

### Exhibits to Letter to ADCRR

Exhibit	Description
1	4/8/21 Exclusion Notice from OPR to The Nation (Vol. 312, No. 7)
2	Vol. 312, No. 7 of <i>The Nation</i> (4/5/21)
3	7/6/21 Exclusion Notice from OPR to The Nation (Vol. 312, No. 13)
4	Vol. 312, No. 13 of The Nation (6/28/21)
5	8/5/21 Exclusion Notice from OPR to The Nation (Vol. 313, No. 2)
6	Vol. 313, No. 2 of The Nation (7/26/21)
7	6/28/22 Exclusion Notice from OPR to The Nation (Vol. 314, No. 12)
8	Vol. 314, No. 12 of The Nation (6/13/22)
9	7/18/22 Exclusion Notice from OPR to The Nation (Vol. 315, No. 1)
10	Vol. 315, No. 1 of The Nation (7/11/22)

# EXHIBIT 1

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# EXHIBIT 2

# THE Nation.

APRIL 5/12, 2021

EST. 1865

**WHY CUOMO  
MUST RESIGN**  
ZEPHYR TEACHOUT

**JUDAS AND  
THE BLACK  
MESSIAH**  
STEPHEN KEARSE

## Black Immigrants Matter

Tracking the detention and  
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JACK HERRERA



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EDITORIAL / BRYCE COVERT FOR THE NATION

# A New Beginning

**P**RESIDENT JOE BIDEN HAS SIGNED HIS FIRST BIG LEGISLATIVE PACKAGE, AND TO quote him in the past, it's a "big fucking deal." Not only does it send desperately needed aid to those suffering the most from the pandemic, but it also marks a sharp departure from how the Democratic Party—and the nation—has approached persistent poverty in the wealthiest country on the globe.

The tax-related provisions alone are hugely progressive. After the dispersal of the \$1,400 stimulus checks, the enhanced monthly child tax credit payments, and the increases to the earned-income tax credit and the child and dependent care tax credit, the poorest fifth of Americans will experience a more than 20 percent increase in their incomes. The richest fifth, on the other hand, will receive less than a 1 percent boost, while the top 1 percent will get nothing at all.

And those are not the only provisions in the package. Congress has also increased unemployment benefits by \$300 a month through September, while offering \$30 billion in rental assistance and \$5 billion for schoolchildren to get emergency food benefits. It has offered free health insurance plans through the Affordable Care Act to people on unemployment and expanded subsidies for everyone so that no one has to pay more than 8.5 percent of their income on insurance premiums. Many of those benefits will flow to people who are unemployed or working for low pay.

All told, these measures are projected to reduce poverty by more than a third, bringing the number of people living below the federal poverty line from 44 million to 28 million.

Yes, these are emergency provisions in response to a crisis we haven't experienced in a century, and many of them are set to expire. But it still shows how much our approach to helping the poor has changed, especially among Democrats. It was only 25 years ago that President Bill Clinton triumphantly declared that he was ending welfare as we knew it. Rather than offering the poor money to help them climb out of a financial hole, the bill he signed required them to start climbing out of it on their own, by logging hours at work, before the government tossed them a ladder. It was emblematic of the party's overall stance on poverty. Some of the very tax credits being offered to all poor American families in the Democrats' relief plan, such as the child tax credit, have until now been withheld from families with little to no income, under the assumption that if they're not working and earning money, they don't deserve our help.

Biden voted for welfare reform in 1996 as a senator from Delaware. And yet in 2020 he made a child tax credit expansion to all low- and moderate-income parents part of his presidential campaign platform for responding to the pandemic.

Democrats have shifted so dramatically that they are already

promising to make the child allowance a permanent feature of the American social safety net. Under Biden's relief plan, families making \$150,000 or less will get monthly payments of \$300 for every child age 5 and under and \$250 for older kids—even families with little to no income. This has the potential to cut the number of children living in deep poverty in half.

The allowance sunsets within a year, but the gamble is that once Americans get a taste of what most other developed countries long ago instituted—regular cash payments to ease the financial stress of parenting with too little income—it'll be all but impossible to stand in the way of making it permanent, even for conservatives and

moderates. Who will want to vote in favor of dramatically reducing most families' incomes? Democrats have already said they'll start fighting to ensure it lives on indefinitely as soon as the ink on the relief bill dries.

If they succeed, it will mark a complete reversal of how this country has approached alleviating poverty. Even as wages have stagnated and basic costs like health care and housing have skyrocketed, we've pretended that poverty is a personal failing. This allowed us to turn a blind eye to the highest level of relative poverty in the developed world while offering the least in taxes and benefits to reduce it. Now the Democrats are unabashedly championing a new approach: giving poor people money so they can afford the things their children need to thrive, so they can escape the Catch-22 of being so financially burdened it's impossible to climb out of the hole—so, in short, they're no longer poor. **N**

**The American Rescue Plan marks a sharp departure in how the world's wealthiest nation has approached persistent poverty.**



EDITORIAL / ZEPHYR TEACHOUT FOR THE NATION

# Why Andrew Cuomo Must Resign

**G**OVERNOR ANDREW CUOMO HAS ABUSED HIS POWER and must resign. He has lied to the people of New York and to the lawmakers who depend on his reports to make policy. Then, when he was caught, he lied about when, how, and why he lied. Cuomo and his staff have used state resources to threaten and retaliate against political enemies—as well as the women who have accused him of sexual harassment.

He is petty, controlling, and grandiose. Even worse, he equates bullying with competence.

To be effective, a governor must have the trust of the lawmakers he works with. Cuomo has lost that trust. More than 120 New York lawmakers have demanded his resignation, along with most of the state's congressional delegation, including the head of the House Judiciary Committee, Jerry Nadler. The head of the state senate's Finance Committee has said she will not speak to Cuomo or his top aides because they are untrustworthy. At a critical time for the state, he keeps bleeding key public health staffers who can't bear his disrespect for science.

Right now he is trying to use the fact that he is being investigated by several different entities—including the New York attorney general, the FBI, and the Department of Justice—to stall for time. If there were questions of fact that could somehow render Cuomo trustworthy and nonabusive, his argument might make sense. But what we already know is more than enough to disqualify him from office.

In March 2020, weeks after the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, Cuomo issued a health directive requiring nursing homes to take Covid-19 patients. This ended up being a death sentence for many people. At the same time, he pushed an industry-sponsored bill through the legislature shielding nursing home executives and hospital lobbyists—many of them donors to his campaign—from legal liability for dangerous decisions.

In June, the state Health Department reported 9,250 nursing home deaths to the governor's office. Cuomo's staff panicked—not because so many people were dying, but because the total was the highest in the country and would make him look bad just as he was riding high in the polls and on the verge of closing a major book deal touting his success handling Covid.

Instead of releasing the Health Department numbers, his office rewrote the report, claiming that fewer than 6,500 nursing home patients had died. Lawmakers who needed that data to make policy questioned the figures, but the governor insisted on their accuracy.

Only six months later, after New York Attorney General Letitia James released a report showing deaths had been undercounted by as much as 50 percent, did Cuomo correct the numbers.

His first policy choice was disastrous, but it was the cover-up—half a year of continuously lying to the public—that requires Cuomo's resignation.

What's more, his office initially claimed he was hiding the numbers out of fear the White House would weaponize them against him. Reporting by *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* revealed that was a lie, too. Meanwhile, over 15,000 New Yorkers in nursing homes have died of Covid.

Cuomo has a long history of bullying and terrorizing people. But he now faces several credible allegations of sexual assault and harassment of employees.

Many of the interactions are undisputed and backed up by independent reporting. For instance, it is undisputed, even by Cuomo, that he asked a 25-year-old entry-level employee if she was open to sex with older men. That constitutes sexual harassment under New York state law. Reports that Cuomo's office leaked personnel files about another accuser, Lindsey Boylan, have not been disputed by the governor, nor have reports that Cuomo's staff (paid by New York taxpayers) made calls to state employees encouraging them to discredit Boylan.

This kind of vicious retaliation is part of a pattern. When Cuomo told Assemblyman Ron Kim that he would “destroy” him for talking to the press about the nursing home cover-up, that was not an empty threat. When the New York State Public Employees Federation endorsed me in 2014, Cuomo retaliated by reclassifying 2,500 employees of that union as management. The message is clear: If you dare cross me, you will be destroyed.

In a recent press conference, Cuomo implicitly threatened to leak confidential files from the Joint Commission on Public Ethics, a body that is supposed to provide independent oversight but acts instead as an extension of the governor.

This is the same governor who shut down an anti-corruption commission when it got too close to his crew. His signature upstate jobs plan, Buffalo Billion, ended with his right-hand man in prison for bribery.

With so many Cuomo revelations coming out, it can be hard to keep them straight—and he'd like it to stay that way—but there is a single, devastating theme throughout them all: his abuse of the extraordinary power given him by the people of New York.

The investigation by James must go forward, as must the criminal investigations. But there is no investigative result that leaves us with a governor we can trust not to abuse power and lie.

For the sake of the state, Andrew Cuomo must resign and let Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul replace him.

**Cuomo is petty, controlling, and grandiose. Even worse, he's incompetent.**

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— Julián Castro

## Immigration Matters

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## APPRECIATION

# Adéu, Comrade

**F**OR THOSE OF US WHO'VE BEEN LUCKY ENOUGH TO WORK with him, Roane Carey, who is leaving *The Nation* after 32 years, is not simply an editor of rare sensitivity and intelligence. He is also a person of extraordinary integrity, kindness, and humility. To write for Roane is to feel protected—not just from your enemies but from your own errors, which he corrects in the gentlest fashion, since he never takes pleasure in correcting you (another rare quality). To write with Roane, as I did on a few occasions when I was the magazine's literary editor, is to experience the true meaning of solidarity, where the assertion of ego is a distraction from the cause on which you've embarked together: speaking truth to power. Has another editor in American journalism demonstrated his level of commitment to racial justice, or to Palestinian freedom, or to exposing the injustices of US foreign policy? If so, I'm not aware of one.

In the offices of *The Nation*, that claim would seem uncontroversial. No one who has spent time at the magazine is unaware of Roane's moral passion,



his informed and humane radicalism, his dedication to stories that most of the media has overlooked, either through indifference or—as in the case of Palestine, on which he also edited two important anthologies, *The Other Israel* and *The New Intifada*—with deliberate disregard. But outside *The Nation*, Roane—a modest, soft-spoken South-

erner who studied history at Swarthmore College—is less well-known, for the simple reason that he has never drawn attention to himself.

I don't mean to make him sound like a saint. A dear and close friend, Roane is as complex as they come, with a salty sense of humor and a love of life and its pleasures that is anything but monastic. I think of him, rather, as a brilliant ensemble musician—a bassist in a jazz rhythm section, say, or a violist in a string quartet. All too easily overlooked by the audience, he is indispensable to the music's power, its binding force, such that when he leaves the group, it will never sound quite the same again. After more than three decades of devoted work behind the scenes at *The Nation*, Roane has left not only the magazine but the country, for a new life in Barcelona. We will miss the music he helped make at *The Nation*, but we're also excited to hear him solo, as an American expatriate in Spain.

Adam Shatz

➤ **Mensch of the mag:** The incomparable Roane Carey, at work in his *Nation* office.

*Adam Shatz is a contributing editor at the London Review of Books and a former literary editor of The Nation.*

## Back Talk Alexis Grenell



# Governor Cuomo's Feelings Aren't the Issue

*The issue is accountability.*

**N**EW YORK GOVERNOR ANDREW CUOMO DOESN'T LIKE to talk about feelings, but these days he can't seem to shut up about them. "I now understand that I acted in a way that made people feel uncomfortable. It was unintentional, and I truly and deeply apologize for it," he said at a press conference in early March, addressing the exploding sexual harassment allegations against him. "I feel awful about it and, frankly, I'm embarrassed by it, and that's not easy to say but that's the truth.... I never knew at the time that I was making anyone feel uncomfortable.... I certainly never, ever meant to offend anyone or hurt anyone or cause anyone any pain."

To hear him tell it, you'd think the legal definition of sexual harassment was based on how the perpetrator—or the victim—feels. But here's Cuomo's own model definition, which applies to all businesses in New York: "A sexually harassing hostile work environment consists of words, signs, jokes, pranks, intimidation or physical violence which are of a sexual nature, or which are directed at an individual because of that individual's sex." The word "feel" appears just once in the seven-page document, which otherwise focuses on conduct, including "subtle or obvious pressure for unwelcome sexual activities." An internal investigation is supposed to follow an allegation, on top of whatever civil actions the accused individual and employer may face.

For those not keeping score, the governor has been accused of a range of harassment by seven women and counting, including forcible touching. Yet in his various nonapologies, Cuomo has ignored the law, offering up a dinosaur defense of his own purported ignorance while also implying that it's his victims who are being overly sensitive. "At work sometimes I think I am being playful," he said, "and make jokes that I think are funny.... I now understand that my interactions may have been insensitive or too personal and that some of my comments, given my position, made others feel in ways I never intended. I acknowledge some of the things I have said have been misinterpreted as an unwanted flirtation."

As Charlotte Bennett, one of Cuomo's accusers, put it in a *CBS Evening News* interview, "It's not an

issue of my feelings. It's an issue of his actions."

That's exactly right, but it's worth noting whose feelings matter in this equation and why. Cuomo dismissed the claims of Lindsey Boylan, the first woman to come forward, as false but disputed the facts of Bennett's account. A third woman, Anna Ruch, has impossible-to-deny photographic evidence of an incident that Cuomo has tried to explain away as merely a customary greeting. He hasn't bothered to respond individually to the others.

It's clear that the governor views Bennett as the most serious threat. So what's the difference between Bennett and the other women?

While the perfect victim doesn't exist, an image of who we think she is most certainly does, and Bennett fits the bill: young, feminine, and vulnerable. The prototype, unpacked in a January study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, corresponds directly to traditional ideas about women as gentle, caring, and nurturing of others. And it influences how the courts evaluate harm, which depends heavily on the perception that the defendant's behavior was unwanted. Few can imagine the 25-year-old Bennett enjoying a probing conversation with her 62-year-old boss about her history as a survivor of sexual violence, being asked if she's open to sleeping with older men and then told that he's OK with dating kids fresh out of college. Bennett herself presents a compelling image in the interview—wrapped in the protection of bulky sweaters—as she describes the governor's gross abuse of power with bracing clarity. Crucially, she has nothing obvious to gain by becoming a focal point. That's what makes her so potentially devastating. Also, it doesn't help that the question "How do you feel about the governor soliciting sex from a girl young enough to be his daughter?" probably won't poll well with the boomer women who make up Cuomo's base.

Boylan, on the other hand, is the perfect foil. Although she was only in her early 30s when she says she was harassed by Cuomo, she's disqualified from the same level of sympathy because she's running for office. And as the former chief of staff for the Empire State Development Corporation, she had more seniority than an entry-level employee and is therefore viewed as more capable

of managing a man's advances. Moreover, she's attractive and ambitious, which may lead some people to erroneously suppose that she can't be harmed. That assumption can even be internalized by victims themselves—as Boylan

**"It's not an issue of my feelings. It's an issue of his actions."**

—Charlotte Bennett

acknowledged in a recent interview, describing how a young survivor reached out to her after she went public about the harassment in December. “I had more sympathy for myself after I heard this young woman’s story,” Boylan said.

Ruch falls somewhere in the middle. She’s young, but most important, there’s a photo of Cuomo seizing her horror-stricken face as a prelude to an unwanted kiss. They’re strangers at a wedding, and here’s the most powerful man in the state locked onto her like a tractor beam. Ruch said that minutes earlier she’d removed Cuomo’s hand from her lower back, after which he called her “aggressive.” Without that photo, Ruch’s story is more easily muddled.

**It’s the “imperfect” victims who make it possible for the “perfect” ones to come forward.**

But it’s the “imperfect” victims who make it possible for the “perfect” ones to come forward. As Boylan acknowledges, the reason she can speak out safely is because she has the privilege of being older and more established in her career. It’s precisely the factors that make her “imperfect” that enable her to act as an on-ramp for others. She’s the match that lights the fuse for Bennett, Ruch, and anyone else who wishes to come forward. As this issue was going to press, another woman, Ana Liss, had already spoken out, describing how Cuomo kissed her hand at work, called her “sweetheart,” and commented on her appearance. Predictably, Cuomo’s spokesman claimed that the governor treats everyone like a cocktail waitress, but notably Liss’s current (and very male) employer, Monroe County Executive Adam Bello, has taken her side.

Despite the familiar talking point that every woman has a right to come forward and be heard—now popular among people eager to avoid taking a position—the women who’ve spoken out aren’t actually trying to lead a national conversation about their feelings. What they do want is the one thing Cuomo is desperate to avoid: accountability. **N**

## Morbid Symptoms Jeet Heer



## Neera, My Tweets, to Thee

*Biden’s defeated nominee showcases the addictive dangers of social media.*

**N**EERA TANDEN, THE FIRST AMERICAN FORCED TO WITHDRAW from a cabinet-level nomination because of bad tweeting, has a winning scrappiness. The child of immigrants from India, Tanden experienced the vast social chasm of American life after her parents’ divorce when she was 5. She ended up splitting her childhood between her struggling mother, who on occasion relied on food stamps, and her well-to-do father, who lived in the suburbs.

From her mother, Tanden inherited a fighting spirit. She also possesses an ability, surely honed in her father’s house, to nimbly navigate the world of the affluent. That has served her well in her capacity as president and CEO of the Center for American Progress, where a large chunk of her job consists of drumming up money from corporations, business tycoons, and foreign autocrats.

Tanden’s mother, Maya, admitted to *The New York Times* that her daughter “can be very aggressive.” But it’s perhaps more accurate to say Tanden can be both aggressive and ingratiating, depending on the situation. She can be two-fisted when going after her political foes—especially on Twitter. As an unreconstructed Clintonian neoliberal, Tanden’s foes include Bernie Sanders-style social democrats as well as Trumpist Republicans. But there’s ample evidence that when she needs to turn on the charm to shake loose some donor money or win over a political ally, she can.

Tanden’s undoing as Joe Biden’s nominee to head the Office of Management and Budget came from the simple fact that the two sides of her persona are mismatched. The punchy tweeter is hard to reconcile with the tactful insider. It’s a striking fact that the decisive turn against her came not from the Democratic left (Sanders, who grilled Tanden about both her tweets and the corporate donations during her confirmation hearings, seemed willing to support her) but from the moderate Democratic Senator Joe Manchin and Republicans like Mitt Romney and Susan Collins, who are known for welcoming Biden’s rhetoric of national unity.

These pillars of the status quo used Biden’s unity language against his own nominee. A spokesperson for Romney said that the Utah senator “believes it’s hard to return to comity and respect with a nominee who has issued a thousand mean tweets.”

As a ritual scapegoat offered up to expiate the sins of partisanship, Tanden was in a real sense a victim of her own politics. Over the past four years, while abrasively critical of Trumpist Republicans, she also evoked the language of comity and civility. She’s very much been the voice—and face—of the ancien régime “resistance” that dreamed of returning the country to a state of bipartisan cooperation between never-Trump Republicans and moderate

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Democrats. The Center for American Progress often touts its ability to work with the right-wing American Enterprise Institute.

Tanden is a compulsive, incessant, unstoppable tweeter. Over the past decade, she's posted more than 88,000 times on Twitter, which even at the old limit of 140 characters is enough to fill several Tolstoyan tomes. A *Times* profile recounted an evening in March 2019 when "Ms. Tanden feuded on Twitter with liberals over whether [Hillary] Clinton condemned far-right hate-mongers strongly enough more than two years ago. The online bickering raged for an hour...when the woman originally targeted by Ms. Tanden's tweets delivered a wake-up call: 'neera, you're responding to a graduate student on Twitter at 1:40 am.'"

Even as it alienates establishment stalwarts like Manchin, Romney, and Collins, Tanden's ferocious tweeting earned her the respect of some of her political foes on the left, whose grudging admiration for a talented enemy recalls that of Ulysses S. Grant for Robert E. Lee. Before she officially withdrew her nomination, *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara

**Tweeting, as Tanden did, that "vampires have more heart than Ted Cruz" is both funny and accurate. It shouldn't cost anyone a job.**

tweeted, "A small part of every true veteran of the posting wars wanted to see Neera make it."

Like many online left-leaning journalists, I've had my share of Twitter tussles with Tanden. While I vehemently disagree with her on much, I don't think any of her posts were disqualifying—certainly not when compared with the truly vile tweets by Donald Trump, which Republican lawmakers so assiduously ignored throughout his administration. Tweeting, as Tanden did, that "vampires have more heart than Ted Cruz" is both funny and accurate. It shouldn't cost anyone a job.

More problematic is the small brigade of online minions and digital attack dogs that Tanden has cultivated and encouraged, sharp-fanged creatures I like to call the Tanden Trolls. They often do overstep the bounds of decency. One Tanden Troll, described by her as "my friend," called Sanders a "fucking fake Jew." And after Tanden's nomination was withdrawn, another troubled individual posted tweets insulting and threatening the children of *New York Times* writer Elizabeth Bruenig and her husband Matt, a think tank

head, both of whom have tangled with Tanden in the past. While Tanden isn't responsible for those threats, it's undeniable that the drama she generates excites and unsettles lost souls.

Tanden's Twitter habit is more than a hobby or a form of political branding gone awry. It's a true addiction. Several in her circle have tried to stage an intervention. A Tanden friend told me that when he urged her to give up tweeting, she responded that this would only hand her foes a victory.

In his excellent polemic *The Twittering Machine*, the British journalist Richard Seymour lays out exactly how social media can take over a person's life. "The Twittering Machine invites users to constitute new, inventive identities for themselves, but it does so on a competitive, entrepreneurial basis," he writes. "It can be empowering for those who have been traditionally marginalized and oppressed, but it also makes the production and maintenance of these identities imperative, exhausting and time-consuming."

Twitter allows us to play a role on a stage watched by millions, to become a hero in the drama of global debate. But there's no worse fate for an actor than to confuse a performance for reality—and to let the role they play consume their real life.

**N**

OPPART/MARIETTA BERNSTORFF



## EL SALVADOR /

ROBIN BROAD AND JOHN CAVANAGH

## Learning How to Win

*What Salvadoran activists can teach us about building coalitions.*

**I**N MARCH 2017, PEOPLE FROM POORER COMMUNITIES across El Salvador stood up to corporate power and convinced their legislature to make their country the first in the world to ban mining to save its precious rivers. Their battle cries: “Water, not gold” and “Water for life.” In the process of their 13-year fight, these water defenders organized a national coalition that came to be known as La Mesa.

During those years, Marcelo Rivera and three other defenders were brutally assassinated. But Marcelo’s brother Miguel, their friend Vidalina Morales, and the members of La Mesa never gave up. They also linked up with international allies to defeat a lawsuit by OceanaGold, a multinational firm that argued the Salvadoran government did not have the right to prohibit mining.

How Salvadorans achieved these two major wins has a great deal to teach people around the world struggling to save their communities from corporate predators. Undoubtedly, the most vital component was the determination and organizing acumen of the Riveras, Morales, and their allies in the community groups that anchored La Mesa.

Yet other community-based movements have lost similar battles all over the world, so what else was critical to their achievement? One factor was La Mesa’s education campaigns, which creatively spread the word on the science of mining and water through radio and TV programs, community forums, church sermons, university-based events, fact sheets, and flyers at mass marches. The success of these efforts was demonstrated in polls conducted by the University of Central America in 2007 and 2015, which revealed overwhelming disapproval for mining.

Another factor was La Mesa’s framing of the issue. The water defenders did not see their fight as simply one against mining; instead, they were “pro-water, pro-life.” This suggests that similar campaigns should champion a positive goal, expressing what the movements are *for*—particularly if it’s something as vital and popular as ensuring clean and affordable water for all. The terms “water defenders” and “water protectors” resonate broadly and effectively around the world.

Among the most intriguing lessons comes from La Mesa’s pursuit of seemingly unlikely allies. The water defenders recognized this to be less a contest of right versus left than right versus wrong—an idea that’s also central to the Reverend William J. Barber II and the Poor People’s Campaign in this country. Yes, the left-wing FMLN party—especially its female leaders—proved instrumental. But notable heroes also emerged

in the right-wing ARENA party. This is especially significant if you remember that from 1980 to 1992, roughly 75,000 people were killed in El Salvador’s civil war. It thus took a great deal of courage for the water defenders to reach out to ARENA, as well as to the ultraconservative archbishop of San Salvador, the nation’s capital, and to a leading government attorney who had served in the military during the war. The water defenders also demonstrated remarkable perseverance when some likely allies in the FMLN were tempted by the inducements of Big Gold.

What the two of us have learned from the water defenders has transformed the way we think about unlikely allies in our US work, expanding our sense of who might join us in a fight. A corollary of this lesson: Some in the private sector can emerge as comrades in a struggle that many perceive as anti-corporate. Granted, the water defenders in El Salvador had an advantage over their counterparts in Guatemala, Peru, and the Philippines, where mining projects created webs of local corporate leaders who were intertwined with and enriched by the extractive industry. But after the Salvadoran civil war, there were few influential families linked to the sector. Since domestic elites in tourism and agriculture depended heavily on water, many supported the defenders or at least refrained from actively assisting Big Gold.

La Mesa’s international alliances played a role as well. To the extent this network, which came to be known as International Allies, was successful, it was because its members understood that OceanaGold’s lawsuit against El Salvador was their fight too, not just something done in solidarity with Salvadoran groups. The global coalition respected La Mesa’s lead on the domestic mining ban and used its own creative media work to turn the struggle into a global story.

According to one of La Mesa’s unlikely allies—José Luis Escobar, the archbishop of San Salvador—there was one final X factor in their victories: a miracle from God. Whether you agree with this or not, any such miracle would not have occurred without the blood, sweat, tears, and doggedness of so many who had so much to lose. **N**

*Robin Broad, a professor at American University, and John Cavanagh, the director of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Policy Studies, are the coauthors of The Water Defenders: How Ordinary People Saved a Country From Corporate Greed, from which this essay is adapted.*



➤ No water, no future: People protest the privatization of water in El Salvador.

# A Numbers Game

BRYCE COVERT +  
MIKE KONCZAL

**A** remarkable thing has happened: The Democrats have reacted to our economic problems on a scale that actually matches them. Liberal economic commentators pointed to \$3 trillion as the minimum amount necessary to ensure a swift recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting recession. And now President Joe Biden's administration has passed a \$1.9 trillion stimulus plan, on the back of a \$900 billion package approved in December. Senator Bernie Sanders wasn't exaggerating when he called the American Rescue Plan "the most significant piece of legislation to benefit working families in the modern history of this country." It's extraordinary how different the political reality is from 12 years ago, when Barack Obama struggled to get an \$800 billion stimulus through Congress. Even at the time, most economists knew that his recovery bill was insufficient.

Today, unlike in 2009, the Federal Reserve Board is in vocal support of the need for new spending and has pledged not to undercut the recovery by prematurely raising interest rates. Conservatives, for whatever reason, aren't focusing on these stimulus packages. Perhaps the nature of the pandemic shows us how we all need government support—as opposed to the 2008 financial crisis, when many policy-makers thought that federal spending was just about bailing out the banks.

Yet for all the things that are different, a few remain the same. There's a continuing threat that Republicans and conservative Democrats will try to steer the economy away from full employment, which could sabotage the recovery just as it's taking off. For this reason, it's essential for the White House to think in terms of a very specific number: 9.5 million new jobs. That's the number needed to return to where we were on the eve of the pandemic. The goal should be full employment, but getting back to the labor market that existed in late 2019 is a crucial first step. Anything less will be a missed opportunity.

There are many reasons to aim for full employment, but the economic benefits of a tight labor market alone justify the target. Prior to Covid-19, unemployment had been below 4 percent for nearly two years and hovered around 3.5 percent for last six months of 2019. Through-

out the Great Recession, economic policy-makers in both parties assumed that getting unemployment so low for such an extended period would be impossible without causing inflation and other problems. This led to a misguided focus on how workers weren't ready for the available jobs—too busy playing video games to be employable, as conservative economists would later complain. Yet by the end of 2019, there was clear evidence of sustained wage growth across the lower end of the income distribution and of rising employment among people who had been incarcerated or otherwise isolated from the labor market. Tight labor markets give workers power and help to make sure that they are better compensated.

But even before the coronavirus outbreak, the recovery wasn't complete. The Black unemployment rate, for instance, remained elevated at 6 percent. And this highlights a second reason to stay focused on the 9.5 million jobs number: There will be many attempts to shut down getting to full employment before we are there. This fall, we'll probably see a few impressive monthly reports for job numbers, which will prompt a strong urge among some policy-makers to declare "Mission accomplished." There are even those who believe the economy was too hot in 2019, and they'll want to slow down the long-term trajectory. At that point, the administration could turn too quickly to other priorities, abandoning the emphasis on maintaining the recovery.

The last reason to shoot for 9.5 million new jobs is political. Getting to full employment—or at least close to it—shows the essential role that government plays in providing for economic well-being. The economy doesn't naturally heal itself. The government must take action to bring down unemployment. We saw this over the past decade. Even though Donald Trump was broadly unpopular, he polled more favorably at handling the economy than the Democrats. Despite his economic policy failures, which made conditions worse for workers and better for corporations, the experience of continuing low unemployment made a big difference for voters. And it is precisely these voters whom the Democrats will need to build an enduring base in the coming decade.

Mike Konczal

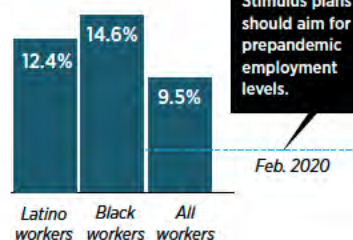
## Let's Get All the Jobs Back

Recovering the labor market that existed in late 2019 is a first step toward economic recovery.

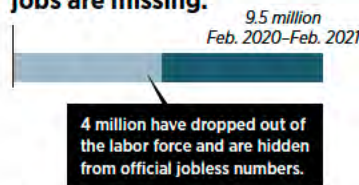
**Don't be fooled by reports of a 6.2% jobless rate.**

*That doesn't include the underemployed or those who have given up looking.*

*The true rates as of Feb. 2021:*



**After one year, 9.5 million jobs are missing.**



Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics; Council of Economic Advisors





SNAPSHOT / Yuichi Yamazaki

## Mourning in Japan

Buddhist monks pray for the victims of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown at a beach in Iwaki, Japan, on March 11. The triple disaster killed almost 16,000 people and left hundreds of thousands homeless. The 9.0-magnitude earthquake was one of the most powerful ever recorded, triggering tsunami waves over 120 feet high that reached more than six miles inland and destroyed entire towns.

### By the Numbers



**85**

Number of countries where the US government has carried out counterterrorism operations since 2018

**800**

Estimated number of US military bases around the world

**7**

Number of countries where the US has conducted an air or drone strike since 2018

**\$1.7T**

Projected cost of the F-35 fighter jet program during its 69-year lifetime

**\$6.4T**

Total cost of the US War on Terrorism

**37M**

Minimum number of people who have been internally displaced or become refugees as a result of the War on Terrorism

**800k**

Number of people who have been killed as a direct result of violence in the War on Terrorism

—Jared Olson

CALVIN TRILLIN  
**DeadlinePoet**

### Stephen Miller Watching the TV News

Will he notice while watching the nurses and docs

Who still fight the pandemic—our heroes, no doubt—

Just how many of them have the colors of skin

Of the people that he was so keen to keep out?

# Black Immigrants Matter

In immigration, as in policing, every arm of the US incarceration and deportation machine brings down a hefty amount of its weight onto the backs of Black people.

BY JACK HERRERA



THE DAY AFTER A MINNEAPOLIS POLICE OFFICER KILLED GEORGE FLOYD, Guerline Jozef's mind was in the skies above the Gulf of Mexico. That morning, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents had forced 30 Haitians—almost all of them Black—to board a deportation flight from Alexandria, La.

Jozef knew many of the people on the plane. In the weeks and months before that day, May 26, she spoke with many of the detained Haitians on the phone, introducing herself as an immigrant advocate. For many of them, locked in detention centers across the United States, Jozef's call was the first time they had heard their native Creole in weeks. Jozef's voice offered more than just a comfort for the Haitians in detention—it offered a way for them to find a lawyer, to raise the tens of thousands of dollars they needed to make bond, to understand how they could apply for asylum, and to access critical medical care, including Covid-19 tests.

**Black migrants face rates of arrest, detention, and deportation disproportionate to their numbers in this country.**

Since cofounding the Haitian Bridge Alliance in 2016, Jozef has received numerous calls, often dozens a day, from Black immigrants in ICE detention. At first, she received calls only from Haitians—men, women, and even children who were waiting for their asylum claims to be processed. Most immigrant advocacy organizations only have the staffing to accommodate Spanish speakers from Latin America, so Jozef, a Haitian immigrant herself, saw a clear need for detained Haitians to speak with advocates who understood them—not just their language

but also, to put it plainly, where they were coming from. They needed a *kon-patriyòt*. However, as Jozef's advocacy expanded, she realized that Black immigrants, wherever they came from, faced particularly dire difficulties in navigating the US immigration system. Soon, Jozef was talking with Eritreans, Ethiopians, Mauritians, Cameroonians, Congolese, Afro-Hondurans, Jamaicans, Afro-Mexicans, Ghanaians, and other Black people from around the world who had sought asylum in the United States, or who had been living in the country without papers, or who had committed some crime that prioritized them for deportation.

From her home in Southern California, Jozef mobilized a national response to stop the May 26 flight and others like it. Her public awareness campaign, waged with a group of other activists, gained some significant traction: Writing from Boston, a city with a large Haitian population, Senators Elizabeth Warren and Edward Markey and

*Jack Herrera is an independent reporter covering immigration, refugee issues, and human rights.*

ILLUSTRATION BY ADRIÀ FRUITÓS





Representative Ayanna Pressley published letters to the Department of Homeland Security throughout the pandemic demanding it halt the deportations to Haiti. Legal representatives told Jozef that multiple people set to board the flight had recently tested positive for Covid-19. Some of them had only been given Tylenol. At the airport, half of the detainees took a notoriously unreliable rapid test, and those who tested negative for the coronavirus boarded the plane. Then the flight took off. As the first wave of protests over Floyd's murder were beginning to break out in Minneapolis, the plane carrying 30 Haitians left Alexandria, flew south over the Mississippi Delta, curved a path along the edge of the Gulf of Mexico, and touched down in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti.

**Nonstop deportations:** Roland Jean kneels on the tarmac after arriving at the Toussaint Louverture airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, June 23, 2020.

Jozef felt exhausted and defeated, and she thought about how the difficulties she faced in advocating for Black immigrants were connected to the violence and aggression that Black Americans face at the hands of the criminal justice system. When, a week after the flight, she finally watched the video of Floyd being killed—the video that shows Officer Derek Chauvin keeping his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds as Floyd cries out that he can't breathe—she felt physically ill. For two weeks after seeing the video, she felt nauseated and deeply tired. She had trouble concentrating, trouble sleeping. "I asked myself: How could someone do this?" Jozef told me this past summer. "How could you do this to a human being?"

That was the same question she asked me when we spoke in July, a day when yet another ICE flight carrying dozens of asylum seekers—some of them infants on their mothers' laps—took off for Haiti. The answer is one Jozef says she

has learned, painfully and persistently, over her 30 years in the United States. Though the majority of people who have been deported from this country have been Latinx migrants from Mexico and Central America, Black migrants face rates of arrest, detention, and deportation disproportionate to their numbers in this country. The lesson Jozef learned: Every arm of our country's incarceration and deportation machine brings down a hefty amount of its weight onto the backs of Black people.

Now, Black immigrants and their advocates are fighting to change that. In the midst of the uprisings after Floyd's murder and the growth of Black Lives Matter into perhaps the largest protest movement in US history, activists hope that the time is right for the broader public to finally recognize the impact the country's immigration system has on Black migrants. Organizations like the UndocuBlack Network and the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), alongside smaller groups like Jozef's, are working to amplify their long-term central organizing thesis: that in immigration, as in policing, Black lives matter.

**F**OR DECADES, BLACK IMMIGRANTS have faced excessively high rates of detention and deportation. According to a report from BAJI, while Black immigrants make up less than 5.4 percent of the undocumented population in the United States, they made up 10.6 percent of all deportation proceedings from 2003

**Black immigrants made up just 5.4 percent of the undocumented population but 10.6 percent of all deportation proceedings from 2003 to 2015.**

to 2015—almost double their share of the undocumented population.

Under the Obama administration, billions of dollars flowed to immigration enforcement, and more people were removed, and at a faster rate, than under any other president in history. (Even Donald Trump failed to break Barack Obama's records.) In speeches, Obama often noted that he'd instructed ICE to pursue only undocumented people with criminal records—a perverse way of indicating his compassion on the issue. However, according to Human Rights Watch, that policy likely caused the number of Black people caught in ICE's dragnet to increase: Decades of overcriminalization of Black communities had resulted in higher rates of conviction for Black people, which, when paired with Obama's emphasis on people with criminal records, led in turn to higher rates of deportation for Black migrants. By 2015, more than one out of every five people facing deportation due to a criminal conviction was Black, despite making up just 7.2 percent of the total noncitizen population, documented or not.

The threats to Black immigrants only increased under Trump. In 2017, Trump ended temporary protected status—a designation that shields immigrants from deportation if their home country is undergoing a crisis—for Haitian immigrants. The move put 60,000 Haitians living in the United States in danger of deportation. That same year, a deportation flight to Somalia caused a scandal after immigrants on the flight told reporters about their horrific treatment: Passengers remained shackled on the plane for over 40 hours as the flight faced logistical issues and was forced to return to the United States. In interviews with *The Intercept*, advocates also said that passengers were forced to urinate in bottles or on themselves and faced beatings and threats by ICE officers.

Trump's policies on the border also endangered Black immigrants. Many Black refugees fleeing countries outside of the Americas fly first to Latin America before making the deadly trek north to the US border. But once they reached the border, hundreds of Black asylum seekers—from Haiti, Ghana, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other countries—were turned away by Border Patrol agents and forced to remain in refugee camps in Mexico, as part of Trump's Migrant Protection Protocols. In February 2020, Trump closed the door completely to many of these migrants when he expanded his racially driven travel ban to include

people from Nigeria, Eritrea, Sudan, and Tanzania.

The situation has reached a crisis during the pandemic. Since Covid-19 hit the United States, the share of Black immigrants in detention has gone up, especially in family detention centers. According to data collected by RAICES, a refugee and immigrant rights organization, more than 44 percent of all families locked in ICE detention this past summer were Haitian. RAICES also found that on any given day in the past year, Haitians were the single largest nationality group in family detention. Many of these families, fleeing widespread political violence in Haiti, have since been deported.

**W**HEN IT COMES to seeking asylum, advocates say that Black migrants also face an uphill battle in having their cases fairly heard.

In the United States, asylum seekers do not have a right to lawyers or a trial by jury; this gives immense power to the subjective opinions of the individual judges who decide their cases. If a judge decides that an asylum seeker seems dishonest, that refugee could get deported back to a country where they face persecution or death. The fickleness of this process seems to have led to demonstrably worse outcomes for Black immigrants at deportation hearings: In the last two decades, people from Haiti, Jamaica, and Somalia have had some of the highest rates of asylum denial of any nationality. Each of these countries has experienced violent political unrest for much of the 21st century, but because they also have dire poverty rates, judges often determine that asylum seekers from these nations are economic migrants rather than refugees. From 2012 to 2017, 87 percent of Haitian asylum seekers were denied asylum—the highest denial rate of any nationality besides Mexicans, whose applications are denied at a rate of 88 percent. In the early 2000s, Jamaicans topped the list of asylum denials, with a 92 percent denial rate. According to the American

Bar Association, Somali immigrants had the highest arrest rate of all nationalities under Trump and the highest removal rate in 2017. (ICE deported 521 Somalis that year, up from 65 three years prior.) Judges also have unilateral power to determine bail for asylum seekers locked in detention, based on how much of a flight risk or public danger they think the applicant might be. Many attorneys say that, in their own experience, bonds tend to be set much higher for Black immigrants—tens of thousands of dollars higher. And there's data to back that up. According to RAICES, between 2018 and 2020, the average bond that immigrant rights organizations paid for their clients was \$10,500, but for Haitians, it was \$16,700.

"Bail is very often set significantly higher for my Black clients than my other clients," says Lisa Knox, a senior attorney with the immigration legal aid organization Centro Legal de la Raza. "I can see how judges treat my Black clients with more suspicion; judges are more likely to assume they're lying." Knox, who is Black, adds, "I can tell they just see some 'criminal' in front of them."

The bond rates for Caribbean and African migrants—often above \$50,000, according to the bond requests I reviewed—are astronomically higher than many immigrants could possibly afford. It can lead to years-long detentions. Indeed,

**"I can see how judges treat my Black clients with more suspicion.... I can tell they just see some 'criminal.'"**

—Lisa Knox,  
senior attorney, Centro Legal de la Raza



**“It doesn’t matter if you’re a football player or a congressman.... Rolling while Black, automatically you’re a target.”**

—Donovan Grant



**Fighting for hope:** Guerline Jozef, the co-founder of the Haitian Bridge Alliance, has become a powerful advocate for Black immigrants.

immigrants, Jozef raised the money to free Marie’s daughter. On Mother’s Day, Jozef called Marie to let her know that her daughter was going to come home. “She made things change for me and gave me hope again,” Marie said.

Jozef, who worked in the entertainment industry before turning to immigrant rights, says she felt moved to do this work—to raise money and aid Black immigrants—because of a simple fact: Few other people were going to do it. As Black immigrant advocates explained to me, even in the immigration justice world, implicit bias makes it difficult for Black migrants to get the aid, lawyers, and support they need. “There are ways in which the nonprofit industrial complex can replicate a lot of the harm that exists outside of these social justice spaces,” says Tsion Gurmu, BAJI’s legal director.

As Nicole Morgan, an attorney at RAICES, points out, many well-meaning white attorneys don’t recognize their prejudice as bigotry. “I’ve heard attorneys say, ‘Oh, I don’t take clients from Benin, because those people are difficult to work with.’” Other Black lawyers say they’ve heard white colleagues use that same word—“difficult”—to describe other predominantly Black nationalities. In other situations, Morgan says, asylum attorneys tend to understand that their clients are dealing with serious trauma and that it can manifest as anger or frustration, but this patience tends to wear away when it comes to Black clients. Thus, white attorneys are more likely to use “difficult” to describe African and Caribbean clients.

the person who spent the longest period of time in immigration detention—10 years—was a Rwandan national. The second longest detention was endured by a Kenyan, who spent about nine years in immigration lockup. (For comparison, the average stay is 55 days.)

While in detention, the conditions that Black people face can also be particularly harsh. According to a study published last year, people from Africa and the Caribbean represented 24 percent of the people placed in solitary confinement in ICE custody from 2012 to 2017, even though they made up only 4 percent of ICE detainees. In 2018, the immigrant advocacy organization Freedom for Immigrants released a report documenting hundreds of allegations of racism and xenophobia in immigrant detention centers. One detained immigrant in Texas said a warden told her, “Shut your black ass up. You don’t deserve nothing. You belong at the back of that cage.” In Massachusetts, another detained Black immigrant recounted an officer telling them, “No one will believe baboon complaints.”

The unpayable bonds often result in family separations. In 2019, Marie, an asylum seeker from Haiti who was unable to pay bail, watched as her 18-year-old daughter was forcibly removed from the rest of her family because, she was told, she was too old to remain in the same detention center as them. When Marie was eventually released, her daughter remained in detention, with a bond set at \$10,000. “I had no money,” Marie said at a press event RAICES hosted in 2020 to raise awareness about the experiences of Black immigrants.

Marie felt hopeless. “But then God really changed my life,” she said. “He put me in touch with Guerline Jozef.” As she has done for countless detained Black



“That’s just the narrative they tell themselves and that they carry throughout their career,” Morgan says.

**T**HE FIGHT FOR BLACK IMMIGRANT lives isn’t restricted to the country’s asylum system. Bigotry and bias permeate the regular immigration system as well.

Donovan Grant, who emigrated from Jamaica as a child, says that “as a Black man growing up in the States,” he learned quickly how racism works in this country. Grant says he remembers one experience in particular. He was 19. He had saved up and bought a new car, a gold coupe. “I can remember it like it was yesterday,” he says. He was dropping a friend off at home in Compton, Calif., when the cops appeared. “I wasn’t even moving, but he forced me to get out of the car. They began searching the car,” Grant recalls. “You get profiled. Just being a Black man in a nice car—it doesn’t matter if you’re a football player or a congressman or driving a Rolls Royce. Rolling while Black, automatically you’re a target.”

That persistent targeting meant that Grant, like many other Black people in the United States, has significantly more experience with law enforcement than other people. “I have a different kind of scrutiny when it comes to my skin color,” he says. It also meant that some-

thing that wouldn’t have led to a criminal record in a rich white suburb (how many frat boys get busted for marijuana possession?) left Grant with a criminal conspiracy conviction. And having a criminal record, when you’re an immigrant, can destroy your life.

The day George Floyd died, Grant was in the Mesa Verde ICE detention center in Southern California. In 2019, he had finished a three-year prison sentence for the conspiracy conviction. But as soon as he was released, ICE rearrested him; his criminal conviction had endangered his immigration status, thanks to a Clinton-era act that greatly expanded the types of criminal conviction that can be grounds for removal. He again found himself behind bars, in what some advocates call the “double punishment” experienced by immigrants.

When immigrants with green cards and legal status take plea deals in criminal cases, they often don’t realize that even a minor conviction or short jail sentence can lead to their eventual

deportation. For Grant, it was devastating to leave jail only to get locked up again. This prison-to-deportation pipeline is so severe for Black people in this country that it has sucked up not just immigrants but native-born Americans as well. In 2018, Peter Sean Brown ended up in a Florida sheriff's office for violating the terms of his probation (he had tested positive for smoking pot). The sheriff's office told him he wasn't getting out after his detention—they were going to hold him so that ICE could pick him up and deport him to Jamaica.

Brown panicked and immediately protested, saying that he had been to Jamaica just once in his life, for less than a day on a cruise, and knew no one in that country. He'd been born and raised in Philadelphia. The deputies just laughed at him. One of them sang the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* theme song: "In West Philadelphia, born and raised...."

"It was so sad and sickening to me, because there is nothing about me that even hints that I might be from somewhere other than the United States," Brown says. "Besides the fact that I'm Black. Nothing besides the color of my skin connects me to Jamaica."

It came down to a case of mistaken identity: Brown allegedly shared biometric information with a Jamaican immigrant ICE had on its radar. But there was nothing he could do to convince the deputies he was telling the truth, even after he managed to have a friend bring them his birth certificate. Eventually, he was placed in an ICE transport bus. As Brown left the jail, one of the deputies did a bad Bobby McFerrin impression, saying, in a Jamaican accent, "Don't worry, man."

Fortunately, Brown spent only a day in ICE detention before the agency realized its mistake. Davino Watson was not so lucky. Another Black, male, native-born US citizen, Watson spent three years in ICE detention fighting the agency's own clerical mistake. When I spoke with Watson in 2018 about his experience, the impact was clear: "It broke my life into pieces," he told me.

**O**N JULY 4, 2018, PATRICIA OKOUMOU climbed the Statue of Liberty about 100 feet from its pedestal in what became one of the most iconic moments of protest in the Trump era. She stood for hours on this country's symbol of tolerance and welcome, demanding an end to family separation and child detention.

In the weeks afterward, many people referred to Okoumou as an ally to immigrants—a label



that perturbed her. Okoumou is also an immigrant; she's a naturalized US citizen, born in the Republic of Congo.

Okoumou says she felt she had to do whatever she could to raise awareness about the Black children she felt had been rendered invisible in the media's coverage of the crisis. "Systemic racism is embedded in our culture so badly, going back to slavery and the way Black children are treated," she says. "It's almost as if we become numb to this reality."

Even though Okoumou's protest dominated the front pages, and the image of her on the statue is still widely shared, she feels as if she herself—her life, her continued activism, her one-room apartment—has been made invisible. She feels ignored and erased, even as her image is everywhere. "I feel like my story gets used," she says.

For Jozef, this all makes sense. She understands the forces at play that make Black immigrants, wherever they are, invisible. "Who is climbing the Statue of Liberty to say immigrant children need to be freed? It was a Black woman," she says. "It is Black immigrants putting their lives on the line, and still we are erased."

For Jozef, the deep roots of bigotry and bias against Black people in the immigration system can explain so much of the suffering we see today inflicted on immigrants of any race.

During her teenage years in the New York City borough of Queens, Jozef learned from her family and the community around her about the tens of thousands of Haitian refugees held by the United States in a massive refugee camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. In the early 1990s, thousands of Haitians fled a brutal military coup and subsequent dictatorship, and many went north in flimsy boats. In response, the United States sent the Coast Guard to form a cordon around the island and pick up any Haitians before they could land in the US. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush established the Guantánamo refugee camp for the same reason his son would later make "Gitmo" the center of his torture

**"It's almost as if we become numb to this reality."**

—Patricia Okoumou

**Do not turn away:** Patricia Okoumou climbed the Statue of Liberty in 2018 to protest the plight of children stuck in detention.

(continued on page 30)

# The Night They Came to



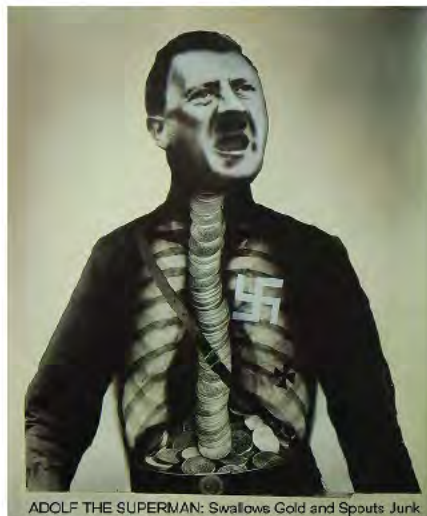
**The face of fascism:** John Heartfield's 1928 portrait of Benito Mussolini.



**Razor-sharp:** Heartfield depicts himself cutting into the neck of Berlin Police Commissioner Karl Zörgel.

THE NATION 4.5-12.2021

**A**S WORLD WAR I decimated a generation, a young Berlin artist born Helmut Herzfeld changed his name to John Heartfield to protest out-of-control German nationalism. In 1916, he was a founding member of Berlin Club Dada—a group of artistic rebels whose influence in all areas of culture continues to this day. Heartfield revolutionized the look of German book jackets and set design. He was a lifelong pacifist whose political beliefs were a constant in his art; his stunning collages, known as “photomontages,” exposed the growing threat of fascism



ADOLF THE SUPERMAN: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk

**The beast within:** Heartfield's devastating portrait of Hitler made him one of the Gestapo's most-wanted men.



**Serial killer:** This portrait of Hermann Göring standing before a burning Reichstag is titled *The Executioner of the Third Reich*.

IMAGES COURTESY OF JOHN J. HEARTFIELD



On the night of Good Friday, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1933, Hitler's SS headed straight for John Heartfield's studio.



Nazis now had the power to kill him for being an artist in Berlin.



Suddenly, the storm troopers kicked in his heavy wooden door.



My grandfather had one chance to survive. He crashed through his window and fell to the alley below.



# Murder My Grandfather

BY JOHN J. HEARTFIELD

ILLUSTRATION BY LANCE HANSEN

He landed badly and could not run.



Desperate, he crawled to the far corner of the courtyard...



and squeezed his small body into an old metal bin.



The Nazis searched for him, threatening anyone who dared to help my grandfather.



The SS strutted around in their immaculate uniforms. They could not imagine a man would hide in a can for hours covered by stinking trash.



They finally left convinced Heartfield would never again insult the mighty Third Reich.



But if those Nazi thugs had a clue what they had failed to accomplish that night, they would have tipped over every trash can in Berlin.



He was a German, but Germany had become enemy territory.



He walked across the mountains to Prague. A pacifist, he had never fired a gun or thrown a bomb. His only crime, one that carried with it the death penalty, was his use of scissors, paste, and his wit to expose the lies, injustice, and brutality of fascism.



in Europe. Using just scissors and paste, Heartfield employed an extensive visual memory and a searing wit to expose the horrors hidden under fascism's shiny surface. One month after becoming the undisputed leader of Germany, Adolf Hitler ordered Heartfield's arrest. The artist narrowly avoided an SS squad, escaping to Czechoslovakia, where he continued to attack the Third Reich with his "art as a weapon." When the German Army entered Czechoslovakia in 1938, Heartfield was high on the Gestapo's most-wanted list. Once again, he narrowly escaped—this time to London, where for 12 years he enjoyed a measure of peace. However, the Czech Refugee Fund denied his written request to remain in England for "his health and his work." In 1950 his brother Wieland brought him to East Germany, where Heartfield's years in England again placed him under suspicion. However Heartfield had powerful allies there, including his lifelong friend and theater collaborator

Bertolt Brecht. After Heartfield's death in 1968, the East German government gathered his original montages, models, and sketches into an archive of his pioneering stage design work, which remained closed for many years—making it almost impossible for academics or the public to view his original work. In 2008, I decided to reintroduce the world to the life and work of my grandfather, a man Brecht called "one of the most important European artists."

I first met artist Lance Hansen after *The Nation* published Lance's graphic biography of George Grosz, who had been Heartfield's close friend and collaborator. Lance originally asked me to work with him on a comic strip about my grandfather. But I thought Lance's initial drawings captured my grandfather's character so well that I suggested we collaborate on a graphic novel telling John Heartfield's extraordinary life story. Please visit [JohnHeartfieldExhibition.com](http://JohnHeartfieldExhibition.com) to learn more. **N**

*John J. Heartfield gives live interactive presentations around the world that focus on his grandfather's life and work and modern political art.*

*Lance Hansen is a writer and cartoonist living in Philadelphia.*

BY JOAN WALSH

**I**N 2018, DONALD TRUMP CONSIDERED REAPPOINTING JANET YELLEN, NOW THE nation's treasury secretary, as Federal Reserve chair. But according to *The Wall Street Journal*, he worried that the 5-foot-3 economist "might be too short to convey stature" at the Fed, though she'd been running it ably for four years.

Speaking of stature, Trump is the first twice-impeached former president, and Yellen is the first female treasury secretary.

Throughout her life, Yellen has been known as a collector—of rocks, stamps, and also firsts. She is the first person to hold the nation's top three economic jobs (in addition to being treasury secretary and running the Fed, she chaired President Bill Clinton's Council of Economic Advisers). In 1971, she was the only woman to graduate with a doctorate in economics from Yale University. A leader over the last quarter-century in economic policy-making, Yellen will need all that experience in a role that makes her the captain of efforts to right the Covid-19-battered economy while also addressing the underlying inequities the pandemic exposed.

Yellen did not speak to me for this profile. But we persevered, because she represents a new day at the Treasury—not just because of her gender, but also because of her career-long focus on how markets fail, especially the way they fail the unemployed and people on the lower rungs of the economic ladder. She will be central to keeping Biden's promises about "building back better," in his words, and pushing the country toward the kind of innovations "better" will require.

Yellen is also something of a throwback to an earlier age of bipartisan comity.

At her Senate Finance Committee confirmation hearing in mid-January, she got repeated praise from Republicans. The Senate confirmed her appointment 84-15. Yet progressive economic and racial justice advocates also praise Yellen, in superlatives. I had the odd experience of having several people ask to talk to me off the record because they will have to work with the new Treasury head—not to criticize her but to praise her, without

appearing to curry favor. "She is the most progressive treasury secretary in history," says someone who expects to work closely with her.

"Janet sees the world in terms of people living paycheck to paycheck, and how economic policy influences their lives and their ability to build a secure future," says Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, who some on the left preferred to see in Yellen's job.

"Biden could not have made a better pick, given that we are operating within the realm of mainstream

D.C. politics," agrees Robert Pollin, a founding codirector of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Yellen, a career-long Keynesian economist, is "firmly left of center," Pollin adds. "She actually cares about the well-being of working people and the poor."

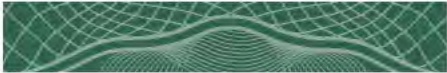
Her pop culture star is rising. Early in her term as Fed chair, the progressive activist group Fed Up, which agitates for the central bank to focus on problems of unemployment and racial and economic inequality, hailed Yellen's tenure by depicting her in iconic Rosie the Riveter garb, symbolizing her focus on

workers over Wall Street. Admirers say that, in her instantly recognizable sensible white bob and jewel-toned jackets, she could inspire the kind of feminist fandom that the late Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg did in her later years. When Biden nominated Yellen, he suggested that she deserved a tribute on the order of the musical *Hamilton*—and the *Hamilton* Twitter account morphed a portrait of Alexander Hamilton into Yellen. Then came "Who's Yellen Now?" by Dessa, a member of the hip-hop collective Doomtree. Here's the bridge, to the tune of Mary J. Blige's "Family Affair":

Don't want no tax evasion  
Forgers faking  
In her Treasury  
Trying for higher wages  
For the nation  
Less disparity.

**B**UT YELLEN WILL NEED MORE than a stellar résumé, pop culture adulation, and even bipartisan admiration to do her job well. The treasury secretary's role is crucial, if poorly understood. She (or he) is the top salesperson for the president's overall approach to the economy. Under Republicans, over the last half century at least, that has meant liberating the so-called free market by pushing tax cuts and corporate deregulation. Under Democrats—but especially, it seems, under Biden, at least so far—it has meant a robust defense of government spending (or investment, as Yellen likes to call it) to heal an economy cratered by Covid and tilted even more toward the white and wealthy by Trump's financial deregulation spree.

Trump's treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, either ignored or helped dismantle many of the 2010 Dodd-Frank guardrails Congress enacted after the 2008 financial crash, most notably by lowering the capital requirements on banks intended to prevent taxpayers from having to bail them out again, deregulating nonbank lending institutions (such as the insurance giants AIG



**"She has long demonstrated a willingness to listen to the voices of people left behind, which is the first step towards fixing the problems."**

—Ady Barkan,  
formerly of Fed Up

# Faces the Moment

After the ravages of the pandemic, the American economy needs more than stabilizing—it needs to be rebuilt from the ground up. Is Yellen up to the task?





and Prudential), and gutting other consumer, investor, and taxpayer protections. When Yellen assumed her role in January, she immediately confronted the scandal over the wild inflation of the stock of GameStop, a declining retail chain, by Reddit users and uber-wealthy investment sharks, often via the controversial Robinhood trading app. But the problem went way beyond GameStop or Robinhood. The role of established casino-capitalist institutions like hedge funds highlighted the accelerating “gamification of Wall Street,” says Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown.

“This is not a game for people who have money in pension funds, for people trying to save for their kids’ college, for people trying to get a mortgage,” says Brown, the chair of the Senate banking committee and a longtime Yellen admirer. He thinks she and other Biden appointees will be able to rein in the financial industry.

**Trifecta:** Yellen is the first person to have served, over the course of her career, as head of the Treasury, the Federal Reserve, and the Council of Economic Advisers.

Yellen can also reshape the Internal Revenue Service, which the Treasury runs, to do the same, Brown believes. Depleted over several administrations and thoroughly debased by Trump appointees, the IRS is now an accelerant of income inequality and racial disparities more than an engine of equity, far more likely to audit low-income Americans—especially those of color—than the rich, while creating a booming tax avoidance industry for individuals and corporations.

“We’ve heard a lot of talk about ‘I just want things to go back to normal, before Covid,’” notes Representative Katie Porter.

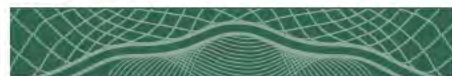
But “normal” wasn’t good for everyone, maybe even most Americans, the whiteboard-wielding California progressive observes. “We have to acknowledge there were problems in our economy before Covid—the gender pay gap, the racial wealth gap,” among others. “We have to ask: What fundamentals of our economy do we need to reorder as we rebuild?” As Yellen presides over Covid relief, financial reregulation, and IRS reform, Porter sees her as “the perfect person to raise those issues.”

In her first two months in office, Yellen has largely met her progressive admirers’ expectations. She fought aggressively for Biden’s \$1.9 trillion Covid-relief package, which passed Congress with zero GOP support. It marked a dramatic expansion of the social infrastructure that Yellen and the new president—perhaps nudged by the Democratic Party’s rising left—have pledged to enact.

“A key job for a Treasury Secretary is to make sure the country is on a sound fiscal course,” Yellen told *The New York Times’* Deal-Book conference in late February. “If you don’t spend what is necessary to get the economy back on track, that has a fiscal cost as well.” She actually has a better version of that pitch: “I think the price of doing too little is much higher than the price of doing something big,” she told CNBC the same month. But she’s not really given to sloganeering. She tends to speak in paragraphs, not sound bites.

Yellen has committed to appointing a top Treasury official to oversee climate change efforts, which might include everything from imposing a tax on carbon pollution and regulating investors’ climate risk to directing Treasury bonds, tax incentives, and other funding to green energy priorities.

And in an early demonstration of her commitment to racial equity, in March Yellen directed \$9 billion in Treasury-controlled funds to lending institutions in low-income communities, especially those of color. One of Yellen’s very first meetings after she was nominated included civil rights advocates, observes attendee Dorian Warren, president of Community



**“Biden could not have made a better pick, given that we are operating within the realm of mainstream D.C. politics.”**

—Robert Pollin,  
economist at UMass Amherst

Change, a progressive organizing group for low-income people. “It was really good—she listened and took copious notes,” he recalls. Ultimately, though, Warren cautions, progress will require “continuing outside pressure and movement work.”

**T**HE PRIDE OF MIDDLE-CLASS, MID-20th-century Brooklyn, Yellen paid tribute to her roots at her confirmation hearing. The economist praised her father, a doctor who had an office in the family’s Bay Ridge home, where patients from the nearby factories and docks came to wait for appointments on their stoop. “Those remain some of the clearest moments in my childhood,” she told the committee.

“He was the kind of doctor who treated the whole patient. He knew about their lives, about when they had been fired or couldn’t pay,” Yellen said. “Economics is sometimes considered a dry subject, but I’ve always tried to approach my science the same way my father approached his: as a means to help people.”

A friend and classmate at Fort Hamilton High School in the 1950s wrote a piece about her headlined “Janet Yellen: Brainy, Brave and Brooklyn Strong.” Writing in *The Fiscal Times* when Yellen was appointed Fed chair, Jacqueline Leo reminisced about the high expectations at their public school, where many teachers were World War II refugees, and about a culture remarkably free of sexist stereotyping. “The editors of all three high school publications—the newspaper, the literary magazine and the yearbook—were all girls.” So was the valedictorian: Janet Yellen, who also edited the school newspaper, *The Pilot*, in her senior year. (She interviewed herself for it and gave herself a tough time.)

“We were expected to take charge, just as our mothers and grandmothers did when men went off to war,” Leo wrote. Yellen’s mother had been a public school teacher during the war years; in the post-World War II recovery period, she stayed home to raise her children.

If her upbringing in post-Great Depression Brooklyn was formative, so was Yellen’s decision to seek a doctorate in economics from Yale, which she received in 1971. Her key advisers were the late James Tobin and Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, two legendary left-liberal economists. A half century later, Stiglitz, now at Columbia, recalls Yellen as “engaged, amiable, organized, and self-composed.” That last quality was particularly important, he says,

because Yale College didn’t admit female undergraduates until 1969, and there were few women in its graduate schools when Yellen arrived in 1967.

Academics aside, Yellen’s Yale experience was formative in two ways. As she had in Brooklyn, she absorbed the post-Depression, post-World War II values of the economics department of the time. “Many people there, including Jim Tobin, had been very affected by the Great Depression,” Stiglitz recalls. “They were much more concerned about equality” than economics departments tend to be now.

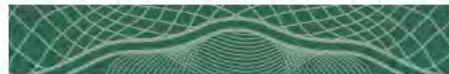
And they were having those discussions situated adjacent to the struggling, majority-Black neighborhoods of New Haven, just as the so-called War on Poverty’s programs were winding down, leaving poverty victorious despite the millions spent to combat it. “Yale was located right at the boundary where the wealth gap was very clear,” Stiglitz notes. “And we were sensitive to all of those issues.”

Yellen confirmed that the first time I met her, at the 2006 National Community Reinvestment Conference, which she convened as president of the San Francisco Federal Reserve Bank. “I was drawn to economics, not, as you might think, as a result of an early fascination with interest rates,” she said wryly in her opening welcome, “but because I wanted to understand the underlying causes of the Great Depression.” In the same speech, she discussed what she’d learned on the ground in New Haven about the Great Society initiatives that left the city blighted by urban renewal projects in the 1960s, with its African American population more isolated and practically as poor as before.

I’d been invited to that convention to share lessons from the community development initiatives I’d written about over the previous decade. Yellen had already studied them. The conclusions she’d drawn from her time in late-1960s New Haven meshed with what many anti-poverty activists found in their research almost four decades later: that revival efforts had to go beyond “bricks and mortar” to weave together the health care, education, employment support, and access to credit that low-income communities need. Another neglected element, she added: “Resident participation is vital to the success of any redevelopment effort.” The community revitalizers in her audience rarely heard such words from central bankers. The same could be said of the bankers who were there.

Yellen became one of the most powerful advocates of the Community Reinvestment Act, passed in 1977 to direct more credit into poor and minority communities neglected or redlined by mainstream banking. As Stiglitz recalls, “She and I supported the CRA when we were in the Clinton administration, but the rest of the financial community was very hesitant about it.” Yellen stood up to the analysts and pundits, especially on the right, who blamed CRA-supported loans to low-income home buyers for the banking and mortgage crash in 2008.

“Most of the loans made by depository institutions examined under the CRA have not been higher-priced loans, and studies have shown that the CRA has increased the volume of responsible lending to low- and moderate-income

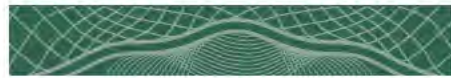


**“We’ve heard a lot of talk about ‘I just want things to go back to normal.’ We have to ask: What fundamentals do we need to reorder as we rebuild?”**

—Representative Katie Porter

**Pop culture cachet:** A still from the video for Dessa’s “Who’s Yellen Now?,” released the same day that Yellen was confirmed as treasury secretary.





**“Her whole life has been about understanding this moment, where government can play a big, important role.”**

—Joseph Stiglitz,  
economist at Columbia University

have been President Barack Obama’s top choice. One of the advocates’ best arguments for Yellen was empirical, not ideological: She had been remarkably prescient about future economic troubles as both San Francisco Fed president and Fed vice chair. In 2006, she warned about the housing bubble; by 2007, she predicted that troubled housing and mortgage markets would shake the overall economy; and in late 2008, she became the first Fed official to declare that the economy was in recession.

That streak continued. Examining nearly 700 predictions by the 14 top Fed officials between 2009 and 2012, *The Wall Street Journal* ranked Yellen number one in terms of accuracy. Other Fed low-interest-rate doves also deserved high marks, the business broadsheet found; inflation-obsessed hawks were the least accurate.

Meanwhile, Obama’s oddly vocal support for Summers also helped Yellen. Ezra Klein wrote about a “subtle, sexist whispering campaign” against Yellen by Obama allies and financial analysts, who told him on background that the Fed vice chair lacked “toughness” or “gravitas.” (As I wrote at the time, gravitas “is a well known Beltway code word for ‘penis.’”) One-third of Senate Democrats signed a letter sponsored by Brown backing her nomination. They ranged from progressives like Brown, Warren, and Oregon’s Jeff Merkley to centrists like Maine’s Angus King and California’s Dianne Feinstein.

Whether because of the empirical, ideological, or feminist arguments, Summers took himself out of contention, and Yellen got the job. Immediately, she began advancing policies to lower unemployment and spread resources in low-income communities of color by keeping interest rates low, using Fed funds to promote employment, and nudging private bankers toward public responsibility. “She was the very first Fed chair to really take on inequality,” says Stiglitz. Early in her tenure, Yellen visited a manufacturing program at a South Side Chicago community college; soon after, Brown recalls, she toured an Alcoa aluminum plant in Cleveland. “These aren’t places Fed chairs usually go,” says UMass Amherst’s Pollin, adding that she also came to his own public university “and spent hours talking to our grad students.”

Angela Glover Blackwell, the founder and former CEO of PolicyLink, a group promoting racially equitable growth policies (disclosure: I’m on its board), found herself invited to join Yellen’s 15-member Community Advisory Committee, one of only two such bodies connected to the Fed. After their first meeting, Blackwell says, “I was so impressed with how she immediately took to the data we presented [on] poverty and unemployment.” Yellen asked them, “What are the jobs in the future going to be? How many people of color? And how were they doing?” Blackwell remembers that Yellen wove the data and analysis into future speeches.

households,” Yellen told the 2008 Community Reinvestment Conference. She warned against using foreclosure trends “as justification to abandon the goal of expanding access to credit among low-income households.”

These and other positions won her overwhelming progressive support to succeed Ben Bernanke as Federal Reserve chair in 2014 over former treasury secretary Larry Summers, widely considered to

Activist Ady Barkan, best known for his advocacy in defense of the Affordable Care Act in the Trump years, was back then a leader of Fed Up. “She has long demonstrated a willingness to listen to the voices and experiences of people left behind, which is the first step towards fixing the problems,” Barkan tells me via e-mail. “She understands the racial and economic inequities that are plaguing us. She also seems ready to invest huge sums of Federal dollars into the economy.”

Yellen also made the right enemies. At a 2015 congressional hearing, then-Representative Mick Mulvaney, the South Carolina Tea Partier who would become one of Trump’s many hapless chiefs of staff, blasted the popular Fed chair for her focus on inequality. “You’re sticking your nose in places that you have no business to be,” he fulminated.

**G**IVEN HER UNPARALLELED EXPERIENCE, a track record of correctly reading economic trends, a commitment to racial and economic equity, and admiration from progressives and even some centrist Republicans, does anyone apart from has-been wing nuts like Mulvaney have worries about Yellen’s coming tenure?

Progressives have raised some concerns, including her public support for deficit cutting in 2018 and her acceptance of millions of dollars in speaking fees from corporate giants and Wall Street titans after leaving the Fed the same year. Yellen also disappointed many left-leaning activists when she began to raise interest rates, albeit slightly, starting in 2016, when unemployment was still comparatively high. “The economy was still kind of soft,” recalls the economist Robert Kuttner, a Yellen admirer, and progressive economists especially saw a need for the Fed to keep its focus on unemployment and its lending rates low. Yellen’s move drove Fed Up leaders to criticize their former Rosie the Riveter. (Stiglitz attended a Fed Up demonstration outside a 2016 Fed symposium in Jackson Hole, Wyo., according to *The Washington Post*.) Kuttner terms her interest-rate hawkishness “an asterisk” in an otherwise progressive career, while adding that her position was widely shared at the time by the central bank’s board of governors.

A bigger asterisk, to some, is her relatively recent embrace of cutting the federal deficit and “reforming” entitlements. At Charles Schwab’s 2018 Impact conference, Yellen called the federal debt “unsustainable,” adding, with

**A rising star:** In 2013, Barack Obama nominated Yellen to chair the Federal Reserve, making her the first woman in the role.







a memorable flourish, “If I had a magic wand, I would raise taxes and cut retirement spending.” The next year, she suggested Social Security and Medicare might need cuts.

Elizabeth Warren, for one, says that doesn’t worry her. “Janet gets that we’re in a completely different world now,” she tells me. “While we may have differed in years past about the effect of the deficit, today her focus is entirely on an economy that has left millions of families behind and threatens to destroy economic opportunity and widen the racial wealth gap.” Kutner agrees, noting that Yellen’s 2018 comments “came in the context of Trump’s tax-cutting spree” and that, at the same time, she recommended tax hikes—which will ultimately be necessary to pay for Biden’s priorities, including the American Rescue Plan Act and his massive infrastructure investment.

“Caring a little about the deficit is not necessarily a bad thing, especially when it comes to reining in rich people on taxes,” adds Jeff Hauser of the Revolving Door Project. The Economic Policy Institute’s Josh Bivens adds, “I think her deficit concerns actually help her in building support for the [American Rescue Plan] proposal,” he says. “Nobody thinks she’s always soft on deficits.”

Still, after winning admiration from progressives for avoiding the revolving door between top government jobs and Wall Street for her entire career—Yellen left the Fed for a perch at the Brookings Institution in 2018—she nonetheless disappointed some when her financial disclosure forms, filed after her nomination in late 2020, revealed she’d received over \$7 million from corporate behemoths, among them big banks, investment firms, and hedge funds. Barkan, who says he remains optimistic that Yellen will “be an excellent Treasury Secretary,” was disappointed

by that news. “We need her to be a really tough regulator,” he says in an e-mail. “I hope that in the coming years, she proves that she is on the side of poor and working class Americans, not the financiers.”

