



First Annual
HIGH SCHOOL WRITING DAY
at Penn State

Friday, April 13, 2018

9 a.m. - 2 p.m.



PennState
College of the Liberal Arts

Sponsored by:
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Creative Writing Program
Program in Writing & Rhetoric

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Registration DEADLINE: March 11, 2018

Registration: <http://www.cvent.com/d/stqg76/4W>

Registration fee: \$10/participant

Program and Registration questions: english@psu.edu

The goal of the **High School Writing Day at Penn State** is to offer high school students a taste of writing, reading, and literary performance on the Penn State University Park campus. The day will feature writing sessions, seminars, a featured speaker, prizes, and performance events for everyone who loves good books, reading, and exploring written expression in its various forms.

Who is Invited to Participate:

A collaboration between our Creative Writing Program and the Program in Writing and Rhetoric, this event is aimed towards **sophomores and juniors** considering the study of writing at the college level. In this initial year of this program, we will keep the numbers small, limiting overall student attendance to **75 students**. Depending on interest, we may need to limit the total number of student participants to a **maximum of 10 from any one school**. However, if more than 10 students from your school would like to attend, please contact the English Department at english@psu.edu to inquire about space. We ask that

at least one teacher (or other qualified adult) accompany the delegation from each school to escort and supervise their students during the Writing Day, but teachers are encouraged to participate in all the activities of the day as well. Act 48 credits for participating teachers are being offered through Penn State at no additional cost. The registration system asks teacher to indicate whether they will seek Act 48 credits (3 credits offered).

Writing Contests:

Registered students are encouraged to participate in the essay, poetry and prose writing contests; prizes for winning entries will be awarded on the day of the event. The deadline for contest submissions is 11:59 p.m. on **March 18**. See contest flyers in this packet for details.

Dress: This is an informal event, so “street clothes” are perfectly acceptable.

Parking:

The closest parking for cars and minivans will be the parking deck next to the Nittany Lion Inn. It is likely that school buses will need to drop off students in front of Pattee/Paterno Library, then proceed to park by the football stadium. More specific logistical details will be sent to registered teachers before the day of the event.

Emergency Contact Information:

In order for students to make the most of the experience, we ask that you not contact students during the event. Should you need to contact your child during the High School Writing Day, you may call:

English Department: 814-863-0258

In case of an emergency, a representative of Penn State will contact you at the emergency contact number on the registration form. Please note that any teachers, parents or siblings attending the event as chaperones are the responsibility of their respective school district.

University Rules:

- Students are expected to stay in the designated spaces on campus at all times.
- The possession or use of alcohol and other drugs, fireworks, guns and other weapons is prohibited.
- The operation of a motor vehicle by minors is prohibited while attending and participating in the program.
- The parking of staff and participant vehicles must be in accordance with University parking regulations.
- Rules and procedures governing when and under what circumstances participants may leave University property during the program: Students are not to leave campus at lunchtime unless accompanied by their teacher or parent/guardian.
- No violence, including sexual abuse or harassment, will be tolerated.
- Hazing of any kind is prohibited. Bullying (including verbal, physical, and cyber bullying) is prohibited.
- No theft of property regardless of owner will be tolerated.

- No use of tobacco products (smoking is prohibited in all University buildings) will be tolerated.
- Misuse or damage of University property is prohibited. Charges will be assessed against those participants who are responsible for damaging or misusing University property.
- The inappropriate use of cameras, imaging, and digital devices is prohibited including use of such devices in showers, restrooms, or other areas where privacy is expected by participants.

Accommodations:

Please contact the English Department at english@psu.edu if you have questions or requests for accommodations due to disabilities (wheelchair access, disabled parking, etc.) or dietary needs (food allergies, etc.).

