ART AND ACTIVISM, POETRY AND EDITING: HELPING TO BUILD “PARADISE”

HELPING TO BRING TRUTH TO POWER

Presented at the ASLE Conference, University of California, Davis, June 27, 2019 by Pamela Uschuk as a collaboration with BEI’s Emeritus Fellows Ann Fisher-Wirth and Melissa Tuckey.

In 2005, when my husband, William Pitt Root, and I founded *Cutthroat, a Journal of the Arts* (named after Colorado’s endangered Greenback Cutthroat trout), our aim was to bring together and provide a forum for a diversity of daring, outspoken and visionary writers from across our nation and the globe. Our bent was and is humanitarian and environmental. For fourteen years, we’ve published writers and visual artists from diverse racial, gender, spiritual, environmental and ethnic communities. Special issues have been devoted to a theme, such as *Cutthroat 1*8, *A Tribute to Joy Harjo and Linda Hogan*, which I co-edited with Luis Alberto Urrea, and Cutthroat’s major anthology, *Truth to Power: Writers Respond to the Rhetoric of Hate and Fear,* published in 2017 on the heels of the 2016 presidential election. This collection features 139 of our country’s most powerful writers, a democratic community addressing our national escalation of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, bullying, the denegration of people with disabilities and the alll-out assault on the natural world by corporations. Besides being an act of resistance, the anthology’s thrust is love. Through beautifully-crafted stories, essays and verse, these writers bear witness and express the hopes, dreams, sorrows, anger, strivings, traditions, activism, duende and spiritual lives of the diverse communities they represent.

Rebecca Solnit wrote, “paradise arises in hell.” For me, editing helps to combat that hell by creating a democratic forum to address this catastrophic historical time.

In *Truth to Power*, Rita Dove’s poem, “Black on a Saturday Night,” celebrates the Black community as it remembers its traumatic legacy of slavery and violence running into the present.

“Beauty’s been caught lying

and the truth’s rubbed raw: Here you get your remorse

as a constitutional right.”

Gila River Tribal member, Natalie Diaz’s response to Walt Whitman in “Reservation Grass” is as searing as it is poignant,

“We smoke more grass than we ever promise to plant.

Our front yards are green and brown, trangles of glass—What is the

grass?—emeralds and garnets sewed like seeds in the dirt.

The shards of glass grow men bunched together—multitudes—men larger

than weeds and Whitman, leaning against the sides of houses…”

Martin Espada’s ecstatic elegy, “Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100, for the 43 members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant who lost their lives in the atttack on the World Trade Center” sings,

“*Alabanza.* When the war began, from Mahattan and Kabul

two constellations of smoke rose and drifted to each other,

mingling in icy air. and one said with an Afghan tongue:

Teach me to dance. We have no music here.

And the other said with a Spanish tongue:

I will teach you. Music is all we have.”

Wendell Berry’s “2007”, admonishes “How troubling/now to ride it drifting/down the flow from the old/high vision of dignity, freedom,/holy writ of habeas corpus,/and the land’s abundance—down/to waste, want, fear, tyranny/torture,/caricature/of vision in a characterless time,/while the abyss whirls below.…Go from the corrupted nation/to the running country. With the land/again making common cause./In loving it, be free.”

In her heartbreaking and damning “Depleted Uranium,” about pollution left after the Viet Nam war, Teresa Mei Chuc writes,

“The water runs

a neon color

in the village. All the villagers

know why

the babies

are born dead

and deformed.…

There are coffins

that are only

six inches long.

If you place

your hand

inside,

it will fit.”

Fiona Martin, an undergraduate student, confronts homophobia in “the future is queer,” writing,

“nevermind that my parents

never took me to church or

believed in god

i still hear the words

“conversion therapy”

and think of my future

because i don’t know my past.

my family, forefathers and fore

mothers and forequeers

they were all murdered

by laughter or “therapy”…”

Our country’s first Indigenous Poet Laureate, Muskogee Creek Joy Harjo in *Truth to Power* takes humans to task, creates a healing ceremony in “For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet.”

“Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that

bottle of pop.

Turn off that cellphone, computer, and remote control.

Open the door, then close it behind you.

Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel the earth

gathering essences of plants to clean.

Give it back with gratitude.

If you sing it will give your spirit lift to fly to the stars’s ears and

back…

Acknowledge this earth who has cared for you since you were

a dream planting itself precisely within your parents’ desire

….Let the earth stabalize your postcolonial insecure jitters.

…Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take

many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint or

ancestor.

…For any spark to make a song it must be tranformed

by pressure. There must be unspeakable need, muscle of

belief, and wild, unknowable elements. I am singing a

song that can only be born after losing a country.”

My editorial goal has always been to feature diverse communities of writers in print. This year I edited (with assistant editors CM Fuhrman and Maggie Miller) *About Place Journal* whose theme was *Dignity as an Endangered Species in the 21st Century*. *Cutthroat, a Journal of the Arts* is working now in collaboration with Black Earth Institute to publish *An Anthology of Contemporary Chicanx Writers.* Its editorial board includes Luis Alberto Urrea, Carmen Tafolla, Octavio Quintanilla, Edward Vidaurre, Beth Alvarado, Matt Mendez, Terry Acevedo and Denise Chavez.

*Cutthroat*’s future projects include an issue planned for 2021 devoted to *Indigenous Writers Responding to Climate Change*, William Root and I will co-edit this with CM Fuhrman (an enrolled member of the Southern Ute Nation, editor of Native Voices, Tupelo Press, 2019). We will choose a staff of Indigenous assistant editors and readers.

Editing to create community and beauty through creative expression in times of great political divide and chaos is extremely important. Like any healthy eco-system, an anthology of writing, no matter what its focus, must be comprised of diverse members to keep it from becoming inbred. An anthology of expertly-crafted imaginative works interpenetrate and enrich one another as well as the reader, creating beauty and love from destructive fire.