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Tapestries 2022: Message from the Professor

Karin Aguilar-San Juan

On Navigating the Politics of Disappointment (with help from Fire and Water)

“The sky is burning”...--Sam Gopal
(1968)¹

“Be like water, my friend”...--Bruce Lee
(1972/2020)²

The Politics of Disappointment

In a global-historical moment filled with precarity, doubt, extremist violence, and anti-intellectualism, it is no small feat that the American Studies majors from Macalester’s Class of 2022 have produced this volume of *Tapestries*. Each piece (whether abstract or essay) presented here has been conceptualized, researched, peer-reviewed, revised, sourced, and footnoted by a generation of young scholars coming of age in a remarkable era. It is too soon to tell where we are headed, whether social and political mass movements will discover or create the “small window”³ that leads toward truly progressive, life-affirming change or if the descent into state-sponsored authoritarian systems, vigilante justice, and life-negating ideologies will continue unabated. And who knows how long Mother Earth and Father Sun will abide by our human-induced chaos? In any case, the mere fact of twelve college students having found a way to apply their gifts and talents toward subjects they

care about over a sustained period of fifteen weeks presents slivers of hope, not only for their lives but also for the future of public discourse. At the end of the day, it means someone is still willing and able to pursue complex lines of inquiry and to construct persuasive arguments despite the overarching trend to seek instant gratification and to collapse all discussion into simplistic--and deadly--dichotomies: right/wrong, good/bad, yes/no, me/you.

Throughout the past four months, these hope slivers have intermingled with a heavy layer of disappointment. Now that we are heading into the darkness of winter, aided by 20/20 hindsight, who knows why anyone expected otherwise? After eighteen months of COVID, during most of which we were fortunate enough to continue with many social and educational activities with the help of online platforms, masks, and vaccines, I somehow convinced myself, as did most of my colleagues and the administrators who run our institution, that our students would rebound without difficulty, be grateful for all the resources we provide, and regain their previous enthusiasm for their studies. Little did we know that students would have to re-calibrate themselves to a world no one expected or anticipated. In the recalibration, disappointment has become a palpable aspect of daily routines.

Disappointment, it turns out, can be both personal and political. In an interview, the artist-activist Ricardo Levins Morales described a workshop he led with men about to be released

¹ This Spotify song inspired Anjali Moore; thanks to her for teaching it to me.

² This famous saying by Bruce Lee is the title of a book published in 2020 by his daughter, Shannon Lee.

³ Novelist Kim Stanley Robinson talks about finding the “small window” where things can go right, instead of dwelling on the many things that are already going wrong.

from prison.⁴ After ten or fifteen years behind bars, they wondered out loud how to deal with disappointment. What if the support we need is not there? Jobs? Housing? Friends? Family? “What is your policy on disappointment?” they asked. From the point of view of these men, and because incarceration in the United States is a racialized and mass-scale issue, facing disappointment actually needs a policy and a plan.

At first glance, the disappointment of students at a well-endowed, private, liberal arts college returning to the classroom after a year and a handful of months of zoom-based learning hardly compares to the fate of adults who leave prison after decades and face a myriad of crushing disappointments brought upon them by a carceral state. To be sure, most analytical comparisons ultimately emanate from a culture of violence, replete with vertical hierarchies of domination and control that silence exploration and devalue connection and relationships.⁵ So what matters here is not whether the experience of disappointment in the context of an adult prison sentence is commensurate with disappointment in the context of senior year in college during a global pandemic. What matters is that there has been disappointment, and that for a variety of reasons that need to be untangled and understood, students are grasping for a sense of meaning and purpose; they are questioning the point of finishing their studies; and they wonder with some trepidation what future awaits them.

Our world is in flux. Volatility is our new normal. Everyday moments are marked by disappointment on a large-scale and small-scale, together with a feeling of meaninglessness and trepidation about whatever comes next. The visionary activist

adrienne maree brown, inspired by the grand dame of science fiction Octavia Butler, offers an emergent-strategy principle: “Change is constant.”⁶ But as a society we are not practiced in change or in going with the flow. We want control over the situation, which we don’t have. The uncertainty of life under COVID has taxed our bodies and spirits: we feel tapped out. To make things worse, the privileges once associated with white supremacy--safety, freedom, belonging, domination--are no longer guaranteed. Systems and logics of racist and hetero-patriarchal superiority require violence and the threat of violence. Isn’t that evident from the January 6, 2021 assault on the U.S. capitol--including those of us living in proximity to whiteness?