Registration Procedure: Register online at: <http://www.cvent.com/d/stqg76/4W>

Registration Cost: \$10/participant (student and teacher)

Appendices:

Appendix A: Tentative schedule and workshop details

Appendix B: Material for teachers related to featured author, including suggested readings

Appendix C: Writing Contests

Appendix A: Tentative Schedule and Workshop Details

HIGH SCHOOL WRITING DAY AT PENN STATE, Friday, April 13, 2018

Tentative Schedule of Events

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| 8-9 am | Registration and Welcome: Pick up materials and grab a quick bite and cup of coffee/tea |
| 9-9:30 am | Welcome and readings of original work by BA/MA students in creative writing |
| 9:30-10:30 am | Impromptu writing session with featured poet, Shara McCallum |
| (brief break) | |
| 10:45-11:30 am | Reading by Featured Poet Shara McCallum |
| 11:45 am -12:45 pm | Catered Box Lunch, with presentation of awards at gathering after lunch |
| 1-2:00 pm | WORKSHOPS—10 TOTAL—see below for choices (registration form will allow participants to select top choices) |
| 2-3:00 pm | OPTIONAL: Open Mic, Book Signing with Shara McCallum, Meet and Greet with Faculty |

WORKSHOP OFFERINGS (1-2 p.m.)

1. Exploding the (Academic) Essay (Greg Coles)
2. Writing Queerness, Queering Writing (Johnathan Smilges)
3. Writing Home (Julia Spicher Kasdorf)
4. The Art of the Poetry Slam (Gabriel Green)
5. Writing to Save the World (Casey Wiley)
6. Science Writing: The Art of Discovery (Dave Pacchioli)
7. Digital Girl Lit: Book Reviews for the Blogosphere (Leisha Jones)
8. Performing Poetry (Cynthia Mazzant)
9. Graphic Memoir (Laura Nejako)
10. How an Online Lit Mag Can Connect the Creative Arts Community (Alison Jaenicke)

1. **Exploding the (Academic) Essay** (Gregory Coles, PhD Candidate in Rhetoric and Composition, Penn State): Academic essays have a reputation for being formulaic and boring. This workshop intends to demolish that reputation. We'll practice the creative tactics that appear in the best academic writing: gripping introductions, evidence that matters; and style to keep both you and your professors awake.
2. **Writing Queerness, Queering Writing** (Johnathan Smilges, PhD Student in English and Women's Studies, Penn State): The thing about queerness is no one really knows what it is. You might *feel* queer. I might even say I *am* queer. But when pressed to give a definition, we almost always default to saying what queer *is not*: It's not straight. It's not cis. It's not allosexual. It's not binary. So how do we write about queerness if we don't know what it is? In this workshop, we'll be working together (and/or independently) to sketch out what this beautiful, fabulous, ambiguous word might mean. [Participants are not required to identify as queer to attend. All are welcome!]
3. **Writing Home** (Julia Spicher Kasdorf, poet and Penn State professor): The title of this workshop implies multiple meanings: talking back to the places we come from, describing home, creating new spaces for ourselves with our words. Participants in this workshop will engage in a free writing exercise to generate new work that could be shaped into any genre. Prepare to be surprised.
4. **The Art of the Poetry Slam** (Gabriel Green, Dual-Title PhD Student in English & African American/African Diaspora Studies, Poetry Slam Coach, Penn State): The mission of Penn State Writers Organized to Represent Diverse Stories (W.O.R.D.S.) is "to create an environment that is conducive to the sharing of personal stories and experiences, and to promote the expression of those stories through creative writing." W.O.R.D.S. hosts weekly meetings and a poetry slam series and has competed at CUPSI (College Union Poetry Slam Invitational) where they are currently ranked first in the nation. In this workshop, Gabriel will go over the basics of slam and will also provide a writing workshop for students to construct their own "slam" poem.

