



*Fir trees in the woods surrounding the House of
the Wannsee Conference on the outskirts of Berlin*

THE INTERFACE TO SOCIETY
Laidlaw Summer I Research Reflection
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The two words that have remained evergreen throughout my first summer as a Laidlaw Scholar are growth and gratitude. It is a true testament to how powerful this program is that I have seen my character transform in real time, living and watching as I learn about myself and the world over just one summer.

Around two years ago, I made a very important choice about where I would go to study after high school. That choice came with risks as I weighed what life would be like if I chose to stay in the United States six months before one of the most consequential political elections in recent years. I am foremost grateful that I had the opportunity to make what may seem like a relatively insignificant decision between the U.S. and Canada. Since making this choice, I am grateful that Canada—Toronto, in particular—has welcomed me with open arms, and that I have found such a wonderful community in this city and country. I am grateful that I am part of such an incredible and distinguished cohort that can tell you far more about the challenges of immigration from places very different from the United States, in addition to all their interests and research, and that these are all things we can discuss and share freely. While I could have had the opportunity of being a Laidlaw scholar at one of the many participating institutions in the U.S., there was something liberating about pursuing something I had been so passionate about at a place where my academic curiosity is not at risk in the same way as the current challenges to American higher education. I am so grateful that I have had all these opportunities in my life and continue to with the support of Laidlaw and the University of Toronto.

I credit one of my reasons for moving to and staying in Toronto for school to the many scholars who left American universities to teach abroad, citing many of my same fears. I have been fortunate enough to learn firsthand from three of these professors who now teach at the University of Toronto, leaving their positions at Yale University in Connecticut. It is through my class with Professor Timothy Snyder and my conversations with Professors Marci Shore and Jason Stanley that I felt confident in pursuing these questions in any academic capacity. Of course, I am eternally grateful to those at the University of Toronto who believed in me and my proposal enough to fund my passions.

I have spent the better part of my life as a designer. My interests come from an early introduction to technology and the internet, primarily leading to a fascination with typography and web design. Type has been my most prized outlet—I have giant books of font specimens that I flipped through before going to bed at four or five years old. Web design came later, but was inherently related. Needless to say, by the time Trump 2.0 announced a “National Design Studio,” I was immediately hooked. The intersection of these interests and the ongoing scholarly discourse about Trump and fascism felt natural as a research approach; it felt so fantastic I could articulate a passion that I had few people to share with in the form of legitimate academic inquiry.

What I knew would be difficult, even before I wrote my proposal, was that this is not something that is covered in citable works. There is virtually nothing easily accessible that discusses exactly what I’m trying to analyze, which was inspiring, because it felt like I could genuinely fuel a discourse in need, but of course, it was incredibly daunting because I had few academic resources where I most needed them. This would ultimately come to slightly compromise my conclusions, because it was difficult enough already to have to remain objective about something that appears so inherently subjective. Laidlaw allowed me to challenge my interests through a million different lenses, and I am so glad I did. It also forced me to genuinely reconcile what Trumpism means and what references there are for a “fascist Trump.” Essentially, it was my job to figure out how we got here, connecting the dots from the graphic perspective.

My initial research proposal framed the authoritarian visual language as one which rewrites collective memory. If a populace has to invoke the glorious past to promote a prosperous future, the authoritarian needs to control what the glorious past means (or at least appears to be). I maintain, and I believe I tacitly demonstrate, this to be the case, but it was not exactly what I was trying to say in terms of the National Design Studio, and so I made a slight pivot.

Any worries I had as I made too many pivots to list immediately subsided when I boarded my flight from Toronto to Berlin. This ten-day trip is exactly where growth and gratitude mixed every second—just as anyone does on their first time traveling abroad alone, and their first time in Germany—I learned so much about what kind of person I am while taking in the moments of gratitude for being able to experience Berlin. I was well-poised to be there, of course; my initial advisor, Professor Yigal Nizri, had endless recommendations on where to go, both for my research and in my spare time, as a scholar of Jewish history. My other co-advisor, Professor Peter Sealy, is the embodiment of Berlin in Canada, and gave me everything left I needed to know. It was a shame the research period ended just before he set foot in Berlin with his summer course, ARC300.

From the start, I knew this had to be an adventure absent of architecture. I am a proud architecture student at Daniels, but there has been far too much said about the comparisons between authoritarian architecture and Trump's visions for the architecture of his administration. It was paramount that I narrow my scope to just graphic design; as niche as the contemporary analysis was, I was grateful for the abundance of resources on the Nazi visual language that helped me understand the background for the contemporary side and articulate my comparison better in writing. My world was illuminated even further upon visiting the many institutions I went to in Berlin. As poor as my German was, I am grateful to the librarians, curators, and archivists who helped me navigate English resources unique or in limited visibility at their locations in Berlin. Among my research tour included a fruitful trip to the House of the Wannsee Conference, which has a seemingly small but mighty collection, which I cannot recommend enough for its beauty in the summertime. Of course, when institutions weren't available, I had my fill of exploring the city, and I cannot convey my gratitude for how wonderful my experience was, despite how much I tried in my Deep Dive conversations. Thank you, by the way, to my wonderful group, who—since we were all abroad this summer—made traveling alone less lonely.

When it came time to put everything into words, it was immediately crushing that I couldn't link everything directly, even though I knew this would happen. The richness of content for the World War II-era research built up a confidence that slowly cracked under the weight (or lack thereof) of contemporary research into the graphic aesthetics of the second Trump administration. Of course, as I tried to articulate in my preface, there is far more scholarly inquiry that needs to be made into this subject. But although I may not have been able to meet every direct connection, I knew it was a lofty ambition, and I am just so grateful that I got the opportunity to grow as a person, a traveler, a researcher, and everything in between this summer. I am proud I at least made a meaningful contribution to the discourse, and perhaps that's all I could have asked for to start. It helped that I got to travel halfway across the world and have currywurst and beer at sunset on the Admiralbrücke as part of it.

Thank you to everyone who supported my interests at every stage: my advisors, my professors, my incredible Airbnb host Christine, the Lidl in Kreuzberg I bought my groceries from, and every German institution I emailed in English and they begrudgingly made me translate their response. My ultimate gratitude goes to Elena Shik and Shraddha Prasad and the Laidlaw Foundation for believing in me and giving me the resources that made all of this possible.