Sherrod Brown, when asked if the news of Yellen’s financial disclosure forms worries him, answers immediately: “It really doesn’t. She told me about that when I first talked to her [about her nomination]. I know her integrity and record and character well enough to know she’ll do a good job.”

**S** O WHAT, EXACTLY, DO YELLEN’S LEFT-LIBERAL ADMIRERS believe, or at least hope, she can accomplish?

The advocates and economists fighting to reverse the huge advantages that the federal government has bestowed on the financial industry over the last 30 years—a bipartisan problem going back to Clinton—say she must revitalize the Financial Security Oversight Council, a Dodd-Frank reform that pulled together agencies like the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation to protect Americans from known abuses and look out for new threats. Just holding regular meetings would be a start, says one Senate source, who adds that the Trump administration left the FSOC “decrepit and abandoned.” The point isn’t meetings for the sake of meetings; Yellen needs to reinvigorate the entire roster of federal regulators charged with policing the field.

Meanwhile, there’s the fight, even after passage of the American Rescue Plan Act, over continued government spending to achieve greater racial and economic equity. Porter thinks Yellen is the right person to make the case that underspending, which typifies the GOP’s approach, “is fiscally irresponsible. Spending is the fiscally responsible path.” Brown wants to see the act’s expanded child tax credit—which he says would lower child poverty by 40 percent and the poverty rate of children of color by an astonishing 50 percent—made payable monthly, instead of once a year. (An

**Lingering damage:**

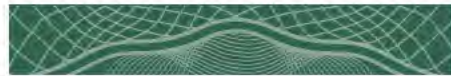
The pandemic has increased demand on food pantries, and “spending is the fiscally responsible path” to recovery, says Representative Katie Porter.



**Yellen will be central to the fight over whether and how government spending can achieve greater racial and economic equality.**

expanded earned-income tax credit could be delivered that way too.) Yellen probably can't make all of that happen by herself; other congressional or White House regulatory tweaks may be necessary. But her support, especially in her role as IRS boss, will be crucial.

Brown, Warren, and other progressives also hope that, as the government directs more money into American homes via those reforms, Yellen and others in the administration will get behind establishing forms of no-fee banking so that low-income people without bank accounts can use those funds without paying sky-high fees. The



## “Janet sees the world in terms of people living paycheck to paycheck.”

—Senator Elizabeth Warren

like financing mortgages in areas threatened by floods or wildfires. New financial rules could require lenders and investors to price in those risks, Yellen says. She also favors a tax on carbon emissions—weak tea to a lot of progressives, but a proposal that could make a difference as part of a broader agenda. Pollin, an expert on the Green New Deal, supports some of the same reforms and adds that Yellen could be instrumental in setting up a \$50 billion green-bond-funding program, in which the Treasury issues bonds that are then purchased by the Fed and invested in clean energy development.

Porter, the deputy chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, and Representative Pramila Jayapal, the caucus chair, are equally hopeful that Yellen's leadership could prove transformative. She's been close to the economic traumas of the past 70 years, from the lingering aftermath of the Great Depression in Brooklyn through the unfinished business of the Great Society in New Haven to the Democrats' inadequate approach to the 2008 financial crash. All of that, they believe, will help her chart a future that requires a multiracial 21st-century New Deal and an even greater Great Society.

Stiglitz agrees. “Her whole life has been about understanding this moment, where government can play a big, important role,” he says.



Porter says Yellen (and Biden) will have to deal with the fact that government moratoriums on rent and mortgage payments don't permanently waive those bills for people who still can't afford to pay them. Like Porter, Jayapal believes Yellen sees those people. Last year, Yellen helped Jayapal develop her Paycheck Guarantee Act, which would provide grants to employers of all sizes to enable them to keep paying and offering benefits to employees during the crisis (though the measure is not part of the Biden administration's rescue plan).

“She was so thoughtful about the proposal, about where we were in the economy, the challenges to minority communities,” Jayapal recalls. “She made it stronger.”

“That's not to say we'll have no disagreements—I'm sure we will,” Jayapal adds. Indeed, not long after we spoke, Yellen expressed reservations about Jayapal's and Warren's proposed “ultra-millionaires' tax,” a wealth tax that the new treasury secretary warned “has very difficult implementation problems.” Nevertheless, Jayapal says, “I have a tremendous amount of hope.”

(continued from page 19)

campaign during the War on Terrorism: The military base existed outside of constitutional jurisdiction. The United States' obligation to legal refugees did not kick in until they set foot on US soil.

The conditions at the refugee center were horrific, with as many as 34,000 people living in flimsy tents surrounded by rows of razor wire. Most were ultimately sent back to Haiti, though some were allowed to pursue asylum claims. But even among those who qualified for asylum, 250 were held in legal limbo in a separate camp because they had tested positive for HIV or were related to someone who had—a discriminatory and medically unsound 1987 law had forbidden those with HIV from entering the country. It wasn't until a federal judge ruled against what he called the “H.I.V. prison camp” that the Clinton administration was forced to shut it down and bring the asylees to the United States.

For Jozef, this moment is critical to understand. This is the beginning of the mass incarceration of immigrants in the United States, she says. Though the government had detained immigrants and even US citizens it had deemed undesirable before—Eastern Europeans at Ellis Island, Chinese and other Asians at Angel Island, Japanese in internment camps during World War II—the tactics tested out on the Haitians at Guantánamo set the modern detention machine in motion. “It began with the mass detention of Black people,” Jozef says, adding that a new landmark in this dark history was reached in 2016, when Haitian families began to be separated, laying the groundwork for the family separation crisis under Trump. (Starting as early as 2007, Haitian children were often separated from their fathers but not their mothers, while under Trump children were separated from both.)

Jozef says that when she heard that Trump had been defeated in November, she was exhausted: For the entire previous month, a deportation flight had taken off for Haiti almost every other day. She says that Biden's victory was a light at the end of the tunnel—albeit a very dim one.

“When I saw the news that Biden had won, it was a feeling that the fight would change,” she says. “Now we must fight to hold him accountable. It's time to retie our boots and keep pushing forward.”

On his first day in office, Biden signed a host of executive orders. One struck down Trump's travel ban on people from several African and Muslim countries; another offered Liberians in the United States protection from deportation. The same week that Biden was sworn in, Guerline learned that the members of a Haitian

family who'd spent the entire pandemic in a detention center had finally been paroled to await the results of their asylum case. And in February, Biden reversed Trump's "Remain in Mexico" asylum policy. But Jozef's sense of hope soon turned to despair: Since taking office, Biden has left some of Trump's harshest measures in place, including a complete ban on asylum that Trump issued in March 2020, with Covid-19 as the justification. Under Biden, thousands of Haitian asylum seekers have been expelled before they even had the chance to ask for asylum. In the first two weeks of February, over 900 Haitians were deported, and Jozef says that there are now days when three different deportation flights have taken off for Haiti, which descended into a major political crisis in February when multiple politicians claimed the presidency.

Jozef dreams of a day when the archipelago of detention centers that jails immigrants and their families across the United States will fall. As president, Biden has the broad discretion to release almost everyone currently in ICE detention. Alternatives to detention exist, and Biden has no obligation to continue detaining asylum seekers, families, and children beyond a short processing period. For Jozef, fighting for this future is how she fights for Black lives. She's seen so much suffering inside immigration jails.

But for now, the struggle continues. According to Jozef, on February 1, the first day of Black History Month, ICE forced 102 Haitians onto a plane. Parents held children on their laps; many of the passengers were less than 2 years old. The flight took off from San Antonio, winged its way over the Gulf, and landed in Port-au-Prince. The next flight would take off just days later.

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## Liberty's Discontents

*The contested history of freedom*

BY TYLER STOVALL



ONE OF THE MORE CONTENTIOUS ISSUES to emerge during America's Covid-19 crisis concerns the wearing of face masks. Heralded by public health experts as a vital way to halt the spread of the disease, masks have also been attacked by conservatives as unwarranted restrictions on personal freedom. Donald Trump, who was briefly hospitalized with Covid in the final months of his presidency, defiantly refused to wear a mask in public, and he wasn't alone: Thousands of similarly barefaced supporters attended his rallies, public health consequences be damned. Many Americans have challenged the call to wear masks, and the public health research behind it, as an attack on their rights as citizens of a free country. Last June, protesters stormed a hearing in Palm Beach, Fla., at which public officials were considering whether to require the wearing of masks in public buildings. During

the fiery session, one woman claimed, “You’re removing our freedoms and stomping on our constitutional rights by these communist dictatorship orders or laws you want to mandate.” As *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist Will Bunch noted after the meeting:

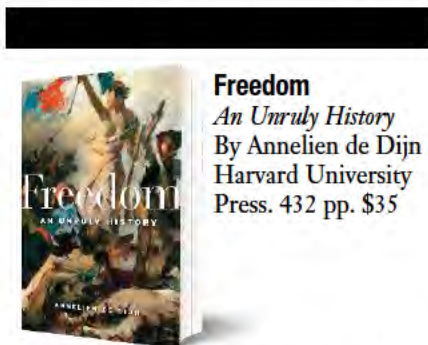
It was another great day for liberty—and yet a horrible one for tens of thousands of Americans who now may die needlessly because so many cling to a warped idea of freedom that apparently means not caring whether others in your community get sick. The reality is that those devil-worshipping elected officials and their mad scientists are trying to mandate masks in public for the same reasons they don’t let 12-year-olds drive and they close bars at 2 A.M.: They actually want to keep their constituents alive.

Give me liberty or give me death, indeed.

Ah, freedom! Few ideals in human history have been so cherished—or so controversial. The United States, in particular, has built its identity around the idea of freedom, from the Bill of Rights, enshrining various freedoms in the law of the land, to the giant statue of Lady Liberty in New York Harbor. And yet—interestingly, for such a foundational ideal—freedom has throughout history represented both the means to an end and the end itself. We wish to be free to pursue our most cherished goals in life, to make money as we will, to share our lives with whom we will, to live where we choose. Freedom empowers our individual desires, but at the same time it structures how we live with other individuals in large, complex societies. As the saying goes, my freedom to swing my fist ends just where someone else’s nose begins; in the words of Isaiah Berlin, “Total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs.” The tension between individual and collective notions of freedom highlights but by no means exhausts the many different approaches to the idea, helping to explain how it has motivated so many struggles throughout human history.

In her ambitious and impressive new book, *Freedom: An Unruly History*, the political historian Annelien de Dijn approaches this massive subject from the standpoint of two conflicting interpretations of freedom and their interactions over 2,500 years of Western history. She starts her study by noting that most people think of freedom as a matter of individual liberties and, in particular, of protection from the intrusions of big government and the state. This is the vision of liberty outlined in the opening paragraph of this essay, one that drives conservative ideologues throughout the West. De Dijn argues, however, that this is not the only conception of freedom and that it is a relatively recent one. For much

*Tyler Stovall is a professor of history and the dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Fordham University. His latest book, White Freedom, was published this year.*



### Freedom

*An Unruly History*  
By Annelien de Dijn  
Harvard University  
Press. 432 pp. \$35

of human history, people thought of freedom not as protecting individual rights but as ensuring self-rule and the just treatment of all. In short, they equated freedom with democracy. “For centuries Western thinkers and political actors identified freedom not with being left alone by the state but with exercising control over the way one is governed,” she writes. Liberty in its classic formulation was thus not individual but collective. Freedom did not entail escaping from government rule but rather making it democratic.

By opening up freedom to its multiple meanings, de Dijn explores an alternate history of the concept from the ancient world to the Age of Revolution to the Cold War, charting those moments when new notions of freedom—such as freedom from government supervision or repression—deviated from its more classical and longstanding definition as self-government. De Dijn thus shows how the rise of modernity brought about the triumph of a new idea of liberty. At the same time, her book invites us to consider the relationship between these two notions of freedom. For de Dijn, this relationship functions as a fundamental opposition, but one can also find in her history enough points in common between them to realize that individual liberty also requires collective freedom. For many, one

cannot be truly free if one’s community or nation isn’t; freedom must belong to one and to all.

**D**e Dijn divides *Freedom* into three roughly equal parts. In the first, she tracks the rise of the idea of freedom in the ancient world, with a focus on the Greek city-states and the Roman Republic; in the second, she examines the revival of this idea in the Renaissance and the Age of Revolution; and in the third, she considers libertarian challenges to the classical notion of freedom and the rise of a new conception focused primarily on individual rights.

For most of this long history, de Dijn is quick to note, the classical idea of freedom as democratic empowerment held sway. The turning point, she contends, came with the reaction against the revolutionary movements of the late 18th century in North America, France, and elsewhere. Conservative intellectuals like Edmund Burke in Britain and liberals like Benjamin Constant in France not only rejected the era’s revolutionary ideology; they also developed a new conception of freedom that viewed the state as its enemy rather than as a tool for its triumph. Eventually, in the modern era, this counterrevolutionary conception of freedom became dominant.

The heart of *Freedom* thus consists of an in-depth exploration of how the demands of democracy gave birth to the original idea of freedom and how, in the face of the democratic revolutions of the late 18th century, the concept was once again remade. In tackling this rather unwieldy subject, de Dijn uses the approach of intellectual history to tell her story, centering her analysis around a series of foundational texts by famous and obscure writers and thinkers alike, ranging from classical scholars like Plato and Cicero through Petrarch and Niccolò Machiavelli to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Burke, John Stuart Mill, and Berlin. She skillfully interweaves this textual analysis with the flow of historical events, vividly illustrating the relationship between the theory and practice of freedom and reminding us that no concept is immune to change over time.

For de Dijn, the story of freedom begins with the Greek city-state, which marked not only the birthplace of democracy but also the origin of the democratic conception of liberty—the ideal of the self-ruling city-state. She

notes that a major part of the originality of Greek thinkers was not just to contrast their freedom with slavery (specifically the slavery of the Persian Empire) but also to reconceptualize freedom as liberation from political rather than personal bondage. By 500 BCE, several Greek city-states, most notably Athens, had begun to develop democratic systems of self-rule in which all male citizens took part in decision-making through general assemblies. De Dijn argues that ancient Greek ideas of freedom developed in this context, emphasizing that freedom came with the ability of people to rule themselves as free men. I use the words “free men” deliberately because women and, of course, enslaved persons had no right to participate in democratic self-government. That inconsistency in fact reinforces de Dijn’s general point: that participation in democracy was the essence of freedom in the ancient world.

In her discussion of freedom in classical Greece and Rome, de Dijn does not fail to note the many objections to this idea of liberty, some from leading philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. For example, in a passage that, by raising the key issue of property rights, seems all too modern, Aristotle noted, “If justice is what the numerical majority decide, they will commit injustice by confiscating the property of the wealthy few.” Gradually, many in Greece turned to another conception of freedom, one that emphasized personal inner strength and self-control over democratic rights. Yet the idea of democratic freedom did not die, even as these notions of personal rights took shape—and this was especially true with the formation of the Roman Republic.

Similar to the city-states of Greece, the Roman Republic thrived for a while as the embodiment of freedom for its male citizens, grounding liberty in the practice of civic democracy. Overthrown by Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, the republic gave way to the Roman Empire, yet historians and philosophers like Livy, Plutarch, and Lucan continued to praise the virtues of the republican freedom fighters. In contrast, the empire—and even more so its successor (at least in terms of the moral imagination), Christianity—divorced freedom from democracy and instead conceived it as personal autonomy and the choice to accept authority. Out of the collapse of the classical city-states and republics came a new ideal of liberty, one no longer centered on collective life and political activity but instead on individual spirituality and a submission to power.

**T**he defeat of democratic freedom by imperial absolutism would play a key role in shaping the revival of the ideal in the city-states of Renaissance Italy, underscoring the link between artistic liberty and self-government. The second part of *Freedom* considers this re-

vival in Europe from the Renaissance to the Age of Revolution. De Dijn notes, for example, that Renaissance thinkers embraced the ancient ideal of democratic liberty as a reaction against the aristocratic royalism of the Middle Ages; the rebirth of knowledge was equally a rebirth of freedom.

Like the Renaissance in general, this renewed idea of democratic freedom arose first in 14th-century Italy, where cities like Venice and especially Florence bore a certain resemblance to the city-states of ancient Greece. Humanists like Petrarch and Michelangelo embraced the idea; even Machiavelli, best known to posterity for advising would-be rulers in *The Prince*, argued in *The Discourses* for a return to the ancient model of freedom. In Northern Europe, writers and thinkers adopted the idea of democratic freedom in opposition to monarchical rule, frequently characterizing the latter as freedom’s opposite, slavery. This was especially true in England, where the Puritan insurgents who executed King Charles I in 1649, at the height of the English Revolution, referred to ancient models of liberty to justify their unprecedented action.

In de Dijn’s analysis, the revival of democratic freedom laid the ground for the Atlantic Revolutions of the late 18th century, which she refers to as the “crowning achievement” of the movement. Her analysis focuses primarily on the American and French revolutions, especially the former. Although she does mention the Haitian Revolution, it would be interesting to see how a fuller consideration of that event, and of the issue of slave revolt in general, might have shaped her analysis.

De Dijn’s consideration of the American and French revolutions continues her emphasis on two themes: the indebtedness of theoreticians and freedom fighters to the classical tradition, and the link between freedom and democracy. John Adams, for example, compared the American revolutionaries with the Greek armies that stood against Persia. A 1790 Paris revival of Vol-

taire’s play *Brutus*, about the most prominent of Caesar’s assassins, won acclaim from the Jacobin public. De Dijn notes how revolutionaries in both countries viewed submission to monarchy as slavery and insisted not just on its abolition but also on the creation of systems of government answerable to the people. She extensively discusses the importance of ideas of natural rights during this era, focusing on key documents like the US Bill of Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, and she disputes the idea that these constituted individualistic rejections of government interference, arguing instead that they reflect the conviction that civil liberties can exist only in a democratic polity.

Yet if the Atlantic Revolutions marked the apogee of the Renaissance’s call for democratic freedom, they also constituted its grand finale, its swan song. In the final section of *Freedom*, de Dijn explores the historical reaction against democratic freedom that produced the currently dominant idea of liberty as freedom from state interference. This new interpretation arose out of the struggle against the American and French revolutions; as she notes in her introduction, “Ideas about freedom commonplace today...were invented not by the revolutionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but rather by their critics.”

This is the heart of de Dijn’s argument in this section of *Freedom*, and she bases it on several themes. One is the idea, promoted by the German philosopher Johann August Eberhard, that political and civil liberty oppose rather than reinforce each other, that one could enjoy more individual rights and freedoms in an enlightened monarchy than in a democracy. The violence of the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution gave this abstract argument concrete weight, enabling democracy to be portrayed as the bloody rule of the mob and turning many intellectuals against it. Burke was perhaps the best known of these conservative critics, but he was certainly not the only one. Others challenged the idea of majority rule, seeing in it not freedom but a tyranny of the many over the few that was inimical to individual rights. Constant rejected the revolutionaries’ attempts to return to the democratic freedom of the ancient world, arguing instead that, in the modern age, protecting individuals from government was the essence of liberty.

This conflict over the legacy of the Atlantic Revolutions gave rise, de Dijn argues, to modern liberalism, which during much

of the 19th century championed liberty and rejected mass democracy as the source of violent revolution and tyranny. Throughout Europe, liberals supported governments based on suffrage limited to men of property; as the French minister François Guizot famously proclaimed, if people wanted the vote, they should become rich. The upheavals of 1848 reaffirmed the dangers of revolutionary democracy for liberal intellectuals. Ultimately, liberalism merged with movements for popular representation to create that strangest of political hybrids, liberal democracy. As suggested by one of its foundational texts, Mill's great 1859 essay "On Liberty," a system of limited democracy would allow the masses some stake in government while at the same time protecting individual freedoms and property rights.

**T**he 19th century brought new challenges to the individualist idea of freedom, however. In Europe, liberals viewed the rise of socialism as a threat to personal freedom, above all because it threatened the right to own property. In the United States, the Civil War challenged liberal ideas of democracy and property rights by freeing and enfranchising enslaved Black people. Indeed, we might say that the Civil War was framed around contested notions of freedom: In the South, much more than in the North, the war was initially portrayed as a struggle for freedom—not just the freedom to own slaves but more generally the ability of free men to determine their own fate. Likewise, in the North, "free men, free labor, free soil" became a central mantra of the Republican Party, and the war was also understood eventually as a struggle for emancipation.

As de Dijn argues, these challenges would only continue and increase during the early 20th century, leading to the decline of liberalism in the face of new collectivist ideologies like communism and fascism. The era of the two world wars seemed to many the death knell of individual liberty, perhaps even of the individual himself. Even the attempts to preserve freedom, such as the New Deal in the United States, seemed more inspired by the traditions of democratic freedom than by its liberal individualist renderings. It is therefore all the more remarkable that the victory of these forces in World War II would bring about a powerful revival of individualist liberalism.

In the decade after the collapse of Nazi Germany, intellectuals like Berlin and Friedrich Hayek would reemphasize the importance of individual freedom—what Berlin termed "negative liberty"—and their ideas would land on fertile soil in Europe and America. Much of this perspective arose out of the Cold War, with the Soviet Union representing the same kind of threat to conservative ideas of liberty that the Jacobin Republic had 150 years earlier. Cold War liberals reemphasized the principle of liberal democracy as, in effect, limited democracy with protections for individual rights against the passions of the mob.

De Dijn largely concludes her analysis of freedom's history with the aftermath of World War II, but it is worth extending her story to explore the success of this vision of liberty since the 1950s.

In the United States, in particular, the rise of the welfare state that began with the New Deal and culminated with the Great Society prompted a sharp counterreaction, one that framed its politics around the idea of individual liberty and resistance to big government. Traditional conservatives in the Republican Party as well as a growing number of neoconservatives linked their Cold War politics to their opposition to the welfare state, insisting that the Soviet Union's and the United States' experiments in social democracy had eroded freedom in both countries, and they were joined by those resisting the achievements of the civil rights movement, reinforcing the relationship between whiteness and freedom. Triumphant with the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980, this anti-egalitarian notion of freedom has dominated the Republican Party and much of American political life ever since. The House Freedom Caucus, to take one current example, owes its existence to thinkers like Burke and Berlin.

**F**reedom is a challenging and compelling analysis of one of the greatest intellectual and popular movements in the history of humankind. De Dijn writes well, making a powerful argument that is both unusual and hard to resist. She shows how the very nature

of freedom can be interpreted in different ways by different people at different times. More specifically, she challenges conservatives who wrap their ideology in the glorious banner of freedom, revealing the long history of a very different vision of human liberation, one that emphasizes collective self-government over individual privilege. In doing so, she shows how philosophers, kings, and ordinary folk have used (and sometimes misused) the past to build the present and imagine the future.

This is a very rich and complex tale, one that raises interesting questions and suggests further exploration of some of its key themes. Following the lead of one of the great scholars of freedom, Orlando Patterson, de Dijn notes how many in the ancient world and at other periods in history conceived freedom as the opposite of slavery and yet also built ostensibly free societies that depended on the work of slaves. The denial of voting rights and thus freedom to women during most of history also speaks to this paradox. De Dijn underscores the importance of this contradiction, but it would be useful to know more about how people at the time addressed it. Slavery

has existed throughout much of human history, of course, but it is interesting to note that the new antidemocratic vision of freedom emerged most powerfully during a time characterized not only by the height of the slave trade but also by the thorough racialization of slavery. Could it be that it was easier to divorce freedom and democracy when slavery was no longer an issue for white men and when the vision of rebelling against slavery was upheld not only by ancient Greek fighters but also by Black insurgents in the Haitian Revolution?

In her analysis, de Dijn stresses the triumph of the individualist narrative of freedom in the years after World War II, but it bears remembering that those years also witnessed the unprecedented success of social democratic states, which offered an alternate vision of freedom centered on social rights, redistribution, and working-class power. The success of these states came directly out of the wartime experience; millions who took part in the struggle against fascism fought not



**Few ideals have been so cherished—or so contested—as freedom.**

just against the Axis but for a more just and democratic world.

Moreover, the postwar era witnessed two of the greatest freedom campaigns in history: the struggles for the decolonization of European empires and the American civil rights movement. Both overwhelmingly cast themselves as crusades for a democratic vision of freedom. Julius K. Nyerere, the founding father of an independent Tanzania, wrote no fewer than six books with the word “freedom” in the title. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, arguably the greatest oration in 20th-century America, ended with the ringing words “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” One should note that resistance to racial equality played a central role in the formation of contemporary conservative ideology, so that to an important extent, the movement for individual freedom was a movement for white freedom.

Finally, one should consider the possibility that, at times, de Dijn’s two ideas of freedom may have points in common. In 2009, at the dawn of the Tea Party movement, a right-wing protester reportedly shouted, “Keep your government hands off my Medicare!” This statement, grounded in ignorance of the fact that Medicare is a government program, prompted much derision. But we should take a second look at what this suggests about the relationship between these two contrasting ideas of freedom. The civil rights movement, to take one example, was a struggle for individual rights not based on skin color and, at the same time, for the protection of those rights by a more democratic government. To take another example, in June 2015, the movement for LGBTQ rights achieved one of its greatest victories in the United States with the Supreme Court’s legalization of same-sex marriage. But did this represent the triumph of a democratic movement for freedom or the destruction of government restrictions on the rights of individuals to marry? In other words, isn’t protecting individual freedom precisely a key point of modern democracy?

It is to de Dijn’s credit that *Freedom: An Unruly History* forces us to think about such important questions. At a time when the very survival of both freedom and democracy seems uncertain, books like this are more important than ever, as our societies contemplate both the heritage of the past and the prospects for the future. **N**



## More Than Love

*Kazuo Ishiguro’s futuristic inquiries into the present*

BY KATIE FITZPATRICK



WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I KEPT A LARGE BASKET OF STUFFED animals, Beanie Babies, and Cabbage Patch Kids in the corner of my room. The Cabbage Patch Kids were hand-me-downs from my older sisters, and they had little outfits knitted, in an unusually sentimental gesture, by my grandma. There were too many for me to play with regularly, and I would sometimes lie awake looking at the basket and feeling guilty about their neglect. Once or twice, I assuaged this guilt by dragging the basket to the center of my room, sitting down next to it, and taking out one doll at a time. “I love you,” I would tell each in turn. “I’m sorry I can’t play with you more often.” Then I would put it back and take out the next, knowing that this would never be enough to make up for the weeks and months of abandonment.

*Klara and the Sun*—British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro’s latest novel, and his first since winning the Nobel Prize in 2017—is narrated by a robot named Klara, created

to serve as an AF, or Artificial Friend, to lonely children. The novel begins in an AF store, where Klara spends her days observing the passersby outside, trying to understand the human world she will one day join. While she is hopeful about her future, readers glimpse what might await AFs like her: Josie, who eventually buys Klara, promises her that she will live in her bedroom, “not in some cupboard or anything.” Later, at a party, two teenage boys threaten to throw Klara across the room,



saying that their own Artificial Friend “lands on her feet every time” and hinting at the abuse many AFs may experience.

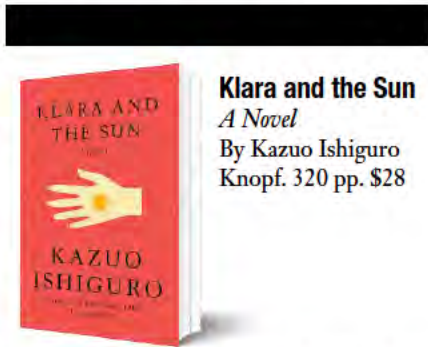
Although the early chapters focus on the exploitation of AFs, the novel gradually redirects our attention from Klara to Josie. Why is she lonely enough to want an AF in the first place? Ishiguro reveals that Josie too has been the subject of scientific experimentation. Along with other children from her social class, she has been mysteriously altered in order to become smarter, so as to be more competitive in the college admissions process. This “lifting,” as it is called, seems to have been directed by her mother, Chrissie, who hopes to secure Josie’s future in a world populated by the swelling ranks of the “post-employed.”

Despite its futuristic premise, *Klara and the Sun* is aimed at our present. It explores many of the subjects that fill our news feeds, from artificial intelligence to meritocracy. Yet its real political power lies not in these topical references but in its quietly eviscerating treatment of love. Through Klara, Josie, and Chrissie, Ishiguro shows how care is often intertwined with exploitation, how love is often grounded in selfishness. And this dynamic is not only interpersonal but central to today’s politics as well. Love, Ishiguro reminds us, is not always an antidote to exploitation and repression; it may even be the thing that makes us complicit in large-scale violence.

Ishiguro’s fiction has often explored the subject of complicity, but he has usually set these stories in a real or counterhistorical past. *An Artist of the Floating World*, published in 1986, features an aging artist reflecting on his participation in the Japanese imperialist movement. *The Remains of the Day*, which came out three years later, tells the story of a British butler who realizes that he has spent his life in the loyal service of a Nazi sympathizer. More recent works have also explored the forms of self-delusion that allow violence to flourish, but they’ve shifted from historical Britain or Japan to worlds of Ishiguro’s own invention. In his 2005 book, *Never Let Me Go*, he imagines a counterfactual 1990s England that triumphs over disease by producing a subordinate class of human clones whose organs are harvested. The novel is set at a boarding school where clones are raised by reformist liberal caretakers who give their young lives a veneer of normalcy but do nothing to challenge the organ-harvesting program that will eventually kill them.

Of all of Ishiguro’s previous novels, *Never Let Me Go* is the one readers are likeliest to connect with *Klara and the Sun*. The narrator of *Never Let Me Go*, a clone named Kathy H., can be seen as the template for Klara. Both have been taught to please the people who exploit them, and

Katie Fitzpatrick is a lecturer at the University of British Columbia and an editor at the Los Angeles Review of Books.



### Klara and the Sun A Novel

By Kazuo Ishiguro  
Knopf. 320 pp. \$28

both are keen to perform well at such a task. In both novels, readers are presented with a similar narrative structure: Ishiguro unspools his plot gradually by using narrators who themselves are only just coming to understand the worlds in which they live. In a particularly nice touch, the latter novel restricts its metaphors to Klara’s own restricted range of experience. While still living in the AF store, she reflects that her shifting emotions are “like the shadows made across the floor by the ceiling lamps after the grid went down.” Once she moves to Josie’s house, the sky is described as “the color of the lemons in the fruit bowl” or “the gray of the slate chopping boards.”

The differences between *Never Let Me Go* and this novel are as revealing as the similarities. Klara is almost immediately established as inhuman, but Ishiguro spends the rest of the novel humanizing her, helping us chart the development of her own complex inner life. In *Never Let Me Go*, we follow the opposite trajectory: When we meet Kathy and the other clones at the start of that book, we have little reason to believe they are anything other than normal human children; it is only as the story unfolds that we learn that they are clones and, as such, are viewed as inhuman by their society.

Ishiguro’s study of the way we dehumanize others—even those who are essential to our survival—has led critics to explore the radical underpinnings of his work. Writing

in the *New Left Review*, Nancy Fraser notes that the novel should remind us of “those whom our social order...treats as spare parts—as sweatshop labour, as breeders, as disposable workers.” Mimi Wong adds that *Never Let Me Go* is a “masterpiece of racial metaphor.” While the race of Kathy and the other clones is never mentioned (and the film version casts them as white), Wong argues that their subordination mirrors both historical and contemporary forms of racism.

*Klara and the Sun* also allows us to draw similar parallels between Ishiguro’s science fiction and real-world exploitation. But there is one striking difference in the way these books depict oppression: In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones’ exploitation by humans hinges on people’s ability to dehumanize and forget them. Their lives are invisible to those who will one day use their organs. But in *Klara and the Sun*, the AFs’ exploitation hinges on people’s ability to humanize and know them. The AFs are harvested precisely for the kinds of human interactions they provide their human owners. While both novels consider the exploitation of so-called disposable workers, this book focuses on those we exploit primarily for emotional labor and care work—a timely commentary during a pandemic in which the essential workers who care for us are too often treated as disposable.

Anne Whitehead notes that in *Never Let Me Go*, empathy produces cruelty as much as care; empathizing with those close to us may be our justification for harming others. In *Klara and the Sun*, Ishiguro makes a related argument: When our affection for others emerges from our own loneliness and desire for connection, it may never shed itself of selfishness and violence. Josie empathizes with Klara enough to solicit her consent (“I don’t want you coming against your will,” she tells her at the store) and to treat her as a confidante and friend, but this kind of empathy is not enough to undo the uneven basis of their relationship. If *Never Let Me Go* demonstrates how easily we can exploit those we never have to see, *Klara and the Sun* shows how easily we can exploit even those we claim to love.

At the end of the book, Klara reflects back on a mad scientist character named Mr. Capaldi, who had “searched and searched” to discover any special essence that could distinguish human beings

from AFs. Klara concludes that he was “searching in the wrong place.” There is “something very special,” she realizes, but it isn’t something inside us—a soul, a spirit, a consciousness. Instead, it is inside those who love us. Klara delivers this moral with full, nauseating sincerity, but it is in fact doubly tragic. First, this moral reminds us that Klara herself has been excluded from acts and feelings of genuine love, and second, it signals that she has not really understood the other characters in the novel, whose expressions of love are deeply flawed.

The limitations of human love are perhaps most visible in the relationship between Josie and her mother. Klara often tries to side with Josie, helping to steer their tense Sunday breakfasts away from “danger topics” like schoolwork. But Klara also becomes complicit in Chrissie’s cruelty toward Josie—a dynamic that first becomes apparent during a day trip to a waterfall.

Josie’s lifting has left her mysteriously ill and often bedridden. For this reason, she is thrilled when Chrissie promises to take her and Klara to a favorite hiking spot. But shortly before the much-anticipated trip, Chrissie tells Josie that she is too sick to go and takes Klara alone instead. Then, at the waterfall, Chrissie asks Klara if she will imitate Josie. In Josie’s voice, Klara tells Chrissie, “It’s okay, Mom, don’t worry. I’ll get well soon.” Klara is not only an artificial friend to Josie, then, but a substitute for her. To Chrissie, Josie herself proves to be a kind of doll, cherished but easily left behind or replaced.

The one meaningful relationship in *Klara and the Sun*—the one hopeful beacon of love—is found between Josie and a boy named Rick. They are neighbors who have grown up together and vowed to love each other forever, even though Josie is lifted and Rick is not. In a beautiful set of scenes, the two communicate their feelings to each other through what they call the “bubble game.” Josie, lying ill in her bed, draws figures—of herself, him, others—and passes them down to Rick, who sits on the floor at her bedside, adding speech bubbles to the drawings. Through this game, they discover the places where their interpretations of the world align and talk about the places where they do not. They discover a love that is defined not by one person impressing their desires onto another but by mutual understanding.

One of Josie’s drawings is covered with a tangled mesh of sharp-

looking objects, with a “tranquil space” in a bottom corner where “the figures of two small people could be seen, their backs to passers-by, walking away hand in hand.” Klara is moved by this image, and she eventually comes to believe that Josie will be healed, if only Rick’s love is strong enough. She’s right, in one way. In the end, Josie does get better, but she and Rick drift apart. Unable to attend the same college after Josie’s lifting, they “show kindness to each other” but are “now preparing such different futures.” Even love cannot transcend the dynamics of class.

Rick’s final conversation with Klara may also lead us to wonder how real their love ever was. “Josie and I will always be together at some level,” he explains. “I know I’ll always keep searching for someone just like her.” One night, at first, read this as a romantic sentiment. But it also suggests that, for Rick, Josie is substitutable. Like Chrissie, who has Klara act as Josie when her daughter is sick, Rick will find someone else who can play the role of Josie in his life. If Klara concludes that the love of others makes human beings special, then it is disturbing to see that those who love Josie see little unique about her.

One of the most startling moments in *Klara and the Sun* comes when Rick’s mother, Helen, accuses Josie’s father—casually, over sushi—of having “fascistic leanings.” Typically, fascism in an Ishiguro novel is a bit like sex in a Henry James novel: a pervasive presence, but one that can only be hinted at or circled around. Indeed, the characters gathered at the table react to this damning charge much as one might react to an unexpected sexual joke. “Mum, for God’s sake,” Rick sighs, while Josie’s father reminds Helen that they cannot have such a conversation “in front of the kids.”

In earlier works like *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro treated fascist violence as a half-repressed, unspeakable memory. Situated at what Francis Fukuyama called “the end of history,” these novels view the

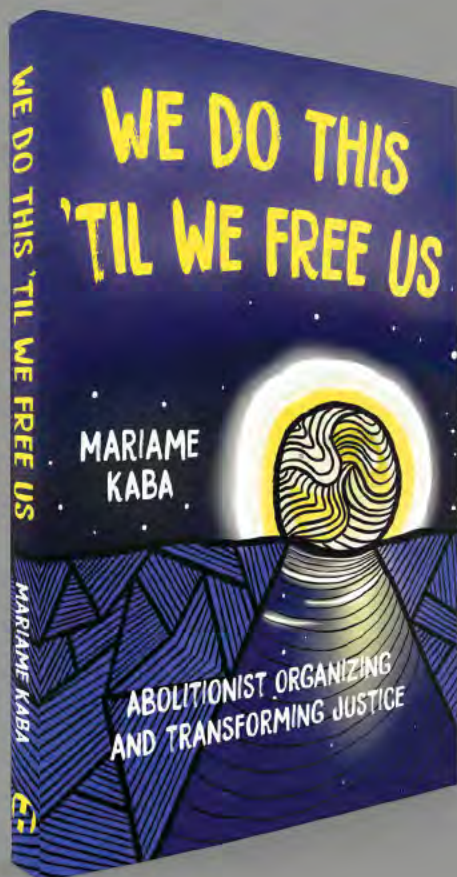
violent clash of ideologies as a thing of the past. As Ishiguro explained in his Nobel lecture, his generation “grew up against the backdrop of the great clash...between capitalism and communism and witnessed what many of us believed to be a happy conclusion. But now, looking back, the era since the fall of the Berlin Wall seems like one of complacency,” one in which war, inequality, austerity, far-right ideologies, and “racism, in its traditional forms and in its modernized, better-marketed versions,” have been left to fester and grow. *Klara and the Sun* is Ishiguro’s first post-Brexit, post-Trump novel, and it tackles rising far-right ideologies head-on; fascism, he suggests, is no longer unspeakable.

Indeed, it is only barely disavowed by the novel’s liberal characters. While Josie and Rick eat sushi with their parents, Rick’s mother explains that she once loved, and perhaps still loves, a man with similar fascistic leanings. “He always has done though I always tried not to notice...,” she trails off. For his part, Josie’s father defends his fascist allegiances by explaining that they give him a sense of belonging and community: “I’m sharing my life with some very fine people,” he explains. This may or may not be a reference to the supposedly “very fine people” Donald Trump saw marching for white supremacy in Charlottesville, Va., but either way, the exchange between these two characters demonstrates how our own loneliness may draw us toward violence or cause us not to notice it.

Ultimately, *Klara and the Sun* warns us against any naive faith in the power of love. We cannot trust that Rick’s love for Josie or Josie’s love for Klara will undo—or even challenge—the social hierarchies and the structures of power that define the modern world. Instead, we must do the harder work of recognizing the places where affection and violence produce each other, where love distracts us from fascism, where care shades into exploitation. *Klara and the Sun* is a story as much about our own world as about any imagined future, and it reminds us that violence and dehumanization can also come wrapped in the guise of love. **N**



***Klara and the Sun* is a story as much about our own world as about any imagined future.**



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# The Two Narratives

*Ami Ayalon's political evolution*

BY RAJA SHEHADEH

**A**MI AYALON'S *FRIENDLY FIRE* IS A BOOK THAT SITS UNEASILY between two narratives. In one, Ayalon, a former director of the Israeli security service Shin Bet, repeats the story that Israel tells the world: that the failure to achieve peace in the region is due to Palestinian terrorism and the refusal to accept Israel's existence. In the other, he offers a personal account of how his understanding of that story—and of the Palestinians themselves—has changed drastically over time.

In telling the first story, Ayalon gives the impression that all would have been well if only the Palestinians hadn't refused to come to terms with the Jewish state. But what makes *Friendly Fire* a unique contribution to understanding what is taking place in contemporary Israel, and what needs to be done to achieve peace, is its author's audacity and readiness to confront the myopia of this narrative and consider its shortcomings.

Who is Ami Ayalon? For a long time, he was a loyal member of the Israeli military and security ser-

vices, someone who had eagerly bought into the assumptions on which the state is based and its history narrated. For 20 years, Ayalon served in Flotilla 13, the Israeli version of the Navy SEALs, and he describes himself during this period as a person for whom "the Palestinian militants were mere targets which [he] took without flinching." He then served as a commander of the Israeli Navy before being appointed chief of the Shabak, also known as Shin Bet.

Born in Tiberias in 1945, Ayalon currently lives in the northern moshav, or set-

tlement, of Kerem Maharal. The moshav, he tells us, was once the prosperous Palestinian village of Ijzim, and he in fact lives in a house that belonged to a Palestinian. Yet even though the Galilee has a large Palestinian population, he admits that he rarely sees any Palestinians on a daily basis.

For Ayalon, the fact that his moshav was built on the ruins of a Palestinian village is merely one episode in a long history of displacement. Throughout the region, he writes, "you can't dig a hole without turning up some trace from eight strata of time. Canaanites, Israelites from the First and Second Temple periods, Persians, Greeks, Byzantines, Arabs, and Ottomans all established settlements in our area." He tells us this so that we won't worry too much about this pattern of displacement—and yet, of course, the Palestinians of Ijzim lived there only 72 years ago, not thousands of years earlier. Their displacement is not ancient news but part of an immediate reality. They, along with their entire nation, are deprived of not only their homes but also a future.

To Ayalon's credit, part of the story of *Friendly Fire* is the way in which he eventually comes to terms with this fact. By the end of the book, he acknowledges that Israel's salvation will only be achieved when it confronts this past. But before doing so, he gives us a history of why his myopia persisted for as long as it did.

Fighting in the War of 1967, Ayalon and his comrades subscribed to the Jabotinsky doctrine of the "iron wall": They had to continue fighting until their strength forced their enemies to accept Israel's existence as a *fait accompli*. This sense of righteousness persisted after the war: Traveling through the occupied West Bank, Ayalon failed to see the Palestinians living there, just as he had failed to see the Palestinians living in the Galilee. Instead, all he saw were rocks, trees, and empty land to settle. In fact, he admits that the only thing that kept him from becoming a settler himself was his military service. "Someone," he explains, "had to defend all that liberated land."

For Ayalon, the new settlements represented a continuation of the idealism that he'd been raised with. Israel's occupation of Palestinian land was part of a larger historical project of settlement, not unlike the earlier kibbutz movement. One of the common assumptions that his book dispels is that the settlement of the West Bank was primarily a Likud party project. As Ayalon tells us, while it was true that Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin couldn't say

enough about Judea and Samaria, the biblical names for the West Bank, the establishment of settlements in the region was not a project of the Israeli right but rather of the Labor government that preceded Likud's rise to power. The first settlements were inaugurated by Labor immediately after the occupation in 1967. Under the administration of Levi Eshkol, with the secular Moshe Dayan as defense minister, Israel "quietly created the space for settlements in direct violation of international law explicitly forbidding an occupying power from building on conquered territory," Ayalon writes.

The settlements drew support from the left as well as from the right. Early settlements, such as Ofra, received guidance from members of the Labor kibbutz Merom Golan, people who knew "how to create facts on the ground." Ofra, which is not far from Ramallah, where I live, was built mainly on privately owned Palestinian land, not only in violation of international law but also of many Israeli rules.

Ayalon admits that had he been in the government then, he would have done the same thing: "The more settlements, the less likely a future American president would force us to hand back the land of our forefathers to our enemies like Eisenhower had done in 1956 with the Sinai Peninsula." But even so, he reminds us that his own involvement in the settlement movement would not have been motivated by "Zionist-socialist New Man ideology nor the post-Holocaust ethos of Never Again." Rather, "it all came down to the thrill of adventure and danger, the intoxicating adrenaline of the fight—the desire to push our limits. Swimming faster, diving deeper, running farther, and shooting less out of careful deliberation than instinct and intuition constituted the formula for survival. In our line of work, if you hesitated, your target would drop you."

**O**ne exceptional feature of *Friendly Fire* is that Ayalon, by charting his own transformation, articulates the range of attitudes many Israelis have toward their Palestinian neighbors. For example, before the first intifada, the author, like many Israelis, only saw satisfied, contented people in Gaza and thought that the occupation was benefiting them. "Unlike the French in Algeria, we weren't colonists; we were liberating land that had belonged to us since antiquity. As for the Palestinians, we were 'enlightened conquerors.' We built them universities and roads and introduced modern agriculture." Only later did he come to realize how mistaken he was, how his prior view of the occupation was an example of colonial wishful thinking.

So, with time, Ayalon's position began to change. In Gaza during the first intifada, he was riding in a military jeep that came under a hail of stones as it drove

*Raja Sbebedeh is a founder of Al-Haq and the author of Strangers in the House, When the Bulbul Stopped Singing, and Going Home.*



### Friendly Fire

*How Israel Became Its Own Worst Enemy and the Hope for Its Future*

By Ami Ayalon, with Anthony David Steerforth Press. 320 pp. \$27

through a camp. Later that night, he reflected on what had happened. He remembered a boy not older than 15 gazing at him with hatred: "His look which felt like a declaration of war struck me harder than the shrapnel." It was then that he saw himself through the eyes of this youngster. "On the kibbutz I was raised to hate the oppressor and to value human dignity and freedom above all else, and according to those values I had to agree with the boy in the camp: I was a hateful occupier and oppressor of millions of Palestinians who aspired to political independence," he writes.

Later, his experiences "in and out of the Shabak interrogation room" shattered his "lifelong preconceptions about the Palestinians." His time in the Shabak forced him to realize that for peace to be truly achieved, Israel needed to stop dehumanizing the Palestinians. His reckoning with this fact was so total that he insisted to his peers that the Palestinian militants he'd once described as "mere targets" must be seen as human beings, even if he still situated their humanity within the context of Israel's struggle "to end terrorism." As Ayalon observes, if Israel wanted to end terrorism, "we couldn't continue regarding them as eternal enemies, and we needed to stop dehumanizing them as animals on the prowl.

They are people who desire, and deserve, the same national rights we have."

Specific incidents during his time in the Shabak only deepened this view. When Ayalon visits the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and talks to their leaders, what he hears worries him. "Reading about the settlers and their mindset was one thing," he discovers; sitting across the table from the likes of Noam Livnat, "who truly believed that God had given him power over Arabs," was something entirely different. It was the first time, Ayalon writes, that he had ever heard anyone defend what can only be described as apartheid: two sets of laws, rules, and standards and two separate infrastructures. "If Arabs behaved themselves and acquiesced to our dominion, we'd allow them access to water and a bit of electricity," he recalls Livnat saying. "The fact that we hadn't yet driven them over the Jordanian border was, to his mind, a sign of our benevolence."

Yehuda Etzion, another settler, tells Ayalon that he wants to destroy the Dome of the Rock, Islam's third most holy site, and replace it with the Third Temple. But it was Rabbi Yitzhak Shapira's theocratic plot to change the laws of Israel that left the strongest impression. Shapira hoped to "turn an Arab living in the Land of Israel into a *ger*, or resident alien," a plan that Ayalon feared would undermine Israel's legal system. After hearing from these settlers, he could only conclude that "these are the people we should be really afraid of."

As shocking as their pronouncements were, what finally led to Ayalon's change of heart was the Oslo Accords and their aftermath. He came to agree with former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Dan Shomron, who, at the beginning of the first intifada, told Israeli politicians that "Palestinian terrorism wasn't a military phenomenon and as such the army couldn't defeat it. All the army could do was fight back the flames to create breathing room for the politicians to launch a political process."

After Oslo, Ayalon repeated Shomron's message whenever his advice was sought: "Ultimately, ending terrorism depends on politics." In his view, the accords had made Al Fatah, the old enemy, into a partner. Now Israel's enemies were the Islamist groups, primarily Hamas. And yet even here, despite Israel's military might, it

would become clear that politics, not force, was the only thing that could lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In the end, Ayalon believed, only the leadership of Yasir Arafat could defeat Hamas. Moreover, if the Palestinian Authority worked with Israel to fight Hamas, then Israel would have to follow through on the terms of the Oslo Accords and withdraw from over 90 percent of the occupied territories. While the Shabak was stuck in the past, the rest of Israel was ready for a new era of politics—perhaps even peace.

In the course of his awakening, Ayalon began to wonder why it had taken so long. “Why hadn’t we officers been handed translations of [the Palestinian declaration of independence] in 1988?” he writes. And what if Israel had “recognized Arafat’s strategic shift ten years earlier?” Might the country “not be facing Hamas’s suicide bombers”?

One answer is telling. Writing about the uncertain years of the late 1980s and early ’90s, Ayalon discusses how then-Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, through the military government in the occupied territories, secretly supported Hamas in the hope that the religious group would undercut the nationalists in the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Israeli establishment was not ready for the politics of peace, including its members who later claimed such a mantle.

**O**nce Ayalon left the Shabak, he became outspoken about the failure of Israel’s establishment to understand the conflict and provide Israelis with security. Often making himself unpopular, particularly in interviews conducted during the

second intifada, he told the Israeli public what it did not like to hear.

In one interview with TV news host Shelly Yachimovich, Ayalon insisted that “our instinctive resort to disproportionate force...has created the opposite of what we want to achieve. We jeopardize our own security each time, in the name of security, our soldiers gun down Palestinian stone-throwers, and our actions fuel calls for revenge.” He added that “when Palestinians felt that preventing terrorism would lead to the end of our occupation and the establishment of their own state, they cooperated with us. What most Palestinians sought, more than anything, wasn’t our blood—they just wanted to trust that the Israeli government would end the occupation and allow them to be free. And we’ve given them little reason to trust us.”

Yet despite all his efforts, Ayalon admits, his advice “had little long-term institutional effect on the Shabak and none on the army.” The killings continued. This led Ayalon to venture into politics himself. Once he became convinced that the Israeli government, and in particular the Shabak, would continue as before, he joined up with the Palestinian academic Sari Nusseibeh to launch a new initiative: a pair of organizations, the Palestinian People’s Campaign for Peace and Democracy and its Israeli counterpart, the People’s Voice.

The twin groups’ strategy was to change the direction of the conflict by taking diplomacy out of the smoky back rooms and into the streets. Their platform included the following principles: There would be two states, for two nations, based on the June 4, 1967, borders, with selective acre-to-acre land swaps to benefit both peoples. Palestinian refugees would mainly return to the demilitarized state of Palestine, while the Jewish settlements that remained in Palestinian territory would be evacuated. Israel would explicitly acknowledge its role in the suffering of the Palestinian people and participate in an international fund to compensate Palestinian refugees for their 1948 losses. Once a peace deal was signed, both sides would renounce all other claims. Jerusalem would be the open capital of both states, with the Arab neighborhoods under Palestinian control and the Jewish neighborhoods under Israeli control.

Reading Ayalon’s revealing book, one can see that he has come a long way. Perhaps his most commendable conclusion is that Israel will never achieve peace until “we change the narrative about the past and admit to ourselves that the Palestinians have a right to their own country alongside Israel, and on land we claim as ours.” And yet while Ayalon has revised his beliefs, he also remains unwilling to take responsibility for his role in the conflict between the two peoples in the first place, whether through his work in the Shabak or his participation in the murder of Abu Jihad, a cofounder of Al Fatah, in 1988.

At one point in the book, Ayalon shrugs at the possibility that the International Criminal Court in The Hague will try people like him for the crime of torture—a practice often used by the Shabak, even though Ayalon personally believed “that torture produced bad intelligence [and] dehumanized the torturer.” This makes me wonder whether a man who has made such a huge shift in his perspective toward Palestinians and their history is really willing to take responsibility for his past in an organization that he calls “the sewer.” On one matter, Ayalon is certainly right: For peace to be achieved, we need politics. But for politics to be achieved, we also need contrition from those, like Ayalon, whose crimes still haunt the Palestinian people.

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REVIEW STORIES



## A Collective Experience

Can a new film capture the revolutionary energies of the Black Panthers?

BY STEPHEN KEARSE

**I**N THE SUMMER OF 1967, FBI DIRECTOR J. EDGAR HOOVER issued the first in a series of memos outlining how the bureau would deal with what it deemed “black nationalist hate groups.” The memos, sent to the FBI offices participating in Cointelpro, the bureau’s covert (and illegal) counterintelligence program, are as infuriating and terrifying as they are outlandish. They claimed that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were “violence-prone.” They declared that the FBI must prevent “a true black revolution” and likened a potential coalition of domestic Black political groups to Kenya’s Mau Mau rebellion. They even posited that Martin Luther King Jr. and Elijah Muhammad were peers, as if there were no substantial differences in their outlooks and tactics. The memos were more a racist projection than a work of intelligence.

*Judas and the Black Messiah* takes its title from these memos, in which Hoover warns of a “messiah who could unify, and electrify the militant black nationalist movement.” The film, directed by Shaka King, focuses on the FBI infiltration of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party. Plotted like a thriller, the biopic uses the operation to ex-

plore the Black Power era and condemn the government apparatus that snuffed it out.

The titular messiah is Fred Hampton (Daniel Kaluuya), the charismatic chairman of the chapter, who was the group’s spokesperson and one of its key organizers until his assassination by Chicago police working with the FBI. Judas is William O’Neal (LaKeith Stanfield), an informant who provided the information that led to Hampton’s death. The juxtaposition of these opposing visions of Blackness—radicalism versus complicity—powers the film, staging Hampton’s death and O’Neal’s deceit as a showdown between a Black revolutionary and a Black saboteur. When the filmmaker Terence Nance was shown an early cut of the film, he reportedly responded by say-

ing, “It kind of makes you question, which ancestor are you?”

**T**he stark binary of savior and traitor has mixed results. In some ways, it makes the story juicier and more propulsive. King structures the story as a gritty thriller, introducing us to O’Neal on the night he stages a carjacking and following him as he’s recruited by the FBI, welcomed by the Panthers, and later swept up by the consequences of his actions. Stanfield’s performance is deliciously squirrely, swinging between comedy, bluster, and confusion. He imbues O’Neal with an intense longing, treating the mole’s dueling allegiances like unrequited loves. Though the FBI uses O’Neal’s criminal record as a cudgel, the scenes where he interacts with his handler (Jesse Plemons), mostly in a swanky restaurant, feel like illicit rendezvous. And when O’Neal is with Hampton, he’s conspicuously in awe of the man’s words.

Hampton, whom Kaluuya brings to life with fiery confidence, leads a steadier life—but he too flirts with major change. As he educates new recruits, gives speeches, and traverses Chicago to form alliances with other political groups like the Young Lords and the Young Patriots Organization, he’s pursued by Deborah Johnson (Dominique Fishback), who is drawn to the Panthers after one of his outreach efforts. In one especially magical scene, they bond over a Malcolm X speech playing on vinyl, quoting the recording to each other with wide, conspiratorial grins. As they grow closer, Johnson questions the constant mentions of death and violence in Hampton’s speeches. Her conviction that he choose life over martyrdom is directed at the audience as well as Hampton. These competing threads of subterfuge, tenderness, and creative license help *Judas and the Black Messiah* escape the usual staidness of biopics, which tend to exalt historical figures and traffic in hagiography rather than storytelling.

But the film is curiously circumspect about the experience of Black Power. In its fixation on the FBI’s efforts to ensnare Hampton, it presents the Panthers more as a target than a party, never quite inhabiting their perspective. Beyond Hampton’s arresting lectures and prescient coalition-building, scant attention is paid to the inner workings of the Chicago chapter or the national organization. Allusions to Panthers in exile

(Eldridge Cleaver), incarcerated leaders (Huey P. Newton), and dead comrades (Bunchy Carter) are so fleeting they feel like minor details.

And then there's the film's uneven interest in the experiences of the members who flank Hampton as he moves about the city. While one real-life Panther, Jake Winters, is mourned in a touching conversation between Hampton and Winters's mother after he is killed in a police shootout, another Panther, the fictional Judy Harmon, is never mentioned again after surviving another intense gun battle with Chicago police. Meanwhile, a leader of the Illinois chapter, Bobby Rush, appears throughout the movie but says little. At one point, as Hampton contemplates his return to prison, he asks, "Is the party about me or is it about the people?" The film tacitly chooses Hampton.

Historical dramas, by their nature, are filled with omissions. But it's striking that the film has so little interest in Black Power as a collective experience—how it empowered groups and communities that were otherwise ignored, how it competed with other political ideologies, how it was pursued differently by the Panthers' many contemporaries, some of whom the Panthers disparaged. The film rejects the notion of Hampton as a messiah, but it declines to advance or explore another framework.

Betrayal is a constant theme in films about the Panthers and other Black militants, from Mario Van Peebles's ham-fisted *Panther* to Tanya Hamilton's haunted *Night Catches Us* to Spike Lee's clumsy *BlacKkKlansman*, which begins with the infiltration by law enforcement of a Black radical group. Even the Afrofuturist superhero fantasy *Black Panther* is fueled by this theme: The rakish villain Erik Killmonger is motivated by the death of his father, who was killed for betraying the Wakandan state. While there's clearly precedent for this motif—the informants the FBI hired to infiltrate the Panthers were largely Black—*Judas and the Black Messiah* highlights how reductive the theme can be. In focusing on O'Neal's betrayal, the film narrows the FBI's gross abuse of power into a character study.

For all of the movie's nods to the fullness of the Chicago Panthers, it's O'Neal who drives the narrative, tonally and thematically. Alongside the standard beats of an undercover-cop story—planting evidence, wearing a wire, nearly being outed—sequences from O'Neal's real-life appearance in the civil rights documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* are reenacted and used as interludes throughout. Shot with stark, bright lighting that contrasts with the rich, dark hues of the rest of the film, these moments emphasize O'Neal's duplicity, reminding us that he will survive all the chaos he's helping to foment. This all makes for gripping psychodrama and riveting plotting, but too often it places O'Neal alone in the center of the turmoil.

The film nods at the other Panthers' struggles, and flashes of personality emerge in asides and

deviations from the plot, from one Panther antagonizing a cop by reading Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" to another heroically confronting two officers conducting an unwarranted pat-down of some Black men. But only O'Neal and Hampton feel whole. The rest of the Panthers—with the exception of Johnson, who visibly hardens over the course of the film thanks to sterling acting by Fishback—seem like props rather than characters. They're often filmed surrounding Hampton rather than interacting with him, as though they were his vassals, not his comrades.

In an interview, King argued that O'Neal's waffling makes for a more compelling story. "Fred Hampton came into this world fully realized," he said. "He knew what he was doing at a very young age. Whereas William O'Neal is in a conflict; he's confused. And that's always going to make for a more interesting protagonist." But while the tension and intrigue of O'Neal's changing loyalties propel the story, the singularity of his experience grows contrived and narrows the political scope of the narrative being told. Centering on O'Neal, the film overvalues the weight of his particular betrayal and ignores the larger story of the Panthers and the structures that were devoted to their failure.

**T**he film's main mode is restraint, a style that occasionally suits its depiction of the government's leering gaze. A movie about the Black Panthers would seemingly lend itself to spectacle and provocation, but King insists on vérité and immersion. Every galvanizing Hampton speech is a spatial experience as well as a rhetorical one, the camera roving

the rooms and crowds the chairman addresses. As he deplores fascism and advocates for community power, we see faces scrunching and lighting up and grimacing, bodies moving, fists raised. Hampton was a phenomenal public speaker, so this is to be expected. But King gets something else too: In the scene in which Hampton returns to Chicago from prison and gives a riveting homecoming speech, the editing highlights the feedback between speaker and audience. Switching between tableaux and profiles, the room shrinks and expands in cadence with Hampton's inflections, accenting the communal and individual impacts of his words. The sequence feels designed to insist that Hampton was not the center of gravity, not the messiah.

Violence, too, is used cautiously. When cops assault the Panther headquarters, the shootout is punctuated by reaction shots from a crowd of enraged onlookers. King clearly casts the cops as encroach-

ers but doesn't revel in the Panthers' holding their ground, instead emphasizing the one-sidedness of the exchange. When the Panthers give up and are brutalized while being handcuffed, the

camera cuts away from the blows and lingers on the concerned faces of the witnesses. Compared with a film like Kathryn Bigelow's *Detroit*, in which police brutality is gratuitously at its center, King makes clear that the purpose of the scene is state power rather than Black affliction. The move tacitly anticipates a viewer already inundated with images of Black death.

The movie's climax, a nighttime police raid that leaves Hampton and another Panther dead, is just as controlled. There's no dwelling on the beliefs of the perpetrators, who are obscured in darkness as they sweep through Hampton's apartment, guns blazing. There's no lingering on the bullet holes that pock the walls. The victims, who have every reason to be outraged, don't cry. We don't even see Hampton die; instead, we see Johnson experience his death, Fishback's face a stoic visage as gunfire flashes behind her. The film's even keel can render it inert, especially when it depicts the FBI, which King resists embellishing despite the outrageous nature of Cointelpro. But in moments like this, King's austerity is pure clarity. Fred Hampton was assassinated by his government. **N**

**The stark juxtaposition between radicalism and complicity powers the film.**





# Letters

## Along the Texas Border

The last sentence in Jaime Garcia and Rick Treviño's article "The Trump Meridian" [Feb. 22/March 1] reads, "As to what lessons we can learn from it... we're still trying to figure that out." But they had figured it out—it's right there in their article (and in the articles about the not-so-poor people who had just attacked the Capitol). All the bottom half of the country wants is to be sure they can have a job that pays above the minimum wage, enough money to put food on the table and a roof over their heads, an affordable health care plan, and a chance for their children to make it in this country. This was borne out throughout the article. What else is there to say?

FRANK L. FRIEDMAN  
Adjunct and Emeritus Professor,  
Computer & Information Sciences  
Temple University  
PHILADELPHIA

Thanks for publishing "The Trump Meridian" and noting my hometown of Brownsville, Tex. But the article omits a vital point. Yes, there was a shift toward Donald Trump in the 2020 election along the border. But hundreds of thousands of Texas border residents, all registered to vote, did not do so. And in the entire state, less than 67 percent of the registered voters voted. What's more, there are millions of citizens in Texas who are eligible to register to vote. They didn't. Get the picture? The rest of the states also have millions of people who are registered and do not vote, and millions more who could register and don't. That is the much bigger story: discovering the answer to why

there are so many nonvoters in the United States. Write it—before 2022 and 2024.

EUGENE NOVRODINSKY  
BROWNSVILLE, TEX.

## Leveling Up

Re "Back Talk" [Feb. 22/ March 1]: Alexis Grenell's column rang a bell for me, as someone who taught college students the value of comparative politics for 35 years. She needs to be applauded for her persuasive case that "we need to level up to a parliamentary system." Compared with our current system, a conversion to a parliamentary system would ensure more democracy, less factionalism, more accountability, and the kinds of public policy that reflect the wishes of a majority of Americans. A simple vote of no confidence would have avoided the two failed efforts to impeach Donald Trump and erased the myth of checks and balances. Many who have lived under the parliamentary design rarely covet life under a presidential system such as ours. No system is perfect, but we can do much better with a new one.

DAVID W. DENT  
Professor Emeritus,  
Towson University  
BROOMFIELD, COLO.

## Correction

"Amid the Wildfires," by Micah Uetricht [Feb. 22/March 1], incorrectly stated that Mike Davis burned his draft card in 1963 and drove a meat truck to a New Mexican restaurant called the Chicken Shack. He burned his draft card in 1965, and the Chicken Shack was located in California.

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# Q&A

## Ro Khanna

US Representative Ro Khanna is consistent. The California Democrat was an outspoken critic of former president Donald Trump's unauthorized use of military force in the Middle East, and he immediately objected when President Joe Biden ordered air strikes targeting Iranian-backed militias in Syria on February 25. I spoke with Khanna, a member of the House Armed Services Committee and the Peace and Security Task Force of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, on how Democratic members of Congress should respond to military actions by a Democratic president.

—John Nichols

**JN: Why was it necessary to speak up so quickly and so boldly about Biden's decision to bomb Syria?**

**RK:** I had told myself that I would try not to criticize the president in the first 100 days. I so desperately want the president to succeed. It's important for our party. It's important for our country. But I didn't expect the president to engage in bombing the Middle East in the first 100 days, either.

I thought it was so important that, early on, Congress take a stand and lay a claim, lay down a clear marker, that we cannot continue the cycle of escalation and bombing in the Middle East that has been counterproductive. Certainly we can't continue it without [the president] coming to Congress for the authorization of military force and trying to seek to work in coalition with the United Nations under international law.

**JN: Beyond the broader principles, there were specific concerns with this mission, correct?**

**RK:** This was not an imminent threat. It was not that our troops were stationed there and there was intelligence that, if the president didn't act, the troops would be in harm's way in 24 hours or 48 hours or even in a week. I mean, this was a retaliatory threat, and it was clearly not authorized under even a tortured reading of the AUMF [Authorization for Use of Military Force of 2001].

I mean, [this strike] was against Iranian militias in Syria. If anything, in Syria, President Obama had tried to seek an authorization and had failed, and so the congressional record was actually opposed to any escalation in the Middle East.

We can't have a view that, OK, if it's a small attack, then the presi-

dent has discretion, but if it's a large attack, then the president has to come to Congress—because small attacks often escalate into large attacks.

**JN: It was notable that several Senate Democrats raised concerns. Do you think there is a greater understanding among Democrats that it's important to speak up when there's a Democratic president?**

**RK:** I do! We saw Tim Kaine, who I think carries a lot of weight because he's a very respected voice across the ideological spectrum on matters of foreign policy, come out and be critical. We saw Chris Murphy do that, and Bernie Sanders did that.

I believe the White House took notice. It was no coincidence that a few days later they're openly talking about how we need to have a new conversation about the authorization of military force in Congress, and that the president supports that and supports Congress asserting its role. From reporting I read—and obviously I don't have any information on this—but the reports I've read [indicate] that it has given the White House pause in terms of further strikes against the Iranian militia or in Syria. So I think that speaking out early was very important, because it set a tone that the Congress will not be rolled over by the executive branch on matters of war and peace, and that these issues are bigger than party loyalty.

**JN: Drawing up a new AUMF is perilous. Real effort has to go into defining what is authorized, right?**

**RK:** Well, John, you hit the nail on the head on what the challenge has been. Every time [US Representative] Barbara Lee builds a stronger coalition to repeal the AUMF, the debate gets caught up in "Well, what's going to replace it?" One point that should be consistent in whatever replaces it is a sunset provision—that these authorizations shouldn't last more than, ideally, a term of Congress.

**N**



**“I thought it was so important that, early on, Congress take a stand.”**

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JUNE 28/JULY 5, 2021

RACISM ON  
WALL STREET  
SUSAN ANTILLA

RAOUL PECK'S  
WORLD  
ED MORALES

The  
unsung  
canvassers  
who turned  
the West's  
biggest red  
state blue.





**Uprooted:** A performance artist commemorates China's Tiananmen Square crackdown in Hong Kong on June 3, after authorities banned an annual vigil there.

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“Joan Didion was a woman who loved Barry Goldwater, who told her friends that Nixon was too liberal.”

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EDITORIAL / AMY LITTLEFIELD FOR THE NATION

# The Sea Change

**I**T'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE SUPPORTERS OF ABORTION RIGHTS HAVE HAD ANYTHING to celebrate. States have enacted a staggering 69 anti-abortion bills this year alone, including nine bans. The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a case on Mississippi's 15-week ban that is likely to upend *Roe v. Wade* entirely. But on the eve of Memorial Day weekend came a victory that was decades in the making: President Biden struck from his budget the 45-year-old ban on federal funding of abortion known as the Hyde Amendment.

The ban forces Medicaid patients in most states to raise money to pay for their abortions or—as happens in one out of four cases—to stay pregnant because they can't. Biden is the first president since Bill Clinton to issue a budget without the ban. In the years after *Roe*, right-wing forces moved quickly to make abortion as inaccessible as possible, even as it remained legal. The Hyde Amendment was part of that strategy. As restrictions mounted, the mainstream pro-choice movement went on the defensive, focusing on preserving the legal right to abortion, although Black women noted that, because of Hyde, that right could never be fully realized. Tensions surrounding the ban came to a head in 1978, when Faye Wattleton became the first Black president of Planned Parenthood. She took aim at Hyde as part of a sweeping vision that she hoped would put the organization on the offensive. But Wattleton soon faced an uprising from within the group's affiliates. "The concerns were that we were going to lose our federal funding if somebody didn't get me under control," she told *The Nation* in 2019. Wattleton weathered the storm and remained in her position for 14 years. But in the 1980s, with attacks on reproductive health care proliferating, the abortion rights movement focused on "choice" rather than access. "These were strategic decisions, taken with the belief that this approach would appeal to the broadest constituency of voters," Marlene Gerber Fried wrote in the book *Radical Reproductive Justice*. Black women organizers, meanwhile, mobilized around a broad range of issues related to their health, forming the National Black Women's Health Project, which would go on, in the early '90s, to launch a nationwide campaign to repeal Hyde. In 1993, President Clinton omitted Hyde from his budget, but the anti-abortion Democrat in charge of the House Appropriations Committee, Representative William Natcher, soon reinstated the ban. The campaign against Hyde did succeed, however, in restoring the ban's exception for victims of rape and incest. "Black women insisted that Hyde would provide a slippery slope to undermine abortion rights and healthcare," Loretta J. Ross stated in *Radical Reproductive Justice*. "History has proven our point."

It has taken almost 30 years for the movement to succeed in pressing another Democratic president to remove Hyde from his budget. During those years, reproductive justice activists have raised

money to fund abortions themselves, while successfully persuading the mainstream movement to make the issues of access and affordability central.

The victory is all the more remarkable given its target. Biden has long been among the more conservative Democrats on abortion. He supported the Hyde Amendment until 2019, when it became clear that he was fast becoming an outlier among Democratic primary candidates. That Biden has shifted his position says less about him than it does about the power of the movement that forced him to do so. Since its launch in 2013, the reproductive justice group All\* Above All has built a coalition of 130 organizations that oppose the ban as an issue

of racial and economic justice. The Black Lives Matter and reproductive justice movements have combined to make support for Hyde a political liability for Democrats. Representative Rosa DeLauro, who convened a hearing on Hyde within days of becoming the Appropriations Committee chair, has promised to omit it from the House spending bill. In the Senate, pro-Hyde Democrats will likely ensure that it remains in place. But even there, All\* Above All has been gaining support for the EACH Act, which would lift federal abortion coverage restrictions.

"We started where we thought we'd be lucky if we had 40 people on a bill at introduction," said Destiny Lopez, copresident of All\* Above All. "We now have 155 people in the House, 27 in the Senate. So it's a marathon, not a sprint." **N**

*Amy Littlefield is an investigative reporter who focuses on the intersection of religion and health care.*

**President Biden's budget does not include the ban on Medicaid funding for abortion, the first in 30 years to omit it.**

COMMENT / CHRISTOPHER MORTEN  
AND MATTHEW HERDER

# Big Pharma's Lie

*We cannot trust these companies to make enough vaccines.  
Global scarcity is a choice, not an inevitability.*

**T**HE WORLD NEEDS MORE COVID-19 VACCINES. YET debate rages as to why the world is short on vaccines, and what barriers need to be overcome to make and distribute more. According to the large American and European drug companies currently making Covid-19 vaccines, the status quo—vaccine scarcity for all except those who live in a few dozen rich countries—is inevitable and unfixable. Their premise is plain: They are the only ones that can make these vaccines, and they are making them as fast as they can. Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca, and Johnson & Johnson are on track to ship enough doses to vaccinate a majority of adults in the rich countries and to donate or sell a significantly smaller number to less wealthy countries, at least until next year. These companies insist they would make more doses and reach more people if they could—but, alas, they cannot.

What stops them from making more, they say, are material problems hardwired into the world economy: a lack of quality-controlled factories and ingredients to make vaccines, of freezers, of engineers and other professionals, and so on. “The scarcity of vaccines is not because of intellectual property but because of regrettable production and distribution challenges,” wrote Michelle McMurry-Heath, president of one of the leading pharmaceutical trade groups. And Moderna’s CEO said last month, “There is no mRNA manufacturing capacity in the world.”

But we doubt Big Pharma’s premise. Numerous independent experts have surveyed supply and distribution chains and concluded that additional vaccine manufacturing could be brought on line in a matter of months. These estimates are much shorter than the 18 months or more that Moderna and other market leaders claim is needed. In fact, drug companies in Israel, Canada, Bangladesh, South Africa, and Denmark have said they have unused vaccine-manufacturing capacity that could be deployed in a matter of months—provided existing manufacturers share their knowledge.

Shouldn’t a rational incumbent be “eager to find partners with the capabilities to expand production,” as some scholars have written, so as to sell more doses of its vaccine? Aren’t “all of the vaccine manufacturers...trying to increase supply as quickly as possible,” as another has claimed? We are skeptical, for two main reasons.

