

**The Elections of 2016: Fears and Hopes of a Brown-skinned Immigrant
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As a foreign student, I arrived in the United States in 1964 on the same PAN AM flight carrying the Beatles from London to JFK. I completed a post-graduate degree in New York on a Fulbright scholarship. My entire higher education was paid for by the United States. Not long after, I fell in love and married a very intelligent, beautiful young woman with whom I raised two healthy bi-racial sons. With a tenured job at a university, a nice suburban home, and a large circle of progressive liberal friends, I was living the American dream, happy but above all feeling secure and safe.

But that sunshine began to fade from my life a few days after Donald Trump descended an escalator in the Trump Tower in June of 2015 to formally announce his candidacy for President of the United States. “Sadly,” he said, “the American dream is dead.” He pointed to immigrants, particularly, Mexicans, as a cause of this great demise. Like background radiation, the “othering” of brown and black skins had always been there, but with Trump’s harsh election rhetoric, incivility went public, driving fear into the hearts of brown-skinned immigrants, like myself.

A white man walked up to a brown-skinned friend of mine sitting in a restaurant and told her rudely, “Girl, pack your bags and get ready to leave.” A few months earlier a man had walked up to me in the local grocery store and inquired if I were Muslim. Knowing that I am registered to vote in a rural precinct in Central Pennsylvania my son, fearing for my safety,

called me from California begging me to cast an absentee ballot instead of going to the precinct in-person. My protestations that everything would be fine did not assure him, so he called my neighbor to make sure I did not go to the voting precinct alone.

The life I had known had changed for the worse, and the signs were everywhere; still, as election-day approached my friends and I took comfort in the improbable odds given by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* against a Trump presidency. But late on election night *The New York Times* carried the banner headline, “TRUMP TRIUMPS.” I was profoundly shaken. Dawn broke on Wednesday with a dismal grey pall over the Pennsylvania sky. The atmosphere on the floor in my university office building was that of a somber funeral—graduate students with reddened eyes from hours of crying, colleagues hugging each other in long silent embraces or passing each other with understanding nods that were not the usual hellos. Something familiar, safe and comfortable had left us, perhaps forever. Sensing my feelings, some friends who had voted Republican tried to assuage my fears, saying that Trump does not mean what he says. But it is too late; the wave of hate and intimidation is now in public view and could very well increase with the white supremacists now advising the President-elect.

It is one thing to witness sharp policy differences among politicians or see fundamental changes instituted by Congress or the Supreme Court. But to experience fear simply from living inside a brown body goes to the core of my being. This is the fear that Ta-Neshi Coates describes in *Between the World and Me*, the fear that black parents feel for their children growing up in black bodies. I was quite moved by Ta-Neshi Coates’ essay on black fear, but that was more out of empathy. Now I, myself, taste that fear. I have always liked hiking alone in the woods of Pennsylvania. Often, I would pass hunters dressed in camouflage carrying guns with a nod, a greeting, all together routine. I now avoid hiking in the woods alone, especially during hunting

season. That is fear. If I have to drive somewhere new I plan to be home before dark for fear of getting lost and having to ask directions. That is fear. My sons have invited me to come live with them in California or New York because they fear for my safety. Talk of even moving overseas now seems routine. But as a life-long student of poverty I am acutely aware that millions of my fellow Americans of color cannot simply move to a safer place.

Occasional episodes of fear are probably a good survival mechanism, but prolonged fear is psychologically debilitating. Moving out of the country is not an option for me, not at this time. I left my native country as a very young man. I became an American citizen not by accident of birth; I made an informed choice after deep reflection. Notwithstanding what happened in 2016, America remains a unique multicultural nation in so many ways. It is still a vast ocean of kindness, generosity, fairness, and decency. Needing to turn away from this fear for my safety, I draw on past memories that have made me happy—travelling, working and living in America. I remember fondly Boston Common, San Francisco streets, mountains in Montana, urban gardens in Milwaukee, the inner city of West Philadelphia, and woods of Central Pennsylvania. The University Park campus in the Appalachian hill country where I teach is nicknamed Happy Valley; there I have taught and studied the problems of the poor. Each semester I end the class on a note of hope and optimism and many students have commented on that appreciatively in their end-of-term evaluations. This is where I shall turn to find hope not just for myself, but for the many others who now feel equally marginalized.

