

YOU ARE HERE: ACTIVISM FROM THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

by Larina Warnock

We've been told a grievous lie—that there is no edge of the world from which to fall.

Activism begins on the edge. It begins at the precise moment that one foot dangles over and someone recognizes the mistruth they've been told all their lives—

We are all equal
We are not all equal
All humans are equal
All humans are not equal
There is no edge of the world
There is no edge of the world
There is no edge of the world

It is at this point that our most primal instincts surface. Fight or flight. Live or die. And if we are not so fatigued that we willingly—even graciously—plunge over, we begin instead to march with stumbling steps back toward those who least want our attention.

Because they do not want our attention—because they fear it—they choose not to hear us, not to see us, not to respond to us. And they hope that everyone else will make the same choice. For the most part, everyone else does. Perhaps because they really don't care, perhaps because they fear that those with power and influence will strip them of their own, or perhaps—and this seems the most likely to me—because they are afraid that by identifying with us, they will become like us.

Avant-garde begins here—at the moment we've returned from the edge and realized that no matter how loud we shout, no matter how many letters we write, no matter what we say, no one is listening. In a society of paradoxically apathetic thrill-seekers, the avant-garde gives us a voice. It gives us the means to attract the attention, and thereby the emotion, of those who can provide the one thing we want most: change.

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When Ezra Pound said, "Make it new," he didn't have activism in mind, yet this philosophy has underpinned activist literature for centuries. In Ancient Greece, poetry served as the Moral Educator. Later, historians would use literary techniques to document world events, religious icons would tell stories to teach the masses civic responsibility and compassion, essayists would entwine fiction with ethical commentary, and politicians would use the language of poetry and prose to garner public support for change. Percy Bysshe Shelley would offer perhaps the single most important defense of poetry, a defense of activism and moral thought, and would proudly proclaim, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

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I submit that every poem or story ever written is activist in nature whether the author intended it to be so or not. Writing, after all, is the advocacy of a particular point of view, even if that advocacy is in favor of the status quo. Writing is a way to say: I dare you to read this and disagree. Language poets would naturally disagree that this has to be the case, but the very nature of language asserts that someone will draw some conclusion through the act of reading. Because of this characteristic of words, in order to narrow the focus of the particular kind of work we're discussing, it becomes necessary to define "activist literature."

Truly activist literature is that work which speaks of or to significant social issues that extend beyond the experience of being human. Put another way, activist literature is writing that *acts* in terms of protest and, more importantly, encourages the reader to *act* as well. This literature may protest change or the lack thereof, but *change* is the central component.

Most people automatically assume that such literature is political. Truthfully, there are three other types of activist literature: environmental, societal, and personal. Still, it is important for our purposes to understand that activist poetry and prose tends to defy categorical boundaries much the way slipstream fiction defies genre and a given piece may fall into one or all of these categories. If it doesn't fall into at least one, however, it isn't activism under our definition.

Because most people equate activism with politics, I'll start there. By political, I don't mean liberal *or* conservative, Democrat *or* Republican, patriotic *or* un-American, national *or* international. Nothing anywhere, least of all art, falls neatly into these thin slices of personal values and I cannot abide supporting the current frame of thought that says they do. By political, I mean work that deals with subjects primarily handled by a governmental entity. This might include war (Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet* or Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*), human rights issues (Carolyn Forché's poem "The Colonel" springs immediately to mind), issues of freedom and what we call civil liberties (Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was ultimately political and Ginsberg's *Howl* became political the moment he was arrested for publishing it), and that range of literature which adores or abhors a particular government (Whitman's nationalist tendencies or John Irving's anti-American sentiments).

The purpose of political literature in the United States is to settle the need for or the dangers of systemic change in the mind of the people because in this country we still believe that the voters rule the law—and to some degree, that is true. Yet, few literary venues publish political poetry or fiction and those that do tend to be near the bottom of the literary scale (that is, they aren't well regarded by their contemporaries). Because of this, there is a dearth of such literature in our current society and international writing has become a source of fulfillment for readers that appreciate it. This phenomenon is partly due to the commonality of litigation, partly to a general fear of controversy, and largely to an increased censorship and fear of the current administration.

