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Snapshots of Hate and Resistance: Charlottesville, VA, August, 2017

A young white man, cheeks as smooth as a toddler's under his Nazi helmet, screams racist rhetoric into the air, his chin and mouth trembling with anger. He looks ready to burst into tears.

Another white man, thin and wiry, paces back and forth in such a frenzy that he keeps hitting his own helmeted head with the pole of his Confederate flag.

A third white man, this one tall and muscular, leans over a police barrier spitting words of white supremacy. Chest thrust out, face red, body straining, he is visibly aching to argue and punch.

"Jews go back to Israel, Asians to Asia..." he yells. "Everyone gets handouts and breaks except the white man!"

A woman built like a bulldog stalks by with her neo-Nazi group, one of only five or so women I saw among the 500 white supremacists present that day. Her middle finger is raised to the surrounding crowd of protesters. She, too, loves this; head up, cheeks flushed with righteousness.

They are all feeding off one another, staying close together under their KKK and Confederate flags, their Nazi symbols, their appropriations of the Stars and Stripes. Their postures and self-

satisfied expressions clearly say that they feel, for the moment, pumped with power.

I am taking these verbal snapshots in Charlottesville, Virginia, on the morning of August 12, 2017, at the white nationalist rally that was to shake the country, and expose the president's sympathy with white supremacy more starkly than anything had before. It was also the day that social justice activist, Heather Heyer, was murdered at only thirty-two years old, and that DeAndre Harris was brutally beaten for simply being an American citizen of African descent.

I was there with another writer, Cris Beam. We were staying at a nearby artist's residency just down the road, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and had decided to forego work for a day and head into town. She and I are both journalists, as well as novelists, but we went that day as private citizens to protest white supremacy and bear witness.

There is a difference between covering an event as a journalist and bearing witness as a citizen. A journalist must estimate numbers and gather quotes from all sides, and try to keep her own opinions at bay. A citizen can simply stare. So, what I witnessed that day was something I might never have had time to take in as a journalist: the body language of hate, and conversely, the body language of resistance.

Cris and I were scared. Only the night before, the KKK had marched through the University of Virginia campus, holding torches like a lynch mob. They intimidated ministers praying in a nearby church, and attacked protesting students with the flames of those torches, lighters, and pepper spray. The governor of Virginia told people to stay away on August 12.

So, we decided to avoid the mayhem in the street and instead stand on a grassy slope leading up to Emancipation Park and the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, the flashpoint of the rally. It was the city's plan to remove Lee's statue that had brought white supremacists swarming into Charlottesville from all over the country, ostensibly in protest, but really to flex their muscles, garner publicity—and, it soon became apparent, to fight.

Up on our slope, surrounded by horrified onlookers, black and white, young and old, women and men, we were able to see much of what was going on. We gaped, clutched each other's hands, and gaped some more. Neither of us had ever seen the body language of hate so close up and in such numbers.

Right beside us we saw another disturbing sight: rows of heavily armed militiamen standing along the sides of the road, legs apart, hands gripping automatic rifles, chests bulging with bulletproof vests. They were dressed in a motley collection of military fatigues from various past wars, no doubt bought at their local Army Surplus stores. But their pistols and automatic rifles were current enough. Several of those rifles looked like M4s, the weapon of choice among American soldiers in Iraq.

"Look at the National Guard," someone said.

They were not National Guard. One had blond dreadlocks; many were bearded. Their blouses did not match their pants. Their footwear was all over the place, as were their ages. Some wore helmets, others baseball caps, some were bareheaded. A few had headphones clamped over their ears. At least one wore a bandolier of shotgun shells. Several wore patches simulating the Confederate flag.

But they all had weapons and they were all white, except for one puzzling black man, who hid behind his sunglasses.

Like the white supremacists, these militiamen's faces, too, were set in anger. But even more striking were their expressions of self-importance as they glared at the counter-protesters gathering in the street, and at the Unitarian Universalist ministers singing songs of peace and love only a few feet away, among them Professor Cornel West.

