



The Trump Tower in New York, Donald Trump's home and base for his transition. Police have surrounded the building on Fifth Avenue, as have thousands of New Yorkers, some protesting his election, some just curious. Flickr photo/Anthony Albright

Letter from America: A Canadian Millennial View

Morgane Richer La Fleche

America is hard to see, or so wrote the poet Robert Frost in 1951. The 2016 American election, which exposed deep fractures in the nation's discourse and demographics, has forced Americans and Canadians alike to revisit their understanding of the nation's divided electorate. As the country goes binary—blue and red, urban and rural, coastal and flyover—what still holds America together?

I spent this past U.S. Thanksgiving holiday with my boyfriend's family in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. Educated and liberal, his relatives mirror the divide between urban and rural voters in the state and across the country. His 90-year old grandmother, who used to volunteer as a counselor for women seeking abortions, canvassed for Hillary Clinton. His aunt and uncle hosted a volunteer working on the Democratic campaign.

And while Cleveland ranks as one of

the most economically distressed big cities in America, there were no signs of Rust Belt decline on their tree-lined streets. The SUVs in their neighbors' driveways marked their distance from the pick-ups we'd passed in nearby towns, where the median income and population are halved. There were no Trump supporters at their dinner table.

Back in Manhattan a few days later, it seemed easier to take comfort in Clinton's now-sizeable margin in the popular vote. New York—like its coastal cousin, California—had been quick to declare its willingness to fight a Trump administration on issues from immigration to LGBTQ rights.

Uptown, protesters gathered in the lobby of Trump Tower, which has become an impromptu newsroom and heavily patrolled tourist attraction. Downtown, an interactive "Subway Therapy" installation in the 14th Street-Union Square station encour-

ages passerby to vent their post-election emotions through sticky note messages, which range from the apologetic ("World, we are sorry we failed") to the positive ("We are all immigrants, love your neighbor") to the obscene.

To some New Yorkers, a Trump presidency still feels theoretical. Deriding Trump as an "orange hand-grenade" for the malcontent, a friend suggests the reality of a Trump presidency would be less dire than anticipated. He spins this upset as a wake-up call that will force the political elite to be more responsive, strengthening the Democrats in the next round. While his optimism is soothing, I remember watching *Tel-emundo's* immigration-focused programming with my Colombian grandmother the day after the election, and recall the rise in hate crimes since. Doubting the impact of Trump's presidency is now a marker of privilege.

This election has made clear that we live in bubbles. After eight years in the United States, I do not know a single Trump supporter. Even my Republican friends supported Hillary Clinton in this election, some because they were convinced by her superior qualifications, others to protest their party's candidate. Only my friends who grew up in rural counties and the so-called flyover states claim to have seen it coming, thankful for their upbringing outside of the bubble.

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A few weeks after the election, I attended a lecture at the Data Science Institute of Columbia University given by Cathy O'Neil, whose latest book *Weapons of Math Destruction* investigates the ways that algorithms threaten democracy. Addressing the elephant in the room, O'Neil described how the predictive models used in political polling as well as micro-targeting strategies had contributed to the erosion of American political discourse. When campaigns can tailor a thousand different messages to audiences based on their identity, candidates don't need to waste time debating the issues. Once the electorate has been reduced to immovable tribes, winning is a matter of voter turnout rather than changing minds.

Consequently, Americans at the extremes of the political spectrum no longer share the same facts, which has made it increasingly easy to replace them with opinions. In just one striking example, a 2015 poll by Public Policy Polling found that 43 per cent of Republicans believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim, a false belief once embraced by the incoming president. Although rebuilding a functional national dialogue has been central to all of my conversations during this election season, I have yet to hear a compelling strategy for unification in a post-fact society where people don't

even know, let alone talk to, their political counterparts.

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For many, reaching out to the other side sounds unacceptably like walking back non-negotiable progress on the cultural issues that have defined Trump's campaign. For some, it means engaging with people who view their very existence as suspect.

I have had the privilege of witnessing the most recent Canadian election from the United States, and the American election from Canada. In many ways, it can feel like these two countries—whose familiarity with each other has always belied their fundamental differences—have diverged irreversibly. Canadians' bewildered contempt for their Southern neighbor has only deepened. Meanwhile, it is already a well-worn quip that Citizenship and Immigration Canada's website crashed as the American election results rolled in.

In Canada, I am fielding more concerned questions than ever regarding the wisdom of my choice to live in the United States. In the U.S., my friends have become increasingly obsessed with our prime minister, for reasons ranging from his fiscal policies to his friendliness with pandas. While Trump ascended on promises of reclamation and retribution, Trudeau has branded Canada with openness, whether at the United Nations General Assembly or on Instagram. At a time when so many coun-

tries are leaning further into fear and division, it has suddenly become very cool to be Canadian.

Yet any glee that Canadians might feel at our own “Obama moment” has been tempered by the knowledge that Canada will feel the repercussions of America's mistakes. While much remains uncertain, friends on both sides of the border have expressed frustration over Trump's stated positions on immigration, trade, and climate change. In Canada, there is concern that Trump's success might inspire a Canadian equivalent—a claim for which there has already been some evidence.

After an election season that has wearied even the pundits, I was anticipating that exhaustion would be the most common response to the new president-elect. Yet I have found unexpected hope in the newfound resolve shown by people who, while politically aware, have never been politically active.

There is a strange solidarity in the willingness of American liberals to take responsibility for the Trump voter, their investment in a shared national project outweighing vast differences in values. I have heard friends strategize how to get involved in local politics. I've witnessed pledges to support social justice organizations, many of which have received a record-breaking number of donations since the election.

On social media, my peers have begun to alternate between categorically denouncing Trump and searching for more effective ways to reach out to voters they don't know. My boyfriend's aunt plans to get involved in immigration justice. If underestimating Trump was in part a product of complacency, then his election has invigorated a new resistance. Let's just hope it's not too late. **P**

Morgane Richer La Fleche, a Montreal millennial, is a graduate of the University of Chicago and has worked on Wall Street. mricherlafleche@gmail.com