Freewriting on Senior Year: Grief, Loss & Freedom

Early in the Fall 2021 semester, I invited students to do some freewriting as a way to air out and ventilate both the positive and negative feelings associated with the experience of entering Senior Year during a continuing global pandemic with all its related issues. Below are excerpts of my prompts and their responses, which I have lightly edited. Taken as a whole, the freewrites offer a “time capsule” of the inner workings of this volume of *Tapestries*. Trigger warning: These words may be difficult to take in. Largely absent are the gestures of pride, jubilation, excitement, and future-orientation that one might expect from students about to finish their college career. Yet in the uncensored poignancy of these words, I find traces of hope and a glow of vitality. What do you see?

⁴ Together with Attorney Camille Bryant, I interviewed the Minneapolis-based artist-activist Ricardo Levins Morales for a project on prison abolition and socially engaged Buddhism.

⁵ Frank Joyce elaborates on an instructive paradigm that compares a culture of violence to a culture of peace in “The

slogan No Justice No Peace gets it backward. Peace is the key to justice” [Counterpunch](#) July 23, 2021.

⁶ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, AK Press, 2017.

Hello, Senior Year!

How does it feel like to be a college senior? When and why did you choose the American Studies major? Has it helped you in times of global crises? How has your identity changed and morphed since you first stepped foot on campus? As you step into your life after Macalester, what do you want to leave behind, and what do you want to take with you?

ZOE: My identity has morphed greatly over my time at Macalester. Being pushed to know how to identify myself has been a major point of growth and also one of deep resentment. Macalester produced the pressure, struggle and overall circumstances to get me to fully uncover who I am today. This is still a highly tumultuous and precarious relationship.... I belong to the queer BIPOC community, the activist community, and above all to my Indigenous community. The intersection of these identities is where I now find comfort and liberation. For that, I am grateful.

DAKOTA: I only ended up going to college out of obligation to my family... I'm a first-gen student and the pressure has been on since I was a kid to go to school and be successful. The ever growing realization of the meaninglessness and fragility of the world built for us by previous generations has only made it harder and harder to see school as anything other than a distraction or method of pacification. This past year I've had experience with real

worldchanging and direct action and community and things that feel like they matter... I don't know how to even pretend to care about college anymore.... during my time at Macalester I've spent more time angry or at odds with the institution and its administrators than anything. My only real campus engagement has been acts of protest against Macalester. This campus and all it stands for feels alien to me now more than ever... I've never felt less like a Macalester Student, or American Studies Major, or even a student. I don't know how to fix that or if it's worth trying to fix.

ADAM: In the past year I've undergone a pretty serious shift in how I see myself with regards to academia. I'd only ever conceived of myself as someone who could most meaningfully contribute to the freedom of all people through writing and ideas. Now I feel so much urgency to build a radically different future for myself with dirt and sweat - things I never thought I'd care to bother with....I don't want institutional accolades or to advance my position in the field of potential candidates for a seat in the shrinking room that is the university, and I don't want to produce something worth publishing (in the traditional sense at least)... These are just reflections on what it means to write something that will ultimately be "published" now that I have no aspirations along the lines of published or professional work.

ANJALI: I have disidentified with Macalester as I have become increasingly embedded in the protest communities in Minneapolis in the last year. I have less motivation to be academically involved because everything else I was experiencing felt so

real and true in a way that classrooms never can be and I've lost all allegiance to institutions because they are almost always a part of the problem and not the solution. I do feel like I am a different person now re-entering my college life and it feels like a totally separate world from the rest of my life.

Grief & Loss/ Hope & Return

Grief is information. How does it feel to address grief as a class writing assignment? One reason we might avoid negative feelings such as grief in the classroom is that we haven't practiced receiving emotions as information. Instead, we choose to avoid or deny the emotion and the information that comes with it with the belief that we can "power through" and "move on" without actually facing what is happening to us. Referring to "The Pandemic as Portal" by Arundhati Roy, do you see yourself as having passed through a portal? And if so, is there something you have chosen to leave behind, though you may grieve its absence?