First, a short take on the election. The ratings-driven media debased the political discourse of the 2016 election by giving priority to conflict and theatre; political surrogates on talk shows would yell and talk over each other with the anchors encouraging them or simply looking on. During the three nationally televised presidential debates I heard no references to

climate change or poverty. This degradation of political discourse continued after the election. I heard a top CNN anchor trying to agitate Bernie Sanders by asking him if he thought he would have beaten Donald Trump if he had not been denied the Democratic nomination. Sanders, the classy man that he is, slapped down the anchor instantly. The news channels' post-election analysis of the Democrats' defeat was also quite disappointing. Many saw the Trump victory as a sign that racism was on the rise, and that disaffected whites came out to vote in droves to repudiate the eight years of a black president. Clinton herself blamed the Comey letter for her defeat. If only she had gone to Wisconsin, some said, forgetting that frequent trips to Pennsylvania did not help her. Many said Trump's victory signaled the rise of racism in the country even though Clinton won the popular vote by over two million votes. No, this election does not represent a sudden sea-change in the nation's cultural and political make-up.

When you look past the winded post-election punditry one theme emerges very clearly: Clinton simply failed to inspire millions of registered Democrats who stayed away or voted for other candidates in a few states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Florida. Statistics show this clearly. Nearly 42% of eligible voters, about a 100 million, did not vote. Trump did not get a whole lot more votes than Romney did in 2012 and or McCain in 2008. Even though the number of eligible voters increased by 18 million from 2008 and 2016, Clinton got several million votes less than Obama did in 2008 and 2016. Simply put, millions of Democrats were not inspired enough by Clinton's message or the party platform to vote. To me this is exactly what merits further examination. There has been no major realignment of social forces in the country and no tectonic shift in politics. The election was not a repudiation of multiculturalism or inclusiveness. Knowing this is the source of my hope for the future.

Even though I greatly fear the “othering” unleashed by Trump’s campaign and victory, I believe that neither Trump nor Clinton offer any feasible solutions to the economic angst felt by rural whites and urban blacks. That belief stems from a life-long reflection on the problem of poverty. There are two philosophical concepts central to my understanding of poverty—economism and sovereign power. Economism is the idea that the central component of human society is an economy in which increased profits and greater material wealth will create more jobs, raise incomes, expand the middle-class, and thus reduce poverty. This philosophy is captured well in Bill Clinton’s 1992 election slogan, “It is the economy, stupid.” All members of the Democratic and Republican political establishment subscribe to this view.

The second concept I invoke is sovereign power as opposed to non-sovereign power, an important distinction made by the late French philosopher, Michel Foucault. Sovereign power is that which was once possessed by kings, monarchs, but now by presidents, prime ministers, and parliaments. In the United States, sovereign power is attained through electoral politics, but power is exercised from the top down through executive or legislative action. Non-sovereign power is what we all possess, not just during elections, but at all times. It is our ability to solve problems in our daily lives. Power is in play in small individual parts and is exercised in concrete actions from innumerable points, not just at election time. Non-sovereign power comes from below and exists in diffused forms in net-line organizations. The election of 2016, like all presidential politics in the United States, was an exercise in economistic sovereign power. I believe poverty has persisted despite a fifty-year effort at its eradication because of our widespread failure to grasp the causative links among poverty, economism, and sovereign power.

When we get past the xenophobic, racist, sexist elements of the campaign there is no denying that many poor people voted for Trump because of economic angst about jobs, low

wages, and high health insurance premiums. Trump claimed he was going to be the greatest job creating president ever. Let us examine that claim briefly. Coal miners in Appalachia did not lose their jobs because the Democrats wanted “to put coal miners out of business,” an unfortunate comment taken out of context and attributed to Clinton. Trump’s promise to restore coal mining jobs to Appalachia is not going to happen because the reason for job losses in coal are economic, having to do with the mechanization of mining, the competition from cheaper coal from Western states, and the expansion of the shale gas industry with massive investments from corporate giants such as Exxon. This is not to suggest that unemployed miners and their families actually believed what Trump said, but they appreciated the fact that he spoke to their pain regardless of the plausibility of his promises. Trump, in his railing against outsourcing and international trade, has promised to bring back millions of jobs by preventing outsourcing; he threatened to impose a 35% tariffs on imports from Mexico and China. The current neo-liberal global economic order has been in place for over thirty years, with bipartisan support in the Senate and Congress, has been ratified by the World Trade Organization and NAFTA, and has been signed by the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The neo-liberal economic order has brought a lot of misery to poor people around the world, but it is the foundation of the current global economic system.

