

## **Much to Do With Hate: One Leftist's Thoughts on Inauguration Day, 2021**

by Chavisa Woods

I grew up in a very rural, conservative area of Southern Illinois. Once upon a time, my hometown was a sundown town. In my hometown county in 2016, 70% of the vote went for Donald Trump. In 2020, it was 73%.

I grew up in an area that has always been poor. Always. For us, the Great Recession started in the 90s, a neoliberal free-market boom allowed monolithic corporations to overwhelm and erode what little local economy we had, buying up local business and paying workers so little they could only afford to shop at other corporate chains. Local profits got pumped out to corporate CEOs thousands of miles away as they continued this vicious, cyclical growth. We didn't have much before. It was a race that started at the bottom and took us straight into the ground. We never recovered.

Democrat's message of basic managerial stability, of bringing the country back to the way it was before Trump, does not resonate for people in small town and rural America, which is a massive portion of this country. Going back to the way things were before 2016, for many people, just means remaining in poverty and still feeling abandoned by their government; like their leaders do not know that they exist.

Trump spoke to these people quite directly. He made them feel like they actually mattered for a change. He had a powerful economic message. His message was completely hollow, full blatant lies and of empty promises. But he repeatedly addressed the economic crisis that has been endless for some, and offered (impossible) solutions for climbing out of the generational poverty they've been stuck in. For many, the fact that he was addressing them was more than other politicians had done, and was enough to get their attention and support initially. Trump spoke to the worst inclinations and fueled the fires of the most dangerous factions of this population.

When I first moved to the East Coast, I told my New York City friends about the fact that in the small rural area in southern Illinois where I grew up, there is an active Klan. Many New Yorkers gasped when they heard this. They found it unbelievable; an active KKK in the north in 2003? That seemed impossible. Likewise, when I mention it to people who still live in the area where I grew up, many of them brush it off and tell me, "Oh well, they don't do much. Anyway, if you just ignore them, they'll leave you alone." (All that tells me is that if you ignore them, they won't do anything to *you*. They didn't leave me alone no matter what I did; because I'm queer. Black and brown people in the area can't just ignore them and be "left alone.") I realized, these two reactions from coastal liberals who didn't know the Klan was still active, and from white people in my hometown who thought ignoring the Klan would make them go away, were not so different from one another.

If you're shocked that there is still an active Klan in Illinois, you do not know your country at all. If you live in a place where there is an active Klan and you've never wanted to have so much as an honest conversation about it, you are a part of the reason it is still there.

I remember, in high school, a boy in my class joined the Klan our junior year. We had always been friendly, though not close, and when I heard he was joining, we had a long discussion about it. In study hall one day. I tried to get him to change his mind, but was unsuccessful. His decision came down to a couple of simple things. He said every member of his family was a member of the Klan, and he wasn't going to disrespect his family by not joining. He also gave me this spiel about people black people and immigrants taking white jobs; about affirmative action and welfare crippling the economy. Now, this kid was dirt poor. His parents hadn't graduated from high school: he wasn't sure if he was going to either. He'd already been held back a year. This kid had rarely ever interacted with anyone who wasn't his own race. He said he knew one black kid and that kid was a good friend, but he thought his friend was "different than all the rest." This is such an idiot's cliché. But it's also real.

A difficult and uncomfortable truth is the fact that these people *have* been abandoned by their government and that they *are also* racist and homophobic, sexist bigots. These two things are not mutually exclusive. It seems that many coastal liberals like to believe that they are inherently separate things as if having suffered and causing suffering cannot exist in the same person, because it's much easier to deal with an enemy if they are simply a villain who has never experienced any hardship or been victimized in any way. But that is not the reality of this world.

Trump has been doing the same thing that the Klan does in poor small-town America on a national stage for the last five years. He's told poor and working class straight white Americans that the reason they can't get ahead is because of everyone who isn't them, selling oppressing others as a way out of the endless economic crisis they have lived. And it works. It's a tried, tested and true method for growing a fervent and bigoted base.

And I'm not implying you can easily turn every person who has experienced a lifetime of dire poverty into a bigot. There have to be some strong seeds of ignorance and hate living in your heart in order for this to work, already. I am also not saying we should forgive them or asking people whom they have victimized to reach out to them. I am simply laying out the reality of the situation; the perfect storm that included the failing of neoliberal capitalism to properly support people, and a desperation that Trump used to his advantage, which contributed to a new rise of fascism in the U.S.