I tried to catch the eyes of these militiamen just to see what was in there. But their eyes were either hidden behind sunglasses, or deliberately avoiding contact.

And then, there were the police. Clad in neon green vests, as if they might be hard to see in the bright sunlight, they stood in rows behind the metal barriers they had erected on both sides of the street. They were far back from the crowds, unreachable.

Cris and I quickly realized we were in a sandwich. In front of us, close enough to touch, were the militiamen, the street, and the amassing neo-Nazis and counter-protesters. Behind us were the police barricaded between gates, and behind them the growing crowd of white nationalists gathering around the statue of Lee, who sat on his bronze horse, blind to what he had wrought.

I kept turning around to watch those police officers, wondering why they weren't responding to the militia, the weapons, the giant cans of pepper spray I saw dangling from neo-Nazi belts. It was as if the police, too, were blind and stuck in place.

Meanwhile, more and more white supremacists were arriving in clumps to wend their way up to the park, chanting their Nazi slogans. The counter-protesters chanted back, "Nazi scum off our streets!"

Then my eye caught a commotion to our left. "Cris, look!" I said, pointing up Main Street. A towering white man with long gray hair, who bore more than a passing resemblance to The Dude in *The Big Lebowski*, was marching down the hill, leading a phalanx of about 100 white supremacists flying Nazi and Confederate flags. Many of them were carrying huge shields painted with various fascist and racist symbols. Many were also wearing helmets and wielding sticks.

At the same time, to our right, the crowd of counter-protesters was approaching, waving signs: "Wake Up and Smell the Nazis," "America Was Built on the Backs of Slaves." And simply, "Wrong 'Hood."

The police stood blinking in the sun.

The Dude led his army with visible aggression, everything about his stride and posture proclaiming he had no intention of giving way to anybody.

The counter-protesters—ministers, women, men, students, young and old—marched on.

The two groups drew closer and closer. The fascists and racists raised their shields and sticks, set their jaws, and chanted Nazi slogans in a mass of male voices: "Blood and soil," and, "You will not replace us/Jews will not replace us."

The counter-protesters, at least half of whom were women, and many of whom were people of color, kept moving forward, waving their signs of peace and resistance.

The police kept on blinking.

As the two flanks moved closer and closer, it was like watching a lit fuse creeping toward a bomb. The police had plenty of time to step between them, form a line, and prevent the *mêlée* that was clearly coming. But they moved not a muscle.

(Later, the police chief of Charlottesville excused this by saying that the militias and white supremacists had more powerful weapons than the police did.)

At the last moment, a small group of people dressed entirely in black pushed their way to the front of the counter-protesters, carrying a flag saying Antifa. Their faces were masked with scarves. Some had helmets, a few had shields and sticks, some had A for Anarchism patches on their arms. There were 20 of them. They were the only sign I saw of readiness for violence from the counter-protesters, except for a couple of people wearing helmets, clearly expecting to be whacked on the head. One of those helmets read PRESS in wobbly white letters.

By now, the two flanks were face to face. And that is when it happened. Cris and I saw it clearly.

The Dude led the charge. He and the other white supremacists ducked down and rammed right into the counter-protesters, using their shields and sticks and fists to send people flying. Colored smoke billowed. Pepper spray sprayed. Water bottles flew. People screamed and ran.

I turned to an officer behind me. “At what point are you going to do something?” I asked.

His reply: “When the crowd gets out of control.”

With the fighting escalating and the tear gas billowing toward us, Cris and I decided to leave. We couldn’t. The police had blocked every side road around, hemming us in. All we could do was move further down Main Street.

There, we saw that about seven militiamen had climbed to the roof of a funeral parlor and taken up guard positions; how they got

there, I do not know. They had even erected a little tent to protect them from the sun. They crouched, assault rifles in hand, looking down at us unarmed civilians milling unprotected in the streets. Everything about their stance was in imitation of soldiers; exactly as if we were in a war and they were awaiting the order to shoot.