First, while it is true that these companies can make more money when they partner with competitors to make and sell more doses, such partnerships impose a trade-off. They require the incumbent to share some of its trade secrets—ingredient lists, instructions for production, and so on. Manufacturers like Moderna and Johnson & Johnson have done so judiciously, protected by nondisclosure agreements and other

legal restrictions. Inevitably, though, some knowledge “leaks” to the competitor. Incumbents eager to guard their first-mover advantage in the marketplace may refuse the trade-off. Indeed, Moderna and BioNTech have told investors that they are applying their mRNA technology to develop a wide range of new vaccines and treatments for cancer, influenza, HIV, and other diseases, which could become global blockbusters—unless their global competitors beat them to the punch. Meanwhile, according to the *Financial Times*, some companies have privately warned “US trade and White House officials that giving up intellectual property rights could allow China and Russia to exploit platforms such as mRNA.”

Second, incumbent vaccine makers might choose not to make enough Covid-19 vaccines to vaccinate the world. To put the point bluntly: Perpetuating the pandemic is better for business than ending it. This isn’t a conspiracy theory; the companies have

**To put the point bluntly: Perpetuating the pandemic is better for business than ending it.**

acknowledged that profits will be secured over the long term should the virus endure. Pfizer’s CFO announced a few months ago that the company sees “significant opportunity” in Covid-19 becoming endemic, which could make the vaccines a durable “franchise.” Particularly devastating from a public health perspective but particularly appealing from a franchise-building one are so-called variants of concern, which may evade existing immunity.

The Pfizer executive pointed to these variants in response to a Wall Street analyst’s question about “the need to revaccinate annually.” Moderna’s CEO has similarly stated that the company expects to sell annual booster shots for the foreseeable future, as the virus is “not leaving the planet.”

In other words, demand for lucrative booster shots depends in part on the emergence of new variants, which, in turn, requires the virus to continue to spread. This simple logic gives the incumbent vaccine makers strong incentives to leave people unvaccinated.

We have no proof that drug makers in wealthy countries are stretching the truth when they say that only they are capable of making Covid-19 vaccines. But we’ve heard such claims before—and they have been proven wrong.

In the 1990s and 2000s, HIV drug makers based in the United States and Europe claimed that manufacturers in other countries lacked the technical sophistication to make the medications safely and reliably. In reality, manufacturers in India and other Global South countries succeeded in making these drugs, in high quality

and on a massive scale, and ultimately did so more efficiently than the original manufacturers.

This time around, Public Citizen, PrEP4All, and other NGOs have presented detailed proposals to scale up Covid-19 vaccine production. These groups are calling on governments to waive (temporarily) the incumbents' patents, compel them to share manufacturing processes, lift export restrictions, and invest billions in publicly governed vaccine-manufacturing facilities.

Given the incumbents' incentives to, in effect, manufacture scarcity, we cannot accept their account of what is and what is not possible. Prior to the pandemic,

few thought it possible to develop, manufacture, and distribute even a single vaccine within a year. Through unprecedented funding and collaboration across the industry, as well as academic researchers, health

care professionals, government agencies, and multilateral organizations all over the globe, the world succeeded in generating multiple safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines.

Now, to get vaccines to everyone who needs them, we need to do even more. We can expand supply significantly by the end of 2021, but only with bold government action that combines big public investment with compulsory transfer of the incumbents' trade secrets. Other vaccines are in the pipeline, but in view of the dire need in many parts of the world, we should make every effort to scale up global production of the vaccines that we know already work.

What we should not do is accept Big Pharma's premise, or trust it to solve the pandemic on its own initiative. **N**

*Christopher Morten is the deputy director of the Technology Law & Policy Clinic at the New York University School of Law. Matthew Herder is the director of the Health Law Institute and an associate professor at the Medical School and Schulich School of Law at Dalhousie University.*

## BACK ISSUES / 1921

## Tulsa's "Stories of Horror"

**I**N 1921, *THE NATION* SENT JOURNALIST WALTER WHITE, the future executive secretary of the NAACP, to Tulsa, Okla., to report on the May 31–June 1 massacre of an estimated 300 Black residents. White came back with one of the most important accounts of what happened a century ago. This short excerpt, describing the violence of the white mob in the city's thriving Greenwood neighborhood, known as "Black Wall Street," still makes for searing reading:

Around five o'clock Wednesday morning the mob, now numbering more than 10,000, made a mass attack on Little Africa. Machine-guns were brought into use; eight aeroplanes were employed to spy on the movements of the Negroes and according to some were used in bombing the colored section. All that was lacking to make the scene a replica of modern "Christian" warfare was poison gas. The colored men and women fought gamely in defense of their homes, but the odds were too great. According to the statements of onlookers, men in uniform, either home guards or ex-service men or both, carried cans of oil into Little Africa, and, after looting the homes, set fire to them. Many are the stories of horror told to me—not by colored people—but by white residents. One was that of an aged colored couple, saying their evening prayers before retiring in their little home on Greenwood Avenue. A mob broke into the house, shot both of the old people in the backs of their heads, blowing their brains out and spattering them over the bed, pillaged the home, and then set fire to it.

Another was that of the death of Dr. A.C. Jackson, a colored physician. Dr. Jackson was worth \$100,000; had been described by the Mayo brothers as "the most able Negro surgeon in America"; was respected by white and colored people alike, and was in every sense a good citizen. A mob attacked Dr. Jackson's home. He fought in defense of it, his wife and children and himself. An officer of the home guards who knew Dr. Jackson came up at that time and assured him that if he would surrender he would be protected. This Dr. Jackson did. The officer sent him under guard to Convention Hall, where colored people were being placed for protection. En route to the hall, disarmed, Dr. Jackson was shot and killed in cold blood. The officer who had assured Dr. Jackson of protection stated to me, "Dr. Jackson was an able, clean-cut man. He did only what any red-blooded man would have done under similar circumstances in defending his home. Dr. Jackson was murdered by white ruffians." **N**

*You can read Walter White's article "Tulsa, 1921" in full at [thenation.com/tulsa](http://thenation.com/tulsa).*



## Back Talk Alexis Grenell



# Men Are Failing

*And, historically, that's actually a precondition for women ascending to power. Can they seize the moment?*

**N**EW YORK STATE SENATOR ALESSANDRA BIAGGI RECENTLY said something that so completely encapsulated American patriarchy at this moment, it should be tattooed on every woman's exhausted face: "We've got to move on past talking about the bad behavior of below-average men." Doing so is made eminently more difficult when they refuse to get out of the way, lining up instead like testosterone-addled lemmings to compete in the pathetic pissing match that now passes for our elections. In this case, I'm talking about the current field of candidates for governor of New York. That includes the incumbent, Andrew Cuomo, who's resisted calls to resign while arming himself with no fewer than four taxpayer-funded law firms to defend against an equal number of investigations. Every week seems to bring some fresh outburst. Whether he's undermining the integrity of the New York attorney general's investigation of a sitting governor despite the fact that he did the same when he held that role ("I'm not telling anyone to have faith in [the results of the investigation]"); contradicting part of the state's definition of sexual harassment that he himself signed into law ("harassment is not making someone feel uncomfortable"); or slapping down a reporter's question about the ethics of profiting off a pandemic to the tune of a \$5 million book advance ("that's stupid"), the whole thing is one yawning display of entitlement. Former governor Eliot Spitzer at least knew when to get off the stage, perhaps because he had some sense of shame and a family business that wasn't politics to fall back on. Cuomo, it seems, can't do anything else, so why not stick around even if it's a raging embarrassment for you and everyone else?

On the Republican side, there's recent entrant and ex-Golf Channel reality contestant Andrew Giuliani. At 35, he's reasoned that he's got 32 years of experience ("I'm a politician out of the womb"). In a press conference, he claimed to have spent "parts of five different decades of my life in politics or public service"—a reference to his father's career, much of which he wasn't even alive for. We're watching Chris Farley's epic *Saturday Night Live* parody of the 7-year-old Andrew at Rudy's swearing-in ceremony shouting, "My dad's mayor!" come to life. Biaggi happens to be the same age as Giuliani, the difference being that she's about a thousand times smarter, more

educated, and more qualified, which still doesn't amount to the implicit plausibility for the role that comes with being someone's son. Daddy issues abound in the field, as Cuomo junior hangs on for dear life trying to best Mario's three terms in office, and the Republicans suck up relentlessly to Donald Trump, their political and spiritual patriarch now banished to Mar-a-Lago like some sort of Florida Prospero: the rightful Duke of America.

A smart, qualified woman who doesn't owe her success to a famous father would be a welcome entry against any of these interchangeably absurd men. Are things bad enough that we've finally arrived at the point where voters might actually support a female candidate? That's the "glass cliff" theory of gender equity, first proffered by psychology professors Michelle K. Ryan and Alexander Haslam in a now-famous 2005 paper: that women leaders are disproportionately represented during periods of downturn or crisis. Put more bluntly: For women to secure power, men need to fail spectacularly. The theory explains why women are often favored to lead companies during moments of turbulence—when the chance of failure is higher—and overlooked for safe or successful endeavors. The concept has been extended to explain female political leadership in moments of political crisis, as well as other non-corporate contexts. When an enterprise appoints a woman to its helm, it can indicate an intention to change, writes Ezhiah Hunt-Earle: "The more decided preference for a female in a failing company may result from a perception that men have maneuvered the organization into trouble and that appointing a female leader may be a method of achieving a desired transformation."

Cuomo had the same thought when Eric Schneiderman resigned as attorney general in response to allegations of intimate partner violence: He immediately set about virtue-signaling that it was time for women to lead the historically male office. Voters are primed to support women in these moments in part because of a belief that they're inherently less corrupt, if not more capable—the long tail of the temperance movement and "fairer sex" stereotypes. The actual evidence for this is scant, and research has found that women are functionally less corrupt only because they're external to the relevant networks of power. Regardless, they benefit from a purity bias in their favor when it comes to following a man who's flamed out.

**Women benefit from a purity bias in their favor when it comes to following a man who's flamed out.**

Which brings us to the current attor-

ney general, Letitia James. Although she was Cuomo's preferred replacement for Schneiderman, he's recently started attacking her as too politically motivated to properly investigate him. After the comptroller made a referral allowing James to investigate whether the governor had misused public resources to write his book, a spokesman bellowed back: "This is Albany politics at its worst—both the comptroller and the attorney general have spoken to people about running for governor and it is unethical to wield criminal referral authority to further political self-interest."

There's no indication that James is doing anything other than her actual job. Indeed, Cuomo himself was an attorney general with designs on running for governor when he investigated then Governor Spitzer. And it's very hard to imagine a Black woman getting away with soliciting underlings for sex, lying about Covid nursing home deaths, cashing in on her crimes, and refusing to resign after nearly the entire New York congressional delegation, both of the state's US senators, and the majority leader of the state Senate called for her to do so. Should James decide to run, she'd be a serious political threat, considering that Cuomo needs her base—the disproportionately Black and female voters in New York City—to win another term.

Below-average men can achieve great heights. But the right woman under the right circumstances just might bring this one down. **N**



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MICHELLE CHEN

## Morbid Symptoms Jeet Heer



### Are the Democrats Capable of Defending Democracy?

*Bolstering voting rights is both urgent and popular—but the party might not have the unity and fortitude required.*

**I**N HIS FIRST ADDRESS TO CONGRESS ON APRIL 28, JOE Biden invoked the January 6 insurrection, saying, "The images of a violent mob assaulting this Capitol, desecrating our democracy, remain vivid in all our minds." He added, "The insurrection was an existential crisis—a test of whether our democracy could survive. And it did. But the struggle is far from over."

These were uncharacteristically bold words from Biden, but they are not hyperbolic. On January 6, a sitting president incited a mob to attack Congress in order to sabotage the certification of his successor. Shocking as that was, it was only the flash point in a larger war against democracy. In truth, Donald Trump's clown coup had little chance of succeeding. The more serious threat lay in the very fact that he was able to do something so reckless and yet remain the standard-bearer of his party, someone whom most congressional Republicans still wouldn't vote to impeach.

Though Trump has left the White House, the Trumpification of the GOP continues apace. Those few brave but hapless Republicans who stood up to Trump, like Congresswoman Liz Cheney, are finding themselves pariahs in their own party, stripped of their positions and scorned by party loyalists. The GOP has embraced the Trumpian Big Lie that the election was stolen, an idea endorsed by 53 percent of Republicans according to a May Reuters/Ipsos poll. Trump is not so much an ex-president as a pretender to the throne, the exiled king of Mar-a-Lago whom elected Republicans cross at their peril.

The Big Lie is behind the efforts of state-level Republicans to roll back voting rights. As Geoffrey Skelley reported in *FiveThirtyEight*, "In the aftermath of the 2020 election, Republican lawmakers have pushed new voting restrictions in nearly every state. From making it harder to cast ballots early to increasing the frequency of voter roll purges, at least 25 new restrictive voting laws have been enacted, with more potentially on the horizon." The most disturbing innovation in this rollback of democracy is the idea that state legislators could be empowered to overturn election results and pick their own presidential electors. In that scenario, Biden or another Democrat could win the popular count in states that carry over 270 electoral votes and still be deprived of the presidency.

According to *Washington Post* columnist Perry Bacon Jr., "If Republicans win the governorships of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin next year, taking total control in those key swing states, they could impose all kinds of electoral barriers for the next presidential election. The Republicans are



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laying the groundwork to refuse to certify a 2024 Democratic presidential victory should the GOP hold a House majority.”

Only the complacent would dismiss this as fanciful. Considering all the antics Trump pulled to try to overturn the 2020 election—and the fact that most elected Republicans are now going out of their way to grovel in front of him—2024 will almost certainly be an even bigger test of American democracy.

Democrats have a very narrow window of opportunity to shore up our democracy against the ongoing GOP threat. The good news is that the party has put forward two very strong measures—HR 1 and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act—which are the most robust pro-democracy reforms in a generation. Taken together, they would make it easier to vote, make voting more secure, limit the power of dark money in politics, and push back against antidemocratic shenanigans like gerrymandering.

Such measures are all extraordinarily popular with the general public. Writing in *The New Yorker* in March, Jane Mayer reported receiving a recording “of a private conference call on January 8th, between a policy adviser to Senator Mitch McConnell and the leaders of several prominent conservative groups—including one run by the Koch brothers’

**Democrats  
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ongoing GOP  
threat.**

network—reveal[ing] the participants’ worry that the proposed election reforms garner wide support not just from liberals but from conservative voters, too. The speakers on the call expressed alarm at the broad popularity of [HR 1’s] provision calling for more public disclosure about secret political donors.”

The two voting rights acts proposed by the Democrats are both necessary and popular. Even with their narrow hold on power in Congress, it should be a no-brainer to push them through. Alas, it’s very hard to pass a prodemocratic measure in an antidemocratic system. Joe Manchin, with his cult of bipartisanship, is one major stumbling block. The West Virginia senator, as Luke Savage notes in *The Atlantic*, “has reiterated his opposition to H.R. 1 on the deeply spurious grounds that any prospective voting-rights legislation ought to pass with bipartisan support—a DOA line of reasoning even when it comes to the watered-down version of the John Lewis Voting Rights Act that Manchin himself is proposing.”

Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema supports HR 1 but, like Manchin, is also a fetishist of the filibuster. Since neither bill can be passed by reconciliation and both lack Republican support, the only way for either to get through the Senate

is by overturning the filibuster. The core truth is that Manchin and Sinema are committed to the old order, even if following the established path leads to a successful Republican coup.

Ultimately, this issue is a test of how serious Biden and the Democrats are about their own rhetoric. If American democracy is indeed facing an “existential” crisis, then Biden should pull out all the stops to win over Manchin and Sinema: offer them any inducements that he has available—and threaten them with severe punishments for not toeing the party line. This is what Republicans are doing to recalcitrant members like Cheney and Mitt Romney. If the GOP can be in deadly earnest trying to undermine democracy, we have every right to expect Democrats to be just as organized, just as dedicated, and just as ruthless in preserving democracy. **N**



OPPART/PETER KUPER



“I’m just happy things are getting back to normal.”

# Q&A

## Alice Sparkly Kat

In *Postcolonial Astrology: Reading the Planets Through Capital, Power, and Labor*, Alice Sparkly Kat interprets the stars through history, politics, and postcolonial theory. Throughout their nuanced and intricate analysis, astrology is a tool to break political and social norms: A look at the relationship of Mars and Venus complicates gendered power dynamics, while a study of the sun becomes a history of surveillance culture and the politics of who gets to be seen. Though some might be hesitant to view astrology as political, *Postcolonial Astrology* encourages readers to study the heavens in order to better understand their own values, views, identities, and desires for the future.

—Mary Retta

**MR: You write in the book that astrology tends to have a mainstream resurgence during times of conservatism or fascism. Do you think the Trump era and the last several years of conservative policy help explain astrology's current popularity?**

**ASK:** Historically, there's often a link between right-wing leaders and a rise in astrology's popularity, which is something that I was really surprised about. There was a resurgence of astrology between the two world wars when fascism was thriving in Europe, and astrology was also very popular after the Civil War. I don't know if Trump had an astrologer while he was in office, but Reagan did—and so did Hitler.

It's hard to spot when it's talking about emotional stuff so there's a lot of astrological stuff that feels right-wing. The idealizing gender and manifesting wealth that I write about in *Postcolonial Astrology* is very conservative. But obviously a lot of people use astrology to deal with those kinds of constraints, so it really depends on how you perceive it.

**MR: Though you write about astrology as a political force, how astrology is often practiced. Do you think there are any alternatives to contemporary mainstream astrology?**

**ASK:** Yes, definitely. The most popular type of astrology right now is usually horoscope columns, which are usually written by white people, though this is starting to change. Horoscopes today can often be very limiting—there's something about horoscopes as a genre that says, “You're going to talk about relationships and career,” and that's the form, I think horoscopes can do much more, but we don't all

see that. I know astrologers who say that horoscopes are like a recipe, or your medicine for the month: They can be a poem, a collage, a series of questions. I write monthly horoscopes, and I usually try to leave my readers with questions, a way to introspect, and a way to interrogate their relationship to capitalism.

**MR: For as much as astrology has grown in popularity, there are still a lot of skeptics. What would you say to people who think astrology is fake or believe that astrology can never be political?**

**ASK:** I think it's a personal choice. I'm not an evangelical—I don't think everyone has to believe in astrology. I don't “believe” in astrology. I think it's a social agreement, and I believe there's something really mystical about imagining something together. It's a consensual space too, so if you don't like astrology, there's nothing wrong with that.

I want people to talk about astrology in a more political way, because it's already this intimate language—it's already political. So let's make it explicitly political. I want people to be more aware of how astrology exists as a political form.

**MR: You pose a question in your book: “What would you look like if you were able to do the naive act of imagining yourself in a world without capitalism?” How do you think astrology helps us imagine this?**

**ASK:** Astrology is all about imagination. It gives you agency and the ability to share imaginative spaces with other people. That takes so much trust and time—that's where the magic really happens.

One of the biggest ways astrology helps us imagine a world without capitalism is through forging meaningful relationships. So much of capitalism is about creating and maintaining a sense of alienation. So if you can find a way to trust someone and share a creative space with them really authentically, that's already a huge step forward.

**“Astrology is already an intimate language—already political.”**





# The Laziness Myth

BRYCE COVERT +  
MIKE KONCZAL

**R**epublican governors are done sympathizing with the millions of unemployed Americans. In March 2020, Congress expanded unemployment benefits to offset the steep, sudden loss of jobs caused by Covid-19. But as of late May, more than three-quarters of GOP-led states said they would prematurely end the extra \$300 payments, broadened eligibility, and longer benefit period.

Lawmakers in these 24 states say they are responding to claims by business owners that more generous unemployment benefits make people unwilling to come back to their jobs. But that complaint is more fantasy than fact.

Economists have pumped out reams of studies on the question of whether larger unemployment benefits make people hesitant to work. The findings are nearly unanimous: They don't. One paper found that increasing unemployment checks in the pandemic didn't cause a drop in employment. In fact, people kept looking for jobs at the same rate as before, and employers didn't struggle to find employees any more than usual. We also have a recent test case: During the Great Recession, employment in states with more generous benefits looked about the same as in states with stingier ones. And when extra benefits abruptly expired last July, there was no sudden increase in the number of people working.

Why might this be? Even if an unemployment check is higher than what someone used to earn at work, we all know it's temporary. A job, on the other hand, offers ongoing income, on which we smartly place a higher value.

What's also clear is that the significantly higher unemployment benefits Congress offered during the pandemic have kept people from going hungry. When Congress finally passed a new increase in December after the previous one had lapsed, and also added another round of stimulus checks and increased food stamp benefits, the number of people living below the poverty line fell by 13 million.

Taking that lifeline away won't goose the economy. There are good reasons some Americans find it difficult to work. For one, many families still don't have child care. Only about half of schools have fully resumed in-person classes, and many child care providers haven't

reopened or returned to normal capacity.

And while we're all relieved that the number of Covid cases is dipping, only around half of adults are fully vaccinated. The very states that are yanking away unemployment benefits are among the most sluggish at vaccinations. Meanwhile, mask mandates are disappearing even though service workers have no way to tell which customers are vaccinated and which aren't.

Work, therefore, isn't safe. And yet most employers refuse to pay a premium to bring people back. While wages in leisure and hospitality jobs have risen recently, they're only just returning to pre-pandemic levels.

Even with these constraints, Americans are, in fact, heading back to work, even if it's not as briskly as some would like. New unemployment claims have been steadily dropping in recent weeks and fell 48 percent between January and late May.

But apparently that progress isn't fast enough for Republican governors. Collectively, the states that say they will pull out of the enhanced federal benefits are expected to kick as many as 4.1 million people off the rolls this month.

This should come as no surprise. Conservatives have long been hell-bent on trying to force Americans to work by threatening to take away lifelines if they don't. They have, for example, touted work requirements in cash welfare assistance, a stick meant to coerce the poor into taking jobs in order to receive financial assistance. We've learned since they were instituted that they don't increase work. What they do is leave more people impoverished.

Even before Congress passed extra unemployment benefits, Republicans were warning that they would punish people for not working. In April 2020, early in the pandemic, then Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia said he didn't want workers "to become dependent on the unemployment system."

GOP lawmakers at all levels seem determined to create a pool of workers so financially desperate that they'll work for whatever meager pay employers deign to offer. It's a barbaric way to treat people, and it betrays a bleak vision of our fellow Americans. There is no crisis of laziness. The only real crisis is that we haven't ensured that people can go back to meaningful, remunerative work.

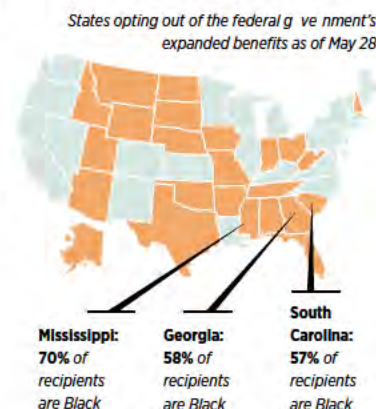
Bryce Covert

## The Rush to Cut Unemployment Benefits

Nearly 16 million Americans are still unable to work.



Yet 1 in 4 could lose pay if 24 states end pandemic relief benefits early...



...and Black people would be disproportionately affected.

Source: The Century Foundation



SNAPSHOT/Fatima Shbair

## Nowhere to Go

Palestinians shelter on May 24 within the ruins of a building destroyed by Israeli air strikes in Gaza. Residents returned to damaged or demolished homes, and clean-up operations continued as the cease-fire appeared to be holding, marking the end of 11 days of fighting that killed more than 250 Palestinians, many of them women and children, and 13 Israelis.

### By the Numbers



**2.5k**

Approximate number of ransomware attacks reported to the FBI in 2020, an increase of 66 percent since 2019

**43%**

Increase in the average ransomware payment since 2020

**\$350M**

Estimated value of the cryptocurrency payments hackers received from ransomware victims in 2020

**\$90M**

Value of Bitcoin payments the cybergang DarkSide received from 47 victims over a nine-month period

**\$4.4M**

Value of the Bitcoin payment DarkSide received from Colonial Pipeline in May after the cybergang hacked the company

**\$4.6M**

Average initial amount demanded in ransomware attacks

**2.1M**

Estimated number of health records compromised by data breaches in April 2021

—Jared Olson

CALVIN TRILLIN  
**DeadlinePoet**

### Kevin McCarthy Changes His Tune Re Trump and January 6

The speakership would be for Kevin  
His version of a place in heaven.  
He seems to think to reach that level  
A pact's required with the Devil.

# Flipping Arizona

The  
unsung  
canvassers  
who turned  
the West's  
biggest red  
state blue.

SASHA  
ABRAMSKY



**E**ARLY ON THE MORNING OF JULY 20, UNITE HERE LOCAL 11 COPRESIDENT Susan Minato crammed her suitcases, computer, and other necessities into her gray SUV rental and set off on a 371-mile drive from her home in the Mount Washington neighborhood of Los Angeles to Sun City West, on the northwestern edge of Phoenix. She was on a mission: to knock on as many doors as possible and help flip Arizona blue for Joe Biden.

It was the height of the pandemic, and at the time Arizona was one of the world's Covid hot spots; nowhere else in the United States had infection rates as high. But Minato, a small, feisty woman who has worked with the union on organizing efforts for nearly 30 years, wasn't one to shy away from potential danger. For months, she had taken the lead in pushing sometimes reluctant coalition partners, in Mi AZ (Spanish for "My Arizona") and other networks, to join with Unite Here in developing a comprehensive ground game for in-person canvassing in the battleground state.

Minato took only one bathroom break and made one gas stop—just over the state line, since Arizona's gas prices are cheaper than California's. Five and a half hours after setting off, she arrived at a large salmon-pink ranch house, with a brick wall surrounding the building and a wrought-iron entry fence. The house, with its crushed-rock garden and two-car garage, was in a solidly conservative neighborhood, a quiet area of plush, recently built homes, where large American flags proudly fluttered in the desert breeze in many of the front yards. It belonged to Minato's sister and had the added advantage of being not far from where her elderly mother was living at the time. It was a 45-minute drive northwest of Downtown, where Unite Here's Phoenix offices were located.

Minato, whose union represents hotel, restaurant, airport, and entertainment venue workers, planned to spend four months living there while she coordinated her army of canvassers.

**It was the height of the pandemic, and at the time Arizona was one of the world's Covid hot spots.**

**U**NITE HERE LOCAL 11, which operates in Southern California and Arizona, has been at the forefront of progressive activism in Los Angeles for more than three decades. In 1989, an insurgent campaign for president by Maria Elena Durazo (now a California state senator) wrested control of the local from a more

conservative leadership, setting the stage for it to swing leftward in the following decade. The majority of the Unite Here activists who subsequently took center stage were women, opposed to the anti-immigrant stance of the state's then governor, Pete Wilson, and determined to make their mark on California politics.

Today, a generation on, the walls of Unite Here's LA offices—in a brick-and-glass block shared with several other labor and economic justice organizations, on a quiet street just north of Downtown's soaring skyscrapers—are decorated with memorabilia from a who's who of good fights. There are United Farm Workers posters, photographs from large May Day union rallies, posters showing Cesar Chavez and Robert F. Kennedy together. There are other posters calling for boycotts of non-union hotels and placards demanding protection for residents with temporary protected status. In pride of place on the rear wall of Minato's

airy office, opposite a war-room white board detailing the ongoing political operations, is a poster urging one and all to "Disobey Trump."

Durazo's 1989 campaign had captured the imagination of the Rev. James Lawson, one of the icons of the civil rights movement, who was instrumental in guiding Martin Luther King Jr. along the path of nonviolent direct action. Sixty years old by then, Lawson was teaching at the University of California, Los Angeles, and hosted regular sessions at the Holman United Methodist Church on training community organizers and union personnel in nonviolence methods. He took the new Unite Here leadership under his wing and began strategizing with them on how best to push their political and economic agenda, to broaden access to the franchise, and to expand the movement for "equality, liberty, and justice."

More than 30 years on, at the age of 92, his hair a shock of white, Lawson still meets regularly with the union leadership and holds workshops—though during the pandemic those meetings have largely been reduced to Zoom encounters. He is proud of how instrumental Local 11 has been in helping shift California politics to the left. Its organizing efforts, he says, "have been contagious and infectious."

But the local's reach isn't confined to California. Since 2007, it has also been one of the biggest players in the long campaign, conducted by an array of racial justice groups like Somos America ("We Are America") and trade unions, to turn deep-red Arizona purple and then, ultimately, blue. Its canvassers were instrumental in flipping a number of city council seats in Phoenix in the years after 2007. By 2013, they had turned the nine-member council blue, and in 2019, they succeeded in getting one of their own, a fiery union organizer and onetime hotel housekeeper named Betty Guardado, elected as a councilwoman representing the sprawling Maryvale district. They played a key role in unseating Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio in 2016, after narrowly failing to defeat him four years



earlier. They returned again to help Kyrsten Sinema win her US Senate seat in 2018. Throughout these campaigns, they established a sterling track record of bringing new voters—especially low-income and minority residents, as well as young people in high school and college—into the political process.

In the summer of 2020, when Minato and her colleagues headed east from California, they had their sights set on the biggest prize of all: Arizona's 11 Electoral College votes, which they knew could prove pivotal in the presidential race.

**T**WENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD MARIA HERNÁNDEZ GREW UP with her four younger siblings, her then undocumented parents, and her grandparents in a home in the Maryvale neighborhood of Phoenix, before moving to Los Angeles to work for Local 11 a few years back. Maryvale was a disproportionately Latino, working-class neighborhood on Phoenix's west side, its potholed streets lined with low-lying bungalows with shingle roofs. In spring, the stunning yellow blossoms of the paloverde added beauty to the neighborhood. But other than that, there wasn't much to soften the hard contours. Its main draws were home to auto repair businesses, payday lenders, car-title loan companies, fast food outlets, and the other low-end stores seen in impoverished communities around the country. It was a

run-down place where people were born poor and too often died poor. Working with the Unite Here local, however, Hernández suddenly felt a sense of possibility.

"Growing up in Arizona, you felt the hatred to people like you, like your parents," she remembers, crying as she talks. "You grow up really fast. You grow up thinking it's normal to be scared of the cops, because you have figures like Joe Arpaio." The notorious longtime sheriff of Maricopa County had won election after

election primarily through immigrant-baiting and pulling tough-on-crime stunts like reintroducing the chain gang and forcing male inmates to wear pink boxer shorts. "I'd be so scared every time my dad would go to work," Hernández says. "I'd wonder if he would come back. Same with my mom."

In 2010, after years of anti-immigrant legislation and voter-passed propositions, Arizona's Republican governor, Jan Brewer, signed the harsh SB 1070 into law. Among its many draconian provisions, it mandated that law enforcement officers demand residency papers from anyone they deemed likely to be undocumented—a blank check for racial profilers like Arpaio. SB 1070 was a precursor to the politics that, six years later, Trump would attempt to imprint on the nation.

In the wake of the bill's passage, Hernández's mother, tearful and scared, wanted to move the family to another state. By contrast, Hernández, then in her junior year at Trevor G. Browne High School, wanted to fight. "It was a political awakening for myself," she says.

That year, thousands of high school and college students around the city took part in walk-outs to protest the legislation. It was a strategy they would continue as Arizona politics heated up over the coming years.

Soon after SB 1070's passage, Hernández got an internship with Unite Here's Campaign for Arizona's Future, where she worked with dozens of young organizers who were committed to taking Arpaio down. "It showed me I had a voice, that I could lead people—that someone like me, the daughter of immigrants, could make

They had their sights set on the biggest prize of all: **Arizona's 11 Electoral College votes**, which they knew could prove pivotal in the race.

a difference through bottom-up organizing,” she recalls, sitting in the LA office in a “Take Back the Senate” sweatshirt, her long black hair pulled back tightly in a bun, her ears adorned with large gold hoops. “I was in the movement. I started to see a shift, something I had never seen before: people coming together to vote out hate.”

In 2012, Unite Here registered about 35,000 people to vote in Arizona, most of them from the poor, minority neighborhoods of Phoenix. They didn’t quite win, but they came pretty damn close.

For Marisela Mares—who at the time was a self-proclaimed “flamboyantly gay” 14-year-old boy and would subsequently transition to being a woman—that 2012 campaign was an epiphany. Students at Mares’s Cesar Chavez High School, in the new southside development of Laveen Village, walked out in protest against Arpaio’s policing tactics and then, en masse, began organizing their community to try to vote him out. Mares recalls telling people, “I’m not old enough to vote, but I’m here because you are old enough to vote.” She would go on to explain what was at stake for her personally: how her undocumented grandparents had self-deported back to Mexico as the anti-immigrant squeeze intensified; how immigration agents had raided her family’s home; how Latinos in the city were routinely being racially profiled and humiliated.

Shortly after that election, a then 19-year-old Hernández encountered Arpaio and State Senator Russell Pearce, SB 1070’s extremist architect, in the halls of the state capitol. She told Arpaio that he didn’t represent the will of the majority of Arizonans and that, the next time around, they would make sure to vote him out. The octogenarian Arpaio glared at her and strode off. Sure enough, four years later, Unite Here’s campaign defeated the self-proclaimed “toughest sheriff in America.” “We did it,” Hernández says, recalling Arpaio’s defeat by 10 percentage points, her voice brimming with emotion. “We got rid of the man who, for so many years, instilled fear in our community. Housekeepers, cooks, dishwashers, folks like me— young people, a coalition of diverse folks, a coalition of people he, for so many years, had tried to keep down—we rose up and said, ‘Bye-bye, you don’t serve us.’ This coalition, we’re going to do the impossible. We don’t ask ‘Can we do it?’, we ask ‘How do we do it?’ and then we do it.”

**F**OUR YEARS LATER, Unite Here’s activists decided to do the impossible once again.

By the summer of 2020, with the election fast approaching and Covid’s spread accelerating, the national Democratic Party had decided to pull back from door-to-door canvassing operations. The pandemic, Biden’s team concluded, simply made it too risky. Local 11’s leadership in Los Angeles and in Phoenix decided the opposite was true: that given what was at stake in both the presidential and congressional elections, it was too dangerous not to go door-to-door.

They hired a Tucson-based University of Arizona infectious disease epidemiologist, Saskia Popescu, to help them devise a Covid safety protocol. It would be modeled on protocols the union had already implemented for getting its out-of-work cooks back into industrial-scale kitchens to prepare food for distribution to pandemic-isolated seniors in LA. Now it would be used first to deploy canvassers safely to Arizona, then for those canvassers to go door-to-door in areas with so-called low-propensity voters to talk about the issues and make sure they followed up by actually casting their ballots.

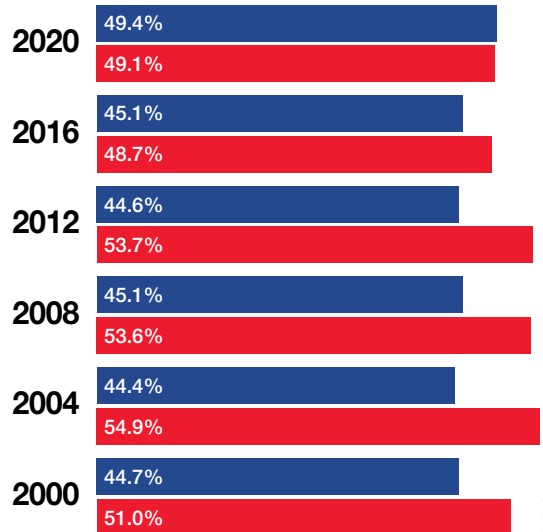
“We focused on distancing, PPE, hand hygiene, and how to respond if interacting with unmasked individuals,” Popescu remembers.

With the protocols in place, the canvassers hit the ground running. More than 300 canvassers came in from the LA area; hundreds more were already in Arizona, willing to knock on doors from morning to night, for what translated to about \$17 per hour plus benefits, paid for by the union’s 504(c)(4) wing, CASE (Central Arizonans for a Sustainable Economy) Action, and its federal super PAC, the Worker Power PAC.

Their target was 80 door knocks per person per day. They exceeded that. By September, many canvassers were knocking on more than 100 doors a day and working six days a week. “We were going to very heavily Republican, conservative areas,” says 31-year-old Josh Wells, one of the campaign’s field directors. “We have to talk to the folks that may not think they’re our people, but they’re experiencing the same problems. Getting them to think that things can be different.”

Wells, a tall, skinny man with a Che Guevara-style beard and a penchant for black berets, whose family originates from Trinidad, grew up in

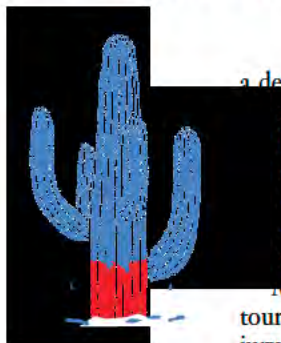
## Arizona Presidential Elections



**Across generations:** The Rev. James Lawson, now a mentor to Unite Here’s leadership, being led into a police wagon at a protest in 1960.



**Over the five months they were in Phoenix, Unite Here's canvassers knocked on hundreds of thousands of doors.**



**Fighting fear:** Unite Here Local 11 played a key role in unseating Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio in 2016.

"My third day, I knock on a door," Wilbur recalls, sitting in the union's offices, dressed in gray slacks, a red Unite Here T-shirt, and gold hoop earrings, a small stud above her upper lip. "This guy comes to the door; he's tattooed, intimidating, bald-headed. He says, 'What the fuck do you want?'" When she told him that she was canvassing for Biden and for Senate candidate Mark Kelly, the man came at her and, his hands on her chest, pushed her to the ground and spat on her. As she lay there, stunned, in a midtown yard not far from the Unite Here offices, she continues, "He says, 'I don't want you on my property, you stupid nigger bitch.' All he saw was my color—he didn't know I'd been blown up in Iraq. All he saw was my color."

The canvassers called the police, but when Phoenix's Finest came, the man denied having assaulted her, and eventually the officers dismissed it as a case of he-said, she-said and left without arresting him. "It lit a fire under me: 'You want a fight? You got a fight,'" Wilbur says. "After that, I was determined to help the union turn Arizona blue." When she called her 93-year-old grandmother, Viola, who was then living in the small town of Holdenville, Okla., to tell her about the incident, her grandmother—who had marched, been arrested, and been beaten during the civil rights years—simply said, "Don't quit. If you quit, you lose. You're fighting for change, for democracy, for the people."

Wilbur didn't quit. And, for the most part, when she knocked on doors that summer and fall, decked out in her PPE, always stepping back six feet from the door after ringing the bell, she received a sympathetic hearing. If she or the other canvassers were invited into the homes of the people they were speaking with to break bread, they explained their Covid protocols and politely declined. At the end of the day, bone weary, the union members would go back to their homes or rented

apartments and safely space out, each one eating in their own bedroom, none of them gathering in the shared space to watch TV together. Over those five months, Minato avers, not a single canvasser got sick with Covid while on the job.

Buffalo, N.Y. He had moved out to Flagstaff, Ariz., after high school to go to college. There, he met the woman he would marry, and the couple decided to make Phoenix their home. But the politics were a challenge: He was Black, she was brown, and the state's leadership at the time veered perilously close to white supremacy. "To raise multiracial kids in a state where there's so much discrimination, very often ingrained in state law, I had to make

a decision: whether I was going to stay here and fight to make things better or go somewhere else. I wanted my kids to see, if the fight is difficult, that's where we should be."

In 2020, the fight was about as challenging as any Wells could have imagined. Sometimes pro-Trump residents threw eggs at the canvassers, let dogs out on them, even physically assaulted them.

Marilyn Wilbur, 49, is a retired Air Force veteran with six tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, who suffered traumatic brain injury and eye, jaw, and shoulder damage after the vehicle she was in was blown up. Having left the military in the wake of these injuries, she took a job as a food worker at Arizona State University in Tempe. When the pandemic hit, she was furloughed. Now, with the election fast approaching and with rising medical bills for the counseling sessions her autistic son needed, she decided to supplement her military retirement and VA payments by working as a team leader for Unite Here, in charge of 22 canvassers. She was, as she puts it, the alpha of her wolf pack.



**S**USAN MINATO AND THE OTHER UNITE Here canvassers from the Los Angeles area—unemployed cooks, concession stand workers, bartenders, and the like—would remain in Phoenix through the November election. "A lot of things inspired me to go out there," says Ana Diaz, who was brought to California from El Salvador by her parents as a 9-year-old in the early 1980s. Diaz, now a single mom, works as a bartender at the Bank of California Center and the Los Angeles Convention Center. She has heavily tattooed forearms—a green owl on her right arm, a fish on her left—wears beaded necklaces, and tints her hair purple.

Diaz had first canvassed in Arizona in 2018, working on the Sinema campaign. Now, in 2020, she felt the stakes were even higher. Originally slated to head to Phoenix in March, she stalled for time because of the pandemic, hoping against hope that things would swiftly ease up. Then, in August, after she had wet her feet by getting out of the house and volunteering at local food banks, she felt she couldn't wait any longer. "I was tired of Trump, tired of his treatment of immigrants, tired of hearing his bullshit. It angered me. He didn't care about our community, about humanity. He cared about his rich friends. What about us—working people?"

Diaz got in her car and drove to Phoenix. There, in temperatures that regularly soared past 115 degrees, she donned a mask and a face shield, loaded up with hand sanitizer, and began knocking on doors. "People at first were iffy: 'What are you doing? You guys are crazy! Why are you here?'" she recalls. But "once we started talking to people, they started remembering us, respecting us from prior campaigns." At the same time, however, "it wasn't all pretty in pink. After dark, we didn't know if somebody would let his pit bull out on you, shoot you. It got scary at times, but I didn't want to let the fear get to me. My mind was set on one thing: 'I need to defeat this asshole—he's done too much to working-class people.'"

Over the five months they were in Phoenix, the local's canvassers knocked on hundreds of thousands of doors (union officials put the number at 800,000, including repeat knocks)



and talked to 190,000 people, of whom roughly 150,000 gave positive responses indicating they supported Biden for president and Kelly for the open US Senate seat. This was after registering many thousands of new, often young voters earlier that year. These numbers were in addition to the 40,000 they had already registered in Maricopa County in 2018 and the 10,000 in 2019. No other Arizona door-knocking operation came close to theirs in terms of scale. Done largely out of the spotlight, their work was as crucial to turning Arizona blue in 2020 as the work of Stacey Abrams and Fair Fight was in Georgia. Given how the GOP, in one state after another, has worked since the election to make it harder for poor and minority residents to vote in future contests, the intensive, in-person methods that Unite Here perfected in Arizona under the most trying of circumstances will be vital in upcoming elections if progressives are to succeed in the face of the GOP's increasingly antidemocratic machinations.

When people said they were too hot to walk or drive to the mailbox to send in their ballots, some of the canvassers would offer them bottles of water, fans, even hand-held misters. When they said their vote wouldn't make a difference, the canvassers explained to them just what was at stake. When they couldn't find their ballots, the canvassers helped them contact county election officials to request new ones. When they wanted to vote in person but feared catching Covid, the canvassers offered them face shields. As the election neared, a growing number of low-propensity voters in Maricopa County cast their ballots.

Joseph Silva, the deputy operations director of CASE Action, trawling through the election data on his laptop, estimates that up to 28,000 people that Unite Here's canvassers spoke with voted in 2020 after having sat out the two previous election cycles. Since Biden won the state by less than 11,000 votes, these additional votes

were critical, he says. "If you flip Maricopa County, the rest of the state is going to flip," explains the 32-year-old Silva, who has a BA in history from UCLA and has been a Unite Here staffer in Phoenix since 2017. "We were talking to new voters, young voters, people of color, newly registered voters, a lot of suburban flip voters in more contested areas. But our secret weapon has always been low-turnout voters. And there was no other way to get to them than at their doors."

That urgent message resonated with Unite Here members throughout Arizona and California. "I drove out, took the Cadillac. I got there in September," says Jaime Gomez, a 31-year-old cook sitting in the Garden Grove office of the Unite Here local in Orange County, a 40-mile drive south of the Downtown LA office, and smiling at the memory. Gomez has been the breadwinner for his extended family since his father began suffering from congestive heart failure a few years ago. It has made him understand the precariousness of many families' finances, the closeness to poverty that so many experience on a daily basis.

In 2018, Gomez drove to Arizona to work as a low-level canvasser. In 2020, with more experience under his belt, he was a team leader. Every day at 7 AM, he and the other leaders would caucus via Zoom, going over the canvassing agenda for the day and then sending out their teams.

Two weeks in, he remembers, despite pro-Trumpers at times trying to attack the canvassers on the streets, he felt in his gut that they were on the cusp of something huge. "Oh, man—are we really winning right now?" he remembers thinking. "Are we doing this?" It's a cascading effect, building upon itself," he adds. "Not just talking to people about voting, but about how the pandemic is being handled. People were starting to call in, reach out to us. They wanted to know how they could vote."

By Election Day, he felt it was a done deal. So did Josh Wells. He remembers thinking, "We turned Arizona blue. No one else was willing to go out and talk to people. We went out there, we talked to people, and people changed."

**I**N THE DAYS AFTER THE NOVEMBER election, with most of the networks declaring the result still too close to call, Minato and her team worked on vital vote-curing efforts, following up with people whose ballots were at risk of being discarded

**Making change:**  
Local 11 canvassers at Unite Here headquarters.

**Up to 28,000 Arizonans that Unite Here's canvassers spoke with voted in 2020 after having sat out the two previous election cycles.**

*(continued on page 23)*



# Culture War in the K-12 Classroom



## The Trump-era GOP's insatiable appetite for red-meat issues has led to a wholesale attack on public education.

BY JENNIFER BERKSHIRE

**W**HEN NEW HAMPSHIRE TEACHER MISTY CROMPTON LEARNED that she had become campaign fodder for a local school board race, she says, “I immediately thought of the California privilege teacher.” Crompton is referring to a third-grade teacher in Cupertino, Calif., who became a right-wing-media punching bag after a lesson she’d taught about white privilege went public. “I thought, ‘They’re going to try to tar me with that same brush.’”

Crompton, who has taught middle school social studies in Derry for 21 years, would seem an unlikely target for culture warriors. She hasn’t even taught since August 2020, when she was awarded a paid sabbatical by the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, a prize granted annually to an exceptional teacher in the state. But what Crompton saw as a once-in-a-career opportunity to study success stories from school districts around the country and help New Hampshire become an “equity leader,” conservatives viewed as a nefarious plot.

“Right now, a Derry teacher is training to change our social studies curriculum to teach Critical Race Theory (Marxist ideology) in our schools with no community input,” warned campaign postcards sent to voters in this southern New Hampshire mill town. Then a Republican state representative from Derry, Katherine Prudhomme O’Brien, weighed in, complaining to school board members that Leaders for Just Schools, a program Crompton is part of, was linked to Black Lives Matter. “I know a lot of people

like Black Lives Matter. They don’t realize it’s a Marxist organization,” warned O’Brien, who also invoked the Cambodian genocide.

This spring, New Hampshire has witnessed an extraordinarily acrimonious debate about public education. GOP lawmakers, who took control of the legislature in 2020, have prioritized controversial—and deeply unpopular

legislation, including a sweeping expansion of a program that provides tuition vouchers for private schools and a ban on discussing “divisive concepts,” such as racism or sexism, in the public schools. Crompton, an outspoken opponent of both measures, says, “I became a pawn in the culture war and in the scheme to discredit public schools.”

She isn’t the only one. Fueled by the Trump-era GOP’s insatiable appetite for red-meat issues—and finding fertile ground in a public politically polarized by the pandemic—the culture wars are raging, upending school board races, reshaping local politics, and now threatening public education itself.

Every generation has its “school culture war thing,” says Adam Laats, an education historian at SUNY Binghamton and the author of *The Other School Reformers: Conservative Activism in American Education*. “You see the same combination of national issues and local anxieties—these ‘You won’t believe what we saw in our son’s textbook’ stories surfacing again and again.”

Take the sudden reappearance of concern over socialist indoctrination. Laats points out that a virtually identical panic emerged in the 1950s: “There’s no more Soviet Union, no more [Fidel] Castro, but once again you have this fear of the government taking over that’s this high-anxiety issue.”

But in at least one respect, the current culture war convulsion differs from its antecedents, Laats says. “The big difference is Trump. He provided a center and a symbol for all of these old ideas to coalesce around.”

In the waning days of Trump’s term, the commission he convened to further the cause of “patriotic education” released its long-awaited 1776 Report—a rejoinder to *The New York Times’* 1619 Project. Though widely panned as plagiarized propaganda, the report has also proved to be extraordinarily influential.

“It’s the idea of the past as a refuge,” says Noliwe Rooks, a professor at Cornell University and the author of *Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation, and the End of Public Education*. “The message is ‘Let’s get rid of the parts and the people in public education that we don’t like.’” She sees parallels between the current attacks on critical race theory and the col-

lisions that resulted from the rise of Black studies in the late 1960s. “Students succeeded in forcing changes to curricula and on campus. But that little bit of progress they made around equity and innovative programs resulted in a backlash that destroyed all of that little bit of progress,” Rooks says.

### Divisive Concepts

**I**N THE PAST FEW MONTHS, GOP LAWMAKERS in one state after another have introduced legislation aimed at keeping discussions of social justice out of the classroom. Bills prohibiting the teaching of critical race theory and other “divisive topics” have already passed in Utah, Texas, Oklahoma, and Tennessee and are under consideration in at least 15 other states.



Misty Crompton, a New Hampshire middle school teacher.



**“The message is ‘Let’s get rid of the parts and the people in public education that we don’t like.’”**

—Cornell University professor Noliwe Rooks

Jennifer Berkshire hosts the education podcast *Have You Heard* and is the author, with Jack Schneider, of *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door: The Dismantling of Public Education and the Future of School*.

ILLUSTRATION BY SONIA PULIDO



In Missouri, a proposed amendment sought to outlaw what its author describes as the “erroneous and hate-filled 1619 Project.”

“It said ‘1619 Project,’ but the aim was much broader. It would affect every part of history and literature,” says Jessica Piper, who teaches 11th-grade American literature in Maryville, Mo., a town of 12,000 on the Iowa border.

Piper would seem to be exactly the sort of teacher that legislators around the country are targeting. Her students read Clint Smith’s poem “How to Make a Cardboard Box Disappear in 10 Steps,” with its stark imagery of lives lost to police brutality, as part of a history lesson on racial violence. In 1931, a mob of more than 2,000 Maryville residents lynched a man named Raymond Gunn, burning him to death on top of the local schoolhouse. “There’s no historical marker, so the students didn’t know anything about it,” Piper says. This year, for the first time since she began using the poem in class, a parent complained.

Piper recently decided that this will be her last year in the classroom. She’s running for the state legislature as a Democrat in a long-shot bid to unseat a Republican who, when he last faced an opponent, won by 80 points.

**BLM backlash:** Nationwide protests and calls for a racial justice reckoning have some legislators and school districts on high alert.

In Iowa, as in Missouri, lawmakers have made the culture wars the centerpiece of their legislative agenda. So far this session, legislators have sought to ban transgender student athletes, implement an ideological test for state-funded faculty, and prohibit the teaching of “divisive concepts” at public schools and universities.

“They went with the Trump 1776 agenda,” says Nick Covington, a high school social studies teacher in Ankeny, a city north of Des Moines. “They’re carrying that banner, and it has a chilling effect on everything.”

The bitter aftermath of the presidential election has also roiled the city. Two Ankeny residents were among the participants in the January 6 Capitol attack. And voting on a school funding question in March was disrupted for hours after police found a live pipe bomb at one of the facilities being used as a polling station.

Covington says the deep divisions outside his classroom are increasingly affecting what happens within it. This year he has been the target of repeated complaints from

a small group of parents. The trouble started in January, when Covington streamed live news reports of the Capitol riot in his European history and economics classes. A parent called the school and claimed that Covington had directed students to his personal social media account, where he’d called Trump supporters Nazis, all of which Covington vehemently denies.

This spring, after Covington showed a Vice News report on the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Va., as part of an AP history unit on nationalism in Europe, parents contacted the school board and the superintendent and demanded that he be sanctioned. Though he’d taught the same lesson for three previous years without incident, Covington was ordered by school administrators to stop talking about current events.

“I’m basically waiting for the other shoe to drop,” he says.

## Deep Divide

**T**HE PANDEMIC’S PROFOUND DISRUPTION of public education was already upending state and local politics, as Republicans eagerly capitalized on parents’ frustration over shuttered classrooms. Now the culture wars are further exacerbating this tense climate.

Jessica Piper’s small Missouri town recently saw the emergence of its first-ever PAC: Northern Missouri Citizens for Reflective Government. The group, which backed conservative candidates for local offices, put most of its energy into attacking an education professor who was running for a seat on the school board in Maryville. Ominous campaign ads depicted Jill Baker, a former schoolteacher, posed between cutouts of Joe Biden and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, spouting anti-Trump sentiments and stressing the importance of teaching social justice in elementary schools. She lost in a landslide.

In Elmbrook, Wis., the Waukesha County Republican Party recently threw its weight behind James Gunsalus, a first-time school board candidate who claimed that Covid was no more serious than the flu. According to Gunsalus, Elmbrook’s schools, long among the highest-ranked in Wisconsin, were in free fall as teachers embraced “leftist indoctrination” over academic content, teaching students that “all white people are racist” and that “some people must be censored or canceled.” He lost by only 5 percent of the vote against an incumbent, coming within 600 votes of victory.

In the North Texas community of Southlake, a fast-growing and rapidly diversifying city near



Nick Covington, an Iowa high school social studies teacher.



**“Lawmakers went with the Trump 1776 agenda. They’re carrying that banner, and it has a chilling effect on everything.”**

—Nick Covington

Dallas, candidates for the school board, the city council, and mayor, backed by a PAC opposing the school district's efforts to incorporate more cultural awareness into the curriculum, all captured around 70 percent of the vote. "Southlake Says No to Woke Education," proclaimed a *Wall Street Journal* headline.

"Every single right-wing person that ran won," says Megan Walsh, who graduated from a local high school in 2017 and is a leader in the Southlake Anti-Racism Coalition, a community group whose advocacy inspired the adoption of the Cultural Competency Action Plan, which the winning candidates have pledged to eliminate. "We're back to square one."

## Pandemic Fallout

**M**UNICIPAL RACES THAT ONCE TURNED ON hyper-local issues have been politicized and nationalized by right-wing culture warriors. But the long reach of the pandemic is at work here too. Debates over diversity plans and critical race theory are further dividing communities that were already split over the response to Covid.

"It's all morphing into the same thing," says Lindsay Love, a school board member in Chandler, Ariz. The first Black board member elected there, Love has been a frequent target of conservative activists and received death threats for her position that schools should remain closed until Covid levels

dropped. "You hear people comparing children being masked to slavery and referring to mask supporters as Marxists," Love says.

"You have lost [the] trust of parents," declared a furious father at a recent board meeting. "Mask mandates, forcing vaccines, canceling prom, limiting graduation, critical race theory. The list goes on. When is enough enough?"

The school culture wars came early to this part of Arizona. After the district adopted a new program that

included training teachers on race and equity issues, conservative parents revolted, charging that the equity training "marginalizes white people." Tucker Carlson has devoted two segments to Chandler.

"Chandler is getting more diverse, and they don't like that," Love says.

Love worries that the culture wars could end up undermining Arizona's public schools. The state's GOP lawmakers are attempting to enact a massive expansion of the state's school voucher program—even though voters overwhelmingly rejected a similar effort just two years ago. Under the proposed measure, two-thirds of students in Arizona would be eligible to use state funding to pay to attend private and religious schools. "There's this constant refrain that our schools are broken, that they're liberal indoctrination camps. It feeds into this push to get parents to opt out of the public schools," Love says.

Arizona lawmakers recently approved their own ban on teaching controversial issues. The Unbiased Teaching Act prohibits teachers in the state's public and charter schools from talking about racism or sexism in the classroom. Teachers who disregard the ban can be fined up to \$5,000. **N**

(continued from page 19)

because they had filled out a line incorrectly or had a signature on the form that didn't quite match the one in the county's files. Gomez says that he helped 10 voters cure their ballots. With hundreds of Unite Here canvassers helping to cure several ballots each, a whole heap of votes ended up being counted that would have been discarded otherwise, in a state ultimately decided by 10,457 votes.

On November 10, when it became clear that her work in Arizona was done, Minato, along with hundreds of other LA organizers, left. Largely under the radar, courting a minimum of publicity, they had helped craft one of 2020's most extraordinary political stories. They had developed a template for how, with the right kind of organizing and outreach, solidly red states around the country—even those with a long history of voter suppression efforts—could be turned blue.

After a brief spell back in Los Angeles, many of these canvassers headed east again, this time to Georgia. As the Senate runoff races there intensified, the canvasser-activists once again played a crucial, albeit out-of-the-spotlight, role.

"I feel honored I was able to do that," says Chris Smith, a 52-year-old African American man with a shaved head and a baritone voice. Born in Virginia and raised in New York, Smith, who works a series of unionized

bartender jobs at stadiums around the LA area, spent nearly eight weeks between November and January canvassing in Georgia, with 15 of his family members and friends, as part of the Unite Here team. "I feel like I got away with something," he says. "I wasn't supposed to have a voice. And I did it. It's amazing to have that voice."

On the Sunday after the November election, a triumphant Ana Diaz got into her Toyota Ventr and made her way from Arizona back to Los Angeles. As she drove through the desert, she cried with happiness. "I was so proud of myself. We had made a change. My kids called to congratulate me: 'We won! I'm so proud of you!'" Shortly after returning to LA, she packed her bags again, hopped a flight east, and, like Smith, settled into work in Georgia. Unite Here's skills at canvassing in a pandemic, combined with Stacey Abrams and Fair Fight's extraordinary ability to register and activate new voters, were instrumental in tipping the balance toward Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff in the Peach State's Senate contests.

"It's been one of the best experiences of my life," Diaz says. "It's a chapter I want to keep adding to, a chapter I hope never ends. You're out there for a purpose, out there for a reason. You're changing the world."

Marilyn Wilbur, who also headed to Georgia for two months after her work in Arizona was done, agrees. And, she says, so does her son, whose autism was once thought by doctors to be so severe that he would never speak. Now, she says, he tells people that "my mom goes around from place to place, state to state, and she saves the world." For Wilbur, there's no greater validation. "It makes my heart feel elated. To him, I'm a superhero. We've shown what the power of coming together can do. We helped people show they wanted a change, helped people realize they have a voice, that they count. Wow, we did it. I was part of it. We just helped make history." **N**

**Unite Here's skills at canvassing in a pandemic were crucial to tipping the balance in Georgia's Senate contests.**



**Lindsay Love**, the first Black school board member in Chandler, Ariz.

# Racism in Wall Street's Ranks

The dangers of working while Black  
in the cutthroat world of finance.

BY SUSAN ANTILLA

THE NATION 6.28-7.5.2021

**A**T 3:30 AM ON A WARM FALL MORNING IN 2009, GLENN D. Capel, a stockbroker at Merrill Lynch, was speeding down the Interstate in his Lexus LS 400 from his home in Greensboro, N.C., toward Candor, 75 miles away. A half-hour earlier, his 84-year-old mother had called from her home in the rural town and said that her heart felt “heavy” and that she had pain going down her left arm. “I’m on my way,” he had told her.

In the cardiologist’s office hours later, Capel stepped outside the room where his mother was being monitored to check his voice mail before the 9:30 AM opening of the stock market. It was then that he was dealt the day’s second blow.

“Your services will no longer be required,” said his boss, Darby Henley Jr., in a message that had landed around 8:30 AM. The personal items in his office would be boxed and sent to his home, the boss said.

“I went through a number of feelings, from shock, sadness, disappointment, and anger, and finally I cried,” remembers Capel, who was one of only two Black brokers at Merrill in North Carolina.

Three years earlier, Capel had added his name to a class-action racial discrimination lawsuit against Merrill, which he now believes put a target on his back. At the time, only 2 percent of Merrill’s brokers nationwide were Black. With the

ILLUSTRATION BY ADRIÀ FRUITÓS





## Instead of responding openly and potentially nipping racism in the bud, companies often play hardball with those who complain.

*This story was reported in partnership with Type Investigations with support from the Puffin Foundation.*

**Race and reprisal:** A Black Deutsche Bank employee's attempt to complain about racist treatment resulted in a written warning—to the employee.

of the firm's brokers—also known as financial advisers—grew only 2.5 percentage points over those 26 years.

The most meaningful industry changes over the past year have come on the heels of intense public pressure. In April, the giant asset manager BlackRock caved to the demands of the Service Employees International Union and agreed to begin a “racial equity audit” in 2022 that would analyze the company’s “impacts on non-white stakeholders and communities of color.” It already had been under a thick cloud of bad press over how it treated its Black employees.

Whether sincere or motivated by image concerns, Wall Street’s heightened passion for addressing the racism in its midst has opened an important conversation about recruitment, promotion, and pay policies in one of the nation’s most lucrative businesses. Missing from the dialogue so far, though, are some key questions: When racism does occur, how do firms treat Black employees who complain? And what happens to Black people when they take their complaints to arbitration or to court?

There’s no doubt other people of color face racism and mistreatment in financial firms, but in light of the industry’s public pronouncements supporting the values of the Black Lives Matter movement, *The Nation* and Type Investigations

firing of Capel, a onetime star broker who boasted two master’s degrees and a pristine regulatory record with no customer complaints, Merrill’s already meager tally of Black brokers was further reduced.

Capel says the company fired him because he allowed a client to pay a \$262 hotel bill in violation of a rule that limited gifts from clients to a value of \$100, though he tried to pay the difference. Henley did not respond to requests

for comment on the firing.

A month after Capel was dismissed, Merrill sent a document to securities regulators that said he had been terminated for—in all caps—“DISHONESTY.”

And, just like that, his career in financial services was extinguished.

More than a decade later, Capel is still out of work, but Wall Street is vowing to change. In the wake of last summer’s unrest, Merrill parent Bank of America and other giant financial institutions rushed to make commitments to racial justice and in several cases broke an industry-wide silence, releasing statistics that exposed the paucity of Black people and other minorities in their workforces. Merrill, for instance, revealed in August that 780 of its 17,500 brokers are Black, a figure of 4.5 percent. That’s a 125 percent increase since 1994, when 2 percent of its brokerage force was Black. But in an industry with sparse Black representation, it is easy to double or even triple a minority group’s numbers. More illuminating is that the Black segment

chose to focus specifically on the treatment of Black workers. In every complaint or lawsuit we investigated, we also sought employers’ responses, though in some cases they declined to comment.

We scoured court records looking for patterns in how firms handled grievances; spoke with academics, employment lawyers, and other experts; and mined a public database kept by a securities regulator to see how Black people fared in closed-door arbitration—forced on many Wall Street workers to protect their employers from public exposure in court.

What we found is that financial firms go to great lengths to keep complaints of racial discrimination quiet and push complainers out the door. Instead of responding openly and potentially nipping racism in the bud, companies often play hardball with those who complain. Black people who are forced to use Wall Street’s arbitration system face bleak prospects: Our analysis of 32 years of data shows that among 31 Black people who filed racism complaints, one settled and only two prevailed.

**N**EW COURT CASES KEEP COMING. IN one, filed in New Hampshire Superior Court in December, Elizabeth S. Evans, a Black Latinx woman who worked at Fidelity Investments, depicted an atmosphere of rampant racism and sexism at the firm’s complex in Merrimack, N.H. Her suit described white male colleagues who said that slavery was great for the US economy, that Black people “give

### Deutsche Bank



To: Joan Reid-Williams  
From: Rudy Gerlich  
CC: Sharon Wilson  
Subject: Written Warning  
Date: 8/16/2012

This memo serves as a warning regarding your conduct which has recently come to our attention following a complaint and investigation concerning your interaction with colleagues in the Control Room. The Bank has determined that your behavior towards, and manner in which you communicate with, your colleagues is contributing significantly to a destructive atmosphere in the Control Room. We understand that you have been disrespectful and at times can be rude and condescending in your communication style, occasionally raising your voice and unilaterally shutting down dialogue. You appear to have difficulty engaging in professional disagreements, followed by periods where you refuse to engage with your peers.

Your disrespect towards your peers has been apparent and, indeed, you have referred to your colleagues as “incompetent.” We understand that you have more experience than some of your colleagues and that you believe your skills are superior. However, your insistence on treating your colleagues with disdain and discounting their contribution is unprofessional and unacceptable.

As an example, you e-mailed a colleague on a Saturday afternoon, questioning his approach about a work matter and offering to discuss it on Monday. On Monday, however, you did not approach him about it despite the fact that he sat in the cubicle next to you. Rather, you e-mailed him at 4:20 pm reminding him you needed a response and “offering” to escalate the matter to me. When you disagreed with his response, which you believed mischaracterized your prior communications, you accused him of lying and complained that he considered you his “equal.” Although your analysis was substantively correct, this became a much more difficult situation than it needed to be due to your failure to work with your colleague in a professional manner.



cops a reason to get shot,” and that women were “gold diggers” and “bitches.” She quit in 2018. The case was settled earlier this year.

Fidelity senior vice president Vincent Loporchio said the firm investigates and takes “prompt and appropriate action” when complaints like Evans’s are raised.

But Evans, who in her first year on the job was praised as “very quick to learn and master her work,” said she had complained of her colleagues’ disrespect and mistreatment repeatedly before she resigned in exasperation. Despite her complaints about one colleague’s behavior, Fidelity promoted him in 2017, and he became her boss. Loporchio said that, after an investigation, Fidelity found Evans’s internal complaint to be “without merit.”

At Morgan Stanley, just days after CEO James P. Gorman garnered praise last June for making a public commitment to diversity, the firm’s former global chief diversity officer, a Black woman named Marilyn Booker, filed a lawsuit in Brooklyn federal court saying the firm had fired her in late 2019 after she pushed to establish a program to help Black brokers. Booker, who graduated magna cum laude from Spelman College, has a law degree and received 17 awards for her diversity leadership over the years. Among the bleak statistics she cited in her complaint was that no one on the firm’s then 16-member operating committee was Black until Gorman added a Black woman in the wake of George Floyd’s murder.

Under pressure from New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer to release previously confidential diversity statistics, Morgan Stanley revealed in November that 2.2 percent of its executives, senior officials, and managers and 2.4 percent of its sales workers were Black in 2018.

that Booker had filed sensationalized allegations that had nothing to do with the way she was treated during her “26 years of success” at the firm. In May, the two sides agreed to dismiss the lawsuit, which typically means there was a settlement. Through her lawyer, Booker declined to comment.

Apart from resending Morgan Stanley’s June statement, Delaney declined to comment on four pages of questions about the Booker case; the firm’s arbitration policies; its handling of internal complaints of racial discrimination; and a class-action racial discrimination case that it had settled with its former brokers.

When Black people speak up, the blowback can be brutal. Joan Reid-Williams, a Black woman who worked in the New York City control room at Deutsche Bank, said in documents filed in New York State Supreme Court that she’d complained to management that two coworkers were making racist and disparaging comments to her. But the ensuing investigation resulted in a written warning to Williams rather than to the colleagues allegedly making the racist comments. The firm wrote her up for violations that included setting her cell phone ring volume too high and being rude. She settled with the bank in 2014. Her attorney, Derek Sells, declined to comment on the case, as did Deutsche Bank spokesman Dan Watson.

As Reid-Williams learned, internal investigations can easily harm a complainant. But it’s impossible to say how often that happens, because these probes are typically performed confidentially. Our research revealed only one example of public data on the outcome of an internal racism complaint at a brokerage firm—in the court docket of the class-action suit in which Capel was a named plaintiff. During the exchange of documents between Merrill and the brokers in that case, Merrill revealed that employees had filed 60 formal racism complaints between 2001 and 2008. Only three were found to have merit.

Frank Paré, a Black financial planner of 16 years and former president of the Financial Planning Association, didn’t hesitate

In response to our inquiry, Morgan Stanley managing director Mary Claire Delaney cited a company statement from June 2020: It would “vigorously defend” itself and “strongly” rejected Booker’s allegations.

“We are steadfast in our commitment to improve the diversity of our employees and have made steady progress—while recognizing that we have further progress to make,” the statement reads, and adds that Morgan Stanley would continue its “high priority efforts to achieve a more diverse and inclusive firm.”

In March, Morgan Stanley filed court papers saying

**Edifice of exclusion:** Merrill Lynch’s offices in Greensboro, N.C., where a onetime star broker was unceremoniously ousted under dubious terms.

**Morgan Stanley revealed under pressure that only 2.2 percent of its executives, senior officials, and managers were Black.**



FINANCIAL INDUSTRY REGULATORY AUTHORITY  
OFFICE OF HEARING OFFICERS

In the Matter of the Arbitration  
Between  
GLENN CAPEL,

Claimant,

No.

Far from filling out the Form in the way that it told Capel it would do, Merrill Lynch instead reported that at the time of termination, Capel was under internal review for fraud or wrongful taking of property, or violating investment-related statutes, regulations, rules or industry standards of conduct. (Exhibit 1 at 3.) It also falsely wrote in Section 3 (i.e., the "Full Termination" section) of Capel's Form U5 that he was discharged for "DISHONESTY." (Exhibit 1 at 2.)

when asked how he would advise a Black broker who was thinking about lodging an internal complaint. "I'd tell them to start looking for another job," he said.

Racism exists in every industry, of course. But on Wall Street, where the potential earning power is vast, Black people face formidable barriers. They make up 13 percent of the US workforce, but they occupy only 2.9 percent of the industry's financial adviser jobs, according to a January report by Cerulli Associates. Those who manage to get jobs can wind up losing them after enduring racist remarks, managers who deny them privileges enjoyed by their white colleagues, and social isolation that is both painful and distracting. The financial industry is a sharp-elbowed business that requires a thick skin to survive, but the brutality aimed at Black people exacts a different kind of toll. Capel and his colleagues gave an example of the day-to-day degradation in their complaint: A Merrill Lynch manager was photographing his brokers for a bulletin board display and suggested to a Black broker that he needn't have his photo taken. "I can find your picture down at the precinct," the manager quipped.

**Shades of Kafka:**  
Glenn D. Capel's  
finance career  
evaporated following  
inscrutable allegations  
of impropriety.

**O**N HIS DESK AT MERRILL LYNCH'S OFFICE IN GREENSBORO, Capel once displayed a treasured award: a foot-long pewter statue of a charging bull sporting a brass Merrill Lynch nameplate. "You know the big Merrill Lynch bull?" he asks. "Well, I won the bull." Capel says he racked up the most assets under management in the firm's 1999 training program, which earned him the pewter prize.

Prior to the falling-out with Merrill, Capel's had been a classic American success story. He was raised on a tobacco and hog farm in rural North Carolina, where his father was a steelworker at an Alcoa aluminum plant.

Capel says he was an honor roll student at East Montgomery High School in Biscoe, N.C., where he was cocaptain of the football team. He landed a sports scholarship at

North Carolina State and had aspirations to be an NFL linebacker, but when his father had a massive heart attack in his sophomore year, Capel took a year off to go home and take care of his family. He later earned a bachelor's degree in business communications and master's degrees in business and health care administration.

As much as he loved football, for years he'd dreamed of becoming a stockbroker. In his teens, he read *Bottom Line*, a business magazine his father subscribed to, and became intrigued with the idea of working on Wall Street.

But when Capel got his big break as a broker at Merrill Lynch's Greensboro location, he quickly got a taste of the bosses' seeming disdain for Black people's success. "When I'd get a sizable account, management was always asking, 'How did you get that account?'" he says.

He said he made Merrill's President's Club in his second year on the job, and he and 75 other brokers in his region got a free trip to a posh hotel in Quebec. It was not the celebratory time he'd expected. Capel knew some of the other brokers, but he was the only Black person in the crowd, and no one socialized with him. To pass the time while others partied, he escaped to the hotel's workout room and lifted weights. It all takes a toll, he says. "The suffering, the social distancing, the isolation, is very hurtful."

**C**APEL AND THE OTHER PLAINTIFFS in *McReynolds v. Merrill Lynch* wound up settling in 2013, with Merrill paying \$160 million to end the litigation. But the public relations hit was just as damaging. Fearful of that type of fallout, Wall Street has long fought for the right to force arbitration on customers and employees. Financial firms won key Supreme Court battles in the 1980s and '90s that the industry has relied on to keep most of its civil rights disputes under wraps.

Today, most major investment banks require employees to agree to arbitration—a policy that the rest of corporate America has admired and copied. Goldman Sachs, UBS, and Edward D. Jones are among those who have fought and won when employees tried to pursue civil rights claims in court.