To order Apple, Ford, Carrier, or Oreo cookies to invest their capital in the United States is to say that capitalists are no longer free to invest according to the company shareholders’ interests. This is the ultimate form of regulation coming from a man who generally opposes all regulation. Does the President of the United States have that kind of power? Consider the consequences. If Apple were indeed forced to assemble their products in the United States, it would mean abandoning the investments in existing factories, building brand new facilities here, recreating a whole new network of suppliers, marketing an iPhone that would cost thousands of

dollars instead of hundreds, and losing one of the largest markets for the iPhone in China. Putting a 35% tariffs on Chinese goods will also put Wal-Mart, the largest employer in the United States, out of business. For years Wal-Mart coerced American companies such as Rubbermaid to move their manufacturing to China to reduce their production costs. Production overseas allows Wal-Mart to sell goods at the ‘everyday low prices’ welcomed by millions of American consumers including Trump supporters.

In a speech from September 2016 Clinton referred to ‘the racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and Islamaphobic’ elements supporting Trump by describing them as a “basket of deplorables,” itself a deplorable remark for which she later apologized. In the same speech, she also seemed to sympathize with Trump supporters who feel the government and the economy have let them down. However, messages about her plans to expand the middle class and reduce inequality did not persuade enough people to come out and support her.

From the viewpoint of economistic sovereign power there is no difference between Clinton and Trump. They both want the economy to grow in order to create jobs that pay high wages to expand the middle class. Even though Sanders had a much more progressive electoral platform than either of the two presidential candidates his message too was about the revival of the middle class by rebuilding industrial America. Trump, Clinton, and Sanders were all seeking sovereign power in order to change the economy. They do not have answers for the economic angst of millions of poor whites, blacks, and Latinos that voted for them. Of this I have no doubt. There are crucial policy differences between Trump, Clinton, and Sanders but they do have one thing in common: a desire to grow the economy, create greater wealth, and revive the middle class through some form of re-industrialization. I believe that expanding the middle class in the 21st Century is an unattainable goal, one that is deeply implicated in creating poverty, inequality,

a permanent underclass, alienation, envy, crime, and most important, the destruction of ecosystems that are the very basis of life, permanence, and security. We remember the 1950s nostalgically as a period of prosperity, but it was in 1962 that Michael Harrington published *The Other America*, revealing that poverty was far more extensive than previously thought. The book influenced President Johnson, who launched his War on Poverty in January 1964, giving us Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, expanded social security benefits, and the VISTA program. And yet, here we are in 2016 when complaints about the disappearing middle class is what Republicans, Democrats, and Independents have in common.

The definition of middle-class remains a bit vague, but its association with consumption has remained strong since the 1950's and its TV advertisements for Westinghouse appliances and GM automobiles. Today, the middle-class is associated with home ownership, two or more cars, the internet, two or more credit cards, and occasional dining out. How much money is needed for that lifestyle can vary between sixty and a hundred thousand dollars for a family of four. Given the centrality of the middle-class basket of goods to the good life in America, policy makers have a predictable sequence of recommendations—higher incomes, more jobs, and faster economic growth. But there are serious economic, social, and ecological limits to the continued expansion of the middle-class. A most basic tenant of capitalism is that investors have the freedom to legally invest their money in any sector of the economy and in any place in the world that welcomes them. No rational entrepreneur would hire an American worker at twenty dollars an hour if the same labor could be bought for a few dollars in Mexico or India. Revolutions in transport and communication technology have made nationalistic capitalism unviable. Steve Jobs was not an unpatriotic American for opening Apple factories in China; he was simply being a rational entrepreneur and is much admired for just that skill. There is a famous idea in economics

called the Stolper-Samuelson theorem which says that when a rich country such as the United States trades with a poor, labor abundant country such as China, the wages in the rich country will fall, but profits will increase. And that is precisely what has happened. It is very difficult to see how we will create jobs that pay \$70,000 dollars a year in a super-sized global market of cheap labor. Both Clinton and Sanders believe that expanding the middle class will reduce inequality, but it is precisely this belief that creates permanent inequality. Membership in the middle class is how we measure the value of people. Poverty is associated with lower social status and often with dependency and sometimes exclusion. We have come to value people for their income and material possessions. The poor are looked down upon even if they are gifted artists, inspiring mentors, loving parents, or caring neighbors. When we speak of expanding the middle class we are inviting people to join a class of consumers who are precluded from joining that group by the iron laws of global competition. We judge people by what they are not and never will be, thus creating a society of permanent unequals. More seriously, the mass consumption of goods happens inside an integrated ecosystem of land, water, air, and life. Climate change is the most serious threat posed by economic growth to the natural world. There is neither grace nor wisdom in our universal desire to organize our lives around endless production and consumption of needless stuff.

