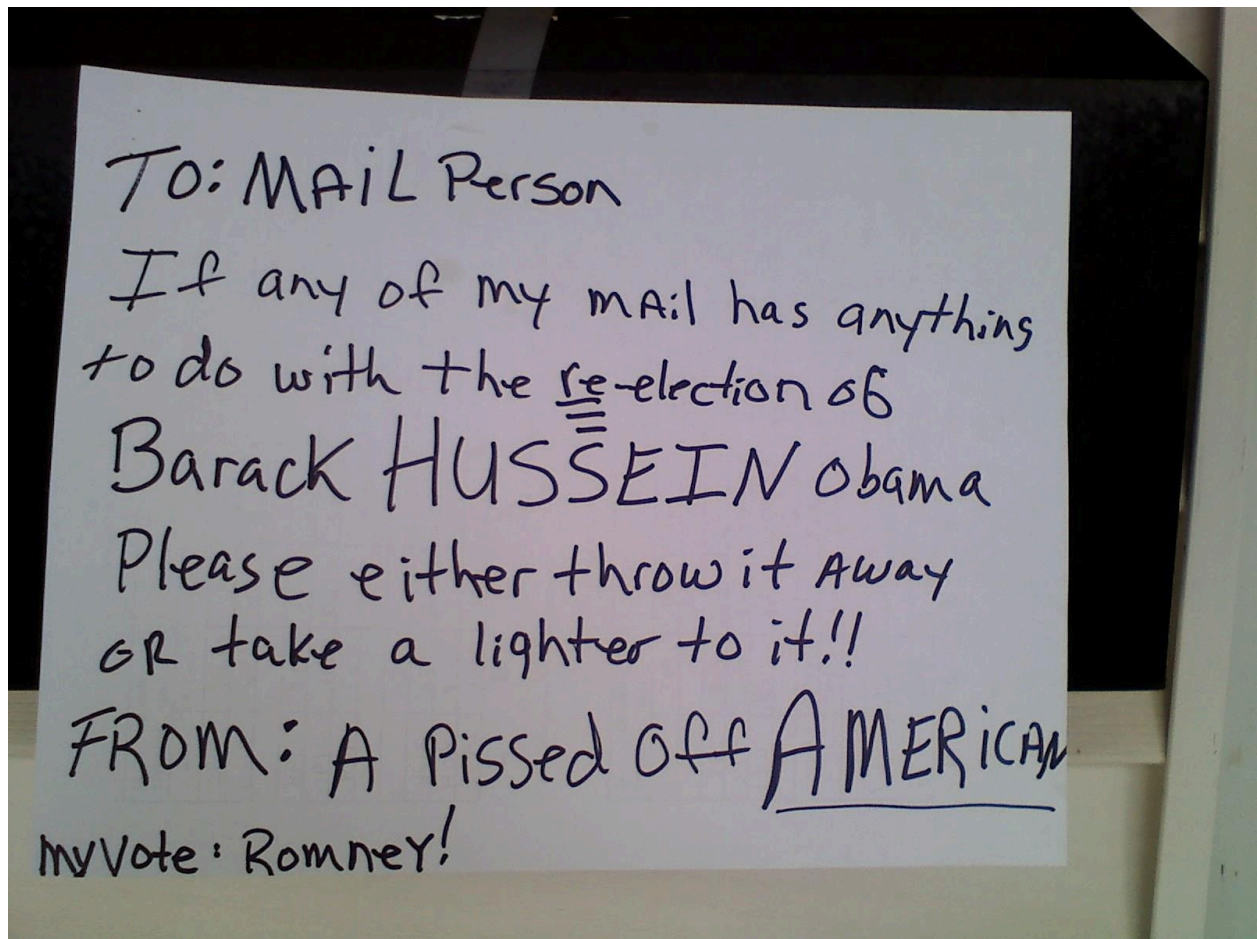
One of my closest friends was sexually assaulted by several members of the football team. She didn’t tell me until long after it had happened. She never told any adult so far as I know. It didn’t occur to me to tell an adult the news she had shared with me. Such was the lack

of structural support for young women facing sexual violence in our community. We literally didn't have words for what had happened to her, and we didn't have any guidance on how to respond. She feared that no one would believe her in a town where football players were revered, and I feared that she was right. Once, a football player asked me to go on a date, and I said no. His revenge was to spray paint hostile sexual language about me on the concrete deck of the public swimming pool in town. I was horrified. My parents complained, but no one responsible for administration and oversight at the public pool took any immediate action to have the offensive language removed. I coached swim team every morning that summer for what seemed like an eternity, with all of the young swimmers seeing this offensive language about me, just holding my chin up and carrying on. I can't explain the inaction of adults or my own relative lack of response other than to say that this sort of sexual violence and intimidation was so normalized in that particular place and time that it didn't generate the strong and immediate responses that it should have.

