



PEOPLE'S
STATE *of the*
UNION

A PROJECT OF THE PEOPLE-POWERED
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE
PEOPLESSTATEOFTHEUNION.USDAC.US

ONCE A YEAR, the President delivers the State of the Union address, a speech meant to highlight important national issues from the past year and suggest priorities for the coming year. It's a broadcast from one to many. But what if, once a year, we could all speak and listen to each other? What if we could collectively respond not through prose and statistics, but with poetry and music?

The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture created the People's State of the Union to do precisely that.

The 2015 Poetic Address to the Nation is inspired by stories shared at more than 150 People's State of the Union community events across the country in late January 2015. USDAC Minister of Poetry and Language Protection Bob Holman commissioned ten diverse poets from across the U.S. to contribute sonnets on the state of our union. Ten additional poets took part in a creative work session in New York City on January 31, 2015, using stories submitted from across the nation as source material and inspiration for a collaborative poem. The Poetic Address was performed live the following evening, February 1, at the Bowery Poetry Club.

Sonnet authors included Jennifer Bartlett, Jessica Hagedorn, Joy Harjo, E. Ethelbert Miller, Marilyn Nelson, Margaret Randall, Luis Rodriguez, Ed Sanders, Tanaya Winder, and Yolanda Wisher. Special thanks to Mahogany Browne for her reading of the sonnets.

New York-based collaborating poets included David Acevedo, Mahogany Browne, Cyd Charisse Fulton, reg e gains, Bob Holman, Paolo Javier, Nikhil Melnechuk, Stephen Motika, Tahani Salah, Judith Santopietro.

A short video about the People's State of the Union can be seen at the [USDAC YouTube Channel](#).

A video archive of the livestreamed Poetic Address can be seen [here](#).



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2015 POETIC ADDRESS TO THE NATION

A shadow hangs where my country should glow.
Despite glories shaped as skyscrapers or sound.
More wars, more prisons, less safe, still low.
Massive cities teeter on shifting ground.
Glittering lights, music tracks hide the craven.
TV, movies, books so we can forget.
Countless worn out, debt-laden & slaving;
Their soul-derived destinies unmet.

Give me NASCAR, lowriders, Hip Hop, the Blues.
Give me Crooklyn, cowboys, cool jazz, cholos.
Give me libraries, gardens of the muse.
Give me songs over sidewalks, mad solos.
Big America improperly sized.
Give me your true value, realized.^{S-1}

I am 71 years of age and there is a sense of hope now ^{I-1}
I am writing for returning troops, PTSD, a job situation for a kid
with autism,
A kid transitioning out of high school, building community
programs ^{I-2}
In March of last year, our collective got together, Passaic Pedal
A gallery, a community garden, a lot of hope, my fondest
memory of the previous year. ^{T-1, I-3}

Ah! Obama's in.
Bum rush Bush to back of bus.

LGBT's grin
represents scissors to cut
America's hanging slip.

First time's got a seat
next to pride of any lace
stitched with non-defeat.
Marry opposite sex, race;
America, stop trippin'.^{T-2}

JUST A MADNESS WHICH
MARINATES BRAINCELLS WHO SWELL
NOT SWEAR FOR WE MUST
CARE ABOUT ONE ANOTHER
MOTHER/BROTHER/ENEMY^{T-3}

Radical hardship
Of Liberation grip
On the horizon
I built Community for
they try to snatch us up^{T-4}

Dear America, my love.
If my blackness turns to fruit
do not pull it from the vine;
let it grow from earth to sky
untouched by hating hands.
So sweet my juice, my jazz,
my blues, so sad but true.
Dear America, my love.