LOUISE: I immediately felt self-conscious when we were asked to write about grief in class. My mind went straight towards thinking "What will be the easiest thing to write about?" Meaning, what topics am I so used to talking about, or so comfortable with surrounding grief that it won't be emotionally hard for me to share or write about. Even in an attempt to write freely I was already censoring myself. Grief has been on my mind quite a bit in the past six months. The pandemic has led to new

absences in all parts of my life. I'm no longer talking to some of my roommates from last year, I had to quit a job I have had since the beginning of college, and we had a death in my family this summer. Through all these absences, I'm trying now to acknowledge the pain that comes with each and every one of them.... I'm sure parts of this grief will follow me for a long time, but right now I am just trying to stay present with what feelings I have now.

SOPHIE: The necklace my grandmother gave me broke a few days ago. I cried. Harder than I felt I should for a little thing. What exactly was I mourning? My grief in this period is a culmination of many losses. After losing my two remaining grandparents, the college experience and life trajectory I had expected for myself, friends I didn't have the energy to keep in touch with, I found myself in a mental place I had never been in before. I felt alone, exhausted, unmotivated, ungrounded. I was grieving all things lost including a version of myself where I was more happy and that I felt more connected with. I've felt better in the past few months, but grief never fully left. When my necklace broke, it wasn't just the necklace. The conditions in my life were just right so that I was transported into the past and the grief came to the surface and became unavoidable. Grief is a fragile place.

HALEY: During the pandemic I grieved many things from people to relationships to past versions of myself. I didn't even know I was grieving, I just thought I was being sad, angry, anxious, anything but grief. Grief felt too heavy for me to hold. I guess if I admitted to myself that I was grieving then it would give me a reason

to stop when I felt like I couldn't stop because the world wasn't going to wait for me. It wasn't until my therapist called me out as she usually does and described that what I was feeling was grief and that no matter the circumstances whether I was close to that person or whether I was grieving over myself, it was valid. Going through the pandemic really does feel like a portal because time didn't work the same and still doesn't. It's unbelievable to think that before the pandemic, I had friends that I thought would be a part of my forever and now we don't talk anymore. I don't regret ending our friendship and it's taken me months to grieve it, but even though it doesn't hurt to see him on campus, my heart still swells with so much love for what we used to be when he passes by. I wonder if he feels the same and I wonder if he also grieved, but that's none of my business anymore. Anyways, I also grieve the version of myself that I lost once I was diagnosed with ADHD. I felt so much relief from the diagnosis and I'm so grateful for it because now I can finally prove that I did need help. However, this meant that I had to say goodbye to a younger Haley, the one that felt so smart and so talented and was "gifted" by arbitrary school standards. The overachieving Haley that could take on the world wasn't realistic anymore and we had to part ways. Even though these were all good goodbyes that I needed, it doesn't make the grieving any easier.

NICOLE: During quarantine I lost a lot of connections to people I thought would be around longer- my roommates at the time mostly. I think I gained some sort of clarity of situations I was in and it was so easy to disappear for a year and a half when everything felt not permanent? I always got this feeling of temporality

when I was online and although I felt like I disappeared during college I felt more present than ever with my family and other relationships I feel like I was neglecting. I left behind this sense that academia will save me from everything I feel like I'm always fighting off because it's not!!! It never was!!! I guess in a way I'm also grieving a past self.

Freedom, Violence & Belonging

Stretch your arms wide, open your chest and lungs, relax your spine, and let yourself expand into the space around you. Feeling strong, open, and porous: are you able to tap into a sense of "being free"? In your life, what is freedom?

ANNA: Throughout middle school and high school, I remember so clearly teachers talking about freedom as this linear, absolute thing. People fight for it and then, ultimately and unequivocally, earn it. And then it's theirs forever! No mention of the white male architects gatekeeping this desired thing, or how tenuous that grasp on freedom can be for various individuals and groups. It is so frustrating reflecting on these teachings because they are so narrow in scope. Teachers did not give me the language or the tools to examine freedom as anything other than this naturally occurring, upstanding concept in our culture. I don't think I really started to see freedom as a method of exclusion and oppression created by and for violence until much later in my education. Because freedom is constantly torn from people and groups and communities, if it was ever granted to them at all, I really appreciated Smallwood's emphasis on its non-linearity, its conditionality, i.e:

“The temporality of black freedom always threatens to carry the unfreedoms of the past forward into the present.” And also, “Freedom’s temporality—for specific groups—does not conform to the steady forward progression posited by the liberal narrative.”