While the causes of the decline in political literature aren't admirable, the effects have actually been good for literature. Writers are forced to think outside the literary box if they want to make a political statement—they are forced into the avant-garde. And recently, the avant-garde has taken the form of old techniques adapted to new circumstances: analogy is safer than reality,

symbolism is necessary to both disguise and highlight the dangers of our direction, the form of a given work is political activism in itself. Satire is on the rise. Subtly takes the place of ranting—which was never particularly effective anyway. New characters are born that can say what we want to say without ending up on the terrorist watch list.

And over time, drawing attention to our work without drawing attention to our selves, governmental change moves from impossible to imperative to yesterday's news.

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I was first drawn to political literature when I read John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany* in high school. Through this exceptional novel (which could also bear the label literary or religious or any number of other things), I learned that interesting characters made political statements more interesting. Later, I would alter the idea just a little. I would attempt to see the world through the eyes of those characters I least wanted to like and perhaps in this way, I could discover how people could be so different from myself in their values. This excerpt from my first political short story, "The War is Over," portrays this idea less subtly than my later prose:

I died tomorrow. I imagined that death would bring me some peace, some reprieve from the idiocy of an increasingly communist America. Of course, I thought she'd die first, being as weak as she was. But I was wrong on both counts.

While I have no intention of publishing this story in whole (it was my first story of this kind and needs far more work than I'm willing to give it), it illustrates the emergence of a distinctly political characteristic in my work—a characteristic that I would in turn begin to seek out in what I read, and which, finding little in literary journals, would eventually lead me to begin my own.

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With global warming quickly becoming the topic of the day, environmental literature is moving just as quickly from its own category into political activism. Still, I find it necessary to separate this particular form of activist literature largely because I believe that most historical writers had no idea they were being activists in this regard at all (Robinson Jeffers being the most notable exception).

Generally speaking, environmental literature is dubbed "nature writing," a label that comes with own set of negative connotations. *Walden* is often given this label despite the fact that Thoreau imbued this work not only with a sincere admiration of nature, but also with significant exposition on the impact of the natural world on humanity (and vice versa). William Stafford is said to have written "nature poetry" despite the fact that his work has consistently served as the inspiration and impetus for numerous environmental activists. A simple statement of appreciation becomes a complex commentary on human consumption, pollution, cumulative damage, and irreconcilable distrust for egocentrism.

In today's world of changing weather patterns, scientific study of endangered species, non-native species, and dying ecosystems, and the well of resources once thought endless drying up, environmental activism takes a less subtle and more traditional form. "Nature writing" has made its way into the realm of politically correct and while we may fear writing fiction(?) about war crimes committed by a U.S. president, we do not fear writing stories or poems about geology, astronomy, or global warming. It seems the most natural thing in the world. And because of that, too few artists make any attempt to reconcile their environmental activism with any sense of originality. And because this writing tends to lack originality, it draws only the attention of a literary audience. The big picture falls from the frame and crumples at the feet of those institutions least able to encourage larger change: the government and public education.

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As editor, most of the submissions I read are about the war in Iraq and global warming. Rarely is this work inspiring on any level. There is no controversy left in either subject. We know (even those of us who outwardly pretend not to know) that we were wrong to invade Iraq and we know that we are wrong to leave our lights on when we leave the house and we know that we shouldn't put plastic in our garbage cans but instead into recycling bins. But we still drive cars that use too much gas, live in houses much larger than we need, and as writers, use too much paper. Environmental activism fails because we cannot hide that we are Americans who consume too much and give too little, because anything we write that isn't printed on recycled paper is hypocrisy. We are left with only appreciation for our beautiful world and mourning for its demise.

