

Literary Resistance in the Poems of Matthew Zapruder

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Abstract

The present chapter seeks to study Matthew Zapruder's literary resistance to and critique of the Trump Administration's family separation policy (a part of the Administration's immigration policy,) evident in several of the poems from the poet's fifth poetry collection *Father's Day* (2019). The prevailing climate of (civil) war; political and/or religious persecution due to belonging to a particular ethnic identity; lack of employment opportunities or quality education, etc. can force people to emigrate from their native country (Montiglio). While it is reasonable to interrogate any individual who has illegally entered the United States – or any country for that matter – as to his/her intentions, it is nothing but atrocious and cruel to separate children from their parents for the latter's' crime of seeking to enter the US illegally for any of the above noted reasons and often only when they might have been unable to afford the cost of legal immigration or unaware of the procedures or protocols to be followed. While "Our Custody" (2019) is a sharp rebuke to the harsh and inhuman policy, "Father's Day" (2019) and "December" (2019), apart from the recurring criticism of the said policy, also express concern about the trauma of experiencing racial discrimination and horrors of war, all of which can, in turn, lead to further unpleasant consequences.

Keywords: *Father's Day*. Matthew Zapruder. Military Interventionism. Racism. Trump Administration's Immigration and Family Separation Policy.

Introduction

The four years that comprised the Presidency of Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States of America (USA), unfolded, and can retrospectively be indeed viewed, as a number of commentators (have) argue(d) in one voice, as an unsettling, tragic, and darkly comical blend of anarchy, chaos, controversies, and sheer incompetency (Lozada).

Soon after his Inauguration as President, the feature that most distinguished Trump was his alleged ability to lie blatantly and offer what the former Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conaway infamously and notoriously termed “alternative facts” (“Alternative Facts”). Indeed, Trump’s lies allegedly began with boasting about the people in attendance at his Inauguration (Robertson and Farley) and culminated with his megalomaniacal refusal to accede to the outcome of the 2020 election (Liptak), leading him to repeatedly and falsely claim that the election was stolen from him (Solender) and delivering a speech that arguably bordered on a call for a coup and incited his followers to storm the US Capitol, culminating in the death of at least four people (Davis and Frias).

In between these two events four years apart one uncovers a number of controversies that would forever weigh upon the President’s legacy, including: his racist worldview (Graham et al.); his public call to Russia to interfere in the 2016 election [and which he later claimed was a joke] (Rupar); his immigration and family separation policy (Levin); his soft stance on violence caused by White supremacist, far-right groups (Klein); his scepticism about climate change (Sangomla), etc.

This chapter seeks to study Matthew Zapruder’s literary resistance to and critique of Trump administration’s family separation policy, a part of the administration’s immigration policy, which recurs in several of his poems such as “Our Custody” (2019), “Father’s Day” (2019), and “December” (2019).

Zapruder, who is a poet, translator, and editor along with being an English teacher at Saint Mary's College, California, has to his credit five collections of poetry, the most recent being *Father's Day* (2019) and which contains the three poems listed above.

In "Our Custody", which was first published online on the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (LARB) website, subsequently appeared in the *Journal Weather* (No. 24), and eventually found a place in the collection *Father's Day*, Zapruder responds to and critiques the harsh and inhuman family separation policy pursued by the Trump Administration. Although the said policy was in effect for a mere three months – April to June 2018 – before public and political outcry and criticism had forced the President to withdraw it ("Q and A: Trump Administration's "Zero-Tolerance" Immigration Policy") and its avowed intention was to curb illegal immigration into the United States, it nonetheless caused both physical and emotional pain and anguish to thousands of immigrants and their children entering the United States illegally, albeit with the desire to seek a better future for themselves and their children.

The policy adopted a "zero tolerance" ("Q and A: Trump Administration's "Zero-Tolerance" Immigration Policy") approach to deter illegal immigration and sought to forcefully separate children and infants from their parents or guardians once they were captured entering the United States illegally. Within three months, nearly 4,368 children were separated from their parents or guardians (Davis). Moreover, though President Trump reversed the policy on 20 June, 2018 by signing an Executive Order to that effect ("Q and A: Trump Administration's "Zero-Tolerance" Immigration Policy"), reports continued to emerge in various news outlets of family separation being still practiced (Jordan and Dickerson; Kriel et al.) with the reported deaths of Jakelin Amei Rosmery Caal Maquin and Felipe Gómez Alonzo, a seven and eight-year-old Guatemalan girl and boy respectively, while in the custody of United States Border Patrol and US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) respectively in December 2018 (Ainsley et al.; Durkin).