Versailles was relatively far away from any urban center – 45 minutes from Dayton, two hours from Cincinnati. It was the kind of place where the Archdiocese of Cincinnati would send a pedophile priest. It was the kind of place where a different priest would once circulate a petition opposing abortion from pew to pew during Mass. To my knowledge, my brother and I were the only parishioners to pass the petition along without signing it. Whether everyone else signed it because of agreement or social pressure I do not know.

Suffice it to say that this small community was a tough place to be different – in ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or political viewpoint. I think I spent a great deal of my high school years in a state of disorienting perplexity and simmering anger. I understood myself to be living in a place with caring, responsible, principled adults. And those people did – and do – exist. I had a strong sense of place and rootedness. There were so many colorful characters living in town, Chunker Paulus among them. My siblings and I could tell you funny stories all night long – and we would if you'd let us. Yet, again and again, I encountered situations when these responsible adults and some of my peers either participated in or tacitly condoned what I knew to be reprehensible behavior and oppression.

From what I can gather in conversations with people I know who still live there, the climate has improved for young women and, to some extent, for sexual minorities. But it remains a place imbued with subtle and not-so-subtle racism. The Homecoming King from my senior year still lives in Versailles. He was my first boyfriend – in third grade – and he was one of the nicer, gentler boys in town. Not long after Barack Obama became President, he friended me on Facebook. If I had been so inclined during Obama's presidency, I could have trolled his page for a daily dose of hostile, racist anti-Obama messages.



Facebook post from VHS Classmate

I read the local paper, *The Versailles Policy*, during both the 2008 and 2012 elections. There were numerous letters to the editor expressing hostile opposition to Obama. Almost all of them would spell his middle name 'Hussein' in capital letters. Almost all of them make references to 'real Americans' in capital letters. During the 2008 election, my brothers and I decided to collectively write a pro-Obama letter to the editor but were initially informed by the editors that it was too long, despite the fact that lengthy anti-Obama letters were routinely published. A defiant set of siblings, we responded by breaking our collective letter into three short letters that were eventually published by the paper. I'm not confident we changed any hearts or minds, but perhaps we gave some strength to Democrats in the community.

Obama had his supporters in town, but they were fewer and quieter. One acquaintance who still lived in town at the time said that she and her husband instructed their children to tell their peers they were voting for McCain in 2008 so that they wouldn't be bullied by their classmates. A more generous person might want to argue that this hostility has everything to do with ideology and nothing to do with race. I'm skeptical. Here is another 2012 post from the Homecoming King's Facebook page, in which he circulated a public image popular among the Birther Movement that time:



Facebook post from VHS classmate

And he was one of the nice boys.

In his 1967 autobiographical memoir, Vladimir Nabakov wrote, ‘Neither in environment nor heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life’s foolscap.’<sup>4</sup> Memory is a tricky thing. It is selective. It amplifies some events. It represses others. It distorts. Are my memories of negative experiences in community the reason I became interested in human rights? It seems possible. But I can’t be certain.

What I do know is that my ambivalence towards community has inevitably shaped the nature of my perspective on human rights. It has made me aware of the way in which prevailing community norms can foster the oppression of minorities. It makes me skeptical of depictions of human rights violations as transgressions committed by an enemy other against innocent, abstract victims. It makes me question the notion that there is a clear, bright line dividing victims and perpetrators. Victims and perpetrators live amongst each other. Sometimes, they are one and the same. Often, the diminishment of human rights results from a failure to recognize the full humanity of members of our own families, our neighbors, our friends. Just as often, it results when we are insistent on defining community narrowly. Impediments to the realization of human rights thrive in the polite silences of respect for community and in the repression or disregard of disagreement. Echoing Hannah Arendt, evil can be banal. Evil, if we want to call it that, is woven into our everyday lives.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Nabakov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Quality Paperback Book edition, 1993): 25.

