WORDS ON PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

4000 Miles

by Amy Herzog
Directed by Mark Rucker

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COVER  Cyclist and writer Neil Hanson during his cross-country bicycle trip. © Neil Hanson. Hanson is currently editing his upcoming book about that trip. Hanson is the author of Peace at the Edge of Uncertainty and readers can receive his periodic thoughts and musings through High Prairie Reflections by signing up at neilhanson.com.

OPPOSITE  Greenwich Village
Characters, Cast, and Synopsis of
4000 Miles

4000 Miles was written for SoHo Rep’s Writer/Director Lab in 2009–10. The play received its world premiere production in June 2011 as part of Lincoln Center Theater’s LCT3 program.

Characters and Cast of 4000 Miles

LEO JOSEPH–CONNELL .............................................. Reggie Gowland
VERA JOSEPH ........................................................... Susan Blommaert
BEC .............................................................................. Julia Lawler
AMANDA ........................................................................ Camille Mana

Setting of 4000 Miles

A recent September in a spacious rent-controlled apartment in Greenwich Village that has not been redecorated since approximately 1968.

Synopsis of 4000 Miles

Since her husband, Joe, passed away ten years ago, 91-year-old Vera has lived alone in her New York apartment. She speaks on the phone daily with her next-door neighbor Ginny and visits the Senior Center, but she lives a mostly solitary life. All that changes when her 21-year-old grandson Leo arrives unannounced in the middle of the night, having just biked across the country from Seattle.

Leo’s family has been worried about him since his friend and riding companion, Micah, died during their journey. Leo continued riding but stopped updating his parents on his progress. Vera’s suggestion that Leo call his mother, Jane, is met with resistance. She drops the issue when he offers to leave. Leo and his mother are “at a juncture where

OPPOSITE Paint elevations for 4000 Miles, by scenic designer Erik Flatmo
more talking is not better than less talking,” he tells Vera. During his pilgrimage, Leo also stopped communicating with his girlfriend, Bec, who also lives in New York. Leo dropped by her apartment before coming to Vera’s, but his surprise appearance after months of silence upset Bec.

After some frustrating miscommunication, due in large part to Vera’s poor hearing and inability to find the words she wants, Vera welcomes Leo into her home and Leo accepts her hospitality. The next morning, Vera does Leo’s laundry and prepares breakfast for him. He finally rises after noon. Vera continues to show her age, complaining about how some days her “head really isn’t right” and her balance sometimes fails her. When Leo asks if there is a climbing wall nearby, he is astounded when she refers to the Yellow Pages instead of going on the internet. Vera owns a computer, but she has never turned it on.

Leo claims he does not like computers either, and he boasts that Micah never sent a single email. Vera suggests that, from a Marxist standpoint, the internet is beneficial because, as Leo puts it when she fumbles with what she is trying to say, it “de-commodifies knowledge.” Leo took a class on Marx during his semester at Evergreen College, in part so he could better understand his family’s history: Vera and most of Joe’s children by his first wife are all Marxists, as was Joe himself. Leo’s mother, however, steered clear of serious politics, to Vera’s chagrin.

Leo’s plan is to stay with Vera only a few days to rest up before getting back on his bike and reversing his trip back to Seattle, but days pass and he does not show any signs of leaving. It does not take long for Vera to become annoyed with her new roommate for the little inconveniences he causes—breaking the faucet in the bathroom and failing to fix it, for example—and with the larger discrepancies in their philosophies about personal responsibility. But she is glad for the companionship, especially after coming home from the funeral of a friend, “the last of the octogenarians.” Leo also gives Vera an excuse to reminisce about her late husband.

Vera learns from Leo’s mother that Leo’s rift with his family is in part the result of his kissing his adopted Chinese sister, Lily, when they both were high on peyote. Lily is now in therapy. Leo claims that her need for psychiatric help has nothing to do with the kiss, but is really the result of his parents’ constant reminders that Lily is adopted. Vera asks whether the kiss is why he and Bec are at odds, but Leo denies it has anything to do with their estrangement.

Bec visits the apartment to talk to Leo, but Leo is late. While Bec waits, Vera tells her about the comical infidelities of her first husband, Arthur—all of which she forgave. Bec, however, does not find these stories funny or helpful: she has no intention of forgiving Leo. When Leo finally arrives, Bec breaks up with him.

Leo tries to salvage the situation by awkwardly reciting a Rumi poem, but Bec responds, “When I’m not furious at you I’m really worried about you.” Leo accuses her of turning her back on everything they once believed, and Bec leaves. A few nights later, Leo tries to console himself by bringing Amanda, a Chinese American college student,
back to the apartment. An awakened Vera walks in on them as things are getting hot and heavy, breaking the mood.

Days later, Leo tells Vera that he has an interview for a job with an organization in the Rocky Mountains. If he gets the job, he will soon be leaving. A disappointed Vera suggests that he has not really given New York a chance. Later, when Leo is talking to Lily on Skype, he suggests that she come out and stay with Vera for a while. During the call, he also apologizes for making Lily feel less like an actual sister when he kissed her. Lily asks him to come home. Leo hastily and awkwardly hangs up.

Immediately after Leo disconnects with Lily, Vera’s phone rings. It is Vera’s neighbor Ginny. Leo cannot understand what she is saying and hangs up. He then hears a disturbing sound from across the hall.

A few days later, Vera and Leo are preparing for Ginny’s funeral. Bec comes over to see if Leo wants to go for a bike ride—specifically, to dip his front tire in the Atlantic Ocean, a ritual marking the completion of his cross-country journey. Leo tells Bec that he is busy with the funeral and that he is leaving the next day, heading home for a few days before traveling to Colorado, where he has been hired as a counselor. After Bec leaves, Leo reads Vera a speech he wrote about Ginny, whom he took to the hospital and stayed with until the end.
Building Momentum
An Interview with Playwright Amy Herzog

By Dan Rubin

Amy Herzog speculates that, had she been born two generations ago, she would have been swept into socialist politics like her grandmother, Leepee Joseph. But the 33-year-old recently-married mother of a seven-month-old baby was not born two generations ago, and instead she became a much-celebrated playwright. “My grandmother would say her politics didn’t go into me,” Herzog told New York Times reporter Alexis Soloski in March 2012, “but the fact that I come from a very political family is very influential on me.” Joseph, also present for the Soloski interview, responded to her granddaughter, “Oh, no question about that. But I didn’t see any politics in 4000 Miles.”

What Joseph did see in 4000 Miles was a lot of herself, her book-lined Greenwich Village apartment, and a very familiar situation: a 21-year-old grandchild coming to live with a grandparent. After graduating from Yale University in 2000—and following a cross-country bike ride with Habitat for Humanity that weaved its way from New Haven, Connecticut, to San Francisco—Herzog lived with Joseph for six months as she tried to ignite her acting career. Their close relationship was tested by life in close quarters: “We had a very hard time,” Herzog admitted in an interview for American Theatre magazine last March. “It wasn’t clear the relationship would survive.”

Fortunately for both her professional life and her personal relationship with Joseph, Herzog was hired by Theatreworks USA for the role of Beezus in a touring production of Len Jenkin’s adaptation of Ramona Quimby. It was a six-month gig. She should have been pleased: she was getting her union membership, making a living, and out of her grandmother’s house. Instead, the experience led to a crisis of faith. She felt “creatively stifled.” “To be an actor you have to love to suffer,” a character in Herzog’s recent play Belleville explains, “and I only like to suffer.”

While doing laundry for the cast of Ramona Quimby, Herzog found herself on the floor of the laundromat scribbling a 10-minute play called Granted, about a young woman who recently suffered a psychotic episode. It was terrible, she later realized, but when she wrote it she thought it was good—and, regardless of its merits, writing it had been more fulfilling than playing Beezus night after night. She left the tour a month early. College friends produced Granted in an old firehouse, and for the first time Herzog saw her work performed in front of an audience. She kept writing.
Two years later she was accepted into the Yale School of Drama’s M.F.A. in Playwriting program on the basis of *In Translation*, a drama about a Kafka scholar, which was the first of two works that mirrored the structure of *Arcadia*. (As an undergraduate actor, Herzog had played Thomasina in the Stoppard play.) What she calls her breakthrough came in her second year in the program, when she wrote *Hungry*, which abandoned any “weird structural conceits” and focused on the interactions of three teenagers in New Jersey. The following year, she wrote *The Wendy Play* based on her experiences teaching at a creative arts camp and challenging the camp’s conservative management when asked to compromise her beliefs while writing a play for the campers. With a cast of 16, *The Wendy Play* debuted in A.C.T.’s conservatory in 2008 as the first coproduction between the Master of Fine Arts Program and the Young Conservatory.

Herzog became an artist to watch in 2010 when *After the Revolution*—the first play to feature Leepee’s stand-in, Vera—opened at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in Massachusetts and then Playwrights Horizons in New York. In June of the following year, *4000 Miles* opened as part of Lincoln Center Theater’s LCT3 program, winning Herzog an OBIE Award for Best New American Play. Meanwhile, she was working on *Belleville*, which opened in November 2011 at Yale Repertory Theatre. Her latest play, *The Great God Pan*, opened last December at Playwrights Horizons. Herzog is currently working on commissions from Yale Rep and Playwrights Horizons, and
in recognition of her success, she received the 2012 New York Times’s Outstanding Playwright Award.

Amid all this activity, Herzog found time (between a rehearsal for The Great God Pan and relieving her babysitter) to speak with us about 4000 Miles.

Because of After the Revolution, you have a reputation for incorporating elements from your family members’ lives into your plays. In 4000 Miles, Vera is based on your grandmother; is Leo inspired by anyone?

He is loosely based on a cousin of mine, but I wouldn’t want to overstate that because this is a cousin who grew up far away from me and I don’t know him that intimately. There were circumstances in his life that inspired the play, but the character came from me and my experiences just as much as from anything I observed about him.

I have a lot of love for the character. We meet Leo at an extremely confused and lost moment. He was already confused and lost, and then the crisis hits [during his cross-country journey] and he becomes much more so. He is beginning to take some responsibility and find connection by the end of the play. I was about 30 when I wrote the play, and I was looking back on my 20s and that time of real confusion that I think a lot of people experience in their early 20s, when they are supposed to be taking steps to become adults but they don’t have any of the tools yet. I feel a lot of sympathy for people in that position.

