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The Trouble with Literature (text and video)

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Joanne Diaz
April 13, 2022

The Trouble with Literature

Thank you for that introduction; thanks to the Kemp family for supporting this award; and thanks to those of you who chose me for this honor. Teaching at Illinois Wesleyan is a privilege, and I am grateful for it every day.

As President Nugent indicated in her introduction, I read and write for a living. I think about how we arrange words in time, how we manipulate time, how we use words to imagine another time. The great Spanish poet Antonio Machado once said that poetry is “la palabra en el tiempo”—the word in time. With measured words, writers create whole rooms of thought and feeling. They can describe and argue, extend and converse, not just with people in this moment, but across generations, even millenia. And in this way, we find connection, not just to a place within ourselves, but with each other.

So, literature connects, but it also causes plenty of problems. And that’s why I’ve titled this talk “The Trouble with Literature.” For all of my writing and reading life, I’ve been drawn to literature, not just because it makes me feel good, but precisely because it often troubles me—a lot.

But what do I mean by trouble? Well, I love to excavate the deep history of language and consider the long journey that every word takes—from ancient Greek and Latin and Sanskrit, up through Germanic and Romance languages, to finally arrive at our always evolving English, a language that swallows up and incorporates everything it touches. “Trouble” has its origins in an Indo-European root: *twer-* to turn, or whirl. It’s related to *turba* in Greek and *turbidus* in Latin, both of which mean *confused, disordered, muddy, perplexed*. This root migrated into English to become *turbine, trouble, disturb, perturb, turbidity*. The chemists in the room will no doubt have more to say about turbidity than I ever could. But simply put, turbidity occurs when matter clouds water. It impairs our ability to see clearly. I like thinking about “trouble” as a physical problem that I can visualize.

In what follows, I'd like to describe how literature is so troublesome, and why that matters right now. To do that, I'll begin with an anecdote about my own past.

During the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college, I had an internship at a nonprofit organization called Facing History and Ourselves. Facing History uses the lessons of history—the Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide, the Civil Rights movement—to help teachers and students stand up to bigotry and hate. That summer, my job was to help catalog photographs, films, and other archival materials for a library that was a resource for hundreds of teachers all over the country. Before this internship, I knew what the Holocaust was, but I had no real sense of what led up to that atrocity. What would it take for an authoritarian regime to annihilate millions of its own people? Well, it turns out, literature played a role.

On May 10, 1933, the Nazi Party coordinated book burnings in Berlin and thirty-three other German cities. Participants swore an oath against the perversion of non-German thought. Hundreds of thousands of books burned in the pyres—including some by Bertolt Brecht, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein. Both students *and* professors organized this book burning, and 40,000 Berliners participated in the streets. In the minds of those Berliners, those books were such a threat, that to destroy them seemed like the only solution.¹

That summer internship rearranged something in my brain. I could now see, with startling clarity, the gradual steps that led to that catastrophe, and I could now, see, too, how there was a kind of template for similar atrocities that had occurred elsewhere in the world. The intellectuals, the artists, the activists striving for social justice: these are the people who seem like troublemakers when

¹ Of course, the 1933 book burnings in Germany were not the first, and the destruction of books occurs regularly when regimes want to police thought or erase cultural memory. For more on the long history of book burnings, see Matthew Fishburn, *Burning Books* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and Fernando Báez, *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern Iraq* (Atlas Books, 2008).

democracy is fragile, as Germany's was in the early 1930s. I am speaking about this experience in such detail because it shaped my understanding of terror, of tyranny, of how easy it is for any one of us to be bystanders in a time of crisis.

Now, I love poems that bring me joy, that describe the beauty in the world, and restore my sense of hope. But more often, I'm drawn to poems that challenge me to think about my role in the world's problems. In early March of this year, as Russian forces invaded and started to destroy whole swaths of Ukraine, this poem by Ilya Kaminsky, a Ukrainian American poet, went viral. As I read this poem aloud, notice how Kaminsky uses clear, accessible language without any prescribed rhyme or meter. Simple, but not simplistic. Notice his use of the collective pronoun "we," how it demands our attention and implicates us, and how unsettling that is.