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I can't blame writers for the lack of avant-garde environmental literature. I myself sink into the traditional when writing about the natural world. Yet, I remember when pears remained on the tree until late September. I remember when Canada geese flew south in November. I remember when I was not afraid to take a deep breath while standing on my front porch. And because I remember, I continue to write. Perhaps one day I will pick up my pen and something original will happen.

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While governments legislate, societies rule. It's not enough to change laws—activists must change minds else the laws will fail. Societal activism, then, addresses the need for systemic, cultural change. This is where things get murky. Personal activism largely emulates societal activism—its purposes and subjects are precisely the same—and without knowledge of the author/poet, the average reader couldn't make a distinction between the two at all. The difference is simple: societal activism occurs when one seeks change on behalf of others, personal when on behalf of oneself.

Twain's work was most often societal. Du Bois' was personal. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (and much of her other writing) was somewhere in between. She obviously was not subject to slavery, but she was just as obviously more personally affected by that history than say, Stephen King.

The subjects of societal and personal activism span the whole gamut of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and disability as well as religion, education, social status systems, and anything else that constitutes a major aspect of a society's standard response toward a population or a situation.

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Personal and societal activism are potential playgrounds for any writer. Who hasn't been witness to some injustice rationalized entirely on the grounds of irrelevant details? Who hasn't felt the sting of some ethereal adhesive keeping society's label firmly in place on their forehead? How easy it is to feel like one person against the world! How difficult to believe that everyone else wears a label, too. How ashamed we should be to recognize that we do this to each other and to ourselves—that the glue for every stereotype is manufactured in our brains and given life through our laser printers.

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I could say that I began writing disability rights literature the day I was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. But that would be a lie.

I could say that I began writing it the day they said I had an autoimmune disease of some kind. (Lupus? Maybe. Multiple sclerosis? Probably. Something else? Could be. We'll just have to wait and see. It could be in your head, too.) But that would also be a lie.

I could say that I began writing it the day doctors told us that our youngest son probably wouldn't make it, or three weeks later when they told us that he would never smile, never laugh, never recognize us, never talk or walk (they got the last one right, at least), or three months later when the neurologist confirmed that oxygen deprivation at birth had left his brain scarred with cerebral palsy. But that would be a lie.

I could say that I began writing it the day my oldest son was diagnosed with autism, my youngest daughter with dyslexia, my oldest child with bi-polar tendencies that she most likely inherited from me.

But we are all justified in a certain amount of despair and it was despair, often in the grim form of a righteous wrath, that carried me through the first twenty-six years of my life. My writing reflected that, even reflected some of the other labels I've carried: teenage mother, high school dropout, juvenile delinquent, abused woman, poor white trash, city girl, hick. And later: success story, proud mother, proud wife, college graduate, emerging writer, community volunteer, and eventually, activist. In the early years, wrath was a suitable emotion for my writing:

I look into the full-length mirror, unframed and super-glued to the inside of the bedroom door. So this is me? Cream colored jeans and a too-tight black t-shirt. Semi-long, flyaway hair, recently brushed and already tangled. Wire-framed glasses that sit a little crooked on a slightly crooked little nose. Yes. This is me. Whoever that is. Fine time for a fucking identity crisis.

---opening paragraph of "The Mirror," 1995

I approached the unfairness of life with anger wrapped firmly around me. I played the victim as well as anyone.

Molding Me (1994)

*Descending desertions
smeared across my reddened back;
his frenzied barks
of useless information
carrying me back
to where I wrung out
the last bloodied kerchief
and hung it on the nearby brambles
of a battered blackberry bush—
battered, bloodied, just like me,
with my head too near la Guillotine;
hair caressed in yucca mush
that he says makes me
him.*

Writing about a class-ist America came just as easily. I've never felt entirely able to write about race relations because quite frankly, I can't know what it means to be African American or Native American or Hispanic or Asian any more than someone without bi-polar disorder can know what it means to be me. I don't have the right to push my own limited perspective, though I can certainly advocate for those who do. Sanctified religious oppression was easy enough to write about. Twain beat me to it, and did it better, but that hasn't stopped me from trying to advance a different view of faith and spirituality. I've written against radical feminism and not given it a second thought. The beautiful thing about all of these subjects is that no matter how often they're done, there are a million ways to present them in new forms, with new ideas, with original content. They are controversial issues. They are *supposed* to incite sympathy and outrage.