Compared to the very focused and mature 20-something-year-old Emma in After the Revolution, Leo seems adrift.

I think they are both people who haven’t done real self-examination. Emma’s response to that is to run as fast as she can and cling very strongly to her beliefs; Leo’s response is to stay still and do nothing. They have a lot in common, and I don’t think Emma’s approach is better than Leo’s, even if she is a more productive citizen and looks a lot better on paper. They are both people who have a lot of growing up to do, and they both do that in the context of the plays.

We first hear about Leo in After the Revolution: Vera says, “All of Janie’s kids are nice people but they aren’t political,” with Leo and his sister, Lily, in mind. Later, Emma argues with her stepmother, “Good politics in my generation is different from good politics in your generation.” Do you consider Leo a political character? Does Leo consider himself political?

Yes, I think he considers himself political. I think his politics run more towards a gentle version of anarchy than towards socialism. He considers himself political in a very contemporary way. I think he has certain causes that he really relates to: the green movement/environmentalism, for example. I don’t think he has an extremely cohesive political philosophy. He has a collection of causes that seem pretty important to him.
Do you think that this is a weakness of our generation: our pick-and-choose style of politics?

I know my more hardcore leftist relatives definitely feel that way very strongly. I have conflicting feelings about it, which ended up in *4000 Miles*. On the one hand, I feel some mourning/grief for my generation lacking a kind of older ideology that was very cozy in certain ways. It was all-encompassing and clear and organized and it united a lot of people.

On the other hand, of course I’m glad I wasn’t raised in Stalinist Russia. As an artist I’m someone who spends a lot of time questioning and wondering and equivocating, and it wouldn’t be a comfortable fit for me to adhere so strongly to one kind of dogma. So, on the one hand I do feel like something has been lost, but on the other hand I can say, “It’s okay to be thoughtful and confused and all over the place.” I think there are advantages to both approaches.

Right after you graduated from college, you went on a cross-country bike ride with Habitat for Humanity. What was that like?

There were two routes: the northern route and the southern route, and each had 30 riders. I was on the southern route, and we began in New Haven and ended in San Francisco and our midpoint was Kansas. It was grueling. I went into it very blithely. I didn’t train: I went on one or two 25-mile rides, but I was 21 and in reasonably good shape and thought I’d be fine.

The first week or two were dreadful. I was in terrible, terrible pain all the time. It was early June and we had a spell of cold, rainy weather, and I really, really questioned whether I could do it. I hadn’t had that kind of challenge—one that was so straightforward and that I felt so unequal to—in a long time. Even as I got a lot stronger and the cycling became easier, it required a certain mindset. I had to narrow my focus down to just getting through the next day. It was incredibly exhausting. Emotionally so. Just the feeling of, “I’m not sure whether I can do this.”

How long was the trip?

It was 4,250 miles and we did it in eight weeks.

Was it rewarding as well as grueling?

Yes.

In the moment, or looking back now?

No, it was rewarding in the moment. It was a rare experience. You felt every day, “This is something I am going to remember for the rest of my life.” Especially as we cleared the Northeast and ended up in places I’d never seen, with landscapes I had never seen—especially once we got to the Rockies, Utah, Colorado, and Nevada. I was very aware of
being in the midst of something really important and meaningful that would stay with me forever.

When your ride ended in San Francisco, did you spend a lot of time here?
A week or two. I've been to San Francisco a couple times. I saw *The Imaginary Invalid* at A.C.T. when I was working on *The Wendy Play* with the Young Conservatory.

What was the experience of working on *The Wendy Play* like?
It was great. The Young Conservatory is unbelievable. I had done the production once before in New Haven in a workshop setting, but it was amazing to have a cast of such talented young actors.

Was *The Wendy Play* the first time you used your own life as material for a play?
I don’t know that my plays are that much more personal than anyone else’s, although I end up talking about it a lot. In that play, there is a character that seems an awful lot like me, and I haven't really done that since then to the same extent. That was perhaps the most personal play I’ve written.

After finishing your 4,250-mile bike ride, you returned to New York and lived with your grandmother for six months. In *4000 Miles*, Leo only lasts one month with Vera. What was your experience like?
It was amazing in the end because we had to get through some really difficult times, and the act of getting through them brought us closer, I would say. I had just graduated from college and had to start my life as an actor in New York City, so I was incredibly anxious and turned around. Then trying to live with a new roommate from a very different generation, who I think had expectations of me as a roommate that I really didn't understand to begin with. At age 21–22, I didn't really have the emotional tools to navigate the situation gracefully. So, we had some bad fights. Which is weird. I'm not a person who gets into a lot of fights, but we had some really tense times.

What were the expectations she had of you?
Simple things like cleanliness. How often I swept my room. I grew up in a very permissive household and then I was in college for a few years, so I wasn't used to having a guardian who had ways of keeping house. I thought I was keeping up to her standards, but I was not. She also had a lot of advice for me. She had been in the theater herself, so she wanted to be helpful to me, but she was in the theater 60–70 years ago and I wasn't particularly appreciative of her help, and I think that angered her. You know: sticky human stuff.
Was there any advice that was particularly out of date?

She kept saying I needed to “knock on the door” of New Dramatists and tell them I was available to do readings, which is actually surprisingly close to being a good idea. She knew what New Dramatists was, and she knew that they did readings: all that was really good, but I don’t think it would have been useful for me to walk in and say, “Hey Todd London, guess what: I’m available to do readings!” That’s what was hard about it. She did know some things, so it was hard to dismiss her outright, but it was also hard to politely explain to her why I wasn’t taking her advice. She would just get mad at me. Every week she would ask, “Have you gone to New Dramatists yet?”

I read that she was disappointed when you decided to stop acting.

Yeah, and I didn’t know how disappointed she was, but she still brings it up all the time. Including at my wedding.

Really?

Yeah: in her toast. She said, “Well, Amy, as you know I really hoped you’d be an actress, and I’m very disappointed about it, but I guess things are going well for you these days, and I’m glad that you found Sam.”

It’s very clear why she became a character in your plays.

Yes.

In a recent New York Times article about 4000 Miles and your relationship with Leepee, she said that you quote her verbatim in the play. Which lines are hers?

Scene four, in the speech to Bec about Vera’s first husband. It wasn’t like I interviewed Leepee and transcribed it, but I heard those stories a lot and I got as close as I could get to what she would actually say if she were standing there telling a story.

Do you still visit your grandmother often?

Sure, she lived with us during the hurricane [Hurricane Sandy] because she lost her power. Her power’s back on now.

Do you miss acting?

Yeah. I was just in rehearsal all day with my amazing cast for The Great God Pan at Playwrights Horizons, and when I watch the people who do my plays I’m glad I’m not acting because I couldn’t do what they’re doing. I recognize that my talent just wasn’t enough to do the kind of work I would have really loved to do, but I do miss it.
How has your training as an actor influenced your playwriting?

I’m sure mostly in ways that are not entirely conscious, but I think there’s something to my actor training that taught me, as an actor, you are always doing something—that the word “act” is relating to “active” and “action.” Every moment of a play, there’s something happening. I think that I understand that more instinctively than I would had I not been an actor first. You learn that when you write plays, but when you know what it is to have to say a line even if you don’t know why you are saying it—“What am I trying to do to this person?”—I am sure that informs your writing.

In college I did Craig Lucas’s play *Blue Window*, and I think that, of the plays I acted in, was the most influential, in that there was something that I learned about an ensemble play in which the story isn’t entirely linear, straightforward, or carefully plotted but is about human behavior and people affecting each other. I think I’ve started to understand that in some of my later plays.

Do you think your actor training makes you a better rewriter of plays? If you hear an actor struggle with a line, are you more ready to change it?

I hope that’s true. I think I do really respond to what I hear in the room. Just today with *The Great God Pan*, I made some cuts because I was watching this actor—Peter Friedman, who is one of my favorite actors in the world and was in *After the Revolution*. There’s this little sequence where I thought, “I haven’t seen that work, and at this point I’m pretty sure it’s my fault because I believe if there was something in it, Peter would have found it.” I’ve been fortunate enough to work with actors with whom I generally feel like I can reach a point of certainty that, when something is not working, I understand it is my responsibility to change it.

How much rewriting did you do with *4000 Miles*? Unlike *After the Revolution*, which is pushing toward a very clear decision, it seems as though *4000 Miles* could have gone in many different directions. Were there routes you started down that you eventually abandoned?

The scene that I rewrote the most was scene nine—the Skype scene between Lily and Leo. It had several prior iterations. At first it was a phone call to Allison (the fourth member of the foursome and Micah’s girlfriend before he died). I spent a lot of time rewriting that phone call, until I eventually abandoned the idea of it being with Allison. It became Lily, but it was still a phone call. It wasn’t until rehearsal (or shortly before rehearsal) that it became a conversation over Skype.

These are storytelling issues I was dealing with. The question was: Does Leo need to have some sort of resolution with Allison to take the next step forward? I felt, for a while, that he did, but then I realized that Lily is a much bigger hanging question. We find out in scene three that they’ve kissed, which has the audience wondering what is going on with that relationship and whether he is going to address it.
That was the major rewrite, but to more closely answer your question: I was very aware of and interested in and worried about how little plot there was. How elusive Leo’s journey was. I didn’t rewrite it a lot. I wrote the last scene before I wrote a lot of the other scenes and knew it was the end. Then it was about figuring out the intermediate steps.

By the end of the play, has Leo grown up?
I wouldn’t say he’s grown up, but I think he’s got momentum in the right direction.

Has Vera changed?
I think this may be her last real intimacy with another person—or, at least, this is an intimacy that is really different from the ones she’ll have for the rest of her life. Vera has learned a more peaceful way of letting go. Not to say she is on death’s door. I think she’s got some years left in her. But there is something she is able to let go of.

The Story of Amy Herzog’s First Play

Amy Herzog: This was third grade and my class was doing a zoology unit. Our assistant teacher, Mr. Hogan, announced that we would create a play in which every student would play a different animal. But get this: there would be one human. A young woman decides to become a zoologist and the plot is born.

Those of us with acting aspirations auditioned for Mrs. Lefelt, the English department chair. The sides were from a dramatic adaptation of “Rumpelstiltskin,” and as I remember it was a very emotional scene. We were whittled down to two—it was me versus Alexis for the lead. Alexis would later be Lucy to my Sally, Ms. Hannigan to my Annie, the Witch to my Little Red. . . . I am delaying the painful revelation that Mrs. Lefelt ultimately chose Alexis to play the human. I was to be one of 25 representatives of the animal kingdom. I would have to make a costume out of construction paper and tell Alexis about the salient features of my species.