Personally, I have a lot of hate in my heart for Trump supporters. I am so sickened by and angry with these people. I have seen firsthand what their philosophies manifest. The area where I grew up is bleak in many ways. There is a dearth of culture, lack of access to good food, art, any social services, no public transportation, even. There is no social infrastructure, of course, not only because the neoliberals have failed these people, but also because these people have repeatedly voted against themselves. Their conservative values have played a huge part in helping to cripple their own economy. I may hate much about them, but I also know that they still live here and they still vote. I also know that many of them have suffered horribly. I know that they were grown and formed by this very society that sets the bottom line at survival, and provides no safety net for anyone.

An uncaring society produces uncaring people.

Many Americans are now in the uncomfortable position of loving people they've come to realize, wish them and their loved ones harm. Finding out a family member is a Trump supporter has filled so many people with rage and heartache over the last four years, and has caused massive rifts within many families and among old friends. It's one thing to grow apart. It's another thing to watch someone you've known all of your life reveal that they are, in fact, a fascist sympathizer.

The day of Joe Biden's inauguration I made a mistake and looked at a Facebook page of an ex-relative who's a hardcore Trump supporter. I was curious to see how she was responding to Biden being sworn in, with the hope that maybe the events of the last couple of weeks—namely the violent insurrection—might have brought her to her senses. I hoped she might have had a change of heart.

What I saw made me feel sick to my stomach; memes that were so blatantly racist (a picture of Biden and Harris that read: "Dems hire Jamaican nanny to care for elderly white man," and, another with a Pornhub logo hovering over Harris and Biden's images, reading: "inter-racial couple fucks entire nation.") These posts were accompanied my comments claiming that she is *not* racist. Out of sheer morbid curiosity, I kept scrolling, finding more memes supporting the right own assault weapons, posts comparing anti-fa and BLM with the KKK. Posts blatantly calling for another civil war, and claiming that the heavily armed right-wing would easily kill us "liberal snowflakes" in "an hour they'll never get back." Of course, there were posts mocking trans people, and gay people, and so many weird things about China, and the "stolen election," and the "killer vaccine." These posts are getting dozens of likes and shares from people in my hometown area.

It felt like an avalanche of vitriol toward anyone who was not a straight, white, cis American.

My ex-relative was wallowing in fantasies of violence toward anyone who is not exactly like her. The cognitive dissonance was also intense. She's repeatedly stated that "Trump is the president of the working man," and then immediately said, in the next breath, "If college is free, then your degree has no value." This statement was particularly mind-boggling to me. I was related to this woman through marriage on my mother's side of the family, where coming from family where many people have not even graduated from high school, and the majority have not been able to afford to attend college. She lauded Trump's riches one second, then literally asked for help for a family member who was trying to apply for HUD housing the next, and saw no contradiction between these two things. It was all so confusing and disgusting, I just had to take a deep breath and close this page.

It felt final, like closing a chapter of life. I hope it was.

Biden and Harris were by no means my first choice. They still aren't. My politics are much further left than what they represent, and I truly believe we can do better in the future, and have to push them further left throughout the next four years.

But also, I was so relieved on inauguration day. I truly believe ousting Trump was only possible because leftists and liberals came together to get him out. I don't know what would have happened if we didn't.

There is a desperate ignorance that has aligned with the fascistic and powerful in this country, and, at the risk of quoting Marianne Williamson, it has created a dark, potent force that is by no means even nearly gone.

It is still on the rise. We've won one battle, but there are no doubt, more ahead. We need everyone who wants to see this new wave of bigotry vanquished to really try and understand the reality that brought us to this moment. The election of Trump was not a fluke. The America that elected him is an America that has been here for a long time. There is a dark shadow shrouding this nation. This is the same darkness I grew up surrounded by in conservative, rural America. I thought I could run away from it. But I can't. None of us can, not even in the liberal urban bubbles (I am nonetheless so grateful for). It's a truly American sickness. We all have to face it.

Listening to the inauguration events, as corny as they were, I also felt just so moved when I thought about how those on the far-right viewed this Democratic win. I feel relieved, angry, terrified and hopeful all at the same time, because for so long, the possibility of Biden winning seemed to me to be slim to none. He was not a strong candidate, and we were still able to come together and get Trump out of office. This tells me that if all of us who experience life in this country as "others," as members of minorities, all of us who have been targets of this new wave of hate, if we come together, we are actually the majority, and we do have the power to demand a tolerant, kinder, more compassionate society. We can take this further. If the left can align across marginalized identities, and if liberals and leftists can truly work together, if liberals can ever decided to get in line with leftists the way we leftists got in line this election, we would have the power to install leaders even at the federal level who would implement policies that would weaken fascist messaging by undermining their dubious economic talking points.

In other words, we have the power and the might to face this insane ignorance and collectively say simply, "Your ideas are disgusting. And they don't even make any fucking sense. Now sit down and shut up while we try to get your kids free healthcare and a better education."