I have shown why the electoral politics of Trump, Clinton or even Sanders will not provide relief to the poor living in rural areas, deindustrialized towns or the inner cities. I reject the claim that poverty is an economic problem that can be corrected through higher income, and an expansion of the middle-class for reasons that I have described above. Our goal should be to improve the quality of life of struggling people when we know that more jobs and more money may not come to inner-city Philadelphia or the anthracite coal counties in northeastern

Pennsylvania. We need to redefine the problem in a way so that we can actually do something—find agency. This is important. We must not wait for federal government programs nor for companies to come in and create jobs for minimum pay and joyless work. We need a vision that allows people to act at a level commensurate to their own non-sovereign power: the power of students, teachers, community residents and local leaders. Non-sovereign power is what we all possess through our knowledge, skills, competencies, care, and love for our fellow beings. This conceptual shift will allow us improve the quality of life and reduce the cost of living by creating work that responds directly to our own basic needs. We have the knowledge, the power and the resources to do it. We don't need to wait.

A few years ago, I directed a service learning course titled, “Rethinking Urban Poverty: Philadelphia Field Project” in a poor neighborhood in West Philadelphia. My students and I witnessed all the usual stressors: unemployment, food insecurity, bad housing, high rents, ill-health and lack of child care. Over the years, I also learned what mattered the most to them; it was their *health, dignity, and community*. So instead of asking why a household did not make more income, we began to ask different questions: What does it take to live in a healthy body? What does it take to live in a safe supportive community? What does it take to live, to love, and to die with dignity? I now know it does not take money. It takes a vision that will help us get beyond the stranglehold that economistic sovereign power has over our imagination.

I opened this essay with a reference to my body. In seeking a new vision of engaging poverty, I believe we should also start with the human body—its physical and mental health, and identity formation. Someone with good physical health is able to perform regular functions such as walking, running, lifting, and moving at age appropriate levels. Someone with good mental health has age appropriate cognitive functions and is able to control stress resulting from daily

living. Not being able to provide for your family's basic needs is a great source of stress that adversely affects one's health. A proper diet, regular exercise, and adequate sleep go a long way towards maintaining good health. By identity formation I mean the social construction of who we are in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and so on. Earlier I stated the fear I feel as a brown skinned person, my color being a marker that a prejudiced person can use to harm, disrespect, or exclude me as the less-valued other. Multiculturalism is the peaceful co-existence of diverse identities using our mutual otherness as a source of celebration.

Multiculturalism is not a lifestyle option; it is an affirmation of respect for the other. Some have objected to the "Black lives matter" movement by saying "All lives matter, not just black." But that is a false equivalency. The slogan "black lives matter" is not intended to say that ONLY black lives matter. It is a reaction to police shootings of unarmed black men whose skin color provided a visible marker leading others to view them as threats.

I begin my vision for social change with the body because unlike wealth, education, and status we all possess a body which is an unlimited source of untapped non-sovereign power. Let us begin with the question of nutrition. As Michael Pollan and many other food activists have said, the food we eat comes from industrial factory farms that contributes to obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, strokes, and many types of cancers. Imagine the transformative potential of simply refusing to eat that food. Imagine that we demanded and ate more fruits and vegetables grown locally in rich organic soil, free of pesticides and fertilizer. Imagine that every school had its own garden used as a classroom to teach children chemistry, biology, mathematics, nutrition, fitness, hands-on-work, finance, cooperation and conflict resolution. On a recent trip, I visited just such a school in Soweto, South Africa, a slum outside Johannesburg. The school provided breakfast and a mid-day meal from their own produce with labor supplied

by the children and a few parents who were employed there. This is not idealistic day dreaming. We already have good examples of urban farms and gardens in cities such as Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Los Angeles. But urban farming needs to be built up so it functions as an important, integral part of our food system. An abandoned empty lot need not be a sign of permanent neglect and despair; it costs very little to transform it to a nourishing space of hope that creates nutrition, health, income, employment, and above all, dignity. Now that is a revolution.

When I taught the course titled, “Rethinking Urban Poverty: Philadelphia Field Project,” I often spent my summer evenings sitting on the stoop of a modest row house that I had rented for the project and watched children outside at play. Kids would dart across the street chasing a ball and a car driver leaning on his horn would warn the kids to be more careful next time. Another child would be riding his bike on the sidewalk, skillfully avoiding the broken glass from a smashed beer bottle. Girls were skipping rope while I strained to hear their song. I loved my summers in West Philadelphia even though I was warned not to take my students to the inner city. For all the poverty and the neglect, I was also struck by the presence of a church on almost every block. Surely, I thought, there must be a wellspring of spirituality here. People greeted each other even if they were strangers. Sitting on the stoop I dreamed what a not-poor West Philadelphia could look like.