This would not do. I approached Mr. Hogan and offered to write the play, and because it meant he didn’t have to or because I was obviously going to be a pain about it he agreed. In my rendering of the story we had outlined as a class, there was one important addition: the protagonist had a sister—the sensible, buttoned-up foil to Alexis’s impractical dreamer. I remember one of my lines, which I wrote for myself all in caps: "THIS TIME YOU’VE REALLY GONE OFF THE DEEP END!!!" If anyone resented my flagrant hijacking of the collaborative process, no one said anything to my face.

SOURCE Adam Szymkowicz, “I Interview Playwrights Part 139: Amy Herzog,” Adam Szymkowicz (April 6, 2010), http://aszym.blogspot.com
A Lived-In Space
An Interview with Scenic Designer Erik Flatmo

By Cait Robinson

Playwright Amy Herzog has a reputation for borrowing—with unsparing honesty—from her family’s history in her work. When 4000 Miles premiered at Lincoln Center Theater in June 2011, designers did not have to go far to follow the playwright’s lead. Herzog’s 95-year-old grandmother, Leepee Joseph, on whom the character Vera is based, has lived in a sunny eighth-floor apartment on West 10th Street in Greenwich Village for decades. When Joseph attended her granddaughter’s play, she found not only herself, but also much of her apartment replicated onstage.

Having previously designed the sets for Higher, Scapin, November, The Government Inspector, and The Imaginary Invalid at A.C.T., scenic designer Erik Flatmo was excited to take on the challenges of creating Vera’s apartment, thousands of miles away from the setting that had sparked the playwright’s imagination. Flatmo did not have the luxury of getting on the subway to pay Joseph a visit; instead, he worked from a variety of sources to overcome the obstacles of filling The Geary’s large stage with an intimate New York apartment. While in the midst of designing the set’s furniture and props, Flatmo took time to speak with us about gathering inspiration and personalizing a space.

At the start of 4000 Miles, Vera is 91 and has lived alone in the years following her husband’s death. How does your design reflect that?

That’s both what challenges and what interests me the most about 4000 Miles. I am at a point in my career where I approach projects through the characters and how they live. I’m still working on the props and set dressings—in this play, they are a huge endeavor, but they’re very important to creating the feel of the apartment. This is a place where she’s lived a very interesting life. A lot has happened here.

Many people who live for a long time accumulate a lot of stuff, but this isn’t a show about hoarding. I don’t want to make the character into a cartoon or a joke about old people. For example, one of the stage directions indicates that the room is filled with books. As a set designer, you read that, and you think, “Oh my God! Books everywhere!” But I think that would be a very facile and misguided way to approach the design. The books are actually a sign of another time, a less-media-centered era, when people read and owned and discussed books. I compare the apartment to a piece of sculpture that is
very old. When you see it, you have this sense that the ideas that went into creating it were of a time prior to your existence.

**How did you go about your research?**

I prefer sources that were not created with a design perspective in mind. One of the books I’ve used a lot is *The Jewish Writer*, by photojournalist Jill Krementz. It’s a book of portraits, and many are taken in these great old New York apartments. I think that, like Vera, writers tend to live a life of accumulation that is reflected in their spaces. I’m sure most people look at Krementz’s book and focus on the faces of the subjects, but I think, “Oh, look at that window in the background! Look at that galley kitchen! I can steal those details.” This approach makes research difficult, of course, because if you went online or to the library and searched for New York apartments, this book would not come up. You have to approach it in an oblique way and say, “What can I search out that might incidentally include spaces that will interest me?” So I am a horrible hoarder of books and magazines.

Biographies and documentaries were very useful to me. For example, the recent documentary about Diana Vreeland [*The Eye Has to Travel*] shows her being interviewed in her New York apartment, talking about how she came of age in the 1920s. The
documentary *Alice Neel* about the painter shows her walking down a book-filled hallway in her New York apartment, where she lived for 50 years. Of course, she is not Vera, but the idea of this elderly woman walking down this long hallway felt significant to me.

**How did you begin your design?**

Finding and believing in the architecture of the apartment was one of the first things I wanted to accomplish. When I read the script, I felt immediately that there was a hallway. The image of a front door opening onto a long hallway feels very New York to me. I lived in New York for a time, and I thought of all the apartments I had seen and lived in, particularly one on 157th Street, and I redid its layout in my mind.

I was also interested in the production design of the film *Fatal Attraction*. Normally, I wouldn't do research from a fictional film, because often it’s a secondary source—a production designer’s idea of a place. But that apartments in the film weren't sets; they were real places in New York. I captured film stills from *Fatal Attraction* so I could see the long hallways and the French doors. (One of the apartments is up for sale now, so you can see it on a real estate website. It’s very labyrinthine.) Of course, in the stills it’s dressed with furniture and props for the film, and *Fatal Attraction* is nothing like *4000 Miles*, but it was the bones that interested me, and the mood, the sense of mystery.

It was only after I completed the ground plan that I realized how important it was to have two bedrooms—Vera’s bedroom and the room where Leo sleeps—at polar ends of the apartment. It feels right to have these two very different characters trying to connect over a distance.

**Was it challenging to put such a sprawling space onstage?**

It was. If you look at the script and make a list of all the rooms that it references, you’ll find it’s very long. I was concerned with showing that the apartment was a large one, even though all the action takes place in one room. At the same time, it’s also important that the size of the apartment doesn’t become a display of wealth. If you rent an apartment in New York or San Francisco today, the idea that someone can afford such a large space is a bit mind-boggling. Vera is not rich, though—she has the apartment because it’s rent-controlled. I want the audience to get the idea that it is from a time when space wasn't at a premium to the extent that it is today.

Most sets that have lots of doors and rooms belong to farcical comedies, where a lot of the humor comes from those doors opening and slamming. When you watch sitcoms on television, the front door opens directly onto a living room space for comic effect: the funny neighbor comes over and tells a joke the minute they walk in. I didn't want this to feel like a comedy set. When I realized that it doesn’t have the same sightline concerns as comedies do, it freed me up. We could have a long hallway with doors off of it, and if every door to every room isn’t seen, that’s okay—they’re implied.
Freedom with Age
An Interview with Actor Susan Blommaert

By Amy Krivohlavek

Susan Blommaert never intended to become an actor. Although she took on peripheral technical duties in theater productions during high school and college, she didn’t set foot onstage herself until she was in her mid 20s. After moving from her hometown of Chicago to the dunes area of Indiana, she was looking for something to do between gigs as a stylist for a freelance photographer. A woman in a bookstore told her about a local summer theater, and Blommaert decided to attend the planning meeting for their upcoming season. “I thought I could volunteer to be an usher or clean up latrines or something,” she remembers.

Instead, as the director began to talk about the upcoming play, a production of Count Dracula, Blommaert was inspired by the character of R. M. Renfield, Dracula’s lunatic assistant, who is typically played by a man. “I don’t know what possessed me,” she says, “but I walked up to the director and asked, ‘Did you ever think of casting a woman in that role?’” She auditioned, he cast her, and her career began. It was a life-changing moment: “When I first walked onstage, I thought, ‘Oh, no, I like this.’ If I had really known what it was like to be an actor, I never would have had the nerve to pursue it. But I didn’t know, and I sort of blindly blundered into it, and it turned out to be a great thing for me to do—of course, I could have made more money if I had continued to be a stylist, but there you go.”

Blommaert began commuting an hour and a half to study acting in Chicago, where she joined one of the first acting classes taught by actor William H. Macy at the St. Nicholas Theatre Company, newly founded by Macy, David Mamet, and Steven Schachter. She moved to New York in 1976, and that city has been her artistic hub ever since. Her early days in New York were difficult, as she struggled to launch her career. “It’s much easier to go to a place like A.C.T.’s acting program, where there is a bit of entrée into the business. When you come from nowhere, it’s way more difficult. I really just continued to study and clawed my way to the next thing—work begets work.”

Opportunities in New York diminished during the 1990s, and Blommaert spent much of the decade finding film and television work in L.A. She never officially relocated, but her frequent trips enabled her to work for a few months, save up enough money for the year, and then come home to New York to do theater. Her long and varied career
includes such film and television credits as Murphy Brown, Edward Scissorhands, The X-Files, Ally McBeal, Law & Order, and, more recently, Kinsey, Doubt, The Sopranos, The Good Wife, The Big C, and Boardwalk Empire. She has always played character parts, and she laughs as she remembers her “death reel”—an audition video that compiles multiple scenes from her early screen career, including many that show her killing someone or being killed. She still ends her current demo with her character’s hanging in Stephen King’s film Pet Sematary. “You’ve got to have a sense of humor about it,” she explains.

During this period, Blommaert witnessed the emergence of television as a more serious and sought-after performance genre. As shows became richer (both in terms of artistic depth and production values), television shook off its earlier low-brow stigma and began to attract top-tier writers, directors, and actors.

Still, the theater—with its immediacy and live audience—remains Blommaert’s first love. She has appeared across the country in many regional theaters and off Broadway with some of New York’s most respected theater companies, including The Public Theater and The Vineyard Theatre. Her sole Broadway credit came as Miss Lynch in the recent revival of the musical Grease. She cherished the opportunity to be part of the Broadway community. “One afternoon between shows I walked up onto the red staircase near the TKTS Discount Booth in the center of Times Square, and I made myself stand there, turn around, and take it all in,” she remembers. “I told myself, ‘Just remember that you did this.’ Things come and go in this business and quickly become memories, but I wanted to remember that I was there, standing there, working there. That was my moment of, ‘Okay, I did this. Next!’”

When the New York production of 4000 Miles transferred from The Duke on 42nd Street to Lincoln Center Theater, Blommaert was brought in to audition to understudy the role of Vera Joseph, a feisty and frank 91-year-old grandmother. As it happens, Blommaert is friends with Mary Louise Wilson, who was playing Vera—the two own houses in neighboring towns in upstate New York. “When they offered it to me, I emailed Mary Louise and asked, ‘So, if I accept this job as your understudy, will you still be my friend?’” she remembers. “She said, ‘Well, darling! How great! You’re far too young, but then, so am I.’”