Look beyond your prison walls.
Count the black seeds behind bars.
The cells where nothing blooms.
Can hope flower from despair?
Yes, America my love –
Resistance comes and then the rain.^{S-2}

STEP ON PODIUM
LIGHTS POP LIKE CORKS FROM PRICEY
CHAMPAGNE POETICS

BY MOI NOT BROOKS BROTHERS GHOST
CUZ THIS CANT BE BOUT NO FAME ^{T-5}

I did not call 1-800-BLACKPERSPECTIVE this morning
What happened to Mike Brown was not new ^{I-4}
Occupy taught me how to listen ^{I-5}

I was that little Mexican kid in that whitewashed school
It wasn't a problem. Till I got it inside my head. ^{T-6, I-6}

I haven't been out
Because of my health issues.
In 2008

Remember being
Part of a group of people? ^{I-7}
Those people got shot. ^{I-8}

The pastor said I love you
But I am not feeling it. ^{T-7, I-9}

Have Heart! Be Heart! Tell Heart with Art

Fill your cart with Friends; share means with Ends
Grow grain, soothe pain, just enough rain, to remain
It's a crazy rod that juts and never Bends

So many things to protect and correct
Resurrect the sect that none dare neglect!
Wake up, kiss the landscape, honor the water
Call off the guns, kiss the ground, no more slaughter

Volta! Volta! Revolta! Revolta!
Time to allow! Time to plow!
Time to cease! Time to release!
Time for Surcease! Time for Enow!
(as in "Paradise Enow")

Give into Grace! No more ill-pace!
Not e'en a Trace, till All shall Erase ^{S-3}

Table of Contents
16 Am I old or New
Space to speak the truth
A tribute to space that feed
The work 32 38 ^{T-8}

paper burns a fixing
really failed a difficult
this blaze first moved to
New York City to find my
friends becoming really lost ^{T-9, I-10}

Esta esquina en llamas
me recuerda México:
su olor quemado

de noche en flama
tan igual al barrio
esta calle de NúYork

las flores desvanecen
mi ácida memoria ^{T-10}

Last year, the big headlines happened far away.
Here, we had droughts, floods, fires, and celebrities.
Our marathons were run, children felt safe,

our bridges held, our planes stayed in the air.
Ebola claimed only a sainted few.
But people are hungry today. People frack.
And some unarmed male people who were black
were killed last year by unindictable white
male people in blue police uniforms.
Then people spoke the three hundred million truths
we must sift through, to find what justice is.
We're learning to respect each other's lives,
that we're less different than the same.
Our grandchildren are our wisdom teachers. ^{S-4}

I was waiting for
The bus and saw a phone number
About helping veterans ^{I-11}

They call me Garner Brown and it's not
Global warming that makes me say I can't breathe ^{T-11}

Everyone's snowman—
God dodges second coming
Love from Arthur runs
Jazz snatched chance while you wait
Beneath Theban sheets ^{T-12}

Celebrate your lives!
Embrace the same differences
We succeed through time

Our dream is equality
Our dream will be reality ^{T-13}

My opinion keeps changing, she said.
Moros y Cristianos, donde esta los Dharma bums, eggs so-so.

That's how the poem begins, he said.
Funny the state we're in, she said.
Constant feed, no comfort.
Union? Hardly.
Gluttons for rum and lechon
We sleep with our shoes on, bags packed
Ears burning, one eye open.
The chatter's incessant, infinite music
Everyone's listening.
God? No.
Love? Poem.
Jazz? Always. ^{S-5}

I was on the team
Then I got lazy and quit
Gained weight, felt empty ^{I-12}

My soul filled with trash
They made me stand in the back. ^{I-13}
The back filled with friends.

Yes there was a lot of trash
But we picked up most of it. ^{T-14, I-14}

love bomb, what's moved me
here to move to you making
fourth failure in sad
see jobs to re-enter me
crisis, in economy ^{T-15}

basic strategy
based on geometry and
democratic

erratic mathematic
emphatic static induced

two party pimp modes
black codes from the underground
founded by white wigged

fore fathers country tis of
thee based on slavery in

gentrification nation ^{T-16}

My wife is in the garden with her dog
who turns his decrepit face to the sun.
My wife's dog is a pug named Rambo.
He resembles Charles Olson. This dog
does not carry a gun and is blind: when he looks
at his owner he sees a fish-shaped girl
who readily shares her bananas with him.
My wife limps, hides, and bends in her garden.
She is the worst gardener ever, better at reading
about gardens than making one and
a depressive besides. Birds are fond of
my wife: her limp, her bad knee, her uneven temperament.