I looked around again for the police to see if they were doing anything about these unofficial snipers. Not an officer in sight.

Time passed. The militia melted away, the last Nazi group marched by, the street began to empty. And then, suddenly, the police appeared after all, an army of them in riot gear forming a black wall across the road. Black clothes, black helmets, masks, guns, huge transparent shields. They stood in formation, like a row of sinister robots.

Nobody was on the street anymore but us, a smattering of counter-protesters, children, and a guy in a kilt carrying a sign saying, “Real Clansmen Wear Kilts.”

Who, exactly, we asked each other, were the police protecting here?

But the police, white nationalist and militias were not the only people we saw that day. There was also the resistance.

Earlier that morning, when Cris and I had driven into Charlottesville, we happened across the very church where Cornel West had led an interfaith prayer at sunrise, and where he and a group of ministers—women and men of various ethnic groups and religions, most of them far from young—were gathering to peacefully protest the white nationalist rally.

One woman in her seventies offered us purple cowls to wear if we wished to march with them. “We are ministers and we are trained to be arrested,” she told me. “Would you join us?”

Being neither religious nor trained for arrest, I declined. But by chance, Cris and I ended up spending most of our time near them anyway. We found them in front of the park, standing with linked arms, alternately facing front and back, singing “This Little Light of Mine” and other gospel and civil rights anthems. The louder the Nazi chants grew, the more full-throated and melodious rose the preachers’ songs.

“Let’s stay here,” Cris said. “I feel intellectually safer with Cornel West.”

At times the ministers knelt, at times they stood, all the while the hate teeming around them, homophobic signs mixing freely with racist and Nazi slogans. An elderly hippie stood nearby, and each time a white supremacist group marched past chanting their words of hate, he rang a bell and banged a tambourine to drown them out. He was surprisingly effective.

Cris and I watched the ministers’ faces. Earnest and determined, yes, and sometimes nervous, too, but they wore none of the anger and self-righteousness we saw on the faces of the haters. The difference between an expression of determination and that of antagonism is striking.

We saw several African American reporters and photographers running close alongside the marching white supremacists, taking their pictures and asking questions, despite the verbal abuse being hurled at them and the prominent display of weapons.

We also saw many citizens bearing witness with their phone cameras when the white supremacists attacked.

All around us, I realized, we were seeing resistance in the form of small acts of courage: singing, staring, praying, photographing – some were even trying to engage in a rational discussion with the Nazis. Much of this courage was coming from the citizens of Charlottesville, for the city was not happy with the invasion of these people spouting hate. It is not a home to white supremacy. Not any more. As one young resident proclaimed in outrage, “I’ve lived in Charlottesville 21 years and I’ve never seen a white supremacist rally here before. Since Trump was elected, there have been five!”

At one point, Cris and I went to seek a bathroom in a side street restaurant. On the door, the management had hung a sign: “Please leave your weapons outside.” Given the open carry law in Virginia, and the horrifying fact that it was legal to bring all those weapons to the rally, this modest sign seemed positively defiant; another act of courage.

On our way out, I saw a waitress writing on the menu board in chalk. Her words:

“What the world needs now,
“Is love, sweet love...”

Two weeks later, I drove back through Charlottesville on my way home to New York. There, I found the streets strewn with flowers and photographs of Heather Heyer. And in the park, now empty of white supremacists, militias, or, indeed, of any people at all, stood Robert E. Lee’s statue. Every inch of him was wrapped in black plastic. This proud defender of slavery had at last been shrouded in shame.

HELEN BENEDICT, a professor at Columbia University, has written seven novels, including the recent *Wolf Season*, and *Sand Queen*, a Publishers Weekly “Best Contemporary War Novel.” Her journalism inspired the Academy Award-nominated documentary *The Invisible War*, and instigated a landmark lawsuit against the Pentagon on behalf of victims of military sexual assault. A recipient of the Ida B. Wells Award for Bravery in Journalism and the James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism, Benedict is also the author of five works of nonfiction, including the book, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women in Iraq*.