For A.C.T.’s production of 4000 Miles, Blommaert is joined by two other understudies from the Lincoln Center production: Reggie Gowland, who plays Leo, and Julia Lawler, who plays Leo’s girlfriend, Bec. “I know Reggie like I would know my own grandson,” she says. “I have a relationship with him already, and I haven’t seen him for a while now, so it will be a lovely reunion.”

At 65 years old, Blommaert is a quarter century younger than the character she plays in 4000 Miles, and she is looking forward to making the role her own. In addition to her beginnings as Renfield, she points to Nestor, another traditionally male role, in an off-Broadway production of Troilus and Cressida, as one of her favorite theater experiences. “The director wanted Nestor to be a very, very old man, and it was freeing,” she says. “My feeling is that Vera probably never cared too much about what people thought about her.
or her opinions. I think there's a freedom with age to say what you think or do what you need to do—there's not enough time to care too much about stuff that doesn't matter.”

Blommaert spoke to us a few weeks before *4000 Miles* rehearsals began at A.C.T.

Amy Herzog has looked at older characters in a serious way in a number of her plays. It’s a wonderful thing, because it doesn’t happen often enough. There’s a wealth of material there with older characters. I remember Amy once talking about the idea of disappearing—how when you’re older, you feel like you’re disappearing. And she has made Vera indelible.

She’s not an over-simplified caricature.

Oh, my God, no. That’s the brilliant thing about the characters in this piece and in any piece I’ve seen or read by Amy: they’re amazingly rich in their layering. They’re so truthfully human.
We love the idea of a “feisty grandmother,” but then Vera also surprises us with her moments of pathos and compassion.

That’s what I mean by the richness of the characters. There is nobody in the show who doesn’t go someplace and experience something. I love the hairpin turns that happen—you’re on one road and, boom, you just fell off onto another track.

The relationships are amazing, even relationships with characters that you don’t ever see. You totally get the relationship of Leo and his mother and Vera to her stepdaughter—and you understand everyone’s relationship to Leo’s sister. That’s not easy to do in the amount of pages Amy has written. She’s amazing at character study and so observant of what it means to be human and intricate.

How do you approach playing a character who is much older than you?

I certainly don’t want to go out there and “play old.” I’m rather quick, myself, and I walk fast, so I will be working on my physical being and adding elements of Vera’s age. Although I know lots of people in their 80s and 90s (my own mother is 96!), they’re all so different in how fragile and feisty they are. For me, it’s coming up with what’s valid and truthful and believable for me to make sure that Vera is what she needs to be.

In addition to her physical restrictions, Vera is also cognizant of what she’s mentally losing—often not being able to find the right words, for example.

As you get older, it’s just hateful. It happens—it just happens. And Vera’s apartment is full of books! So for someone who is a word person, not to have the word they want has to be horrifying.

What are the most challenging moments of the play?

I think that the acceptance of life where it is, what it is, at any given moment is a huge challenge for anyone, including Vera. And also for Leo—all of the characters in the piece have this challenge ultimately at some point—the acceptance of what it is to be alive, where you are, and how you go on. That’s really hard, in a lot of ways, especially when you have loss and grief, like Leo. Or when you have loss, obviously, like Vera has, and will continue to have, because of her age, including the loss of parts of herself. She puts up a really good fight, a really good fight—and obviously she will continue to do that. That’s the acceptance part. You’re just going to continue to live the best way that you can.

That really speaks to the heart of the play and why people connect with it—wherever you are in your life, there are challenges.

What’s lovely about this piece is that, wherever you are in your life, there’s someone in the play who you’ve been, you are, or you’re going to be.
Did you have a chance to meet Amy Herzog’s grandmother?
Yes, I did. I met her at opening night in New York. She is absolutely amazing—extraordinary. She was 95 then, I think, and right there partying.

There was a photo of her in the New York Times demonstrating as part of the recent Occupy Wall Street protests!
That’s interesting, because I think that’s what Leo would have been doing. I love the fact that she’s still out there. In the play, Vera’s probably more of a pinko, and he’s probably more Greenpeace. They have an awful lot in common, these two people. It’s a coming of age for both of them. Obviously, you’re never too old or too young to be learning from each other. They are two very interesting, smart, opinionated people who eventually take the time to hear one another.

Let’s hope that more and more characters like Vera will be written.
I think there is more of an awareness of this need, especially as the baby boomers age—they want to see themselves! It would be nice to hear more of the rich wisdom of age that’s out there that we sometimes ignore. Older people have a lot of good things to say—a lot of stupid things, too [laughter], but that’s the nice thing about age: you might be disappearing, but at least you get to do and say what you want in the meantime!
At Home with Vera/Leepee Joseph
Family Connections in the Plays of Amy Herzog

By Dan Rubin

**emma:** I’m neglectful and self-righteous and can’t admit when I’m wrong.

**mel [laughing]:** Well, you’re a Joseph. You have some good qualities too.

—Amy Herzog’s *After the Revolution*

Amy Herzog’s *4000 Miles* is the second play to deal with members of the Joseph clan, based largely on Herzog’s extended family—specifically her father’s stepfamily through the second marriage of his mother, Leepee. After her philandering first husband, Arthur (Herzog’s biological grandfather), divorced her, Leepee married Joe Joseph, a blacklisted communist with three children by his first wife. The current political makeup of Herzog’s relations is somewhere left of Left. “In my family, ‘liberal’ is kind of a dirty word. It suggests you are pretty far right of everyone else,” Herzog told journalist Patrick Pacheco in April 2012.

The fictionalized Josephs first appeared in Herzog’s semi-autobiographical 2010 play *After the Revolution*, which follows 26-year-old Marxist Emma Joseph after she learns that her grandfather, also named Joe Joseph, spied for the Soviets during World War II. Emma knew that her grandfather had been blacklisted as a Communist after appearing before a Senate subcommittee on un-American activities, but her family led her to believe that he had been questioned simply because of his ideology—not his actions, which he lied about under oath. Discovering the truth sends Emma’s own political convictions into a tailspin. In fact, the entire family mythology built around Joe’s life collapses in Emma’s mind. She grew up angry at her biological grandmother Tessie for abandoning Joe when he was blacklisted. Vera (Leepee’s stand-in) met Joe when he was penniless and depressed, and she accepted him, proud to marry a man who stood before the committee and took the Fifth. But the revelation of Joe’s espionage undermines the legend. What if, Emma wonders, Tessie left Joe because he was actively putting their family in jeopardy by committing treason for a government a world away? It was a question Herzog’s own family had to grapple with when a similar revelation about the real Joe Joseph surfaced in 1999, two years after his death.

*After the Revolution* introduced audiences to Vera as a supporting character who at once provides comic relief and an exacting firebrand political perspective. The character
was forged from Herzog’s interactions with Leepee, whom she has described as “funny, dry, sassy, and devastating”—and “not grandmotherly.” The playwright said in May 2011, “I interact with her in a complicated way, like I interact with people of my own generation.”

As a schoolgirl, Leepee demonstrated for free school lunches, and she was arrested at the age of 12 for picketing. As a young woman, Leepee worked on the Federal Theatre Project of the Work Projects Administration and took acting classes. She spent decades working as a theater production secretary. Like the fictional Vera, the 96-year-old New Yorker lives alone in her Greenwich Village apartment. She remains as politically active as her age will allow, and she participated in the Occupy Wall Street protests by carrying a “Tax the #$&%!ing Rich” placard around town. “The only way change ever takes place is if you believe in something, and you work for it,” she told New York Times reporter Alexis Soloski in March 2012.

Vera is nine years younger in After the Revolution than she is in 4000 Miles. She is a bit feistier and, at times, more inappropriate, but her hearing and sharpness have already started to erode. In After the Revolution, Joe’s death is much fresher in Vera’s mind: he passed only a year and a half before that play begins. Vera is pleased that Emma has followed in the political footsteps of Joe, but she says she is glad Joe is not alive to see how “the rest of the grandchildren aren’t in the political scene at all.” This apolitical brood includes Emma’s cousin, Leo, the central character of 4000 Miles. Leo is the son of Vera’s stepdaughter Jane, who, we learn in After the Revolution, has taken advantage of capitalistic America to accumulate a degree of wealth.

The circumstances of the politically charged After the Revolution allow audiences to see a side of Vera that is alluded to but not focused on in 4000 Miles, which is primarily a domestic play about unlikely roommates. When Emma comes to Vera for an explanation of Joe’s questionable dealings, her grandmother defends her husband’s actions:
Listen, Joe was a member of the Communist Party, you know that. Anybody with a beating heart and a half a brain was back then, that’s hard for people to understand nowadays, because people have become so . . . whaddayacallit. Apathetic. But it’s true. And the Russians were really the ones fighting the war, not us, and some people were very happy to sit back and let them die, even some people in the party, and some people like your grandfather were not. You’re talking about ethics, well those were his ethics, not to turn his back on his comrades who were fighting fascism.

At the end of After the Revolution, Emma concludes that her grandfather’s activities were dishonest and dishonorable, but that his greater legacy is “his belief in a society where regardless of your race or political persuasion you may speak out without fear.” Vera reprimands her granddaughter for what she says amounts to “naming names” and declares: “The fact is you weren’t there back then so you can’t ever really know what it was like. You can look back and say we did this wrong, or we did that wrong, but the point is it was for something. I look at most people your age, at your cousins, and I don’t know what they’re for. I don’t know how they’re going to feel when they get to be my age. When they look back and see how they spent their time. I look back and I feel proud.”

Like Vera, Leepee was disappointed that Herzog seemed to be using After the Revolution to question whether her husband had done the right thing. “I thought what my husband had done was perfectly legitimate,” Leepee contends. Herzog admits, “She would have preferred a play that would have been a wholehearted agitprop defense.” The playwright worried that her grandmother would also be put off by her depiction in 4000 Miles of Vera succumbing to age and losing her faculties. But Leepee read the script three times in advance of the show’s opening, and when she saw it in the theater, she loved it.

Herzog has written other plays based directly on her own experiences (The Wendy Play), about her relationship with her mother (Love Song in Two Voices), and set in her hometown of Highland Park, New Jersey (The Great God Pan). “Anything I write,” she explains, “has a lot of points of contact with my own experience.” But she is aware of the risks associated with using one’s family as source material. She reported that there were initially “some storms going on, some unhappiness” from her family in regards to her work. Pacheco asked the playwright, “What dictates your ethical approach to what you will and will not divulge about them?” Herzog answered: “It entails a lot of communication so they know what’s going on. My grandfather’s name was already in print but I did have some real anxiety about naming his name in writing the play about him. In terms of the living members, I am inspired by what I’ve witnessed, but what I write ultimately ends being a work of fiction. And I try not to talk about what’s true and what’s not in order to protect their privacy. So far it’s worked. Nobody’s disowned me.”