But few have gone to the extremes of Morgan Stanley, which has faced multiple racism complaints by Black former employees. In 2015, the firm sent e-mails to 36,000 workers that required them to respond to the company and opt out of a new mandatory arbitration policy if they wanted to retain the right to sue in court. The message included no hint of time sensitivity or importance in its subject line, and many employees said they didn't recall receiving it. In the end, more than 30,000

**The financial industry requires a thick skin to survive, but the brutality aimed at Black people exacts a different kind of toll.**

employees failed to opt out, including several Black brokers who would later be forced into private arbitration.

**B**ROKERS USE SEVERAL ARBITRATION forums for employee disputes, including the commercial operations at the American Arbitration Association and JAMS. The two forums release only bare-bones information about their awards, but the public can get a fuller picture of how Black people fare in arbitration from the Wall Street-funded Financial Industry Regulatory Authority. Along with its role as a regulator, FINRA also runs an arbitration program for its members and offers an online database where the public can use keywords to search records of final awards dating back to 1988.

We searched that database using a number of terms, including “race,” “racism,” “racist,” “African American,” and “Black.” We got hundreds of results, many of which had nothing to do with a racism claim and some of which were racism claims by other minority groups. We wound up with a list of 31 cases in which we were certain that the complainants were Black.

Only two of those Black complainants, or 6.4 percent, won their claims. Another complainant settled. In two other cases, the arbitrators denied the racism claims but awarded damages on other grounds, including retaliation.

I did a similar search of that database looking for sexual harassment and hostile environment cases in 2018 and unearthed what I then considered extreme results: Among 97 cases brought by women and decided by FINRA arbitrators, only 17 complainants won, or 18 percent. (Men who brought sexual harassment cases won 29 percent of the time.) I’ve reported on Wall Street civil rights cases since the mid-1990s and wrote a book about sexual harassment in finance, *Tales From the Boom-Boom Room*. Gender discrimination was and remains a serious issue in the industry, but when it comes to arbitration, Black people fare much worse by comparison.

Another striking takeaway is how little the nature of racism allegations by Black people on Wall Street has changed over the years.

In the past decade, Black brokers at Edward D. Jones, Wells Fargo, and JPMorgan accused their bosses of assigning them to the least lucrative locations. (In March, Edward D. Jones

reached a \$34 million settlement with Black brokers who had sued the firm.) Black brokers at Morgan Stanley alleged in a 2015 lawsuit that they were left out when management distributed the accounts of departing salespeople. A Black broker at JPMorgan said in a 2018 filing that he was interested in working at several desirable locations, but a manager said they wouldn’t be a good “fit” for him because of his ethnicity. (Harlem would be a better fit, he says they told him.)

Those cases don’t sound much different from the racism complaints filed at FINRA a quarter-century ago. Back in 1993, Stephen Collins, a broker at Great Northern Insurance Annuity Corp., complained that his bosses told him he didn’t project an image that clients could accept and assigned him to a mostly Black area of Pittsburgh. Great Northern said Collins was terminated because he failed a securities licensing exam by a significant margin. He lost his case in 1994.

Merrill Lynch broker Anthony H. Hoskins said he was told in the early 1990s that he didn’t “fit the typical Merrill Lynch broker profile” and “wasn’t what Merrill Lynch was looking for.” He lost his case. FINRA arbitration is “controlled by the industry for the industry,” he said in an interview with *The Nation*. “How are you gonna win?”

FINRA keeps the legal papers filed in arbitration cases under lock and key, but every so often the details become public, either because a claimant files in court despite an arbitration agree-

ment or because a firm strikes back in the courts after losing.

Both of those factors were at work in the racial and gender discrimination case that broker Cindy R. Davis brought in 1994 against Shearson Lehman Brothers. Davis, one of the two Black people we found who won their FINRA cases, filed a complaint in federal court, but Shearson successfully fought to have it moved to arbitration. After Davis won, Shearson went to court to ask that part of the award be vacated.

That opened the door for Davis to file a public response that exposed damning arbitration testimony. Davis’s branch manager, Glenn Dropkin, was a defendant in the case, and Davis’s lawyer asked Dropkin’s boss whether there could be any evidence strong enough to bring him around to believing Davis over Dropkin. “If you received information that Mr. Dropkin had called Ms. Davis a n\*\*\*\*r and there were witnesses present who confirmed it, would you believe it?” her lawyer asked. The boss’s answer was no.

**O**N JULY 14, 2006, GLENN CAPEL AWOKED AT 6 AM AND DID WHAT HE DOES every morning: He prayed, took a shower, and got dressed to go to the Merrill Lynch office five miles away. He was feeling a bit anxious as he pulled into a parking space. He stopped at the newsstand in the lobby, picked up a half-dozen copies of that day’s *New York Times*, and took the elevator to the fourth floor, where he had a prized office overlooking a pond that drew flocks of swans and ducks.

Capel had agreed to speak with the *Times* about the historic racial discrimination

## Racism in Wall Street’s Ranks



**A JPMorgan manager told a Black broker he wouldn’t be a good “fit” for several desirable locations because of his ethnicity.**

lawsuit that had been filed the previous November—one he would soon join as a named plaintiff. In the story, he was quoted saying that it had been “a lonely struggle” being the only Black person among 40 brokers at the branch. His photo was in the business section.

He closed the door to his office to read the paper. Soon there was a knock on his door. His boss, Henley, and a compliance manager entered the room. He recalls Henley asking, “How could you do this to us?” and adding that the entire office was on pins and needles because Capel had complained publicly.

For over an hour they were encamped in Capel’s office, haranguing him with questions and comments. When they finally left, Capel made his way out to his car, figuring he’d have a late lunch after an emotional morning.

That’s when he saw the shattered glass of his car windows scattered all

over the parking lot. He called the police and his insurance company and then decided to call it a day at 2 P.M.

He was at home with his wife and two kids a few days later when the phone rang. He didn’t recognize the voice, but he will never forget what he heard. “You and your family need to be careful,” the man said, and then hung up.

William P. Halldin, a spokesman for Bank of America, which purchased Merrill in 2008, said the firm takes complaints of discrimination or inappropriate behavior very seriously and has a comprehensive process for filing and investigating such

reports. He added that the firm was “not in a position to comment on things that allegedly were said 11 years ago or more and haven’t previously been reported to us.” Henley, who is now an executive at Truist Investment Services in Charlotte, did not respond to e-mails and voice mails seeking comment.

Capel began keeping the upsetting details from his wife because he didn’t want to add to her stress. But the pressure eventually undermined their marriage. Choking back tears, he says that his wife told him, “I don’t have the thick skin you have. I don’t think I can go through this.”

They got a divorce. He gave his keys to his mortgage company “and walked away from the house” in Greensboro because he couldn’t make the payments. Today he splits the rent on an Annapolis townhouse with a fellow church member.

Making up for some of his pain was the \$250,000 award for being a named plaintiff in the lawsuit, plus the “more than a million” dollars for his individual claim. That’s a substantial amount of money by most standards, and Capel was grateful for it. But to a man who grew up on a tobacco farm in North Carolina and then worked his way to success on Wall Street, the journey has been particularly painful, and the settlement money he received at 50 doesn’t match the revenue he’s lost over the past 11 years. “My best earning years have been taken away from me,” he says.

In 2019, he managed to get Merrill to delete the reference to “dishonesty” in his industry records, arguing successfully to a panel of FINRA arbitrators that Merrill had defamed him.

Even with the damning reference removed, he fears that his role as a leader in a high-

profile class-action suit lingers as a threat to his career. Capel says he’s sent out well over 100 job applications since his firing. When we met in February near his Maryland home, I asked whether he’d thought about pursuing a job outside of the brokerage industry. He paused for a moment, Googled his name on his iPhone, and leaned over to show me the results: The third entry under his name was the *New York Times* article about the class-action racial discrimination case that had featured his photo and remarks. “Employers look and they say, ‘This guy’s very talented on paper, but is he a troublemaker?’”

**C**APEL’S STORY DIDN’T HAVE TO END that way. But multiple obstacles would have to be overcome to change the system that has ruined his Wall Street career and those of many of his Black peers.

Regulators would need to play a more aggressive role. To some degree, that is already in the works at the Securities and Exchange Commission, where President Joe Biden has appointed a new chair, Gary Gensler, who took office in April and is sympathetic to so-called ESG (environmental, social, and corporate governance) matters. His predecessor, acting chair Allison Herren Lee, had made clear in a public statement as commissioner last year that she thought that more rigorous disclosures on climate change and diversity issues were warranted. So far, though, the agency has focused mostly on climate change. If the SEC wanted to take a stronger stance on racism, it could require that companies disclose a tally of their internal racism

complaints each year and reveal whether investigations found for or against the employee.

At the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Biden’s new chair, Charlotte Burrows, is seeking to undo some of the damage caused by her Trump-appointed predecessor, filling open jobs and putting a renewed focus on systemic discrimination cases. Even so, the agency has brought few big cases against Wall Street firms. In an interview in the fall, before she was named EEOC chair, then Commissioner Burrows told me that cases filed against financial companies compete with those brought by employees in less lucrative industries who can’t afford a lawyer. In late April, *USA Today* revealed that the EEOC itself

**If the SEC wanted to take a stronger stance on racism, it could require employers to disclose a tally of their internal racism complaints.**

## Racism in Wall Street’s Ranks



was being accused of racism by its Black employees in Dallas, prompting Burrows to order a review of the allegation.

As a self-regulatory organization for the financial industry, FINRA has been mute about its members' settlements of alleged egregious civil rights violations over the years—and remains so. A spokesperson did not respond to specific questions as to whether FINRA might have the authority to pursue discrimination cases, but noted that its focus is on “investor protection and market integrity.”

FINRA's own officials, however, have made comments in adjudicatory documents that suggest racism cases would be well within its reach. In cases heard by its Office of Hearing Officers and National Adjudicatory Council during the past five years, FINRA officials have said that its rules provide broad authority over members “even against unethical conduct that may not be unlawful,” including “unethical, business-related conduct,” regardless of whether it involves a security.

Bill Singer, a veteran Wall Street lawyer in New York, says FINRA thus far has not prosecuted racism cases despite its broad authority. “I would argue that by not prosecuting it, FINRA is condoning it,” he says.

On April 29, FINRA published a notice seeking comment on any aspects of its rules and processes that might create “unintended barriers” to greater diversity in the industry.

The positive efforts are a start, but they are not game-changers for Black people who are subject to unresponsive or punitive complaint systems at work.

In February, two former BlackRock employees—Essma Bengabsia, an Arab American woman, and Mugi Nguyai, a Black man—published an open letter to the firm's CEO asking BlackRock to fix its internal investigations process and publicly disclose a tally of employee complaints in its diversity, equity, and inclusion report. BlackRock sent a memo to employees on March 2 saying that it would set up a separate team to improve its investigations process. It is the only reform we could find that attempts to address the flaws of a complaint system.

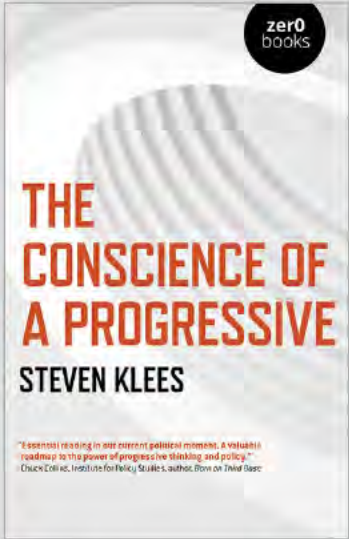
A sign of real change would be if the failures of industry leaders to reckon with racism in their ranks took a meaningful toll on their reputations. That has yet to happen.

Morgan Stanley, for example, has been the target of multiple lawsuits—including the one by Marilyn Booker—and has employed strong-arm tactics to force arbitration on its employees. Yet, even with racial justice at the front of the public's mind, this history has not tarnished the company's image as an industry leader.

In December, CEO Gorman landed on a *Bloomberg Businessweek* list of the 50 people who defined 2020, a rarefied roster that included Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, racial justice activist Colin Kaepernick, and infectious disease official Anthony Fauci. A full magazine page devoted to Gorman lauded him for his takeover prowess and Morgan Stanley's high stock price. A member of the firm's board called him “one of the great CEOs, not just in banking but one of the great CEOs, period.”

Even in the year of George Floyd's murder, the firm's civil rights failings didn't get so much as a mention. **N**

*Susan Antilla is an award-winning investigative journalist and author who has written about employment discrimination and investor fraud for publications including The New York Times, Bloomberg, and The Intercept.*



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## To Our Readers

One year ago, millions of people took to the streets, demanding justice amid an epidemic of police brutality and white supremacy, against the backdrop of a public health crisis that has taken the lives of more than 500,000 Americans. *The Nation* stood with them, providing the deep reporting and incisive analysis to help move the country to action. Elie Mystal, our justice correspondent, elucidated the ways racism seeps into the fabric of our country; Dave Zirin reported on the intersections of race, class, and gender in sports; Courtney E. Martin wrote about raising an anti-racist family; and Alyssa Oursler and Anna DalCortivo amplified the voices of organizers in Minneapolis.

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# The Past Has a Future

*Raoul Peck's world*

BY ED MORALES



OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS, RAOUL PECK has emerged as one of his generation's leading filmmakers and intellectuals. Beginning with *Lumumba* and *Sometimes in April*, his unflinching examinations of the assassination of

Patrice Lumumba in 1961 and the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Peck has shown us the horrors of late-stage decolonization and postcolonialism. With his last two feature films, *I Am Not Your Negro*, about James Baldwin, and *The Young Karl Marx*, he produced startlingly original and moving portraits of two of his main muses, setting the stage for his latest work, an epic four-part docuseries for HBO, *Exterminate All the Brutes*.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO

For Peck, each of his films is as much a vehicle for political argument and posing philosophical questions as it is a way to offer alternative historical narratives. Even as he attempts to reinvent the documentary genre through innovative storytelling, employing a kind of dreamlike melancholy akin to jazz improvisation, as he did in *Negro*, he is a formalist committed to inventing new cinematographic modes. Although he built his career by assuming the role of journalistic or directorial objectivity and prefers to show rather than tell, he's unafraid to step out from behind the camera and challenge the underpinnings of those Western myths that shaped his education and continue to define so much of contemporary political life.

With *Exterminate All the Brutes*, a hybrid documentary that combines rare archival footage, stunning still photography, first-person narration, and scripted, harrowing set-pieces, Peck embraces formalistic play and experiment in a way he hasn't in the past, successfully merging feature-film-style vignettes with documentarian flourishes of text, image, and collage. The series' four hour-long episodes—"The Disturbing Confidence of Ignorance"; "Who the F\*\*\* Is Columbus?"; "Killing at a Distance or... How I Thoroughly Enjoyed the Outing"; and "The Bright Colors of Fascism"—do not so much focus on themes as use them as jumping-off points that allow Peck and his characters to riff on the jagged edges of colonialism, slavery, the mass displacement and destruction of Native Americans, and the normalization of genocide. While this might seem an impossibly broad task, Peck makes his nonlinear lament work, the coherent force residing in its investigation of memory and a precise distillation of visual and aural affect.

**B**y turns deeply disturbing, engagingly personal, and darkly amusing, *Exterminate All the Brutes* is a sweeping journey across time and continents. The series takes its title from a book by Sven Lindqvist, who used the famous line—scrawled at the bottom of a report to an ivory trading company by an increasingly deranged Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—to launch his own ruminations on the colonial mindset. In his preface, Lindqvist tells his readers that these words were intended by Conrad to describe what was really behind the "civilizing task of the white man in Africa"—that is, identifying "inferior races" for destruction. For Lindqvist, this horror show of genocidal violence was carried out on four continents before coming home to roost with "Hitler's destruction of six million Jews in Europe." Peck's project embraces the grand scope of this past, but he also keeps his viewers focused on its legacy today.

Peck establishes this line of inquiry early in the first episode, when he directs the viewer's attention to three themes that he

will return to again and again: civilization, colonization, and extermination. These are central parts, he argues, of the world's Westernization. The essence of colonialism is a belief in a civilizing project that celebrates the beneficence of a superior race in its subjugation of inferiors, which often entails mass murder and displacement. For this reason, Conrad—before introducing Kurtz's unambiguous call for extermination—has Marlow recall the text of report that Kurtz was writing: "We whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might of a deity,' and so on, and so on."

For the typical HBO viewer, Peck's frankness about violence and colonialism might be difficult to comprehend, though the increasing recognition of the structural nature of racism gives it a kind of inevitable logic. Peck offers us three authors as his guides: Lindqvist, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. In Lindqvist, a longtime friend and collaborator and the rare "European who dares see the beast for what it is," Peck finds a world traveler doggedly uncovering the excesses of genocidal violence. In Dunbar-Ortiz, the author of *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, he finds a scholar of Native American history who has focused much of her work—especially *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment*—on the use of guns and slave patrols to displace and discipline Native and African Americans.

As a fellow Haitian, Peck finds in Trouillot's classic work of historiography, *Silencing the Past*, a reflection of his own frustration with Haiti's marginalization and the more general silencing of those

who resisted their extermination. A book that seeks to reveal how historians often erased the Haitian Revolution, "the only revolution that materialized the idea of enlightenment, freedom, fraternity and equality for all," *Silencing the Past* also gives Peck a rallying catchphrase: "History is the fruit of power; whoever wins in the end gets to frame the story." Peck embraces Trouillot's assertion that erasing the Haitian Revolution was essential to the modern Western historical narrative, even if many historians denied that fact. The revolution "created the possible," Peck notes, by playing an important role in the collapse of the system of slavery. "It was the ultimate test of the universalist pretensions of both the French and American revolutions."

**E**xterminate *All the Brutes* begins by exploring the mindless brutality of the colonial project. We are introduced to a leader of the Seminole Nation (played by Caisa Ankarsparre) and Gen. Sidney Jessup, one of Andrew Jackson's henchmen (played by Josh Hartnett), and follow them as the Seminole leader seeks to hold on to territory she shares with Maroons. When Jessup stops her in the middle of a field, she confronts him bluntly: "You call human beings property? You steal land, you steal life, you steal humans? What kind of species are you?" Jessup replies, "This kind," and then pulls out a gun and shoots her.

The camera pulls away from her in silence, and Peck later explains why: "Our job as filmmakers is to deconstruct these silences." At the end of the second episode, he embellishes a graphic rendering of Choctaw people dying in snowdrifts with a quote from Tocqueville, who witnessed the Trail of Tears: "No crying. All were silent." A cringe-worthy sequence focusing on a photo shoot of the journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley and his enslaved adopted child Kalulu uses silence to reveal a kind of terror. In fact, the continuing silence of those who have benefited from colonialism in the face of such violence and exploitation is the series' most chilling silence of all.

Peck himself, however, is noticeably not silent. Early on, he acknowledges the necessity of putting himself into the story, his gravely citizen-of-the-world voiceover replacing Samuel Jackson's sonorous gravity in *I Am Not*

*Ed Morales is the author of Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico.*

*Your Negro*. Using home-movie footage of his family's trip to the 1964 World's Fair in New York City, Peck begins to tell us his own story. "It's not about you, unless the story is bigger than you," he intones, adding, "Neutrality is not an option."

**A**s the series develops, we come to realize how far from neutrality *Exterminate All the Brutes* is—and with good reason, given its subject. The show is a relentless attack on racism, genocide, colonialism, and the extractive nature of imperialist and post-imperialist forms of capitalism. It tells the story in *longue durée* to remind us of the immensity and depravity of this history, from the dawn of African slavery to the marketing of displaced Native Americans' land to the rubber plantations of the Belgian Congo that helped sate the growing European thirst for bicycling. It's about what Walter Mignolo called "the darker side of Western modernity." Like *I Am Not Your Negro*, the style is fluid, nonlinear, fond of using Barbara Kruger/Jenny Holzer-inspired text slogans, at times zanily posted, as on an egregiously racist clip from the Hollywood staging of *On the Town*, or paired with Anita Ward's post-disco classic "Ring My Bell."

In some ways, Peck's style resonates with Adam Curtis's story-driven hybrid docs, in which he uses BBC-footage collages and flashing title cards layered with an ironic musical soundtrack to frame big ideas and dark truths about empire. Curtis's latest, *Can't Get You Out of My Head*, tries to explain the current apocalyptic overhang by juxtaposing historical figures like Mao's wife Jiang Qing, New York Black Panther Afeni Shakur, Soviet dissident Eduard Limonov, and conspiracy theorist Kerry Thornley. Curtis incorporates more Black characters than usual, and the ending of episode two concludes with a fiery Stokely Carmichael speech punctuated by the Mekons' "Where Were You?" But Peck's style embodies a Black historical materialism—one that charts the passage of time through the lens of Baldwin and Marx rather than Freud. Like Curtis, he knows the Western world prefers a fantasy to reality, but he is also interested in how this fantasy is realized in hyperreality. "I know this story is painful, but we need to know it," he says with sober recognition at the end of episode one, after flashing clips from *Apocalypse Now* and Werner

Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, and he isn't kidding.

*Exterminate All the Brutes* is not an easy series to watch: Much of what we see is disturbing, from a montage of photographs listing various genocides to the uncomfortable staging of Hartnett as an enforcer on a Congo rubber plantation cutting off a rebellious worker's hands, to the more psychological revelations of the way this sort of violence is embedded in quotidian culture. In one sequence, Peck moves from home movies of Adolf Hitler kicking it in the countryside with Eva Braun to an explanation of how settler colonialism "requires violence and the elimination of natives," before reaching a climax of sorts with a quote from William Carlos Williams: "The land, don't you feel it? Doesn't it make you want to go out and lift dead Indians tenderly from their graves to steal from them some authenticity as it must be clinging even to their corpses?"

When Peck comes across a reference—"kill the brutes"—to Kurtz's dictum in H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, he lingers on the idea that Wells's protagonist found a kind of titillating terror in smashing and killing the subhuman Morlocks. Moving on to Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, he muses about the scientist "civilizing the animals with torture." "The nightmare is buried deep within our consciousness," Peck adds. "It says who you are and what you have become."

As we come to the series' end, *Exterminate All the Brutes* forces us to consider how American mythology accepts the westward expansion as a tragicomic struggle between cowboys and Indians, when in reality it was soaked through with bloody carnage. It suggests that behind the manufacture and distribution of benign household products lies the figurative or literal dismemberment of slave labor. Peck argues that buried in the Western mindset is the notion that the burden of privilege and of imposing civilization requires the frequent spilling of blood.

**T**he hybrid aspect of *Exterminate All the Brutes* works well, for the most part, from a scene set in the Congo in 1895, where Hartnett is bathed by an expressionless Black female slave as Ella Fitzgerald croons "The Man I Love" in the background, to a scene in London where people of color dressed in 21st-century fashions walk out of an 1866 lecture on racial categorization by the Darwinist philologist Frederick Farrar, to a scene in which a Black priest watches while young white slaves are whipped.

The vignettes serve as a way of increasing the viewer's uneasiness, as a rote recounting of atrocities gives way to a gnawing uncertainty about how they might be depicted in one of Peck's fictional set-pieces.

The richly textured layers of the series also reflect the auteur himself, whose detached analytical narrative slips at times into a personal, confessional style, and

whose earlier films were already a cross between genres. In the third episode, he wrestles with a Du Boisian "double consciousness," even a triple or quadruple one—as a Brooklyn Black man taught never to go on the wrong side of the tracks; a "good soldier, a perfectly well-educated student of Western humanistic civilization"; a Haitian who has traveled extensively in Africa; and a precocious student who learned about Marx while studying film in Berlin, where he lived for 15 years. Peck is aware of his relative privilege, but he also remains wedded to an internationalism that allows him to see the tentacles of slavery, colonialism, and domination in the Americas, Europe, and Africa rather than a project confined to just one area of the world.

Among the many themes developed here, Peck is particularly effective in weaving a narrative thread between the construction of race and racism and the current state of endless worldwide war. He begins with the "originators of the project," the late medieval Spanish, and



**Each of Peck's films is an essay and historical argument as well as a study in narrative and form.**



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their classification of Black and Indigenous people as “other.” He visually quotes Jean-Daniel Verhaeghe’s film *Dispute in Valladolid*, about the 16th-century de las Casas–Sepulveda debate that found Indigenous people worthy of religious conversion, shifting enslavement practices toward Africans.

Later, Peck offers a reading of how “the West” distinguished itself from “the rest” through the development of weap-

ons: first cannons, then automatic rifles that “killed long before the weapons of their opponents could reach them.” In another extended passage, he explores the genealogy of the US arms industry, beginning with America’s first corporation, the Arsenal of Springfield, founded at the Springfield (Mass.) Armory in 1777, where the assembly line and interchangeable parts became the essence of America’s industrial revolution. The

military-industrial complex, a term coined by Eisenhower almost two centuries later, is nicely illustrated by a montage of revolving-door figures like Norman Augustine of Lockheed, John C. Rood of Raytheon, and former vice president Dick Cheney, among others.

Peck also follows the story of how, in the 19th century, scientific racism became the law of the Western land. After Darwin’s theory of evolution proved useful to race scientists like Herbert Spencer and Georges Cuvier, “genocide became the inevitable by-product of progress,” Peck argues. The idea of “killing at a distance” emerged out of the easy Dutch and British victories against the Spanish Armada; continued in the late 19th century with Winston Churchill reporting for the *Morning Post* on the lack of excitement in the British subjugation of Sudan in the bloody Battle of Omdurman in 1898; and had its climactic moment, of course, with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which Peck punctuates with Elmore James’s plaintive guitar riffing on “The Sky Is Crying.” “The only language they seem to understand is the one we use when we bomb them,” President Truman’s recorded voice says over the music.

For Peck, the horrifying mass slaughter at the end of World War II comes out of the horrifying evolution of weapons and imperial tactics that allowed the West to dominate in the first place. Now we are back at the beginning—at Lindqvist’s insistence that the Nazis’ atrocities against Europe’s Jews, Romani, Slavs, and homosexuals stemmed from the centuries of genocide and racialized violence in the Americas and Africa that preceded them, and that they represent, as Aimé Césaire observed in *Discourse on Colonialism*, how fascism was colonialism turned inward on Europe.

What comes next? *Exterminate All the Brutes* does not say, other than that “the past has a future we never expect.” The key, for Peck, is that we must refuse to forget what happened. We cannot let that past fade from our memories in the future, either. As Baldwin said to Dick Cavett on a late-night talk show excerpted in *I Am Not Your Negro*, “All your buried corpses now begin to speak.” I think of George Floyd and the other Black Americans killed by the police over the past year, and how throughout this film, Peck also allows us a way of hearing them speak, too—and how this speech may help us construct a better future. **N**

## DISCOURSE ON WHY INMATES EXIT PRISON WORSE THAN WHEN THEY WENT IN

Bet you thought there was no such thing as too kind. I can’t write it into this poem without admitting kindness is a synonym for “too close” when its nectared syllables sap these prison walls. O Kindness,

lotus flowering muddy waters, I can’t call on your greening nature, your bloom that fruits into song, into breath, in a place rotting under unnatural light,

where a staff member who’s friendly toward inmates is slurred a “murder groupie,” asked if they’ve hugged their thug today,

where they are disciplined for embracing the blues out of an inmate, compassioning the self back into the self. I remember when humanness lived inside me like a community garden, every visitor welcome & nourished in their coming & going, all those bright hues— but my body has become a border.

I’ve let knapweed root & wrangle what no longer will grow.

B. BATCHELOR



# The Demand of Freedom

*The United States' first civil rights movement*

BY KELLIE CARTER JACKSON

**R**ACISM IS NOT REGIONAL. I OFTEN HEAR PEOPLE REFER TO it as though it were trapped in the South. White Northerners who are appalled by the blatant racism around them will say things like “This isn’t Mississippi” or “Take that attitude back to Alabama.” But whether white Northerners like to recognize it or not, slavery was in every colony in the United States for more than a century and a half. It was part of the fabric of America—all of America. After South Carolina, New York had the largest enslaved population; by the mid-18th century, one in five people in New York was Black. It is important to note that the North was not the utopian refuge that public memory likes to romanticize it as. Prosperous Black communities in places like Philadelphia during the antebellum period were more the exception than the rule. And even the City of Brotherly Love experienced

several major anti-Black riots in the 1830s and '40s.

Another frequent misconception when it comes to antebellum Northern politics is the myth that most Northerners were abolitionists. There is an important distinction between those in the North who were antislavery and those who were abolitionist. Many in the North hated slavery for how it undermined the value of free labor, and

some also detested it for its brutal practices, but being antislavery did not make one an abolitionist committed to the immediate end of the institution of slavery. And even among abolitionists, not all believed in the fullness of Black humanity or the equality of the races. It was entirely possible during the antebellum period to hold both antislavery and anti-Black sentiments. As Frederick Douglass noted, “Opposing slavery and hating its victims has become a very common form of abolitionism.”

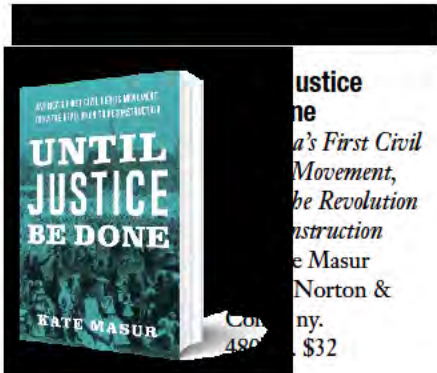
Throughout the 19th century (and even now), racist ideas about Black poverty and Black criminality guided the laws of the day—and this was true in the North as well as the South. States like Ohio and Illinois did not want to be held responsible for the well-being of African Americans, who they be-

lied would drain their resources or compete with white people for labor and wealth. Northern state constitutions were often ambiguous about defining citizenship and civil rights. Free Black Americans had to continually contest anti-Black laws and norms that left Black people with no guarantees as to how they might obtain and maintain equal protection under the law.

Just as the long history of racism in the North tends to be forgotten, so too does the long history of those who sought to dismantle its racist and anti-Black laws. While it is common to cite the civil rights movement or perhaps the Reconstruction period as the first attempt at securing an egalitarian United States, these struggles began much earlier. Historian Kate Masur's *Until Justice Be Done: America's First Civil Rights Movement, From the Revolution to Reconstruction* helps exhume the often neglected history of both Northern racism and slavery and those Black freedom struggles in the 19th century that sought to abolish them. A clear and compelling account, Masur's book pushes us to rethink our understanding of anti-Blackness in the North and the activism that helped free Black people through the constitutional amendments that abolished slavery and granted them citizenship and equal protection under the law. Despite legal setbacks, unfavorable court decisions, and white supremacy, Black and white activists and advocates in the 19th century managed to make their belief in fairness and inclusion concerning Black civil rights the mainstream view.

Many have written about the 13th and 14th amendments, but the origins of their underlying principles can be found, Masur argues, in the 18th century and in an often ignored history of Black activism that goes back as far as the early days of the American republic. Her earlier book, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle Over Equality in Washington, D.C.*, focused on this history in the context of the District of Columbia—both in terms of its local government and as the seat of the national government. In *Until Justice Be Done*, Masur widens her geographic scope and considers how the struggle for equality manifested itself all over the country, particularly in the Midwestern states. By doing so, she reminds us that Black activism and the fight for civil rights were found not only in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. She also reminds us that until the North recognized the need to dismantle its own racist and exclusionary practices, it held no moral high ground over the Southern slaveocracy.

**U**ntil *Justice Be Done* begins with the American Revolution, when the rhetoric around freedom and equality forced its participants to consider what these values might mean for Black Americans. Between 1774 and 1804, all of the Northern states came to abolish slavery, but the position of free Black people



living outside the South remained complicated. Few Northerners wanted Black people around them, let alone to give them the equal rights of citizens. Ohio, a state that initially was only 1 percent Black, became the first in the Northwest Territory to adopt “Black laws,” and many more soon followed. These discriminatory practices kept Black people from voting, testifying in legal cases that involved white people, or freely living their lives without the sanction of one or two white landowners vouching for them. In the North, Black people were treated as a burden. For many African Americans, therefore, freedom did not equate to belonging; as Masur notes, with the exception of “a tiny handful of visionary radicals...northern whites were monolithically antiblack.”

During the early years of the American republic, anti-Black laws spread in the North and came to shape the country's politics and culture. State after state, such as Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan, adopted various restrictions intended to limit Black freedom and require documentation for Black settlement. These restrictions made Black people vulnerable to loss, theft, and damage. Free Black people who hoped to shape the legislative process were often denied the right

to vote or participate in political life and thus found themselves dependent on white Northerners to vote for their interests and further the principle that all men deserved universal rights. Historians have neglected or glossed over these barriers and the details of how Black people and their allies fought to change them prior to the Civil War and Reconstruction.

One aspect of Masur's book that is particularly welcome is her decision to center her narrative on the efforts of Black Americans to achieve a national consensus surrounding citizenship and civil rights. As much as we love Frederick Douglass, there were many other, unsung Black activists operating outside of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia who were as determined to speak out and act up and as vital to the struggle for emancipation. Writing about the mostly unknown Black activists in Ohio and Illinois, Masur describes how they worked tirelessly to repeal racist laws and create enclaves of Black achievement. She reveals how they not only changed laws but won over white allies, who took up these causes as their own. The repeal of the Black laws in Ohio, for example, was a victory that many hoped would be repeated in other Midwestern states, such as Illinois and Indiana.

**T**he stories of these Black activists are central to Masur's narrative. Men like John Mercer Langston, an attorney and one of the first African Americans elected to public office, as a town clerk in Ohio; William Howard Day, an Oberlin graduate, newspaper editor, and secretary of the National Negro Convention; and David Jenkins, a leading Black activist and editor of a weekly newspaper, all played essential roles in repealing the Black laws and fighting for Black freedom. One of the most interesting people in Masur's book is Gilbert Horton. In 1826, he was a 26-year-old free Black man who was part of the crew on a ship called *The Macedonian*. Horton's father had worked for years to purchase his son's freedom, which happened when Horton was just 5 years old. As he traveled as a seaman, however, Horton's freedom was always at risk when he entered the slave states.

*Kellie Carter Jackson teaches at Wellesley College and is the author of Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence.*

After *The Macedonian* docked in Norfolk, Va., he traveled to Georgetown in Washington, D.C., where he was arrested on suspicion of being a runaway and held in the local jail until an investigation could be completed.

Horton repeatedly insisted that he was a freeman, but without “evidences of freedom,” he was certain to be sold into slavery if his “owner” did not come forward. Advertisements were sent out nearly every day with his description in an attempt to find this person. Thankfully, the advertisements reached Horton’s family in New York, who immediately began to advocate for his release. The country’s first Black newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, founded by Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm in New York City, was a voice for free people of color who had been wrongly imprisoned and sold into slavery, and Horton’s case became a cause célèbre in their campaign to urge Black readers to stand up for their status as citizens.

The case brought larger issues to the fore, such as abolishing slavery and the slave trade in the nation’s capital. It also raised the question of whether free Black people were indeed citizens, entitled to the same “privileges and immunities” under the Constitution as white people. While one might expect the nation’s capital to be a beacon to free Black people, it was instead a place where the defenders of slavery had ramped up laws that targeted them. The district, like the various slave states, put the onus on free Black people to prove that they were free. The Black press and its allies protested such laws in Washington, which, they contended, violated the US Constitution.

Horton’s case became a national controversy. Masur is astute at taking episodes like this and weaving them into her discussion of the country’s larger political history. During the same period, for example, the Missouri debates of 1820–21 that eventually led to a ban on “free negroes and mulattos” entering the state called into question the notion of citizenship as a nationally recognized status, and Horton’s story allows Masur to show the people behind these arguments as well as their constant struggle to achieve citizenship—a struggle that was rife with stalemates, denials, and delays.

**I**n *Until Justice Be Done*, Masur illustrates how citizenship and civil rights were the key to Black mobility.

Who gets to move and who must stay, who has access to land or titles and who is refused, are all intricately tied to race. Aspects of this book recall Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor’s *Colored Travelers: Mobility and the Fight for Citizenship Before the Civil War*, in which the author contends that long before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat and Homer Plessy brought his case before the Supreme Court, African Americans understood the connection between citizenship and mobility, which was and remains an inalienable right. Free

African Americans in the North spoke out against their unjust treatment by refusing to be banished from public spaces, trains, steamships, and virtually any other mode of

transportation that would have required their segregation and subordination. Freedom from discriminatory practices while traveling became a part of the civil rights movement. In other words, as both Stordeur Pryor and Masur argue, among a long list of challenges that Black Americans faced in the 19th century and well into contemporary times has been the ability to travel unobstructed and free from anxiety.

Moreover, mobility was also tied to criminality. As Masur shows, Joseph Thompson, a veteran ship steward and free Black man, learned this hard lesson while traveling as a sailor from Bordeaux, France, to New Orleans. Upon arriving, he requested that he be paid a portion of his wages. Insulted, the ship’s mate accused him of stealing. Thompson was promptly arrested and detained until he could secure friends to aid him. Questions like “Who are you?,” “Who do you belong to?,” “Where are you going?,” and “What are you doing here?” were all intended to remind Black people that they were under constant surveillance.

Masur dedicates an entire chapter to the experiences of Black sailors in Southern ports. In South Carolina, for example, the law required that all free Black people who arrived in the state by water be detained and confined in a jail until their vessel was ready to depart. Free Black sailors had to be savvy in their travels. Masur shows

us African Americans, often assisted by white allies, employing direct and subversive tactics to invoke their citizenship and challenge a system upheld by the absurdity of race. As a result of such tactics, a bill was passed in Massachusetts to safeguard the rights of Black sailors, while new legal challenges would test the constitutionality of laws in other states and further the idea of seeking an act of Congress to create changes on the federal level.

By detailing these legal cases and state statutes, Masur’s book is also in conversation with the ideas of Chris Bonner’s *Remaking the Republic: Black Politics and the Creation of American Citizenship*, which argues that until the states and the federal government found a consensus on the terms of citizenship, “black people suffered under this ambiguity.” Black people in America knew they were human beings, and they knew they were citizens of the United States—or, at the very least, were entitled to such citizenship. This history details the various efforts Black leaders had employed to transform the country’s practices and policies. Activism in the North was not just about abolishing slavery; it was also about repealing state-level Black laws that prevented African Americans from experiencing true liberation.

**T**hough her book is deeply researched, Masur misses some opportunities to highlight the role and contributions of Black women in this struggle. She mentions Mary Jones, the wife of John Jones, a community leader in Alton, Ill., whose home was a safe haven for fugitives. Mary helped raise money to purchase runaways, but not much else is revealed about her. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a leading abolitionist and activist for civil and women’s rights, isn’t mentioned until the epilogue. Had Masur chosen to look west, she could also have included Mary Ellen Pleasant, an abolitionist and activist whose work earned her the moniker “the mother of human rights in California.” Several of Pleasant’s high-profile cases ended in major victories for civil rights, including her suit against railroad companies in San Francisco, *Pleasant v. North Beach & Mission Railroad Company*, which went all the way to the California Supreme Court. After almost two years of litigation, San Francisco outlawed segregation on the city’s public transportation. Yet despite

**“Our warfare ought not to be against slavery alone.”**

the contributions of such women, Masur's book is largely a story of men: The neglect of Black or other women is an unfortunate but all too typical feature of the field. Scholars often blame the lack of sources, but how sources are read also plays a major role in the way women—and Black women in particular—are silenced.

Nevertheless, *Until Justice Be Done* reminds us that, despite the popular conception of American history, change and

progress are not inevitable in the United States. We are not marching confidently toward a more egalitarian and democratic society. Without constant activism and radical pressure from the bottom up, even the advances that have been won are not secure.

Today, Black people face many of the same legal barriers they did in the 19th century: segregated schools, limited relief for the poor, unfair trials, and voter sup-

pression. Although the Black laws have been repealed, anti-Black sentiments have remained—in the North as well as the South. In fact, most of the recent police killings and shootings of Black people that have captured national attention have taken place in the North and particularly the Midwest: Tamir Rice in Ohio, George Floyd in Minnesota, Laquan McDonald in Illinois, Jacob Blake in Wisconsin. Recently, a study found that the top 15 cities ranked as the worst for African Americans were nearly all in the North and primarily in the Midwest (Fresno, Calif., was the sole exception). In my own state of Massachusetts, a state labeled as progressive, Black people are only 7 percent of the population and yet make up 27 percent of the prison population. *The Boston Globe's* Spotlight team revealed several years ago that the average net worth of white families in Boston is over \$247,000, whereas for Black people that figure is just \$8.

Such appalling statistics have a deep history, but so does Black activism. I think it's fair to view the social and political mass organizing in Missouri, Wisconsin, and Illinois as ongoing and necessary because Black laws were repealed but anti-Black sentiment has persisted. The fight for fair treatment within the criminal justice system, as well as access to certain neighborhoods and even health care, are rooted in the long, hard fights that Black activists and their white allies took on over 200 years ago.

*Until Justice Be Done* does not offer a recipe for obtaining equal recognition and treatment for Black people, but it does illustrate how they and their allies envisioned a path toward building a better world. By examining how free Black people living in the North had to navigate hostile terrains and discriminatory laws while simultaneously pushing for the end of slavery, it also reminds us that emancipation and equality are not the same thing. This book is not about abolitionism; much like being antislavery, being in favor of abolition wasn't enough. Freedom requires civil rights, political rights, and economic rights. As the Black abolitionist Joshua Easton declared in 1837, "Abolitionists may attack slaveholding, but there is a danger still that the spirit of slavery will survive, in the form of prejudice, after the system is overturned. Our warfare ought not to be against slavery alone, but against the spirit which makes color a mark of degradation." **N**

## Saying I Am a Survivor in Another Language

We are in the moment before we decide,  
for the first time, to have sex.

We fill our mouths with salami and wine.  
I am careful, peeling wax paper off glazed sponge cake

baked by nuns who live down the street.  
One nun, this morning, took my hand in hers

while she told me that the most important ingredient  
is the silence of prayer.

I cannot tell you this, but I held onto her  
while she walked me through a village

made of thick paper. A train with a real light  
and human figurines hot-glued to look

like they were heading somewhere.  
I was terrified. I didn't touch a man for seven years.

Asleep. Your eyelashes open against my chest.  
You are the first person to not know this.

TANEUM BAMBRICK



# It's All in the Angles

*Joan Didion's long view*

BY HALEY MLOTEK

**N**ANCY REAGAN ONCE CLAIMED THAT SHE COULDN'T GET fair press coverage from the women sent to write about her. Perhaps, she speculated, these journalists were jealous of her, "a woman who wears size four" and who has "no trouble staying slim." Her theory was put to the test when *The Saturday Evening Post* sent Joan Didion to profile her in 1968, the year that Ronald Reagan, then the governor of California, would lose the Republican presidential primary to Richard Nixon. If not a competition of looks or a comparison of waistbands, then what could have accounted for the resulting article? "Pretty Nancy" followed the style that was then becoming distinctive of Didion's journalistic prose: a blunt, self-assured series of descriptions and observations that lead the reader to believe she was just writing down what she saw. Here is Nancy pretending to pluck a rhododendron blossom. Here is Nancy finding her light. Here is Nancy wearing "the smile of a woman who seems to be

playing out some middle-class American woman's daydream, circa 1948."

Nancy, of course, did not like Didion's profile. She found it sardonic and judgmental and accused Didion of having written the piece before they even met. She couldn't understand it, she said later. She thought they were having a nice time.

What is it about Joan Didion that seduces and then betrays? In her writing she promises little, and in her public life she offers even less. The title of Didion's

new essay collection, *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*, almost seems like the kind of cruel joke one might find in one of her pieces. Has a writer ever been less likely to say just what she means? Across the 12 works included—which span Didion's entire career from her column in *The Saturday Evening Post* in the late 1960s and '70s to one-off essays and reports for *The New Yorker* to speeches given at her alma mater, as well as introductions to other people's books—the impression one gets is that of reading a magazine made up of all ledes and kickers. This is the case with "Pretty Nancy," too. It contains many of Didion's trademarks. Her sentences often exist as aphorisms, all the more brutal for being brief; her choice of weapon tends to be the direct quote. These tendencies capture something true about her writing in general: Her essays show a writer who attempts a close reading of the powerful

people and strange circumstances she encounters but then, when understanding proves difficult, draws back to look at them from a great, flat distance.

**I**n *Blue Nights*, her 2011 memoir about grief, family, and work, Didion said that when she and her husband, John Gregory Dunne, worked on dialogue for their screenplays, they would mark the time a character spent speaking before coming up with the words themselves: What was said was not as important as the rhythm and length of the speech. Her essays also have this novelistic approach. As Hilton Als notes in his foreword to *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*, “a peculiar aspect of Joan Didion’s nonfiction is that a significant portion of it reads like fiction.” This appears to be the case, however, not because Didion is too imaginative in her journalistic renderings but rather because of her sense of control over the material and her certainty of its meaning, as though nothing happens without her permission.

One finds echoes of this approach in the way Didion circles around the California governor’s wife, the tension hovering in the sharp point she holds back from making. There are inferences into what kind of person Nancy is, what kind of mother her teenage son might see her as, what kind of sycophantic circle a political family might live within. In many ways, Didion casts Nancy in a film of her own making. The writing could serve as cues for a character in a screenplay rather than as descriptions of a real-life woman in a magazine profile.

*Let Me Tell You What I Mean* includes a kind of corollary to “Pretty Nancy,” Didion’s 2000 profile of Martha Stewart (or, more to the point, of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia LLC), another story of a woman in the business of promising domestic harmony. “This is getting out of the house with a vengeance, and on your own terms,” Didion writes, “the secret dream of any woman who has ever made a success of a PTA cake sale.” Didion’s sentences have a way of taking a person at face value and seeing the way subtle truths lie under glossy surfaces.

Other profiles are of groups, like her essay on a meeting of Gamblers Anonymous, in which she writes that she had to leave as soon as she heard the people there speak of “serenity,” because it is a word she associates with death. There is a profile of a building, too—San Simeon, the castle William Randolph Hearst built with his newspaper fortune. Here, Didion’s classic cruelties are put to good use, showing her disdain for the wealthy who never had to learn how to use their money wisely: “San Simeon was...exactly the castle a child would build, if a child had \$220 million and could spend \$40 million of it on a castle.”

When writing about what she likes, Didion finds herself drawn to her subjects with an intimate

included here, is now frequently quoted in essays about Didion for its unrelenting admission that she considers writing a hostile act. She also returns in the speech to the cinematographer’s lens:

Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind.... The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what’s going on in the picture.

The questions such a collection of essays demands—for example, why these pieces, and why now?—invite a cynical answer that is then attached, inextricably so, to the thought itself: Because these are the pieces that haven’t been recently collected; because these are the pieces that can be sold either to the completist or to the casual reader. If this book does have a theme, it is one indistinguishable from what many readers already know about Didion: that all of this writing is less about the topic than about how Didion feels about it. This unanswerable approach can almost lead the reader to the point of hypnosis—no matter the subject, her preferred subtext is what she won’t tell and we can’t know. Nancy Reagan probably had many reasons to feel betrayed by Didion’s article, but the reason she was insulted had nothing to do with Didion’s insincerity: She evades, but she does not lie. In her writing, she may not tell us what she means, but we can certainly sense how she feels.

Betrayal, of course, is possible only when a loyalty has been broken. Who, readers might ask, does Didion stand with? What is she for or against? In a 1972 essay, “Seduction and Betrayal,” Elizabeth Hardwick said that these two illicit actions have become a question more of psychology than of ethics. “We ask ourselves how the delinquent ones feel about their seductions, adulteries, betrayals, and it is by the quality of their feelings that our moral judgments are formed.... In novelistic relations, where the pain inflicted is only upon the feelings of another person, everything is blurred.”

*Haley Mlotek is a writer, editor, and organizer who is writing a book about divorce.*



**Let Me Tell You What I Mean**

by Joan Didion

\$23

approach; she writes about them as if she is sharing their secret. In “Alicia and the Underground Press,” the subject is alternative newspapers, but the essay is really about the purportedly objective mainstream press and Didion’s fatigue in the face of it—she much prefers a journalistic tone that mimics a conversation between friends. “These papers ignore the conventional newspaper code,” she explains in what, for her, can be read as praise, and instead “say what they mean.” When a writer at an underground newspaper has a thought, Didion adds, they say so, and best of all “quite often in lieu of who, what, where, when, how.”

But as the reader continues through the essays in this collection, her writing can also take on the feeling of being alone in someone else’s living room: She is going through their homes in search of a secret. In her article about the Hearst castle, she critiques the childishness of grown men, and in “On Being Unchosen by the College of One’s Choice,” she critiques the overgrown precociousness in children. As with a face in profile, the angles are everything.

**D**idion loves other people’s words, to turn them over and examine them from all sides. This does not necessarily mean that she is faithful to what they said: “Why I Write,” a speech she gave at UC Berkeley and

# Words Matter

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—Claudia Sole, Calif.



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When New York Review Books reissued this essay along with some of Hardwick's other essays in 2001, Didion made the following observation in her introduction:

At the time *Seduction and Betrayal* was first published, a reviewer in *The New York Times* complained that if the book had a fault, it was that its author failed to "make sufficient distinctions between the real and the literary." That there are no such distinctions to be made, that the women we invent have changed the course of our lives as surely as the women we are, is in many ways the point of this passionate book.

This fuzziness that both Hardwick and Didion describe—of novels that seem like biographies, of news reports that read like fiction—is perhaps the only way to read Didion's work. Every profile is of a character; every article invents a story. As she told a student reporter for Berkeley's *Daily Californian* in 2001:

The whole way I think about politics came out of the English Department. They taught a form of literary criticism which was based on analyzing texts in a very close way. If you start analyzing the text of a newspaper or a political commentator on CNN using the same approach of close textual analysis, you come to understand it in a different way. It's not any different from reading Henry James.

For Didion, politics, like a novel, pulls from life but also can exist as fantasy, and can therefore be read like literature.

With this, a key is handed to those inclined to read Didion like code. A woman can accept her fate or she cannot, Didion seems to say again and again; she can play heroine, or she can escape the narrative altogether. The future awaits us either way. A woman with no loyalties is a Madame Bovary. A woman who cannot help her loyalties is an Anna Karenina. A woman who is the last to discover her own loyalties is an Isabel Archer. And a woman who will write book after book and essay upon essay without ever claiming her own loyalties is a Joan Didion.

**I**n novels by Henry James and his contemporaries, being a journalist is something of a punishment to the journalist and to those around the journalist: Reporters, editors, and critics are a necessary burden on the social circles of much more interesting characters and a quiet threat to good manners. Like Henrietta Stackpole, the feminist journalist who acts as a comic foil for Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, their presence signals someone who knows a secret is currency. We wait in suspense to see if they try to cash it in.

The curious thing about reading Didion is finding her agree with this literary assessment. In "Alicia and the Underground Press," and in other essay collections like *Political Fictions* and nonfiction books like *Miami*, we often find Didion describing a certain kind of journalist as a marginal figure, at the boundaries of an event. Their access—and their determination to keep it—often is a central theme in her descriptions of her peers.

Perhaps that's why Didion has also so frequently become a subject for other writers, and a subject of such strong critiques. The many roles she occupies—journalist, novelist, and screenwriter—has made her an idol of publishing, and with that vaunted status comes an ever-rotating inquiry into who she is and what she believes. I'm sure some people read Didion and think she's just fine, but given her style, fame, and other forms of capital and cachet, it is also hard not to notice the extremes of love and hate. Readers and subjects alike often report the same mistaken expectations, the same hurt feelings, as they periodically look to excavate some meaning or matter from the extensive collection of writing that exists by or about Didion.

When critics go looking for signs or theories about Didion, they often turn to her politics. Writing for *Popula*, Maria Bustillos argued that she was "the First Lady of Neoliberalism" and that the fandom around Didion misses the politics at the center of so much of her writing. "The weirdest thing about it," Bustillos writes, "is this dyed-in-the-wool conservative woman...somehow became the irreproachable darling of New York media and stayed that way for decades, all on the

strength of a dry, self-regarding prose style and a 'glamor shot' with a Corvette."

Reading Didion's latest collection is enough to convince anyone that her writing is often more evocative than empathetic, more interested in style than in meaning. For some this might be primarily a literary feature of her writing, but for Bustillos this has made her journalism often read like "an unrelenting exercise in class superiority." And it is true that Didion's politics, while often contradictory and strange, were not all that inscrutable or indiscernible. She was a woman who loved Barry Goldwater, who told her friends that Nixon was too liberal, who unironically embraced a gently nostalgic interpretation of Americana and never missed an opportunity to cite a Hemingway sentence or a John Wayne scene. Her ideology is right there for the reader—laid out on the page, waiting for your interpretation.

But a reader is not a voyeur, and an audience has its own autonomy. Didion's calculated vanity turns other people into a reflection that somehow manages to show nothing; this does indeed look, to a certain type of romantic, like seduction. She puts herself in view and then shuts the blinds. This may frustrate some readers, but it is hardly an act of "betrayal." I often think about a line in Robert McKee's popular and frequently skewered screenwriting manual, *Story*, in which he says that he is always surprised to see audiences who want to know everything possible about a character over the span of one film. You couldn't know everything about a person in an entire lifetime, he reminds us. What makes you think you can get it all in a 90-minute movie?

There was a time when reading Didion made me feel like I had swallowed something that burned—that I could taste what it might be like to make someone sick with desire—and she retains that sense of being both divisive and adored; she will remain a powerful observer of our times and someone whose style people are quick to turn into metaphor. You could read every Joan Didion book ever released, study every sentence, look for her name in the margins of other biographies and in the bylines of archived clippings, in the credits rolling past on the screen, and still, you might know nothing.

**Didion may not tell us what she means, but we certainly know how she feels.**



# Letters

## Magical Realism

☛ The stunning dismissal of the climate emergency and ecological breakdown in *Capitalism, Alone: The Future of the System That Rules the World*, as Alyssa Battistoni points out in her excellent review of Branko Milanovic's new book ["Diminishing Returns," May 17/24], is typical of the economics profession, especially in the United States. Milanovic recently blogged that proponents of degrowth are engaged in "magical thinking" because they allegedly advocate measures that have no political chance. It may be so to propose policies that violate political realities, yet it is magical thinking an order of magnitude greater to propose policies that violate physical, chemical, and biological realities.

ALAN RICHARDS

## Past as Prologue

Re "Free Dr. Seuss!" by Jeet Heer and "Clearing the Shelves" by Katha Pollitt [April 19/26]: Trying to see how and why earlier generations came to what we now consider unfortunate judgments is a valuable exercise. For one, it guides us toward the humble recognition that our current assured and confident views will in turn face reconsideration.

JAMIE SPENCER  
ST. LOUIS

☛ As Pollitt correctly points out, obsessions with judging the past by today's values distract us from the real issues. Keep the focus on the infrastructure bill. Focus on

the voting rights bills. Take on immigration reform. Don't get hooked into false culture war issues that the right just loves to focus on.

MANNY BARBARA

It is a false dichotomy that we have to choose between inclusive children's literature and what Pollitt writes are "social and economic changes." Rather than swallowing the sins of the past with a wink and shrug, we might make better choices about the texts we teach. There is no excuse for fostering a questionable nostalgia for Dr. Seuss when there are so many talented authors of color writing nuanced, beautiful, and authentic stories from a wide variety of perspectives, opening windows onto new worlds or allowing students to be reflected in what they read.

TINA DE LA FE  
LANSING, MICH.

☛ If we ban offending books, we erode the most important skill we can teach: reading critically. Adults should be commenting and questioning as they read to children, not just to point out the flaws in a particular book, but to teach them how to question and analyze what they read.

SUSAN ABRAHAM

## Correction

"A Solitary Trade," by Jennifer Wilson [May 17/24], incorrectly stated that Jhumpa Lahiri's first book published in Italian was titled *Il Altre Parole*. The title of the book is *In Altre Parole*.

☛ Comment drawn from our website [letters@thenation.com](mailto:letters@thenation.com)  
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REMEMBERING 1921

# Tulsa Massacre

**O**ne hundred years ago, on May 31 and June 1, 1921, a mob of white people killed an estimated 300 Black residents of the Greenwood district of Tulsa, Okla., and torched the area. For years, the massacre was hardly taught in schools, but that is finally changing. A longer version of the comic by illustrator and artist Lynn Bernstein is

**Nab Negro for Attacking Girl In an Elevator**

A negro girl, who does not give her name, was attacked in an elevator at the courthouse on May 31. The girl was taken to the hospital and is recovering. The negro was arrested and is being held in the jail. The girl's father is a prominent citizen of Tulsa. The negro is a young man, about 17 years old. He is charged with attempted rape. The girl was taken to the hospital and is recovering. The negro was arrested and is being held in the jail. The girl's father is a prominent citizen of Tulsa. The negro is a young man, about 17 years old. He is charged with attempted rape.



**1. The Mob:** On May 31, *The Tulsa Tribune* reported the arrest of a Black teenager for the “attempted assault” of a white girl, code for attempted rape. Within hours, thousands of outraged whites gathered at the courthouse, as did Blacks, who came to protect the accused teen. Men on both sides were armed.

A white man took it upon himself to disarm a Black man, and the gun went off. As one witness said, “All hell broke loose.”



**2. The Invasion:** At 5 PM on June 1, a white horde, including law enforcers, descended on Greenwood, Tulsa’s Black neighborhood. Airplanes dropped explosives on buildings. Men armed with rifles forced Black residents into internment centers and then looted their homes before burning them to the ground. When martial law was finally declared at 11:30 AM the next day, Greenwood had been obliterated. About 300 Black Tulsans were dead, and 10,000 were made homeless.



**3. The Aftermath:** The June 1921 grand jury report determined that the crowd of white Oklahomans at the courthouse were merely curious spectators who were “quiet until the arrival of armed negroes, which precipitated and was the direct cause of the affair.”

Greenwood had been a mecca where Black laborers could find employment and Black professionals could prosper. It had modern homes and excellent schools. Its downtown rivaled any white downtown with its banks, restaurants, theaters, and shops. This rankled many whites, especially those less prosperous.



**4. Epilogue:** Eventually Greenwood was rebuilt, but it was never the same.

2001. An Oklahoma commission report acknowledged that government agents both contributed to the violence and failed to punish the perpetrators. It also found that Blacks had ample reason to believe the accused teen would have been lynched.

2007. Indictments against the alleged Black participants were dismissed.

2008. Tulsa’s mayor, Kathy Taylor, apologized to the remaining survivors.

2019. A state bill approved \$1.5 million for the centennial of the massacre, less than the \$1.8 million in damages filed in 1921 (about \$27 million in today’s dollars).

2020. The US Senate failed to pass an anti-lynching bill. There are still no federal anti-lynching laws, despite 120 years of trying.

—Lynn Bernstein

# EXHIBIT 5

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**Publication Date:** July

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Sincerely,

Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation & Reentry  
Office of Publication Review

# EXHIBIT 6

INCLUDING

Karla Cornejo  
Villavicencio

Molly Crabapple

Jeet Heer

Jay Caspian  
Kang

Sophie Lewis

Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts

Kim Stanley  
Robinson







EDITORIAL / ELIE MYSTAL FOR THE NATION

# Supreme Throwback

**T**HE DEMOCRATIC PARTY LIKES TO THINK OF ITSELF AS THE PARTY OF LABOR, ONE that represents minimum-wage workers, the so-called white working class, unionized labor, and employees from vulnerable communities attempting to overcome structural hurdles. But the party has done little to stop one of the most persistent anti-labor forces in American society and politics: the current Supreme Court. The Roberts Court—this era of jurisprudence presided over by Chief Justice John Roberts—has been the most anti-labor court since the New Deal, and every term it gets a little bit worse.

This term saw a particularly devastating attack on labor rights in the case *Cedar Point Nursery v. Hassid*. Not only did Roberts and his conservative brethren and sister justices use the case to vitiate the ability of labor to organize workers; they did it by reviving an old argument made by segregationists. In the process, their ruling undermined a raft of regulations meant to prevent businesses from discriminating against workers or customers. It's a five-alarm-fire bell for those concerned about the rights of people as opposed to corporations—or it would be, if only there was anybody to hear it.

*Cedar Point* was decided at the end of June. At issue was a California regulation that required corporate farmers like Cedar Point (a 300-acre strawberry farm in Northern California) to allow union organizers onto their premises to talk to the laborers. The organizers' access was limited to three times a day (early morning, late evening, and during the lunch break) so as not to interrupt the farmwork, and to no more than 120 days a year.

In a 6-3 ruling, Roberts, joined by the other justices appointed by Republican presidents, struck down the California regulation. The court ruled that the regulation was an exercise of the government's power of eminent domain and amounted to a "taking" of private property by the government. Specifically, it argued that the regulation was a form of *per se* taking, or a government "seizure" of land instead of a mere regulatory restriction on land use. Roberts said that Cedar Point was thus entitled to compensation for the government's violation of its property rights under the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution.

Roberts's ruling was unnecessarily extreme. Instead of the wrong-but-narrow ruling he could have written, which would have framed the California regulation in less sweeping terms, he went for the jugular. He wrote that the "right to exclude" was "one of the most treasured" property rights and that property could not be "invaded" without compensation to the owner. What that means in practice is that even if the government wanted to compensate Cedar Point and all other factory farms, the cost to the taxpayers would be prohibitive. The decision thus effectively nullifies the government's ability to enable union organizers' access to labor at its place of work.

The effect of this decision on labor rights in California will be

bad. But what makes it even worse is that it is unlikely to stop with strawberry growers. The notion that property owners have a "right to exclude" that cannot be violated without compensation is pulled directly from old-school segregationists who argued that they could not be forced to serve customers of color at their lunch counters. By resurrecting that argument, rejected by the Supreme Court in 1964, Roberts has given shape, form, and breath to a beastly new legal logic.

Harvard Law professor Niko Bowie tweeted a few examples of where this could lead: "Anti-discrimination laws 'take' employers' 'right to exclude' workers of color, pregnant workers, and LGBTQ+ workers.... Fair housing laws 'take' landlords' 'right to exclude' renters of color, families, and renters with vouchers.... Endangered species laws 'take' landowners' 'right to exclude' conservationists."

This brings me back to the Democrats, who could intervene by, say, working to expand the Supreme Court but haven't so far. If they won't stand up for labor's right to organize, will they bother to reject the argument that business owners can exclude people of color from their property, or LGBTQ+ workers from their office park? How many bipartisan commissions need to be erected before Democrats use their power to dilute the worst instincts of the conservatives on the court?

*Cedar Point* shows that the court's conservatives are willing to step into a time machine to take away the rights of constituencies Democrats claim to care about. But I'm not even sure our elected officials noticed. **N**

**It's a five-alarm-fire bell for those concerned about the rights of people as opposed to corporations.**

# No Offense David Bromwich



## Secret Science

*Did Anthony Fauci tell the whole truth about gain-of-function research?*

**D**R. ANTHONY FAUCI HAS SERVED AS DIRECTOR OF THE National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) since 1984. His salient qualities would seem to be a genial concern for our well-being and a fund of practical wisdom informed by expertise. Still, 37 years in a position of enormous power is probably too long not to nurture delusions of infallibility.

Fauci confirmed that impression when, in a June 9, 2021, interview with NBC's Chuck Todd, he said, "A lot of what you're seeing as attacks on me, quite frankly, are attacks on science." The reason his critics resent him, Fauci added, is that, throughout the Covid siege, he has been a source of "inconvenient truths." Just how inconvenient have his statements been, and how truthful?

Testifying before the Senate on May 11, Fauci was asked by Rand Paul: "Do you still support [National Institutes of Health] funding of the lab in Wuhan?" "Senator Paul," replied Fauci, "with all due respect, you are entirely and completely incorrect." Few in the audience would have known that Fauci's NIAID did funnel money, through a grant to a North Carolina virologist, Dr. Ralph Baric, to support gain-of-function research on bat viruses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Gain-of-function research—which can make a disease more lethal or infectious—had been shut down by a US moratorium that lasted from 2014 to 2017. The link to China was cut by a presidential order in April 2020. So, Fauci's testimony was not literally false: NIAID wasn't *still* supporting the bat virus research in the Wuhan lab; and the support had been at one remove.

The avowed purpose of gain-of-function research is to combat a future pandemic that nature hasn't yet found the ingenuity to launch. But the investment also has a potential military use—to sicken and kill enemies in large numbers. And criticism of this experimental subculture has come largely from scientists themselves. Richard Ebright, a professor of chemical biology at Rutgers, said that the Fauci-Baric model—using gain-of-function techniques in an urban center, in a lab known for its failure to maintain the highest level of safety—was like "looking for a gas leak with a lighted match."

Fauci's early and insistent claim that Covid-19 came from nature was abetted by a friendly subterfuge. Dr. Peter Daszak, an associate of Baric,

organized a letter of February 19, 2020, signed by 27 public health scientists, which affirmed the pandemic's natural origin. (In a February 6 e-mail, Daszak had coordinated with Baric to keep his name off the public letter, so as not to arouse a well-founded suspicion of a conflict of interest.) This gave Fauci a breathing space of several months, during which his reputation rose steadily.

Early on, Fauci declared that masks were unnecessary. He later confessed that he had shaded the truth to avert a run on vital equipment. When he gradually revised upward the percentage of vaccinated Americans required for herd immunity, what was really changing was his estimate of how much truth we could take, and when.

Further into his exchange with Paul, Fauci offered some reassuring words: "Dr. Baric is not doing gain-of-function research, and if it is, it is according to the guidelines, and it is being conducted in North Carolina." Well, is he or isn't he? Because if he is doing that research, who would know better than Fauci? In this testimony, as in much of his conduct over the past two years, Dr. Fauci was speaking "nothing but the truth." Yet he was mindful of what Jesuits used to call a *reservation*.

A reservation, in this sense, is an unspoken qualification. The speaker telegraphs a public meaning, confident it will be misunderstood. He holds in reserve a private meaning whose release might damage a higher cause (a cause known to the speaker and God, of which God approves). For God, in this context, we should read: "US government institutions of scientific research." Yet American support of catastrophically hazardous experimentation was by no means the only pertinent fact withheld from American citizens.

Several Wuhan lab researchers had been suddenly hospitalized in November 2019 with an illness reported to be influenza. A comprehensive June 3 *Vanity Fair* article by Katherine Eban—following trenchant investigative pieces arguing against the came-from-nature hypothesis by Nicholson Baker and Nicholas Wade—revealed that officials at the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance were advised not to look into the "Pandora's box" of the Wuhan lab. After the outbreak, the Chinese government

incidentally removed from the online record 22,000 virus samples and sequences, to hamper any inquiry into the source of Covid-19. Fauci hardly registered a demur at these irregularities.

His advocacy of gain-of-function research may have begun

**"A lot of what you're seeing as attacks on me, quite frankly," said Fauci, "are attacks on science."**

with his support for alleviation of the AIDS epidemic, but it got a considerable boost from his service as George W. Bush's bioterror czar. He showed a keen interest in strengthening the human immune response to pathogens such as those that cause anthrax and plague. A few years into the Obama administration, one could still encounter Fauci—in a 2011 *Washington Post* op-ed, cosigned by Francis Collins, director of the NIH, and the virologist Gary Nabel—arguing that the benefits of “engineered viruses” made it a “risk worth taking.” Nor did he let up under Trump. At an NIAID conference in 2018, Fauci celebrated the lifting of the “pause” on such research. With govern-

ment in “upstream” control of funding, guidance, and publications, what could go wrong?

Many in the scientific community now suggest that a lab-leak origin of Covid-19 is likelier than a natural one. The virus seems too perfect, it drills into human

tissues so neatly, and no intervening adaptations have been found in nature. Anthony Fauci may be remembered, in the end, as a warning more than an exemplar: an adventurous bureaucrat in the field of scientific research who became a hero in his own eyes. The trouble begins when such a person asks for our implicit trust in return for his good intentions. **N**

**Anthony Fauci may be remembered as a warning more than an exemplar: a bureaucrat who became a hero in his own eyes.**

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## The Front Burner Kali Holloway



### To Be a Problem

*The country's promised “racial reckoning” is turning out to be another white lie.*

**W**ITH INEVITABLE REGULARITY, RACIAL INJUSTICE AND VIOLENCE lead to moments of national conflict when even white Americans can no longer ignore the issue. And just as inevitably, instead of addressing this country's pervasive racism and anti-Blackness, white Americans locate the problem somewhere within Black people themselves.

We're in yet another of those moments, as last summer's promised “racial reckoning” turns out to be a white lie. Black demands for full citizenship and equality are being treated as entitlement, calls for white racial accountability redefined as white persecution, and anti-racism falsely construed as anti-whiteness. To reestablish unchallenged white dominance, a movement of white resistance, or *anti-anti-racism*, is working tirelessly to blot out what it sees as a problematic presence—purging Black folks from democracy by stripping voting rights, erasing Black struggle from history by banning the teaching of slavery and its legacy, and prohibiting protest that threatens the white supremacist status quo.

We can be shocked, but certainly not surprised. This nation has a long history of counterbalancing any move toward Black liberation with the insistence that Black existence is better wholly removed or more tightly controlled. In an 1814 missive addressing the prospect of African American emancipation, Thomas Jefferson advocated for Black expatriation to another country, contending that without the yoke of slavery around their necks, African Americans were “pests in society.” Abraham Lincoln, even as he drafted the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, told a delegation of Black leaders invited to the White House that “your race suffer very greatly... by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence,” and placed the blame for “white men cutting one another's throats” on Black folks requesting equality, claiming “but for your race among us there could not be war.” Lincoln suggested the solution was for Black people to “sacrifice something of your present comfort” by picking up stakes and relocating abroad, an idea the president would support until days before his assassination.

Many would assert that Jefferson and Lincoln were just white “men of their time,” but even as the times have changed, this pervasive white American attitude has not. The Republican Party has gone all-in on attacking critical race theory, labeling it a “dangerous ideology,” “anti-American,” and “a blatant attempt to change the foundational principles of our nation,” despite the fact that no GOP lawmaker seems to know what CRT is. Conservative legislatures are seeking to ban the teaching of structural racism in 22 states, though CRT itself is already not being taught outside of graduate and law schools. The party has taken a similar approach to the 1619 Project, introducing federal

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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues.

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Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country's second largest city.

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bills to defund the teaching of the curriculum to students in grades K-12. Under the guise of anti-riot measures—and to push the idea that protest for Black lives is inherently violent—over 70 bills that criminalize protest have been proposed around the country, including multiple “hit and kill” laws that would effectively make it legal to run over protesters with a car.

Some of this is cynical political calculation. Conservative propagandist Christopher Rufo admitted in March that his “goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.” But that strategy works only because it is easy to stoke white fears of status loss in the face of even the most minor Black progress, an outlook that views Black appeals for equality as a kind of racial overreach. The more Black liberation movements are viewed by conservatives as potentially successful, the more vigorous the reactionary effort to shut them down, to demean them as a threat to the country and, more importantly, white

**Instead of dealing with racism, white Americans locate the issue within Black people themselves.**

feelings. (Note how many of the right-wingers opposing CRT claim it makes children feel bad.) *It's not us, it's you*, in other words.

In 1961, as white parents raged against integration, James Baldwin addressed what motivated their anger: “They do not really know what it is they are afraid of, but they know they are afraid of something, and they are so frightened that they are nearly out of their minds.... We would never, never allow Negroes to starve, to grow bitter, and to die in ghettos all over the country if we were not driven by some nameless fear that has nothing to do with Negroes.”

And here we are again. I noted last September that white support for Black Lives Matter, which surged immediately after George Floyd’s murder, had already fallen precipitously less than two months later. A recent *New York Times* investigation finds that a year later, “Republicans and white people have actually become less supportive of Black Lives Matter than they were before the death of George Floyd—a trend that seems unlikely to reverse anytime soon.” In tandem with that drop-off in support, there’s been a rise in “tough on crime” sentiment, a

reaction to the defund-the-police messaging that gained traction last summer. Never mind that crime is down overall and that the 2020 increases in homicides occurred not only in cities that trimmed police funds—always by tiny amounts that fall far from actual defunding—but also in those that made no cuts to police budgets or poured yet more money into law enforcement.

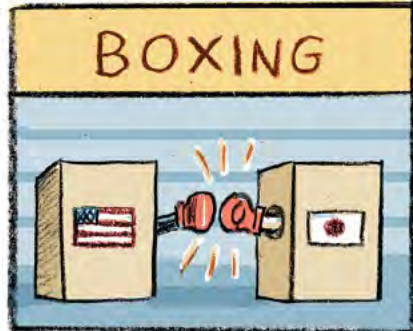
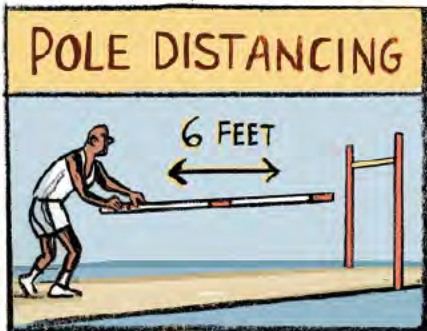
Jennifer Chudy, an assistant professor of political science at Wellesley College who contributed to the *Times* study, expressed skepticism last year that white support for BLM would hold. Recently, noting that white support for Black civil rights correlates with racial sympathy, Chudy said that “less than 20 percent [of white people] feel sympathy towards...every flavor of Black suffering, from microaggression to physical altercations akin to what George Floyd faced.”