I imagined the narrow streets lined with neatly painted row houses in states of good repair greeting the passersby with hanging baskets bursting with brightly colored flowers. I imagined well-insulated homes, heated with solar power and green roofs. I wished for every child, woman, and man to live in a healthy body. I hoped that Fairmont Park in West Philadelphia would be filled with people walking, talking, and exercising, and that residents

could use a part of the park to grow food. I hoped that every empty lot now cluttered with old tires, needles, and junk would be cleaned out, and these spaces would be turned into spaces of hope growing vegetables, fruits, and flowers. I hoped we could have a large program in urban agriculture to provide nourishment, savings, and jobs. As the late Jane Jacobs, the visionary urban planner had suggested years ago in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, I hoped we could slow the street traffic, widen the sidewalks, put up basketball hoops, and let children play there, and I hoped the buildings would have a wide variety of uses so people would use the streets at all times of the day. With more eyes on the street there would be less crime and more security. I hoped the streets would be filled with pedestrians, bicycles, and public transport. West Philadelphia has many magnificent old churches, modest store front churches, and increasingly, mosques. I wanted these houses of prayer to ring out and announce that West Philadelphia is a place of spirituality, of inner and outer peace, of healthy bodies, of safe streets, of trusting children, of loving parents and doting grandparents.

Sitting on the stoop I felt native to this place. As a native, I did not want to be pitied or patronized, and I particularly did not want the Census to call West Philadelphia a poverty area. My neighbors and I should not be judged by what we do not have, rather I wanted to be judged by the beauty and health of our bodies, our sense of dignity, the comfort of our modest row houses, the safety of our streets, the productivity of our urban gardens, and the sustainability of our communities. The residents of West Philadelphia and their friends have the imagination, the knowledge, the resources, and the non-sovereign power to attain such a dream. However, we will first have to rid our minds that the American dream is about the fossil fuel economy, belching factories, industrial farming, fast food, processed food, high-tech hospitals to cure diseases, low-

density housing, private automobiles, and mass consumption. These are the driving forces of inequality, poverty, envy, conflict, and exclusion.

What I dreamed about in West Philadelphia is possible even in rust belt towns, old coal mining towns, and rural America. Beginning with a reflection of the body we expand out in ever widening circles to demand and create alternative systems to consume and produce food, to encourage preventive health care, to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, to build energy efficient homes, and to move away from the dependence on private automobiles. Above all we need to define a new ecological ethic towards our natural world, recognizing that the health of our body depends on the health of land, air, water, soil, plants, and animals. As should be evident, poverty cannot be eradicated within a framework of economistic sovereign power dedicated to the expansion of the middle class. Historically, presidential candidates have depended on corporate contributions for campaigning. Taking advantage of the power of the internet, Sanders pioneered a new way of campaigning by soliciting small donors. However, a reading of his newest book *Our Revolution* shows that his plan for transforming America is still an economistic one with a focus on the middle class. The domination of economistic thinking is particularly evident in the primacy he accords to industrial jobs and his dismissive remarks of identity issues related to race, gender, and sexuality. My reaction to Sanders is very personal. I have economic security and a nice home, but I still genuinely fear for my safety.

To return to the recent election of 2016, it is appalling that over 42% of eligible voters just did not turn up and Clinton lost several states because Democrats were a large part of that 42%. Clinton was supposed to have a superior ground game, but it is not enough to simply organize the electorate every four years. Voter participation in mid-term elections is even lower than in presidential elections. There is a lesson that we should have learned from the years of the

Obama presidency. He never translated his wide appeal to actively engage people build grass-roots social movements around such issues as food, agriculture, health, energy, housing, and transport. His signature bill known as Obamacare, however well intentioned, is a good example of the use of sovereign power as many polls in 2015 showed that a majority of the people did not approve of his handling of health care. I believe the answer to voter apathy lies in producing an engaged citizenry exercising non-sovereign power in everyday concrete actions organized around healthy food, health care, disease prevention, affordable housing, bike lanes, public transport, working for racial, social, and climate justice, and electoral reforms for overturning Citizens United, eliminate gerrymandering, and having fairer elections. I believe it is much easier to persuade an activist populace to vote every four years if they already routinely exercise non-sovereign power engaged in issues such as food and health. Contaminated water is bad not only for black bodies in Flint, Michigan, but also for white bodies living in the coal fields of Appalachia.