Biking TransAmerica

By Cait Robinson

The most popular and best-known cross-country bike route is the TransAmerica Trail, which runs between Yorktown, Virginia, and Astoria, Oregon. As the title of Herzog’s play suggests, it is just over 4,000 miles long, though many cyclists, like Leo, modify the standard route to create their own. The TransAmerica Trail is popular for its diverse scenery, historical landmarks, and national parks. In the decades following its official establishment in 1976, bike shops, campgrounds, and cyclist-friendly restaurants and lodgings have sprung up to service the route’s many travelers. Older establishments have kept journals for passing riders to fill out over the decades, providing an informal cyclist’s history of the route.

Though cyclists ride the trail in both directions, beginning in the East at the Yorktown Victory Monument (which commemorates the final battle of the Revolutionary War) is traditional. Many cyclists dip their rear tire into the Atlantic Ocean to mark the beginning of their adventure. The first leg of the trail traverses the Appalachian Mountains and numerous Civil War landmarks, including the Cold Harbor Battlefield, site of one of the Union Army’s bloodiest losses. Cyclists can also visit Monticello, the plantation of Thomas Jefferson, the grounds of which are preserved today as a museum.

Once past the Kentucky state line, cyclists can expect days of tobacco fields, coal mines, and, as one blogger writes, “a lot of single-wide mobiles, dogs, roosters, coal trucks, and . . . roadside trash,” as well as the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln and Old Fort Harrod, a reconstruction of the state’s first settlement. The trail through Illinois leads to the mighty Mississippi River, made more impressive by its expansive flood plain, and into Missouri. The trail passes through the small towns of the Ozarks, which have been hit hard by the recent recession. Despite the many boarded-up storefronts, each town still seems to boast at least one all-you-can-eat lunch stop decorated with American flags.

The rolling plains subside into Kansas’s famously flat prairies, where the trail leads through more small towns (including Cassoday, “Prairie Chicken Capital of the World,” population 129), cornfields, sunflower fields, cow pastures, Mennonite churches, and oil wells. Kansas has a reputation for friendly faces, and Yodeling Katy, an elderly local of Chanute, is one of the tour’s most famous. Many cyclists make a point to stop at her house and are rewarded with a song played by Katy on her ukulele. The TransAmerica
Trail connects briefly with the nineteenth-century Santa Fe Trail in Kansas, and historical sites documenting America’s first commercial highway dot the roads.

The trail from Western Kansas to Pueblo, Colorado, the trail’s largest city, is dusty and sparsely populated, offering little company other than prairie dogs, pronghorn antelope, and meadowlarks. Trees are few; instead, the highway is lined with bunch grass, fragrant sagebrush, rabbit bush, yucca, and prickly pear cacti. Cyclists find little to no protection from sunburn, and dehydration and heat-induced fatigue are common. Pueblo, whose bustling streets and city traffic are a stark contrast to the desolate highways that precede them, is situated at the base of the Rocky Mountains, marking the end of the Midwest’s level, forgiving roads. The TransAmerica Trail turns north here, climbing the Rockies to Hoosier Pass—its highest point at 11,542 feet above sea level.

Wyoming offers riders a starkly beautiful landscape. The sagebrush-lined trail passes through eerie ghost towns and the impressive glacier-capped peaks of Grand Teton National Park before leading to Yellowstone National Park. At Yellowstone, cyclists can see the park’s famous Old Faithful geyser, Yellowstone Lake (the largest freshwater lake in North America), and Yellowstone Caldera (the continent’s largest supervolcano), all results of the park’s location over a volcanic hotspot. Yellowstone is also home to numerous endangered and threatened species: elk, bison, wolves, and grizzly bears.

After leaving the park, cyclists cross the southwestern tip of Montana, which Lewis and Clark explored 200 years ago and was later settled by forty-niners during the Gold Rush. Missoula, Montana, is the home of the Adventure Cycling Association, the group that officially established the TransAmerica Trail. The association’s headquarters are something of a mecca and offer welcome snacks and a resting place before sending visitors off toward the especially mountainous and forested roads of Idaho. After crossing the Oregon border, cyclists ride through the imposing Hell’s Canyon, carved over millions of years by the Snake River’s waters, and along the still-visible wagon wheel ruts made by settlers on the Oregon Trail. After crossing the dormant volcano peaks of the Cascade Mountains, the last mountain range between cyclists and the Pacific Coast, they end their journey on the sandy shore of Astoria, Oregon. It is traditional to dip the front wheel of one’s bicycle into this ocean, as well, to symbolically complete the trip.

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The touring cyclists who populate the TransAmerica Trail are a diverse group, but the sheer length of the journey selects for those who can afford to devote about three consecutive months to the trip. Thus, the route enjoys special popularity with college students out of school for the summer, retirees, and professionals with flexible work schedules and the financial security to take time off. Many bike in groups, or purchase tours led by a professional guide, but others prefer to ride solo. Biking across America to raise money for a charity is common, but other cyclists pursue the journey for the personal rewards alone. All are united by an interest in challenging themselves physically, emotionally, or both.

A cyclist might carry as much as 50 pounds of gear—including personal effects, camping equipment, tools, and spare bike parts—on his or her bicycle. Most cyclists prefer to carry their gear in panniers, sets of two bags that can be slung over the front or rear wheel, an additional single pack on an attachable front rack, and a small bag on the handlebars for valuables and cameras. Managing this considerable heft requires both physical endurance and acute self-awareness. A cyclist must patiently pace him- or herself or risk serious injury and fatigue. “Acknowledge strengths and weaknesses,” advises Ed Pavelka, record-breaking ultramarathon cyclist and former executive editor of *Bicycling* magazine and competitive cycling magazine *Velo News*. “Make goals hard, but not too hard. Up to a point, the more challenging or compelling the goal, the better. Past that point, however, a goal can seem so difficult that you stop taking it seriously.”

In addition to being physically rigorous, long-distance touring presents considerable psychological stressors. Touring cyclists are uniquely vulnerable to unforgiving weather, crime, automobile collisions, and animal attacks (dog bites are a common danger that can abruptly end even the most carefully planned trip). In combination with the monotony of long days on the road, the isolation of riding alone (or the constant proximity to one’s traveling companions), and the paucity of personal luxuries, this can cause cyclists considerable stress.

Of course, this is part of the allure. In many cyclists’ blogs and autobiographies, the trials of touring are idealized as the ultimate adventure in self-discovery. “Biking lets you come alive both in body and spirit,” says cycling guru Gary Klein. For many, it is a lost-boy’s way out of an oppressive, adult existence and all that is sacrificed in the
name of maturity: individuality, wonder, risk-taking, and self-sufficiency. “The routes expected of me; the conventional procession towards a secure job, a sensible pension, a respectable-sized gravestone—the roads to ‘success’—just did not appeal to me,” writes career adventurer Alastair Humphreys in his autobiographical book Ten Lessons from the Road. “I did not want to be jolted with the realization—years from now, while waiting one day in the rain for a bus—that life had passed me by.” Blogger Jeff Commissaris echoes this sentiment in a post about launching his TransAmerican ride:

The day I put my two-week notice in to my boss, I never felt better. . . . “Just wanted to tell you that you’ve been doing great work here,” she told me. Blah, it’s always the same BS. We’re all pawns in a stupid game to make money for someone else, while we are encouraged to buy cheap crap, the latest cell phone, plasma TVs, new cars, homes, all to end up in a dump one day, all to build a prison around us that we are then indebted to the corporations for the rest of our lives. For once, I wanted to be truly free. Nothing but the open road, non-committal, nothing to tie me down, nobody to tell me what I needed to do.

To those who share Humphreys’s and Commissaris’s fears, long-distance touring is the ultimate opportunity for escape and self-actualization. The possibility of near or total self-sufficiency off the grid offers cyclists a liberating sense of self-worth as they shirk the convenience and security of day-to-day American life. “I am both more capable and more vulnerable than I ever knew,” writes blogger RJ. “If I can adventure by leg power and good wits across a continent, what else can I do? What’s next?”

What Happened to the Left?
Vera, Leo, and a Century of Life on the Left

By Emily Hoffman

No one saw Occupy Wall Street coming; everyone was too busy sounding the death knell for the American Left. Recent American history—the post-'60s conservative backlash, Republican ascendancy, the first Bush administration, and then the second, the failure to organize an effective movement in opposition to the Iraq War, the apathy of the millennials, and the recent rise of a radical, right-wing grassroots protest movement in the form of the Tea Party (to name just a few episodes)—had left many across the left spectrum despondent. So despondent that, on September 24, 2011, seven days after the first Occupy Wall Street protest at Zuccotti Park, leftist historian Michael Kazin published an op-ed in the New York Times entitled “Whatever Happened to the American Left?” In it, he counseled the Left to seek “a reconnection with ordinary Americans” and to “stop mourning its recent past and start organizing to change the future.”

Weeks later, Kazin was on record championing the Occupiers as the resurgence the Left had been waiting for. He was careful, though, to warn of the dangers of a protest without a movement, tactics without strategy, a sustained commitment to leaderlessness. He wasn’t the only one; a veritable legion of older and wiser left-wingers came forward to offer their suggestions, warnings, and castigations to the Occupiers. They had been burned before; they didn’t want to be burned again.

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Contemporary American politics works in dualities—Republicans v. Democrats, conservatives v. liberals, Right v. Left—where the terms on either side of the “v.” are perceived as essentially interchangeable. Left, liberal, Democrat—whichever way, you voted for Obama. But in truth, there are often starker distinctions to be found within each camp than between them. Speaking in gross simplifications, leftists are revolutionists: communists, socialists, anarchists, progressives, anti-imperialists. They believe, as Kazin puts it, in “a radically egalitarian transformation of society,” a vision which most often entails the dismantling of capitalism as we know it. Liberals, by contrast, favor reform over revolution, prefer a Keynesian economic model (a capitalist system in which government regulates macroeconomics), and hold that government, by redistributing wealth through taxes and programs like social security and medicare, can
ensure basic equality. Though they have been forced to work together for decades, the left-wing coalition has always been made up of uneasy bedfellows.