HALEY: In my mind, personal freedom is people being able to live their best lives without any care in the world. However, the shift of that definition due to slavery, neoliberalism, and greed to become one that is possessive and carnivorous makes me sad and angry. Why is there a need to always want more? Why is there a need to always want to be on top?

NICOLE: To me in highschool traveling was synonymous with freedom- to be far away from my parents and family. I’m now thinking of this one big house in La Alborada - it stood out against all others because its balcony was so modern looking, my mom would tell me some Italian woman owned it. My brother and I would walk past the windows sometimes just to feel the AC and look at the mosaic patio. This is when wealth started to mean freedom.

SOPHIE: The feeling of being un-free is more noticeable than being free. The feelings of pressure, anxiety, and stress affect my body creating tension, pain, and discomfort. When I feel this way it is constant and unavoidable. For me, to be free is to not have these feelings. It is a non-feeling in the way that it is not noticeable until I realize the absence of negative feelings.

Fire + Water

ARTIST STATEMENT FROM THE CLASS OF 2022: Burn it all down! Burning sounds destructive but in our rethinking of flames, burning entails more than destruction--it also signals new growth. Indigenous people have used “controlled burns” to maintain environmental cycles. While a fire burns, seeds can actually germinate as the heat makes their shells crack or the kernels explode. Out of these fires, new life is allowed to flourish. Where this Indigenous practice has been suppressed, the lack of controlled burns has led to bigger and recurring wildfires--and more wanton, unplanned destruction....In order to usher in a new future that is liberatory for all forms of life on this planet, we need to *control burn*. Only in this way will we be able to reframe, reimagine, and construct a better world.

In the midst of disappointment, and surely in response to it, the Class of 2022 in American Studies developed an image that resonates with them: a tree in flames surrounded by its seeds which, by their very nature, germinate in the heat. Imagine each abstract and each essay as a seed about to burst open in an arboreal conflagration! The idea of a “controlled burn” animates this issue of *Tapestries*, signaling an aspiration toward persistent engagement amidst a searing, scorching blaze.

In other contexts, I’ve wondered if U.S. society’s immersion in a culture of violence imbues into each individual within a society a certain thrill in destruction. The playwright Alice Tuan has referred to America as a “necrophiliac”⁷ and on more than one occasion,

⁷ Personal communication, April 1, 2020.

I have seen a cultural impulse toward death as a response and a solution: to situations we despise, to people we despise, even to Life itself. Cancel culture is a tiny version--and mass shootings in schools a much larger and more tragic one--of a necrophiliac's knee-jerk reaction to a negative experience. With 2.2 million people sent to prison and jail, and 800 military bases worldwide, the United States exhibits these necrophiliac traits as a matter of domestic policy and foreign affairs. Is anyone surprised that as the United States moves into decline as a world superpower (having recently withdrawn from a major war in the Middle East), a society once assured by "American exceptionalism" now shows a malaise akin to disappointment and despair?

Envision wildfires across the planet. Destruction engenders confusion and despair, and the scale of loss triggers grief. Eventually, if the destruction is not complete, new growth peeks through, tiny glimpses of hope and a new future. This is exactly what happened in the years after the U.S. bombings of Japan following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. Massively out of proportion to the event used to justify them, the bombs reduced every major Japanese city to rubble. Yet in Hiroshima, some vegetation experienced regrowth. Labeled and cared for as *hibakujumoku* ("atom bombed trees"), these survivor plants have flourished, given fruit, and borne witness to massive efforts at reconstruction and friendship in the decades following World War 2.⁸

As I finish this note, a thin blanket of snow covers St. Paul. Frozen particles of water have created this wintry dreamscape, a seasonal delight especially for those with shelter and the resources to stay well-fed and warm, perhaps by a fireplace. Water and fire sustain life, as much as they can also make life very difficult to navigate.

May these words--together with the abstracts and essays they accompany--move one step further toward clarity, hope, and renewal in the months and years ahead.

–St. Paul, Minnesota

⁸ See [Green Legacy Hiroshima](#) for the inspiring story of atom-bombed trees as a global friendship initiative.