And yet, if we loathe the communities in which we live, or have lived, how can we change them? Is the only answer escape, self-protection, and retreat? We speak of people voting with their feet. Migration can be a path for people to seek freedom and security. But to the extent that we are fleeing the oppression of community, are we also reinforcing or even exacerbating the homogeneity of the communities we leave? We seek refuge as individuals, but our individual flight into the safety of communities of affinity may perpetuate isolating and repressive patterns of division at the social level. How can we disrupt these social patterns while protecting our own bodies and souls?

### **Between Longing and Loathing?**

Where, if at all, can one find the appropriate balance between longing for and loathing of community? I have found myself struggling more than ever with this question during the past year since the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. From the moment of his election almost exactly one year ago to the date of my current writing, social fissures in U.S. politics have erupted to the surface. From day one, liberals like myself have been wringing our hands about the incipient threat of authoritarianism embodied in his presidency while simultaneously acknowledging the threads of authoritarianism and white supremacy that are an integral part of the fabric of this country's history, woven into our past long before Trump's election.

We have encountered endless recriminations about 'what went wrong'. Some critics point to a misguided identity politics – focused too much on rights for people of color, for women, for the disabled, for the LGBTQ community – as the cause of Democrats' doom. If only the Democrats had not abandoned rural and working class white voters, these critics say, the outcome would have been different. Others focus on pervasive misogyny as the factor that fundamentally determined the electoral outcome. Yet others emphasize racism and white supremacy as the primary forces that brought Trump to power. Contending perspectives on rights and vulnerability—who is threatening whom in the current political order, who has been disadvantaged in contemporary U.S. politics—are a central feature of our political and social divisions.

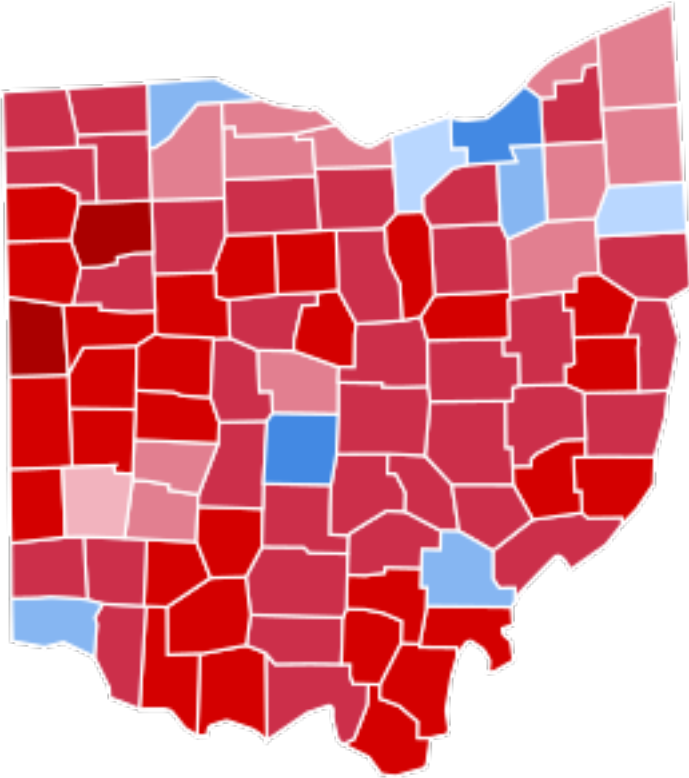


*Far right rally and protest in Boston, 2017. (Michael Dwyer/AP)*

The immediate aftermath of the 2016 election triggered my strongest feelings of loathing for my childhood home. Versailles, Ohio is Trump country. Versailles is located in Darke County, on the western edge of the state of Ohio bordering Indiana. The electorate in Darke County voted overwhelmingly Republican, with 78.8% of voters casting their ballots for Trump. Darke County is adjacent to Mercer County, where 80.7% of the electorate voted for Trump.<sup>5</sup> On the electoral map, that Trump-supporting part of Ohio can be represented with the deepest of reds in a sea of red.

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<sup>5</sup> “2016 Ohio Presidential Election Results,” *Politico*. Available online at: <https://www.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president/ohio/>.