The twentieth century saw two major waves of leftist activity in the United States. The first came, unsurprisingly, during the Great Depression, when Americans were desperate and disillusioned with a system of corrupt big business that would not take responsibility for plunging the nation into poverty. “The average man,” Henry Ford said in 1931, “won’t really do a day’s work unless he is caught and cannot get out of it. There is plenty of work to do if people would do it.” The next week, according to Howard Zinn, historian of the Left and author of *A People’s History of the United States*, Ford laid off 75,000 workers.

The dire effects of the Depression inspired nationwide protests. In his 1933 book, *Seeds of Revolt*, Mauritz Hallgren compiled newspaper reports from around the country:

Arkansas, January 3, 1931. The long drought that ruined hundreds of Arkansas farms last summer had a dramatic sequel late today when some 500 farmers, most of them white men and many of them armed, marched on the business section of this town. . . . Shouting that they must have food for themselves and their families, the invaders announced their intention to take it from the stores unless it were provided from some other source without cost.

In the summer of 1932, 20,000 veterans of World War I marched on Washington, demanding that Congress pay off their bonus certificates. Most camped: as reporter John Dos Passos wrote, “The men are sleeping in little lean-tos built out of old newspapers, cardboard boxes, packing crates, bits of tin or tarpaper roofing, every kind of cockeyed makeshift shelter from the rain scraped together out of the city dump.” Congress denied their request.

However spontaneous and reactionary these uprisings might sound, solid ground had been laid for them three decades earlier. Union organizing at the end of the nineteenth century had given birth to the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor, which had won major gains for workers on the national railroad and inside coal mines and textile mills at the turn of the century. Though unions experienced a steady decline of influence during the boom years of the ’20s, when times got bad, the infrastructure was in place for wide-scale, organized dissent. A million and a half workers in different industries went on strike in 1934. Groundwork had also been laid by the populist movement of the 1890s, which, though not successful electorally, had articulated a prolabor, anticorporate message that stuck.

The 1930s were the heyday of the American Communist Party, with membership tripling between 1933 and 1939 to approximately 100,000. The economic critique offered by the party found sympathetic ears across the left-wing spectrum and with ordinary working people; the Depression was so shocking, so devastating, that many were willing to entertain the notion that capitalism was fundamentally flawed. Communism had yet to acquire its association with totalitarianism. Stalin had begun his purges, but word had not yet reached the United States; the violence of Mao’s Cultural Revolution
would not come for another 30 years. In 1930s America, communism was for radicals, but it was seen as a viable leftist position. Communists played major roles in organizing labor; they also helped lead the nascent charge for racial equality. When nine black boys were wrongly accused of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931, the Communist Party took up their defense in advance even of the NAACP.

The groundswell of leftist agitation gave teeth to Roosevelt’s New Deal convictions. In 1933, Roosevelt began enacting his program of “Relief, Recovery, and Reform,” the most sweeping government assistance program in the history of the United States and the seed and essence of the liberal view of government potential and responsibility. The Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), the New Deal’s work relief program, made the federal government the largest employer in America (and provided more funding for artists than at any other point in American history). The Wagner Act promoted labor unions; the Fair Labor Standards Act set maximum hours and minimum wages for many categories of workers; social security was established.

For many, the New Deal was a triumph, the cornerstone of the liberal project. Zinn, however, offers a traditional leftist critique:

When the New Deal was over, capitalism remained intact. The rich still controlled the nation’s wealth, as well as its laws, courts, police, newspapers, churches, colleges. Enough help had been given to enough people to make Roosevelt a hero to millions, but the same system that had brought depression
and crisis—the system of waste, of inequality, of concern for profit over human need—remained.

Many staunch leftists saw the New Deal in the same cynical light; their revolution had been defanged.

Still, any leftist would have chosen even the most sinister co-optation over the outright persecution that came two decades later. Zinn writes,

The Left had become very influential in the hard times of the ’30s and during the war against Fascism. The actual membership of the Communist Party was not large—fewer than 100,000, probably—but it was a potent force in trade unions numbering millions of members, in the arts, and among countless Americans. . . . If the Establishment, after World War II, was to make capitalism more secure in the country, and to build a consensus of support for the American Empire, it had to weaken and isolate the Left.

McCarthyism devastated the Left. Through arrests, blacklisting, and the interminable hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a crippling culture of fear and mistrust descended over not only the communist fringe, but over the entire progressive movement. Public sympathy turned against labor, against the entire New Deal coalition, even against Hollywood, with its density of leftist writers and artists. Labor was effectively dismantled. No quarter was left untouched. Robert McNamara, secretary of defense under Kennedy and Johnson, admitted in his 1995 book The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam that the ill-advised decisions in Vietnam were in part a result of the fact that all of the Asia experts in the State Department had been purged during the McCarthy era.

Liberals had been burned by their association with the Communist Party; the only way forward, in the eyes of many on the left, was to come out in vehement opposition to communist principles. Thus, the birth of Cold War liberalism, the final resting place of the Old Left. Cold War liberals staunchly denounced communism and its sympathizers and supported American anticommunist efforts abroad, while they continued to push for equality and New Deal principles on the home front by distancing those policies and ideals from the incendiary party. They supported President Johnson’s vision of a Great Society and his War on Poverty, meant to extend the material privileges of capitalism to the 20 percent of people (African Americans and poor whites) who did not yet receive them.

As the Old Left was being blacklisted, neutralized, liberalized, and fractured nearly out of existence, a New Left was already beginning to form. They were younger, brasher, bent on challenging the mores of a repressed and repressive society. Their critique was not so much economic as it was social, and they were primarily students, not workers. This is the Left we remember, the Left that inspires nostalgia: civil rights, free love, the antiwar movement, the women’s movement. In other words, the ’60s.
The scope of the committed was immense. Within the civil rights movement, for instance, there were the nonviolent followers of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the radical militants of the Black Panthers. In the women’s movement, there were lesbian separatists and Betty Friedan and her housewives. There were the hippies who, in some minds, were working toward the radical transformation of society and, to others, just wanted to do drugs and get laid. Though their goals were varied, the different movements of the 1960s had enough force behind them to coalesce into a zeitgeist. This was the counterculture, and they wanted nothing less and nothing more than to drastically reconstruct American social life.

And then there was a whole bunch of really scared kids who didn’t want to go to Vietnam. As did the Great Depression, the draft provided a unifying issue for ordinary people to rally around. It was more than the symbolic burning of a few draft cards. Sustained, mass dissent eventually so swayed public opinion that the war could not be continued.

What happened next is curious. The zeitgeist evaporated. After the successes of the various campaigns of the ’60s, a conservative backlash and a political splintering of the Left followed, leaving it without a coalition or common goal, without a movement. The Vietnam War had been the last great unifier, and when it was over, the Left had nothing to hold together the feminists, the environmentalists, the gay-rights advocates, and those continuing the fight for racial equality.

One explanation is that labor had never been a big part of the New Left. The postwar years saw an unprecedented improvement in the living standards of the majority of
Americans. The Depression was ancient history, and the economic critique of the ’30s lost much of its persuasive power. The civil rights movement had initially included full employment in its list of demands. The idea was to not only get everyone a seat at the lunch counter, but to give them the ability to buy a hamburger. In fact, as far-fetched as it sounds now, the Humphrey-Hawkins Act, which made full employment an official goal of the federal government, was passed in 1978, due in large part to the extensive lobbying and demonstrating of civil rights activists. Unfortunately, between the time the bill was introduced in 1974 and the time it passed four years later, Congress had so fully gutted it that it was little more than a symbolic victory. Meanwhile, the civil rights movement had moved on. Without an economic critique, the Left lost its power to unite working people.

Instead, identity politics became the name of the game. Identity politics describe a politics based on just that: individual identity. If you are gay, you fight for LGBT rights; if you are a woman, you fight for feminism. If you are black, you continue the fight against racial discrimination. You make your arguments for equality based on your personal experience and identifications. In the ’80s and ’90s, identity politics exploded the way people thought about gender, sexuality, and race. The gay marriage fight today is reaping those dividends—dividends born, also, out of the necessity of organizing to survive the AIDS plague.

Thus parceled, the Left floundered. They could not stop Reagan from coming to power, nor did they fight his racially motivated War on Drugs. They could not mount a meaningful and sustained opposition to the first or second Iraq wars. In 2011, though they rallied and protested, they could not stop the violently anti-union bill put forth by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, which gutted unions’ ability to use collective bargaining. This kind of legislation would have been unthinkable in the 1930s during the heyday of American labor. But at the turn of the twenty-first century, there was no movement.

* As Old and New leftists found stability and asylum in university posts, they watched as a generation of disconnected individualists, concerned with acceptance and recognition over structural reform, came of age. The millennials, children of the baby boomers, took their freedoms and ran with them. Their parents had wanted to live outside of repressive systems; the children seemed to believe they did. This meant that as the older generation passed out of active political participation it was not replaced by its children, who were busy figuring out just what they could get done on the internet. This bore eventual fruit, but for more than a decade, it looked a lot like universal complacency.

Even those who were more traditionally active weren’t out in the streets: they made up the professional class of liberals, legions of NGO workers who did their part to make systems that worked a bit better, that were a bit fairer. This more career-oriented mode of activism brought them stability, but with it also came all of the compromises associated with paid work. Aside from the NGO class, there were boutique leftists, who bought hammer-and-sickle-printed shirts, spun from American cotton. There were
the locavores, who, in the face of globalization, turned inward, hoping to regain some degree of control over the politics of consumption. There were vegans. There were nouveau hippies. There were pockets of young radicals: prison abolitionists in Oakland, anarchists in New Haven. There were countless identity groups fighting for their pet causes. There were the environmentalists with their cars running on cooking oil.

This is the motley crew that showed up, and kept showing up, at Zuccotti Park and around the country, joined, too, by thousands of working people who felt a connection to the rallying cry, “We are the 99%.” Their tactics were drawn from an arsenal of left-wing strategies: mass marches, nonviolent sit-ins, agitprop theater, symbolic destruction of private property, drum circles. There were also strategies more particular to the Occupy movement that came to typify it: the human microphone, nonhierarchical decision making, and, most importantly, occupation.

