

What We're Fighting For
by L. Timmel Duchamp
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Aqueduct Press released my new collection, *Like Shards of Rainbow Frolicking in the Air*, on June 1, 2025, as the 96th volume in the Conversation Pieces series. This collection includes a new story, “The Last Nostalgia,” which I finished on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic, and three older stories first published in the 1990s. For the second time in my role of publisher, I’m reacting to an all-out attack on all that I hold dear by publishing work of my own to affirm values and ways of thinking that I share with my community of choice.

The first time I did this was in 2005. Bush II’s “Endless War” and “Christian Crusade,” which, besides turning the entire world into its battleground, put a good portion of the US public into a coma of stultification and rendered the Washington cognoscenti dupes who bought into and helped propagate the administrations lies. (The *New York Times*’ infamous Judith Miller knowingly fabricated lies, but I’d like to think that most of her colleagues simply succumbed to group-think.) Twenty years later, those same people, including the top folks at the *New Yorker*, copped to having been deceived without ever mentioning that a substantial minority of citizens—which included my own community—protested the deceptions vigorously, in concert with millions of people outside the US. It was only after the 2016 election that the “liberal media” became preoccupied with the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation flowing ever more lavishly through Trump-world.

How could this have happened? Well, during the years of Bush II’s Endless War, the display of flags and shopping were just about the only acceptable forms of public expression about “the War on Terror,” except of course in politically radical spheres that the mainstream (now branded “legacy”) media venues had for decades ignored or maligned. Mind you, this was before social media swept over us. Blogs and internet forums were the thing then. We began hearing of people being questioned by the Secret Service and the FBI for derogatory comments they made online about the POTUS at a time when the full-scale assault by the US Government on due process and human rights became, for many people, not only acceptable but also a source of pride (which was why members of the service photographed one another torturing and abusing Iraqis imprisoned in Abu

Ghraib. The Administration actually put out pseudo-legal justifications for torture and extreme rendition. The big chill this caused, including in the publishing industry, was part of the reason I started Aqueduct Press.

But it was the enormous surge of corruption and abuse caused by the flow of money to defense contractors, the horrors perpetrated by the US while depicting the destruction of Iraq as its “liberation,” as well as the triumphal shift to a reactionary episteme via the Administration’s wildly successful efforts of perception management that provoked me into publishing my five-volume Marq’san Cycle. In retrospect, my timing was excellent. When I wrote those books in the 1980s, few readers could make sense of them—the underlying assumptions and connections were imperceptible to all but a handful of the people who read them. When I published them from 2005-2008, however, much of the novels’ logic was easily grasped—thanks, perhaps, to the Administration’s blatant exaggeration of the “values” critiqued in the Marq’san Cycle.

This time, all it took were a handful of days in late January 2025 to provoke me. This time is different, though. One difference is that the three oldest stories in the book made sense to many readers at the time of their publication (though I believe that at least two of them will read a bit differently now, given how much farther most of us have come in our understanding of gender since the late 1980s and early 1990s when I wrote them). I believe from what one of my beta readers told me that the never before published story, “The Last Nostalgia,” makes obvious sense to her now precisely because of what has unfolded in the first hundred days of the regime. (In 2019, when I wrote it, it struck at least one reader as puzzling.)

More important, though, is a startling, even shocking difference between what Bush II did in 2005 and what Trump is doing in 2025. Although Bush II stultified and chilled thinking that refused to buy into the Administration’s group-think, it did so without defying the most basic assumptions grounding our lives, work, and family relations—relying on the use of the exceptional to permit and obscure its violations of ordinary decency, which the mainstream media happily assisted it in doing. The Trump Administration, by contrast, is intent on sweeping away our most basic understanding of public, social, and familial relations, determined to eliminate the most fundamental personal freedoms, and marking out anyone who isn’t white and wealthy as outside the norm, marginal, and thus vulnerable to being treated as less than fully human. (In other words, ever vaster numbers of people are being branded exceptional.) While it is true that the right wing has for decades insisted on interpreting demands that every individual be treated with respect as “political correctness,” decrying such demands for depriving privileged persons from disrespecting and bullying others, this regime

has a far more sweeping goal—that of forcing us into an episteme in which white cis-gendered males (and, to a lesser extent, white “trad” heterosexual wives) take priority over everyone else, erasing everything that science and the discipline of history has learned about race and gender, and also granting wealthy corporate bodies the right to poison the air we breathe, the water we drink, and continue their willful, breakneck pace toward climate catastrophe.