I told my wife you are beautiful; you need to stop
feeling sorry for the flowers and go get a job. ^{S-6}

Immigrant world

El Sur emerge
un olor de otro tiempo
se expande aquí

como el sudor
de los tiestos llenos
en tibios jugos

NúYork también es mi Sur
Mi huella nace aquí ^{T-17}

I was that little
Mexican. I didn't know
I had an accent.

Wasn't a problem
Until it got in my head.
I couldn't do good.

But then someone told me I
Am human and I matter. ^{T-18, I-16}

Take care of the love now
Believe in the dream of love
Let love exist

Formed in differences is love
Fused in differences is love ^{T-19}

I sit beneath the tree of promises, some
hanging dead on weighted boughs,
the mouths of others upturned
and open, hoping for rain.
Neighbors and strangers
crowd with me beneath the tree,
its shade broadens to embrace them all.
The tree of promises
promises nothing,
it is only a tree.
A girlchild with ancient eyes
leads us in song.
Everyone hears familiar language:
bones rattle down an unfamiliar scale.

Another State of the Union promises peace
as it secrets war, promises freedom
to those who brave desert death
while deportations increase, welcomes

professional killers home,
mourns another black youth dead,
shot by the cop who knows
he has permission.
We the people have been through this
more than once.
But the poem sounds,
its words create cacophonous harmony.
A century changes gender
and tomorrow's sun says no more war. ^{S-7}

state tree, in a peace
time long lost to secret wards
possession of my
permission to pluck sweaty
and precise through poem soundscape ^{T-19, I-15}

My heist—Miami!
Morose ostriches chirp, preach:
'That's stature, Arthur!'
Funny nihilist stealing
Constant haunted tanka dream ^{T-20}

to fit, robotic
lifelines fixing chaotic
in smartish effort
team lives, not invisible
mattering before we loves ^{T-21}

La casa flota
desde el río fluyen
lirios muertos

fértil en su sombra
en su nada oscura
el hogar aún en pie

cada ala es un vacío
así acuden todos ^{T-22}

dreaming, glances my
sneaky, knowing everyone
a dog bar cannot
maker me complacent, a gov-
ernment sense and safer time ^{T-23}

We were running out of breath, as we ran out to meet ourselves. We
Were surfacing the edge of our ancestors' fights, and ready to Strike
It was difficult to lose days in the Indian bar if you were Straight.
Easy if you played pool and drank to remember to forget. We
Made plans to be professional– and did. And some of us could Sing
So we drummed a fire lit pathway up to those starry stars. Sin
Was invented by the Christians, as was the Devil, we sang. We
Were the heathens, but needed to be saved from them: Thin
Chance. We knew we were all related in this story, a little Gin
Will clarify the dark, and make us all feel like dancing. We
Had something to do with the origins of blues and Jazz
I argued with a Pueblo as I filled the jukebox with dimes in June,

Forty years later and we still want justice. We are still America. We
Know the rumors of our demise. We spit them out. They Die Soon. ^{S-8}

Union noise treacling
Gluttons tongue neon onion
'We please the Po-Po!'
Ears breach cherubic Rubio
The ether reverbs in heart ^{T-24}

Form my dreams to mind
Unionize the mind and heart
Act accordingly

We are all sharing this dream
All of our lives matter ^{T-25}

I said I don't care
What is happening to you
It's your life not mine.

That's when I thought I
Was the majority in
Majority rule.

People who don't listen—why
Do we let them speak? ^{T-26}

my grandmama's house is now the e.p.a.
call this place home & there's hell to pay:
shady lane banks stealin people's cribs away,
police departments actin like the kkk,
turncoats treatin my prez like a runaway,
we rock the mask & hoodie—more threat than a gamma ray,
but can't be no union when our black asses ain't okay.
should we wait for the wiz to change the color of the day,
let the witches of doom rain on our hey, hey, hey?
naw, i'm a black girl sippin '94 du bellay,
steady plottin over a mean double crochet
how to make my grandmama's house the u.s.a!
gonna wear my love like combat boots & berets...
see, them doctors can't save you, but your grandma may. ^{S-9}

Marchin' again y'all
Selma's breath not breathin' in
Heave America

FREE TO BE AT LAST FROM PAST
TRANSGRESSIONS IS THE LESSON...