*Electoral map for the 2016 Ohio presidential election, by county.*

In the aftermath of the election, there was a profound outpouring of anger, grief, and fear among Democratic-minded people from Versailles, many of whom had left the community after high school but some of whom had stayed in the area. For those who have left, many of us now live in solidly ‘blue’ parts of the country, in urban areas, in college towns, or in majority-Democratic states. We call someplace else home. Someplace else *is* home. At this stage of my life, as I have celebrated my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, I’ve lived vastly more of my life outside of Versailles than I lived in it. Versailles is my childhood home. It is the place where I grew up. It is no longer home.

Within weeks of the election, a network of people from Versailles began to forge connections over social media, first among friends and acquaintances and then building wider networks of people who did not previously know each other but who all had roots in the community. This network includes people who identify as LGBTQ, individuals who have partners from diverse ethnic or religious backgrounds, individuals who are married to immigrants, and people who simply hold different political and ideological viewpoints than the Versailles mainstream. Prior to my interactions with people in this network, I never would have guessed that so many of us had a shared sense of perspective about our experiences growing up in a conservative, small town.

Individuals in this network formed a private, closed group on Facebook where members can connect and support each other. The person who created the group named it the VHS

Refugees.<sup>6</sup> She adopted a cover photo with a picture of a torn piece of paper held together by rainbow-colored safety pins, an image that signifies inclusiveness and safety.



*VHS Refugees Facebook cover photo.*

I can hear the critics in my head. You call yourself refugees? Isn't that a bit overwrought? Doesn't that language diminish the experiences of 'real' refugees fleeing wartime violence or state-based political persecution? Are you really just a group of sore losers, whining about 'First World Problems'? Perhaps. Perhaps members of this group are the 'snowflakes' that the most vehement among Trump supporters like to mock, fragile beings who play up their own woundedness and are hyper-sensitive to disagreement.

But I have listened to the stories people have told in the groups, and the wounds seem real. The 'refugees' are a disparate group. There are physicians, people who work in business, educators, social workers, farmers, factory workers, and those who have experienced unemployment among us. We are united by a shared understanding of what it means to be different in a place that devalues difference. Members have shared stories of having been bullied as children. It might be tempting to dismiss the significance of such bullying with 'kids-will-be-kids' rhetoric. But implicit, if not explicit, threats of violence often lurk behind such bullying. Many of us have memories of such threats, if not actual experiences of violence. We certainly didn't experience the meanness as harmless. Women have opened up about experiences of sexual assault and harassment. LGBTQ members of our group have talked about the ways that they were intimidated in their youth and have sometimes been rejected by their families. One of our group's members is married to an undocumented migrant. She has genuine fears that her family will be ripped apart by the Trump Administration's policies. People in the group have common experiences of being able to navigate family and community in Versailles only by keeping their identities and views to themselves. For members of VHS refugees, the metaphor of the closet takes up a vast amount of mental space in our understandings of community. The people calling us snowflakes now were the same people who were bullying and tormenting us then.

Although the 2016 U.S. presidential election has brought my feelings of loathing towards community to the surface, it also has confronted me with a more sobering reality. No matter how much I might want to, I can never leave home. Home is here, there, and everywhere. Racism, misogyny, and homophobia – forces that contributed in whatever degree to the election of Trump – did not emerge out of nowhere in the 2016 election. They have been political undercurrents,