And thus, for an awful lot of white Americans, the complications of racism would be solved if Black people would stop complaining about it. If only we’d all just go along to get along, things would feel a lot better. Nearly 120 years ago, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois addressed the query that is almost never overtly posed to Black folks but is always embedded in the national understanding of race: “How does it feel to be a problem?” It remains the wrong question. **N**



OPPART/PETER KUPER

**SAFE OLYMPIC EVENTS**



# Which Is the More Prescient Dystopia?

## *Gattaca*

DAVID M. PERRY

**A** LITTLE LESS THAN HALFWAY THROUGH the 1997 film *Gattaca*, Irene (Uma Thurman) steals a strand of hair from the desk of a coworker she knows as Jerome (Ethan Hawke), and takes it to an all-night DNA testing booth, passing a woman who is having her lips swabbed just five minutes after kissing her date. A few seconds later, the technician gives Irene her answer: “Nine-point-three—quite a catch.” But 9.3 of what? How does her printout of amino acids translate to a scale of 1 to 10, a “genetic quotient” that leads the technician to think her boyfriend is a catch?

After nearly a quarter century, *Gattaca* has aged disturbingly well. The New Zealand writer and director Andrew Niccol crafted a noir dystopian thriller of a society trapped by eugenic ideology and ubiquitous biometric surveillance. Those with poor GQ are deemed “in-valid” and condemned to a life of poverty, drudgery, and crime. But those with good GQ also measure themselves against impossible standards, believing that their DNA determines what they should be able to do, and they plunge into depression, suicidality, and self-sabotage when they’re unable to meet expectations. Today, as we charge into an age of biotechnology, the film feels especially prescient, providing a benchmark against which to compare our trajectory. Our capacity for both genetic manipulation and biometric assessment is advancing, but we have not improved our ability to hold conversations about genetics, disability, or even abstractions like the relationship between probability and outcomes. I worry that our *Gattaca* future is nigh.

The hair fiber may have scored a 9.3 GQ, but it doesn’t come from Hawke’s character, whose real name is Vincent. Vincent is an in-valid, a child conceived in the back seat of a Buick and allowed to develop as nature sees fit. He’s got a 99 percent chance of developing a heart condition, and his life expectancy is 30 years. He’s also brilliant and wants to be an astronaut, but he has no chance of passing the genetic screening for a space gig at the Gattaca Aerospace Corporation. So he engages in a criminal conspiracy with the real Jerome (Jude Law). Jerome was genetically engineered to near perfection, becoming a champion swimmer and a silver medalist in the Olympics before suffering a spinal injury in a car crash. (Later we find out that Jerome, unable to tolerate being second best, had stepped in front of the car. It’s the rare disability-suicide

## *Parable of the Sower*

NIELA ORR

**T** HE EVENTS IN OCTAVIA E. BUTLER’S 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* presage this moment of mass shootings, global warming, en masse migration from California, a pandemic that throws into relief rampant structural inequities, widespread drug abuse, and a presidential candidate who campaigned on returning the country to a sense of so-called normalcy. (In the book’s sequel, 1998’s *Parable of the Talents*, one politician promises to “Make America Great Again.”) When the novel was published, it was set 31 years in the future. The gap between the version of life Butler imagined and the one we’re living in is closing.

*Parable of the Sower* tells the story of activist Lauren Oya Olamina, who is 15 when the book begins and lives in an increasingly destabilized Southern California with her minister father, her stepmother, and her four brothers. Like other micro-communities in their Los Angeles County town, the Olaminas and a handful of other families live behind a wall to escape looting, murder, sexual assault, drug abuse, arson, and corporate slavery. Responding to her environment, Lauren has already started to develop Earthseed, the spiritual philosophy she creates based on the notion that “God is change.” She lives with a condition called hyperempathy, which causes her to become ill when she vicariously experiences the suffering of others. It is perhaps this hyperempathy that makes Lauren so attuned to the impending doom around the corner (literally, for her and her compound). She seems to be the most worried person in her community and suggests that people refine their emergency preparedness for a series of catastrophic events. She reads history books to fortify herself; in a conversation with a friend, Lauren underscores the significance of the Black Death in the 14th century, saying, “It took a plague to make some of the people realize that things could change.” Eventually her suspicions come true, and Lauren leads a band of travelers to Northern California in search of freedom, paying jobs, and affordable water.

In a present-day America that’s reeling from the toll of the pandemic, the War on Drugs, the prison-industrial complex, reproductive oppression, and weakened labor unions and that is constantly threatened by white supremacy, the cowardice of career politicians, and the avarice of the wealthy, the lessons of *Parable of the Sower* have practical application. The principles of Martine and Bina Aspen Rothblatt’s Terasem Movement (founded in 2002), which focuses

The Debate

plot point that places the blame on society rather than on disability.) Jerome makes a deal to provide Vincent with hair, blood, urine, and skin samples in exchange for a portion of Vincent's salary. The fraud works. Vincent becomes a navigator, but before he can launch into space, the mission director at Gattaca is murdered. A manhunt ensues, the cops find an eyelash from Vincent himself, and the movie rolls forward.

It's a pretty good plot. Vincent has a genetically engineered younger brother, Anton, against whom the naturally conceived in-valid measures himself, a tension that plays out in adulthood. Vincent helps Irene realize that even if she's not perfect according to the charts (she's "valid," but no 9.3), she can do more than she realizes. But it's not the plot that's made the story endure; rather, it's the film's vision of the world.

The premises of *Gattaca* feel real not just because its characters espouse long-held eugenic principles in the development of prenatal testing and genetic engineering technologies but because the movie pairs those ideologies with surveillance. It's one thing to have an ableist viewpoint about the value of people, another to have the technology for genetic engineering, and yet a third to build a society around the routine penetration of the body to extract blood, urine,

and saliva and measure it against a universal database.

The film isn't perfect. Aside from the presence of a Black geneticist and a few extras, its world is extremely white, and I don't think that's an accident. As we watch Vincent embark on his early career as a janitor, he provides narration about the times, saying, "I belong to a new underclass, no longer

determined by social status or the color of your skin. No, we now have discrimination down to a science." That's nonsense. Ableism and eugenics intersect with racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. Inventing new forms of discrimination does not erase the old ones.

Still, a single film, like a single essay, doesn't have to do everything. Make no mistake, our *Gattaca* future is coming; the technology can't be held back. What we must do now is work to undermine the eugenicist ideologies that will lead those technologies to cause increasingly greater harm. And that's where this movie comes in. When I talk to people about designing babies, I often get assurances that discrimination against kids like mine—my son has Down syndrome and is autistic—is bad, but where's the problem in trying to create advantages, to alleviate burdens? *Gattaca*, however, makes the case that you cannot design your way to happiness and that trying to do so will build a world ever less free—even for those who achieve high marks in GQ, IQ, or whatever other rubric we use to mismeasure potential.

David M. Perry is a journalist and historian. He is a coauthor of *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe*.

> P E R R Y

> O R R

## The Debate

on nanotechnology and cyber-consciousness, were inspired by the book's Earthseed philosophy. adrienne maree brown's 2017 manual *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* was also influenced by Earthseed. Since last spring, Tananarive Due and Monica Coleman have hosted a series of webinars called "Octavia Tried to Tell Us: Parable for Today's Pandemic," in which Butler scholars explore the context and imaginative implications of the book's predictions. In an October 2020 interview in *The Believer*, writer and housing attorney Rasheedah Phillips advised people interested in envisioning survival to start with Butler. "She is the person who prepared me, to the extent that I am prepared for this," Phillips said.

Yet it is not only because of its pragmatism that *Parable of the Sower* should be considered the more prescient dystopia; it also ingeniously foresaw movements in today's culture to recenter marginalized groups, including young Black girls and women; Indigenous communities, whose botanical and nutritional insights are crucial to the survival of Lauren and her band; and youth, of which the Earthseed collective is mainly composed. Lauren is a fictional forerunner to courageous young people like Darnella Frazier, X González, Greta Thunberg, and the late Erica Garner.

Perhaps the biggest indication of *Parable of the Sower's* foresight is its understanding that as powerful as empathy is, it's not enough (Namwali Serpell's *New York Review of Books* essay "The Banality of Empathy" is also useful in articulating this idea). When Lauren's lover suggests that it might benefit society if most people had her hyperempathy, Lauren calls the notion a "bad idea." "You must know how disabling real pain can be," she insists. Just as hyperempathy is not enough to save Lauren, it won't be enough to save us. Empathy takes courage, compassion, and an interest in alterity, and many people in her world and ours lack those qualities. But art, at least, can prompt us to think critically. Like empathy, critical thinking requires compassion and a desire to move past pretense toward truth.

Here again, *Parable of the Sower* is telling. "Use your imagination," Lauren tells a friend. "Any kind of survival information from encyclopedias, biographies, anything that helps you learn to live off the land and defend ourselves. Even some fiction might be useful." And the novel has been. But as Lauren learns, reading is only the first step. Explaining her impetus to move beyond studying, Lauren tells someone from her old neighborhood, "I thought something would happen someday. I didn't know how bad it would be or when it would come. But everything was getting worse: the climate, the economy, crime, drugs, you know." Yeah, I do know—and all of that requires thoughtful action now.

Niela Orr is a deputy editor of *The Believer* and a fellow at the Black Mountain Institute.

**Make no mistake, our *Gattaca* future is coming; the technology can't be held back.**

**Art, at least, can prompt us to think critically. Like empathy, critical thinking requires compassion.**





SNAPSHOT/Stephanie Keith

## Pride of Place

Henry Arango, aka Adrian, in Tompkins Square Park before the 27th annual Drag March in New York City on June 25. The 93-year-old dancer fled Cuba in 1956 and got a job at the storied Club 82, where he performed as the biblical temptress Salome for such stars as Elizabeth Taylor and Errol Flynn. He cheered on the Stonewall uprising in 1969 and marched in the first Pride parade a year later.

### By the Numbers



**121°F**

Temperature reached in the town of Lytton, British Columbia, on June 29, the highest ever recorded in Canada

**90%**

Estimated percentage of Lytton destroyed by wildfire on June 30

**99.8%**

Percentage of the world that was cooler than Portland, Ore., on June 27, when the city hit 112°F, a record that lasted one day

**108°F**

Temperature in Seattle on June 28, an all-time high

**56%**

Percentage of homes in Seattle without air conditioning, the highest of any US city

**59M**

Number of people affected by drought in the western US

**45%**

Percentage by which greenhouse gas emissions must be cut from 2010 levels by 2030 to hold temperature rise to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels

CALVIN TRILLIN  
**DeadlinePoet**

### Kim Jong Un Drops Some Weight

So Kim Jong Un is looking rather svelte.

He's lost at least four notches on his belt.

Has illness or a diet made him trim?

Have shortages of food reached even Kim?

Not yet. But if that threat becomes more credible,

He'll find in time that missiles are inedible.

# UTOPIA

Allows Us to Dream Together



Views from nowhere: Holbein's portrait of Sir Thomas More, currently on view at the Frick Collection, was commissioned in 1527.

## A map of the world without Utopia tells us little about where we want to go—and even less about where we are now.

JEET HEER

**U**TOPIA AND DYSTOPIA ARE TWINS, BORN AT THE SAME MOMENT from the shared ancestry of social critique. Although remembered as the first modern attempt to systematically imagine an ideal society, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) began with a stark portrait of a Europe torn apart by war and crushing poverty, with the shocking prediction that if the enclosure of farmland continued, soon sheep would be eating people. This horrifying prospect made it urgent to look for an alternative, which More sketches out as an egalitarian, communal society of shared property.

More's utopian hopes were balanced by his dystopian fears, with a new sense of human agency in the making of history leading to possibilities both hopeful and dire. In the half-millennium since More wrote, countless others have trodden both paths, painting scenarios of either earthly paradises or human-created hells.

The equipoise More achieved has been lost in our own era, in which our fantasy life is overburdened with dystopian nightmares and the utopian impulse is only faintly heard. In his 1994 book *The Seeds of Time*, the literary theorist Fredric Jameson mournfully reflected that "it seems to be easier for us to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness of our imagination."

Jameson saw this cramped, blighted imaginative inability to conceive of positive systemic change as one of the hallmarks of post-modernism. The past few decades have proven him prophetic, as the dystopian imagination became ever more dominant in our culture. Frightening (and all too plausible) stories of climate catastrophe, pandemics, and rising authoritarianism thread their way through newsca-

and popular fiction. Whether it's Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, or countless zombie movies, we have no shortage of ways of imagining the end of the world: nuclear war, rising oceans, biotech gone mad, totalitarian dictatorship. What's lacking is any positive road map for building a better world.

**T**HE UTOPIAN IMPULSE IS CONTROVERSIAL ACROSS THE political spectrum. Margaret Thatcher brutally summed up the conservative ethos by saying "There is no alternative." If Thatcher was right, then utopian speculation is feckless and doomed to failure. And some on the left would agree. Karl Marx consistently used "utopian socialism" as a term of abuse, referring to airy thinkers like Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon who drew up blueprints for ideal societies without considering as Marx himself tried to do, the actual historical dynamics and conjuncture of forces that could realistically bring about change



Scientific socialism, Marx insisted, was superior to utopian socialism. In that same spirit, the radical international relations scholar Immanuel Wallerstein, in his 1998 book *Utopistics*, warned that "utopias are breeders of illusions and therefore, inevitably, of disillusion. And utopias can be used, have been used, as justifications for terrible wrongs. The last thing we really need is still more utopian visions."

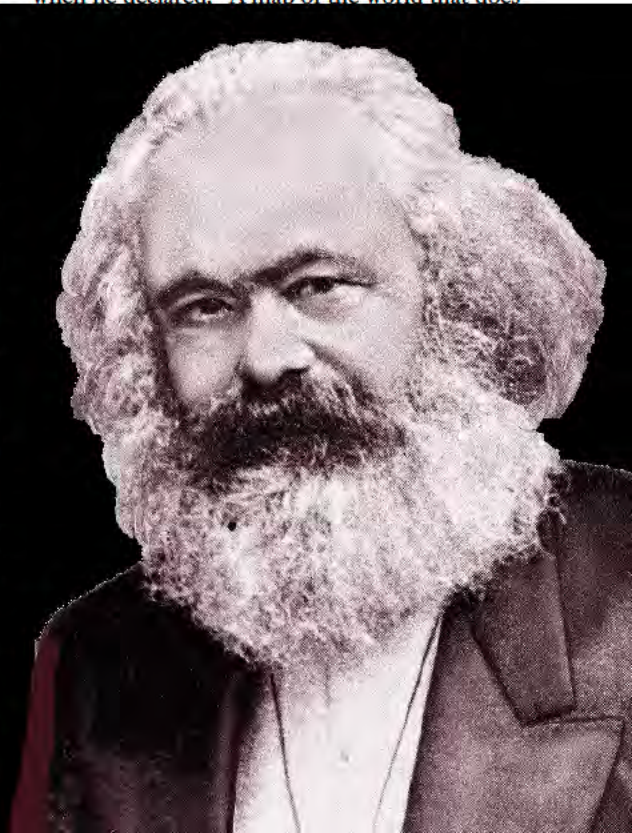
**A**GAINST BOTH MARX AND WALLERSTEIN, there's a venerable tradition of radical thinkers who have tried to redeem the idea of utopia in Marxist terms by insisting that the hope of a better society keeps social agitation alive. Jameson is perhaps the greatest living exemplar of this tradition. In a 2004 essay in *New Left Review*, Jameson insisted, "It is difficult enough to imagine any radical political program today without the conception of systemic otherness, of an alternate society, which only the idea of utopia seems to keep alive, however feebly."

A utopian imagination isn't sufficient in and of itself to build a better world, but it's an essential prerequisite. Oscar Wilde expressed it best in his essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) when he declared, "A map of the world that does

**"Utopias can be used, have been used, as justifications for terrible wrongs. The last thing we really need is still more utopian visions."**

—Immanuel Wallerstein

**Disputed territory:** Though Karl Marx (bottom right) used "utopian" as a term of abuse, the literary theorist Fredric Jameson (top right) argues that the utopian imagination is essential to human liberation.



**“It is difficult enough to imagine any radical political program today without the conception...of an alternate society, which only the idea of utopia seems to keep alive.”**

—Fredric Jameson

**Early warning:**

Before the Chinese or Russian revolutions, Kang Youwei (top right) wrote *The Great Consonance*, foreshadowing both. His Irish contemporary Oscar Wilde (bottom right) imagined “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.”

not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.”

History bears out Wilde’s conceit. The genre of utopian fiction, born of frustration during periods of thwarted promise, is a uniquely sensitive barometer of historical change. People start writing utopias when they feel discontented with the existing order—what Jameson identifies as the moment of stillness before the eruption of the revolutionary storm.

Building on Jameson’s work, the historian Perry Anderson, also writing in *New Left Review*, argued:

There is little doubt that this has indeed been a recurrent pattern. More’s own *Utopia*, in 1516, preceded the outbreak of the Reformation that convulsed Europe, and consumed More himself, by less than a year. The next cluster of significant utopias—Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (1623), Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627) and Robert Burton’s idiosyncratic digression in *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621–38)—appeared in the period before the outbreak of the English Civil War and the Neapolitan Uprising of

the 17th century. The greatest utopian reverie of the 18th century, Diderot’s *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1772), was written a generation before the French Revolution. In the 19th century, too, the remarkable set of utopian fictions in the last years of the century—Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), Morris’s reply in *News from Nowhere* (1890), Hertzka’s *Freiland* (also 1890), to which we might add, as a pendant from the Far East, Kang Youwei’s *Great Consonance* (1888–1902)—precede the turbulences of 1905–11 in Russia and China, the outbreak of the First World War, and the October Revolution.

A further example is the utopian speculations of Frankfurt School Marxists like T.W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and Herbert Marcuse during the 1940s and ’50s, works that were early premonitions of the upheavals of the ’60s. Periods of revolution themselves, Anderson added, are accompanied by an efflorescence of utopian writing. The ’60s and ’70s were no exception to this rule, witnessing the last great burst of the utopian tradition in the feminist and queer speculative writings of Shulamith Firestone, Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, and Marge Piercy. We are still living through some of what these writers imagined.

Even after the utopian firestorm of the ’60s and ’70s died out, there were a few significant embers in the science fiction of Stanley Kim Robinson, who imagined an ecologically sustainable California in one of the greatest of modern utopias, *Pacific Edge* (1990). Not by accident, Robinson had done his doctoral thesis, on the fiction of Philip K. Dick, under Jameson.

What do we lose by giving up the utopian imagination? The political scientist Lyman Tower Sargent describes utopian thinking as “social dreaming.” Utopias teach us to dream collectively, to sharpen our imagination, to demand more, to ask if the injustices of the world really need to exist—or if we can figure out how to junk them.



One of Jameson’s crucial arguments is that utopias don’t offer simple blueprints to be executed but function rather as diagnostic tools for figuring out what is wrong with society. Mutually exclusive utopian proposals can

still serve the same end of exposing the insufficiency of existing society. Jameson’s preferred utopia of universal employment might seem at odds with Marcuse’s scheme for universal leisure. But both proposals are meant to highlight the monstrosity of a system that ties survival to employment and maintains a reserve army of the jobless.

The function of utopia, Jameson argued in his 2004 essay, “lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined.”

One of the most hopeful signs of the present moment is that for the first time since the 1970s, the utopian imagination is reviving. Once-lonely voices like Robinson and Jameson are now being joined by a younger chorus calling for a universal basic income, a Green New Deal, open borders, a super TVA to modernize America’s infrastructure, and abolition of police and prisons, among other utopian schemes. Not all will pan out—nor do they need to. The utopian impulse exists to spark discomfort with the status quo and agitation.

Where it ends no one can know, because all social progress is made from the bottom up, with people hammering out alternatives amid the conflicts of political life. But the energy to create those alternatives wouldn’t exist without utopian dreams. **N**



# GAMES

## My Own Private Utopia

In my *Sims* universe, I am a helpful genie whose goal is to make everybody as happy as possible.

ELIE MYSTAL



TO THE UNTRAINED EYE, VIDEO GAMES CAN look like violence pornography for frustrated youths. Most games revolve around killing and gunplay (“combat” in the parlance of the industry). You can slay monsters, massacre aliens, or find a game that

gives you a very big gun and very many cops to mow down if they stand in your way. The more cerebral “strategy” games revolve around concepts of war and battle. And even “kid-friendly” hits like *Minecraft* still have modes that give the player lots of enemies to kill. To some, video games can look like a dystopian mirror that reflects all of the ills of our violent, decaying culture.

To me, video games are an escapist utopian fantasy. That’s because they give me something I can’t get nearly enough of in real life: control. I get to choose which conflicts I engage in and how I resolve them. My choices are limited only by the rules of the game, not the inane vagaries of late-republic American life. Take a game like the oft-maligned *Grand Theft Auto*. Yes, the cops might hunt me in the game, which is not all that different from real life. But in the game, I have control over whether they get me. I can escape their attention simply by hiding or maybe by getting a quick new paint job on my car. And that is a comforting fantasy. In the real world, I cannot so easily change my color to avoid the ire of law enforcement.

**Elie’s World:** Mystal’s *Sims 4* avatar, up close and in his backyard. Technically, the avatar is the grandson of Mystal’s original character in the game.

Still, as utopian control fantasies go, I’m not really into the shooters. After a long day of fighting Republicans in real life, I don’t always feel like fighting with hobgoblins in a game, even though the digital versions are at least bound by rules and artificial logic. So the game I keep coming back to, for well over a decade now, is the one that gives me ultimate control over every little detail of my virtual life: *The Sims*.

*The Sims* came out in 2000 and is, at core, a digital dollhouse. You make people—Sims—and dress them up and then move them into houses and dress up the houses and then watch the Sims do very important things like go to work and cook dinner. The player can place hurdles for the Sims to overcome (often a deep pool with no ladder) or grant them favors (like a working toilet). They get married, have children, grow old, and die, all with a little prodding from the



player. The “game” essentially involves acting as a deity (a slightly creepy voyeuristic deity) who watches them live out their lives.

When I first played the game (*The Sims* was succeeded by *The Sims 2* in 2004, which was a megahit and the first version I played), I was really into the architectural design aspects of the game. I was all about environmental determinism and basically tried to force my Sims to behave the way I wanted them to by imposing structural limitations on their living spaces. I was also, in real life, living in a series of cramped Manhattan apartments and working at a job I hated, and I didn’t think my Sim-self deserved to be any happier than I was. I reacted with glee when a Sim based on my best friend tried to

tend to his little Sim garden in the rain and was struck by lightning and died. (Sorry, bro.) That's how my world was: cramped, wet, and punishing to those who dared to try. I appreciated the game's accuracy.

By the time the current version of the game, *The Sims 4*, came out in 2014, my circumstances were much different. I had one kid, another on the way, a job I was actually good at, and a house outside the city. Oh, life was still nasty, brutish, and not nearly short enough. But I wanted to think that the world could be a better place than it demonstrably was. And so I started construction on my *Sims* utopia.

The organizing principle of my world is that everyone must be as happy as possible. My new architectural designs are big, airy, and green. I'm no longer an angry god, but a helpful genie. The game gives your Sims certain desires based on their personalities, and I try to be a wish-fulfillment machine. No more getting struck by lightning for trying to garden. In fact, I've turned the rain off completely. (I kept the snow because the Sim kids like it.)

I also tightly curate my community. I picked a neighborhood and moved all the prepackaged Sims out. I moved my Sim family and Sim friends in. I have to be around Sims that I want to be happy, after all. No Republicans are allowed in my game. I've even deleted the files of prepackaged Sims that give me any kind of Republican vibe. (There's a family called the Landgraabs, and I put them right in the dustbin.)

The friends I do put in the game are people I really like in real life, people I'm happy to be reminded of as my Sim-self jogs through town. During Covid-19, *The Sims* is as close as I've gotten to "getting the band back together." I even made us a bar. I'd blow my entire entertainment budget for a year if the game got a *Rock Band* expansion so we could all play music together.

Which isn't to say there's no drama. Utopia would be boring if there were no opportunity for conflict. I know that because I have one version of the game where aging is turned off, nobody gets old, and nobody ever dies. What I realized was that version of my town was boring. Immortality meant that nothing ever mattered. There was no thrill from getting a promotion or learning a new skill, because everybody had time to do everything anyway. Turns out, living forever is the death of fun.

In my current game, people grow old and die. I'm actually on the fourth generation of my "family." My world is much browner and, well, gayer than what I started with. That's just what happens when you let Sims flirt with whomever they want and marry people who share their interests. But I do occasionally have to add a family I don't personally know just to decrease the chances of inbreeding: So, the Obamas are in my game. Sasha grew up and married my grandson. I'm buried in their backyard.

Frankly, I couldn't write a better utopian postscript for myself: a founding member of a brown, gay, rainless world that banished Republicans who is buried under the kiddie swing of his progeny.

It's a little bit counterintuitive and sneakily authoritarian, but having enough control over the system so that people can be allowed to do whatever makes them happy is my biggest utopian kink. Sometimes, I just need the terrible world to leave me alone with my dolls. **N**

# DISABLE

## Crippling



**Blind spot:** Geordi La Forge is one of *Star Trek's* few disabled characters.

**Society can benefit from conjuring worlds that model diversity and inclusion.**

s.e. SMITH

# BILITY

## Utopia to Save It

IMAGINING BETTER WORLDS CAN HELP US IMPROVE our own, but literary and cinematic utopias often exclude those who don't fit into what are usually racially and culturally homogeneous societies. And whether it's 1516 or 2016, utopian thinkers are especially prone to leaving out one group whose experiences and insights should enrich our dreams of the future: the disability community.

For centuries, utopias have presented disability as a personal shortcoming to be remedied, not as an identity to be supported and celebrated. A disability in a utopia is socially undesirable—a cause of suffering that does not belong in a place where wholeness of body and spirit is prized. The disability community, however, has a very different view of itself. And understanding what a more inclusive utopia entails shouldn't just inform attitudes about what constitutes an ideal society; it should shape the way communities approach disability in the real world.

The exclusion of disability from utopias reflects long-standing social attitudes. Throughout much of Western history, disabled people were sequestered, either in institutions or at home. Disability wasn't a topic of discussion in polite society, except in the context of charitable activities. When characters with a disability or an illness do appear in utopian worlds, as in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), they serve as plot devices that help develop the nondisabled characters around them. More's denizens find pleasure and fulfillment in caring for the sick, of whom we learn nothing. Rarely, as in a text like Sarah Scott's *A Description of Millennium Hall and the Country Adjacent* (1762), the authors deal directly with disability and its policy implications. Scott proposes that disabled people should be treated with dignity and respect, not exploited and housed in workhouses, a sentiment that is unfortunately still radical.

The mere nonexistence of disabled people wasn't enough for writers like H.G. Wells and Edward Bellamy; for them, that absence was a desirable consequence of eugenics, a movement they enthusiastically supported. Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) positioned crime as an illness, at one point stating that "all cases of atavism are treated in the hospitals," reflecting the belief that genetics determined criminality. Wells revisited eugenic and utopian themes over and over in his work, writing in 1901 that society should "check the procreation of base and servile types, of fear-driven and

cowardly souls, of all that is mean and ugly and bestial." He also noted that people with impairments and mental illnesses should be killed or not permitted to "propagate." Many feminists of the era were also proponents: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) envisioned a harmonious society without men, where eugenics could hone the women of Herland to perfection.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, utopian fiction advertised the idea that it was possible to mold better people through the judicious application of breeding, sterilization, and euthanasia. Popularized by texts like Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), which imagined humans evolving into a twisted and vile race called the Morlocks, eugenics took hold in England and the United States. But the ideas didn't stay there. American works on eugenics influenced the Nazis, who deployed utopian thinking with tragic consequences.

UTOPIAN ERASURE OF DISABILITY TAKES MANY forms beyond crude eugenics. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Starfleet officer Geordi La Forge is blind—but his VISOR (an acronym for Visual Instrument and Sensory Organ Replacement) and later ocular implants negate his disability. He, in fact, has better vision than his sighted colleagues. Even then, La Forge is one of the few disabled characters in the franchise, a reminder that in this longed-for future, disability is no longer a problem, whether genetic, the result of an accident, or the cost of war. That's seen to striking effect with Captain Christopher Pike, who first appears in the *Star Trek* universe as a wheelchair user but, in a forthcoming spin-off that begins before he is injured, is able-bodied. *Star Trek* has had diverse casts, but it has largely failed to include disability within that diversity.

Science fiction also raises the prospect of using technologies like CRISPR to edit the human genome and thereby eliminate genetic disabilities. The dystopian film *Gattaca* (1997)—whose name is derived from the four nucleotide bases of DNA: guanine, adenine, thymine, and cytosine—illustrates the dangers of humanity's hunger for genetic engineering. The film is set in a society with widespread prenatal gene editing, but Vincent Freeman (Ethan Hawke) was conceived naturally and faces discrimination. As an "in-valid," he chases his dream of going to the stars. *Gattaca* asks the viewer to consider the costs of a eugenic utopia, challenging rhetoric about the promise of genetic modification by taking it to a logical extreme.

The world of *Gattaca* isn't necessarily far off. Some advocates fear genetic testing and editing may make Down syndrome, dwarfism, autism (which hasn't been decisively linked to any specific genes), and numerous other impairments and identities things of the past. In a sense, the goal of some nondisabled-led disability organizations is ostensibly utopian: building a better world by eradicating disability. For example, Autism Speaks, an organization that purports to represent the



**The visible man:** H.G. Wells popularized eugenics in his utopian-themed science fiction books.

s.e. smith is a journalist based in Northern California who focuses on disability, culture, gender issues, and rural America.

## To conceptualize what disability in utopia might look like, it's critical to understand disability as an identity rather than an adverse life experience.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. concluded that the state has a compelling interest in forcibly sterilizing disabled people, infamously writing in *Buck v. Bell* that “three generations of idiots are enough.” Devaluing disabled lives did not stop there. During the coronavirus pandemic, care rationing of ventilators and some kinds of treatment targeted disabled people—some of whom, like Sarah McSweeney in Oregon, died because of it. Additionally, euthanasia continues to be pushed on the disability community by some proponents of “right to die” legislation who imply that disability alone is grounds for physician-assisted suicide.

“Are you fit?": A movie poster for the 1934 film *Tomorrow's Children*, which criticized the legal eugenic practices of the era.

TO CONCEPTUALIZE WHAT DISABILITY IN UTOPIA might look like, it's critical to understand disability as an identity rather than an adverse life experience, as the noted science fiction author and visionary MacArthur Fellowship recipient Octavia Butler did with hyper-empathy syndrome in *Parable of the Sower* (1993). *Sower* is the first in a two-book series that presciently

takes on climate change and economic inequality, featuring a young woman, Lauren, who feels the emotions of those around her, such as pain or fear. She escapes into the world of her mind, developing the beginnings of a religion, Earthseed. While her disability is only one element of Lauren's intense experiences, it's an important part of who she is and how she relates to the world.

Disabled people can and do lead fulfilling, rewarding lives—sometimes because of the disability, not in spite of it. Their experiences are diverse: Not all disabled people feel the same way—many do want to be cured or do not view disability as something to celebrate. It's a big community: About 26 percent of Americans live with an impairment that affects the way they interact with the world, and with long Covid and PTSD originating in traumatic climate events, those ranks are swelling.

Disability culture is lively, complex, and integral to society. But even talented writers and filmmakers struggle to envision how disability might manifest itself in a utopian society. Utopia, they reason, should have ramps and elevators, way-finding tools for blind and low-vision people, and interpreters for the Deaf community. This future is much like the present, but with broader doorways. It is the kind of policy-centric utopia seen in Adolf Ratzka's 1998 short story “Crip Utopia,” which depicts a world in which everything is accessible and no one needs to fight for elevators or file repeated insurance appeals.

Focusing on accommodations, however, leaves out more visionary possibilities. In addition to physical access, one might consider emotional access, or what Mia Mingus terms “access intimacy,” which she defines as “that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs.” It is a much deeper approach than merely adding ramps. It recognizes access as a complicated, evolving need that may interact with other aspects of someone's identity and experience; for example, a Black woman who develops PTSD after witnessing police violence may experience triggers in ways that vary depending on where she is, feeling safer in

Black spaces than white ones or needing more support in environments that remind her of her traumatic experience. It is a fundamental element of “cripspace”: spaces curated by and for the disability community, with the needs of disabled visitors emphasized.

A utopian crip-space captivated viewers of Nicole Newnham and James LeBrecht's Oscar-nominated *Crip Camp* (Netflix, 2020), which provided a lively, intimate, and disability-centric glimpse into the independent-living movement. The film revolves around Camp Jened, a summer camp for disabled youth where disability is embraced, welcomed, and honored rather than simply being accommodated, a revolutionary experience for people who may have spent their whole lives feeling shut out. Such spaces can be intimidating for nondisabled people, who are not accustomed to being in environments that do not cater to their needs and expectations, let alone those that celebrate disability instead of hiding from it. This is a striking reversal of the usual narrative, and thus, in its own way, is a utopia for disabled people who want to be the heroes of their own narratives, not plot devices in others'.

A crip-space is an environment that pushes back on cultural attitudes about disability; it is a room where disability is at the center of the conversation, one where all participants strive to make sure everyone is included. That may involve making way for a wheelchair or ensuring that someone can see the sign language interpreter, but it also includes honoring differing lived experiences of disability and holding space for one another. Crip-spaces do not just

respect disability identity. Race, gender, sexuality, class, parenting status, adoptee experience, and more are considered in a crip-space, and their interactions with disability are acknowledged.

The crip-space engages with difference in a way that can and should inform utopias, which typically function by eliminating difference. The consequences of things like “colorblind” ideology are both painful and obvious in the present moment but are

ignored in visions of the future. The crip-space knows what society struggles to understand: Pretending that differences do not exist does not eliminate them; it just shuts people out.

In a culture where disability is unwelcome, its presence in utopia may be unsettling to some, but society can benefit from conjuring worlds that model diversity and inclusion, where differences are celebrated rather than flattened. **N**





# CULTS

## The Negative Image



**Family portrait:** Jim Jones, founder of the Peoples Temple, with his wife, Marceline, their adopted children, his sister-in-law, and her three children, California, 1976.

**In our flattened historical imagination, pictures of atrocity and those of progress can coincide in unsettling ways.**

**JAY CASPIAN KANG**

**A**T FIRST GLANCE, THERE DOES SEEM TO BE something a bit out of touch, even menacing, about the scene. A small gathering of white people kneel before a Black man and woman seated on a park bench. Some of the white people appear to be washing the man's and woman's feet. A white woman in a red shirt strolls around with a megaphone intoning, "Repent on behalf of, uh, Caucasian people." She then pulls over three people in what appear to be first-responder and police uniforms, who take a knee in what looks like an act of deep penitence.

From the pavement, a man with a British accent leads the group through a prayer. "We stand here confessing...repenting for our aggression, repenting for our pride...for thinking we are better, that we are above."

The captions tell you that the Black people are "protesters" and the white people are white people, and that this is happening in Cary, N.C., which doesn't mean much to the vast majority of the audience watching this minute-long clip on their phones. The protests are national, which means this scene could happen anywhere, and what it shows reflects not on specific cities or people but rather on "the movement" as a whole. By the time it becomes clear these are church people and this ritual is a religious tradition and not some inevitable metastasizing of identity politics, wokeness, or critical race theory, the clip has already projected a vision of the future

*Jay Caspian Kang is a writer at large for The New York Times Magazine and the author of the upcoming book The Loneliest Americans.*

## The visual history of dissent in America has always been carefully edited.

**Preaching his gospel:** Jim Jones speaks at a rally in San Francisco, April 1976.

ty, Martin Luther King Jr. at the March on Washington, Gandhi sitting cross-legged in the dust—from the bad. These categories are under a slow but constant negotiation. In my lifetime, Muhammad Ali and Harvey Milk went from being lightning rods for controversy to achieving a type of American sainthood. Their iconography comes in the form of stirring photographs and video clips that gesture toward the ideals we say we hold.

These saints serve a dual, seemingly contradictory function: They personalize political action by showing that you, too, can change the world, but they also build boundaries around the political imagination. In my high school history class, we learned that Harriet Tubman was good and John Brown was bad. No explanation was provided, nor was it necessary. Tubman always looked serene and determined; Brown, wild-haired and seditious. We might not have been able to articulate the difference, but we were taught to know it when we saw it. All of this, of course, predates the Internet.

Nowadays, those litigations seem to take place in real time without any coherence or narrative. Every day, we see some image or footage that convinces us that we have entered a new era, which then triggers demands to see the unedited version, which in turn reveals some truth to someone else. This is not a new phenomenon, but the speed of associations and the manic need to separate good dissent from bad dissent has paradoxically inspired mass acts of forgetting. When everything is just like some other historical thing, nothing is remembered for what it actually was.

Two abstractions battle it out: the world the protesters want, and the equally utopian, thoroughly scrubbed history in which every “good” revolution took place without a drop of blood shed or an inelegant phrase uttered. For the latter, history does not provide context or clarity. Instead, it works as a polemic that obscures anything that

filled with bizarre rites, inversions of the social order, and a multicultural coalition of weird people acting out an expression of white guilt.

The obvious points of comparison here are the icons of the burned-out radical '70s, whether the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Weather Underground, or, most dramatically, Jonestown. In these viral fantasies, the foot wash-

ers of Cary become the congregation of Jim Jones's Peoples Temple. The water is always Kool-Aid, even when the metaphor doesn't quite fit.

**H**ISTORY ON THE INTERNET GETS DELIBERATED IN TWO ways: Someone is always telling you that nothing like this has ever happened before, while someone else says that actually, this thing happens all the time. (Right now, I can hear people protesting, “But that's how history has always worked.”) There's no reason to litigate whether this compulsion is a good thing or a bad thing—for better or worse, it's where we are—but we can, at the very least, trace the paths these types of argument take. Whether it was a bizarre ritual or a perhaps clumsy and too earnestly stated commitment to anti-racism, this event has certain symmetries with other things that happened in the past.

Those who say “This is how it's always been” are right about one thing: The visual history of dissent in America has always been carefully edited. From a young age, we are indoctrinated through images that separate the good—the Boston Tea Par-

does not sync up with the edited reel of saints: Gandhi in rags, King at the March on Washington, John Lewis taking his first steps across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

**J**UST MONTHS BEFORE THEY SET OFF FOR the jungles of Guyana, Jim Jones and the congregation of the Peoples Temple stood in front of the International Hotel in San Francisco, a single-resident-occupancy building in what was then called Manilatown. Stripped of context, the images from that night could serve as a type of nostalgia porn for the radical '70s. The fight to save the hotel and its population of mostly impoverished, elderly Filipino men had been taken up by a coalition of Asian American, gay, and student activists. The Peoples Temple, whose congregation was mostly Black, provided foot soldiers for a prolonged confrontation. When the police finally arrived to evict the tenants, they were met by a multiracial, working-class coalition who put their bodies on the line to save housing for the indigent.

Everyone knows the plot twist at Jonestown. The set-up is assumed: A charismatic leader entices nearly a thousand impressionable young people to follow him into the jungle. The center does not hold. Nine hundred bodies are laid out for the obligatory helicopter shot. All the other gaps are filled in with the assumption that all the

things Jones preached, whether apocalyptic gospel, communism, or equality among the races, will go bad when taken to extremes. This may well be the correct way to think about Jones, a mass murderer who led a mostly Black congregation to its death, including members of his own “rainbow family.”

“Jonestown fulfilled the most dire warnings of its opponents,” write John R. Hall, Philip D. Schuyler, and Sylvaine Trinh in their book *Apocalypse Observed*. “After the murders and mass suicide, Peoples Temple became the quintessence of the ‘cult,’ stereotypically portrayed as an organization that drains both property and free will from its members and ‘brainwashes’

them into a ‘group mind.’” There are certainly cults that do these things, but Hall and his co-authors' scholarship makes an important distinction between Jones, the con-man preacher, megalomaniac, and murderer, and his congregation. The latter “sought to participate in an integrated community that transcended persistent racism in the United States. In a society where



the practice of religion is largely segregated from everyday socioeconomic organization and practice, the group infused its members' working lives and social relationships with new 'religious' meaning."

Religious lessons about loving one's neighbors and caring for the less fortunate, in other words, had been tangibly expressed by the Peoples Temple. Something similar could be said about the church's ideas of socialist liberation: Well before Jones ever stood in front of a congregation, the left had sought what, in modern terms, would be called a "multiracial, working-class movement" built on solidarity and shared struggle. What that actually might look like has been clouded by history, in no small part by efforts to cast any type of communal living or emancipatory action as yet another Jonestown. I am not trying to make excuses for Jim Jones here or even to entirely separate the flock from its doomsday apostle—Jones did not act alone in Jonestown, and the killing of children, in particular, had to be carried out by loyal followers. Nor do I wish to argue that Jonestown's role as a cautionary tale comes entirely from some unfair twisting of its intentions—918 dead are 918 dead.

But I first encountered the photos from the International Hotel a couple of years ago, while doing research for my upcoming book. While I recoiled at the sight of Jones with his dark sunglasses and bouffant hair, these were exactly the types of pictures that work well in the turbine of online historical associations: See? There *have* been examples of multiracial, working-class solidarity. The association with Jones, of course, made them unusable, but I wondered why there were so few obvious replacements.

The images of good dissent are frequently segregated: Good oppressed people make a good peaceful protest, and good white people make some good difficult decisions. After a hard night of deliberation, Lincoln frees the slaves. The utopian visions that fall under the most scrutiny are always the ones where people from different backgrounds rise up together in the name of a radical reimagining of the world. The paradox is that while the scrubbed-history utopians call for "unity" or "togetherness," they also quietly disqualify every example of solidarity, whether Harper's Ferry, the Rainbow Coalition, or the foot washers of Cary.



**Ceremony:** Police officers kneel alongside religious leaders at a prayer walk in Cary, N.C., to honor George Floyd.

I wondered, half-seriously, if they might be a deep state operation to freak out the squares and elicit comparisons to the Peoples Temple, which, needless to say, soon followed. Over the next few days, I looked through everything Black Hammer had posted online. While there wasn't much to like or even understand, I could sense the desperation of young people who had no meaningful pathway into politics. If things go bad for them—and it seems likely they will—Black Hammer will slide into the litany that includes Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, and Heaven's Gate. Little will be said about the conditions that created them, and even less will be written about those who felt the same sense of urgency, imagined something that did not turn the gears of history, and found some separate peace.

We are already in an era of manifestos, separatist cults, and acts of mass violence. But the vast majority of these come from the far right. The historical-comparison machine has coded the participants as "fascists" or "white supremacists," which they may well be. But for those who lament that the center, once again, has lost its hold, the history of dissent teaches only one lesson: Stay in your lane or watch the bodies pile up. Given the accumulating crises of the past five years, it might seem reasonable, or at least excusable, to reduce everything to a warning.

Today, history itself has become a front in the culture war. Several state legislatures have passed vaguely written laws that effectively ban the teaching of this country's racist past. Videos of concerned parents screaming at school boards about critical race theory go viral every day. These efforts should be called what they are: an attempt to turn the narrative of last summer from an organic uprising of millions of Americans from all racial and class backgrounds into a conspiracy run by intellectuals, Marxists, and the progressive elite. It's incumbent on anyone who cares about emancipatory politics to resist these laws and the chaos they will unleash, but if we are ever to get out of these endless culture wars, we must also rethink the space these linear histories take up and ensure that we're not just replacing one fully determinative, alluringly symmetrical narrative with another. We must stop thinking that the problems of the present can only be understood by finding corollaries in the past. Not everything is Jonestown, including Jonestown.

LAST SUMMER, AS I WATCHED THE POLICE TEAR-GAS thousands of protesters, I wondered what might happen to all the people who had confronted cops in riot gear. There is nothing quite as radicalizing as getting tear-gassed by the police.

Most, I imagined, would go home, post heartfelt missives on social media, and return to their lives. But some, I knew, would have their lives changed forever. Would we see a resurgence of the type of radicalism that defined the late '60s and early '70s, with a body count to match?

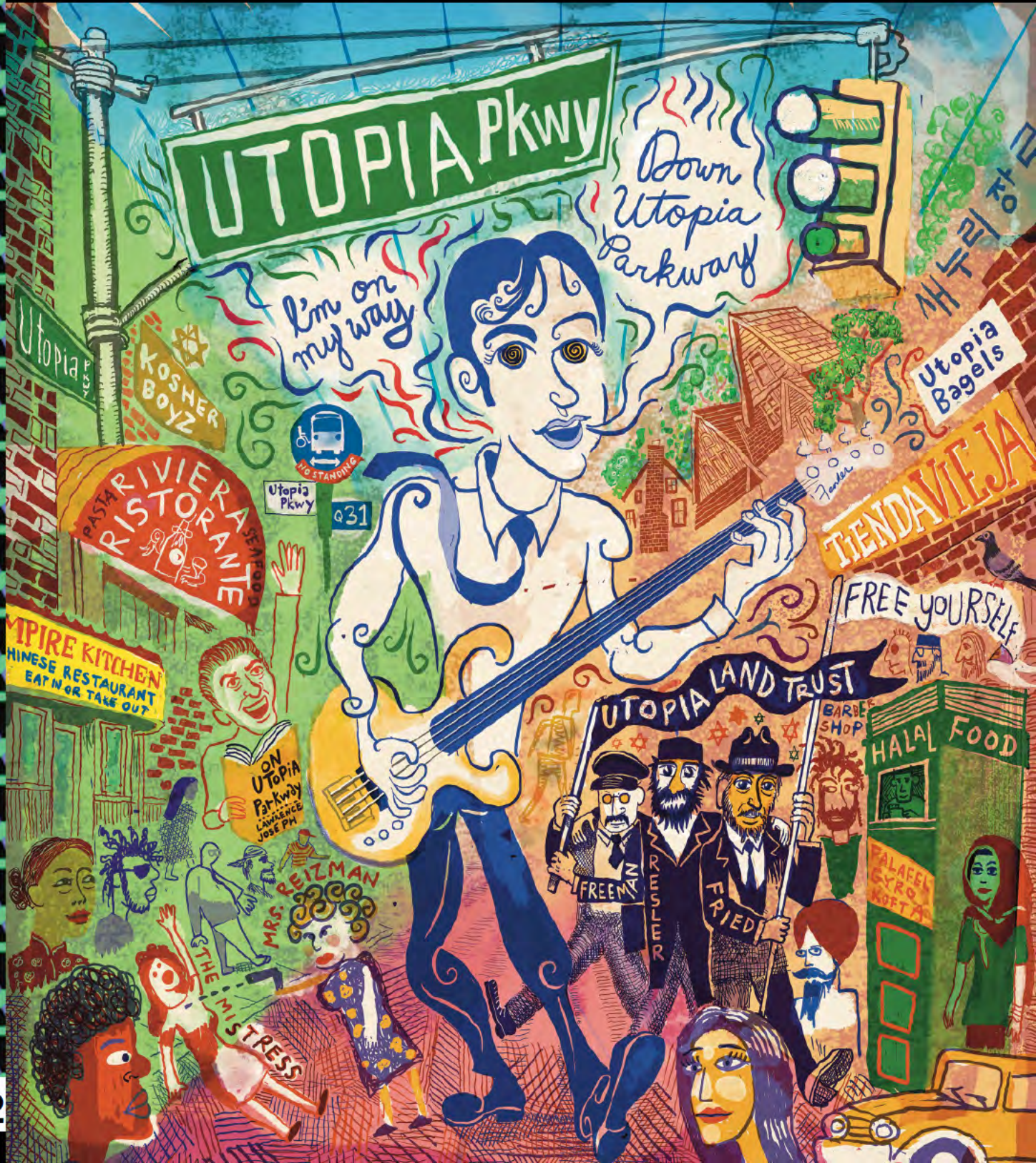
Just before the first anniversary of George Floyd's murder, videos, photos, and tweets began to issue from a group calling itself Black Hammer, which claimed to have "liberated" a nonarable 200 acres of land in the mountains of Colorado. They spoke in the dense, comical jargon of academic anti-colonialism, posted video missives in clown makeup, denounced Anne Frank as "amerikan propaganda," and called for burning copies of her diary. They seemed so perfectly engineered to evoke Jonestown that

**Would we see a resurgence of the type of radicalism that defined the late '60s and early '70s, with a body count to match?**



# THE CITY

All That's Utopian Melts Into Asphalt



## Utopia Parkway is both a dream and a place, a promise and a farce, stretching through time and space.

MOLLY CRABAPPLE

**U**TOPIA PARKWAY. IT'S A NAME THAT sounds like an oxymoron, so impossible, so perfect it shouldn't exist. Yet it does, a 5.1-mile gash—four lanes of asphalt, sometimes two—running through New York City's largest borough, Queens.

The roadway begins, if a line can be said to begin, in Beechhurst in the north. From there it runs past the Long Island Expressway, down through Clearview, Flushing, and Hillcrest to Jamaica Estates in the south, where it fragments just before reaching the behemoth of Grand Central Parkway. This intersection is one of the most dangerous in the city, a place where bodies, bikes, and sometimes lives meet the harsh reality of the pavement. For much of this route, the road is banal, an endless procession of squat brick houses broken up by the occasional gas station or bagel shop. But as it approaches its southern end, it narrows and shifts, becoming something else entirely: a quaint, tree-lined street that deposits its travelers in a place that may or may not exist. The maps call it Utopia, but the residents call it Fresh Meadows, which is its own kind of irony.

Most New Yorkers probably haven't been to Utopia Parkway, haven't traveled its stingy curves, but they may have heard of it in passing, from local traffic reports or perhaps from a line of poetry or song. With a name like Utopia Parkway, the bards were bound to discover it, mining it for meaning. Lawrence Joseph turned it into a poem, as did Julio Marzán. Charles Mee turned it into a play. In the 1990s, the indie rock band Fountains of Wayne spun it into both an album and a song. When the lead singer croons, "I'm on my way / Down Utopia Parkway," he means that he is on his way to somewhere bigger, somewhere exciting—somewhere else, anywhere else. It sounds almost like an anthem—or a dare. Or maybe it's a promise, bound to be broken.

**U**TOPIA PARKWAY—BOTH THE IDEA and the place—is a deeply New York phenomenon: high and low, longing and stasis, bravado and banality, all pulling in the same direction. While it's certainly possible it could exist somewhere else, it's also unlikely.

To understand why, it's necessary to go back in time to another moment of mass movement and flux, when utopian dreams seemed to be everywhere: in illicitly printed pamphlets, in the

underground safe houses of banned Russian revolutionary movements, and carried on the waves by a new mass of immigrants heading to New York City.

It was the late 19th century. After the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 and the wave of pogroms that followed, Jewish immigrants began to pour into the United States. By 1902, there were 585,000 in New York, making up over 17 percent of the city, most of them Eastern Europeans packed into the Lower East Side, where they sweated in the garment trades and began the now familiar story of economic ascent. But thousands of them had grander ambitions. Witness to political repression and racist mob violence, inspired by forbidden thinkers like Marx, Kropotkin, and the Russian radical Nikolay Chernyshevsky, these socialists and anarchists still nourished the dangerous dreams that sent them across the ocean.

In America, they found a degree of political freedom unthinkable in Russia, as well as a legal order that did not target Jews for specific persecution. Relatively free and socially unmoored, these radicals launched a dizzying range of experiments in collective living. They tried to stake their claims to utopia in a world they still thought of as new.

First, there was the Am Olam movement, in which hundreds of young idealists attempted to build agricultural communes in the spirit of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier. Their lack of farming experience didn't matter—the earth itself would teach them, they thought—and so they bought acres of Arkansas forest and Louisiana swampland, sight unseen. Dozens died. Within a few years, most of the communes went bust.

One Am Olam member had better luck. The 22-year-old Abraham Cahan fled Odessa after members of his revolutionary sect shot the czar, but he ditched the back-to-the-land fantasies for the dance halls and firetraps of Orchard Street; in 1897, he founded *The Forward*, a socialist Yiddish newspaper whose circulation soon rivaled that of *The New York Times*. When my great-grandfather Sam Rothbort arrived in New York in 1904, *The Forward* was his bible. Sam himself tried to bridge the difference between New York reality and Am Olam's bucolic delusions. At the height of his artistic success, he flounced out of New York and set up an egg farm on Long Island. A romantic vegetarian, Sam refused to kill male chicks. My great-grandmother spent her days feeding a quarrelsome and rapidly growing army of roosters, until the Depression hit and the farm inevitably collapsed.

Between 1890 and 1920, nearly 2,000 Jewish farmers bought land in the Catskills, sometimes renting out cottages on their property and combining fresh air with grand promises of vegetarianism, pacifism, trade unionism, and socialist, secular Yiddish. And in the mid-1920s, thousands of Jewish garment workers built housing cooperatives in the Bronx, each representing a different strand of leftist ideology. The Yiddish literature professor Marv Zuckerman grew up in the social-democratic Amalgamated Houses, built by the Amalgamated Garment Union in which his father was an official. The apartments were owned by the workers, who elected the management. Zuckerman remembers a close-knit, Jewish, working-class immigrant world of unions, mutual aid societies, May Day marches, and secular Yiddish night schools where portraits of Marx hung next to those of the great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem. Residents came from "every point on the leftist political spectrum..." he wrote. "Anarchist, communism, Lovestone-ite-ism, Trotskyism, Zionism (both left and right), Bundism, Social democracy, socialism."

Unsurprisingly, sectarian battles raged within the co-ops, among kids as well as adults. One friend of Zuckerman's, the nuclear physicist Victor Gilinsky, arrived in the Bronx Amalgamated community with his Bundist parents in 1941, the end of a harrowing escape from Nazi-occupied Poland and Soviet Russia.

**Utopia Parkway—both the idea and the place—is a deeply New York phenomenon: high and low, longing and stasis, bravado and banality.**

*Molly Crabapple is an artist and writer living in New York.*

**“Free yourself from the high rent of New York! Free yourself from the cramped, filthy holes that the...landlord calls ‘rooms.’”**

—Ad for Utopia Land Trust co-ops



One of their first visitors was Mrs. Stein, a communist neighbor who was collecting money for Birobidzhan, a Jewish autonomous oblast that Stalin had set up near the Russian-Chinese border. Gilinsky's family had stopped in Birobidzhan as they made their way to Vladivostok on the Trans-Siberian Railway. A brief conversation in the station was all it took for his father to learn that the alleged Yiddish paradise was a police state. He told Mrs. Stein as much. “Fascist dog!” she

hissed and stormed out. Victor, then 7, still remembers that Mrs. Stein's son jumped him as he was leaving the building while she stood behind them screaming, “Hit him again!”

Utopia is serious business.

**W**HEN SIMON FREEMAN, SAMUEL RESLER, AND JOSEPH FRIED formed the Utopia Land Trust in 1903, they likely had decidedly less ideological baggage. I know nothing more about these three men, whose real estate pursuits were their sole brush with history, but I imagine them as slangy allrightniks in bowler hats, trying to put their unpronounceable hometowns behind them. Who cared for Gozsephésa when they had Broadway? They meant to seize the Goldene Medine like a pot of gold.

The trio bought 50 acres between still rural Flushing and Jamaica, which they planned to divide into lots. In advertisements free of leftist rhetoric, they promised a Jewish “colony” that was leftist in practice. It would run on a cooperative basis, with industries and stores. They would name the streets Hester, Orchard, Delancey, to recall the Lower East Side motherland or maybe to underscore the contrast. For the next year, they flogged the project relentlessly in *The Forward*. “Free yourself!” commanded one ad placed in May 1905. “Free yourself from the high rent of New York! Free yourself from the cramped, filthy holes that the good-hearted landlord calls ‘rooms,’” from the firetraps that offered tenants two choices: jump out the windows or burn alive. “Come to our office,” the ad beckoned. “Our agent will pluck you from hell, where you cook and roast, and bring you to the Garden of Eden, our lots at the Utopia Land Company, where the air smells of perfume, the land is bedecked with nature's green carpet, and the birds sing poetry in magnificent choruses. With a single word...you can have a peaceful, happy home, at a low price.” Where do I sign up?

They may have been apolitical, but Freeman, Resler, and Fried shared with Am Olam a grandiose rhetoric doomed to remain unfulfilled. In the summer of 1905, they promised *The New York Times* that within months, the first batch of “colonists” would arrive in their “Hebrew Utopia.” Funds ran out soon after, and the project collapsed. In 1909, the company sold its holdings to one Felix Isman of Philadelphia for \$350,000.

From there, the neighborhood grew by dribs and drabs, as real estate speculators bought up farmland and cut it into lots for urban escapees to build their dream homes. In 1926, the *Times* first mentions Utopia Parkway as the boundary of the just-sold Whittaker Farm, and in 1929, the assemblage artist Joseph Cornell bought a wood-framed home at 37-08 from some Russian immigrants. He would remain there for the next four decades until his death.

Utopia Parkway makes its first appearance in *The Forward* in 1935, after Mrs. Reizman of 14-37 pulled a revolver from her kimono and shot her husband's mistress. Her husband covered the corpse in kisses, neighbors said, and *The Forward* covered every salacious bit of the trial. This was a far cry from the respectable little burg Utopia's founders envisioned. Still, for all the noisy shim sham of New York real estate, major development started only in the 1940s, when the Gross-Morton Park Corporation bought the land and plunked it full of Cape Cod-style suburban houses: 24 blocks of American nowhere. No trace remains of Freeman, Resler, or Fried, except for the parkway's name.

In New York today, there is little room for the collective spirit that made the three men try to stake out their 50 square miles of Queens meadow. Like every proletariat, American Jews fought tooth and nail for their children not to follow in their footsteps. When they entered the middle class, those children no longer needed to pool their finances or their living spaces. The old Yiddish socialist New York still exists in fragments beneath the shiny, slightly shattered city. The Forward Building, Abraham Cahan's Beaux-Arts headquarters, still stands, the Marx and Engels busts glowering from the front, but the interior was gutted and turned into luxury condos.

At the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, I study Yiddish the way British schoolboys once studied Latin: to understand revered, but still alien, forebears. No matter how prosaic the subject, I cannot help but feel the electricity conveyed by the old German-Slavic words encased in holy letters; I feel like a medium, staring into a mirror to find ghosts.

In that spirit, I took the long subway ride over to Utopia.

**B**EFORE THE F TRAIN EVEN REACHED Queensbridge, a man got on lugging a violin case. He was South Asian and wearing a sweat-stained red polo. He took out the violin and, with great verve, played the unmistakable bars of “Hava Nagilah,” the vaguely Zionist song that became a stand-in for all Jewish songs in the popular imagination. I gave him \$2, notwithstanding the politics of the song's origins.

I got off the train at 169th Street, with its row of stores offering elaborate henna designs and cash transfers to Bangladesh, then walked 38 minutes through the leafy streets until I reached Utopia Parkway. It was exactly the sort of unlovely beige with which this country likes to blot out its natural wonders, a sprawl of poky big box stores—TJ Maxx, Coldstone Creamery—that constitute the suburban wasteland of latter-day America. I ate an egg and cheese at a small Chinese deli and stared through the window at Utopia Center, whose square architecture resembled a Midwestern gynecologist's office. Was this the dream of Freeman, Resler, and Fried, I wondered: to be just as dull as everyone else?

I walked north from Union Turnpike, where the little brick houses sat on little lawns with picket fences. For-sale signs boasted names from everywhere—Stella Shalamova, Jiangwei (Wayne) Zhou. Posters from the Bukharian Chai Center offered an ice cream social and a reading of the Ten Commandments. Further up sat two-family brick homes, bounded by wrought-iron fences covered with gloppy paint. They could have been the fence I grew up behind in Far Rockaway.

(continued on page 27)

# LANGUAGE

## The Measure of Our Lives



**Without online language diversity, only a handful of people will dictate the fate of the world.**

**NANJALA NYABOLA**

*Nanjala Nyabola is the author of Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics and Travelling While Black: Essays Inspired by a Life on the Move.*

**A**NYONE WHO GROWS UP MULTILINGUAL knows that words are more than just labels that we apply to things. We are funnier in one language than another, because the wordplay comes faster. We are sweeter in one language than another, because we know how to wish someone a morning filled with flowers and not just a curt “Good morning.” Words shape the contours of our sociality and open up our imagination to what is possible. They allow us to write and speak ourselves into our communities and into the world.

Language makes it possible for us not only to describe the world but to inhabit it. “We do language. That may be the measure of our lives,” Toni Morrison said in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

What will be the language of our digital future? What will be the measure of our digital lives? I’ve been thinking about this lately, particularly as we digital-rights advocates stumble to translate key developments in a rapidly changing space to our audiences—the nonspecialists who need to understand the implications quickly and completely so they can defend themselves. Most of the technology we use is built around English as the default language, even if the coding that provides the basis for final platforms and applications is in specific computer languages. In many countries, even the rules that we develop to rein in the worst online behavior are often conceived in English. So Kenya has a data protection

## The platforms that we rely on to remain connected in this digital age are not ready for our multilingual truths.

a platform that manages vaccine scheduling. This platform has allowed for third-party app development, which means those who can afford to purchase the apps can more easily skip the queues, to the detriment of less digitally connected citizens. Surviving the pandemic in India increasingly depends on a citizen's ability to navigate technology—skills that are scarce in much of the population. Even without a pandemic, the digital future oscillates wildly between a utopia of well-connected citizens understanding and vocally demanding their rights and a dystopia in which a handful of hyper-informed people dictate the life outcomes of the unconnected and deliberately misinformed majority.

Language will be crucial in determining which version of the future we end up with. Most of the tech that we encounter is built with an English-speaking user in mind. After all, English is used throughout the world, with more than a billion people speaking it as a second language. Indeed, most of us who speak English also speak another language, often switching to English only in spe-

cific formal contexts or when consuming the cultural products of the current global hegemon, the United States. The platforms that we rely on to remain connected in this digital age are not ready for our multilingual truths: We live in numerous languages, and constraining our ability to communicate in them effectively limits our ability to participate fully in our digital future.

Consider content moderation on social-networking platforms. In Africa, where some 2,000 languages are spoken, we would need content moderation in at least the eight Indigenous languages that have more than 10 million speakers, though that would cover only a handful of the continent's 54 countries. We would also need effective translation for the five non-Indigenous languages that are the official languages of the African Union and for unofficial languages like sheng' and pidgin in which we conduct our daily lives. The current lack of such translation partly explains why hate speech and misinformation in languages other than English often go unnoticed until it is too late. A post inciting violence based on rumors of ethnic attacks in Oromo or Tigrinya will go viral many times over before an English-speaking content moderator in the Philippines or the United States realizes what it means. This isn't a kink that will be sorted out with time: It's a major policy gap that speaks to the systemic neglect of certain parts of the world.

More important, digital-rights advocacy also increasingly defaults to English. This movement—which encompasses debates on everything from privacy and data protection to net neutrality and fair business operation—is trying to curb the excesses of the early, heady years of the Internet. After one or two decades of near-universal consensus that the Internet was an unalloyed good, activists are increasingly challenging the way in which it is being shaped by commercial and political interests rather than by community values like inclusion and trust. But even in the world of advocacy, those of us demanding digital rights still default to English, because it is the language of the platforms we organize on and against.

I believe that this lack of linguistic diversity is partly why it has proved so dif-

icult to build a global, grassroots digital-rights moment. Advocates are speaking, but are we being understood? Are we using language effectively as a tool for inclusion or doing enough to navigate the histories that underpin how our message is received?

In the Commonwealth, English learning has a legacy of both structural and physical violence; erasing Indigenous languages was part of the effort to erase Indigenous cultures. In Kenya, even decades after independence, African students experienced the disc, a circular piece of wood that represented the promise of punishment. If a teacher caught you speaking a language other than English, you would receive the disc, and when you returned it at the end of the school day, you would get a beating. Years and years of beating the Kiswahili, Dholuo, Banyala, and Kamba out of impressionable children resulted in a post-independence generation that built social systems around rewards for mastering English. Although these rules have fallen away with independence, many people still laugh at those who speak “broken” English—a running joke about “backwardness.” The generational advantage that learning English delivers is locked in. This story repeats itself in colonized countries around the world where colonial languages are still taught through rote learning reinforced by caning, thereby suppressing the use of Indigenous languages.

This history raises the question of whether English should be the language of the digital future. African digital-rights activists increasingly say no. We are not just working with existing tech platforms to translate their content into languages other than English; we are also creating software to make translation into African languages better. But even this is not enough.

A digital future in which we can only participate in translation is inherently unequal and exclusionary, shaped by the paranoias and predilections of places that we may never visit. Words take on specific meanings in a specific social context. “Cockroach” can be more than a harmless gibe in Kinyarwanda, the official language of Rwanda; it can be an incitement to genocide, because of the way it was used in the lead-up to ethnic violence. And the choice to translate some words and not others reflects the priorities set by those who develop the language of technology. A tech future in which financial terms are translated but digital-rights terms and their implications exist only in English upholds the idea that African communities are valuable





only as markets, not as places where people live and love. We must make it possible for people to use technology in their chosen languages.

**T**HIS WAS SOME OF THE THINKING BEHIND THE KISWAHILI Digital Rights Project that I am currently implementing. I kept noticing that speakers in grassroots digital-advocacy initiatives would awkwardly default to English when explaining essential concepts like surveillance or privacy. Neither Kiswahili nor any of the 100-plus languages that are spoken in Kenya and Tanzania have translations for these words, at least not in terms of their full human-rights implications. We were giving people the words, but we were not giving them the language.

Kiswahili was a natural choice for the project. It is the most widely used language in Africa, spoken by over 150 million people in at least eight countries as both an official language and the language of commerce. It is the only Indigenous African language that is an official language of the African Union. It is a rich language with numerous dialects, because its Indigenous speakers inhabited powerful city-states that were connected enough to share a root language but disconnected enough for that language to take on local flavors. As an official language in Kenya and Tanzania, Standard Kiswahili also has the advantage of benefiting from the numerous linguistic institutes dedicated to promoting it. And because it is part of the largest language group in Africa—the Bantu languages that spread across the continent south of the Sahara—Kiswahili provides an excellent base on which other languages can build.

We have been working with experts from Kenya and Tanzania to translate key digital-rights terms into Standard Kiswahili and with cultural producers to popularize them. We have translated not just the words but the ideas behind them: for instance, choosing a word that doesn't just define surveillance as the act of being watched but also has roots and modification that emphasize that surveillance isn't a good thing. In fact, there was no word for surveillance that conveys what it means in a digital-rights context until we started this project. We offered *udukizi*, which isn't just about watching but watching with the intent to influence behavior.

Motivated by the ways in which Africans switch languages on social media, I wanted to help make it possible for us to do the same when talking about digital rights. We are working to increase the space for Kiswahili language communities to use technology on their own terms. We are working for a digital future in which people can demand privacy rights, the protection of their data, and an end to surveillance without having to do so in translation.

Yes, there are numerous digital efforts to preserve rare and dying languages, but most of us are multilingual in a less dramatic way. Our languages are not at risk of disappearing per se; they are at risk of being left behind because of the unspoken principle that technological advances must serve the unending quest for efficiency and standardization. We should be able to express that version of ourselves who is funnier, wittier, or more direct, even if it is more expensive or less efficient to enable that, because the point of culture is not efficiency—it is color and complexity and depth.

We need to bring our whole selves into the digital future, and language is central to that. In Africa, which has the youngest population on the planet—more than half of its inhabitants are under the age of 30—a majority of us don't remember life without the Internet. We want our languages to be spoken in the digital-first future, and we want to be able to shape technology to suit us. And so creating space for us to exist online with as much linguistic complexity as we want is an act of resistance. We must keep affirming our right to define the measure of our lives. **N**

(continued from page 24)

I kept walking until I hit Utopia Playground, a generous span of grass and asphalt that offered every childhood amenity: a basketball court and a soccer field, monkey bars and sprinklers, and plenty of concrete, where toddlers played and chattered in a babble of languages.

Almost half of Queens is foreign-born, and more languages are spoken in the borough's 109 square miles than in any other place on earth. Though it was once the home of Archie Bunker and Donald Trump, the Queens of today has a cosmopolitanism that is working-class and solid—made by working people from everywhere who live together in this near-impossible city, in defiance of all the pundits who deny that people so profoundly different can carve a collective life together. If there is any utopia in Utopia, it is this. It is built by the Sikh, Black, and Mexican boys shooting hoops, by the Hasidic kids and Guatemalan kids battling over a soccer ball, by the tiny girl writing Chinese characters along the pavement while her brother hollers insults from his bike, by the mom in the sheitel who watches everyone's children run through the fountain in this much-needed summer after the plague.

It's imperfect, sure, and fraught and hard and filled with conflict, with hustlers and with bastards. The architecture sucks. It's not how the books tell us a utopia should be. But utopia does not exist, by definition; Utopia, on the other hand, is as real as the baking asphalt beneath my feet.

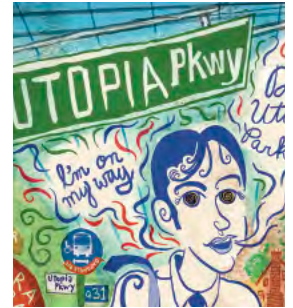
I walk north and count the mix of names on the stores.

**Was this the dream of Freeman, Resler, and Fried, I wondered: to be just as dull as everyone else?**

Chen's Cleaners. Bombay—an old movie theater where you can now eat samosas while watching Bollywood's latest. The Utopia Jewish Center, where half the letters are missing in "Am Yisrael Chai." I walk until my legs won't walk, and then I keep on walking.

In his book *Naming New York*, Joshua Jelly-Schapiro writes about all the names for streets, bays, and alleyways whose origins have long since been forgotten. Where did Fresh Kills come from? How about Far Rockaway? Who were Ann and Catherine? The meanings died but the words remain, like the impressions of ancient sea creatures left on limestone.

I see Utopia Parkway like this. All the grandiose plans have faded into the prosaic present, the small houses inhabited by people from everywhere on earth, struggling each day to build for themselves and for their families a private sliver of a better world. Behind the chrome railings racked with roses, their kids grow up into New Yorkers. Like me, they will forget the old languages of their old countries but will grow up striving for their own utopia, their very own no place. **N**



# FEMINISM

## Reading Shulamith Firestone in the Pandemic



### Revisiting her complicated manifesto.

SOPHIE LEWIS

**T**EACHING AN ONLINE COURSE ABOUT A UTOPIAN manifesto from the 1960s is a brutally effective way to illuminate the dystopianism of the pandemic-stricken present, let me tell you. To be sure, great surges of love and rage have hit the streets again and again over the past few years, disrupting the unlivable, carceral, care-poor reality that is, for so many of its denizens, the United States. As these waves of abolitionism crested, for example in the summer of 2020, one could almost catch a glimpse of what it might have felt like in 1968, when everything seemed on the table; suddenly, the restraint of 21st-century radicalism was illuminated. It is especially instructive, I feel, to look at the utopias of that bygone, almost-revolutionary era right now, during the late-stage pandemic. The re-entrenchment of gender cynicism, of nuclear familyism, has lately crept up on so many of us, without us fully noticing.

An overwhelming majority of today's babies are

being shaped in drastic, unheard-of privacy; reproductive laborers are at a breaking point; meanwhile, trans people—and victims of domestic violence generally—are suffering in silence, staying in the closet, unable to flee. Who better, then, to pierce the surreptitious, mind-numbing normalization of all this, under both Trump and Biden, than Shulamith Firestone (a mere 23 years old in '68), with her scalding refusal of every “natural” premise of American society and her vision of a future in which children and adults together (having eliminated capitalism, work, and the sex distinction itself) democratically inhabit large, nongenetic households?

“Shulie” (as she was known to her friends in her youth), a Chicago art-school graduate and subsequent New Yorker, deemed the overthrowing of class, work, and markets to be a self-evidently necessary task, barely worth defending. What really interested her, instead, was the abolition of culture and nature, no less—starting with patriarchal “love” and its “culture of romance” on the one hand, and pregnancy on the other. Besides editing and producing the short-lived, self-published militant (and millenarian) women's liberation journal *Notes*, Shulie cofounded several revolutionary groups—New York Radical Women, Redstockings, and New York Radical Feminists—which sometimes carried out direct actions targeting, for instance, a Miss America pageant and a Manhattan bridal fair. She then published her book-length manifesto, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, through (controversially) a mainstream press. In it, she advocates for “the abolition of the labor force itself under a cybernetic socialism” and “the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women.” Ectogenesis—the machine uterus—is famously a part of this speculative picture. But above all, she contends, women must liberate children and themselves from the capitalist patriarchy—seizing control over technology, eradicat-

Sophie Lewis is a feminist theorist based in Philadelphia and the author of *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*.

ing the tyranny of work, automating labor (yes, even reproductive labor, as far as possible), and shedding the incest taboo such that play, love, and sexuality might “[flow] unimpeded.”