“Our Custody” opens with the poet commenting on the year 2019 as it is drawing to a close:

This year was serious

in a dumb way,

and hilarious

like a grave cut

into a smile. (Zapruder, “Two Poems”)

The first paradox alludes to the gaffe-prone Trump – for instance, his strange manner of pronouncing “China” (Carrejo); his curious way of holding a glass of water (Varma), etc. – whereas the second, beginning with the third line and punning on the word “grave”, hints that while much of Trump’s actions evoke ridicule and laughter, the immigration policy pursued by his administration is gravely – that is, seriously – inhuman. Indeed, as the poet puts it, “. . . a grave cut / into [the shape of] a smile” is nevertheless a grave and cannot hide the grim reality of what it contains.

Zapruder refers to the “[d]reams” (“Two Poems”) of the unknown thousands of people who were either put into detention centres or deported to the very country they were fleeing from – war-torn Syria, for instance – and of the children who were separated from their parents, leaving them emotionally scarred for perhaps the rest of their lives, distrustful of the United States and its legal and military institutions. Tragically, their dreams of a better life “died” (Zapruder, “Two Poems”) without ever being given the chance to metamorphose into reality.

The poet goes on to lambast those who should have raised their voice against such unjust and inhuman treatment but remained mute spectators, whether they be Republican lawmakers or the civil society:

We listened to the earth
say nothing, and knew
everything. (Zapruder, “Two Poems”)

Thus, the poet seems to imply that both he and his readers were complicit in this cowardly silence and are not entirely blameless for having let the President have his way with the tyrannical law. Alina Stefanescu, in the course of her interview with Zapruder observes that the “broad, inclusive “we” in this case speaks of the two children who died in immigrant detention centers” (Stefanescu).

The poor living conditions at the detention facilities (“Are US Child Migrant Detainees...?”) – lack of beds, soap and toothbrushes; poor meals; absence of adult caretakers that forced older children to take care of younger ones; etc. – are compared by the poet with “a dark arctic closet” (cold, harsh, inhuman, etc.) where “seeds” (that is, the children) obviously cannot grow (both physically and intellectually). Moreover, even if they are allowed to step out into a fenced courtyard for playing or exercising, “the new garden” is “tended by machines” (Zapruder, “Two Poems”) – in all likelihood surveillance cameras, categorizing even children as threats.

The following lines allude to a Trump administration official’s sickening statement to the media on the unreasonably harsh policy and its tragic outcome:

One whose name
will become dust said
in the shadow
under an umbrella
in our custody

only two died,
so it was a good year. (Zapruder, “Two Poems”)

Zapruder notes that he wrote the poem after watching a press conference with someone in the current administration (I don’t think it was the President, but I can’t remember, I think I blocked it out) standing under an umbrella in the rain, bragging that only two children had died in 2018 in their “custody.” First of all, this “only” is surely a horrendous lie. And it is obviously unfathomable that someone would say something like that without covering themselves in ashes and permanently going away to the desert to repent. Every time I heard about those children in those immigration detention centers, I imagined those kids who are different in some way, how their vulnerability without their parents would be even more extreme even than the neurotypical children. Every time I thought about that, I would feel physically ill. (Zapruder, qtd. in Stefanescu)

The poet, apparently shocked at such callousness, can only take solace in the fact that the two children who died are now forever beyond the reach of the cruelty, discrimination, and violence that characterizes life on earth:

What can we say?
They were children
and will always be. (Zapruder, “Two Poems”)

The titular poem in Zapruder’s fifth collection *Father’s Day* is influenced by the poet’s son being diagnosed with autism nearly a month after the November 2016 election (Jollimore). For the poet, this intensifies the acute awareness of what it means to be labelled the Other –

whether in terms of skin color, nationality, or as in the case of his son, neurodevelopmental disorder.