We Lived Happily During the War

And when they bombed other people's houses, we
protested

but not enough, we opposed them but not

enough. I was
in my bed, around my bed America

was falling: invisible house by invisible house by invisible house—

I took a chair outside and watched the sun.

In the sixth month
of a disastrous reign in the house of money

in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,
our great country of money, we (forgive us)

lived happily during the war.²

² From *Deaf Republic* by Ilya Kaminsky (Graywolf, 2019).

Kaminsky doesn't specifically name the United States or Ukraine in this poem, so there's a way in which it can ripple with new energy and acquire new meanings, perhaps in new places, even years from now.

Ilya Kaminsky wrote a *New York Times* opinion piece in early March, and in it, he described his correspondence with a journalist friend who still lives in Ukraine. Kaminsky asked the friend what he could do to help the Ukrainian people, and the journalist friend said this: "Putins come and go. If you want, send us some poems and essays. We are putting together a literary magazine.' In the middle of war, he is asking for poems."³

When people are at their most desperate, when everything seems hopeless, they still insist on poetry. Ihor Kalynets, another Ukrainian poet, was imprisoned in the Soviet Gulag for years in the middle of the twentieth century. While imprisoned, he wrote his poems on cigarette papers and balled them into his pockets so that they wouldn't be found by the prison guards. When Chinese immigrants were detained at San Francisco's Angel Island in the early twentieth century, they etched poems on the walls to articulate their worry over an uncertain future in a country that refused to welcome them. When Anna Akhmatova's son was imprisoned by Joseph Stalin, she continued to write *Requiem*, her greatest poem, memorizing her revisions so that the papers wouldn't be found by the secret police.

Literature both emerges from—and provides an antidote—to trouble. But it creates trouble, too. Every writer is in conversation with other writers, and the conversation is so expansive, it crosses so many time periods and traditions and languages and ideologies, that it might feel like it's impossible to harness it. Literature is intertextual. And once again, I will rely on etymology to make my point: the word "text" comes from the Latin *textus*, from *tex-ere*, to weave. This is where we get

³ "Poems in a Time of Crisis," *New York Times*, March 13, 2022.

the word *textile*. Every literary text is woven, with hundreds of threads of thought and feeling, all of which come from and point in numerous directions.

To illustrate this point, I'd like to read an erasure poem by Tracy Smith called "Declaration." Erasure is a fairly straightforward poetic constraint: it requires that the poet erase words from a published text—usually one that's not their own—until a poem appears. As I read this poem, notice how Tracy Smith troubles the Declaration—surely one of the most famous and foundational texts in the West. By erasing that document, she's challenged me to see something I hadn't seen before: a text underneath the text written by our Founding Fathers, all of whom were white, and some of whom owned slaves. The "He" in this poem is no longer King George, but America, and the "our" is no longer the Founding Fathers, but the peoples who were taken against their will to build this new nation.

Declaration

He has

sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people

He has plundered our—

ravaged our—

destroyed the lives of our—

taking away our—

abolishing our most valuable—

and altering fundamentally the Forms of our—

*In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for
Redress in the most humble terms:*

*Our repeated
Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.*

We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration

and settlement here.

—taken Captive

on the high Seas

*to bear—*⁴

Of course, the Declaration of Independence is an aspirational text in which colonists wish for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But Tracy Smith’s poem reminds me that it is also a document that is built upon another narrative as well.

So, not only is literature conversational—intertextual—but it’s also incomplete. It’s never finished. When you buy or borrow a book, it has a cover; it has a spine; it has blurbs on the back that praise the book, and an author’s photo. The book seems like a completed project. But a text is not finished until we read it and discuss it and decide on its value together. When we do, the results can be surprising. I know I’ve been surprised more than once in classes I have taught at Illinois Wesleyan.

Consider this excerpt from Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*. The structure of this poem is simple—a catalog of names, all the way down the page—again, simple, but not simplistic. These are the names of African Americans who have been killed by police in recent years.