5. **Writing to Save the World** (Casey Wiley, Assistant Teaching Professor of English, Penn State): This workshop focuses on taking big ideas—local, global, or both—and synthesizing these into action via writing. Can our writing actually change the world? Participants will brainstorm changes they want to see in their schools, communities, states, country; write about grassroots ways change could occur; and finally create early ideas for social media campaigns, letters, websites, but also poems and stories, to try to enact steps of change.
6. **Science Writing: The Art of Discovery** (Dave Pacchioli, Penn State Director of Research Communications): The best science writers are creative writers, masters of language and story who happen to take science as their subject. They also excel at making foreign concepts both understandable and surprisingly relevant. Participants will sample a range of writing about science, and try their hands at the essential task of translation.
7. **Digital Girl Lit: Book Reviews for the Blogosphere** (Leisha Jones, Penn State Assistant Professor of English): This workshop will introduce students to female coming-of-age books, teach them about the art of book reviewing, and challenge them to write book reviews and pursue online publication on a platform of their choosing.
8. **Performing Poetry** (Cynthia Mazzant, Penn State Lecturer of English, Poetry Out Loud Regional Coordinator, and Artistic Director of Tempest Productions, a professional and educational theatre company): Using our bodies and voices to convey thoughts and feelings, we will explore and practice various recitation and performance techniques to bring poetry to life. Bring a poem with you or we will have several you can choose from.
9. **Graphic Memoir** (Laura Nejako, candidate for BA/MA in Creative Writing and BA in Secondary Education, English, Penn State): This workshop will discuss how the graphic memoir transcends traditional literary boundaries through the use of digital media and innovative techniques like using the space between panels as a narrative element. Participants will have the opportunity to create their own one-page story.
10. **How an Online Lit Mag Can Connect the Creative Arts Community** (Alison Jaenicke, Penn State Lecturer of English and Assistant Director of Creative Writing): This workshop will share Penn State's recent experience extending its literary magazine reach into the online realm with the creative arts journal *Klio*, thereby expanding the possibilities for creative expression among writers and artists on campus. Participants will be challenged to brainstorm and share possibilities for their own schools' creative communities.

Appendix B: Materials for teachers related to featured author

This year's featured author is Penn State professor and poet **Shara McCallum**.

Originally from Jamaica, McCallum is the author of five books of poetry, published in the US and UK. We believe your students will find her poetry engaging and thought provoking. Her work is often concerned with history (the public story of events), memory (the personal story), and myth (the meaning we make of the two).

For the High School Writing Day, we request that students read at least **the packet of six poems** from her most recent books, *This Strange Land* and *Madwoman*, attached here. Some teachers and students will want to purchase the books, and we encourage you to bring your own copies to the festival to get them signed by the author. (*This Strange Land* comes with a compact disk of the author reading.)



Mad Woman by Shara McCallum (Alice James Books, 2017)
This Strange Land by Shara McCallum (Alice James Books, 2011)

Resources for teaching the poetry of Shara McCallum:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/shara-mccallum>

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/shara-mccallum>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_5ShBVCsHc

Activity 1

In the Youtube video clip above, from a reading at the 2014 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival, McCallum introduces herself as an “immigrant” and reads “Psalm for Kingston” (in the packet), a poem that includes the voices of a number of other people, indicated in italics. Notice that the epigraph for this poem comes from the Hebrew Bible and refers to ancient Israelites who were asked to sing songs of their homeland while they were living as exiles in Babylon.

Context: McCallum’s parents were Rastafarians when she was growing up, and according to Rastafarian belief, all people of African descent are exiles in the New World. Students might be interested in hearing Bob Marley, who is named in the poem, sing “Exodus.”

For discussion: How do “song” and “poem” relate to one another in the work of this poet? How does she help us to imagine the place and its people? What details are especially vivid for you? Why might someone wish to gather details of her former home place?

Writing prompt (see writing contest announcement)

Activity 2

In the collection *Madwoman*, some poems are spoken in the voice of an imagined character, Madwoman, as if the author were speaking through a mask. This strategy is called “persona.” In “Madwoman as Rasta Medusa,” we have a Jamaican version of an ancient Greek myth.

Context: Acquaint students with the story of Medusa, including the reason for her transformation into a monstrous Gorgon. This poem is written to sound like Jamaican patois and demands to be read aloud, (fi = to).

For discussion: Why would an author choose to write in a voice other than her own? What truth is the Rasta Medusa asking us to see?