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As editor, it became easier to see the potential pitfalls of personal and societal activism in writing. Too often, the submissions I receive at *The Externalist* sound preachy and/or self-righteous, utterly dismissive of any other point of view. It is incredibly easy to tell people how they should think or feel, incredibly easy to write a rant. It is incredibly difficult to do it well. If activism of any kind is going to work, we have to get people to read it—from start to finish. And people don't like to be told how to live. A little subtlety goes a long way.

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So why did it take me so many years to write about disabilities, and why is it so difficult? First, those of us living with disability aren't exactly excited about bringing it into our work lives.

For years, I kept my mental health concerns to myself. I was ashamed. I was pissed off. I didn't imagine that anyone would understand anyway. I was mostly right.

Second, there doesn't seem to be anyone to blame for disability. Like diabetes or power outages, it's just something that happens. Why write about something that can't be changed?

When I first became ill, I thought that it would be only fair to my employer that I try to get disability benefits and not try to work. After all, if I needed the ability to rest mid-day and complete the day's work later in the evening than office hours, or the ability to comp out days and work the occasional Saturday to make up for last Tuesday when my legs went numb, that was my problem. It meant that I couldn't do the job. It's not my employer's fault. Why should they be asked to accommodate my weakness?

Finally, it's nearly impossible to write about disability issues in such a way that it doesn't garner a disgusting sense of pity from the reader. Disability rights issues don't encourage people to advocate change (because it seems obvious that a person with disability X shouldn't participate in activity Y—why are they telling us this anyway?) and they don't incite anger the way race or gender equality concerns do (because there is no one to blame). Instead, disability rights issues rouse two completely unhelpful emotions: pity or “inspiration.”

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The truth about mood-stabilizing medication is hard to swallow. It is, at times, a necessary evil designed for the purpose of allowing other people to like you while it saps every thread of creative energy, inspiration, and passion from your brain. When you're diagnosed with bi-polar late in life, you've already grown up with a very different perception of what is normal. Normal, to me, was caring so much about someone that it was physically painful to think about losing them—and often thinking about losing them was also normal. It was reading about the latest Senate Bill and being angry enough or hopeless enough to tear the ears off your favorite teddy bear—and tearing the ears off your favorite teddy bear was also normal. But more importantly to me, it was

feeling the muse in the tips of your fingers and writing for hours or days without any sense of how little you'd slept or eaten—and not sleeping or eating for days was also normal. The harder truth about mood-stabilizing medication is that you realize at some point that you are not normal, and that other people want you to be.

-The Art of Chaos Control (memoir in progress)

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In order to write honestly about bipolar disorder, I first had to come to the realization that it is an acceptable part of who I am. Then I had to come to the realization that I was one in perhaps ten thousand people that believed it was acceptable. The former came to me during a leadership institute on disability advocacy in 2003, a life-changing event, where I met a gentleman with cerebral palsy that held conversations with me by tapping his left foot—the only limb he had consistent control of—and who was among the wisest people I have ever met. Quite suddenly I realized that we are not as limited by our own illness/disability/eccentricities as we are by the outward view of others that these things limit us. The latter epiphany came at exactly the same time and without much need for conscious thought at all. I'd been living that knowledge for years.

In Poetry 201 in college, I made the mistake of mentioning my history of bipolar disorder in front of a classmate who promptly said, "You aren't thinking of suicide, are you?" Was it an expression of shock or dismay on my face that made her follow up with, "Well, Sylvia Plath was manic-depressive"?

