

WHOSE LIFE MATTERS (2021)

I

Several years of teaching English 110 pass before I have the sense to create the no-no list. It happens the semester after a student insists on writing his paper, the one that is worth 35% of his grade, on the existence of God. The student recently accepted JC as his personal savior and the paper is a way to spread the Good News. But he begs off the presentation portion of the assignment. I let him record himself giving the presentation instead. He doesn't look directly at the camera. The no-no list starts small: no papers about abortion or the death penalty or any other values-based topic. This is college. We argue about ideas, not morality.

II

Every year, our neighbor John invites us to his Fourth of July party. In 2015, we finally make the short trek across the moonlit street, full wine glasses in hand.

John's son Jackson introduces us to a surprisingly diverse group of his friends. When I was young, everyone I partied with was just like me: white, straight, working-class. We listened to the same music. Smoked the same cigarettes. Drank the same whiskey. This is something else entirely. Something hopeful and beautiful. But also, these kids are my

students' age, could end up in one of my classrooms someday. So I can't stay long and I don't go back.

III

The composition program adds a multi-media requirement for E110. Instead of oral presentations, my students make iMovies and PowerPoints about their research topics. I love watching their projects and they mostly love making them. We watch them together during the last week of class. Outside of the no-no list, students can still pursue any arguable topic they'd like. The range is astounding. Except when it isn't. Concussions, global warming, Disney princesses and marijuana legalization join the no-no list.

Sometimes the topics are troubling, but I am still at a point in my teaching career where I reserve judgment. Still so naïve. A funny thing about the young white boys who choose ignorant and offensive topics: they have a way of being absent from class the day their projects are scheduled to run. They are surprised when they show up to the next class and find I have a way of rescheduling their showtime to a date they will actually be present.

The young man who does his project on the superior intelligence of white people is one such example. His classmate, a Latina student, does her project on DACA. She is a Dreamer. This semester has been hard for her and everyone she knows because it's 2017 and a racist is running the country. Her project has pictures of her family alongside cogent arguments against ending DACA. Her fellow students collectively rate it as the class

favorite. I cannot tell you how my heart sings. I cannot tell you how proud I am of these kids, how lucky I feel to know them.

IV

In early June of 2018, D and I head to the National Gallery to see the Obama portraits. Images of Barack's portrait do not do it justice. Kehinde Wiley paints vibrancy and light onto his canvases. Gazing at it hurts my heart. I miss having a grown-up in charge. But more importantly: I didn't know what it was to feel proud of my country until 2008. Ten years later, I can't believe I'll ever feel that pride again. I think it will be an abomination when Forty-Five's portrait hangs on these walls. But then again, it has to. We can never forget this happened.

We head to Dupont Circle for dinner. I stop short in front of a huge rainbow banner outside The Church of the Pilgrims: LOVE IS LOVE IS LOVE. The whole neighborhood is decked out for Pride. All is not lost.

V

In late August, John sits on his bike in front of our driveway. Long graying hair in a ponytail. Bandana tied tightly around his skull. Leather jacket overlaid by a denim vest that

has not one but two patches with the initials BLM. I'm psyched to think Black Lives Matter to this white middle-aged biker dude.

VI

My students seem a little less hopeful come fall 2018. I tape these things to my barren office door:

- The photo I took in front of The Church of the Pilgrims
- A mod pink Walt Whitman urging students to "Be curious, not judgmental."
- A printout of a Greta Thunberg tweet: "When haters go after your looks and differences, it means they have nowhere left to go. And then you know you're winning!"
- An image of the hundreds of students who took part in the Global Climate Strike on campus
- A flyer for the local chapter of the Well-Read Black Girl book club

My office mate digs our newly decorated door, says she wants to add to it but never does.

The weight of this world. The oxygen sucked out of every room. My prior classroom stance of political neutrality now feels downright negligent.

VII

I want a picture of John's vest but the bike has been in hibernation for what passed as winter this year, and with it, the gear. I peak out of the window every time I hear a bike rev up. One Saturday in May of 2019, I overhear John in the backyard talking to D. I go outside and ask if he still has the vest with the Black Lives Matter patches on it.

He says: Bikers Lives Matter.

He says: I'm the president of the local chapter.

He says: I'll give you a t-shirt and I promise you this--no one will mess with you when you wear it.

I say: Oh.

Nod dumbly. Feel something emptying out of me. Turn around and walk back inside as soon as I can manage it.

(unfinished)