Writing prompt (see writing contest announcement)

Packet of poems (see following pages):

from *This Strange Land* (Alice James Books, 2011)

- “Psalm for Kingston”

from *Mad Woman* (Alice James Books, 2017)

- “Race”
- “Mad Woman’s Geography”
- “Exile”
- “Ten Things You Might Like to Know About Madwoman”
- “Madwoman as Rasta Medusa”

PSALM FOR KINGSTON

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem

—Psalm 137

City of Jack Mandora—*mi nuh choose none*—of Anancy
prevailing over Mongoose, Breda Rat, Puss, and Dog, Anancy
saved by his wits in the midst of chaos and against all odds;
of bawdy Big Boy stories told by peacock-strutting boys, *hush-hush*
but loud enough to be heard by anyone passing by the yard.

City of market women at Half-Way-Tree with baskets
atop their heads or planted in front of their laps, squatting or standing
with arms akimbo, *susuing* with one another, clucking
their tongues, calling in voices of pure sugar, *come dou-dou: see*
the pretty bag I have for you, then kissing their teeth when you saunter off.

City of school children in uniforms playing dandy shandy
and brown girl in the ring—*tra-la-la-la-la*—
eating bun and cheese and bulla and mangoes,
juice sticky and running down their chins, bodies arced
in laughter, mouths agape, heads thrown back.

City of old men with rheumy eyes, crouched in doorways,
on verandahs, paring knives in hand, carving wood pipes
or peeling sugar cane, of younger men pushing carts
of roasted peanuts and oranges, calling out as they walk the streets
and night draws near, of coconut vendors with machetes in hand.

City where power cuts left everyone in sudden dark,
where the kerosene lamp's blue flame wavered on kitchen walls,
where empty bellies could not be filled,
where *no eggs, no milk, no beef today* echoed
in shantytowns, around corners, down alleyways.

City where Marley sang, *Jah would never give the power to a baldhead*
while the baldheads reigned, where my parents chanted
down Babylon—*Fire! Burn! Jah! Rastafari! Selassie II!*—
where they paid weekly dues, saving for our passages back to Africa,
while in their beds my grandparents slept fitfully, dreaming of America.

City that lives under a long-remembered sun,
where the gunmen of my childhood have been replaced
by dons that rule neighbourhoods as fiefdoms, where violence
and beauty still lie down together. City of my birth—
if I forget thee, who will I be, singing the Lord's song in this strange land?

Exile

Say morning,

and a bird trills on a doorstep
outside a kitchen.

Inside, fingers roll johnnycakes,
dropping balls of dough into oil,
splattering, singeing a wrist.

Here, a woman is always
singing, each note tethering
sound to meaning.

The trick is to wait
on this doorstep forever.
The trick is to remember

time is a fish
swimming through dark water.

Race

You are the original incognito.
Transparent, all things shine through you.
*She's the whitest black girl you ever saw,
lighter than "flesh" in the Crayola box.*
But, man, look at that ass and look at her shake it
were just words, not sticks or stones, flung
when dresses were the proof that clung like skin,
when lipstick stained brighter than any blood.
Girl, who is it now you'd want to see you?
And what would that mean: *to be seen?*
Why not make a blessing of what
all these years you've thought a curse?—
you are so everywhere, so nowhere,
in plain sight you walk through walls.

Madwoman's Geography

In my first life, I slid
into the length of a snake. Then

sloughed scales for wings.
Was content one hundred years

till the air, as all things must,
lost its charms. After a long time

falling, I landed in the sea.
What could I do but follow

any wake? How else chart
a course than the way a child

plucks flowers from a field—
the eye compelling the hand to reach?

Madwoman as Rasta Medusa

I-woman go turn all a Babylon to stone.
I-woman is the Deliverer and the Truth.
Look pon I and feel yu inside calcify.
Look pon I and witness the chasm,
the abyss of yusef rupture. Look pon I
and know what bring destruction.
Yu say I-woman is monstrosity
but is yu gravalicious ways
mek I come the way I come.
Is yu belief everyone exist fi satisfy
yu wanton wantonness.
Yu think, all these years gone,
I-woman a come here fi revenge.
Wo-yo—but is wrong again yu wrong.
I-woman is the Reckoning and Judgment Day.
This face, etch with wretchedness,
these dreads, writhing and hissing
misery, is not the Terror.
I-woman is what birth from yu Terror.

Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman

1. The source of her rage and joy are the same, which is true of many people where she's from, who, at one point or another, have not had a pot to piss in.
2. Like everyone, she has her flaws. For instance: she's convinced of the importance of her own grief.
3. In her own mind, she sometimes moonlights as the earth. As a girl she once built a raft from blue mahoe, masking tape, and her own foolishness.
 - 3b. This may or may not be true, but sharks wouldn't go near it anyway.
4. For instance: she really loves Abba and thinks "Chiquitita" was written for her, personally. If you know the song, or might care to google it and listen on YouTube, even if you don't understand why she persists in this delusion, she hopes—despite your better judgment, taste in music, and/or profound sense of ironic detachment—that you'll love it.
5. While she has little actual faith (having lost most of it somewhere in a gully, perhaps in a big rainstorm that took place sometime in her childhood, which is her usual guess for everything) and therefore cannot in good conscience recommend to you the act of praying, she has nonetheless cultivated a deep belief in the colour red—as in the poppy, which she admires since it seems harnessed to nothing but its own fiery display.

7½. She has already grown tired of this list and is irritated (with herself, not you) that she is now obligated to four or five more disclosures, depending on how you're counting.

6. She is concerned details of her past make people uncomfortable. For example: her father was crazy, and not just in the colloquial sense. For example: he killed himself.

5b. *It might be better to be a gardenia. Less showy.* This is what she thinks on the days she's not admiring the poppy.

6b. Since she's told you this story of her father, she wants to assure you she's fine now, which you might conclude anyway, if you met her, because she smiles a lot.

7. She has problems distinguishing fact from fiction.

8. Also, she's concerned lists are way too postmodern, a theory, which at first she thinks is shiny as a new penny, then quickly finds annoying and infectious, like sand flies. She wants to assure you this is true even if she is mixed-race, from a host of nations, the sum of a bunch of world religions, and born in 1972.

8b. Now that she's alluded to literature and theory, she's a bit alarmed you might begin to think of her as a character in a story. On the other hand, she likes stories very much, especially those rarer ones in which women get to be the heroes, so if you can't help yourself, then she thinks it would be okay, but asks that you please make her a myth.

Appendix C: Writing Contests

High School Writing Day at Penn State April 13, 2018 WRITING CONTESTS

General Guidelines

A trio of writing contests is offered as a part of the 2018 Penn State Writing Day at Penn State. All students registered for the daylong event are free to enter any or all of the categories below (limit=one entry per category per student).

- **Expectations:** While it is fine for you to discuss your ideas with your teacher, parents, or friends, we request that you do not have outside help with the preparation of the actual essay, poem, or piece of creative prose you submit.
- **Deadline:** March 18, 2018, 11:59 pm
- **Judging:** Entries will be judged by Penn State graduate students in the Creative Writing Program and the Program in Writing and Rhetoric. To keep submissions anonymous during judging, please do not include any identifying information (name or school) in the document sent.
- **How to Submit:** Entries should be sent as an attachment in an email sent to english@psu.edu. The attachment should be in the form of a **Word document or pdf**. Indicate the **category** of your writing on the first page, but omit any identifying information (author name or school). In the **body of the email**, please provide:
 - ✓ Author of submission(s)
 - ✓ Title of submission(s)
 - ✓ Name of School
 - ✓ Grade level of author

Categories

- *Prose Written in Response to Featured Author's Work*
- *Poetry Written in Response to Featured Author's Work*
- *Critical Analysis of Current Events*

Detailed instructions for each writing contest category are provided on separate sheets on the following pages.