In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis
 In Memory of Eric Garner
 In Memory of John Crawford
 In Memory of Michael Brown
 In Memory of Laquan McDonald
 In Memory of Akai Gurley
 In Memory of Tamir Rice
 In Memory of Walter Scott
 In Memory of Freddie Gray
 In Memory of Sharonda Coleman-Singleton
 In Memory of Cynthia Hurd
 In Memory of Susie Jackson

⁴ Tracy K. Smith, *Wade in the Water* (Graywolf, 2018), 19.

In Memory of Ethel Lee Lance
 In Memory of DePayne Middleton Doctor
 In Memory of Clementa Pinckney
 In Memory of Tywanza Sanders
 In Memory of Daniel L. Simmons, Sr.
 In Memory of Myra Thompson
 In Memory of Sandra Bland
 In Memory of Jamar Clark⁵

Toward the bottom of the page, all that is left is the phrase “In Memory” repeated again and again until it fades into open space.

Now, I’ve used Rankine’s book multiple times in my classes. However, in Fall 2020, something surprising happened: after I read this poem aloud, a student said, “that’s not where my page ends.” The student had a second printing of the book, and there were more names on her page. Another student had the third printing of the book, and that had more names that scrolled onto a second page. Claudia Rankine had deliberately created open space around her poem so that future iterations of the book would necessarily change. Rankine was writing into a future that she did not yet know, but suspected would include violence against Black people in America. That in and of itself is a provocation, a call to action.

So, literature is always incomplete until we read and discuss it. And because the times are always changing, because we are always changing, it means that we will necessarily encounter texts that are upsetting, and even offensive. Every text I teach is complex, and layered, and many texts—especially Shakespeare’s plays—include just about every kind of human transgression. There’s no way you can watch *The Tempest* and not feel discomfort when Gonzalo fantasizes about how easy it would be to turn a seemingly deserted island into a plantation. You cannot watch *The Taming of the Shrew* and not bristle at the misogynistic treatment of Katherina. You cannot watch *Titus Andronicus* and not be troubled by its scenes of spectacular cruelty. In fact, in 2014, during a performance of

⁵ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf, 2014), 134.

Titus Andronicus at the Globe Theater in London, audience members vomited, fainted, and had panic attacks because of what was being enacted onstage.⁶

These things can be so upsetting, that we might want literature's problems to just go away. I'm not a huge fan of bracelets, but I do like to wear this one. One of my oldest friends gave this to me years ago. The bracelet features the covers of books that have been banned at some point in history.

It's become fashionable to ban books again. Some politicians are not only introducing bills that restrict what teachers can and cannot teach, but they are also demanding that some books, especially books that address race, gender, and sexuality, be banned from public libraries.⁷ As you might recall, a school board in Tennessee voted to remove Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* from its curriculum in January of this year. And a few months ago, Texas governor Greg Abbott told educators to remove "pornographic" material such as the book *Gender Queer* from library shelves.⁸ School board meetings used to be rather drowsy affairs, but no more: now, parents are accusing librarians of being pedophiles for including books that address gender and sexuality.

Maybe these seem like distant anecdotes that aren't immediately relevant to us. But it's surprising when one of these bans affects a book that you love. Over the past couple of years, my nine-year-old son has borrowed *New Kid*, a graphic novel by Jerry Craft, from the library at least five times. It's one of his favorites, and he's not alone: it's been on the *New York Times* bestseller list and is the recipient of the Newbery Medal and Coretta Scott King Award. In this book, which is based on Jerry Craft's own life, we follow Jordan Banks, a seventh-grader who loves video games and

⁶ Nick Clark, "Globe Theatre Takes Out 100 Audience Members with Its Gory *Titus Andronicus*." *The Independent*, July 22, 2014. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/news/globe-theatre-takes-out-100-audience-members-with-its-gory-titus-andronicus-9621763.html>.

⁷ For more on the surge in book bans, see Elizabeth A. Harris and Alexandra Alter, "Book Banning Efforts Surged in 2021. These Titles Were the Most Targeted." *New York Times*, April 4, 2022.