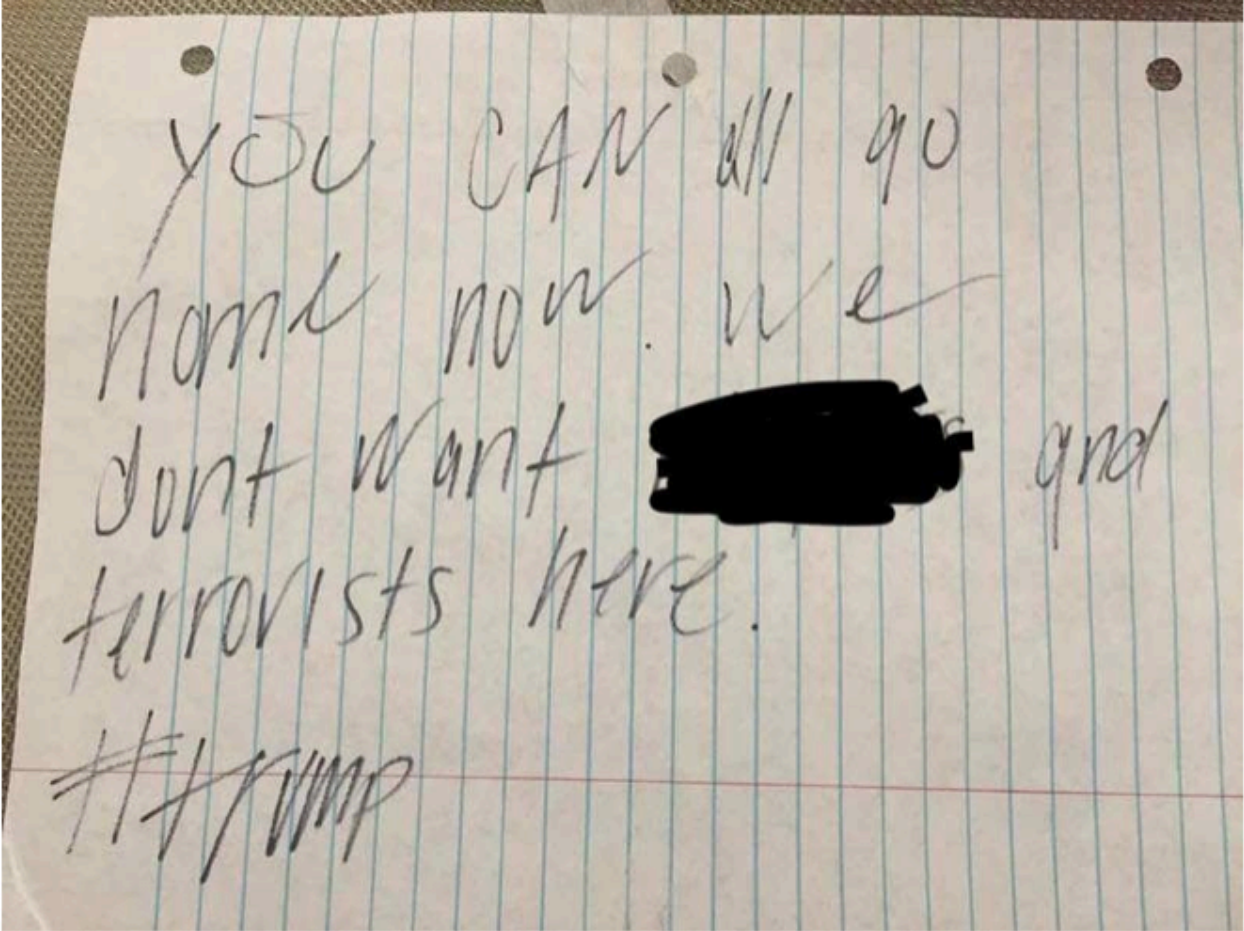
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<sup>6</sup> VHS is the abbreviation for Versailles High School.



tapped into with varying degrees of explicitness in U.S. electoral politics, all along. These forces are not contained within particular geographic spaces, even if they are more pronounced in some places than others. They are everywhere.

I now live in Iowa City, a 'progressive' college town that other Iowans sometimes derogatorily refer to as the Socialist Republic of Iowa City. (Locals sometimes embrace this label with a degree of pride.) On the Saturday after the 2016 election, I was walking our dog down a street in my neighborhood, a historic district in the community and the precinct that has one of the most reliable Democratic voting records in the state of Iowa. As I walked down the street, a man in a big pickup truck with a large, metal Confederate flag fixed to the grill of the truck drove assertively down the middle of this street, the unmuffled engine loudly bringing an auditory dimension to the apparent show of celebratory force. I had never seen a Confederate flag displayed in any form in Iowa City prior to this day. Maybe I just wasn't looking. Mere days after the election, a Muslim family living in Iowa City found a threatening note taped to their front door. In the photo of the note below, a racial epithet has been blocked out. The wave of harassment and intimidation that followed Trump's election swept through Iowa City and other progressive places as well as conservative towns like Versailles.