While sharing several of Firestone’s feminist commitments, the philosopher Hortense Spillers was devastating in her takedown of *The Dialectic of Sex*’s failure to imagine nonwhite women’s liberation, as well as the contempt for Black nationalism displayed in Firestone’s regrettable Chapter 5. The chapter in question is titled “Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man,” and undeniably, it deserves everything Black feminists have said about it. Despite having denounced Freudianism as “misguided” in Chapter 3, Firestone here disregards slavery, colonialism, and any historical-materialist basis for white supremacy, instead explaining it as a psychological and fundamentally “sexual phenomenon” that mimics the Oedipus complex. Black men are the sons in the American national family, she posits lazily, hence they are driven to kill the white man (Dad) and rape his white wife. In her deconstruction of the “myth of the Black rapist” in *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis politely summarizes this theoretical clusterfuck thus: “Firestone succumbs to the old racist sophistry of blaming the victim.” Spillers is less polite: “Is this writer doing comedy here, or have we misread her text?”

Alas, the presentation of racial stereotypes as psychological portraits of individual members of the so-called “Family of Man” is not intentionally a part of Firestone’s extensive (and sometimes excellent) comedy. Blind to both queer urban and nonmonogamous Indigenous lifeways, Firestone misses the fundamentally racial character of the production of cis-heterosexual gender in post-Reconstruction America, and the flaw is fatal to her whole project. She was not wrong, of course, that canonical Marxists and ’60s New Left “politicos” failed to attend properly to the spheres of sex/gender, baby-making, the colonially imposed nuclear family, and romance. But the horizon that so motivated her—the “explosion” of American culture in its entirety—is ultimately unimaginable without the abolition of whiteness, which she ignores. The twinned institutions of childhood and motherhood, upon which culture rests, according to her, were after all forged within white supremacy, as Spillers so aptly showed in 1987 in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” In other words, when Firestone talks

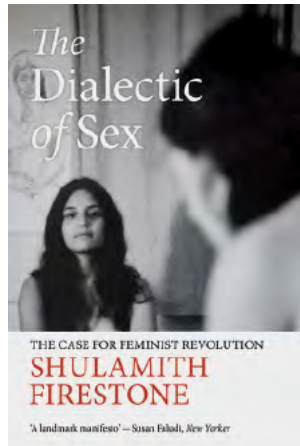
about eliminating “the” sex distinction, she is eliding, under the sign of everywoman, what is really a multiplicity of racialized sexes and gender oppressions. Women do not all have the same gender. “The” utopia-bound dialectic of sex, if we should try to diagram it (as Shulie, believe it or not, did), is probably four-dimensional.

IT IS NOT UP TO ME TO EXCUSE OR “FORGIVE” CHAPTER 5. ON PAGE 1 OF THE TEXT, however, if you do make it that far (knowing what you now know about the whole), there is a very compelling idea: namely, that the fundamental categories we use to think about historical change “are not big enough.” If we are generously inclined, *The Dialectic of Sex* can serve as a reminder that the wretched of the earth can and must harness science, remake nature, and unleash universal equality and joy. Technologies exist, Firestone plausibly affirms, that could—if the proletariat wanted—equitably distribute, reduce, and perhaps eventually dissolve the burden of drudgery entirely. She affirms up front her wish for a word more all-embracing than “revolution” for the playful, orgiastic scenario she has in mind. Preempting her aghast technophobic critics—who nevertheless (for 50 years!) have never deigned to see past her positivity vis-à-vis artificial wombs—Firestone declares straight up that an intensification of capitalism, namely “The 1984 Nightmare,” is highly likely if control over reproductive technologies continues to be wielded by the ruling classes and isn’t stormed from below.

The flawed *Dialectic*, in all its immortal exuberance, priceless drollery, and anguished seriousness, remixes Engels, Marx, Freud, Hegel, Beauvoir, and the kibbutz, combining high metaphysics—couched conversationally, almost as stand-up comedy—with the visceral phenomenological observations that “childbirth isn’t good for you” and “childhood is hell.” Immediately after its release in 1970, heartbreakingly, Firestone deserted the world of politics for good. Her big second book, intended to “lay the foundations of a powerful new women’s art—with the potential to transform our very definition of culture”—never arrived. Instead, in 1998, a follow-up text appeared at last: *Airless Spaces*, a tiny, fragmentary, despair-filled collection of stories about the psychiatric incarceration of Shulie and other inmates. Toward the end of that volume, under the heading “I Remember Valerie,” the author dedicates a couple of pages to a non-comrade—the “matriarchalist” Valerie Solanas, who “waxed paranoid” at her once long ago and had, she’d said, loathed *The Dialectic*. “It was many years before I heard of her again,” Firestone concludes. “Then it was just an obituary stating that she had been found in a San Francisco hotel dead of lung disease.” In 2012, Shulie died alone, too, in her apartment, still presumably waiting for the right term, more all-encompassing than “revolution,” to be invented.

Rereading *The Dialectic of Sex* over half a century after it was written, I am angered by its travesty of a critical race analysis and amazed at its silence on colonized, lesbian, gay, and trans people, the pioneers of struggles in and against the family. I am disappointed with its middle-classness and its disgust at the pregnant body; unimpressed with its conflation of femaleness and gestational labor; and embarrassed by its complete inattention to sex work, empire, disability, lesbians, and queer life generally. A disloyal daughter to all family abolitionists who came before me, I actually disagree with more of Firestone’s individual points than not. But I see something

**A flawed treatise:** Firestone’s 1970 manifesto is replete with blind spots but bears rereading.



**The horizon that so motivated Firestone is ultimately unimaginable without the abolition of whiteness, which she ignores.**

of my late mother in her biography, and I love—sometimes to the point of weeping—her book's absolute negationism, its horniness, and its sincerity. I support utterly its program of doing away with marriage along with all forms of proprietarian kinship. Through a wrinkle in time, I lay claim to Shulie, lovingly, irritably. I hold in my heart, without quite understanding it, her commitment to realizing “the conceivable in the actual.”

In an essay about another hilarious, well-read woman who died lonely and mad in her apartment—Marilyn Monroe—the artist Audrey Wollen writes about the gift she and her friends feel they received from Monroe's brief, incendiary contribution to human history: “Tending to our impossibilities, we offered those around us both the negative, the zero, and its accompanying wish. That's what Marilyn gave us.” Part of what Wollen is saying here, I think, is that the urgent destruction of this world, and the desire for a common life, are caught up in, well, a dialectic. And if so, then that

is what Shulie gave us too, I feel: a literal map (“for that rare diagram freak”)—though it's partly a joke—charting the way to a place where it would be possible to be a heterosexual feminist, a femme intellectual, and a comrade child.

Blind spots and all, Shulie Firestone merits revisiting in the age of coronavirus because she defamiliarizes (not to say guff-

aws at) the very building blocks of contemporary capitalism—notably the private nuclear household—that the experience of Covid-19 can, despite everything, teach us to call into question. While the sanctuary of “family” has on one level grown ever more invisible and unquestionable under the United States' botched waves of quarantine, lockdown, and de-masking (which were themselves premised on the society-wide sacrifice zones of so-called care homes, not to mention global vaccine apartheid), the necessity of class consciousness, care revolution, and children's liberation has also strained into view. Down with the chauvinist micro-nationalism of family values, said Shulie—which has been echoed by so many of us who discovered, via “stimulus” checks, that the sky does not fall when human survival is decoupled from the wage. Down with nationalism and the competitive micro-nations of family values, said Shulie: We are, transgenerationally, the makers of one another, the guardians of one another's health, the intimate aliens from a future that now suddenly seems worth trying for.

**N**

# BORD

## Freedom to Move,



A portrait of the artist: Karla Cornejo Villavicencio.

**In a world without borders, I will never have to write about immigration again.**

**KARLA CORNEJO VILLAVICENCIO**

**H**AVE A DREAM, A TOTAL FANTASY, OF WHAT IT COULD MEAN TO be an immigrant artist. In this dream, I am still me, nothing has changed, but I can write about literally anything other than immigration. I can write about the homoerotic relationships of male bison—in my own voice, not in some plummy British baritone fixatedly narrating stories about alpha males and dominance hierarchy. I could write about the hard work of rehabilitating German shepherds after careers spent working as traumatized and weaponized K-9s for problem police departments. Maybe I could write about bees.

I would like to do all of this, but instead I am borne back, always, ceaselessly, to immigration. To policy debates and talk of solutions and stories, stories, stories.

NATHAN BAJAR

# ERS

## Freedom to Write



First, the audience demands it: Because I am a formerly undocumented Latina writer, I am forever asked to play activist and talking head, to sing Greek opera about my childhood. After I released my first book last spring, I did what ended up being a year of press on Zoom, and for the first few months, I would deflect the inevitable questions about immigration policy or my early years in Ecuador before my family came to America with my signature loquacious demurring. Then I had my partner, a professor who doesn't mince words, tell event organizers that I did not talk policy, particularly Donald Trump's zero-tolerance policy, and I did not talk about my own childhood separation.

I don't do it because I don't want to, and because it's not my fucking job. I am simply not *interested* in policy. It is a language I do not understand. It is advanced calculus, and I went to a high school that stopped teaching at trig. And policy is pain. I turned off my Google notifications for "ICE" and "undocumented immigrant" because hu-

man suffering can send me deeper into my already committed relationship with Silver Hill Hospital in Connecticut. As both a human and an artist, I want to be able to emancipate myself from what causes me pain instead of having to mine it for stories and then market myself by the bruises.

But other people like pain; pain is exactly what they like. They exalt my bravery when they read my work and then bring out the mounting pins for my bell jar—queer, brown, Latina, undocumented immigrant. Strangers delight in rolling the Rs in a name nobody I love calls me. *Karrla*, said when Karla is a choice, overenunciating it like they're trying to speak through marshmallows stuffed in their mouths.

I could decide to stop and try my luck at making a living writing about television. But I'm very good at writing about immigration. It helps that I remember we are people first, capable of the entire spectrum of human emotions and behavior. And I write because I consider my reporting and my art to be payment in motion to my parents for having given up their upper limbs, health, and right to self-determination so I could be able to make a living typing words in an air-conditioned room. That helps. If I weren't writing about immigrants, in the way I write about immigrants, I would be drinking all the time, because there aren't enough other people doing it.

This country's treatment of immigrants has been so inhumane that there needs to be a record—not only of injustices and grave suffering but of deep humanity, dignity, humor, and character. Beat reporters, journalists, essayists, and documentarians have taken great care to document not only the injustices but also the lives that go on, the people that keep living, not in shadows but in streets that are under sun, shade, sun, shade—all on the same block even. With parents risking the possibility of their children's death through migration in order to avoid the certainty of their children's torture back home, we need a record.

And so I write. I've written tens of thousands of words, fiction and nonfiction, most with extreme levels of cortisol in my blood, to arrive at the same old plea: a plea to those in power to create a world in which migrants can be people. Then maybe migrant artists can be free.

That world begins with a path to legalization for undocumented Americans that is closer to amnesty than what the current Congress favors. It also requires a world in which open borders would not be treated as some far-fetched policy goal to be accomplished in our lifetime but as a worldview that informs how we approach all sentient beings, particularly those of our species.

I don't like comparing human migrants to any migratory species. Human migrants should inspire a deeper, more complicated affect than the miraculous call of a goose flying at night. But, to that end, I know that any person I meet who gets heated about an "invasive" species of bird in a suburb is not a person I would feel safe around as a brown woman, a migrant, and therein lies a sameness. Some of us are considered pests.

So long as I keep feeding the baby starlings in my backyard, I will keep writing about immigrants, because neither of us are welcome—and I suspect that means forever.

**And so I write: a plea to those in power to create a world in which migrants can be people. Then maybe migrant artists can be free.**

*Karla Cornejo Villavicencio is an essayist and novelist. Her book *The Undocumented Americans* was a 2020 finalist for the National Book Award in nonfiction.*

# POLITICS

## Utopia Is Possible, if We Demand It

**Radical faith in grand visions is supercharged by the promise that fundamental change is possible.**

JOHN NICHOLS

boundaries in order to achieve “a renovation of the natural order of things” so sweeping that his 18th-century generation might be recognized as “the Adam of a new world.” Therein lies the genius of Paine’s project at the founding of what remains the American experiment. He was not talking about the distant future. His was a practical utopianism—yes, that’s possible—which, in the words of Paine scholar Harvey J. Kaye, inspired readers to go about the work of “trying to build utopia in America.” Of course, Paine’s comrades fell short, stumbled along the way, and at times failed miserably. That was predictable. What mattered was the trying. This is the key to the most vital utopian thinking: It does not imagine perfection; rather, it proposes a dialectic based on what historian Eric Foner identified as a “new language” of possibility.

The notion that utopianism can be purposeful is what makes it radical. The most potent utopian thinking is seldom found in jet-pack-wearing flights of fancy or the imaginings of spacey future worlds where enlightened beings don flowing robes and await the arrival of a time-traveling Bill and Ted to encourage them to “be excellent to each other.” In Paine’s time, and in the best eras that have evolved from it, there was an understanding

of the utility of utopian thinking as a political instrument. It could be adopted by visionary authors, playwrights, and presidents. It would be embraced by mass movements. But it was not a constant. Pragmatic utopianism has surged at critical junctures in our history—as when the radical social experiments of the 1840s were covered as breaking news on the front page of Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune*, and when, in 1966, A. Philip Randolph and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. thrust “A Freedom Budget for All Americans” onto the desk of President Lyndon Johnson—and it has receded.

To be sure, its recession in recent decades has been pronounced, as the world-weariness, the cynicism, and the craven calculations of political and media elites



**Thomas Paine** declared in the 18th century that “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” It was not a distant hope.

**T**HE MOST INFLUENTIAL UTOPIAN THINKER in American history did not write futuristic novels or imagine perfect worlds in which evolved humans dined on honeydew. He was a gritty political agitator who responded to the news of his day with manuals designed to inspire politically and economically disenfranchised people to immediate action. Yet even now, more than two centuries after his death, there is no mistaking the utopian promise of Thomas Paine’s declaration that “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

Paine, like so many other utopian thinkers, past and present, broke down religious, political, social, and literary

fostered a neoliberal consensus that delighted in recalling the crude language of Margaret Thatcher, who advocated for austerity with the declaration that “There is no alternative.” Rebecca Solnit well and wisely observed a decade ago that “Utopia is in trouble these days. Many no longer believe that a better world, as opposed to a better life, is possible, and the rhetoric of private well-being trumps public good, at least in the English-speaking world.”

But, as Solnit knew, the Thatchers and the Reagans and the Bill Clintons and the Paul Ryans were on the wrong side of history. There was always an alternative. There still is an alternative. It can be imagined, and it can be achieved. But that will happen only if we pull utopian thinking off the pedestal and recognize the deepest truth of our intellectual and practical history: that there are few tools so powerful as a rough-and-tumble, unafraid-of-getting-dirty utopianism for organizing and achieving transformative change. Instead of an endless search for perfection, the utopian thinking that most frequently matters addresses immediate issues with a sense of urgency. It can and should be epic in scope and character, but it should also be willing to get specifically militant, as when French feminists argued for mandating equal representation of women in parliament with the suggestion that it was time to be “a bit utopian.”

Radical faith in grand visions—be they political or economic, social or spiritual—is supercharged by immediacy and the promise that rapid fundamental change is possible, that we can seize the moment and transform it. This is the faith that tells us technological progress need not enrich only the few but can in fact empower the many. This is the faith that says standards for public safety need not be dictated by mayors and the police unions that endorse them but can be controlled by the community. This is the faith that says a burning planet might not just be saved but renewed.

The seed of hope that inspires activism is also what makes utopian thinking so powerful. This power must be reclaimed if we are to harness the energy of a remarkable opening when—because of a pandemic that upended everything about what we thought possible, and of movements for justice that are finally being heard—it might finally be possible to address our contemporary variations on Paine’s *American Crisis*.

This rare opening highlights a need for utopian thinking, in all of its forms, that is more pressing than at any time since the end of World

War II. If ever there were a moment that called for Paine’s “birthday of a new world,” this is it. Tens of millions of Americans, hundreds of millions of people around the world, see the possibility. More bold ideas are being advanced than at any time in decades. There are serious discussions about ending poverty, precarity, and inequality with universal basic income schemes. Demonstrators fill the streets to demand not just the defunding of police but the upending of systemic racism. A new generation of campaigners propose to save the planet and the people who inhabit it with a Green New Deal. Where UBI, abolition, and climate justice went unaddressed in the fall presidential debates of 2016, they framed the debates of 2020. The most important of those debates were not between Donald Trump and Joe Biden but between Biden and the future. Biden was resistant, declaring when the climate crisis came up that “The

difference between me and the new green deal is they say, automatically, by 2030 we’re going to be carbon free. Not possible.” That was a frustrating response, but it was also an invitation to the sort of utopian thinking, and the sort of utopian demanding, that says, “Yes, possible.”

It was to be expected that right-wing Republicans in Congress would dismiss the Green New Deal as “a radical reshaping of American society in the name of utopian environmental policy,” as did Republican Representative Morgan Griffith from Virginia. That conservative commentators from the Colson Center would declare, “Abolishing police is the stuff of utopian fantasies.” That media outlets like Prairie Public Broadcasting would ask, “Is a Universal Basic Income too Utopian to Work?” What was unexpected, and hopeful, is the speed with which centrist Democrats like Biden, and even a few Republicans at the state and federal levels, have been drawn

into discussions of these proposals since the pandemic hit and Black Lives Matter demonstrations filled the streets of American cities after the murder of George Floyd.



A. Philip Randolph organized the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom from the Utopia Neighborhood Club House.

UTOPIAN THINKERS ARE ALWAYS SPINNING OUT IDEAS, AS my friend Erik Olin Wright proved with his three-decade-long Real Utopias project, in which the late University of Wisconsin sociology professor brought together thinkers and activists to explore visionary responses to contemporary challenges. The conferences Wright organized from the 1990s to the 2010s were epic gatherings where great thinkers from around the world wrestled with everything from transforming the division of labor within families to redesigning the distribution of wealth within capitalist societies and genuinely empowering participatory democracy. The utopian responses that Wright and his comrades spawned did not get enough attention in their moment. But they are the sorts of ideas that get a second look in times of peril and uncertainty. These are such times. We can be overwhelmed by everything that’s coming at us. Or we can mount an overwhelming response that channels the visionary energy of Karl Marx, who declared that there is “a world to win,” and the humanity that Arundhati Roy expressed when she wrote, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

Wright launched the Real Utopias project at a time when the Cold War had ended and Francis Fukuyama was proposing that the moment should be understood as “not just the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of histo-

**“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”**

—Arundhati Roy

## “A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now.”

—Thomas Paine

**Bernie Sanders** introduced into our politics ideas that are common in many countries but are dismissed as utopian in the US.

improving institutions. Instead of indulging in utopian dreams we must accommodate to practical realities.” Wright’s proposal “embraces this tension between dreams and practice.” Rejecting “vague utopian fantasies [that] may lead us astray,” he argued that “Nurturing clear-sighted understandings of what it would take to create social institutions free of oppression is part of creating a political will for radical social changes needed to reduce oppression.”

That’s a reasonable restatement of the historical view of the political power of utopian thinking—a view that has been accepted and utilized by figures as distinct as Paine; Fanny Wright, the feminist, abolitionist, and anti-capitalist social reformer who established a multiracial utopian community in the 1820s; Edward Bellamy, the utopian novelist whose best-selling 1888 book *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* would be credited by Eugene V. Debs as “the first popular exposition of socialism in this country” and, eventually, earn plaudits from New Dealer Arthur Morgan as “almost a catalog of social legislation of the past half-century”; and W.E.B. Du Bois, whose groundbreaking 1920 story “The Comet” wrestled with overturning white supremacy in a visionary anticipation of Afrofuturism that imagined a post-apocalyptic New York where a surviving Black man comes to recognize himself as the Adam of a new world.

**U**NFORTUNATELY, CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL AND MEDIA ELITES ARE QUICK to reject visionary thinking of any kind. In today’s United States, the word “utopian” is often used to discredit progressive ideas and candidates. When Bernie Sanders ran as a democratic socialist for the presidency in 2016 on a platform that was radical only in the context of constipated American politics, his rival, Hillary Clinton, dismissed his agenda as “little more than a pipe-dream.” After she lost the fall race to Donald Trump, Clinton

wrote as such: That is, the end-point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” Jacques Derrida rebuked Fukuyama with a stinging declaration: “Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the ‘end of ideologies’ and the end of the great emancipatory

discourses, let us never neglect this obvious, macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable, singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth.” With his relentless intellectual curiosity and rigorous humanity, Wright sought to take the discussion to the next level by highlighting radical thinking that addressed the issues left unresolved at “the end of history.” With the Real Utopias project, he sought to reopen the debate by identifying visionary responses that he argued required only political courage, an understanding of technological progress, and a leap of the imagination to be achieved.

Wright acknowledged that the notion of “real utopias” might seem like a contradiction in terms for those who accepted a narrow definition of the U-word. “Utopias are fantasies, morally inspired designs for a humane world of peace and harmony unconstrained by realistic considerations of human psychology and social feasibility,” he mused. “Realists eschew such fantasies. What is needed are hard-nosed proposals for pragmatically im-



wrote a book in which, *Vanity Fair* noted, she argued that Sanders had “hijacked the Democratic primary and derailed her White House bid by misleading voters with his utopian, pie-in-the-sky proposals for free health care, free college, and free ponies for all.” A derogatory application of the “utopian” label to the Sanders candidacy was a constant. A *Forbes* headline declared, “Bernie Sanders’ Scandinavian Utopia Is an Illusion.” *The Washington Times* announced, “Only morons would vote for crazy Bernie Sanders’ utopian socialism,” while *The Washington Post* ridiculed the senator’s desire to create a Scandinavian-style social welfare state as “utopian fantasy.” The line of attack was so prominent that Sanders announced, “It is not utopian thinking to say that every man, woman and child should have access to health care as a right.”

There was no debating the point if you lived in Norway, New Zealand, or any of the other countries that guarantee health care. But the fact is that what Sanders was proposing—health care for all, free college, expanded Social Security, a \$15-an-hour minimum wage, and requirements that employers provide paid parental leave, sick leave, and vacation time—sounded utopian for a lot of working-class Americans. The senator’s campaign acknowledged he was proposing a “political revolution.” So why, instead of getting defensive, didn’t Sanders draw inspiration from the author of the original American Revolution

to explain how ideas once thought to be utopian can be mainstreamed? Sanders would have benefited by borrowing a page from Paine, whose tracts inspired immediate revolutionary action.

Paine opened *Common Sense* with an acknowledgment that “Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general Favor;

a long Habit of not thinking a Thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of Custom.” With that, he outlined the argument for the rejection of the divine right of kings and a revolution against the wealthiest and most militarily powerful empire on the planet. The revolution ensued, formally beginning with the signing of a Declaration of Independence just six months after the publication of a pamphlet that concluded with a utopian cry. “A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand....”

Not a bad point of beginning, then. Or now.



# ARCHITECTURE

## The Built Utopia



### Why do we keep getting it so wrong?

KATE WAGNER



TWO YEARS AGO, THE DANISH ARCHITECT Bjarke Ingels, along with MIT and Oceanix (a start-up developing new ways to build on water), released a sprawling techno-utopian plan called Oceanix City, a community of 10,000 meant to float off the coast of New York City. Reading the press release is like assembling a collage of eco-technobabble, containing everything from the idea of being “resilient” (which here means “not flooding”) and the use of solar panels to hydroponic farming and a “zero waste” food policy. Of course, Oceanix City, an abstract utopia (meaning a utopia built by technocrats and operating within the existing social framework) assumes an almost entirely consumption-oriented habitat rather than a production-oriented one—meaning that other, less fortunate nations will still be the ones toiling in absentia to bring all the luxuries of everyday life. Ten thousand people, when considering the total population of New York City, is not a lot of people. And while the directive insists that the eco-

villages will be affordable, nobody involved quantifies how affordability will be determined or maintained.

The more one reads into the design brief, the more one finds details that initially seem chipper but are, in reality, rather sinister: for example, the tidbit about how the project is meant to survive a Category 5 hurricane—something New York City itself is not. What we are seeing here is, in effect, a scarcity mentality couched in the jargon of sustainability, pure escapism masquerading as some kind of vague ideal society of (checks notes) people who live on floating solar-panel islands presumably working from home while the rest of New York drowns. Oceanix City is a project I return to frequently in my writing because it is a perfect example of everything wrong with contemporary design’s so-called big dreams. However, it’s not a stand-alone instance of egregious cynicism masquerading as idealism. No, the project is emblematic of a broader trend of endlessly salable techno-utopias, which include remarkably insipid things like 3D-printed tiny houses to solve homelessness, underground luxury bunker communities, and skyscrapers suspended from asteroids.

The technology for each of these ideas may be new (or even nonexistent), but they are, in fact, old ideas repackaged in glitzy new renderings—in the case of

*Kate Wagner is an architecture and cultural critic based in Chicago. She is the creator of the blog McMansion Hell.*

Oceanix City, by boyish starchitects who are very good at using PR and fantastical imagery to conveniently shield the fact that they are happy to work with environmentally destructive despots like Jair Bolsonaro (as Ingels attempted to do, unrepentantly). One can find a number of precedents for such projects

dating specifically to the 1960s and '70s, a period not dissimilar to our own: one of financial and social crisis, beset with questions about the future of both the city and the earth itself. From financialization to gas shortages to housing crises to increasing existential dread regarding the environment, what's old is truly new again. It's no surprise that half-baked ideas from this former period have re-emerged in their current, even less inspiring forms. (At least

the projects from mid-century both looked and were, in many ways, cool.) The first of these are megastructures. Megastructures are, according to the Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki (whom the historian Reyner Banham credits with inventing the term), "large frame[s] containing all the functions of a city, mostly housed in transient short-term containers." They're further defined by a shared compositional form ("composed according to traditional Modern Movement precepts") and group form ("accumulation of identical spatial or structural elements into larger complexes").

By that definition, Oceanix City, with its prefabricated, geometric patterns and installations, certainly fits the bill. However, just as Oceanix appropriates the imagery of sustainability (wood

framing, green space, solar panels), the megastructures of the 1960s and '70s (almost all of which remain speculative and unbuilt) appropriate the hallmarks of high modernism. In the case of Paul Rudolph's mass housing proposal for the Lower Manhattan Expressway, that meant the highway. Rudolph's plan featured sprawling, angular brutalist apartment buildings suspended over the infamous proposed highway that was supposed to plow through Lower Manhattan and ended in being canceled, thanks to concerted community activism. Or consider the sublime industrial landscapes that litter the outskirts of many a metropolis, such as the massive, space-framed, fractal-like megacity plans of Japanese Metabolists like Maki and Kisho Kurokawa. These megastructures were typically conceived as massive, prefabricated closed systems, many of which were suspended above an existing urban fabric (often a highway) or, like Oceanix City, floating in a bay or harbor.

In these cities, both those that were speculative and those intended for real production, all functions of life have been designed and allotted modular units that would then be attached to a system of other units. Yet, in reality, all megastructures do, in the words of architecture historian Felicity D. Scott, is attempt "to make architecture congeal the...forces of capitalism as form and to adopt its modes of visibility." For all their supposed flexibility, their functions resemble instruments of control as much as anything else. All of the terrible things in the world and in cities, things that are inherent to the oppressive division of social relations wrought by capitalism, would effectively still exist in these hyper-designed, hyper-rationalized spaces. This, of course, prompts the question: Utopia for whom?

## Design, while obviously involved in world transformation, cannot by itself solve social problems related to climate and urbanization.

### Modular decay:

The Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo, one of the few Metabolist projects that was actually built, has fallen into disrepair.



THE OTHER THREAD IN THE OCEANIX City vision of the future is one of ecological escapism. In this, it also owes much to the hippie mindset of the 1960s and '70s, when things

like communes and dome cities seemed to promise escape from the aforementioned social relations (surely one cannot be alienated from one's own labor if one quits one's job and jets off to the desert to live communally!). Drop City, an experimental geodesic-dome building project founded in 1965 in a Colorado pasture, is perhaps the best-known example of this phenomenon, of a city that aimed to sever all ties with existing social structures. Half extended art project and half bizarre interpretation of the ideas of Buckminster Fuller (the popularizer of the geodesic dome), Drop City domes were made of both cheap, new, mass-produced building materials like silicone caulks and vinyl and items upcycled from junk yards, making it one of the earliest attempts at low-waste architecture, albeit somewhat kooky and misguided.

Its building plans were provided by a zine called the *Dome Cookbook*, by an ex-mathematician named Steve Baer, a kooky character in and of himself who wrote sprawling, possibly acid-inspired treatises on innovative geometries. With the use of recycled materials, Baer and company argued that "everyone in the

world can have a beautiful, comfortable dwelling unit for less than \$1,000." According to Scott, in order to declare independence from the lumber industry, the Droppers (as they dubbed themselves) invented a new shingle style out of recycled car tops. Citizens were essentially scavengers, feeding off the waste of a gluttonous America. If this sounds ill-fated to you, you're right, it was. Domes, as cool as they are, are not practical; they're notoriously leaky and are difficult to turn into functional homes with, you know, more than one room. Also, living out of domes made from trash had obvious health effects (all

that sheet vinyl languishing in the sun stank and put toxic fumes into the air). Also, unfortunately, the mere revolutionary structure of the geodesic dome was not enough to actually bring about any real social revolution, and, as in many communes, times got desperate, things broke apart, and what was once an eco-paradise became nothing more than an abandoned trash heap in a goat pasture. So it goes.

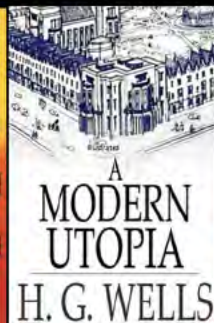
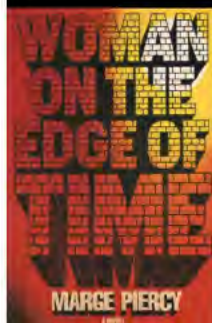
# FICTION

## Novel Solutions

While one cannot deny that Rudolph's megalomaniac drawings and models for Lower Manhattan or a bunch of architecture hippies tripping on acid while living in trash domes are *definitely cool*, these utopias, in the practical sense of the term—as imaginaries of an ideal society—frankly suck. As a result, their progeny, be they in the form of 3D-printed tiny houses for the indigent or spurious off-shore eco-villages, also suck. The reason they suck is simple: Design, while obviously involved in the process of world transformation, cannot by itself solve social problems related to climate and urbanization.

That's not to say that all utopian experiments and lines of thought in architecture suck. In fact, there's a great deal we can learn from the utopian thinking of the past. Arts and Crafts movement pioneers and utopian socialists William Morris and Walter Crane, writing in the 1880s, argued for unalienated handiwork, authenticity in craft, and an escape from the new modes of mass production and their exploitative division of labor, which they saw as the destroyers of both art and life. At the core of their praxis is a simple but still revolutionary belief that we should be free to do as we please and labor as we want to, not as we are forced to in order to survive. This was an ideal that powered the Bauhaus in its earlier years, before its turn toward mass production. We can look also to the broadly humanitarian if not utopian visions that brought us what little remnants of the welfare state we have left: council housing in Britain and public housing in the US (both worthy and functional causes now picked clean by neoliberalism) or even the New Deal, which, though problematic, provided thousands of beautiful and functional public buildings in varying architectural styles across the country.

We have the tools and the protocols to build a real architectural and ecological utopia already at our fingertips. These include systems of alternative energy consumption and production; building systems like Passivhaus that use dense insulation and massive walls to conserve energy; landscape architecture that is sensitive to existing ecosystems; urban planning for mass public housing and transportation to replace oil-burning car dependence; preservation protocols to adapt, save, and reuse existing structures; and hundreds of years of architectural precedent to be influenced by. What we lack, actually, is imagination, drive, and political will. As we can see by the current movements in tenant organizing and advocacy for a Green New Deal, that's changing too. All the ingredients for a better world are there—it's now up to us as political and social actors to fight like hell for them. **N**



**Climate catastrophe has transformed utopian fiction from a minor literary genre into an important tool of human thought.**

**KIM STANLEY ROBINSON**



RECENTLY I READ AN EXCELLENT BOOK: *THE SOVIET NOVEL*, BY KATARINA Clark. In it she observed that the USSR's socialist realism suffered from what she called “modal schizophrenia,” because the writers were supposed to stay true to the situations they described while also evoking the better world socialism would bring. They were caught trying to bridge that gap between what is and what ought to be.

Clark's diagnosis made me laugh. I've been writing utopian novels for a long time, and I recognized all too well the syndrome she described. The novel is usually regarded as a realist art form, and I'd go even further: By telling the stories we use to understand our lives, the novel helps create our reality. In novels, things go wrong—that's plot. People then cope. That's realism.

Utopia, on the other hand, is famously “no place,” an idealized society sometimes described right down to its sewage system. In utopia, everything works well—maybe even perfectly, but for sure better than things work now. So utopias are like blueprints, while novels are like soap operas. Crossing these two genres gets you the hybrid called the utopian novel: soap operas put in a blender with architectural blueprints. It doesn't sound all that promising.

Then came Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. Published in 1975, this was the first great utopian novel, and it demonstrated just how good the poor, misbegotten hybrid can be. Of course, there'd been earlier utopian novels, like William Morris's *News From Nowhere*, or H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, or Aldous Huxley's *Island*. These were all interesting efforts. But Le Guin's book was a triumph. What she showed is that by describing a utopian society in a moment of historic danger, you create for it all kinds of problems that its characters must solve. It will get attacked from the outside, corrupted from the inside; things will go wrong, and so you have your plot. Le Guin combined an intriguing utopia with a compelling novel, and the result was superb. The people on her habitable moon, Annares, have formed an alternative society to the imperial capitalist world, Urras. They devised a system that is feminist for sure and either democratic socialist or anarcho-syndicalist, but in any case in a state of flux, its people doing everything they can to keep what's best about their

*Kim Stanley Robinson is the author of more than 20 books. His most recent is The Ministry of the Future.*

system while also fending off impositions from the home world. It's political fiction at its best.

Inspired by Le Guin's example, I've often tried this hybrid form, and been stymied by its problems and spurred by its potential. One weakness I've become aware of is how often the authors of utopias set them after a break in history that allows their societies to start from scratch. In the 16th century, Sir Thomas More began the use of this device with a physical symbol: His utopia's founders dug a Great Trench, cutting a peninsula in two and creating a defensible island. Other kinds of fresh start appear in utopias throughout the centuries, always clearing space for a new social order. Even Le Guin's *Annaras* is founded by exiles from Urras.

But in this world, we are never going to get the chance to start over. This was one of the reasons Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels objected to 19th-century utopias like that of Charles Fourier, the French designer of small communes living in perfect harmony: They were fantasy solutions that served only to distract people from the real work of politics and revolution. They were also in competition with Marx and Engels's own ideas, so there was the usual left infighting. But it was a legitimate complaint: If utopia isn't a political program, then what is it for?

The answer should be obvious. Utopias exist to remind us that there could be a better social order than the one we are in. Our present system is the result of a centuries-old power struggle, and it is devastating people and the biosphere. We must change it—and fast. But to what?

Utopias are thought experiments. Imagine if things ran like *this*: Wouldn't that be good? Well, maybe...let's live in it fictionally for a while. What problems crop up in this system? Can we solve them? What if we tweak things this way, or that? Let's tell this story and then that story, and see how plausible they feel after we spend some imaginative time in them.

The problems that might develop in a proposed better system both propel the novel's plot and give you things to think about. Then, hopefully, you can apply what you've learned to your current political situation. Having glimpsed a destination you like, you can then consider the actions available in your own time to get there. The great feminist utopias of Joanna Russ (*The Female Man*) and Marge Piercy (*Woman on the Edge of Time*) gave life to the experience of women's political solidarity, and readers were then encouraged to change their present situation in those directions.

Now the onrush of catastrophic climate change has forced a reckoning. We either invent and institute a better way, or a mass extinction will take us down with it. Necessity has thus jammed utopia into history and turned it from a minor literary genre into an important tool of human thought. We need it like never before, and as the need has become acute, the bar has in effect been lowered: If we manage to dodge a mass extinction event, then we can call that utopia. People in any non-catastrophic future can heave a sigh of relief, grateful for such a stupendous effort by our generation. A healthy relationship to nature will create and require lots of good work as well as a commitment to justice for all Earth's creatures—humans very much included. That may be as close to utopia as we'll ever get, and it would be close enough. After all, you don't want to deprive future people of their plots. **N**

# HAR

## A Blazing



## In and out of utopia.

SHARIFA RHODES-PITTS

IN 1964, FOLLOWING THE UNREST IN HARLEM ROUSED by the police murder of James Powell, age 15, the poet June Jordan received an invitation to write for *Esquire*. Perhaps the invitation reached her in a manner that would feel familiar to some during our time. That is, perhaps she had been invited to explain.

But Jordan elected not to account for the conditions that had led to the boy's death that July, or for the subsequent six days of violent protests, wherein steel-helmeted members of New York City's Tactical Patrol Force descended on Harlem by the busload. They confronted peaceful crowds of up to 1,000 marchers as well as less decorous assemblies who greeted the police with their own tactical operations: bottles and debris hurled from the rooftops. All were met with the uniform dispersal strategy of shots fired into crowds.

COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER

# LEEM

## World



Rather than explain any of that, Jordan responded with a dream. She proposed a collaboration with the architect R. Buckminster Fuller: a radical/visionary redesign of Harlem to create an environment where such events were not possible. The poet undertook this project while newly separated from her husband, having sent her young child to live with relatives because her poverty could not sustain them both. Her dream of a transformed Harlem was composed at a moment when her personal precarity met the larger crisis. Years later, she called the project “a beginning,” and perhaps it is helpful to hold on to that feeling when contemplating the resulting design. Its most striking feature was 15 conical towers, 100 stories high, intended to house 500,000 people, insistently lifting Harlem and its population to the skies: upward, forward, and out of history.

Those same towers would furnish a complicated network of roadways, walkways, a rainwater-harvesting system connected to the city’s reservoirs, government buildings, shops, and cultural centers. Each apartment

would be substantially larger than in typical public housing, boasting balconies and parking spaces—“every window would have a view.” New highways would connect Harlem to its surroundings, conveying people in and out of the neighborhood and opening up what had been cut off by borders literal and imaginary. It was a design that yearned for expansion and connection—but also a total obliteration of what had come before. “Partial healing is not enough,” Jordan wrote in a text accompanying the proposal, “a half century of despair requires exorcism.” When the article was published in April 1965, Jordan’s byline appeared (under her married name, June Meyer), but the collaborative design—though the collaboration was at her instigation—was attributed to Fuller alone. The title she had chosen for the piece, “A Skyrise for Harlem,” was changed to “Instant Slum Clearance.” Jordan’s text offered specifics indicating that she and Fuller “fully expected its enactment”: a construction time line of three years, prefabricated elements to be delivered by helicopter, a budget financed by private investment. But the illustrations, as Jordan later noted with some despair, were captioned as “utopian details.”

**T**HE SAME MONTH JORDAN AND FULLER’S DREAM OF A “RECONSTRUCTED Harlem” was published in *Esquire*’s pages, entering the history of the unbuilt, another project in the neighborhood was nearing completion. Intermediate School 201 was designed before the riots, which were themselves preceded by a February

1964 school boycott in which over 400,000 students declined to attend school to protest their segregated education. One flyer rallying them to the cause showed a Black boy staring through the broken shards of a mullioned window with the caption: “I don’t have a good integrated school.” Integration was understood as the force that would elevate their lives—because the best indicator of better opportunities was the presence of white people. So when the plans for IS 201 were published, they immediately caused a furor. The school would be situated at the confluence of Black Harlem and El Barrio, its eastern face abutting the elevated train traffic of the Park Avenue viaduct. Tenements, decrepit brownstones, a warehouse, and at least one church were demolished to make way for the new school: instant slum clearance indeed. But the rest remained. Black parents knew what this location meant. It was too deep in the ghetto to ever be integrated; white people would not send their children there.

As Marta Gutman details in a chapter of *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community*, authorities responded with a logic that continues to govern the still-unresolved problem of unequal education available to poor, Black, and brown children. The city assured Black parents that the white bodies supposedly so necessary as vectors of excellence and justification for investment would be lured to the

“showcase school” by its comforts and innovations. The school would have flexible-space, open-plan classrooms and would be the first in the city to be air-conditioned. These amenities, along with innovative teaching, would be the prize for white families daring a descent into what *Time* magazine called “Darkest East Harlem.” Such improvements were not for the sake of the existing community alone. (A similar idea operates in Jordan and

**Esquire changed the title Jordan had chosen for the piece, “A Skyrise for Harlem,” to “Instant Slum Clearance.” The illustrations, she noted with despair, had been captioned “utopian details.”**

Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts teaches at Pratt Institute.

**“The idea of building it without windows was so the parents couldn’t look in and see it was segregated and the kids couldn’t look out to see it was Harlem!”**

—*Amsterdam News*

from East Harlem.” A total of 10 white families reportedly signed up for school tours, including one headed by Bruno Piscitello, who told the paper, “I wouldn’t be doing this for integration’... as his wife nodded in agreement.” Instead, he would enroll his daughter only if the school in Harlem was better than the one in their neighborhood. If they did come, it would not be as participants in an experiment of transformation, but as a kind of resource extraction.

By then, a version of this self-interest had also begun to alter the aspirations of the neighborhood parents, who threatened and then carried out another boycott. Now, instead of agitating for the dream of integration, their efforts were governed by realpolitik. Geography being destiny, the location of IS 201 determined that it would be segregated. Therefore, parents and activists argued, let it offer “quality segregated education” under community control. As the Harlem-based sociologist and organizer Preston Wilcox asserted in 1966, “If one can believe

that a predominantly ‘de facto segregated’ white school can be a ‘good school,’ then, one must believe that a ‘de facto segregated’ and predominantly Negro and Puerto Rican school can also be a ‘good school.’”

This struggle, first articulated by parents, soon found supporters—or as *The New York Times* described it, “Militant Negroes Move to Aid Group in Harlem.” There was Stokely Carmichael, still of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, having just declared for Black Power; a young Louis Farrakhan, ascendant just after the elimination of Malcolm X. Ella Collins, the sister of the slain leader, then attempting to guide the remnants of his Organization of Afro-American Unity, also lent her support: “We must create for ourselves and plan our own destinies.”

When that fight was won, at least temporarily, the school opened in April 1967—a year later than originally planned—after a three-week boycott, picketing, and prolonged negotiations. But in the midst of the struggle over what kind of school it would be, parents and activists began to notice the matter of the building itself—the work of New Orleans-based architects Curtis & Davis, imagined without any input from the local community.

At a cost of \$5 million, it was then the most expensive school in New York’s system, and won prizes and praise for its design. But some parents and activists—including members of the Harlem Parents Committee, already organizing in the neighborhood for a decade, and other groups formed in the midst of the IS 201 struggle for school control—saw this architecture as an affront. Wilcox called it “a palliative for anger.” The facility was said to support students’ ability to concentrate, boasting ideal climate control, consistent lighting, and ease of maintenance. Each of these qualities was the result of a single feature: The classrooms had no windows. (Recall the broken window in the school boycott flyer—according to the Board of Education, broken windows were among the greatest expenses in maintaining school properties.) The windowless structure dampened the rumble of the elevated train and also, the *Times* noted approvingly, “shut out noise, dirt and distraction” from the “squalid slums outside.” The

Fuller’s Skyrise project, which by its visionary design planned to attract and accommodate “an additional quarter-million residents, everyone willing to participate in the integrated transformation of a ghetto.”)

*The New York Times* noted how, in pursuit of white students, the city sent “10,000 four-page ‘invitations’ to pupils in the schools of the Northwest Bronx and Queens. The leaflets stressed the educational opportunities available at the new school and offered special bus service to and

designers’ remit was predicated on the belief that students’ ability to concentrate required them to dissociate from the places they called home. The school’s exterior, sheathed by brick screening, was repeatedly described in a positive appraisal by *Architectural Forum* as a shield. While every room in Jordan and Fuller’s towers would be graced with its own view of a Harlem reimagined after the riots’ destruction, a political cartoon in the *Amsterdam News* derided “the windowless school”: “I think the idea of building it without windows was so the parents couldn’t look in and see it was segregated and the kids couldn’t look out to see it was Harlem!” And the building—again, designed before the riots—seemed prepared for future sieges. Seeking a design fix for the problem of the noisy elevated train, the architects were able to subvert a code requiring light in school buildings by having the structure qualify as a fallout shelter.



YEARS LATER, WHEN I LIVED IN HARLEM, I sometimes passed that way, and IS 201 did not seem out of place. This was not a positive achievement. The building—in those days it housed the school of the Boys Choir of Harlem—seemed naturalized with its adjacent landscape, the one it had been designed to exclude. It was already old, and in my memory it was always covered in scaffolding and ringed by a tall chain-link fence, like something undergoing reconstruction. I did not know, or think to inquire, about its history. So I was unaware of the picket lines and controversy, or the brief, aborted experiment in community control. I did not know about the 12-inch walls and floors designed to withstand nuclear war. But the forbidding brick façade—shield—communicated something about what Jordan had been trying to avoid when she wrote to Fuller in the midst of their design collaboration, urging curvilinear features “to overcome physical patterns of inevitability; the sense of inexorable routes, the impossibility of a differentiated approach, of surprise.”



Despite their different origins, the Jordan-Fuller collaboration and the Harlem school fiasco raise similar questions. Neither design, not the built or the unbuilt, achieved its end. While it is easier to decry the school as a failed experiment imposed on the community and undone by its assumptions, it is not hard to imagine Jordan and Fuller’s Skyrise meeting a reception at least as bewildered and possibly becoming every bit as reviled. Neighbors referred to IS 201 as “the prison,” “the warehouse,” “the fortress,” and “Fort Necessity.” Other undoubtedly colorful local nicknames might have been earned by Skyrise, depending on what unforeseen problems the

design created or solved. In recent years Jordan and Fuller's collaboration has been resurrected and celebrated by scholars as a lost instance of black feminist architecture and, rightfully, an achievement of Jordan's speculative imagination. But both operate in architecture's heroic, and thus truly utopic, mode.

Jordan rightly invoked the imaginative leap necessary to transform Harlem, but this was framed as "a proposal to rescue a quarter-million lives by completely transforming their environment." The notion of an architectural rescue mission may be where Fuller's imprint is most visible. In early 1966—just before the struggle began over IS 201, its design and control, and how these would combine to determine what kind of future was possible in Harlem—Fuller was quoted in *The New Yorker* making claims that might have been used to justify those windowless classrooms: "You can't reform man, and you can't improve his situation where he is." Fuller further described his theory of change with the language of conquistadors and corsairs: "The tiny minority that went to sea, for example...immediately found [themselves] outside the law." This "outlaw area" was the place where technology was developed and change was possible. If Harlem were an such an area, then Preston Wilcox's harsh assessment of IS 201—that it was "a monument to absentee-decision-making, colonialism"—may have been equally applied to Skyrise, even if it was codesigned by Jordan, a native daughter of the neighborhood.

Maybe neither is more utopian—or dystopian—than the other. One reached skyward, the other burrowed underground and oriented inward. But of both, it is worth asking: Whose utopia is it?

Interestingly, the two projects shared a design element. Jordan writes of the innovation, developed with Fuller, to build the new towers on columns above existing tenements. This way they'd avoid the displacement summed up in the Harlem aphorism "Urban renewal equals Negro removal." Instead, residents would stay in their homes during the construction process and then move up, into the new towers, which would begin 10 stories above street level. Only when the ascent was complete would the old buildings be razed, the empty space below becoming public park space and roads.

IS 201 also hovers above street level, elevated on tapered concrete columns or piloti that earned it another of its nicknames: a "tomb on stilts." In *Educating Harlem*, Gutman wrote that these were among the design's allusions to "classical European, African, and Native American" influences, but another observer, writing in 1973, called them an "inspiring example of modern American riot architecture." What the architects thought would be a covered schoolyard was



instead sought out as shelter for Harlemites who lived out of doors, its shadows inviting in the deprivation the building attempted to shut out—neatly contradicting Fuller's notion that every use could be determined by design. Surely the 100-story towers of Skyrise would have created as much shadow as shade.

Darryl Williams, who was among the first students to attend IS 201, has posted a short documentary on YouTube in which he attempts to make sense of the time he spent there, wondering if "people knew that IS 201 was built out of struggle." To a soundtrack of Gil-Scott Heron, he drives through the neighborhood, interviewing his fellows from the schoolyard and the block, boys who had played together in those streets before the school was erected and are now almost old men. Williams's own impressions of the school are salutary. He attended during the brief period when the local-control experiment was allowed to unfold, so he recalls the community groups whose after-school activities flourished in the building, pressing inward from across Harlem with "Jazzmobile, Each One Teach One, Malcolm-King College, Night Center, self-defense classes, and talent shows." He has a precise memory of the building's 56 concrete pillars, as if the number itself were a cipher whose meaning is known only to the initiated. His film ends insisting that the value of the school be brought to light, "because its history remains in the dark."

**From broken windows to no windows:** Future students of Harlem's experiment in design.



WHEN SIR THOMAS MORE set out to imagine "not only a future but a destiny" that was "consciously and deliberately designed" (to describe his treatise in terms borrowed from Jordan and Fuller), the tradition of creating an ideal world to oppose an imperfect one was not new. But he needed a new word. Jordan considered "utopia" an epithet slandering her dream of New Harlem precisely because it denoted impossibility and therefore continued inaction. But More's vision was aligned with the greatest action of his time, the voyages of "discovery" and the subsequent projection of European power onto the lives, destinies, and possibilities of all other peoples of the world. This is not a coincidence. More's text—and the spate of tracts that followed the publication of *Utopia* in 1516—were written into the expanded imaginary opened up by conquest. The "new" territories were spaces where it could be

**When I lived in Harlem, IS 201 did not seem out of place. This was not a positive achievement.**

imagined there were no people. Or, if there were people, they could be civilized and perfected—or, should they resist, vanquished and exterminated.

It is easy to recognize in More and those who followed him not only the blueprints of an unbuilt world but also, in some cases, the world that came and maybe the world that is coming. More's *Utopia*—that happy place, or no place—was socialist while also a slave society; Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, offered a proto-feminist entry with *The Blazing World*, ruled by an empress and “so well ordered that it could not be mended; for it was governed without secret and deceiving Policy; neither was there any ambitious factions, malicious detractions, civil dissensions, or home-bred quarrels.” Sir Francis Bacon, in his unfinished *The New Atlantis*, described an island that flourishes after the rest of the world is destroyed by rising seas.

Each was dreamed up not only as a deliberate design of a new world but because of a world that no longer existed, a world—following the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter—whose people and their vision of how or what the world might be had been destroyed by European encounter. The relationship between utopian thought and conquest is that of Borges's “map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it.”

But if More's neologism lodged in Western tradition as mere idealization, Vasco Quiroga, the Bishop of Michoacán, read *Utopia* as a builder would read a blueprint, determined to make it “the Magna Carta of European civilization in the New World.”

*Utopia* was the plan Quiroga would follow when attempting to smooth over the inconveniences arising in 1530 when the Purhépecha began to rebel after the execution of their leader, Tzintzicha Tangáxoan II. Opposed to enslaving Indigenous people, preferring rather to pacify them by indoctrination and instruction, Quiroga proposed to fix the problem of the *indios* scattered throughout the countryside (where they were likely in retreat, recuperating from violent reprisals). They would be brought to live in cities, “that the natives may have enough for themselves and for those whom they must support; that they may be sufficiently well kept and that they may be properly converted, as they should be.” This would be achieved through deliberate design: a six-hour workday, property held in common, and all corrupting luxuries eschewed. Quiroga's plan called for reordering patterns of living with mathematical precision. The natives would be gathered into hospital-towns, which he called *Republicas de Indios*: “a city of six thousand families—each family composed of from ten to sixteen couples—would be ruled, regulated, and governed as though it were a single family.”

The “Indian Utopia” founded by Vasco Quiroga persists, his good works still celebrated today. A Mexican tourist website describes the legacy of Tato Vasco, as the bishop is fondly remembered, whose program of training is classed as an

enduring success in the villages of Santa Fe de Mexico, Santa Fe de la Laguna, and Santa Fe del Río. As if the production of tourist handicraft was the destiny of a people who had fought against their obliteration, travelers are instructed to visit “Paracho for guitars, Tzintzuntzán for pottery, Santa Clara for copper products and Nurío for woven woolen goods.” The website does not record the prophetic vision of a Purhépecha woman who predicted an apocalyptic punishment meted

out by an offended goddess, announcing European arrival, the coming rip in time, and the end of the known world:

Break all those jugs for it shall not be from here on, as it has been up to now when we were very prosperous. Break

all the wine tubs everywhere, leave off the sacrifice of men and bring no more offerings with you because from now on it is not to be that way. No more kettle drums are to be sounded, split them asunder. There will be no more temples or fireplaces, nor will any more smoke rise, everything shall become a desert because other men are coming to earth. They will spare no end of the earth, to the Left Hand [west] and to the Right [east], and everywhere all the way to the edge of the sea and beyond.

Perhaps, then, the point is not whether utopia can be recovered to organize a new politics—a utopia of the grassroots—but how much the world we live in is already someone's utopia. How are we to be delivered from it, by it, when we are still in it? Sylvia Wynter has scoffed at the compromised

position of a scientific community that created climate change now attempting to respond to it. Recognizing the *longue durée* spanning from the early modern age of discovery to ecological collapse, you could say of the new utopians, as Wynter did, “The proposals that they're going to give for change are going to be devastating!”

I WAS YOUNG AND RESPONSIBLE FOR NO ONE'S survival but my own when I decided my book *Harlem Is Nowhere* would be the first volume of a trilogy studying Black utopias. The settings—Harlem, Haiti, and the Black Belt of the American South—were of my choosing; though they were not places I belonged to by origin, I felt my origins tied up with them. The phrase “Black utopia” had been supplied by a mentor when I told him about those places, and it was with an irony that I did not question but was not exactly my own.

Occasionally I am asked to explain her, the one whose dream this was, by people who hear me name those places and think that, like the 10,000 invited to attend school in Darkest East Harlem, they cannot possibly be utopias because they would not like to go there. Plenty have been bold enough to tell me that those places are dystopic. At some point it became plain that I was operating with a different working definition of utopia than the (white) people asking me for clarification. It was not the *Blazing World* of Margaret Cavendish, a place “so well ordered that it could not be mended.” I had come to think of utopia as a location of the unbuilt, the not-yet, a place of unachieved dreams.

I realize now this was just one of a group of words for which I had private, alternative definitions, owing to the mother tongue I had learned in my native country, the family of origin. I was



**“There will be no more temples or fireplaces, nor will any more smoke rise, everything shall become a desert because other men are coming to earth.”**

—Purhépecha prophecy



a teenager, soon to discover on my mother's bookshelves June Jordan's *Civil Wars*, with its essay on the Skyrise for Harlem, when a teacher questioned the way I sneered dismissively whenever the word "politics" crossed my lips. I was speaking the dialect of my parents, who by the time of my birth had mostly left politics behind—though they were still very young. Politics made fatherless daughters, for though mine resided at home, I knew he lived in the Revolution. My definition of utopia had been formed growing up in a world measured against the unachieved, where time was told by an event—a revolution?—that had not happened, or had not happened yet, where dreams (and people) were thwarted, and the substance of these things was available to me only as an aura I experienced as a small girl leaping through political tracts stuffed in boxes in closets, bearing an unaired, nostril-burning scent I came to associate with the early 1970s. That was utopia, this not-yet of the past that was also still ongoing.

This conditionality, besides a flexibility of tenses, caused me to avoid some territories I recognized as home but would not enter: no campus sit-ins, protest marches, or even petitions; never a raised fist. I did not disagree with such measures, but when I was young I had an aversion to anything that appeared to me as reenactments of my parents' time in the Revolution. They had met as members of something that, until a few years ago, I knew only as "The Organization." There was a discontinuity between these two varieties of future: the one my peers claimed to be moving toward and that of my parents' not-yet. Unable to reconcile these futures, for years I avoided anything that could be understood as a movement, until a time when moving, with others, became what I was doing in the present tense.

This, and the fact that I am older now—responsible for the survival of someone besides myself—is why, when reading histories of the not-yet, I remain less interested in heroic contours. Instead, I search for the people who did not join the picket lines or the boycotts—the ones meant to be kept out by the windowless classrooms. Mostly they are not in history, though occasionally they slip through. In *Assata*, the autobiography of Assata Shakur, I hung on to the story of the necessarily unnamed sister who "always referred to [Shakur and her] comrades as 'you militants.' She was a militant too, but at the moment she

was not active, not out on Front Street, as she called it"—and therefore could provide undetectable harbor to usher Assata underground. When watching a documentary about the Black Panthers, I wondered why much more wasn't said about the families abandoned when the Panthers bunked in collective apartments, beds piled up in the rooms of makeshift headquarters—survival pending revolution. I wondered about the ones left behind and how they managed to survive. It was their struggle, but not their politics, so their stories are deemed subordinate; they will not be admitted to the utopia of the grassroots.

The shape of such lives may be deduced largely from the fact that some managed to continue. Not dreaming because always awake, keeping themselves and someone else alive. I do not think of this as hope—which is, perhaps, also heroic. And I worry about what this means for any self-concepts of radicality I may still retain, for it feels like a path to gradualism—repeating in my head is Nina Simone's voice from "Mississippi Goddam": "They keep on saying, 'Go slow.'" But to contemplate mere survival may be necessary during an era when we can't know if we'll have the time or the ability to live as we might wish—at any speed or by any design.

I needed a new word. Then I came upon the work of the Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor, who speaks of Native "survivance" as the persistence of stories, insisting on a Native presence in time if not in history, as peoples if not in politics. In this survivance, maybe there is a means to continue, against what the Purhépecha knew was coming to rule "the edge of the sea and beyond." And thus, perhaps, positioned to continue against the rising of the sea itself.

**I**N EARLY JUNE LAST YEAR, MY FATHER SAID SOMETHING I STILL HAVEN'T WORKED out completely. He told me that what we are living through now—a world ablaze with a pandemic, wildfires in California where he lives, and the so-called racial reckoning that was happening, is happening, has already happened, or has not happened yet—felt familiar. It all reminded him of 1968: irresistible forces transforming everything, all at once and unpredictably. My father was too young to see action that year of the Revolution, but he had absorbed the chaos and promise and hurtling change. What he said next surprised me, though I responded with silence. His conclusion was that, in light of the current happenings, all that was left to do was "to hunker down and take care of your people."

This was not the vision of politics I had expected from him. I was alone in lockdown with my son, his grandson (a miracle of a phrase I did not expect ever to pronounce because of the language spoken in my native country). I listened to my father as I stood in the quiet green backyard of the rural-ish exurb where I've lived since taking my son from the city. We had arrived here a few months before the pandemic and the uprisings, so for a long time I had the feeling of experiencing a near-miss. In the evenings I followed the news of updated death tolls and learned which cities were under curfew, using headphones so my son would not hear. It was a future I had not prepared for, a location in which my world had become much smaller, and some of my dreams further away, because I was trying to find the best way for us to survive. **N**

## I search for the people who did not join the picket lines or the boycotts—the ones meant to be kept out by the windowless classrooms.

**An "Indian Utopia":** Inspired by his reading of Sir Thomas More, Vasco Quiroga, the Bishop of Michoacán, founded cities that still exist today.



# ELDER CARE

## Aging Is Actually Living

If Americans approached aging and disability not as an individual crisis but as a collective responsibility, what kind of safety net could we build?

**BRYCE COVERT**



**B**RANDON WILL HAD A LIFE PLAN: go to grad school for creative writing in New York City and eventually get a job in publishing. But then his mother, Janice, came to visit. She had lost a “startling” amount of weight, he said. At 62, she wanted to take cabs for short distances. He noticed a stiffness in her facial muscles that made it difficult for her to express emotion. “I’d be taking selfies and she couldn’t smile,” he recalled.

Within a year she would be diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. “It got real serious real quick,” Will said. He decided to sublet his room in New York and move home to Detroit for three months. “I thought we’d get her back to where she’d been before the spiral happened.” It’s now been five years, and Will still lives with her, monitoring her meals, doling out her medications, and helping her get around the house without falling.

Will said his family was “very blue collar.” His father was an electrician, and his mother paused her freelance writing career to be a stay-at-home parent. “We had always been kind of broke, but my parents did a great job working with so little,” he said. There were no college funds, but there was always food on the table and money for book fairs. In retirement, Janice lives on a modest 401(k) account and receives a portion of Brandon’s father’s pension. A few years ago, a doctor wrote Janice a prescription for home health care, and an aide came to assess her. He outlined a care plan, but Medicare refused to cover it. Medicaid might, but Janice’s modest income makes her ineligible for it.

One way or another, long-term care is likely to touch all of our lives. Those with incomes low enough to qualify for Medicaid can get coverage for nursing home stays or, for a lucky few, care inside their homes, and an even smaller number can afford private long-term care insurance. Outside of that, there is no system for helping us afford the care we need if we are fortunate enough to live long lives.

“Our country has never had a long-term care system,” said Ai-jen Poo, director of the advocacy organization Caring Across Generations. When the United States implemented programs like Medicare and Medicaid, life expectancy was far shorter and support for aging wasn’t on the agenda. The issue hasn’t garnered much political attention since then. Americans don’t like to think about death, aging, or disabilities. “We’ve been youth-focused and ability-focused,” said Sarah Szanton, director of the Center for Innovative Care in Aging at the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing. “We have so

much ableism, and we have viewed [aging] traditionally as a private matter.”

Today, the United States has a tattered state-by-state patchwork instead of a comprehensive social safety net. “We call it the nonsystem of long-term care,” said Susan Reinhard, senior vice president and director at the AARP Public Policy Institute. Most people assume that Medicare will cover long-term care, but it doesn’t automatically pay for even short-term assisted living or nursing home stays. In rare cases it will cover short-term in-home care from a certified aide. Medicaid covers nursing homes and, in some states, will sometimes cover home care, but many only qualify after they have spent down their assets—often by paying out of pocket for costly nursing home stays.

There’s also a serious mismatch between what families can access through Medicaid and what Americans want when they age. Nearly 90 percent of Americans say they want to age at home, but few get to do so. More than 800,000 people are on state waiting lists to get home-based care through Medicaid. Waiting lists are a problem of supply. Home health care aides make a median hourly wage of \$13, frequently don’t receive any benefits, and have few possibilities for advancement. The job is physically demanding and emotionally taxing, so there is a chronic shortage and lots of turnover.

If they can afford it, Americans can buy private long-term care insurance, but very few—7.5 million—do. The policies tend to be restrictive about what services and providers they’ll cover, and they often deny coverage based on preexisting conditions. Some won’t pay benefits in the case of common conditions like Alzheimer’s or diabetes. And premiums are high, since only those who are most vulnerable and costly to insure tend to buy it.

**A**NATIONWIDE LONG-TERM CARE SYSTEM MAY NOT seem utopian—the idea appears so commonsensical that many Americans assume we already have one. But crafting something functional and humane would be an incredibly ambitious effort, requiring creative thinking, robust resources, and vast political will.

A truly functioning system would offer people a variety of choices. Some people may need a nursing home or assisted living. Others may choose to pay a family member or a friend to provide care, or to hire a professional aide. All options would have to be of high quality, which requires big investments in the workforce.

To make the system affordable, it needs to be universal: We all pay into it, and we all know what the program covers. It would be “just like [how] a certain part of our paychecks go to Social Security. We know at the end, more or less, what that means when we retire,” said Kenneth Knapp, director of the Center for Long-Term Care at New York Medical College. Poo proposes a new Medicare program to cover long-term care for those who are eligible—“Medicare Part X,” she suggested. And she calls for a brand-new, nationwide social insurance program for everyone else. “We need a public infrastructure, a public system that allows us to pool the risks associated with long-term care.” That way we could “have enough resources in the system to both support access to the services and a strong workforce.”

That’s a tall order in a country that hasn’t created a new social safety net program in decades. But without it, the responsibility typically falls on family members. More than 40 million Americans are providing unpaid elder care. Those caregivers take on a critical role without typically knowing much about what they’re getting into—nearly always stepping in after an

**“You’re thrown out there on your own and you’re trying to piecemeal assemble your [care] plan.”**

—Brandon Will,  
family caregiver

## “We call it the non-system of long-term care.”

—Susan Reinhard,  
AARP Public Policy Institute

**Essential workers:** There is a chronic shortage of home health aides. Better wages and benefits help grow the workforce.

emergency—and with few supports. Brandon Will and his mother were always close. If he was sick or short on rent, she’s the one he would call. Even when he lived in New York, they would go to see the same movie at the same time in their different cities and get on the phone to talk about it afterward.

Will had, even in his 30s, already envisioned what the future would look like for the two of them: He would move back to Chicago after grad school, and Janice would retire and move close to him. But that was supposed to be when he was in his 40s or 50s—not now. And yet today they’ve moved to a one-story house in Chicago; Will has a bedroom in the garage.

Janice has cognitive and balance issues from Parkinson’s. She also began to suffer from debilitating chronic pain that turned out to be fibromyalgia. After the home health aide came, Will took the binder of physical therapy activities he left behind and began trying to implement the regimen himself. But less than a year after the aide visited, his mother fell and snapped her femur while trying to negotiate the surface change between the kitchen tile and the hallway carpet. Will thinks she “absolutely” wouldn’t have been so severely injured and needed surgery if they’d had more support.

These days he helps Janice with things large and small. He lines up activities and phone calls to keep her mind active. Walking is difficult for her, so he has to be at her side even though she uses a walker. It can take her almost an hour to get

to the corner of the block. He makes sure she eats at certain times so that she can take her medications as prescribed. After another bad fall last summer, he helps her get to and from the bathroom at night.

Will bemoans the fact that her care is reactive, not proactive. Medicare will cover things that are medically necessary, such as the walker after Janice broke her femur, but not assistive devices that could actually prevent a fall, like bars to help her get in and out of the bathtub. He’s done what he can to learn how to be a good caregiver: reading articles, going to Parkinson’s caregiver support groups, joining groups on Facebook. He takes notes every time Janice has physical therapy sessions so he can help her repeat the exercises. “But man, I wish we’d had this one guy who was ready to tell us everything,” he said of the home health aide who came for the assessment. “You’re thrown out there on your own, and you’re trying to piecemeal assemble your plan.”

The situation also makes it difficult for Will to pursue his career. He had just been offered a low-level job in publishing when he moved home to care for Janice. For the first few years he kept thinking he could get back to that plan, or at the very least use the time at home to finish a book he’s writing. “Yeah, it was not a writing retreat,” he said with a laugh. “Your anxiety is growing: Am I going to miss my window?” He’s started freelancing, but he doesn’t have the mental capacity to hustle for more work, nor does he have consistent days and times when he knows he’ll be free to do it. Finances are incredibly tight, and they eased only slightly during the pandemic, because his student loan payments were put on hold.

Having a home health care aide help Janice, even for a few hours a week, would make an enormous difference. “It would completely change my life if we could get someone to come a couple times a week,” he said.

AGING IS ALREADY A CRISIS FOR American families, but it’s only going to get worse, and quickly. From 2018 to 2030, the number of Americans age 65 and older is predicted to increase by more than 60 percent. By 2034, the country is expected to have more seniors than children. This growth, fueled by the aging baby boom generation, “is unprecedented in the history of the country,” Knapp said.

Washington state may be the best prepared to weather the coming silver tsunami. John Alexander, 71, has been living in a rented room in Vancouver, Wash., for 11 years. “I live in a nice house across the street from a park where everybody walks their dogs,” he said. It takes a lot of dedicated work to keep Alexander safely at home. He’s long estranged from his family, but he needs daily care because his legs don’t function well and are subject to frequent muscle spasms. “My legs are like noodles—they can’t support me,” he said. He even needs help using the TV remote because the buttons are too small for his weak grip.

Alexander has three caregivers. Five days a week one woman wakes him up around 8:30 and cleans him, feeds him, moves him from his bed to his wheelchair, and leaves at 10:30. The next caregiver comes in at 2 and stays until 7, helping him maintain his mobility and cognition by doing puzzles and physical therapy. The woman who owns the house, Vicki Bickford, fills in the rest as she can.

At first Bickford was able to provide the care herself, and she became Alexander’s health



aide. But as he started to have trouble walking, Bickford found a young single mother, Lauren, who had been working low-paying retail jobs, to take over. At the time, Lauren was living with her three children in one room of her parents’ house. In Washington, wages for home health care aides are high enough that Lauren has been able to save up money to get her own apartment. “Her kids are fed, have clean clothes; she’s going to be buying a car soon,” Bickford said. Lauren has health insurance and access to training and education, which is building “her self-worth,” Bickford added.

All of this care is free to Alexander under Medicaid. “I’m very satisfied with the caregiving I’m getting,” he said. It’s still not enough—Bickford is pushing to get him care to cover

more hours, particularly when he's alone overnight, often having to sit in his own waste. Still, it looks far different here than in most other states, where the ability to get care at home is severely limited.

"Washington leads in everything," Reinhard said. AARP has ranked the state number two in the country for providing long-term care supports, in part because over 60 percent of its Medicaid and state-funded long-term care funding goes to home-based care, compared with a national average of 45 percent. One of the state's most important innovations is the way it treats home health care workers. "The state invested in home care in a very real way," said Sterling Harders, president of SEIU 775. For two decades, home care workers have been organized through Harders's union, and they've secured some of the best pay and benefits for such work in the country. The starting wage is now \$16.72 an hour, Harders said, and the workers get raises every six months. They can obtain health insurance for \$25 a month and have access to an employer-paid retirement program. They even get paid sick leave and mileage reimbursement for driving their own cars to work. Washington also offers "the most robust training program for caregivers in the country," Harders said. Home care aides must complete 75 hours of basic training, akin to what certified nursing assistants receive, and most do another 12 hours a year to stay up-to-date on best practices or learn about the specific needs of their clients.

Because of these reforms, "home care is much more available," Poo said, "especially in the rural communities." It means that there are 23 home health and personal care aides for every 100 adults who need one—still not enough, but above the national average. It also means that caregivers are well trained and well compensated, offering clients more peace of mind.

Washington residents who need long-term care will soon experience the country's first-ever social insurance program to help defray the cost. Eventually any state resident who pays into the system for 10 years—not only those on Medicaid—will be able to receive \$100 a day, up to a lifetime cap of \$36,500, if they need help with daily activities like eating or bathing. The money will cover everything from a home health care aide to the installation of a shower bar. But while residents will start paying in January 2022, the benefits won't be made available for another three years after that. And the

benefit is likely to increase the demand for home health care aides, necessitating more supply.

"We may be best in the nation, but it's still not enough," Harders noted. Even the higher wages are often not enough to live on, and health insurance is available only for workers and excludes their children.



IF WASHINGTON HAS MADE BIG INVESTMENTS IN THE SUPPLY OF CARE, HAWAII HAS experimented with how to help people afford it. Iris Yafuso Toguchi realized something was wrong when she took her mother to the emergency room to get stitches and was told that she didn't have health insurance. Her mother, who ran the family bakery, had been forgetting to make the payments for months.

When Yafuso Toguchi checked her mother's bank accounts, they were nearly empty: She'd spent it all on items advertised on late-night television. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's around 2015.

Caring for her is a challenge. "It's like having an infant or a baby that's 150 pounds," Yafuso Toguchi said. "When you have a baby, you know this baby's going to grow and become independent.... This, we're going backwards." She realized her mother needed nearly constant care to keep her safe.

The first time Yafuso Toguchi took her mother to an adult day care, where she could socialize with others her age under trained supervision, "it was like the first day when you take your child to kindergarten. They go off and they don't say bye to you, and I cried in the car," she recalled. But on the drive home it dawned on her: "I have peace of

mind, I can rest, I can actually do something." It's helped her mother, too, keeping her mentally sharp and physically active.

At first, Yafuso Toguchi paid for the program out of pocket, depleting her savings. Then she saw an ad on TV for a state program that started at the end of 2017: Kupuna Caregivers. The word "kupuna" in Native Hawaiian means "senior" but also conveys a sense of respect and honor. The Kupuna Caregivers program gives people who care for family members \$210 a week to cover paid caregiving so they can keep working. It's "a first-in-the-nation model," said Ian Ross, public policy and advocacy manager at the Alzheimer's Association-Hawaii. Yafuso Toguchi enrolled. For about a year it paid for six days of adult day care a week. "It was a godsend," she said. The program was established on the heels of the Kupuna Care program, which Hawaii began in 2012 to help elderly residents who aren't on Medicaid pay for essential services they need to live at home. The two programs are about "respecting the tight-knit family and respect for elders that we have in Hawaii," said Ross.