What were their demands? It became trendy to say that they had none, but that was disingenuous. The truth was that they ranged: from the more liberal focus on regulation and reform, to a more radical vision of social and economic transformation. The philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler said in their defense:

People have asked, so what are the demands? What are the demands all of these people are making? Either they say there are no demands and that leaves your critics confused, or they say that the demands for social equality and economic justice are impossible demands. And the impossible demands, they say, are just not practical. If hope is an impossible demand, then we demand the impossible—that the right to shelter, food, and employment are impossible demands, then we demand the impossible. If it is impossible to demand that
those who profit from the recession redistribute their wealth and cease their
greed, then yes, we demand the impossible.

There were more and less compelling Occupiers, and we saw them all on TV: from
the ones who could articulate a complex critique of neoliberal economic policy, to those
hippie descendants who were still just looking for peace and love. The occupation lasted
for a good six months. But, up against active and often disproportionate hostility from
city governments (who repeatedly used tear gas and S.W.A.T. tactics to evict protestors),
disagreement amongst Occupiers over tactics (exacerbated by a media that highlighted
anarchist practices like destruction of corporate property as the behavior of the “bad”
Occupiers), the arrival of cold weather, and the loss of momentum that can strike any
leaderless movement, the occupation could not hold on forever. The movement, now, is
considered more or less over.

Occupy Wall Street nevertheless marked an enormously powerful discursive moment,
when the fractured Left found each other again in the streets and again heard what it
was to speak with one voice. And that voice spoke of economic inequality, making the
fundamental flaws of American capitalism the focus of mainstream discourse for the
first time, perhaps, since the ’30s. Just as the Great Depression unified Americans in a
critique of laissez-faire capitalism, and the Vietnam War unified much of the country in
a campaign against American imperialism, the Great Recession of 2008 has given the
dissatisfied a new focal point to rally around.

Where is the movement? As technology changes, so too does the face of dissent. The
Occupy network is alive and well on the internet. Occupy’s recent response to Hurricane
Sandy in New York exemplified a provocative new model of group social action. Alan
Feuer wrote in a *New York Times* article titled “Occupy Sandy: A Movement Moves to
Relief”:

Maligned for months for its purported ineffectiveness, Occupy Wall Street has
managed through its storm-related efforts not only to renew the impromptu
passions of Zuccotti, but also to tap into an unfulfilled desire among the
residents of the city to assist in the recovery. This altruistic urge was initially
unmet by larger, more established charity groups, which seemed slow to deliver
aid and turned away potential volunteers in droves during the early days of the
disaster.

Perhaps the New New Left is coming together after all?

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The Backlash Against Communism in America

By Michael Paller

During the 1930s, many young people, like 4000 Miles’s Vera Joseph, joined the Communist Party. They joined not necessarily because they believed in Soviet-style communism (though some did), but because, at that time, the party was the only one in America devoted to liberal causes such as the eradication of racism and poverty at home and fascism abroad. Some joined because unemployment in America was between 25 and 30 percent and at similar levels in European democracies, while in the Soviet Union, they read, there was full employment. Even with Roosevelt’s New Deal, democracy and capitalism seemed doomed. Communism held the key to the future. Most of these young party members were just idealists looking for answers.

There was another side, of course, as the historian Ted Morgan, author of Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America, points out: recovered transcripts have confirmed that the American Communist Party, practically from its beginning, was an active recruiter of Soviet agents. “American Communists by the dozens penetrated the government, some at high levels, and stole scientific and political secrets, including information on the atomic bomb,” Morgan writes.

From its inception in 1918, the Soviet Union was considered to be a dangerous threat to the United States. President Wilson attempted to destabilize the new regime and help its opponents overthrow it. In summer 1919, several prominent American officials received mail bombs, and an anarchist threw a bomb at the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, igniting what became known as the Palmer Raids: a series of attacks on unions, suspected communists, and anarchists. (Most Americans believed they were all vaguely connected.) The goal, in Palmer’s words, was “to rid the country of Red agitators,” whether or not they had actually broken any laws.

In 1935, Martin Dies, a young, ambitious Texas congressman, warned that four million illegal immigrants were lurking in the shadows, threatening the nation’s security. In 1938, following a rash of sit-down strikes and other labor unrest in the car industry, Dies called on Congress to establish a committee to investigate un-American activities, including the spread of communist propaganda. Called the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Dies became its first chairman.
Among the committee’s early goals was undermining the Federal Theatre Project, part of the Federal Arts Program, which put about 25,000 artists to work in their own professions. During its hearings, the committee established the modus operandi it would employ in all its subsequent investigations: subpoena disaffected former employees who would name the names of alleged communists. Lavish praise of the friendly witnesses was followed by hectoring of the accused, whose guilt was generally presumed.

As the paranoid hysteria of the Cold War set in, the committee achieved its greatest notoriety in its investigation of supposed communist influence in show business, which resulted in the blacklisting of hundreds of actors, writers, and other creative people. The specter of Soviet world domination was fed by rumors of high-level espionage that allowed the Soviets to build atomic and hydrogen bombs. Hundreds of federal employees lost their jobs merely on the suspicion of communist sympathies. High profile trials, like those of Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs, preceded hundreds of highly publicized congressional hearings bent on rooting out communist influence.

On February 10, 1951, Senator Joseph McCarthy announced he had a list that contained the names of 205 Communists employed by the State Department. Senator Millard Tydings described McCarthy’s allegations as “the most nefarious campaign of half-truths and untruths in the history of this republic”; Conrad Snow, who headed up the State Department’s Loyalty Review Board, said, “This is McCarthyism—the making of baseless accusations regarding the loyalty and integrity of public officials and employees. . . . The purpose of it all is, of course, not the public interest, but political advancement in a period of public tension and excitement.” Nonetheless, McCarthy was made head of the Committee on Government Operations, as well as its subcommittee, the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which investigated alleged Communist conspiracies in the federal government.

In 1954, McCarthy rashly accused the Army of harboring communist influences. The hearings, broadcast on national television, revealed to the nation his bullying tactics, loose grasp of facts, and desperation to hold the limelight. He was bested by the Army counsel, Joseph N. Welch, in a famous exchange, which ended with Welch demanding of McCarthy, “Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?”

By the time the mid-century witch-hunts ensued, the danger posed by Communist espionage had passed. The various subcommittees of the House and Senate often used unscrupulous means to destroy a threat that either no longer existed or, in the case of theHUAC and its “investigation” of show business, never existed.

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Why You Can’t Find the Right . . . Whaddayacallit

A Brief Introduction to Tip-of-the-Tongue Episodes

By Dan Rubin

vera: You know, there are a lot of bad things about getting old, but the worst one is not being able to find my words. I just hate not being able to find my words, I feel like an idiot half the time.

—4000 Miles

The plot of Anton Chekhov’s short story “A Horsey Name” hinges on a steward’s inability to access a piece of information he has stored in his memory. He needs to recall the name of a particularly adept healer, Jacob something, who would be able to relieve his master’s excruciating toothache. That the healer’s name has something to do with a horse is all the steward can manage to remember. It is only after his master visits a less-preferred dentist that the steward retrieves the name: Jacob Hayes.

Tip-of-the-tongue experiences (TOTs) are the frustrating inability on the part of a speaker to retrieve a desired word. We know we know the elusive information. We are confident that eventually it will come to us. But, in the moment, it is completely inaccessible. We have all experienced what some refer to as an “empty gap” or a “complete blank.” It has also been clumped in with that catchall: absent mindedness.

Without naming it, American philosopher and psychologist William James described the feeling of a TOT in his 1890 book The Principles of Psychology:

The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is intensely active. A sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness and letting us sink back without the longed-for term. If wrong names are proposed to us, this singularly definite gap acts immediately so as to negate them. They do not fit the mould. And the gap of one word does not feel like the gap of another, all empty of content as both might seem necessarily to be when described as gaps.

The first empirical research on TOTs was undertaken by Harvard University researchers Roger Brown and David McNeill, who published their findings in the
landmark article “The ‘Tip of the Tongue’ Phenomenon” in a 1966 edition of the *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*. They described the outward signs of a study participant experiencing a TOT as “unmistakable; he would appear to be in mild torment, something like the brink of a sneeze, and if he found the word his relief was considerable.” They found that TOTs are nearly universal experiences, which occur an average of once a week, with occurrences increasing with age. TOTs are most frequently elicited by the search for a proper name, and often the first letter of the target word is accessible even while the remainder is not. Often the TOT sufferer can access words related to the target word (e.g., *Mayres* or *Colt* when searching for *Hayes*), and about half the time a TOT is resolved during the experience.

A number of studies have fleshed out Brown and McNeill’s findings over the last half century. In addition to being able to recall the first letter of a desired word during a TOT state, people can sometimes access letters from elsewhere in the word, the sound of the word, the number of syllables it has, or how a word might be said in a different language. Alternate words—e.g., the words *vessel* and *vase* when the target word is *urn*—rather than being helpful clues, present themselves repeatedly and involuntarily to the mind even after the speaker has rejected them; they serve as obstructive “blockers” to finding the desired word. Research based on self-reports suggest that TOTs are accompanied by intense frustration followed by significant relief when the TOT is resolved, and there is a strong motivation on the part of the speaker to achieve resolution. TOTs may be more likely when persons are under stress, tired, or unwell. Anxiety about impending memory failure may even precipitate TOTs, especially in older adults.

Retrieval of a targeted word is usually possible, even if it takes several days following the original block. Spontaneous “pop ups” (when the desired information seems to surface out of the blue) are possible after a TOT experience has dissipated, but they are over-reported. Other memories, sensations, and events may trigger the subconscious retrieval of the missing word. A 1982 study found that the most common self-resolution strategies (in which younger adults engage more often than older adults) involve combining the partial structural information that is accessible (first letter, etc.) with contextual information about the word (e.g., a person’s profession, when the target is a name) and visual and auditory mental cues (e.g., a memory of the person’s face).

People of all ages experience TOTs, but frequency does increase with age, especially with regard to proper names (as opposed to abstract words). In fact, they are the most frequently reported memory difficulty among older adults. That TOTs increase over time is interesting, because semantic memory (the ability to consciously recall facts) does not, in fact, deteriorate until very late in life—on average in the eighth decade. Even then, semantic memory shows only a gradual decline.