Racist note in Iowa City following 2016 election. (Stephen Gruber-Miller, Iowa City Press Citizen, Nov. 14, 2016)

In the weeks immediately following the election, I struggled to make sense of the emerging data on demographic voting patterns. A solid majority of white voters voted for Trump. The strongest part of Trump's base included whites without a college degree, two-thirds of whom voted for Trump. Despite the allegations of assault and harassment against him, Trump won a majority of white women. Trump won a plurality of white voters with a college degree. Trump voters included family, friends, and neighbors. Not just from my childhood home in Versailles but from my adult home in progressive Iowa City. I found myself observing people and pondering whether they had voted for Trump. If they had, did that mean they endorsed his campaign rhetoric exhibiting hostility to women, to people of color, to immigrants, to the LGBTQ community, to persons with disabilities?

I was forced to ask myself a difficult question that I should have been asking myself all along: Is this how marginalized populations always feel when in a majority white, heteronormative setting? Do you constantly have to ask yourself: Are these people hostile to me and my rights? Can I trust their kindness and goodwill? What do they really believe on the inside? Because those were the questions that I was starting to ask about all of the seemingly kind and good-natured people surrounding me.

I have confessed in this essay that I have longed for my pre-political childhood. It allowed me to love, without ambiguity, the people surrounding me. The development of political consciousness in my adolescence brought me loathing of the confining, narrow-minded, and bigoted aspects of community. The love I felt was now tainted with ambivalence.

For much of my adulthood, I have navigated this tension between longing and loathing by distancing myself from it. I feed my longing with periodic but infrequent visits home, during which I indulge my nostalgia by engaging in simple rituals and revisiting fond memories with family and friends. I keep my loathing at bay by avoiding deep connections with people from home. We follow the adage to avoid discussing politics and religion in polite company because it is fraught and unproductive when we do. We exist for the duration of my visits in a bubble of niceness. When our visits are over, we often leave that bubble without ever truly connecting in a meaningful way. We like each other well enough. If we're family, we even love each other. But we don't really know each other fully.

When my loathing percolates, it can bleed into despair. I try to embrace a 'live-and-let-live' philosophy. I don't want to force my views or beliefs on family and friends with whom I disagree. I believe in abortion rights but understand people who oppose abortion and am even willing to use their preferred language ('pro-life') when in conversation with them. It goes without saying that I would never support policies that would force a person with pro-life views to have an abortion or that would force a person who identifies as straight to marry a gay person. I would never insist that anyone open themselves up personally to an interracial relationship. I accept that friends and family may prefer to attend churches which embrace views on sexuality, gender, and race that I oppose. Let people who are different from me live in peace. Let them believe as they see fit as long as they are not harming others.

Yet, I do not see a 'live-and-let-live' philosophy returned by many of the people with whom I disagree. It is not enough for them to have their beliefs accepted by society. They wish to define how I will live. They *would* force me to carry a baby to term, even if that baby was a product of violent rape or if my health were at risk. They *would* prevent me from marrying or living in equality with a person I love if my relationship was not heterosexual. They *would* treat my interracial relationship with suspicion or, worse, hostility. They *would* prevent me from

ending my life in dignity if I had a terminal illness and was facing interminable pain. And on and on.

I don't wish harm to people who would impose their values on me if they could. Yet, I am unwilling to live without complaint in a community that would repress my basic rights, or those of others, in that way. In darker moments, I imagine a hypothetical scenario where I have no choice but to live in a community that denies fundamental human rights. In this scenario, I do not imagine myself fighting for my rights with violence. At the same time, I cannot imagine resigning myself to the situation and seeking contentment in the comfort of a community that I do not believe is just. I imagine myself preferring death. Live and let live is not an option? Fine. Let others live. Let them be happy and content, living according to their world view. I do not wish them harm. But I do not wish to live this way. In melodramatic moments, I imagine myself with the bravery and calm of a Buddhist just prior to an act of self-immolation, a most extreme and final form of protest.

I don't normally live in a state of melodrama. I do not want to self-immolate. I do not have to live in a community that denies fundamental human rights whole cloth, at least not my own rights. I am a highly educated, upper middle class, white, cisgendered, straight woman. Lucky me. What am I complaining about anyway?

In my good fortune, and being generally averse to the idea of self-immolation, I instead seek either escape or retreat. I have escaped the political and cultural narrowness of my childhood home. In my current home, I tend to spend the most time with like-minded people who share my views. I limit my engagement with those with whom I disagree, and especially with individuals or groups who are hostile to rights that I consider to be fundamental.