But they aren't perfect. After the first year, because of high demand, Yafuso Toguchi's coverage was reduced to three days of adult day care a week. Advocates had been rallying around increased funding for the Kupuna Caregivers program when the pandemic began and the legislative session was thrown into chaos. "Funding is a really big issue," Ross said. Each year the legislature has to find money in the budget to keep it going.

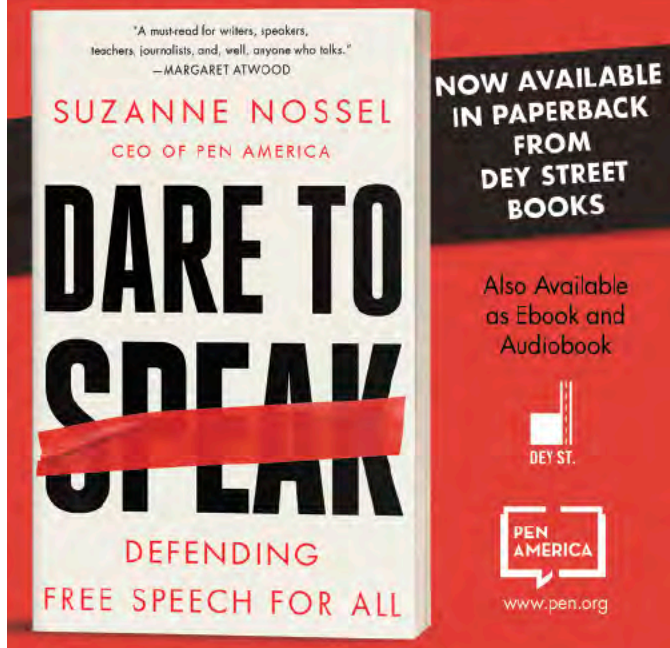
The unpredictability of funding is indicative of the program's incomplete nature. It was meant to be "a stepping stone to something more permanent," Ross explained. It can't and

**No place like home:** Nearly 90 percent of Americans say they want to age at home, but few get to do so.

**More than 40 million Americans are providing elder care but not getting paid for it.**

"Suzanne Nossel is one of the most courageous and sensible voices in America when it comes to the value of free speech. If everyone in America read *Dare to Speak*, we'd be so much better off."

—SEWELL CHAN, *Los Angeles Times*



won't reach everyone, nor does it cover the full cost of care. States like Hawaii and Washington, which are so far ahead in their approaches, have only scratched the surface.

**M**UCH COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED SIMPLY BY CHANGING the way we approach caring for the aging and disabled: not as an individual crisis but as a collective obligation. That mindset is at the heart of some smaller-scale innovations that rely heavily on the idea of community.

In 1999, a group of elderly homeowners in the Beacon Hill section of Boston faced a conundrum: They wanted to stay in their homes, but they were too wealthy to receive Medicaid—and yet not wealthy enough to afford the services they needed. So they founded a “village”—a collective in which members pay dues (a few hundred dollars a year) and typically hire someone to oversee the services they need to stay in their homes, such as transportation, social programs, or help with housekeeping tasks. Some even hire a shared chef or a nurse. There are now about 300 such villages affiliated with the Village to Village Network across the country.

These villages can't solve everything or include everyone. It takes 18 to 24 months and often significant resources to get new ones started. Members have to be mobile, and the villages don't offer medical services. Barbara Sullivan, the executive director of the Village to Village Network, wants to see government resources help more of them start up and keep going. “If Medicare can reimburse, through the Advantage program, Uber and Lyft for [rides to] medical appointments, why can't we get reimbursed?” she asked.

Someday people who need assistance might choose to live in something like Carehaus, a residence where the elderly and their

caregivers live together. Artist and filmmaker Marisa Morán Jahn and architect Rafi Segal, who are launching the first Carehaus next year, started the project because of their personal experiences. Morán Jahn, the daughter of Chinese and Ecuadorian immigrants, has dealt with struggling to find care for her young son and also with worrying about her isolated grandmother. Segal's father and grandparents grew up on a kibbutz in Israel. Combine those things and you get Carehaus. Older residents live in private rooms clustered around a large shared space, and each floor is dedicated to an activity or need: a kitchen, an art workshop, a fitness area. Caregivers, meanwhile, get an affordable place to live with their families and can share the work.

The details matter. There are no corridors, so it's easier for older people to orient themselves. Each floor has a mural in a different color to help them find their way. The color changes as the wall meets the floor to help those who are visually impaired differentiate the two. It will also look “hip,” Segal said, to change the way we think about where the elderly live.

The first Carehaus will be a 20-unit building in central Baltimore housing 12 seniors and four caregivers and their families. Morán Jahn and Segal hope many more will follow. They're already looking for new sites in Houston and Miami.

**E**LDER CARE IS “SOMETHING THAT'S BEEN REALLY HARD to get political momentum behind for as long as I can remember,” said Poo. But there's a growing recognition that aging doesn't have to be all about “decline and vulnerability and frailty”—warehousing the old in facilities until they die. “The thing we always forget is that aging is actually living.” With the right support, older Americans can continue to have full lives. “We think of children as an investment and older adults as not an investment,” Szanton pointed out. But “older adults have a lot to provide.”

The policies are slowly shifting accordingly. Thirty years ago, Reinhard said, states were spending resources almost exclusively on nursing home care. Now that is nearly evenly shared with home-based and community-based care. The Affordable Care Act included the CLASS Act, which would have established a national, voluntary social insurance program for long-term care. But without a mandate that Americans buy plans, it never became solvent and was shut down in 2011. During his 2020 run for president, Senator Bernie Sanders included long-term care coverage in his Medicare for All proposal, and it was also included in congressional legislation.

Then Joe Biden campaigned on a care package that included elder care, and as president he has proposed a \$400 billion investment in home- and community-based care for seniors and the disabled in his American Jobs Plan. The pandemic revealed not just the shortcomings of our nursing homes—which turned into nightmares as sickness and death spread inside them—but also that care for our loved ones enables us to live full lives.

“Beforehand, if you didn't have the ability to afford long-term care, you just thought of it as a personal failure,” Poo said. “Now we're talking about what is our responsibility as a nation to support our collective ability to take care of the people that we love.”

Will is determined to try to get more care for his mother again—just someone to come to their home for a few hours a week. He plans to reapply to Medicare to cover the cost of an aide. But having been disappointed once, “it's hard to even get my mind in the game,” he said. “We are hopeful. But I am expecting a long process with no promises.”



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## Where the Wild Things Are

*Brandon Taylor's university dramas*

BY JENNIFER WILSON



**I**S AN ANIMAL A BEING OR A BOUNDARY? Is it a kind of living organism or a threshold that anyone might cross—if pushed far enough? As the scholar Jack Halberstam argues in his latest book, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, many of our associations with animals and their natural habitat are rooted in colonial practices of categorization that distinguished “the domestic/tame/civilized” from “the foreign/wild/barbaric.” However, far from urging us to dismantle this binary, Halberstam asks us merely to reorganize the judgments we attach to it so that the wild and animalistic might not be something we fear descending into but rather something

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO



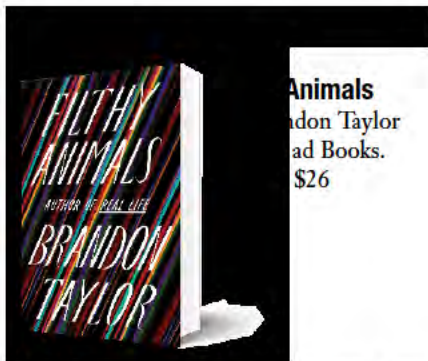
we might actively embrace. Much as queer theory seeks to recuperate the word “queer” itself, Halberstam notes, so too should we reclaim “wildness” as not a disparagement but as a mode of resistance. To be wild is not to fail at being civilized but to recognize the failures of civilization to sustain life—physically and spiritually. Wildness, he argues, “functions as a form of disorder that will not submit to rule, a mode of unknowing, a resistant ontology, and a fantasy of life beyond the human.”

*Filthy Animals*, the novelist Brandon Taylor’s first short story collection, is filled with characters who crave the kind of feral freedom that Halberstam describes. The opening story, “Potluck,” begins with a character looking into the window of an apartment on a frigid Wisconsin winter night: “Noise of an undifferentiated party variety drifted out into the deep blue cold, meeting Lionel under the sunroom window, where he had stopped to peer inside.” Varying degrees of ferociousness await him there: classist disdain from the academics in attendance, unwanted sexual advances, and wanted sexual advances that presage jealousy-driven acts of cruelty. Interior spaces do not offer warmth and protection from the elements but instead leave Lionel and many of the other characters in the collection (many of whom are queer, women, and people of color) vulnerable to the predations of stronger human animals. At one point, Lionel finds himself sitting next to the girlfriend of a man who has been flirting with him and senses “a kind of heat” transferring between them, “some kind of animal recognition.”

This first story lays out the basic terrain of *Filthy Animals*. Over the 11 stories, mostly set in Madison, Wis. (where Taylor attended graduate school in biochemistry), the spaces of civilized domesticity are revealed to be the dirtiest, bloodiest, most dangerous places in which a wounded animal could find itself. This is conveyed quite literally at times: The humans of *Filthy Animals* are prone to baring their teeth, making fists, shedding or drawing blood; on occasion, they even bite. A largely middle-class array of professionals—mathematicians, ballet dancers, medical students—their mouths seem perpetually open and ready to attack, their hands rarely far from a sharp object to throw at their rivals or lovers.

The violence in *Filthy Animals* is that of gentility. It is domesticated. As Taylor’s characters brutalize one another in recital rooms, lecture halls, coffee shops, and other spaces that we are conditioned to think of as full of erudite, well-mannered types, we are left to conclude that these kinds of places—formal and informal corridors of power—in fact provoke the worst and basest instincts in people. More than being in the wilderness, it is within the shimmering towers of civiliza-

*Jennifer Wilson is a contributing writer for The Nation. Her work has also appeared in The New York Times, The New Republic, The New Yorker, and elsewhere.*



**Animals**  
Brandon Taylor  
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tion that we are likely to be at our most animalistic. Taylor’s first book, the novel *Real Life*, was a campus drama set within a fiercely competitive graduate program in biology. *Filthy Animals* in many ways represents a continuation of that novel’s exploration of the cruel forces unleashed by aspiration and entitlement. Everyone, both books suggest, is merely a worm trying to evade a scientist’s ambition-laden scalpel or a rival lover’s dueling pistol. Here, once again, we encounter the sharp incisors of people who are used to getting their way, and others—women, people of color, queer people, workers—who are expected to offer up their flesh in response.

**T**aylor writes with incredible clarity and precision about the lives of people in small university towns, and how they are never as quaint or idyllic as those on the outside might imagine. In both his fiction and his personal essays, he explores the casual brutalities of the academic world and the ways in which they are intensified for people of color. Writing about his decision to leave that world in an article for *BuzzFeed*, he recounted some of the racist comments and attitudes he ran up against while in graduate school: “Science was

the constant humiliation of wondering if I had justified my presence or if I had made it harder for the next black person to get admitted. Science was having to worry about that in the first place.”

Taylor’s lab training, however, stayed with him even after he left school. It turns out that a fascination with nascent life forms and what they can grow into serves a writer of fiction well. In both science and writing, “you churn the raw material of life into something that can be understood,” he notes, “and when you fail, you marvel at the mystery of things.”

This fascination with the beauty of failed subjects was at the center of Taylor’s debut novel. Nominated for the Booker Prize, *Real Life* tells the story of Wallace, a gay Black graduate student in biochemistry, as he navigates the social isolation and racism of his predominantly white research lab. There is perhaps no better environment to see people at their most primal than in a cutthroat graduate program where resources are scarce, survival (a research job) is prized above all else, and might (tenure) makes right. Racism exacerbates all of these things; an enduring belief in white intellectual superiority results in Wallace’s capabilities constantly being underestimated. Dana, a white lab mate who is considered “bright, bright, bright” despite her poor technique and displays of impatience with her research project, is so loath to ask Wallace for assistance that she “skewer[s] the animals with the needle” and works so slowly that they become dehydrated: “Her worms turned into hard pralines right there on the slide.” In *Filthy Animals*, people treat one another the way Dana treats her worms: as means to an end, as tools for getting what they want. No one is safe from this instrumentalization; all can be loaded onto a slide and prodded until their insides burst.

*Filthy Animals* is its own book, and Wallace of course does not appear, but the cast of characters in the collection share a lot in common with him. They are lonely, uncertain, and looking for a way out of the various cages they find themselves in. They also, at times, prove to be the predator as well as the prey. As the characters try to betray their way out of relationships, sabotage their careers, or attempt to end their lives, we are reminded that freeing oneself can often be a violent process.

“Potluck” introduces us to

several characters who will return subsequently in “Flesh,” “Proctoring,” “Mass,” “Apartment,” and “Meat.” These stories revolve around Lionel and two ballet students, Charles and Sophie. Lionel, it is revealed, was in the mathematics graduate program but took a medical leave of absence following a suicide attempt. His motivations for trying to take his life are deliberately presented as murky and diffuse, but his family suspects it is because “he’d been ripping and running with all them white kids at school.” Lionel contests this suggestion: “His aunts and uncles saw his desire to kill himself as an extension of all those things they didn’t like or understand,” but “it was nobody’s fault. Things happened.” We learn that the party is his first attempt to socialize after a stay in a mental health facility. Uneasy, he looks around the potluck table for grains and greens, careful to avoid meat, which he has stopped eating since his suicide attempt: “The thought of consuming dead things, when he had been so close to dying, when he had wanted to die, was too much.”

From the dinner party, we get flashbacks to Lionel’s time at the facility, which was designed to give the appearance (despite windows that could not fully open) that a person there could come and go. Referring to the delicate and unimposing material of the locking mechanisms on the windows, Lionel realizes that it was intended “to look not threatening,” that the staff “wanted the people at the facility to feel affirmed by their captivity.” At the party, he is a captive to different forms of social pressures and nearly buckles under their weight, at one point having to excuse himself to go to the bathroom. When he meets Charles and Sophie for the first time, he discovers a couple of kindred spirits, at least in one important way: They too are ambivalent, as any domesticated animal would be, torn between the competing desires for safety,

protection, and enclosure and for absolute and boundless freedom.

As Lionel gets to know them, he discovers that Charles and Sophie are in a nonmonogamous relationship. They pretend not to belong to each other, but that pretense unravels frequently and with ferocity. After the party is over, Charles follows Lionel home in the snow, leading to a sexual encounter between the two men that eventually binds the three of them together. Sophie forces Lionel into a tense friendship, seemingly unsure how to balance her various conflicting urges—to affirm her commitment to free love, but also to win, to beat out the competition. When Lionel becomes uncomfortable with it all and tries to leave her apartment, Sophie tries harder to

bait him and starts to bare her fangs, literally. “Do you think I’ll eat you?” she asks, as she “snapped her teeth playfully at him.”

In “Little Beast,” we find out what the other side of this kind of entrapment—a full-on embrace of being feral—would look like. Fittingly, it is a story about a child. It centers on a seemingly twentysomething babysitter named Sylvia and the little girl she’s in charge of along with her brother, and we quickly realize that either one could be the titular beast. The girl gets into all sorts

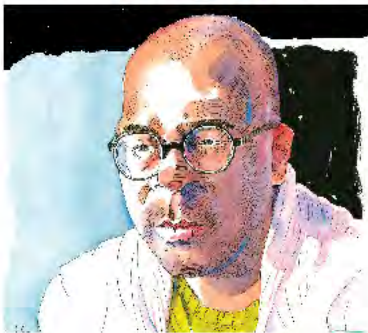
of muck; early on in the story, she walks over to Sylvia and reveals that her hands are covered in dog shit. Later, Sylvia finds her jumping up and down on her parents’ bed, totally naked, covered in scratches, her hair filled with twigs and dirt. “How has she done this to herself? She looks like a wild thing,” she thinks in frustration. Sylvia does not handle this kid with kid gloves: She plunges the little girl’s shit-covered fingers into hot, almost scalding water. “It would be nothing, would take nothing,” she thinks, “to rend this girl to pieces.” Taylor compares Sylvia in this moment to the wily beast in “Little Red Riding Hood,” describing her as “part wolf,” though not because Sylvia

is angry with her; it is more that she sees herself too much in the girl. Recently out of a relationship and engaging in self-destructive sexual behavior with the father she babysits for, Sylvia recognizes in the girl’s wildness a burning thirst she likewise feels at the back of her throat. It is the same burning that led her to leave her boyfriend, to be unbound by the needs and expectations imposed on women by men: “Sylvia thinks she can understand the girl. She knows what it is to be trapped inside a thing, inside a life. She knows what it is to want to tear a hole in everything.”

In Taylor’s title story, “Filthy Animals,” we meet a pair of young men who are not quite at that point yet, not entirely ready to bare all and give in to sheer instinct. Its main characters, Milton and Nolan, two Black teenagers, have just gotten high in a basement when they get a text from a white boy named Abe and his friend Tate, who invite the pair to a “burner” out in the woods. “Burner,” it is explained, “means there will be ten to fifteen people they vaguely know and kerosene-soaked rags torched in metal barrels. Cheap whiskey, cheap beer for the Christians. Coke, molly, and weed for the true believers,” rounded out by the scent of “Tommy Boy cologne” and the look of “dark denim turned white in the crotch and ass from wear.” Tate and Abe, Taylor alerts us, “bring out the worst in Nolan, excite the animal part of him.” The boys all know each other from Sunday school and have a history of becoming violent in their encounters. These scuffles and fistfights are often just an excuse to touch one another, to be intimate and physical in a way that does not stir up feelings too complicated—until it does. Desire subdued breeds violence, and that night things go too far; the usual roughhousing gets complicated by the insertion of a rock. When it is all over, Milton steps out of the woods looking to clean the blood, dirt, and cum off of his hands. (The trees had offered a brief hiding place from the rest of the world.)

The other stories in the collection maintain an interest in physicality and bodies and force. In “Mass,” a young man named Alek thinks about his brothers, type-A medical students who used to beat him up as a kid; one even ground a lit cigarette into his arm. “Perhaps it was always this way with brothers,” Alek speculates, “a truce brokered only after

**Taylor writes with incredible clarity about the lives and desires and discontents of people in small university towns.**



an equilibrium of physical strength had been met, as if the potential for mutual destruction were the only thing that kept them from tearing each other limb from limb." In "What Made Them Made You," a young woman with cancer feels a mysterious presence suffocating her at night but is told not to fear it, as she is made of the same stuff as any monster found on earth (which reads, particularly in the context of the story, as an allegory about family in a culture that tells us to accept or paper over the violence they can inflict on us).

Only in "Anne of Cleves," the story of a woman, Marta, settling into her first lesbian relationship, do we get something like a reprieve, an example of humans living in harmony with the natural world, not so much taming it as fusing together with it. Marta finds in this relationship a safe place where, unlike at work or in her previous relationships, she no longer feels compelled by men to give them what they want from her, to protect their egos, to circumvent their anger. In Sigrid, her new partner, she is freed from that, and their relationship slowly becomes surrounded by vegetation, by wild things that nurture. "They had grown vegetables in a little plot behind the house and pickled them," Taylor writes. "They opened jars of okra and peas and beans. They made their own kraut. Their house smelled like vinegar, but it was the healthiest that Marta had felt in a long time."

**I**n recent months, Taylor has also emerged as a talented (if self-deprecating) cultural critic. Whenever he's about to publish an essay, he tweets a picture of Taylor Swift dressed in a serious-looking black sweater with her hair in bangs. "You know what this pic means," he announces to his followers. "Essay time!" one responds. The image of Swift is Taylor's way of gently mocking the "internet essayists," a term he has never quite defined but that I think from contextual clues refers to bad-faith takes on identity engineered to get clicks but not to move the conceptual needle forward. Taylor's own online writing shows us that this is such a waste of the Inter-

net, which in his hands is reminiscent of its earlier, unfettered iteration. He uses the freedom of online publishing to take risks, to tell the truth about your faves. His popular newsletter, *Sweater Weather* (named for his love of the garment), defies simple categorization. Launched in 2019,

*Sweater Weather* ranges in modes and registers and includes everything from erotic Stanley Tucci fan fiction to commentary on race in the contemporary horror genre ("How do you make something to terrify a people who have lived for genera-

tions in a state of constant besiegement?"). Taylor has also written about the "internet novel," a category that seems to have finally arrived this year as a legitimate sub-genre, thanks to entries by Lauren Oyler (*Fake Accounts*) and Patricia Lockwood (*No One Is Talking About This*). Publicly voicing a frustration shared privately among Black writers and critics, Taylor notes that "through no fault of their own," these books were credited with capturing the whole of online culture, rather than what felt like a distinctly white understanding of the Internet as primarily a source of emotional disturbance: "None of the transformative capacity or will to change that animates so much of online life for black and brown and queer people exists in these novels." Referring to the message boards and chatrooms he spent time in growing up, Taylor notes that "the internet saved my life when I was younger.... Because while the world I lived in told me one thing about myself, the greater world told me I could be something else."

Neither *Real Life* nor *Filthy Animals* could be described exactly as being Internet fiction, though each depicts a world that Black and queer online spaces could offer refuge from. His characters (especially Wallace and Lionel) are undeniably isolated, surrounded by people who make demands of them both to be things they are not and to not be things they are—and to read these people's minds about when it's the proper time for each. It is perhaps fitting, then, that Taylor's writing, from his fiction to his Twitter page to his newsletter, has created precisely that space for readers now: a refuge from the beastly terrors of marginalization—an untamed, unruly, ecstatic wilderness. **N**

**Neither *Real Life*  
nor *Filthy Animals* is  
Internet fiction, but each  
offers insight into Black  
and queer online spaces.**

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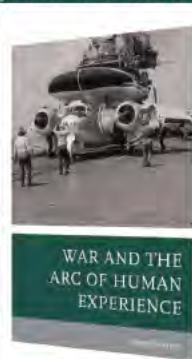
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# Age of Predation

*The sinews of Reaganism*

BY THOMAS MEANEY

**E**VER SINCE RONALD REAGAN BECAME GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA in 1967, we have relied on two native informants about his time in power: Joan Didion, of Sacramento, and Mike Davis, of the San Bernardino Valley.

For Didion, a onetime “Goldwater girl,” Reagan was one of the few Americans of his generation to experience something approaching luxury socialism. As a ward of Hollywood, which rented and furnished his homes; then of US corporations such as General Electric; and finally of state and federal governments, Reagan, for most of his life, never lived in anything resembling everyday America. As Didion reported, Nancy Reagan carried cash only when she needed to leave the house for a manicure. “I preferred the studio system to the anxiety of looking for work in New York,” she recalled in her memoir.

For Mike Davis, one of the country’s most formidable working-class intellectuals, the critical components of Reagan’s ascent were economic and geographical. Reagan was the herald of the new business class of the American West and Southwest, much of whose profits came from war-related industries. Long predating recent epiphanies on the American Right, such

as that of Christopher Caldwell, Davis saw that the crucial innovation of the Reagan strategy was to give up on the Goldwater dream of shrinking the US state and instead mobilize it to transfer wealth upward and to launch a *Vernichtungskrieg* against unionized labor.

*Reagandland* is the final installment of Rick Perlstein’s history of the postwar American right. It is a tribute to his skill as a writer that he combines Didion’s determination to pin down the aura of the Reagan era with some measure of Davis’s capacity to explain its material components. Examining Reaganism at both the molecular and stratospheric levels, Perlstein attends as much to its underlying dynamics as to its spectacle. Like Davis, he reminds us that much of

the action took place offstage, with “Ronald Reagan” serving as the vehicle for a new band of conservatives and social movements not content to be hemmed in by the old Republican order.

One of the tonics of this rare combination of historical narrative and structural analysis is how much it throws the Trump years into relief, allowing for a more sober consideration of the past half decade. The sense of recklessness that corporate Republicans, including the Chamber of Commerce, imputed to Reagan recalls their successors’ treatment of Trump in the lead-up to his winning the Republican nomination. The fervor of today’s Trumpists was even exceeded by the most ardent Reaganites of yesteryear. When a group of Situationists stormed the 1980 Republican convention and distributed copies of J.G. Ballard’s short story “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” (“In assembly kit tests Reagan’s face was uniformly perceived as a penile erection”), with the title page replaced with the presidential seal, they got nowhere. The pamphlet was taken in stride by the faithful: just another position paper outlining the advantages of their candidate.

But perhaps the largest service Perlstein has rendered in *Reaganland* comes in its form. The book refuses to travel the endlessly repaved road of presidential biography, with personal psychology and moralizing at the center. To a greater extent than in *Nixonland* and *The Invisible Bridge*, Perlstein surveys the wider political landscape of which Reagan himself is but one feature. *Reaganland* not only teems with political operatives and hustlers—on the right, center, and left—but also suggests that the most potent forces of American political change lie outside formal politics. All the more striking is that this message comes when the American left is more invested in electoralism and its promise than at any point since the 1940s.

In the arena of American political writing, Perlstein’s oeuvre presents a dissent from the Great Man theory of history that reached its contemporary apogee in the work of Robert Caro, in which figures such as Lyndon Johnson and Robert Moses make history through their unyielding will and have the tragic dimension, the singular essence, that Caro also attributed to his first biographical subject, Ernest Hemingway.

The trouble with such a method is less that it simplifies historical change than that it lends itself to a further mythologization of American power. If the hubris of American democracy has been borne by the occupants of its highest office, then the country can correct its future by simply finding worthier figures to fill it. Perlstein is more interested in how an administration inherits a set of problems and develops an ideological response to them. Whereas Caro locks himself into the bobsled of biography,

*Thomas Meaney teaches at Humboldt University in Berlin.*



Perlstein prefers to skate around the ice and to bump up against all manner of mobilizations and movements that, in mass-market books about American politics, typically exist only on the margins. Reagan is the face and voice of a radical right vanguard in Perlstein’s account but not its beating heart.



Appropriately, Perlstein devotes much of *Reaganland* to a figure who belongs to the territory as much as Reagan himself: Jimmy Carter. For it was Carter, the most conservative Democratic presidential candidate since John W. Davis in 1924, who revised the New Deal coalition of the Democratic Party—drastically cutting the federal budget, turning away from détente with the USSR, scaling back the urban jobs program, and ending labor law reform—and opened a Pandora’s box of political innovations of which Reagan was the ultimate beneficiary. A Southern Baptist who retreated to the biblical mountaintops to make big decisions, Carter also proved that evangelicals could take power.

On foreign policy, Carter cleared the ground for his successor. The Reagan administration effectively domesticated Carter’s human rights agenda and employed it as a Cold War battering ram.

(Trump, too, far from dismissing human rights, simply emphasized different ones—the right to religious freedom, for instance.) Finally, and most decisively, Carter undid the postwar Keynesian pact between capital and labor that had made full employment a loudly utterable priority in Washington. By appointing Paul Volcker as his Federal Reserve Board chair to fight inflation by the most draconian means possible, Carter virtually guaranteed the very recession, along with its accompanying explosion of unemployment, that buried his chances for reelection. It was a spectacular instance of political self-sabotage undertaken in a fit of what Carter was convinced was fiscal responsibility.

Reagan’s real electoral competition was the array of seemingly more plausible candidates for the 1980 Republican nomination. As Perlstein notes, Reagan regularly led the polls, but much of the press and pundit class expected a more vigorous Republican competitor to knock him out of contention. The establishment scion George H.W. Bush promised to anchor the GOP in donor-friendly harbors. But Reagan faced a more serious threat from John Connally, the former governor of Texas, who was favored by the US Chamber of Commerce and the business contingent of the Republican Party. Connally was effective on the stump and was a bruising phrasemaker: “They just put speeches in front of Reagan to read,” he told *The New York Times*, and dismissed Bush as “a bed-wetting Trilateralist.”

As Perlstein shows, Reagan was the most skilled politician on the campaign trail. He also experienced considerable good fortune. Bush made the mistake of trying to reinvent himself as a populist; the man once known in Congress as “Rubbers” for his patrician enthusiasm for birth control became an unconvincing convert to the anti-abortion cause. Bush’s international experience—he’d headed the CIA and served as ambassador to China—also made him vulnerable to being tarred as a proto-globalist. In the kind of detail that mysteriously escaped Jon Meacham’s attention in his 400-page memorial for Bush, Perlstein tells how Bush used his diplomatic ties to Beijing to score a deal for his private oil company to prospect on China’s coasts, back when Beijing’s idea of the national interest was rather different from what it is today.

Connally detonated his own chances against Reagan on the unusual terrain of foreign policy. In order to gild his credentials in that sphere, he put forward an anodyne plan for Middle East peace that included restraining “Israel’s creeping annexation of the West Bank.” Reagan’s aides had deleted such a phrase from a Reagan op-ed earlier in the year out of fear of a backlash. They were well advised: Within days, Connally was being lambasted by the right wing as well as the liberal press, with *The New York Times* comparing him, in unfavorable terms, to Jesse Jackson.

A great merit of *Reaganland* is how Perlstein examines which foreign policy questions impinged—and which did not—on Reagan’s rise. One stubborn myth he dismantles is that Carter missed out on a second term because of his performance during the Iran hostage crisis. But an NBC poll at the height of the crisis showed that 72 percent of Americans approved of Carter’s handling of it. “The 17 percent of voters who cited the crisis in Iran as the most important issue preferred Carter by a heaping margin of two-to-one,” Perlstein writes. “Carter won the hostage issue.”

**A**s for Reagan, the man himself, Perlstein upends the conventional liberal wisdom that he was a Hollywood automaton plugged into a teleprompter and delivering tinselly right-wing talking points. “Reagan had won practically every debate he had participated in,” Perlstein writes. In 1967, after being outfoxed by Reagan in a debate, Robert F. Kennedy ordered his staffers never to have him face off against “that son-of-a-bitch” again. In the 1980 campaign, Reagan easily triumphed over the limber locutions of William F. Buckley Jr. in a television debate about the fate of the Panama Canal.

The coup de théâtre on the campaign trail took place in a small gymnasium in Nashua, N.H., where the Reagan campaign team deceived both Bush and the local newspaper into thinking they were about to participate in a two-person debate. Having paid for the event himself, Reagan and his

team surprised the audience and the organizers by surreptitiously inviting all of the other Republican candidates to the gymnasium. When the moderator, Jon Breen, sensed foul play and tried to have Reagan’s microphone switched off so that Reagan would stop making the case for including all the candidates, he seized the mic and, mimicking a scene from the 1948 Frank Capra movie *State of the Union* in which Spencer Tracy’s character delivers a righteous speech, intoned: “I

am paying for this microphone, Mr. Green [sic]!” The audience, either familiar with the film or simply delighted with the prefab entertainment, exploded in raucous celebration. It was remarkable not only how adroitly Reagan performed his lines

but how he recycled a dewy Hollywood moment with what appeared to be actual political passion.

But where Perlstein really hits his stride is when he passes from the surface of Reaganism to its sinews and Reagan himself fades from view. If there is a motor of history in *Reaganland*, it is the direct-mail campaign pioneered by Goldwater veteran and Reagan campaign strategist Richard Viguerie. Viguerie not only operated a shadow mediasphere of personalized newsletters for voters’ mailboxes for decades; he also discovered a way to raise enormous sums of money outside the usual channels. Reagan did not need to go hat in hand to corporations to nearly the same degree as Bush and Connally. Viguerie used the mailing lists to Venn-diagram their various supporters. Different conservative groups—the World Anti-Communist League, the National Right to Work Committee, the National Rifle Association, No Amnesty for Deserters, Citizens for Decent Literature, George Wallace followers—could be built off one another exponentially and corralled into the Reagan camp via pseudo-intimately worded letters to their members. By 1980, Viguerie was so successful that the largest conservative political action committee, Citizens for Reagan, could reap a significant portion of its \$9 million from donations smaller than \$25. *Reaganland* makes a persuasive case that the right’s ideological triumph in the 1980s was as much a technological one.

**Reaganland makes the case that the right’s ideological triumph was the result of a technological one.**

**W**

hen it comes to the overall phenomenon of Reaganism, Perlstein hesitates to offer too strong of a theory.

A longtime Chicago resident, he must be familiar with the scene from a certain 1980s crowd-pleaser in which the despondent third wheel in a Red Wings jersey stares for too long at a Seurat painting at the city’s Art Institute. The pointillist canvas of *Reaganland* is mesmerizing, and Perlstein feels obliged neither to provide a hierarchy of causes for Reagan’s ascent nor to weigh up the chief components of Reaganism.

This panoramic perspective has its advantages. At its best, *Reaganland* is a history of interlocking and abutting mobilizations, a study of the social forces at the end of the 1970s. In discrete mini-histories of Phyllis Schlafly’s campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment and Anita Bryant’s antigay crusade, as well as of opposing ones—Ralph Nader’s highly successful consumer protection movement (where is the Netflix miniseries on this?) and Harvey Milk’s organizing in San Francisco—Perlstein wants to stress how forces outside the formal party matrix were in many ways more important than those within it. Power is diffuse in *Reaganland*, and Reaganism was the field where disparate interests could join together.

Alongside his empirical prowess, Perlstein does stake out the substance that distinguished Reagan and his backers from their right-wing predecessors. If Nixonism was characterized by the traditional exercise of state power and Keynesian management of the economy—“We have learned at last to manage a modern economy to assure its continued growth,” Nixon declared in his first inaugural address—Reaganism was distinguished by its desire to cover itself in an aura of extra-governmental activism and to incorporate the instability of the economy into its governing dynamic. Under Reagan, the US state continued to grow, but worrying about the deficit was for losers. The underpinning for this assumption was what the influential Reagan apparatchik Jude Wanniski called the “Two Santa Clause Theory.” The idea was that, even as Carter and the Democrats became fiscal hawks modeled on the Republicans, the Republicans grew content to ignore mountains of government debt in order to enact tax cuts while leaving the deficit-pruning to their foes. Unlike the postwar Keynesians, the

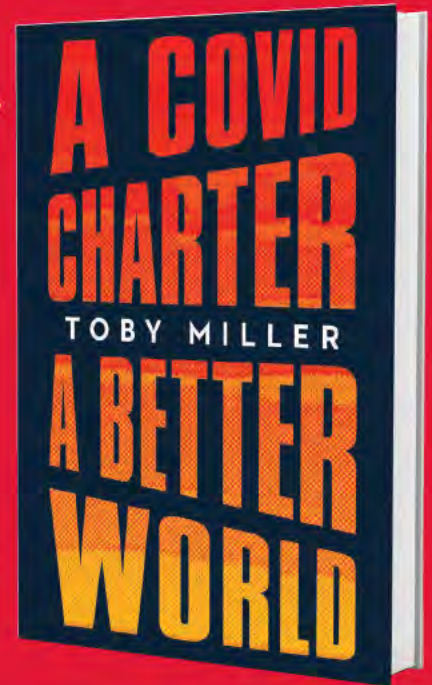
# BOLD Ideas, ESSENTIAL Reading

“Toby Miller offers bold governing principles to secure the rescue, perhaps even the thriving, of humans and the planet. However one might amend his charter, it is impossible to reject its premise, which positively screeches from Miller’s accounting of how the pandemic was lived in four nations: **We cannot go on like this.**”

—Wendy Brown, author of *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*

“Miller makes a cogent argument for the need to change course in economic and social policy, both nationally and globally. The COVID pandemic has made it possible for many to see that the current economic system and the legislation that it promotes do not work.”

—George Yúdice, author of *The Expediency of Culture*



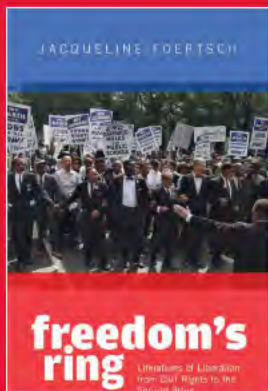
## Humanity's Last Stand

Confronting Global Catastrophe

Mark Schuller

“An electrifying work that dissects a range of interconnected problems—climate change, ultra-right nationalism, and global inequality—and proposes concrete steps to avert total catastrophe.”

—Roberto J. González



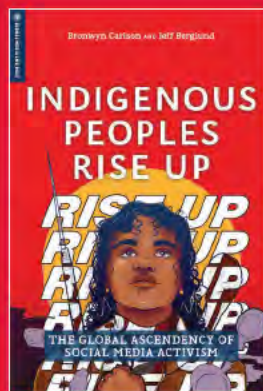
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Jacqueline Foertsch

“Freedom remains a core concept in American national identity. Foertsch’s book traces how it rallied postwar Americans to fight for racial equality, personal liberation, and women’s rights ...”

—Erika Doss

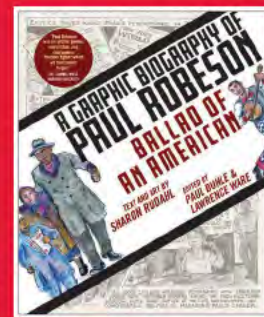


## Indigenous Peoples Rise Up

The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism

Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund

Social media has bridged distance, time, and nation states to mobilize Indigenous peoples to build coalitions across the globe and to stand in solidarity with one another.



## Ballad of an American

A Graphic Biography of Paul Robeson

Sharon Rudahl

Edited by Paul Buhle and Lawrence Ware

“Sharon Rudahl does a magnificent job of highlighting the key details of Paul Robeson’s astonishing life.”

—*The Progressive*



## Shades of Springsteen

Politics, Love, Sports, and Masculinity

John Massaro

“Massaro writes about classic Springsteen themes—politics, love, sports, and masculinity—with insight, care, and thoughtfulness.”

—June Skinner Sawyers



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Reaganites were explicit about not caring how, or to what ends, capital was allocated, if at all, as long as the GOP's upper-class loyalists amassed more of it.

It is on the relationship between Reaganism's political and economic policies and its engagement with various right-wing social movements that Perlstein ventures to present a theory, though one common enough among left-wing observers. As Perlstein sees it, Reagan's overall economic policies were not popular in themselves, and so they required a cultural component

to make them more palatable to the public. Toward this end, Reagan and his cadres of supply-siders and corporate lobbyists embraced the right's culture war. As Reagan strategist Paul Weyrich pointed out, "sex" was the "Achilles' heel of the liberal Democrats," and Reagan and his Republican allies were prepared to bet that the electorate was still much more traditional than liberals were willing to allow. They concocted lurid fantasies of gay public school teachers corrupting the young and a netherworld in which women worked all day while their in-

fants were wards of the state. Such stuff was nothing new, of course, for the Republican Party. What was novel was the efficiency and magnitude of the funding available to push cultural nightmares into the mainstream media and the public realm.



To what degree is *Reaganland* a contribution, or at least a commentary, on political strategy? In the summer of 2004, Perlstein wrote an article for *Boston Review*, subsequently published as a pamphlet, in which he called on the Democrats to learn from the success of Reaganism. "Ronald Reagan used to say that there are no easy answers but there are *simple* answers," Perlstein wrote. "The Democrats need to make commitments, or a network of commitments, that *do not waver* from election to election." He called for a long-term commitment to economic populism, one that needed to be sustained even in the teeth of political defeat. On this point, he was on solid ground. Despite his worshipful *falange*, Reagan was, after all, never very popular. As Sheldon S. Wolin noted in *The New York Review of Books* at the time, less than half of the electorate voted in the 1980 election, and among those who did, only 10 percent described themselves as "true conservatives."

The story of Reaganism, then, is the story of a political vanguard: how a small band of merry supply-siders put on culture-war paint, mobilized conservative social movements to excite the party's base, and brought about a new economic order and a new political dispensation. While Perlstein's book certainly presents the fullest picture we have of the Reagan years, its lessons for opponents of Reaganism are far from clear. For even if economic populism is, well, popular, the same is harder to know of some other urgent platforms today, such as the Green New Deal.

Political parties are also not nearly the vehicles for political change they once were. The Democratic Party is even less of an integrated apparatus today than it was when Perlstein delivered his advice to it 15 years ago. These days, it includes awkward groupings of the tech elite and neoconservatives, as well as socialists, many of whom, paradoxically, have come to see their fate bound up with its fortunes. In many ways, the challenge of smashing the legacy of Reaganism is harder than anything solvable by a vanguard schooled in strategic patience. A left version of the Mont Pèlerin

## What Counts

First breath, best breath.  
I don't mean anything by that.

Shale over shale.  
I concentrate on acts

to keep from repeating  
words in my head.

I sit up and copy them  
in bed.

"So, so glad  
I'm not doing that.

So glad I'm not  
the one doing that."

These waves slide over  
gray shingled sand.

One covers another  
as the first draws back.

Best breath, first breath.

RAE ARMANTROUT



Society or the Mises Institute—willing to throw an election away, as the right did with Goldwater, only to return with a vengeance with the next generation's Bernie Sanders—does not seem as viable when the intertwined crises of climate change, viral disease, and financial capitalism present threats too urgent to wait out. Kamala Harris could be in power until 2036

The ascendancy of Reaganism also requires us to look more closely at the global economic conditions that made it possible than at the local contingencies it seized upon. In the past, Perlstein has been taken to task by some of the best writers on the American left—Peter Frase and Tim Barker, most prominently—for describing Carter and Volcker's actions as “heroic and self-sacrificing,” when in 1979, they introduced punitively high interest rates to combat inflation, which ultimately ended the recession but delivered a blow to American labor from which it has never recovered.

In *Reaganland*, Perlstein has tried to correct his sails: The Volcker shock now appears as a comedy of errors that Carter set in motion when he forced his treasury secretary, Michael Blumenthal, to resign for launching a corruption investigation of Bert Lance, the director of the Office of Management and Budget. That sent the stock market into a plunge so steep that only appointing someone with the stature of Volcker—a Chase Manhattan veteran—could soothe Wall Street's jitters. But despite his nimble navigation through the contingencies of Reaganism, Perlstein does not fully reckon with how the Volcker shock was a response to a much larger, harder-to-avoid iceberg. Volcker was trying to stabilize an American imperial project that had been undermined by its own success: Cold War allies in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere were flooding the global market with goods that undercut American corporate profits. US corporations continued to invest at home in preparation for the next boom. But the Keynesian creed that had governed the American economy in the postwar decades, during which high productivity and growth were taken for granted, was experiencing a dark night of the soul. Volcker's shock was not meant to expunge the faith; it was a Hail Mary attempt to clear the “dead wood” of the economy (that is, hundreds of thousands of working Americans), to rationalize it, and to create the conditions for another boom.

But the boom never came. At some point during Reagan's time in power, American capitalists became conscious of the new reality. Their action changed shape: from profit-seeking and industrial production to predation, in Robert Brenner's recent term. If elites could not capture increased gains from a growing economy through innovation and expansion, they could at least capture them from a stagnant economy through lobbying, legal-suturing, and ideological pressure. In a world of reduced productivity,

culture-war-fighting becomes less about class defense and more about caste-marking, since access to the returns on capital is an increasingly political activity. This was the new political-economic dispensation that matured under Reagan, which was always bigger than him, and which now seems to be experiencing a crisis of its own. The mantra of Reaganism—“growth,” “freedom,” “sovereign people”—looks in disrepair today. But we would do well to remember: The rites of a religion can long survive the death of its god. **N**

## Cortés Burning the Aviaries

Last night, I let in all the birds.  
I told my grandmother to stay awhile.  
I said, stop disguising yourself as wind.  
You are not the only one who can fly.

I told my grandmother to stay awhile.  
There is something in the wind. I recognize your voice.  
You are not the only one who can fly.  
Have you seen Montezuma's aviaries—still green, full of breath?

There is something in the wind. I recognize your voice.  
You talk to me all at once with your mouth full.  
Have you seen Montezuma's aviaries—still green, full of breath?  
Cuídate, I thought you were blessing me.

You talk to me all at once with your mouth full.  
I don't believe in god but I do believe in Mexicans.  
Cuídate, I thought you were blessing me.  
I am sorry I picked all your red tulips.

I don't believe in god but I do believe in Mexicans.  
I said, stop disguising yourself as wind.  
I am sorry I picked all your red tulips.  
Last night, I let in all the birds.

MONICA RICO



# In Delaware County

*The collective trauma in Mare of Easttown*

BY ERIN SCHWARTZ

**T**HE CREATORS OF HBO'S *MARE OF EASTTOWN*, A MURDER mystery set in a small Pennsylvania town, aimed for verisimilitude. Its main cast studied the phonics and cadence of the Delaware County accent—all the downturned O's and "water" pronounced to rhyme with "rudder"—which Kate Winslet (who plays the titular Mare Sheehan) described as "amongst the top two hardest dialects I've ever done." The costume designer sent snapshots of people in line at Wawa, the legendary Pennsylvania convenience store, to director Craig Zobel for inspiration. Clothes were distressed with scrubbing brushes, holes added. In terms of its content, the show can occasionally feel like a primer on the problems facing suburban and rural America. Its characters contend with the opioid epidemic,

insufficient health care, precarious and low-paying jobs, a lack of support for the elderly, and ambitious young people moving away for college with no plans to return. Crime in Easttown is driven less often by passion or malice than by the desperation of people forced to get by on less.

The exception is the show's central

mystery. Late one night, Erin McMennamin, a young mother with ties to many in the Easttown community, is killed by a relative, her body left in a creek. The investigation that ensues sends shock waves through the town and devastates the family of Mare's close friend Lori Ross (Julianne Nicholson). The family becomes isolated from Easttown life, but not, the show implies, forever: In the penultimate scene, Mare and Lori manage some kind of reconciliation as Lori sobs in her friend's arms on the kitchen floor.

Verisimilitude on its own can seem clinical; in *Mare of Easttown*, it is counterbalanced with a finely tuned emotional realism, as if the series' relationships had been buffed until they felt sufficiently timeworn as well. As with climactic moments like Lori and Mare's, the town's petty affairs are rendered in as much detail as its tragedies. There are gossips and cruel teens, squabbling couples, women drawing on their eyebrows to attend a funeral. The show depicts several loving relationships in which neither party, on a day-to-day basis, can stand the other.

Brad Ingelsby, the show's creator, describes himself as "totally new" to the TV murder mystery genre, and *Mare of Easttown* does not depart significantly from the standard structure: dead girl, gruff detective, cliffhanger at the end of each episode, red herrings leading away from the real killer, who is revealed in the finale. But the attention paid to the mundanity amid the tragedy distinguishes *Mare of Easttown* from other detective shows. Its unique strength is that it presents pain, loss, and forgiveness as collective rather than individual processes, the stuff of everyday life rather than dramatic aberrations from the norm. Injuries large and small, with consequences that spill out beyond any single victim, take a village to repair.

**A**t the center of many of these processes is Mare, a vape-sucking, cheese-ball-eating detective who lives in a split-level home with her mother, Helen (Jean Smart); her teenage daughter, Siobhan (Angourie Rice); and her grandson, Drew (Izzy King). (In interviews, Winslet described Mare as the kind of person "who looked at herself in the mirror when she brushed her teeth in the morning and would not look in the mirror again [all day]" and added that she "doesn't drink water once in the entire show.")

Mare is still mourning the death of her son, Kevin—Drew’s father—who died by suicide roughly two years earlier, something she avoids thinking about, mostly through work and alcohol.

Mare is exceptionally good at her job, both the traditional detective work and the part that involves fielding early-morning calls from senior citizens about graffiti. In the show’s first episode, she receives a call that the home of her friend Beth Hanlon (Chinasa Ogbuagu) has been robbed by Beth’s brother Freddie (Dominique Johnson), presumably to buy drugs. After finding Freddie with a cache of stolen sports memorabilia in his freezing-cold home, Mare arranges an alternate place for him to stay the night and instructs an officer to get in touch with the utility company; shutting off heat during the winter is illegal. “Call PECO Gas. Let them know they’re breaking the law,” she barks.

This arc ends with a detail I almost missed: When Mare finds Freddie dead from an overdose in his home several weeks later, the heat is off again. As Mare and Beth sit quietly on the back of a couch, their breath frosts in the air. Who knows whether the cop forgot to call, the gas company stonewalled, the heat came on but then went off again, or something else happened. It probably would not have prevented the death, but the tragedy of the cold house struck me in a way that the conclusion of the show’s central plot didn’t, in part because it felt more realistic—because it was the product not of an unspeakable act but the sum of myriad small failures, some of which were likely motivated by cruelty and some of which were simply oversights, which is how bad things happen in real life.

*Mare’s* cliffhangers and reveals occasionally seem shoehorned in—an arc involving a kidnapper who holds young women captive in his bar-slash-home feels especially dissonant, as does the revelation of Erin’s killer—which might make for an imperfect mystery. Still, the show’s enduring appeal is that its creators seem more interested in Easttown itself, its small failures and successes, than in the murder. “In a lot of crime dramas, you sort of open with the death and the investigation really starts from the opening shot,” Ingelsby told *The Wrap*. “Whereas in [the first] episode [of *Mare of Easttown*], it’s kind of a slice of life show, really.”

There are tragedies, like Freddie’s death, but also joy. A similar amount of time is given to a somber autopsy scene, for instance, as to Mare scream-laughing at her mother in the car after Helen’s ill-timed revelation of an affair with a recently wid-

*Erin Schwartz is a contributing writer for The Nation. They write frequently on television, popular culture, and books.*

owed man. An ear surgery for Erin’s 1-year-old son, delayed multiple times because of a lack of money, is completed in the final episode, and an envelope of cash that Erin had earmarked for the surgery, stolen by her ex-boyfriend, is unexpectedly returned.

TV crime dramas can tend toward the epic and the teleological, presenting events and characters in a hierarchy of significance that builds toward a discrete

conclusion, oriented by principles of truth, justice, and honor. That sensibility is certainly present in *Mare of Easttown*—most plotlines are tied up neatly but the end, and the climactic choice that Mare makes at the investigation’s conclu-

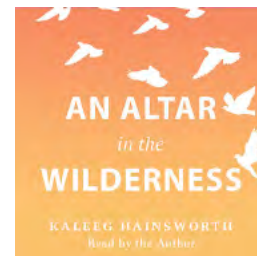
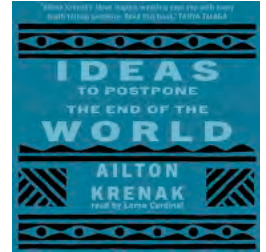
sion is a principled one. But there’s also the pull of the entropy of everyday life: futures shaped by reactions and adjustments, contingencies, the decisions you make to get through the day.

The show is willing to accommodate the idea, for example, that maintaining a significant lie may keep your family safe; that there are some situations in which burying or delaying the processing of trauma keeps you sane; that doing something awful and then going on with your life is both monstrous and human; and that you can love someone deeply without liking them very much. Not the most satisfying of narrative conclusions, but things we have all experienced, to a degree that seeing them onscreen offers a different kind of catharsis than watching the detective unmask the perpetrator of a crime. They offer a different model of heroism, built of imperfections and compromises, in which repairing old wounds happens slowly but inevitably. **N**

**The show’s strength is that it presents pain, loss, and forgiveness as collective rather than individual.**

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# Letters

## Holiday Spirit

Re “Democrats Should Create More Federal Holidays,” by Ed Burmila [June 14/21]: Those who work for private businesses often don’t get federal holidays. Instead of making up new holidays, require that businesses provide paid days off for the existing ones.

BARBARA MEYER

I think a president could add, at most, one federal holiday to the calendar as a matter of political reality. Joe Biden should add Election Day. As a federal holiday, it might lessen, but by no means eliminate, the impact of the GOP’s voter suppression efforts.

ROBERT HAINING

## The Other Greenhouse Gases

Re “Junk” [May 31/June 7]: Bill McKibben reviews Mark Bittman’s food history, *Animal, Vegetable, Junk*, without a single mention of how factory farms emit massive amounts of methane and nitrous oxide, two of the most potent greenhouse gases. There is a proven strong link between animal agriculture and the climate crisis, but McKibben never notes that the vast amount of the wheat, corn, and soy raised in the world goes to feed livestock. We cannot save human civilization just by eliminating fossil fuels while continuing to eat 80 billion land animals a year.

Greta Thunberg has the courage to say that we must radically change our relationship with animals. The threat to civilization isn’t just junk food. It’s global warming supercharged by our totally unnecessary overconsumption of all animal products, subsidized

by the government and profiting the same agribusiness companies that push their junk on us.

MICHAEL BETZOLD  
DETROIT

## A Last Resort

I hope it’s not too late to respond to “Abolish Guardianship and Preserve the Rights of Disabled People,” by Sara Luterman [March 22/29]. Not all guardianship is plenary, meaning people under guardianship do not simply lose all of their rights. As a professional guardian, I need to state clearly that our goal is always to restore rights whenever possible.

Here in Florida, people with disabilities may get a guardian advocate instead of a guardian, because they are able to determine some aspects of their lives with support. While we all have the capacity, it is important that we get our affairs in order to avoid guardianship in the future. On this we can all agree. We may be an illness (virus?), car accident, or addiction away from confusion or the inability to meaningfully express our wishes. Guardianship is a last resort.

PAM WIENER, PHD  
WEST PALM BEACH, FLA.

*The writer is director of the Alpert JFS Guardianship Program and a board member of the Florida State Guardianship Association.*

## Correction

Because of an editing error in “An Absolute Shit,” by Mina Tavakoli [May 31/June 7], the name of the French poet who was referenced as “admiring and despising [Wagner] in equal measure” was omitted. It is Catulle Mendès.

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# THE Nation.

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INDIA WALTON

## He's Back!

Former Maine Governor Paul LePage called himself "Trump before Trump." Now he's ready for a comeback.

Sasha Abramsky

To the NAACP:

**"Tell them to kiss my butt."**

**"What I think we ought to do is bring the guillotine back. We could have public executions."**

**"Reading newspapers in the state of Maine is like paying somebody to tell you lies."**

**"Let me tell you something: Black people come up the highway and they kill Mainers."**

**"You shoot at the enemy. You try to identify the enemy... people of color or people of Hispanic origin."**

**"You must buy health insurance or pay the new Gestapo—the IRS."**

**"If you want a good education, go to private schools. If you can't afford it, tough luck."**



**Painted words:** Activist Sirisak "Tom" Chaited displays the message "Marriage Equality" on their head for the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia in Bangkok, Thailand.

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EDITORIAL / INDIA WALTON FOR THE NATION

# Grieving in Buffalo

**O**UR BUFFALO COMMUNITY IS GRIEVING RIGHT NOW. WE'RE GRIEVING FOR PEARL Young, a grandmother who volunteered every Saturday at her church's food pantry. We're grieving for Miss Kat Massey, a dear friend of mine who would write a \$10 check every month to the community land trust I ran. We're grieving for Londin Thomas, an 8-year-old Black girl who hid in a milk cooler while a mass shooter opened fire on a supermarket full of shoppers in East Buffalo, killing 10 people and wounding three others. Londin survived, but she will live with the trauma of that day for the rest of her life. The shooter's victims were mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts—pillars of our community who were looked up to and loved.

Many elected officials and leaders have offered their "thoughts and prayers" to our community. But I'm going to be frank with you: If those kind words aren't backed up with action, you can keep them.

This attack was not an isolated incident. It is part of a long history of racial terror and violence that dates all the way back to the country's inception. Colfax, in 1873; Tulsa, in 1921; Rosewood, in 1923; Birmingham, in 1963—and now Buffalo. Black people's existence in this country, since we first were taken from our homes, has been marked by terror. And if we're not working actively to undo the systems of racism and harm, then nothing in this country will change.

The fact that Buffalo is one of the most racially segregated cities in the nation didn't happen by chance, but by design. The Kensington Expressway was built to move people from the center of Buffalo to the suburbs as quickly as possible without having to witness the poor living conditions of the city's Black residents. Even today, people in East Buffalo, through which the highway runs, have higher rates of asthma and other preventable health conditions.

Racism, similarly, is baked into our nation's political and economic systems. It's why we still have the Jim Crow filibuster, which stands in the way of commonsense gun laws and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. It's why Black Buffalonians have suffered from decades of disinvestment, dispossession, and exploitation at the hand of big banks, landlords, and corporations.

The Tops supermarket where the shooting happened is in the heart of a Black working-class neighborhood in East Buffalo that continues to experience housing disrepair, air and water pollution, and poor access to health care, jobs, and food. The Tops store was one of the few places where people could buy fresh produce and fill their prescriptions and where young people could find stable jobs. Now, with the supermarket closed, people have nowhere to shop, and food apartheid in East Buffalo will grow even worse.

Following the attack, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown called for more funding for the notoriously brutal Buffalo Police Department. But more police and surveillance in our community wouldn't have stopped this attack. And we owe it to our commu-

nities not to throw false solutions at the problem. If we want to prevent future tragedies, we need to begin addressing racism and white supremacy at its source, not at its culmination. How does a system that devalues Black lives expect the members of society to value them?

Our leaders can no longer afford to run away from these issues, because they're not going away. We need to treat white supremacy and structural racism as the moral crises that they are and make deep investments in Black and brown communities. Redlining and housing covenants made our community an easy target. The shooter was able to narrow down his list to a few locations where Black residents shop because of decades of racist policies.

We also need to increase the funding for community-based and culturally competent organizations providing care and support to people on the ground. We must combat the dangerous myths—like replacement theory—being promoted by the GOP and right-wing media outlets. And we must push back against nationwide efforts to prevent teaching the truth about our history in schools.

The shooter will be incarcerated for a long time. But there is no punishment that can erase the fear and trauma that people experienced or turn back the clock on that terrifying afternoon. True safety for our communities will come only when we have the courage to stand up to white supremacy and racism in their many forms. **N**

**If we want to prevent future tragedies, we need to begin addressing white supremacy at its source.**

*India Walton is a senior adviser for the New York Working Families Party and a former Buffalo mayoral candidate.*

COMMENT / ROBERT L. BOROSAGE

# Which Side Are They On?

*Progressives need to recognize that the DCCC and the DSCC are not our allies.*

**A**FTER THE LEAK OF SUPREME COURT JUSTICE SAMUEL Alito's venomous draft opinion overturning *Roe v. Wade*, activists took to the streets and money flooded into Democratic Party coffers, as the party's leaders vowed to make Republican extremism on abortion a defining issue in this fall's critical congressional elections.

And so, in the hotly contested Democratic primary in Texas's 28th District between the pro-choice Latina challenger, Jennifer Cisneros, and the incumbent, Henry Cuellar, the sole remaining anti-choice House Democrat, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and the Democratic leadership are pulling out all the stops... in support of Cuellar.

WTF. Cisneros, a 28-year-old immigration lawyer supported by Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and various progressive electoral groups, forced Cuellar into a May 25 runoff—which Cuellar appears to have won by an extremely thin margin, though the votes were still being counted as we went to press. If the party leaders had just stayed neutral, Cisneros would have been the odds-on favorite to win the primary—and run as a pro-choice progressive champion in a district that leans Democratic.

Instead, Representative Jim Clyburn stumped with Cuellar, dismissing those who think “we have to agree on everything” as “sophomoric”: “If we're gonna be a big-tent party, we got to be a big-tent party,” Clyburn told reporters. “I don't believe we ought to have a litmus test in the Democratic Party.”



But Cuellar isn't just anti-choice. He is Big Oil's favorite Democrat. He consistently votes against lowering drug prices, winning the favor of Big Pharma. He gets an A rating from the NRA. He's against the PRO Act, President Biden's core legislation to help empower workers. For a kicker, his House and campaign offices were raided by the FBI in January. (His campaign says he is not a target of the investigation).

Democrats shouldn't have to agree on “everything,” but it's hardly “sophomoric” to suggest they stand for something.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is unrepentant, stating: “I support my incumbents. I support every

**It is time for progressive donors to focus on building an independent infrastructure for change.**

one of them, from right to left. That is what I do.” The DCCC also weighed in heavily to help Shontel Brown turn back the challenge from Nina Turner, a true progressive champion, in Ohio. In Oregon's newly drawn Fifth District, the DCCC backed Representative

Kurt Schrader against a popular progressive, Jamie McLeod-Skinner, even after local party committees representing about 90 percent of the vote formally asked it to stay out of the race. Schrader, the chair of the House Democrats' conservative Blue Dog Coalition, is infamous for being one of the three Big Pharma Democrats who worked to block legislation that would lower prices for prescription drugs. With super PACs linked to AIPAC, the American pro-Israel lobby, pouring money into the race, Schrader even snagged an endorsement from President Biden.

McLeod-Skinner had the support of Senator Warren and a broad range of local unions and progressive groups. Despite being outspent 10 to 1, McLeod-Skinner—who tagged Schrader as the Joe Manchin of the House—has a likely insurmountable lead in a race in which computer glitches have delayed the final vote count.

The DCCC not only protects incumbents; it also recruits designer candidates for open seats, favoring those with military or intelligence credentials and suitably pasteurized moderate views. Its show horse, Representative Conor Lamb, ran in the Pennsylvania Senate primary touting his ability to work with Republicans. Lamb was, as the *Daily Beast* put it, “sheared” by Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman, the 6-foot-8, tattooed, goateed Sanders supporter running openly against the Manchin wing of the Democratic Party.

Yet even more destructive than the ac-

tions of the DCCC during this cycle has been the tsunami of outside super PAC money that corporate and special interests have unleashed on progressive candidates in Democratic primaries.

When Brown upset Turner in the 2020 primary, big-time outside expenditures made the difference. That provided the playbook rolled out against progressives in primaries across the country this year. For example, AIPAC is putting out big bucks for the first time. Its first-round endorsements featured more Republicans than Democrats, including dozens who voted against certifying the 2020 presidential election, but it seems particularly focused on assailing progressive women of color in Democratic primaries.

In Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, Summer Lee, a progressive powerhouse and state legislator, earned endorsements from union locals, state legislature colleagues, Sanders, and Justice Democrats, among others. The Democratic establishment consolidated around Steve Irwin, a former Republican congressional staffer and anti-union attorney. As *Sludge* reports, three out of every four dollars supporting Irwin came from AIPAC or super PACS associated with it, totaling more than \$2.6 million. Despite this, Lee held on to win by a very small margin. And in North Carolina, sadly, Nida Al-lam, a proven progressive favored to win the nomination in

**AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby, seems particularly focused on assailing progressive women of color.**

the state's Fourth District, was undone by the \$2.4 million dumped into the race by AIPAC and its various allies.

In Oregon's Sixth District, Andrea Salinas, a progressive candidate backed by prominent local and national liberal and Latino groups, found herself challenged by a political unknown, Carrick Flynn, whose candidacy was basically invented by \$13 million in independent expenditures plopped down by a super PAC funded by a crypto billionaire. Bizarrely, Pelosi's House Majority PAC spent \$1 million for Flynn as well. Happily, Oregon voters resented the effrontery, and Salinas won going away.

All of this is a dramatic reminder that even as Democrats mobilize against a Trump-dominated Republican Party that poses a direct threat to our democracy, the fierce battle over who and what the Democrats represent must continue. The sabotage of Biden's reform agenda by the likes of Manchin in the Senate and the Big Pharma Democrats in the House demonstrates that we won't come close to the changes this country desperately needs unless progressives transform the Democratic Party from within.

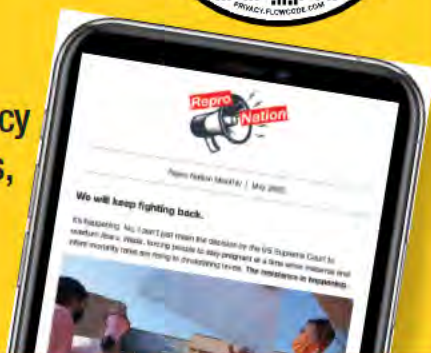
In this struggle, the party committees—particularly the DCCC and its Senate equivalent, the DSCC—often stand in the way, along with the massive war chests of today's Gilded Age special interests.

In response, progressives have been building an independent infrastructure to recruit and support insurgent candidates. Independent endorsements from progressive leaders like Sanders, Warren, Ocasio-Cortez, and Congressional Progressive Caucus head Pramila Jayapal galvanize support. The Working Families Party, Our Revolution, Justice Democrats, Way to Lead, Democrats for America, and the Progressive Change Campaign Committee seek out and help support progressive challengers. Progressive unions like SEIU and issue-specific groups like the Sunrise Movement increasingly endorse in primaries as well. These can help counter the outside super PAC money, but as the victories of Fetterman, Lee, and Salinas demonstrate, only ongoing—and on-the-ground—organizing can withstand the blizzard of negative ads and slanders that progressives will face. It is long past time for progressive donors and activists to stop contributing to the DCCC and its allied PACs and focus on building this independent infrastructure for change.

**N**



Our new monthly e-mail newsletter meets the urgency of this moment with stories, analysis, and resources on the global struggle for reproductive freedom.



Scan the QR code or visit [thenation.com/repro](https://thenation.com/repro) to sign up for free.



## A Right to Be Human

*The anti-abortion movement's justification for overturning Roe is rooted in the dehumanization of women.*

**T**HERE ARE STAGGERING NUMBERS OF WOMEN helping to drive the anti-abortion fight. Currently at the center of the action is Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch. She petitioned the Supreme Court to review *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which, according to the recently leaked court opinion, will result in *Roe v. Wade* being overturned. Fitch uses her own story of raising three children as a divorced, single working mother to justify her anti-abortion position: that overturning *Roe* will “empower” women, giving them a chance to “redirect their lives.” Fitch disregards the fact that the majority of women who seek abortions are already mothers and that working parents in the United States are disadvantaged by the lack of government-mandated parental leave and subsidized child care. As a result, motherhood is more likely to empower women who have the financial and social means to succeed in this role. For many women, having children, or having more children, increases their financial needs and makes regular employment more difficult, pushing them into poverty, which the child welfare system often conflates with neglect. Far from being empowered, these women experience the humiliating intrusion of investigations to determine their parental fitness and custodial rights.

Beyond Fitch's blindness to the actual experience of many mothers in this country, what is so insidious about her position is that it rests on the assumption that only motherhood truly empowers women. It extends the traditional conception of motherhood as the only natural position for women and the only acceptable realm within which to assert power, leaving power in all other realms primarily to men.

The notion that we must have children to fully realize ourselves reflects a view of women as fundamentally incomplete. We are not sufficient on our own but can gain value as an extension of a man or by becoming a mother. Through self-sacrifice and care of others, we can be made whole. Our role as subservient caregivers determines not just our identity but our humanity. For anti-abortion activists, an embryo or fetus is more important than the woman whose body it resides in, and her life should be sacrificed for it. This clump of cells is more human than she is.

Women and girls have long been taught that we are only as good as what we provide to others.

The residue of these messages plagues me even after significant efforts to educate myself about where they come from and to disentangle them from my sense of self-worth.

As a psychologist and parent of two young children, I spend the bulk of my day caring for others. These are meaningful activities and certainly challenge me to grow in valuable ways. But what challenges me the most is not doing for others but allowing myself to just be. Trusting that I am enough as I am to have value and rights.

My struggles are mirrored by so many of the women I see in therapy, who feel they must meet others' needs before voicing their own, shrink themselves to make room for others, and not burden anyone by their existence. They wonder why they lack confidence, and they blame themselves.

These challenges often get worse with motherhood; many women feel that they lose themselves as their needs are subsumed by those of their children. Women who become mothers show declines in psychological health compared with women of the same age who are not mothers. They have higher rates of depression, and those rates increase with added life adversities (poverty, divorce, underemployment), which are more prevalent among women of color. Women with children are also at higher risk of intimate partner violence and are less likely to leave abusive partners than women without children.

The messages that lead women to internalize a sense of inferiority come from all the usual sources—the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (particularly mothers), wage gaps (which widen substantially when women have children), and fights over women's rights to govern their bodies—but also directly from other women.

Our society weaponizes women against women. For Fitch to ascend the ladder of the conservative political structure, she had to make herself useful in a way that members of the male majority can't: As a woman on their side, she lends them credibility in the fight to take away women's rights. Worse, Fitch transforms their intentions to assert dominance and control into a message that, through submission to authority and acceptance of the position conferred on us by men, women can be empowered.

Like our worth, our power has traditionally been determined by our relationships to men and our roles as mothers. This is how women perpetuate the idea that our lives are about deference and self-sacrifice.

**The notion that we must have children to fully realize ourselves reflects a view of women as fundamentally incomplete.**

That in losing ourselves through the care of others, we find ourselves—as we ought to be by patriarchal standards. And having children is a way to justify our existence.

Women like Fitch, and there are many, are not likely to give up their alliance with this power structure, because it has put them among the oppressors rather than the oppressed. But millions of women—and trans and nonbinary people—suffer as a result. We have been taught to accept the forces of oppression rather than struggle against them, and that if we suffer, it's our own fault for wanting more than the role afforded to us. That is the kind of “empowerment” Fitch is advocating: empowerment through submission and compliance with a system that benefits wealthy white men above all. Empowerment that comes at the expense of women's agency, autonomy, and humanity.

In our fight for abortion rights, women must help one another see ourselves as human first. Only then can we choose whether to become mothers. **N**

*Nicole Nebbrig, PhD, is a clinical and research psychologist in Brooklyn.*

**NATION NEWS**  
JEET HEER RETURNS

## Homecoming!

**T**he *Nation* is delighted to announce that Jeet Heer is rejoining the masthead as a national affairs correspondent and bringing his weekly podcast, *The Time of Monsters*, in-house. In addition to continuing his monthly *Nation* column, “Morbid Symptoms,” he will file twice-weekly dispatches on [TheNation.com](http://TheNation.com).

The titles of Heer's column and podcast are a nod to the philosopher Antonio Gramsci's famous remark “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” In this political and cultural moment, Heer believes that we too are living in an “interregnum,” an interval of opportunity for the forces of good or evil to prevail, where the future is very much unknown. His essays and episodes will seek to diagnose the problems of our times—and explore their possible solutions. **N**

## No Offense David Bromwich



# Can Another War Save Us From Ourselves?

*The policing of public opinion over Ukraine goes to extremes unimagined during the fight against Hitler.*

**A**MERICA HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN A CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE for some time. Most of our recent political controversies have ended in denunciations and upheavals that seem off the charts by the standard of all previous American experience outside war. Consider the right-wing birther movement, which questioned the authenticity of President Obama's citizenship, and the left-liberal Russiagate scandal, which accused President Trump of being a Russian agent. The loudest voices leveling these charges came from people with no interest in evidence. Rather, the accusations served their purpose within the factions that constitute the “base” of the major parties.

Barack Obama, a few years into his presidency, got into the habit of saying (in a tight spot when Americans seemed to support a bad cause): “It's not who we are as a people.” But do we know who we are as a people? On March 3, the Metropolitan Opera severed its relations with the singer Anna Netrebko because, in speaking out against the Ukraine war, she failed to denounce Russian President Vladimir Putin and said a word in defense of artistic freedom:

I am opposed to this war. I am Russian and I love my country but I have many friends in Ukraine and the pain and suffering right now breaks my heart. I want this war to end and for people to be able to live in peace.... I want to add, however: forcing artists, or any public figure, to voice their political opinions in public and to denounce their homeland is not right.

Would any foreign artist in living memory have been so publicly dishonored for not reciting the prepared script?

According to a July 2020 Cato Institute poll, almost two out of three Americans are afraid to voice their political opinions because they fear they might offend someone. They save those opinions for election time—and we should not be surprised that the results of elections surprise us. In 2016, the result turned into a permanent shock—a slow-rolling, everlasting panic—for Democrats. The same happened to Republicans in 2020. Constitutional democracy requires a peaceful transfer of power following free elections. This, in turn, depends on the custom that losers concede with grace and winners are allowed their innings. But a great many Democrats, led by Hillary Clinton, were persuaded that the 2016 election had been stolen by Putin. Four years later, a majority of Republicans, led by Donald Trump, came to believe

# CoQ10's Failure Leaves Millions Wanting

Use this pill to supercharge your brain and think better than ever.

Millions of Americans take the supplement CoQ10. It's the "jet fuel" that supercharges your cells' power generators, known as mitochondria.

As you age, your mitochondria begin to die. In fact, by age 67, you lose 80% of the mitochondria you had at age 25. But if you're taking CoQ10, there's something important you should know.

As powerful as CoQ10 is, there is a critical thing it fails to do. It can't create new mitochondria in your cells.

## Taking CoQ10 is not enough

"There's a little-known NASA nutrient that multiplies the number of new power generators in your cells by up to 55%," says Dr. Al Sears, owner of the Sears Institute for Anti-Aging Medicine in Royal Palm Beach, Florida. "Science once thought this was impossible. But now you can make your heart, brain and body young again."