Ron de Santis, the governor of Florida, and Greg Abbott, the governor of Texas, have led the way in this effort to erase scientific knowledge and change our shared assumptions. They’ve done this by banning books, rewriting history, censoring the language in all official documents, trashing school curricula at every level of education, and so on. The Trump Administration is doing all this and much, much more. A large part of the “Department of Government Efficiency” excisions are aimed at institutional memory and the scientific establishment and its discourses, as well as the very notion of public health, public services, and public welfare, an effort that goes hand in hand with a disingenuous rewriting of history among other things. The struggles and accomplishments of women and black people are being deleted from official institutional histories. Elon Musk’s infamous chainsaw—which he boastingly held up to a cheering audience at a CPAC meeting—is all about marginalizing everyone but the MAGA core (though the poorest of them are themselves at risk) and is having the effect of making all the many public services past governments have provided either ineffective, inaccessible, or outright eliminated. Among the public services under threat is that of education. By this I mean not only the attacks on the Department of Education, but also on the health, safety, and intellectual and moral integrity of most colleges and universities across the country, both public and private. The support they receive from the federal government is largely invisible to most citizens, but many will be aware of the direct attacks on Columbia and Harvard, two of the wealthiest and most highly thought of educational institutions in the country and the world. The Administration justifies its attacks on these institutions on the grounds that they tolerate criticism of the government of Israel for its openly genocidal policies (which the Administration cynically—given that it is itself, at its highest levels, riddled with longtime anti-Semites—label “antisemitism”). I suspect that the real reason they have chosen to attack Columbia and Harvard is that if they can take down such prestigious and powerful institutions and force them to rewrite history and censor the language and content used in teaching and research, they believe that every other educational institution will fall into line and embrace a set of assumptions and values that have long been discredited in the academy.

Can a collection of loose cannons erase our current epistemic reality and replace it with assumptions and notions of common sense antithetical those currently held? I don't know. Certainly epistemic reality has turned over on a dime in the past. Look at what happened in this country at the end of WW II. Has their clumsy, brute-force erasure of "DEI" (which basically stands in for a declaration of intent to treat every individual decently, without prejudice with respect to skin color, gender, sexual preference, disability, and religion) succeeded in changing most people's basic desire for fairness? Has their declaration that, contrary to scientific fact, human beings have only two genders changed anyone's mind about that? I don't know. But I do know that if their ideological agenda is not constantly challenged, the longer such attacks go on, the more likely our episteme *will* be dramatically, drastically altered.

We all need recognition—recognition of who we are, of how we make our world, of what is necessary not only to survive, but also to flourish. The creative arts lie at the heart of such recognition. My passionate understanding of this need has from the beginning been a driving force in my writing. It has also been a force in my work as the publisher of Aqueduct Press. It's a sense rooted so deeply within me that I don't even think about it when I'm working.

Given all the material damage the Trump Administration is doing to our world, it is easy to dismiss the epistemic dimension of its agenda. That would be a serious mistake. As historian Quinn Slobodian has pointed out, particularly in his recent work *Hayek's Bastards: Race, Gold, IQ, and the Capitalism of the Far Right* (Zone Books, April 2025), the political theorists who are the architects of Trump's assault on institutions of every sort, most especially of the federal government, consider their doxa of "natural hierarchies" as the basis for all their policies—as well as the rationale for re-imposing racial, gender, and other forms of discrimination that we've been chipping away at. It's no accident that they're using outdated pseudo-science (which parodies the scientific method either naively or cynically) to defy twenty-first century biological science. Some of them have even resorted to the long-discredited scientism of craniometrics. And some of them share Elon Musk's notion that empathy is the enemy of civilization. Needless to say, their notion of "civilization" and their ideas about it bear no resemblance to my own. The architects of Trump's policies learned from post-World War II conservatives that democratic practices put human, social values above the ability of individuals to accumulate unimaginably vast fortunes by squeezing both unpaid and underpaid labor out of ninety-percent of the population and buying off elected officials at every level of government.

So why did I choose these particular stories for this collection? Two of the stories are explicitly concerned with gender and the contradictions, terrorization, and conceptual confusion

underlying a relentless ideology of sexual dimorphism. One of the stories looks at the destabilization of capitalism that results when pleasure and joyosity take priority over unquestioned routine and commerce. And the newest story, “The Last Nostalgia,” explores the limitations of intelligibility and the resentment such limitations tend to arouse and considers whether some forms of unintelligibility are in fact necessary for a society that isn’t homogeneous and regimented. The characters in these stories face boundaries intended to constrain how they think about themselves and the choices they face. Each must actively explore their world and find a way to understand it, to navigate their way through it, to help construct it, and to live in it.

Values and material conditions are inextricable. Please, please, let’s not forget that.