God says one fountain, drink all
Don't split water wells
Burnin' rock, I laid down law

Not law marchin' tear gas fists
upside oppression, no bliss ^{T-27, I-16}

People say "racism," but
it was all a rainbow for me. And James Baldwin
says, The time is always now ^{I-17}

The middle-schoolers in Harrisonburg know the sense of
belonging
can overcome the broken system of education. ^{T-28, I-18}

Not when or where but how, did we lose you,
in between Last Seen _____ the words become elegy
echoing sidewalks and streets. Hand out your picture to
strangers, post it on Post Office bulletin boards: Missing
as if it were destination, a place one goes
to disappear in invisible cities. Except there's no hero
like in the movies or endless resources for us which shows
how truly invisible we are to them. How is it no one can know?
When 1,181 women were taken, did millions of eyes not see
or pay attention to you being swallowed up?
For the ones left behind, left looking, endlessly searching,
for the murdered and missing, in the cities in which we loved
(and love) you. We won't forget. To demand for you
action, words, a poem that ends in your lives mattering, too. ^{S-10}

We are all the same
Underneath this skin and bones
Dreaming of living
A life of equality
Unblemished in love and hope ^{T-29}

in LA, south where
balancing aspects of shock
never thought, felt
excluded after new year
wonders, what essence in light ^{T-30, I-19}

What does belong mean.
Ripped from land and keep me
freedom on awakening
Story rising in landfills
of broken bodies shaking ^{T-31}

Awake & listen! Now hear this!
I was born in Texas, grew up in Kentucky.
High school in Hawaii, never graduated
In Utah, moved to New York, never left
In California, my children's names are Dakota
(For real) North, South, Carolina Louisiana Alabama,
Alaska. I was trained to kill by the Poets, & ordered
To steal people's languages and last names till I became
Citizen4. They call me Garner Brown & it's not Global
Warming that makes me say #ICantBreathe.

It's the way the fourteenth line
Of the sonnet closes in, death
By one's own hand. To State the Union
Is to make the Poem that Heals. ^{S-11}

ENDNOTES

Sonnets

- S-1: Luis J. Rodriguez
- S-2: E. Ethelbert Miller
- S-3: Ed Sanders
- S-4: Marilyn Nelson
- S-5: Jessica Hagedorn
- S-6: Jennifer Bartlett
- S-7: Margaret Randall
- S-8: Joy Harjo

S-9: Yolanda Wisher
S-10: Tanaya Winder
S-11: Bob Holman

Tankas

David Acevedo: T-6, T-13, T-19, T-25, T-29
Cyd Charisse Fulton: T-2, T-27
reg e gaines: T-3, T-5, T-16
Bob Holman: T-1, T-11, T-28
Paolo Javier: T-12, T-20, T-24
Nikhil Melnechuk: T-7, T-14, T-18, T-26
Stephen Motika: T-9, T-15, T-19, T-21, T-23, T-30
Tahani Salah: T-4, T-8, T-31
Judith Santopietro: T-10, T-17, T-22

Inspired by stories posted to the People's State of the Union website:

I-1: "Untitled," Pastor T.L. Barrett, Chicago, IL
I-2: "Allison's Story," Allison, Louisville, KY
I-3, "Coming Together," Geo, Clifton, NJ
I-4: "Untitled," Roseann and Vynetta, St. Louis, MO
I-5: "Untitled," Ramy, Los Angeles, CA
I-6, "Untitled," Anonymous, Los Angeles, CA
I-7: "Untitled," Jan, Oak Park, IL
I-8: "Untitled," Kathy, Claiborne, MD
I-9: Untitled, Tom, Chicago, IL
I-10, "What's Happening to Old Men?" Melanie, Brooklyn, NY
I-11: "Untitled," Noble, Chicago, IL.
I-12: "Untitled," Anonymous, Daly City, CA
I-13: Untitled, Car, Daly City, CA
I-14: Untitled," Anonymous, Daly City, CA
I-15: In response to Margaret Randall's sonnet
I-16: "Opportunity," Amanda, Lincoln, NE
I-17: "Untitled," Andre, Chicago, IL
I-18: "Untitled," Kristi Van Sickle, Harrisonburg, VA
I-19: "Untitled," Anonymous, Los Angeles, CA