2018 High School Writing Day at Penn State

WRITING CONTEST:

POETRY and PROSE Written in Response to Featured Author's Work

(see Shara McCallum's poems and material for teachers in information packet)

Writing prompts:

1. Some of us are immigrants. Some of us have lived in the same house all of our lives. Yet, all of us have left the world of our young childhoods; in fact, you might even say we are exiles from that distant time. Write a piece of poetry or prose that captures a time or place lost to you now.
2. Choose a well-known character from a myth or fairy tale, and write a poem or piece of prose in his or her voice. Be sure to include details that make the voice authentic and believable. Use this opportunity to articulate a truth you feel strongly about.

Guidelines:

In addition to the general guidelines and submission instructions given on the previous page, please adhere to the following when submitting poetry and prose in response to the featured author's work:

- Students may submit up to one entry in poetry and one entry in prose, in response to either or both prompts.
- Poetry submission may be 1-3 poems, one poem to a page.
- Prose submission (which may be fiction or nonfiction) should not exceed 3-4 pages (or 1,000 words).

Judges: Entries will be judged by BA/MA students in the Creative Writing Program in the Penn State English Department.

Prizes (to be determined and announced before deadline)

2018 High School Writing Day at Penn State
WRITING CONTEST:
Critical Analysis of Current Events

In a *New Yorker* commentary entitled "Words of the Year," Louis Menand reports on the 2017 winner, "Youthquake." The experts at Oxford Dictionaries define "youthquake" as "significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influences of young people." "Other usage professionals," Menand continues, "have chosen their own Words of the Year, 2017 edition," such words as "populism," "feminism," and "complicit."

As you consider Menand's analysis of important words, determine the word you think best represents the 2017 Word of the Year. You might choose one of the words Menand mentions or come up with one of your own.

Then, in an expository essay of three-to-four pages (double-spaced), provide a definition for the word you've chosen (either a definition provided in the article or one of your own), argue for the importance of the word you've chosen, and provide specific examples or other kinds of support for the assertions you make about the word and its influence. Your audience consists of writing instructors who are interested in the opinions of smart high school students.

Your teacher will provide you with a copy of Menand's essay and give you one week to compose your essay, submitting that essay to us no later than 11:59 p.m. on March 18.

Keep in mind that the Penn State judges will evaluate your essay according to how well it

1. reflects a thoughtful analysis of the question
2. establishes a strong thesis statement
3. provides clear, appropriate, and sufficient detailed support
4. defines key terms where needed
5. demonstrates purposeful organization
6. conforms to (or artfully deviates from) the conventions of edited American English

Entries will be judged by graduate students in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric in the Penn State English Department.

Prizes awarded for winning entries will be:

- 1st place: \$300
- 2nd place: \$150
- Honorable Mentions (3): \$50 each



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT WORDS OF THE YEAR

If language, as Emerson said, is fossil poetry, then “youthquake” seems like a plastic bone. “Youthquake” is the verbal concoction recently declared Word of the Year (the year being 2017) by the experts at Oxford Dictionaries. They define it as “significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people.”

The actions and the influence of young people not being unusually notable or effectual during the past year, you might wonder whether the Oxonians are confusing 2017 with 1967. Actually, “youthquake” dates from 1965, when it was coined by the fashion industry. But Oxford says that the incidence of “youthquake” spiked around the time of the British elections last June, when the Conservative Party did worse than expected and a surge of votes for Labour was attributed to high turnout among younger voters.

Given that Labour did not win a majority, and Brexit remains in progress under the auspices of a Conservative Prime Minister, it’s a little hard to know what the quake part was. “Youthquake” has also been criticized, in Britain, as the kind of word that someone sitting at a desk, such as a headline writer, might come up with, a word that no one would use in speech. People prefer to have their neologisms boil up unbidden from the global electronic soup—like, for instance, “milkshake duck,” one of the runners-up to “youthquake.” (You can Google that one. And is it a word, or is it a meme?) Nevertheless, we are assured

that “youthquake” is “a word on the move.”