According to Stefanescu, the poem reveals “the particular tension of a father-poet’s dual roles – to observe the child and to help the child thrive in a competitive, status-drive[n] country” (Stefanescu). However, for Zapruder, “the personal and political intertwine, and illuminate each other” (“Father’s Day”) for just as his son might suffer the trauma of Othering on account of the disorder, so too the children of immigrants who have been separated from their parents or guardians will be looked upon as Others by a political establishment that sees them as intruders rather than as innocent children. The poet warns that

we must not think
this is some dream
the children sleeping
alone in some
detention center
don’t need
our brilliant sincerity
it’s not enough
to give some money
make some calls
they are not ours

but they are (Zapruder, qtd. in Stefanescu, emphasis added)

It is this empathy with the children that leads the poet to argue that fathers all over the country “don’t deserve” (Zapruder, qtd. in Stefanescu) any celebration if they stay silent over the discrimination and injustice that immigrant children have to suffer on account of their being

considered and treated as the Other by an unsympathetic political establishment. The poet argues that the nation's founding fathers have already failed him and those of his generation in that despite the perceived injustice they "cannot / stop waiting" (Zapruder, qtd. in Stefanescu), where individual and collective responsibility has been shunned, consigned and considered to be the obligation of the Opposition parties to address the issue.

Zapruder considers himself and those of his generation "the first / new fathers" (qtd. in Stefanescu) who must ensure that children, irrespective of their nationality and race, are protected from the burn of harmful political ideologies such as the family separation policy. Failing to protect these children would only leave emotional scars in their hearts and minds about the United States which would perhaps perpetuate in their children in turn based on what they learn from or are told by their parents about their experience of the United States. Indeed, the poet warns that apart from those belonging to his generation on whom the onus lies to protect the children, "there are no others" (Zapruder, qtd. in Stefanescu) – in other words, merely blaming the founding fathers or looking to them for inspiration to address the racial or cultural divide would serve little purpose unless one is willing to actively resist such negative ideologies and policies: "[n]o fathers were going to sort it out for us (mine died of a brain tumor in 2006)" (Zapruder, qtd. in Stefanescu).

In "December", Zapruder again returns to the theme of protecting vulnerable children and a critique of the United States' tendency of military interventionism that leads to the loss of life of "gentle soldiers" (qtd. in "Father's Day") but is at the same time critical of, or at least disappointed with, sporadic protest rallies becoming a new fad but which bring about little change in ground reality:

At first we all
went down to the lake

to hold hands,
all the multicolored
signs said
with love
we will resist,
over my head
...
a few weeks later
again people stood
at the water,
this time at night
holding flashlight
to say to fire
you came
without permission
and took our young
gentle soldiers

for art (Zapruder, qtd. in “Father’s Day”)

The poem concludes with the grim reminder that if forced family separation to curb illegal immigration, racial discrimination, and sending the young to fight and die in wars (or return with post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]) that benefit a few continue, one can never be safe from harmful, sudden, and seen yet unforeseen consequences where a child separated from his/her parents for their crime of entering the country illegally to secure a better life for themselves and the child might himself/herself turn to a life of crime – for instance, the Trump administration had maintained insufficient records that would help reunite separated children

with their parents (Soboroff; Soboroff and Ainsley) – or continuously being subjected to racial discrimination can eventually lead a person to verbally retaliate which can then turn to physical violence with injuries and/or deaths on both sides. One can detect an echo of W. H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939” (1939) – “I and the public know / What all schoolchildren learn, / Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return” (Auden) – when Zapruder reminds and ends with a warning that

I have known
no voices
will come at last
to tell us how
to stop pretending
we don’t know
if it is not
safe for some
it is not

for anyone. (Zapruder, qtd. in “Father’s Day”)

Conclusion

Zapruder doesn’t hesitate to speak truth to power, criticizing through his literary resistance the inhuman family separation policy of the Trump administration to curb illegal immigration into United States. People often are forced to emigrate from their native country due to prevailing climate of (civil) war; political and/or religious persecution due to belonging to a particular ethnic identity; lack of employment opportunities or quality education, etc. (Montiglio). While it is reasonable to interrogate any individual who has illegally entered the United States – or any country for that matter – as to his/her intentions, it is nothing but

atrocious and cruel to separate children from their parents for the latter's' crime of seeking to enter the US illegally for any of the above noted reasons and often only when they might have been unable to afford the cost of legal immigration or simply unaware of the procedures or protocols to be followed.

Zapruder is also intensely conscious of the lifelong trauma that one can be saddled with when either a child is forcefully separated from his/her parents only because they chose the wrong means to enter a country or when a person is racially discriminated against or witnesses the horrors of war at close quarters. In either case, the resulting deep resentment against the country/authority, individuals, and/or leaders responsible can lead to tragic consequences that could have been avoided in the first place by taking a more humane approach when trying to curb illegal immigration, promoting cultural and racial harmony, and avoiding military interventionism.

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