Yet, even armed with this new understanding of myself, my children, and disability in general, I was hesitant to write disability-related anything. Too often when someone would hear that my son has cerebral palsy, I would in turn hear, "I'm so sorry." Too often when someone would hear that my other son had autism, I would be asked, "Is he good with numbers?" Too often people would say, "I don't know how you do it. I just couldn't do it. How do you *live* like that?"

I don't want anyone's pity and I don't want to be viewed as some kind of superwoman. What I want is what anyone wants: to live my life. But can I *not* write about disability? Don't I have an obligation to advocate for myself, for my children, and for those that simply ask to be treated like people—people with minds that are perhaps outside of our comprehension, but that are *thinking, breathing, responsible* adults who merely need different tools to lead their lives?

I began to consider the difficulty of writing about these things in such a way that I did not garner pity, or that I didn't inspire someone to donate to the March of Dimes or United Way and call it good because in their minds, the most obvious solution is simply to find a cure. I wanted to write in such a way that my readers would recognize the inherent beauty in disability. My first attempt came out a tad too inspirational:

Usually, he lies on a blanket in front of the television. His hair is short, surrounding his face in chestnut tufts. Almond-shaped eyes of a deep brown hue glance to and fro, often moving before he can muster the strength to turn his head. When the grey and white drapes in the living room are open, and the sun casts its rays down upon his face, those eyes sparkle and gleam, as though nothing in the world is horrible or sad. During these times, he moves himself closer to the window, to look up at the sky.

It takes him several minutes to get there, because he cannot crawl or walk to it like other three-year olds, even though he is very tall for his age. Instead, he arches his back as high into the air as he is able, often showing the small plastic feeding button that sticks out like a second navel on his stomach, until he's almost resting on the top of his head and the small, red heels of his feet. Then, with one great heave, he pushes himself backward with his right leg, plopping his back onto the carpet. He repeats these motions several times, sometimes falling from his arched back before he's able to shove, but always trying again until he's gotten to where he wants to be. And through the whole process, your body quakes. You want to pick him up and move him to the window, but the therapists have told you that he needs to do this, that this will help him.

On very nice days, when the air is warm and the sun is high, he'll sit in his chair on the front porch, his arms at his sides, and his fingers bent into half-closed hands. His knees sit slightly out-turned and his toes are curled at the end of his tiny bare feet. The foam supports of his wheelchair outline his head and sides, casting strange shadows across the cement.

He watches the box elder bugs, their red-striped wings flitting across the white railing. These are a source of great joy to him, and his face lights up in a huge, open-mouthed grin, showing a tiny dimple on his right cheek. He giggles, and the giggle is contagious, and you giggle with him, only his giggle is softer, purer, and you suddenly feel out of place in what must be a wonderful and merry world. You wonder that God believed that this child needed you, because you feel so inadequate next to his strength of heart and force of will. Because you cannot laugh at box elder bugs.

And then you realize that you are laughing, that he has taught you how, and you know that God gave this child to you not because of his need, but because of yours.

Later, I would write a rant of a poem called “They Aren’t All Rain Man” about the incessant belief that all children with autism are savants with numbers and plain dumb about everything else. Another poem, “Ode to Autism,” would consider the amazing qualities of this so-called disability and my honest desire to enter that world and better understand. I would write a short story called “Not Broken” in which a resident of an assisted living facility would stand up for herself and say, “NO MORE!”

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Not everything I write is activist in these terms. But I am conscious that everything I write has the potential to be.

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I found that societal activism was much easier than personal activism. Personal activism required me to step too far inside myself and, not knowing precisely how others think and view the world, this writing required me to examine the efficiency of what I was saying. It turned out to be the perfect place to try out new techniques. Because in order to show anyone why I have no desire to be “normal,” I first have to show them what it’s like to enter my mind.