But is a politics of escape or retreat really a suitable answer to a politics of nostalgia? We migrate. We shift, and we sort. In the language of U.S. politics, blue territory becomes ever-more blue and red ever-more red. We engage with those with whom we already agree and with whom we feel secure. We engage only on the surface with those who are different. With all of the shifting and sorting around identity and ideology, our politics become more and more polarized. Such polarization is fertile ground for the diminishment of human rights.

What is the alternative to a politics of nostalgia or a politics of escape? If home is everywhere, how can I escape the forces that I believe to the depths of my soul to be unjust? What community in the world is unmarked by misogyny, racism, homophobia, classism, or some other form of divisive difference? I don't believe in utopia. The quest for utopia has been a primary cause of the gross violations of human rights that appall me. Is genocide a synonym for utopia? Perhaps it should be. Do our efforts at self-sorting operate according to similar dynamics? Are we seeking the same homogeneity and purity and elimination of conflict and disagreement via escape and retreat from difference, albeit without a reliance on overt violence?

## **A Politics of Reckoning**

I have admitted my longing for the simplicity and clarity of my childhood. But a politics of nostalgia does not serve the cause of human rights. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera writes, 'In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine.'<sup>7</sup> There is danger in a nostalgic view of community. As Kundera

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<sup>7</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Perennial Classics, 1984): 4.

compellingly shows in this novel, nostalgia can work in the service of authoritarianism or totalitarianism, on the political left as well as the right.

Yet, if longing in the form nostalgia can lead one to embrace communal tribalism and to gloss over a community's shortcomings, surely there is also peril in unremittent loathing, devoid of a generosity of spirit or a curiosity to understand others. Such loathing inevitably hardens political disagreements and produces an unwillingness to engage with those with whom one disagrees. A politics of loathing, one that characterized my emerging political consciousness in adolescence and early adulthood, can only diminish human rights.

For much of my adult life, I have engaged in what might be described as a politics of escape or retreat. To be sure, I engage in civic life as productively as I can. I vote, of course. I have canvassed my neighborhood. I write letters to the editor and to my legislators. I engage my students in political conversation and consider a wide range of ideological and political perspectives in my courses. But I continue to seek escape from the most difficult engagements. My sister voted for Obama in 2008. She voted for Trump in 2016. We still have not really talked about that. And, this, despite the fact that my sister and I are close and are able to communicate and connect over so many issues outside of politics. I love her dearly. Why is disagreement with those whom we love so difficult?

As I enter my sixth decade on the planet in fraught political times, I am considering if there are other ways to engage in politics that might be more likely to expand rather than diminish human rights. It occurs to me that a politics of reckoning might provide a useful framework for thinking about human rights issues, at least in my own life. Reckoning. Judgment. A summing up. A settling of accounts.

As I consider what a politics of reckoning might look like, I return to the past, to some of those events that sparked feelings of loathing for community. I think about the two girls from my high school class, wearing black-face in the yearbook photo. I am friends with these now-adult women on Facebook. We are 'friends' in a loose sense of the word, to be sure. We weren't especially close in high school. We don't really know each other well now. I can't recall the last time I saw either of them in person. We follow, with a degree of polite interest, I think, each other's posts. But we've never made any effort to know or understand each other. To my knowledge, I do not believe there has ever been any public discussion of the incident involving them wearing black-face to school. Do they even remember it? One of the women who had worn black-face to school all those years ago is now parenting several children of color, a deep commitment she has made in service of her pro-life politics. I may not agree with her politics, but I respect the consistency and depth of her commitment to living out her values. By all accounts, she is devoted and loving parent. What am I to make of this evolution? What legacy, if any, does her past leave on her present? Is it unfair that I think about that long-ago incident of her wearing black-face to school as I wonder about the larger racial politics involved with a white family raising children of color in a homogenous, rural community? Or is, in fact, her active embrace of difference precisely how change happens? What legacy does my own past leave on my present?