⁸ Sharif Paget and Nicole Chavez, "Texas Governor Calls Books 'Pornography' in Latest Effort to Remove LGBTQ Titles from School Libraries." CNN: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/04/us/texas-lgbtq-books-schools/index.html> Accessed April 4, 2022.

comic books and dreams of one day becoming an artist. He's started to go to an elite private school, where he is one of the few students of color. The book allows readers to imagine what those middle school years might be like: awkward, lonely, embarrassing, sweet, and full of incomplete knowledge about how we come up in the world. But *New Kid* also requires that readers truly imagine the challenges that the main character faces as a person of color. In interviews, Jerry Craft has said that he wrote this book because he wished that such a book had existed when he was a kid.

A few months ago, a parent in Texas started a petition to ban Jerry Craft's book. According to her, *New Kid* presents a psychological threat to her white children. At one point in an interview, she described the book's themes as poison.⁹ I'm not sure the parent has actually read this book, because if she did, she'd see that all of the characters are complex and strange and funny. They all make mistakes, including the students of color, and all of the characters learn how to offer empathy to one another...even if they don't always like each other. Historian Annette Gordon-Reed suggests that parents who object to books like *New Kid* "don't want their kids to empathize with the black characters. They know their kids will do this instinctively. They don't want to give them the opportunity to do that."¹⁰

The trouble with literature can feel like a direct threat in a cultural moment when it's hard to listen to and empathize with other people. But if we ban books; if we threaten teachers and librarians; if we try to "protect" children by erasing the stories of trans people and people of color, we are working from a place of fear, not empathy. Libraries are a public good, just as playgrounds are, and national parks, and swimming pools, and public transportation. They are there for all of us.

⁹ "Talking While Black: The Farce Awakens." This American Life. National Public Radio, January 7, 2022. This parent's rhetoric is common; for a thorough treatment of such rhetoric in modern book bans, see Emily J. M. Knox, *Book Banning in 21st Century America* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

¹⁰ Annette Gordon-Reed qtd. in Viet Thanh Nguyen, "My Young Mind was Disturbed by a Book. It Changed My Life." *New York Times*, January 29, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/29/opinion/culture/book-banning-viet-thanh-nguyen.html>.

Dr. Lisa Corrigan has argued that book bans “undermine public trust in public institutions,” just at the precise moment when we should be conversing, listening, empathizing.”¹¹

Bad news is like toothpaste that comes out of the tube. Once it’s out, all you can see is the mess on the bathroom sink. Because the bad news is so loud and scary and seemingly hopeless, we often don’t hear the good news that follows. But don’t despair! I’m going to end this talk on a hopeful note. Let’s hear some good news:

- Carolyn Foote, a Texas librarian, has founded an organization called FReadom Fighters, which is committed to overturning bans on books. Don’t mess with librarians.
- Elsewhere, independent bookstores and ordinary people are starting banned book reading clubs.
- In early January, Art Spiegelman’s book *Maus* crept back onto bestseller lists.¹²
- And the Texas ban on Jerry Craft’s book has been reversed, mostly because the students who have actually read and loved the book have fought for it.

There have been many times over the past couple of years when I have wanted to say “this is the worst.” And then I remember this line from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: “The worst is not/So long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’” (4.1.27-28) And it’s true: it is only silence that is the absolute worst. Literature challenges and disturbs us, yes, but it also inspires us to reach out to one another and talk about the most urgent emotions and experiences that we have. Because books—and our critical thinking about those books—are a path to liberation. That’s why this is called a “liberal arts” college.

¹¹ Corrigan, Lisa [@DrLisaCorrigan]. “Banned Books.” Twitter, January 28, 2022.

¹² Jennifer Calfas, “*Maus* Tops Amazon Bestseller List After Tennessee School Board Pulls Graphic Novel.” *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2022: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/maus-tops-amazon-bestseller-list-after-tennessee-school-board-pulls-graphic-novel-11643650246>.

The liberal arts liberate. The disciplines that we engage with here are those disciplines that make us free—free to create, to inquire, to critique.

If we really engage with the most troublesome texts, might we be able to learn how to listen better, empathize better, and fully recognize the joy of others? The suffering? The complexity of the human experience? I know we can; I hope we will.

Thank you for listening.