**SOURCES**

Café Society

The first integrated nightclub in the United States, Café Society was opened in New York City in 1938 by Barney Josephson, a former shoe salesman. He stole the name from writer Clare Boothe Luce (The Women, among others), who used it to denote the wealthy patrons, like herself, of New York’s upscale clubs. Josephson proclaimed his venue to be, “The wrong place for the Right people,” capitalizing the R as a jab at wealthy conservatives. “I wanted a club where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front, a club whose stated advertised policy would be just that,” he said. He opened Café Society in the basement of 1 Sheridan Square. Entertainers included Billie Holiday, Alberta Hunter, Zero Mostel, Jack Gilford, Art Tatum, Sarah Vaughan, Carol Channing, and Teddy Wilson. Customers included Paul Robeson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Langston Hughes, and Dashiell Hammett. Holiday introduced the antilynching song “Strange Fruit” at the club. In 1947, after Josephson’s brother, Leon, refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, business fell off and he was forced to sell the club.

Campari

Campari is a vibrantly red Italian aperitif with a bitter orange taste. It is often mixed with soda.

“Cuba's healthcare is wonderful . . . and literacy, too.”

The People’s Socialist Party, later renamed the Communist Party of Cuba, gained control of Cuba in 1961. Led by Prime Minister Fidel Castro, it used guerrilla warfare to oust the corrupt and oppressive regime of United States–backed military leader Fulgencio Batista and declared the country a communist state and ally of the USSR. In response, the United
States ended all diplomatic relations with Cuba. Since its inception, the Communist Party of Cuba has been the nation’s sole political party, dominated by Fidel Castro and his brother, Raúl Castro, the nation’s current president. “Counter-revolutionary” dissention has been systematically repressed in Cuba; since 1980, hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled to the United States.

Although the nation is impoverished, Cuba has developed a world-class health care system on a shoestring budget. Only $300 per person is spent on health care each year, compared to $7,000 in the United States. This is achieved by keeping the salaries of physicians low and emphasizing primary and preventive care; only 35 percent of doctors specialize. Medical costs to patients are kept low, and, despite the salary cap, there are plenty of doctors—one for every 170 people, twice the per capita average in the United States—because their educations are paid for by the government. Cuba has a system of neighborhood clinics with doctors who are responsible for all the patients living nearby; everyone has access to primary care. Despite these successes, there are medicine shortages and the rich are given preferential treatment.

In 1961, Fidel Castro launched a campaign to address the rampant illiteracy that existed in rural areas. He sent thousands of people who could read and write into the countryside to mentor those who could not. In addition to trained teachers, more than 100,000 literate 10-to-19-year-old students left school to volunteer with the program. By the end of 1961, more than 700,000 rural Cubans had been reached. According to the CIA, literacy in Cuba is currently at 99.8 percent—which is .8 percent higher than the U.S. literacy rate.

**Climbing Wall**

A climbing wall is an artificial vertical structure with grips for hands and feet. Users are usually supported by a rope, or belay, to prevent them from falling. Climbing walls have become a popular urban substitute for rock climbing, and both indoor and outdoor walls have sprung up at many gyms.

**Communism in China**

The Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921 as a study group working within the confines of the Nationalist Party. Before long, however, the Nationalists turned on the Communists...
and purged the party of them. Thus began decades of on-and-off conflict between the two groups until the end of World War II. By that point, popular support for the Communists had grown, setting the stage for the eruption of civil war in 1946. Strong grassroots support, superior military organization and morale, and large stocks of weapons seized from defeated Japanese forces led to Communist victory in 1949 and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Mao Zedong, an early member of the Communist Party of China, quickly rose to prominence. Though inspired by Marxist-Leninist thought, Mao was unique in his mobilization of the country’s hundreds of millions of peasants, with whom he worked to instill a proletarian consciousness. Frustrated by the elitism that arose of the Stalinist model of government, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward, an attempt to introduce a more Chinese form of communism and to improve agricultural and industrial production. The result, however, was a massive decline in agricultural output, which led to famine and millions of deaths.

In an attempt to reassert his waning authority, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to purge the country of bourgeois influence and revive the revolutionary spirit. Stressing egalitarianism and idealizing the peasants’ lack of sophistication, party leaders closed all schools and forced thousands of city workers to receive “profound class education” through agricultural labor in the countryside. Anyone—from students to high-ranking politicians—suspected of harboring elitist or intellectual thoughts could be harassed, imprisoned, or killed. By 1976, an estimated one-and-a-half million people had died and much of the country’s cultural sites and artifacts had been destroyed.

**Evergreen**

Leo is probably referring to Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, a progressive state college founded in 1967. Located 70 miles southwest of Seattle, Evergreen has been described as a “stoner school” but also as an excellent fit for untraditional learners who are graduate school–bound. The school’s mission states, “Faculty members write narrative evaluations to assess student work, rather than reducing performance and progress to a letter grade. The curriculum promotes engagement and collaboration, rather than competition. Students have the freedom, and accountability, to design their education to meet their personal and career goals, without the limits of formalized majors or rigid requirements.” Some have suggested that this lack of rigidity and competition makes Evergreen a less attractive school for career-minded students, but the school was recently ranked one of the country’s best colleges by *U.S. News & World Report.*

“No such thing as a local banana”

A phrase widely found on the internet, “No such thing as a local banana” is a meme meant to raise consciousness about the hidden environmental and social costs of foods not locally grown or sustainably farmed. The banana is among the most popular and inexpensive fruits in America;
as many bananas are consumed each year as apples and oranges combined. But they are also among the most labor-intensive to produce, and because they must be imported from tropical climates (Central and South America, in particular), they have a large carbon footprint. Apples, on the other hand, are much cheaper to produce and are usually grown within a couple hundred miles of consumers. The history of the banana trade is also replete with cruelty and corruption.

Parsons
Parson’s School of Design was founded in 1896 and merged with The New School in 1970. Parsons The New School for Design is considered one of the leading art and design schools in the world.

Peyote
*Lophophora williamsii*, known by the common name peyote, is a spineless cactus found in Southern Texas and Northern Mexico that contains mescaline and other psychoactive alkaloids. It is commonly used as a hallucinogen. For thousands of years, peyote has been used in the religious ceremonies of various Native American tribes. Today, recreational use of the drug is prohibited, but members of the Native American Church are allowed to use it in spiritual contexts.

“Rocky Mountains counselor for a bunch of rich kids”
Leo is likely referring to an outdoor education, leadership, or wilderness therapy program aimed at teenagers. Outward Bound, one of the oldest and best-known organizations, pioneered the model of guided wilderness expeditions as a means of self-discovery and character development. Expeditions occur all over the United States, ranging from a few days to a few months. Students gain survival skills and, depending on their location, experience in kayaking, backpacking, rock climbing, mountaineering, and backcountry skiing. For Rocky Mountains expeditions like the one Leo describes, tuition ranges from $2,000 to $4,000 for three weeks.

“There Is a Field,” by Rumi
Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi lived in Central Anatolia, now Turkey, in the early thirteenth century (1207–73). Many historians claim that he is woefully misunderstood by the West. Rumi was a classically trained Muslim cleric and scholar who taught shari’a law in a madrasah and wrote volumes of profoundly mystical Persian religious verse while remaining an orthodox and practising Sunni Muslim. American poet Coleman Barks’s translations/adaptations made Rumi into an American New Age guru by stripping the poet’s work of its original Islamic context.

Some have argued that Rumi’s representation of Islamic mysticism (Sufism) is the most accessible, tolerant, and pluralistic incarnation of Islam, but, as leading Turkish Rumi scholar Talat Halman explains, Rumi’s primary relationship was always with God:

The Sufi spirit softens the message of the Qur’an by emphasising the sense of love, and the passionate relationship between the believer and the
beloved, God of course being the ultimate beloved. So in the eyes of Rumi and the Sufis, God becomes not the angry god of punishment, nor the god of revenge, but the god of love.

Rumi also shared an intimate bond with his spiritual guide, Shams Tabrizi, and when Tabrizi mysteriously disappeared, Rumi wrote 3,500 odes, 2,000 quatrains, and *The Masnavi* (a mystical epic 26,000 couplets long) in an attempt to express his loss and longing, “a nightingale separated from the rose.”

Barks secularized Rumi’s writings for popular Western consumption. Madonna incorporated Rumi poems into her songs. Rumi’s work is available in a self-help audiobook aimed at relaxing New York commuters. Rumi has even been hailed as a torchbearer of homoeroticism because of his love for Tabrizi.

Printed in Barks’s *Essential Rumi*, “There Is a Field,” which Leo reads to Bec, is one of poet’s most famous pieces:

> Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other* doesn’t make any sense.

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### Political Terms

**Socialism** is any of various theories or social and political movements advocating collective or governmental ownership of the means of production and control of the distribution of goods.

**Communism** advocates for a system in which goods are owned commonly (rather than privately) and are available as needed to each member of a group, assuring egalitarian returns to those working.

**Marxism** is a theory of socialism associated with Karl Marx and includes the labor theory of value, dialectical materialism, economic determination of human actions and institutions, class struggle as the fundamental force in history, and a belief that class antagonism and misery among the working class will lead to a revolutionary seizure of power by the working class, which will then establish a classless society.

**Anarchism** is a political theory opposed to all forms of government and governmental restraint. It advocates for voluntary cooperation and free association of individuals and groups in order to satisfy their needs.

**Fascism** is any system aimed at setting up a centralized autocratic/dictatorial regime with severely nationalistic policies, exercising regimentation of industry, commerce, and finance; rigid censorship; and the forcible suppression of opposition.
Questions to Consider

1. How are Leo and Vera different? How are they similar? How does Vera benefit from her time with Leo? How does Leo benefit from his stay with Vera? What do they learn from each other?

2. Explore how Vera’s ideas about feminism are at odds with Bec’s understanding of feminism.

3. What role does Leo’s relationship with his sister, Lily, play in 4000 Miles?

4. How do politics come into play in 4000 Miles?

5. Vera has lived in the same apartment for decades and has been its sole occupant since her husband’s death ten years ago. How is this reflected by the scenic design? How does the apartment and its history impact Vera’s relationship with Leo?

6. Have you lived with an unlikely roommate? What did you gain from the experience?

7. What is your relationship with the generations above and below you? What major differences to you perceive between generations? What do you think are the primary causes of these differences?

8. Playwright Amy Herzog describes young liberal politics as fragmented. Do you agree? What are the advantages and disadvantages of wide-reaching activism?

For Further Information . . .