I also think about my good friend from Versailles who married a black man. I have been friends with her since childhood. Growing up, I stayed at her home overnight on many occasions. Her parents, both factory workers, are kind and amusing, her father quiet and wry, her mother voluminous and kind, like her daughter. When my friend started dating her now-husband, her parents threatened that they would never accept it if she married him. If she married him and had children, those children would never be allowed in their home. They would not have a

relationship with their grandparents. My friend shrugged and shook it off, with good nature that I don't think I could have mustered. She stayed in her relationship with her then-boyfriend, and she also maintained her relationship with her parents. Patience and time wore down their resolve to prevent their daughter from having an interracial marriage and family. The wedding was a joyous and diverse celebration. Her parents have welcomed their biracial grandchildren into their home with love. Both of her parents campaigned for Obama in 2008. In Versailles, Ohio.

How do such anecdotes figure into a politics of reckoning? To start, they suggest that it is not sufficient to account for harms or transgressions in assessing a community. One has to account for the good as well. One's reckoning has to factor in the possibility of change over time.

But how does one foster change in a community resistant to change?

In my scholarship, I am particularly interested in human rights issues that are contested *within* cultures, *within* communities, and *within* families. I examine intra-community and intra-familial disagreement as a primary obstacle to consensus and change on human rights. The causes of some of the most confounding global human rights challenges are to be found in particular community contexts. Recognizing the importance of the ways in which human rights are contested within communities and families seems clear cut as a scholarly matter. Identifying ways to respond to difference within communities and families is vastly more difficult.

If the fundamental fault lines in debates over rights lie within communities and families, that is also where the source of cultural change often lies. Working from the bottom-up within conservative religious and cultural communities is necessary to affect real, sustainable change to contested cultural practices. Changing formal laws is not enough and may even generate cultural backlash and unintended consequences.

Change occurs within the context of social and familial relationships. In his study of footbinding and infibulation, Gerry Mackie notes that these 'harmful traditional practices' are typically carried out in the context of families where the parents are 'good people who love their children.'<sup>8</sup> Likewise, I need to remind myself that people from my childhood home with whom I disagree on human rights issues are good people despite their complicity, acceptance of, or implications in the discriminatory norms that prevailed in the community's culture. Efforts to promote human rights in such contexts must begin with this assumption and need to treat people in these communities as moral agents whose participation in generating change is essential rather than as subjects to be forced to change by outside actors.

But how exactly? When analyzing human rights issues in a society other than one's own, it is easy to say that it is essential to adopt culturally-sensitive approaches to change that actively involve individuals from the community. It is harder to imagine how to do that when you are of a community but have left it. Once you have left such a community, you are perceived as an outsider. What right do you have to come back to this community and criticize its values? At the same time, there is a fine line between complicity, complacency, and cultural sensitivity for individuals who reject the values of communities they have left.

In fact, you may have felt and been treated like an outsider even when living there to the extent that you did not embrace the community's prevailing norms. In homogenous tight-knit communities, dissent is often stifled, sometimes through outright violence or threats of violence, but perhaps just as often because dissent is perceived as betrayal. That is why you felt silenced when you lived there, and it's part of why you left. Surely the answer isn't to ask marginalized

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<sup>8</sup> Gerry Mackie, "Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Convention Account," *American Sociological Review* 61: 6 (1996): 999-1017.

people, including sexual, gender, or ethnic minorities, to remain in communities that oppress them.

And what of individuals who simply differ according to political viewpoints or ideological perspectives? Do they have an obligation to remain in communities from which they feel alienated? For myself, the answer is clear. I needed to leave. And I cannot return home, not to Versailles. I can visit, but the thought of a long-term return there evokes too much pain in my body and soul. I know my place in that community. I know how I need to be there in order to avoid offending people or provoking hostility—which is to not be my true self.

Although I cannot return to my childhood home, I think about the ways I might be able to navigate disagreement and difference in the communities where I now live and work. As a teacher and a scholar, might I be able to apply for a grant that brings together religious leaders from churches representing different theological and ideological perspectives as well as different racial or ethnic backgrounds? Might these religious leaders serve as bridges across some of the social and cultural divides in our societies? What can I do at my university to foster discussion across the political and cultural divisions that have been contributing to tension and conflict on campus? Are there other ways I can help promote connections and communication across differences in ways that will enhance rather than diminish human rights?

I've muddied the waters in this essay. I've asked many more questions than I have answered. As I ponder the ideas that are forming in my head, I can feel seeds of hope growing. But I'd like to sit with the questions a bit longer.

This is my own politics of reckoning.