Other usage professionals have chosen their own Words of the Year, 2017 edition, and the honorees have a similarly wonky character: “populism” (Cambridge Dictionary), “feminism” (Merriam-Webster’s), and “complicit” (Dictionary.com). According to Merriam-Webster’s, “feminism” was the most searched-for word in its online dictionary, up seventy per cent from 2016. But who in 2017 needed to be told what “feminism” means? Upon searching, these people would have learned from Merriam-Webster’s that the definition of “feminism” is “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes.” Some number of them were probably relieved to learn that it is still just a theory.

On the whole, 2017 was not a great year for the English language. Reality is running ahead of our vocabulary. For one thing, no good terms have emerged

to describe the current state of political affairs. What is the ideology of this Administration? It is not social conservatism or neoliberalism, and it is certainly not populism (though it may be faux populism). “Nationalism” seems to be the default term, but that does not capture the freebooting and bullying behavior of everyday political life. Normal terms do not apply. We are living in a down-is-up, war-is-peace world.

It may be that, in the language of politics, a few words are ready to be cycled out. Some of these are words that ended up on the losing side. It is a good bet that Americans will not be hearing “diversity” or “together” much in the next Presidential election.

In the lexicon of commentary, some terms have suffered serious semantic erosion and could be dropped. “Normalization” once meant making the deviant conform to the ordinary, but it now means the opposite, accepting the deviant as the new ordinary. “Pivot” used to mean “turning one’s attention to,” as in “Obama’s pivot to China.” It now means something more like “faking it for political effect”—as in “My God, Trump is not pivoting!” (It turned out he didn’t because he couldn’t.) It would be nice to see if we can live without “double down,” which now seems to mean “refuse to acknowledge the obvious.” And “breaking news”: isn’t that a redundancy?

Arguably, the Word of the Year is not a word at all. It’s an alphanumeric character, #. The President speaks in hashtag, but so do the President’s opponents, and so does, for example, the #MeToo movement. Like most major shifts in



communicative modes, # democratizes, while freaking out traditionalists, who worry, not wrongly, about the loss of ambiguity and complexity. But, look, something is being said, and it's being read.

With all the damage that's being done to the social fabric, in matters ranging from race relations to income inequality, to name just two areas where the national leadership seems not only determined to make things worse but weirdly excited about it, fretting over the state of the language seems like an indulgence. Fossil poetry or not, words are tools, and what matters is the job that they are being made to do. Still, language is a commons. It's a resource that we share, and the resource is impoverished when words are redefined, weaponized, or otherwise co-opted and bent out of shape.

A good candidate for Word of the Year in this category is "fake." "Fake" once meant "counterfeit" or "inauthentic," like a fake Picasso or a fake birth

certificate. It is now used to mean "I deny your reality." "Hoax" is used with the same intention. ("Alternative facts," another phrase associated with reality denial, seems to have been mocked out of existence.)

Many Americans were shocked to hear their beliefs characterized as "fake science" or "fake news." Those Americans thought that they understood what counts as evidence, what counts as reason, what counts as an argument. Suddenly, the rules changed. In national politics, you no longer need evidence or reason. You no longer need to make an argument. You need only to assert. If your assertion is questioned, you need only to repeat it.

"Fake" and "hoax" are the "abracadabra"s of the Trump world, words recited to make inconvenient facts disappear. In most of life after nursery school, "abracadabra" doesn't work, because it stops fooling other people. For grownups, as a rule, saying something doesn't make it so.

This is not true of Presidents, however, grownup or not. Presidents are legally empowered to make what comes out of their mouths a reality for other people. This President has realized that he can say literally anything and someone will pop up to explain it, or explain it away.

"When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean," Humpty Dumpty says to Alice. How can you make a word mean so many different things? Alice asks. "The question," Humpty Dumpty replies, "is which is to be master, that's all." George Orwell said the same thing. Meaning, at bottom, is about power. "Truth," Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., once said, is "the majority vote of that nation that could lick all others." A disagreeable thought, but not an inapposite one in 2017.

Later on, of course, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. Something to look forward to in 2018. Happy New Year.

—*Louis Menand*