Locke said the mind was a blank slate. I don’t know that I believe that, but the page is certainly as good a two-dimensional model as any.

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The bipolar mind is associative.

There are numerous layers of thought moving against each other constantly.

I may consider at one moment what it means to be a writer
and the next moment, what it means to be an editor,
and the next moment what it means to be a
woman in the 21st century who happens to be creative and also professional
and then again, perhaps the most defining experience of my life has been my status as a
poor, white, teen mother, high school dropout, witness to death and joy and pain and life
and all of these things are constantly weaving in and out my brain
and turn out to be interconnected—why on earth would I want to give up all of this *feeling*?

I will feel everything.

And I’ll be damned if I’ll feel bad about it.

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Manic (2008)

They like you to think
they are listening:

psychologists, psychiatrists,
psychiatric ward
of a children's hospital

ugliness, and any sense
There should be some punishment—
capital or mandatory minimum—

for the negligent displacement
of justifiable passion/fear/pain/joy.

These are the cornerstones of life,
extremes not only
will become. It is their
leaves the world
to the plight of

thing...

worth feeling

“LET IT ALL OUT” and we do
their ears and their eyes

with a capital U is

Easier to trace the
or the
that
starting with us,

that wants you to think

teachers and preachers
and parents and psychs—

obsessively sterilized
of justice

for
the murder
of memory,

(the replacement?)

define(d), but refine(d)--
fear of feeling,
word-numb, deaf, and dumb
powerless people

right. One...thing...
real. One...thing...
some thing about. They

and cry, “THAT’S NOT TRUE!”
just too ugly

chemical composition of the
crooked corners of a lie than admit
the whole damn world is
starting with you,

stopping
with every
they
are
listening.

of truth,
we might feel.
corporeal or

the analgesic
who we
not m(in)e, that
trying to make one...

shout,

and they suffocate

Truth

to face head on.

mind,
falling apart
starting

kind-hearted soul

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I'm not an angry person. Not anymore. And truthfully, if I were in someone else's brain, I might find it a peaceful place. But the rapid succession of emotion that I've become accustomed to is home—it is who I am—and I like me. Most of the time.

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As editor, I see plenty of societal activism come across my desk, and sometimes it's really good. Sometimes it feels as though the author has really been listening to those they're talking about. Most of the time, it reads like someone feeling very sorry for someone else.

As editor, I would love to see more personal activism, more honest assessments of the labels imposed upon us and also, the labels we impose upon ourselves and on others.

And humor. Oh how I would love to see more humor.

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The Externalist publishes only activist literature. I began this online journal as an experiment and much to my surprise, we began receiving submissions immediately and even more to my surprise, people started writing to say they were actually reading it. Ironically, one of the primary subjects of the journal—economic status—is the very thing that keeps the journal online-only and free. I still have a day job.

In our submission guidelines, we state specifically that “highly experimental work is discouraged.” It occurs to me near the end of this essay that (if anyone is still reading by this point), I should explain the difference between *avant garde* and *highly experimental*. *Avant garde* is a method, a technique in itself, and to be successful, it must serve a purpose for the content of the particular piece in question. Highly experimental work is just that—experimental. It's a “trying out,” a “test run,” a “let's see if this works” kind of thing.

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As writer, I have come to understand that I do, in fact, have an obligation to consider what affect my work will have on someone else and to use my abilities, to the best of my ability, to advocate. It's hard sometimes to stifle the angry voice, to move away from the rant and into the form that someone else might actually want to read (rants are a dime a dozen), and even to try out new techniques and ideas and personalities and perspectives (I'm a rather boring person, really).

Harder was realizing that no one characteristic of activism would be sufficient. Content for the sake of content is ineffectual. Art for the sake of art is boring. Experimentation for the sake of experimentation is powerless. But if these three are blended successfully, we have the ability to erase the edge of the world, to paint a sign in the center of our universe that proudly proclaims: YOU ARE HERE and so is everybody else.