"I tell my patients the most important thing I can do is increase their 'health span.' This is the length of time you can live free of disease and with all your youthful abilities and faculties intact."

Medical first: Multiply the "power generators" in your cells

Al Sears, M.D., recently released an energy-boosting supplement based on this NASA nutrient that has become so popular, he's having trouble keeping it in stock.

Dr. Sears is the author of over 500 scientific papers on anti-aging and recently spoke at the WPBF 25 Health & Wellness Festival featuring Dr. Oz and special guest Suzanne Somers. Thousands of people listened to Dr. Sears speak on his anti-aging breakthroughs and attended his book signing at the event.

Now, Dr. Sears has come up with what his peers consider his greatest contribution to anti-aging medicine yet — a newly discovered nutrient that multiplies the number of tiny, energy-producing "engines" located inside the body's cells, shattering the limitations of traditional CoQ10 supplements.

## Why mitochondria matter

A single cell in your body can contain between 200 to 2,000 mitochondria, with the largest number found in the most metabolically active cells, like those in your brain, heart and skeletal muscles.

But because of changes in cells, stress and poor diet, most people's power generators begin to malfunction and die off as they age. In fact, the Mitochondria Research Society reports 50 million U.S. adults are suffering from health problems because of mitochondrial dysfunction.

Common ailments often associated with aging — such as memory problems, heart issues, blood sugar concerns and vision and hearing difficulties — can all be connected to a decrease in mitochondria.

## Birth of new mitochondria

Dr. Sears and his researchers combined the most powerful form of CoQ10 available — called ubiquinol — with a unique, newly discovered natural compound called PQQ that has the remarkable ability to grow new mitochondria. Together, the two powerhouses are now available in a supplement called Ultra Accel II.

Discovered by a NASA probe in space dust, PQQ (Pyrroloquinoline quinone) stimulates something called "mitochondrial biogenesis" — a unique process that actually boosts the number of healthy mitochondria in your cells.

In a study published in the Journal of Nutrition, mice fed PQQ grew a staggering number of new mitochondria, showing an increase of more than 55% in just eight weeks.

The mice with the strongest mitochondria showed no signs of aging — even when they were the equivalent of 80 years old.

## Science stands behind the power of PQQ

Biochemical Pharmacology reports that PQQ is up to 5,000 times more efficient in sustaining energy production than common antioxidants.

"Imagine 5,000 times more efficient energy," says Dr. Sears. "PQQ has been a game changer for my patients."

"With the PQQ in Ultra Accel II, I have energy I never thought possible," says Colleen R., one of Dr. Sears' patients. "I am in my 70s but feel 40 again. I think clearer, move with real energy and sleep like a baby."

## It works right away

Along with an abundance of newfound energy, users also report a sharper, more focused mind and memory, and even younger-looking skin and hair. Jerry M. from Wellington, Florida, used Ultra Accel II and was amazed at the effect.

"I noticed a difference within a few days," says Jerry. "My endurance almost doubled. But it's not just in your body. You can feel it mentally, too," says Jerry. "Not only do I feel a difference, but the way it protects my cells is great insurance against a health disaster as I get older."

## Increase your health span today

The demand for this supplement is so high, Dr. Sears is having trouble keeping it in stock. "My patients tell me they feel better than they



NASA-discovered nutrient is stunning the medical world by activating more youthful energy, vitality and health than CoQ10.

have in years. This is ideal for people who are feeling or looking older than their age... or for those who are tired or growing more forgetful."

"My favorite part of practicing anti-aging medicine is watching my patients get the joy back in their lives. Ultra Accel II sends a wake-up call to every cell in their bodies... and they actually feel young again."

## Where to find Ultra Accel II

Right now, the only way to get this potent combination of PQQ and super-powered CoQ10 is with Dr. Sears' breakthrough Ultra Accel II formula.

To secure bottles of this hot, new supplement, buyers should contact the Sears Health Hotline at **1-800-226-7151** within the next 48 hours. "It takes time to get bottles shipped out to drug stores," said Dr. Sears. "The Hotline allows us to ship the product directly to the customer."

Dr. Sears feels so strongly about this product, he offers a 100%, money-back guarantee on every order. "Just send me back the bottle and any unused product within 90 days, and I'll send you your money back," said Dr. Sears.

The Hotline will be taking orders for the next 48 hours. After that, the phone number will be shut down to allow them to restock.

Call **1-800-226-7151** to secure your limited supply of **Ultra Accel II**. You don't need a prescription, and those who call in the first 24 hours qualify for a significant discount. To take advantage of this great offer use Promo Code **NATUA0522** when you call in.



that the 2020 election was stolen by some combination of illegal ballot-harvesting, deliberate miscounts, and tampering with computers.

Both eruptions portended the loss of a national morale and discipline. If you were a foreign leader looking at the United States, you would say to yourself: "That is an unstable country; that is a troubled people. How can we enter into agreements with people who do not trust themselves?"

On May 13, Steny Hoyer, the Democratic majority leader in the House of Representatives, said that the US is now "at war" with Russia. Congressional Republicans were overwhelming, and Democrats unanimous, in voting for a \$40 billion war-assistance package to be sent to Ukraine. Apparently without any serious debate, we find ourselves on the brink of all-out war in defense of a favored nation, against a nuclear-armed power, Russia.

Recall that Ukraine was the source of the information that launched the first impeachment of President Trump, and that Trump's offense took the form of an extortionate demand for information about the salary paid by a Ukrainian energy firm, Burisma Holdings, in return for unexplained services by the

**We are seeing the ascent of mob psychology on an exorbitant scale.**

son of our current president, Joe Biden. It is at points like this that Roman orators would break off a speech with a silence that signified: "Words fail me."

George Washington said in his Farewell Address: "The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism."

Concerning the division of other nations into friend and enemy, Washington added: "Nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded.... The peace often, sometimes perhaps the liberty, of nations, has been the victim."

Washington's warning applies with summary accuracy to American foreign policy since 2001.

Today we are far gone in "passionate attachments" and "inveterate antipathies." But while we instruct the world in democracy, our own politics has become a scene of uninhibited aggression that undermines our standing as instructors. One party refuses to dissociate itself from the riot that burst into

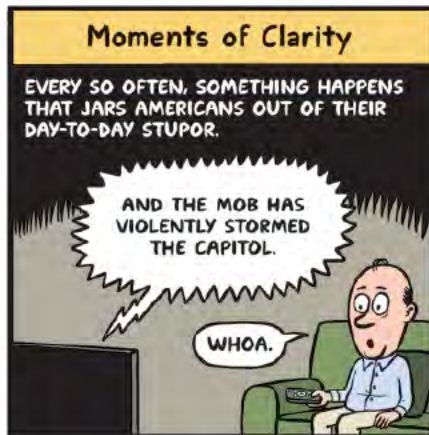
the Capitol and sought to disrupt the certification of the 2020 election vote. The other party answers the sudden increase of shootings in American cities after June 2020 by blaming it on Covid.

What we have seen in the last 10 years, intensified in the last five, and raised to a fever pitch in the last two, is the ascent of mob psychology and hysteria on an exorbitant scale. It shows in our lazy, frightened acceptance of censorship—lately elevated to the point where Facebook and Twitter could jointly announce a ban on all messages, news, and communications that "undermine trust in the Ukrainian government." This kind of blackout was considered beneath our dignity in the fight against Hitler and the Cold War.

The US proxy war in Ukraine, and the bipartisan self-satisfaction with which many Americans regard it, is an exercise of displacement. We are risking a world war in the belief that only a world war can repair our broken democracy. But are we so helpless? And are we so important? If we could decide "who we are as a people," we might go some way to reduce the terrible destruction of another war. We might even earn thanks from the billions who are not Americans but who are compelled to share the planet with us. **N**



OPPART/JEN SORENSEN



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# The Supreme Court Is Broken. How Do We Fix It?

## Strip Its Power

RYAN DOERFLER

**W**ITH THE LEAK OF A DRAFT OPINION in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* formally overruling *Roe v. Wade*, progressives' worst fears about an ever more reactionary Supreme Court appear set to come true. After decades of chipping away at abortion rights, the court's conservatives—now a rock-solid majority—seem ready to complete that ideological project openly and even triumphantly.

In itself, such a decision would be catastrophic, especially for those who don't have the resources or the personal freedom to travel vast distances to receive basic health care. The draft opinion's unapologetic tone also presages similarly harmful outcomes on issues ranging from contraception to same-sex marriage to immigration to climate change. Indeed, some of these outcomes are already here.

With this parade of horrors about to be realized, progressives are returning with even greater urgency to the question of what to do about the conservative leviathan that is the Supreme Court. As in earlier moments, the temptation is merely to replace that leviathan with a progressive one, packing the court with benevolent justices who will wield the institution's power for good. Real progress, though, requires the beast to be slayed, stripping the court of its authority and returning our society's most pressing and important questions to the democratic arena—where progressive causes, backed by popular movements, stand the best chance.

Considering the history of the federal right to abortion helps to reveal the severe limitations of relying on a juricentric approach to securing fundamental rights. Just four years after the court recognized that right in *Roe*, a nearly identical court declared in *Maher v. Roe* that the state was under no obligation to make abortion economically feasible. Even at the height of its support for reproductive health care, in other words, the court ensured that the right to abortion would be one in name only for millions of women without the financial means.

The Supreme Court's refusal to guarantee meaningful, *positive* rights to US citizens (let alone noncitizens) goes far beyond abortion. Even during the Warren Court era, the historical anomaly to which so many defenders of juristocracy cling, liberal justices failed to extend constitutional protections to America's economic underclass, thereby abandoning

## Expand It

ELIE MYSTAL

**L**ET'S START WITH THE OBVIOUS: I'M in favor of jurisdiction stripping, weather stripping, or stripping while dancing on a pole if that's what it takes to stop the Supreme Court from turning the clock back to 1859. I'm in favor of using any and all nonviolent means available to stop the court's current embrace of bigotry and misogyny. If jurisdiction stripping reminds the court that it is a coequal branch of government and not a judicial clergy, superior to the elected branches, then I'm all for it.

The legal theory behind what has come to be known as jurisdiction stripping is sound. The Supreme Court gave itself the power to declare unconstitutional both laws passed by Congress and orders signed by the president in the 1803 case *Marbury v. Madison*. This power of judicial review was not written into the Constitution nor contemplated during its ratification battle. The Supreme Court invented it, and that means Congress can, in theory, take it away. Congress can pass a law and then exclude that law from judicial review. Congress can, on its own authority, determine what is constitutional and what is not.

This works in theory. My concern is that the Supreme Court will simply ignore attempts to limit its power, and all the time and effort spent convincing politicians that jurisdiction stripping is the answer will leave us exactly where we started: with a high court untroubled by the desires of the American people. Congress will pass a law and include a stipulation saying, "This law is not open for Supreme Court interpretation." Then the Supreme Court will say, "No. In fact, this law passed by Congress is unconstitutional." The Supreme Court can, and likely will, use judicial review to reject congressional attempts to get around judicial review.

What happens next depends a lot on what kind of law Congress attempts to shield from the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Constitution. If it's the kind of law that requires the states to do, or not do, something, the states that agree with Congress will go along with Congress, while the states that agree with the Supreme Court will refuse to follow the "unconstitutional" congressional mandate. Think about jurisdiction stripping in the abortion context: Congress can pass a law that protects a woman's right to choose and prohibits the Supreme Court from reviewing it.

Debate The Debate

an ideal of substantive equality in favor of formal equality.

In addition to failing to provide positive rights, the Supreme Court has, throughout its history, actively impeded Congress from providing such rights through ordinary legislation. Most famously, the court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875 in the *Civil Rights Cases*, undercutting Congress's primary effort to guarantee the rights of Black Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War. Much more recently, in a decision hailed by liberal media as "upholding" the Affordable Care Act, the Supreme Court invalidated Congress's expansion of Medicaid, once again depriving poor people of the affirmative right to health care they are so desperately owed.

What this history suggests is that the most plausible path to a meaningful right not only to abortion but also to education or racial equality or climate justice is through federal legislation rather than judicial edict. As history also suggests, such progressive legislation would face eventual judicial resistance—unless Congress were to strip the Supreme Court (and other courts) of its authority to decide on the constitutionality of that law.

By invoking its power under Article III to make "exceptions" to the Supreme Court's jurisdiction over most cases and its total discretion over the existence of "inferior" federal courts,

Congress could—and should—insulate legislation like the Women's Health Protection Act from judicial invalidation by including a provision withdrawing from any court the right to consider challenges to the constitutionality of that law. Deploying such jurisdiction-stripping provisions broadly would ensure that the meaning of our Constitution and, more fundamentally, what rights exist within our constitutional order would be determined by (at least somewhat) democratically responsive officials in Congress and the White House, as opposed to democratically insulated philosopher kings.

Removing issues like health care or climate from the courts would have the further advantage of placing responsibility at the feet of elected officials. Rather than speculating about whether some judicial nominee would respect *stare decisis*, "moderates" in the Senate would have to explain why they do or do not support a right to choose. Similarly, rather than promising, as President Biden has since his election, to enact federal abortion legislation if the Supreme Court overrules *Roe*, he and his party would have to explain why they are not protecting women's reproductive freedom right now.

Finally, although jurisdiction stripping is often characterized as an alternative to court expansion, the two are not mutually exclusive. Given its history, though, merely adding progressive justices to the Supreme Court would yield limited benefits in the short term and leave in place an undemocratic behemoth that would wreak further havoc in the end. **N**

*Ryan Doerfler is a professor at the University of Chicago Law School.*

> DOERFLER

> MYSTAL

## The Debate

The religious fundamentalists will ask the Supreme Court to review the law anyway. It's likely the forced-birth caucus on the Supreme Court will decide that Congress cannot strip its power and then determine, again, that Congress doesn't have the power to protect women's rights. Texas will listen to the court and outlaw abortions; California will listen to Congress and allow them. Nothing will have been solved.

In contrast, the types of laws that are ripe for jurisdiction stripping are those whose implementation the president, as head of the executive branch, has full control over. An environmental regulation on power plants might work. The Supreme Court might say the regulation is unconstitutional, but when armed agents of the federal government come to shut down the delinquent power plant, there's little a Supreme Court decision can do to stop them.

But think about what I'm saying and play the tape all the way to the end. Jurisdiction stripping works only if a president, in command of an army, is willing to defy the Supreme Court's view of itself. That is a dangerous game to play, especially if the goal is to "restore" democracy.

Jurisdiction stripping—the kind that doesn't lead to a military takeover—requires the Supreme Court to willingly relinquish some of its power but does not reform or incentivize the court to relinquish that power. That's why I favor court expansion instead. The problem, to my mind, is not that the Supreme Court is powerful but that we've decided to let conservative extremists wield that power, unchecked, for life.

But imagine this: Instead of starting with jurisdiction stripping, add 20 justices to the court who believe that jurisdiction stripping is constitutional—and then pass legislation not subject to judicial review. Or add 20 justices who believe the Supreme Court should have a code of ethics—and then pass ethics reform. Or give me 20 justices who believe that term limits can be legislated without a constitutional amendment—and then pass term limits legislation. The court needs to be expanded with people who think the court can be restrained, before attempting to restrain the court. You shoot the bear with the tranquilizer dart and then put the tracking collar on it; doing it the wrong way around is how well-meaning folks end up as dinner.

Right now, the law is whatever five Supreme Court justices say it is. The way to fix this is not to pass new laws, as those five people will just ignore laws they don't like anyway. The solution is to flood the court with people who will make better decisions about laws. The Supreme Court must be reformed before it can play well in the sandbox with the other two branches of government. **N**

*Elie Mystal is The Nation's justice correspondent.*

**Real progress, though, requires the beast to be slayed, stripping the court of its authority.**

**The problem is not that the Supreme Court is powerful, but that conservative extremists wield that power.**



SNAPSHOT/Pablo Porciuncula

## March of Silence

Uruguayans taking part in the *Marcha del Silencio* in Montevideo on May 20 hold portraits of their loved ones who were disappeared during the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1973 to 1985. Organized by the group Mothers and Relatives of Uruguayans Detained and Disappeared, the annual demonstration began in 1996 as a way to commemorate the victims of state terrorism.

### By the Numbers



**693**  
Number of mass shootings in the United States in 2021

**212**  
Number of mass shootings so far in 2022

**14%**  
Rise in gun deaths in 2020 as compared with 2019

**45,222**  
Number of people who died from gun-related injuries in the US in 2020

**53%**  
Percentage of US adults who say gun laws should be more stringent

**2020**  
The first year in over two decades

in which the federal government awarded grants for gun-violence research

**\$25M**  
Minimum amount approved by Congress for 2022 for firearms-related criminal background checks

**\$32.3M**  
Amount the NRA spent in 2020 on elections, lobbying, and "outside spending" (typically political ads for or against candidates)

CALVIN TRILLIN  
**DeadlinePoet**

### The Next Move

"Republican lawmakers this year passed an unprecedented bevy of bills targeting the authority of state and local election officials, a power grab that might allow partisan legislators to overturn future election results by claiming there was fraud."  
—*Stateline*

Elections neutered by the right?

Now fears of that are mounting.

The battle's changed from who can vote

To who can do the counting.

# He's Back!

Paul LePage called himself  
"Trump before Trump." Now he  
wants to stage a comeback.

**Sasha Abramsky**

To the NAACP:

**"Tell them  
to kiss  
my butt."**

**"What I think we ought to do is  
bring the  
guillotine back.  
We could have public executions."**

Reading newspapers  
in the state of Maine is like

**paying somebody  
to tell you lies."**

Let me tell you something:

**Black people  
come up the  
highway  
and they kill Mainers."**

**"You shoot at  
the enemy.**

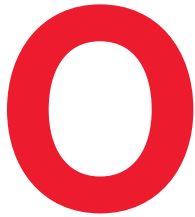
*You try to identify the enemy...  
people of color or people of  
Hispanic origin."*

You must buy health insurance  
or pay

**the new  
Gestapo—the IRS."**

If you want a good  
education, go to

**private  
schools.  
If you can't afford it,  
tough luck."**



Portland, Me.

ON A CLOUDY SPRING MORNING, MAINE'S EX-GOVERNOR, 73-YEAR-old Paul LePage, journeyed to the heart of his state's largest, most diverse, and most progressive city to preside over the opening of a new Multicultural Community Center. Wearing a lavender shirt and slacks, LePage wooed liberal Mainers, declaring that he wanted to make Maine "inclusive to all new citizens," that he loved talking to immigrants about the countries they came from, and that he hoped his state would roll out the welcome mat and tell new arrivals "We love you."

There was a surreal quality to the speech, given the many anti-immigrant comments LePage had made during his eight years as a far-right Tea Party-affiliated Republican governor, from January 2011 until 2019. This is the man who, in his two terms in office, fired up his base by telling them that the country was at war against immigrants—especially Hispanic immigrants and, more generally, immigrants of color—and that in a war you shoot first and ask questions later. At the height of the panic about the mosquito-borne Zika virus, the governor announced that asylum seekers were bringing the "ziki fly" with them. Though LePage grew up in the historically oppressed French-speaking community of Maine, he failed to acquire any empathy for the underdog as a result. Instead, he became a major supporter of Donald Trump's campaign promise of a border wall, his subsequent assault on immigrants' rights, and his proposed travel ban aimed at Muslim immigrants and visitors.

Now, in 2022, LePage is running for governor again. In his effort to return to the office he vacated in 2019, he's trying to soften his image on issues like immigration to appeal to a broader audience. Watching the charade unfold at the opening, 73-year-old Edgar Allen Beem, a longtime columnist for the *Portland Phoenix* and myriad other newspapers, was stunned. "It was a cynical appeal from a politician who's always been anti-immigrant," Beem says. "He, like a lot of Republicans, is very good at putting a happy face on horrors. He'll tell you he balanced the budget, set up a rainy-day fund. What he doesn't

tell you is, more kids went hungry and fell into poverty. He dismantled the Department of Health and Human Services; it's still not been built back up."

It's easy to do a recitation of LePage's greatest hits, and not just on immigration: He declared that drug dealers, who he had at one point averred were Black and brown and coming up from New York to plunge white Mainers into addiction, should be beheaded. He refused to attend a breakfast commemorating Martin

Luther King Jr. and then told a reporter who asked about it that the NAACP could "kiss my butt." He challenged Democratic politician Drew Gattine to a duel, called him a "cocksucker," and said he would shoot him between the eyes after Gattine allegedly called him a racist. He gratuitously vetoed legislation banning conversion therapy for gay Mainers—legislation pushed by Democratic Representative Ryan Fecteau, who would go on to become the youngest state House speaker in the country—even though the bill had won support from Republicans in the senate and similar bills had been signed by his fellow Republican governors in New Hampshire and New Jersey.

"LePage is not collaborative," Fecteau says. "He's chaotic. And seemingly every day he's trying to find the next thing by which to sow division and chaos. He was the first governor in the nation to veto legislation banning conversion therapy. I think Governor LePage either didn't understand the implications this harmful practice had, or he did understand and agreed that LGBTQ people should be subject to this harmful practice. It was a day I will never forget."

The ex-governor's reactionary political résumé doesn't end there. He largely dismantled the state's public health system. He refused to implement Medicaid expansion—despite 60 percent of Maine voters having favored it in a 2017 referendum—creating what Robyn Merrill, of Maine Equal Justice Partners, describes as a perverse situation in which the state's political muscle was used to "roll back help to people." Like Trump, LePage was infamously hostile to the press. And he gleefully urged Trump, as president, to be more "authoritarian."

In 2016, after endorsing Trump for president, the controversy-courting LePage boasted that he was "Donald Trump before Donald Trump." It was a bombastic statement, but in spite of their dissimilar origins, there was more than a kernel of truth in it. Unlike Trump, LePage grew up in extreme poverty, as one of 18 children in an abusive, alcoholic household, and ended up homeless during his teenage years in the early 1960s. But he went from rags to riches, making a fortune as a businessman running a company called Marden's Surplus & Salvage, and relied heavily on his life story, as well as his salty persona, in crafting his appeal when he eventually made the leap into electoral politics.

This time around, however, LePage—who won his 2010 and 2014 races when the field included a credible independent candidate, meaning he needed only a plurality of the vote to win—is going mano a mano against an incumbent Democratic governor, Janet Mills. Eliot Cutler, a former attorney who served as the spoiler candidate in

**In his effort to return to office, LePage is trying to soften his image on issues like immigration to appeal to a broader audience.**

Sasha Abramsky is The Nation's West Coast correspondent.

## It's entirely possible that this will become the road map used by other verbal-bomb-throwing demagogues—even Trump himself.

**The incumbent:** Governor Janet Mills shakes hands with attendees at the Gulf of Maine 2050 International Symposium in Portland.

the power of collective memory in rallying voters to reject a return to governance based on scapegoating and the deliberate stirring of destructive chaos.

**W**HEN JANET MILLS WAS elected governor in 2018, progressives in Maine heaved a collective sigh of relief. True, the ex-attorney general was about as mainstream a candidate as one could get, and during the election she made a point of tacking to the middle. But while she may not have championed a number of progressive priorities, such as expanding tribal rights in the state, Mills was rational and competent. She was committed to implementing Medicaid expansion and repairing the damage LePage had done to public health institutions; she wanted a cooperative rather than an antagonistic relationship with labor unions; she vowed to protect voting rights; and she aspired to meet the state's constitutional requirement to fund K-12 schools at a much higher level than had been the case in recent years.

After the Covid pandemic hit, 14 months into her term in office, Mills was at the forefront of efforts by governors from both political parties to counter the chaos and disinformation emanating from the panicked Trump White House. She implemented strict stay-at-home measures early on, introduced mask mandates, and later coordinated an extraordinarily effective vaccination campaign, which resulted in Maine having one of the highest vaccination rates in the country. By October of last year, over 80 percent of eligible Mainers were fully vaccinated, making it the fourth state in the country to reach that goal.

2010 and 2014, was recently arrested on child pornography charges, and no one else of note has filed paperwork to enter the race. If LePage—already the de facto GOP nominee, with endorsements from the state party and Senator Susan Collins—wants to win in the general election, he needs to appeal to a significant number of moderates and younger voters. There are, potentially, voters who don't share his xenophobia but are nevertheless

ripe for plucking from the Democratic coalition, given their anxiety about the state of the economy. Cue his shameless pivot on how to treat, and talk about, immigrants.

Yet LePage needs to pull off this maneuver without alienating his hard-right base, the Mainers who don't always vote—or always vote Republican—but who flocked to LePage because he refused to temper his language and didn't tone down his distaste for outsiders. Hence his continued embrace of Trump's "Stop the Steal" lies about the 2020 election, as well as his revival of a preposterous scapegoating claim, seemingly drawn from thin air, that people took buses from Massachusetts to Maine to illegally vote in the gay-marriage legalization referendum in 2012.

If LePage can perform this trick successfully in 2022, it's entirely possible that this will become the road map used by other verbal-bomb-throwing demagogues—even Trump himself—to take back power on the national stage come 2024. But if he loses—if he once more fails to break through the 50 percent threshold—it will show the limits of demagoguery, as well as



Mills has racked up a strong record since January 2019, says Drew Gattine, now the chair of Maine Democrats, as he sits at the heavy wooden dining room table in his atmospheric 19th-century house in the town of Westbrook. In addition to expanding Medicaid and raising state spending on K-12 education, Mills has also increased funding for mental health, disability, and elder services.

State Senate President Troy Jackson details yet more accomplishments. In the past few years, Mills and the Democratic-controlled legislature have introduced universal school meals, established collective bargaining mechanisms for loggers, and used state surpluses to help offset soaring property taxes. Moreover, under Mills, the state has doubled its rainy-day fund. This is a source of particular pride for Jackson—yet he fumes at the fact that so many Republican and independent voters, fed a steady drip of misinformation, continually tell him that the rainy-day fund under LePage was larger. In reality, it now stands at nearly half a billion dollars, more than double what it was in January 2019.

Jackson is horrified at the thought of LePage returning to power, slashing the state income tax in an effective giveaway to wealthy residents, and using the resulting cash shortfall as an excuse to launch another round of savage attacks on the social safety net, education, and the public health infrastructure—all in the name of fiscal probity. "A lot of things that I care about are at risk at that point," he says tersely.

At the moment, the few existing polls on the race show Mills significantly ahead, though by no means with a blowout margin. As of mid-May, the polling site Race to the WH had her most favorable poll showing her 7 points ahead, with a 56.1 percent chance of winning. Though several polls in recent weeks

have shown LePage's number rising, none of those polls show the ex-governor outpacing the current governor, whose office didn't return repeated calls and e-mails requesting comment for this article.

**F**OR MANY PROGRESSIVES IN THE STATE, however, Mills's margin isn't nearly comfortable enough. Mike Tipping, the author of *As Maine Went: Governor Paul LePage and the Tea Party Takeover of Maine*, is adamant that there's no room for complacency. An activist with the Maine People's Alliance, the 38-year-old



Tipping is running for the state senate in the purple Eighth District, which ranges from the liberal college town of Orono, in the center of the state, to the conservative community of Lincoln 40 miles north.

In his book, Tipping writes that LePage won high office by preaching an “aggressive, conservative populism,” by convincing low-propensity voters to turn up at the polls, and by telling “a series of whopping lies on the stump.” Twelve years after LePage’s first victory, that playbook remains potent.

Tipping, in blue jeans and sneakers, with a raincoat to guard against the chill and rain of early spring, canvasses in the evenings and on weekends, rapping rhythmically seven times on each door and reciting his patter about how he wants to learn what issues most concern the person whose door he’s just rapped on. He hopes to knock on 4,000 doors before primary day in June and aims to give out thousands of his leaflets, as well as round wooden “Tipping State Senate” refrigerator magnets that he has hand-milled and polished in his basement workshop. His goal is to collect thousands of phone numbers that he can text on primary day with reminders to vote.

People are angry about inflation, Tipping tells me as he canvasses a low-income housing development made up of long, mustard-colored wooden modular bungalows on the edge of Orono. They don’t feel they are earn-

ing enough to live stable lives. They’re angry at what the Covid crisis has done to them, both economically and psychologically. Since Democrats control the White House, Congress, and Maine’s legislature and governor’s office, many are blaming the party for their woes. As a result, the party is facing a noticeable enthusiasm gap in getting its voters to the polls in the midterms. Because of this, Tipping argues, even if LePage is far behind going into the last weeks of the race, there is still the risk of catastrophe, as occurred in the US Senate race in 2020. In that contest, polls consistently showed the Democratic challenger ahead of Susan Collins, yet on Election Day, drawing on strong support from rural counties, Collins pulled out a 9 percent win over her opponent.

“I think [LePage] absolutely could get reelected,” Tipping says. “He got 48 percent last time in a three-way race. If the polls show him down a significant amount, I wouldn’t trust them at all. All through 2014 he was polling at 35 to 39 percent—right to the end, when he won with 48 percent. It’s similar with polling issues with Trump. It’s difficult to reach certain populations, and a lot of people are reluctant to say they support LePage or Trump. I think it could easily go either way.”

Whereas Trump is dogged by allegations of kleptocracy and personal corruption, even LePage’s many enemies don’t claim that he used the office to personally enrich himself. In that sense, says Mark Brewer, a professor of political science

**Writing on the wall:** A mural depicting LePage in a Ku Klux Klan robe along the Eastern Promenade Trail in Portland.

**“It’s difficult to reach certain populations, and a lot of people are reluctant to say they support LePage or Trump.”**

—Mike Tipping





party in control of the White House usually takes a beating during the midterms. Biden's not doing well [in the polls]. Hopefully the Democrats will get enthusiastic and get their voters out to vote and not be complacent."

**W**HAT TIPPING AND MICHAUD recognize as possible—the return of a right-wing demagogue to power years after his political obituaries had been written—is, for reformers in Maine, the ultimate nightmare scenario, one that they have spent years trying to build firewalls against.

In November 2016, halfway through LePage's second term, voters passed ranked-choice voting into law via a referendum, making Maine the first state in the union to adopt such a system.

Some organizers say that they did so to make it less likely that an extremist like LePage (who would be very few voters' second choice, in a state that has historically prided itself on its moderate version of Yankee Republicanism) could win office with minority support. But they were thwarted: Months after the referendum's passage, the state supreme court upheld the constitutionality of ranked-choice voting for primaries and federal elections, but not for state elections, citing, in its decision, passages in the state constitution that specify these only have to be decided by a plurality of the voters. A bitter blow for progressives, the decision meant that in races with multiple candidates, someone like LePage would continue to have a viable path to power.

Ranked-choice voting is a way of strengthening local democracy, says Maine's secretary of state, Shenna Bellows, a longtime supporter of the change. It allows people to vote their hearts instead of having to think strategically about which candidate is the most viable, knowing that their second choice will count almost as much as their first choice does. But, she acknowledges, the wording in the state constitution does make it very difficult to implement ranked-choice voting in general elections for state offices.

Bellows, who's 47, grew up in extreme poverty. Her parents were environmental and antinuclear activists, and until she was in fifth grade the log cabin that her father built for them had neither electricity nor running water. Today Bellows sees Maine becoming more diverse, and as secretary of state she has supported reforms such as the one recently signed into law by Governor Mills, which allows tribal IDs to be used as proof of identity for

at the University of Maine in Orono, he is a cleaner redux candidate in 2022 than Trump would be in 2024. Given the soaring rate of inflation, the unknowns of how the pandemic will evolve, and the sense felt by many that the good times are disappearing in the rear-view mirror, Brewer believes that LePage could break through the 45 percent ceiling that would, in normal times, hem in a candidate as conservative and polarizing as he is. "If people are still paying over \$4 a gallon for gas in November, that won't be good for Mills," Brewer says. "And what happens if there's a new Covid variant in November? None of that would be good for an incumbent officeholder, regardless of who the incumbent is. His ceiling could be in the low 50s if all the dominoes fall right."

Mike Michaud, the Democratic candidate that LePage defeated in 2014, agrees. A longtime paper mill worker and union member, Michaud served 20 years in the state legislature and 12 in the US Congress as a moderate Democrat from the rural Second District of northern Maine. In his race against LePage, the Democrat was consistently up in the polls during the campaign, only to lose by 4 percent come Election Day. Michaud had hit all the issues that ought to have resonated in mill country, he says: He had opposed NAFTA, slammed China for currency manipulation, and railed against the unfair trade deals that were decimating Maine's paper industry. In short, he did all the things that Trump would do, to great effect, two years later. Yet, battered by the gun lobby and facing LePage's onslaught against welfare spending, big government, and other bugaboos of the right, he ended up being vulnerable. When push came to shove, a critical mass of erstwhile mill workers and their families abandoned the

Democratic Party and helped secure LePage's second victory.

Nursing a local pale ale at a long wooden table in the Blue Ox Saloon in Millinocket, its walls lined with old books and mounted moose heads, Michaud recalls how he'd tried to phone LePage to concede the election and congratulate his opponent. The Republican victor, ever the pugilist, refused to take his call. Could LePage win again? Michaud answers cautiously: "The

**Home base:** LePage greets supporters during the Maine GOP Convention at the Augusta Civic Center in April 2022.

**A critical mass of erstwhile mill workers and their families abandoned the Democratic Party and helped LePage secure a second victory.**

the purpose of voter registration. But she worries that when candidates for high office like LePage opportunistically glom on to Trump's false narrative about a stolen election in 2020, it "undermines the fabric of our democracy"—not only in Maine but in the country at large.

"It feels like we turned the page on LePage. It was a dark chapter," says Robyn Merrill, of Maine Equal Justice Partners. "The fear, though, is that the page wasn't actually turned, that he could get back into power and eviscerate programs again, gutting systems in a way that will again take years to recover from. He tries to stoke people's fear, and that's part of the divisive rhetoric around blaming groups of people for the fact that folks are struggling and having a hard time. Really, we want to be going in the other direction. Government should be by the people, for the people—and we should continue to do a better job in terms of connecting to people."

**L**EPAGE'S APPEAL IS SIMILAR TO THAT of Trump, or Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, or, say, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. To his fans, LePage is a tell-it-like-it-is straight shooter, a man who speaks from the heart and sticks it to the liberal elites with their thin skins and their 24-hour-a-day readiness to be triggered by crude comments. He doesn't let the so-called experts dictate policy or allow outsiders—those "from away," as Mainers describe them—to determine what local political priorities should be.

In the mill towns and hamlets of the north, a marvelous landscape of frozen lakes and Impressionist-like reflections of sky and clouds in the rivers, LePage's persona is widely appreciated. In places like Millinocket—a small town along the banks of a tributary of the West Branch Penobscot River, the glory days of which are decades in the past—many of the run-down wooden houses sport Trump flags in their yards and LePage posters in their windows. It's not uncommon to see "Fuck Mills" bumper stickers on the cars parked outside.

On Central Street, just inside the Millinocket town limits, is American Legion Post 80, complete with a helicopter and tank outside and a basement bar inside. For 49-year-old Joseph Batchelder, who books entertainment at the post, LePage is a breath of fresh air. And he makes Batchelder feel that his part of the state isn't just some backwater, that it actually

matters. "He's straight-up, right to the point. When he gets stuff done, he gets stuff done. Any improvement to the state, it's always to the southern part. LePage did the northern part. I'd rather see him than that other woman [Mills]. Everything she's done has been backwards." (In reality, according to data provided by the Maine Center for Economic Policy, despite LePage's rhetoric about helping down-at-the-heels northern mill towns, the economic growth during his two terms in office was overwhelmingly concentrated in the cities of the south; from 2007 to 2014, a period that included most of LePage's first term, rural Maine saw a period of economic contraction.)

Batchelder, who says he has contracted Covid twice—the first time made him feel like he had a combination of asthma, pneumonia, and pleurisy—isn't vaccinated. He doesn't appreciate Mills's imposition of mask mandates and her efforts to make vaccines compulsory for some parts of the workforce, and he supports LePage in his opposition to mandates. "A lot of us don't believe in the vaccines," he says. "A lot of people with vaccines are still getting sick. I believe it's a big money game. I believe Covid's real, but they make it more scarier than it is."

LePage's life story resonates with people like Batchelder, the people who feel routinely ignored and humiliated. The ex-governor came of age in gritty industrial Lewiston, in central Maine. It is a place dominated by large brick riverfront factories and warehouses, with imposing churches whose copper steeples have turned green with age and low-end department and grocery stores. While many Maine towns exude an old-world charm, Lewiston's architecture is brutalist and functional. It was on these streets that the young LePage lived for several years, after he fled his violent family home.

To his opponents, LePage came away from his abusive childhood with a sense of brutality rather than empathy, with a soul curdled in some very profound way.

Steve Turner, an activist with the Maine People's Alliance who has his own firsthand experience with living in deep poverty, believes that LePage is "a person who forgot where he came from." Turner views the former governor with something approaching loathing. "He treated poor people in a very mean way, made it difficult for us to access what social services we have in the United States." He is particularly scathing about LePage's veto of Medicaid expansion and about the obstacles he placed in the way of people attempting to get unemployment insurance. "LePage has a keen sense of individual responsibility," Turner says, "and a defective sense of mutual responsibility, of collective responsibility,

of 'we' rather than 'me.' I wish that someone would explain to LePage that Stage 3 or 4 cancer is not the same as laziness, and PTSD is not the same thing as shiftlessness. But he'll never get it—because he's all set."

Davida Ammerman, a transgender board member of the Maine People's Alliance and a 52-year member of the carpenters' union, recalls that in 2018 LePage signed on to a brief asking the US Supreme Court to permit employers to fire queer and transgender employees because of their identity. After LePage left office, the political culture in Augusta became more sympathetic to trans issues.

**"He tries to stoke people's fear, and that's part of the divisive rhetoric around blaming groups of people."**

—Robyn Merrill

**Two to tango:**  
Donald Trump and LePage at a rally in Portland in 2016.



## As a candidate in 2022, LePage has opposed mask mandates and denounced the vaccine requirement for health care workers.

**Taking a stand:** Suavis Furaha, an asylum seeker from Burundi, at a protest against LePage's immigration policies.

for tough-guy politics and his attacks on social safety nets simply make him feisty—a big bear of a man whose tough exterior eventually gives way to a friendly soul underneath. “LePage had a bombastic way about him,” says Hanington, a self-proclaimed moderate whose strong Maine accent does things with the letter “A” that somehow defy gravity. “But I saw later he was very personable. The persona of him being a bully and bombastic? He was attacked constantly, and when you’re attacked for being what you know you’re not, you get defensive.”

At the 3 Cousins Firearms store, on the corner of Lincoln and Cedar streets in Lewiston, next to a large church and a few blocks from the majestic Androscoggin River, much of the staff and their clientele are solidly in LePage’s camp. The little shop, one wall lined with powerful rifles and another painted with a giant American flag, is co-owned by Trevor Brooks. For Trevor’s father, 71-year-old Dan Brooks, LePage’s support for the Second Amendment is critical. “Without the Second Amendment, I’m afraid of what the country would look like,” he says. Wiry thin, in jeans, a plaid shirt, and a camo cap, with a trimmed gray goatee, Brooks worries that Mills doesn’t “support the Second Amendment like I would like. She doesn’t seem to be with Second Amendment people. LePage, I do like him.” He particularly likes the permitless carry law passed in 2015. “I would definitely vote for him again.” Brooks also likes the fact that LePage slashed government, worrying that there’s a tendency to “law ourselves to death” in America. Even though he and his son are both fully vaccinated and, during the early months of the pandemic, customers were asked to mask up before entering the store, Dan says he is wary of mask and vaccine mandates and is concerned that Mills’s public health policies are eroding the state’s storied live-and-let-live principles.

Brooks’s friend Steve, a machinist and gun enthusiast who is hanging out at the store in a 3 Cousins Firearms sweatshirt, agrees. Regarding masks, his philosophy is “You want to wear it, wear it; you don’t want to wear it, don’t wear it. It’s a free country. To push your issues on somebody else, your way or the highway—last I checked, it isn’t preschool. This is a free country that could be exterminated just by people doing stupid shit.”

In his two terms as governor, LePage successfully tapped into the resentment toward big, encroaching government. He positioned himself as the defender of the little man and railed against what he saw as government overreach. As a candidate in 2022, he has opposed mask mandates, denounced Mills’s vaccine requirement for health care workers, and suggested that children needn’t be protected from a

Ammerman worries that these gains will be reversed if LePage wins power again. He was, they argue, “a bully. He was getting people to hate each other when he was governor. He was anathema to the LGBTQ community.” Edgar Allen Beem puts it more succinctly: “He grew up abused by his father, and he abuses everybody.”

To LePage’s friends, though, such as former state representative Sheldon Hanington, his penchant



virus that, for most of them, will not have lethal consequences.

Of course, as with Trump, there is more than a pinch of hypocrisy to the “I speak for the people” shtick. When LePage, whose campaign ignored repeated phone and e-mail requests to make the candidate available for an interview for this article, termed out in January 2019, he left Maine for the warmer climes and lower taxes of Florida, the latter of which were better suited for his wealthy business needs. When LePage argued against Medicaid expansion, he was making it harder for many of his most fervent supporters—who are disproportionately white and working-class and, frequently, work in gig-economy or non-union jobs—to gain access to medical care; all the while, as a public employee, he had state-of-the-art insurance. When he attacked the minimum wage in the name of business efficiency and ordered the jackhammering of a mural celebrating Maine workers that adorned a wall in the state’s Department of Labor, he

wasn’t just giving the middle finger to Maine’s artists, who, predictably, howled in outrage at the cultural vandalism; at the same time, he was deliberately sticking it to the interests and the very dignity of the ordinary working-class men and women that he claimed to be a spokesman for. In January, even as he was attacking vaccine mandates for health care workers, he floated the idea of requiring all welfare recipients in Maine to provide proof of vaccination in order to receive benefits.

**O**N THE POLISHED WOODEN WALLS of 76-year-old Eric Rojo’s high-ceilinged living room in a farmhouse at the end of a dirt track outside Lincoln, which he bought when he moved back to Maine after living around the world since 1967, there hangs a large collection of swords. One is a World War II-era ceremonial sword from Japan; another is a weapon with an eagle motif from the Austro-Hungarian Empire that he picked up at an antique store in Munich when he was serving in the Army there after he had been rotated out of Vietnam.

Rojo is an energy security specialist who retired from the US Army, where he served in the Department of Energy, a few years back and then moved to Mexico (he had married a Mexican professor, and the two wanted to live there for a few years). In Mexico, he was an active

member of the country's chapter of Republicans Overseas. His body lean, his eyes full of intellectual intensity, Rojo prides himself on his no-nonsense ability to get the job done—whatever the job may be. And he doesn't hold back when he talks about this belief that politicians are taking the place he lives in the wrong direction.

When Rojo moved back to Maine recently and started renovating his farm, the local chapter of the Republican Party asked if he'd be willing to run for office. Despite his age—and despite his alienation from the wing of the party that had bought into Trump's lies about a stolen 2020 election—he agreed to throw his hat into the ring as a primary candidate for District Eight, the district that Mike Tipping also hopes to represent come November.

"The economy is a disaster here," Rojo says. And the skyrocketing cost of fuel "has a lot of people pretty much locked up in their homes, making choices between buying food and gasoline." He wants to promote energy independence, in particular an increased use of nuclear power; to find ways for parents to have more input on what their children learn in the classroom; to invest more in technical schools to train the state's workforce; and—a rarity among today's Republicans—to strengthen environmental laws against pollution and the despoilment of public lands.

On the stump, the candidate—who is running in the primary against a woman who has embraced the more hard-right rhetoric that has shaped so much of modern GOP discourse—found that these issues were resonating. "We are picking up a lot of Democratic support both here and in the south [of the district], because they're unhappy with the economic situation and the lack of opportunity."

Rojo's campaign manager—none other than LePage's friend Sheldon Hanington—believes not only that Rojo has a good chance of winning in November but that Maine is about to swing right after recent election cycles in which the Democrats have come to dominate the state government in Augusta. "This election cycle is going to turn in favor of turning the state red," Hanington says, adding that LePage could pick up as much as 60 percent of the popular vote. "People are having it hard," he continues. "It's going to be hard for Mills to explain the state of the economy versus LePage saying, 'We're going to fix the economy, because we've done it before.' When you [spend] \$70 for a tank of gas, it hurts, just as much for a Republican as for a Democrat. Heating oil costs \$500."



**B**Y MOST METRICS, DESPITE THE HIGH INFLATION AND SOARING ENERGY costs, Governor Mills has a sterling set of accomplishments to fall back on during her reelection campaign in the coming months; by contrast, LePage's record is mediocre at best. When he was governor, in the period after the Great Recession, there was significant job growth—but as Garrett Martin, president of the Maine Center for Economic Policy, explains, compared with other states, the growth was unexceptional; in fact, Martin's team has calculated, Maine ranked 43rd out of the 50 states for job growth during this time. By contrast, under Mills, the recovery from the job swoon in the early months of the pandemic boosted Maine's rank to 17th. Since Mills took office, poverty is down, health insurance coverage is up, and the rainy-day fund has never been fuller. With employment ticking up and tax revenues soaring, Maine is in a position to give a tax rebate of \$850 to most residents this year.

In 2017 the Maine Center for Economic Policy produced a paper, "Lost Federal Funds: Lost Opportunities for Maine," that estimated that LePage, in turning his back on Medicaid expansion, feeding hungry families, treating people with substance abuse issues, improving services for mentally ill teenagers, and other programs, had forfeited \$1.9 billion in funds that Maine was eligible for. During LePage's time in office, the center's economists found, Maine was the only state in the country that did not see an increase in the number of residents with medical coverage in the four years after passage of the Affordable Care Act. It was also the only state with no statistically significant jump in the percentage of children with some form of health insurance. Since Mills took office, Maine has accessed federal funds to cover more of the uninsured and has ramped up a host of public services that, under LePage, had withered on the vine.

Yet, like President Biden, Mills faces an electorate that seems to have soured on Democratic policies and rhetoric

*(continued on page 27)*

**Maine's shame:**  
College-age students protest LePage at a town hall meeting in Lewiston in 2016.

**Since LePage left office, poverty is down, health insurance coverage is up, and the rainy-day fund has never been fuller.**



It Was a  
**“Nightmare”**

One woman's story about seeking a second-trimester abortion tells us everything we need to know about post-Roe America.

BY GARNET HENDERSON

IN OCTOBER OF 2021, KRISTYN SMITH CHECKED HERSELF OUT OF THE HOSPITAL in Charleston, W.Va., where she had been denied an abortion. Bleeding and in pain, Smith drove for six hours with her fiancé to Washington, D.C., to have the procedure performed there. On the day of her first appointment at the Dupont Clinic, she was 27 weeks pregnant. “They were the sweetest, most compassionate people that I had ever met,” she said of the clinic staff, who made her feel safe and supported. The seven weeks leading up to her arrival there, however, had been a “nightmare.”

Less than two months after her abortion, Smith contacted me after finding my podcast, *ACCESS*. She sent an e-mail with the subject line “Abortion at 27 weeks” that detailed her story of agonizing delays and denials of care. In many parts of the country—particularly in the South and the Midwest—getting an abortion at any stage of pregnancy is difficult because of the dwindling number of abortion providers, the onerous legal restrictions, and other financial and logistical barriers. But getting an abortion later in pregnancy, particularly in the third trimester, is difficult everywhere. Twenty-two states have bans in effect that prohibit abortion starting between 20 and 24 weeks’ gestation, and 20 states impose a ban at viability, generally recognized as 24 weeks. When exceptions to these bans exist, they are often narrowly applied, and in the handful of states where third-trimester abortion is legal, there are few providers.

According to a 2014 Guttmacher Institute report, while 72 percent of abortion clinics offer care up to 12 weeks, only 25 percent offer care up to 20 weeks, and just 10 percent offer it through 24 weeks. Following the 2009 murder of Dr. George Tiller—who was relentlessly targeted by anti-abortion extremists for more than a decade because he provided abortions in the third trimester—very few doctors are willing to openly provide this care. A small number of clinics provide abortions at 26 weeks and beyond; all are independent, meaning they are not affiliated with Planned Parenthood and therefore

have less public and institutional support. Hospitals are more likely to provide abortion care later in pregnancy; however, hospitals perform only about 4 percent of all abortions in the United States, and many have policies that limit abortion care.

Any day now, the Supreme Court is expected to issue a ruling that could overturn *Roe v. Wade* or gut it beyond meaning. In that event, 26 states are poised to ban abortion to the fullest extent possible. Many things have changed profoundly

since the pre-*Roe* days; perhaps most significant, illegal abortions can be medically safe thanks to the advent of medication abortion. However, anti-abortion policies still endanger lives, as in Smith’s case, by delaying or denying care in life-threatening situations. What’s more, research shows that most people who need abortions later in pregnancy experienced logistical delays in accessing care at an earlier point in the pregnancy. These delays will only compound if abortion is banned in roughly half the country, because thousands of patients will be forced to travel across state lines to the few remaining clinics. The number of people seeking later abortions is undoubtedly about to increase,

and our medical system is unprepared to care for them.

SMITH’S PREGNANCY WAS A wanted one. She knows that stories like hers—involving fatal fetal diagnoses and health risks—are often presented as exceptional and used to undercut the needs of people whose reasons for seeking an abortion may be less sympathetic to some. Smith is unequivocal that later abortion patients deserve care regardless of the reason. “Abortion is health care; it is needed,” she said. “It saves lives, even if not physically like mine.”

Smith discovered she was pregnant just over six months after giving birth to her third child. The pregnancy was a surprise, but it quickly became a happy one. Smith and her fiancé picked a name: Kase. “We were ecstatic,” she told me.

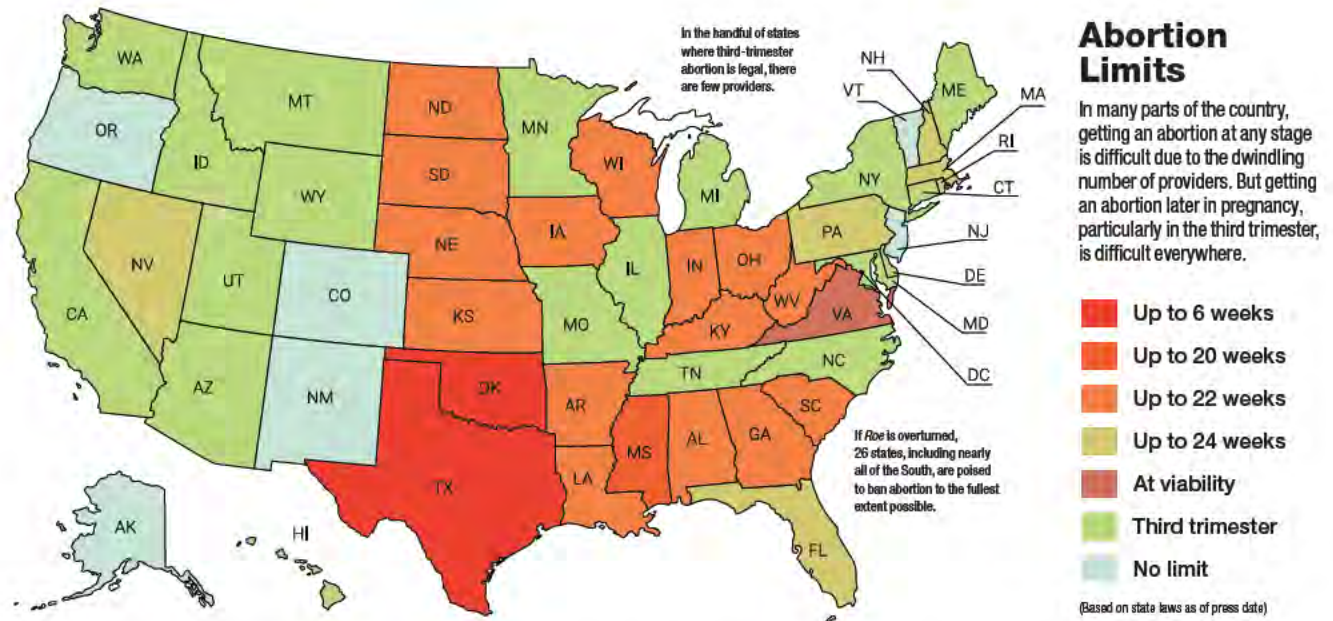
In the early ultrasounds, Smith said, “everything was perfect and healthy, just as in my other three pregnancies.” But during her 20-week anatomy scan, things took a turn. Kase’s kidneys and bladder were dilated, and very little amniotic fluid surrounded him. Without enough amniotic fluid, the lungs cannot develop properly. The fluid also cushions the fetus and allows it to move, so low levels can result in restrictions on growth and other musculoskeletal complications.

Smith’s ob-gyn referred her to a team of maternal-fetal medicine (MFM) specialists in Cincinnati, a three-and-a-half-hour drive from her home. Smith lives near Charleston, which is one of West Virginia’s largest cities but has a population of less than 50,000. Nearly all of the MFM specialists in the US—particularly those practicing cutting-edge techniques like fetal surgery—reside in urban areas, which poses a significant barrier for those with high-risk pregnancies in rural or smaller metropolitan areas, who may not have the means to travel. According to a 2020 report from the March of Dimes, 2.2 million women in the US live in maternity care deserts.

Smith made two trips to Cincinnati, initially hopeful that she might be able to continue the pregnancy with the help

**The number of people seeking later abortions is undoubtedly about to increase, and our medical system is unprepared to care for them.**

*Garnet Henderson is an independent journalist reporting on health and abortion access.*



## Abortion Limits

In many parts of the country, getting an abortion at any stage is difficult due to the dwindling number of providers. But getting an abortion later in pregnancy, particularly in the third trimester, is difficult everywhere.

- Up to 6 weeks
- Up to 20 weeks
- Up to 22 weeks
- Up to 24 weeks
- At viability
- Third trimester
- No limit

(Based on state laws as of press date)

of fetal surgery. “Looking back,” she says, “I was naive.” Only after speaking with the specialists did Smith realize just how serious the situation was. Kase’s urinary tract appeared completely blocked, and as a result his lungs were severely underdeveloped and his heart looked small. Even if surgery successfully corrected the obstruction, it would be a difficult road ahead.

“He would have been in the NICU up in Cincinnati for at least six months,” Smith said. “And that would have been with 10 to 20 surgeries in his first year of life, [and] monthly doctor appointments back up in Cincinnati. And to put my three kids’ lives on hold for that? My relationship with my fiancé, my whole life would have been turned upside down. And we’re not wealthy. We don’t have money to do those things.”

Still, they tried. Smith underwent tests and procedures in preparation for the surgery, but there were complications during one of the procedures. The doctors told Smith she wouldn’t be able to have the surgery the following week as planned. By this time, she was 23 weeks pregnant. They counseled her on her options, including terminating the pregnancy or allowing “nature [to] take its course,” meaning that she could go home and wait to have a stillbirth.

However, even though the doctors assured Smith that the decision to end the pregnancy was a valid one, the hospital never offered her that option. The state of Ohio bans abortion at 20 weeks postfertilization, or about 22 weeks’ gestation, with an exception only for the critically compromised health of the pregnant person. At the time, Smith’s diagnosis had to do only with the fetus’s health, not her own. Even so, there are risks in continuing any pregnancy, said Dr. Matthew Reeves, the founder of the Dupont Clinic, where Smith eventually got her abortion.

“Forcing someone to continue and endure those risks when you know there’s going to be a lethal outcome for the newborn is not a wise decision,” he said. But abortion bans rarely account for these nuances.

“Many people I’ve interviewed who had a fetal health issue assumed [their state’s] abortion ban wouldn’t apply to them, and yet it did,” said Katrina Kimport, a medical sociologist at the University of California, San Francisco. “And in practice, peo-

ple are denied care even when they ought to fit into those exceptions.” For Smith’s part, she felt there was an implicit judgment in the fact that she was told she could have an abortion but wasn’t offered that option directly. “It wasn’t really put on the table as it should have been,” she said.

**M**ANY ELEMENTS OF SMITH’S STORY reflect experiences that are common among people who have abortions in the third trimester. For a recent journal article, Kimport interviewed 30 people who had abortions after the 24th week of pregnancy. When people have abortions at this point, they tend to arrive there through one or two “pathways,” she said.

The first pathway is initiated when new information is obtained during, or just before, the third trimester. Many diagnoses related to fetal health cannot be made until the middle of the second trimester or into the third. New information might also be related to the health of the pregnant person, as well as to a later recognition of the pregnancy. “There is a persistent and small number of people that do not recognize their pregnancy until somewhere in the third trimester,” said Kimport, adding that preexisting health conditions often play a role.

The second pathway to third-trimester abortion comes about as a result of barriers to care. These include a lack of funds to pay for an abortion, a lack of access to nearby care providers, an inability to get time off from work, and other roadblocks. “Some people also experienced less common but nonetheless pretty serious obstacles, including things like being prevented from leaving their home by a parent,” said Kimport. In a previous paper based on data from the Turnaway Study, which tracked the long-term

**“Many people who had a fetal health issue assumed their state’s abortion ban wouldn’t apply to them, and yet it did.”**

—Katrina Kimport

effects of having or being denied an abortion, Kimport and her coauthor, Diana Greene Foster, found that 94 percent of the participants who had abortions at or after 20 weeks experienced a delay in accessing care.

In a situation like Smith's, new information can itself be the cause of delays. An abnormal finding on an anatomy scan often leads to further tests and visits with specialists, Reeves said, which means it can be weeks before a person knows whether their pregnancy will ultimately be viable or not.

For Smith, the waiting became unbearable after she was sent home to West Virginia, which has a law that is nearly identical to Ohio's, banning abortion at 20 weeks postfertilization. The West Virginia ban does include a vague exception for a "nonmedically viable fetus"; however, the state's sole remaining abortion clinic performs abortions only up to 17 weeks and six days. Smith's obstetrician wasn't willing to intervene as long as the fetus had a heartbeat, but the heart never stopped. With each weekly ultrasound, Smith felt more distress. Her Cincinnati doctor's description of the condition disturbed her. "His exact words were 'Imagine if you were wrapped in Saran Wrap, vacuum sealed, then wrapped again in a thick, tight blanket. That is what your baby is experiencing with no liquid around him.' With every kick...I broke down, knowing my baby was struggling to move, and how uncomfortable he had to have been since week 16, when this abnormality typically occurs," she said.

Finally, a midwife told Smith about the Dupont Clinic. She took the first available appointment, which was two weeks away. Because abortion is legal at all stages of pregnancy in D.C., people from all over the region who need later abortions travel there when they are unable to obtain care where they live. Reeves estimates that at least half of the clinic's patients come from more than 100 miles away. "Some weeks it's 70 or 80 percent," he said. The clinic's website states: "We do not require any particular 'reason' to be seen here—if you would like to terminate your pregnancy, we support you in that decision."

But then, about a week before her appointment, Smith started bleeding. She described the blood as coming in "gushes" accompanied by sharp pain, comparable only to what she had experienced during labor. After two days, Smith's obstetrician admitted her to the Charleston Area Medical Center (CAMC) Women and Chil-

dren's Hospital for monitoring. There, she was placed under the care of an ob-gyn named Byron Calhoun. As reported by Caroline Kitchener in *The Washington Post*, Calhoun is well-known for his anti-abortion views. A former president of the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Calhoun is an outlier even among physicians who oppose abortion: He believes abortion is never necessary to save the life of a pregnant person. In fact, he advocates cesarean sections to deliver fetuses that won't survive birth, a practice most experts consider not only dangerous because of the risk to the pregnant person, but also unnecessary.

Calhoun also has a long history of trying to discredit abortion providers. In 2013, he called a former patient up out of the blue, gave her the phone number of a lawyer, and encouraged her to sue an abortion clinic and its doctor. Calhoun told the woman something shocking: that he had found a 13-week fetal skull in her uterus while treating her for pain and bleeding following an abortion the previous year. However, she had been only nine weeks pregnant at the time of her abortion, and Calhoun had said nothing about a skull at the time. The woman did sue, but a pathology report from CAMC found no evidence of a fetal skull. In dismissing the lawsuit, the judge called Calhoun's assertions "sensational."

Also in 2013, Calhoun claimed that he was caring for patients experiencing abortion complications on a "weekly" basis. The claim was dubious on its face, given that such complications are rare. One of the most comprehensive studies on the subject found that minor complications, such as bleeding and mild infection, occur in about 2 percent of abortions. Major complications, including hospitalizations, surgeries, and blood transfusions, occur in just 0.23 percent of cases. Overall, abortion is 14 times safer than childbirth. Once again, Calhoun's claims were contradicted by his employer, CAMC, which provided data showing that the hospital had treated only two patients for abortion complications in the previous year. Despite a public outcry following these incidents, CAMC continues to employ Calhoun.

He is also the only maternal-fetal medicine specialist in Charleston.

"Immediately, before even saying 'Hi, hello, how are you?,' he asked me what type of drugs I had been doing," Smith said. Calhoun also told her that she wasn't bleeding consistently enough to justify intervention: "His words were 'Until you start bleeding at a rate of a fountain of blood, then I can't intervene with a c-section,'" she said. Even after she pressed—through tears—for a possible explanation for her pain and bleeding, Smith said, Calhoun continued to imply that she had done something to cause the complications, but eventually concluded that her placenta was likely separating from her uterus as a result of the procedures that were performed to save her baby. In severe cases, this condition, called placental abruption, can cause hemorrhage, a leading cause of maternal mortality.

"He said he wanted me to lay in that bed for weeks or months until it got bad enough for him to intervene," Smith told me, adding that Calhoun advised medications that are typically given during preterm labor to speed up fetal brain and lung development.

**"With every kick...  
I broke down, knowing  
my baby was struggling  
to move."**

—Kristyn Smith

**The Dupont Clinic** in Washington, D.C., provides abortion care to people who are unable to obtain it where they live.





## "I signed myself out and prayed I would make it to D.C. the next week."

—Kristyn Smith

hospital, she continually asked the doctors to induce labor in order to end the pregnancy and allow her to hold and comfort her baby until he died. "[Calhoun] said I was requesting an abortion and his beliefs did not align with that, therefore he would not be doing that," she said.

Both Calhoun and Smith's regular ob-gyn told her that if she gave birth at this point—she was 26 and a half weeks pregnant—the hospital would be required to give her newborn medical care under a West Virginia law that mandates medical intervention for fetuses "born alive." Even pulsation of the umbilical cord—before it has been cut—qualifies as a sign of life under the law. Smith found the thought of prolonging Kase's suffering after birth unbearable. "I signed myself out and prayed I would make it to D.C. the next week," she told me. (Neither Calhoun nor CAMC responded to multiple requests for comment.)

A woman takes part in a candlelight vigil outside the Supreme Court prior to oral arguments in the case that may overturn *Roe v. Wade* this summer.

**T**HE FAMILY'S CARS WEREN'T RELIABLE ENOUGH TO MAKE the six-hour drive to D.C., so Smith and her fiancé rented one. She paid \$200 to put a deposit down for her appointment. The remainder of the \$9,000 fee was paid by an abortion fund, as were her travel costs. In the end, three different abortion funds pitched in.

Smith's mother, who is strongly opposed to abortion and took her to anti-abortion rallies when she was growing up, drove from her home three hours away to care for the children. "She wasn't as bad as I thought she would be, but she did say, 'You know, if you decide not to go through with this, I'll help with the baby. I'll raise him, I'll take him to doctor's appointments,'" Smith said. "She was living in this fantasy world of 'Just do anything to save the baby.'"

Still experiencing pain and heavy bleeding every few hours, Smith traveled to the Dupont Clinic. It was while recalling her experience there that she teared up for the first time during our conversation. "It was the worst experience of my life, but they made me feel some type of comfort," she said. At Dupont, Smith was paired with a specially trained doula to support her through the process. Most important, the medical team made it clear that the way Smith had been treated in West Virginia was unacceptable. For the first time, she felt she was being listened to.

The doctor also confirmed that Smith's placenta had been separating from her uterus and said her baby's kidneys were the biggest he'd ever seen. Smith was able to hold the baby after he was delivered—the outcome she'd wanted but was denied in her home state. "The doula suggested I may not want to uncover him from the neck down due to how small his chest was in comparison to his belly. These are just some reassurances that I'd done the right thing," she told me. "I truly don't know how I'll ever get over it," she added. "But knowing I put my Kase out of suffering and he will never know an ounce of pain is the only thing that helps."

Shortly after her first conversation with Calhoun, Smith started experiencing sharp, intense pains that came on quickly. A nurse administered the narcotic Stadol, which Smith said made her feel extremely disoriented. "It just felt like they gave me that medication to shut me up," she said. During her time in the

Smith's story is unusual in that she encountered a doctor so vehemently opposed to abortion. But even if a different doctor had advocated for her to have an abortion in West Virginia, the bid may have been unsuccessful. "Often doctors first have to defend these decisions to their institution. Before you even get to the state, you have to defend it to the administrators," Kimport said. A 2020 study by some of her colleagues found that 57 percent of teaching hospitals, mostly in the South and the Midwest, placed limits on access to abortion that went beyond the dictates of state law. Catholic hospitals in particular are known for their refusal to provide abortion and many other types of sexual and reproductive health care, and the number of Catholic hospitals in the US is growing rapidly: As of 2020, one in six hospital beds is now in a Catholic facility. However, Protestant and secular hospitals limit abortion as well, especially in the South. These hospitals often rely on committees to determine whether doctors can perform medically indicated abortions, and their institutional policies are rarely straightforward or transparent.

Abortion regulations also have a chilling effect, making medical providers reluctant to offer care for fear of punishment or even criminalization. Shortly after SB 8, Texas's near-total abortion ban, went into effect, reports began to surface of doctors hesitating to treat ectopic pregnancies, which must be terminated without delay for the health of the pregnant person. Dr. Shanthi Ramesh, the chief medical officer of the Virginia League for Planned Parenthood, says she heard several such stories through colleagues.

State laws and institutional policies already interfere with a patient's decision, Ramesh said. "It really should be the patient and a doctor that they trust having a conversation together about the risks, about the benefits, about the treatment, and then honoring the decision that they come to." And she fears a future in which states could ban abortion outright, a near certainty following the demise of *Roe*: "I think that there are good people that

will be harming patients in an attempt to comply with the law, or [because] of confusion over it, and that's really scary to think about."

"Looking back," Smith told me, "my life was 100 percent in danger.... The fact that [Calhoun] got to choose when enough was enough is terrifying to me. How I was treated was medically unethical. Something has to be done, or laws need to be changed."



(continued from page 21)

and that notices the bad economic indicators, especially the sticker shock of high inflation, while ignoring improvements in the broader economy and the social safety net. Despite the fact that roughly 70,000 low-income Mainers have gained health coverage under Mills and unemployment is down to 3.3 percent (lower than the national average), the Democratic governor's support may well be softer than that of LePage, who is not just tolerated by his fans but, like Trump, adored for his willingness to ruffle feathers and step on toes.

For Troy Jackson, this signals danger. The senate president, a working-class politician who prides himself on having his finger on his state's blue-collar pulse, believes the outcome of the election is a toss-up, and he is deeply concerned that the GOP is well-positioned to tap into public anger, especially around inflation, over the coming months. "There's people who feel, it doesn't matter who's in charge, they're always getting screwed—and sometimes I wonder if they're right," he says, laughing nervously.

For the ex-Tea Party governor, this makes for fertile political terrain. "Paul LePage," says Steve, at 3 Cousins Firearms, "is a man's man. He's a personable person. He doesn't think he's better than you."

Does LePage's penchant for inflammatory language bother Joseph Batchelder, in Millinocket? Not in the slightest. "Tell me what sailor don't swear!" he says with a hearty, barrel-chested explosion of mirth. "Everybody has a foul mouth. It's the way it is—

it's just words. A lot of people are getting too sensitive, I guess."

In fact, Batchelder continues, LePage's language helps to engage his audience. "It wakes people up: 'Oh my gosh! He said that?!' They're actually listening."

State Senator Chloe Maxmin, a longtime activist on climate justice, says LePage's campaign is a predictable if dispiriting follow-on both to his earlier spells in the governor's mansion and to the Trump era. "The antagonism and division and vitriol is still really alive and is just being transferred to LePage," she says. "People want hyper-independence from the government. Mask mandates and closures fed into this, and LePage took advantage of it." If he were to win in November, she says, "it would be like Trump getting reelected, completely decimating all government services...for people who need them the most."

—State Senator Chloe Maxmin

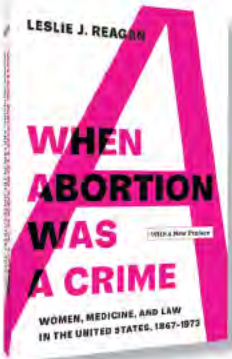
As the spring melts the long winter's snow and gradually breaks up the lake ice, LePage is traversing the state with his tax-cutting, anti-mandate, anti-welfare, anti-regulatory agenda. He is seeking to capitalize on a broad, inchoate sense of anomie, to pick up support in places that previously shunned him. To do so, he's been willing to moderate his image on immigration and other key issues, even as he doubles down on his tax policies, his anti-regulatory stances, and his embrace of election conspiracy theories. "I can honestly say he has softened," Hanington assures me. Then he pauses and backtracks slightly. "But he is not weak. It's the same beat of the drum, but he has learned to tone it down."

**N**

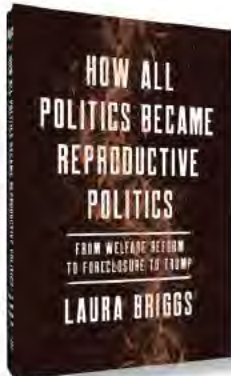


**"The antagonism and division and vitriol is still really alive and is just being transferred to LePage."**

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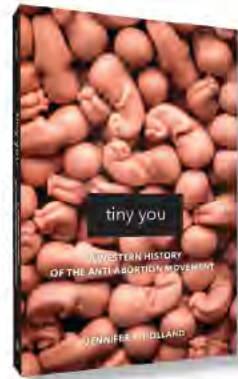
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# Fear and Loathing in San Francisco

In this reputedly progressive city, tech and real estate money has bankrolled a centrist backlash.

BY CHRISTOPHER D. COOK

# A

AFTER JUST TWO YEARS IN OFFICE, CHESA BOUDIN, THE district attorney of San Francisco, gets blamed for every crime in the book—even offenses committed before he took office and beyond the city limits. For his efforts to tackle wage theft, end cash bail, expand the program that diverts nonviolent offenders from prison, and prosecute abusive cops, Boudin has been rewarded with a recall campaign scapegoating him for all of this city's woes. The vote takes place on June 7, and recent polls suggest it will be an uphill battle for Boudin and progressives.

Loaded with cash from local billionaires, Big Tech, and other corporate interests, Neighbors for a Better San Francisco and an allied group called San Franciscans for Public Safety have poured a whopping \$5.1 million into the campaign to recall Boudin. Real estate interests have also kicked in, including more than \$600,000 from Shorestein Realty Services, a major local developer. As the Democratic strategist Cooper Teboe told *Forbes*, Boudin is “the unfortunate recipient of all of the anger from the investor class and the billionaire class.” The recall’s top funder is the Republican billionaire William Oberndorf, who donated \$3.7 million to federal candidates in 2020—mostly

to Republicans, including Senators Mitch McConnell and Tom Cotton.

While Boudin is the primary target, this centrist uprising first came to public attention in February when it spearheaded the recall of three school board members (a campaign that was financed heavily by Oberndorf and the billionaire investor Arthur Rock). Next came electoral threats to progressive supervisors who didn’t support the school board recall, revealing a larger political agenda. Then, in late April, corporate interests mounted a gerrymandering effort that

*Christopher D. Cook is an award-winning investigative journalist based in San Francisco.*



# E BACK SAN FRANCISCO



**Boudin derangement syndrome:** Since taking office in 2020, the DA has become the locus of a corporate backlash.

# RECALL CHESA

[BOUDIN.ORG](http://BOUDIN.ORG) Paid for by Yes on Recall Chesa Boudin Committee. FPPC #1435510. Financial disclosures available at [sfethics.org](http://sfethics.org)

could put some supervisor districts in the centrist camp. And now, the furious push to recall Boudin.

“There is a big money effort to roll back progressive politics in San Francisco,” says Tim Redmond, founder and editor of the progressive news site *48 Hills*, who has covered politics here since 1986.

Propelling this movement is a well-financed narrative that has insinuated itself into local media and politics—and a sizable portion of the electorate. This narrative blames San Francisco progressives for complex crises whose causes reach back decades and far beyond the city line. The writer Michael Shellenberger, who’s making an improbable run

for the California governor’s office, bizarrely blames the left for the city’s ills in his book *San Fransicko*, with its bombastic subtitle: *Why Progressives Ruin Cities*.

At the heart of this reactionary movement is a misdiagnosis of genuine problems. Burgeoning homelessness and drug addiction here are preventable tragedies. Housing costs are among the highest in the nation, with the median single-family home priced at \$2 million, far out of reach for most people. The city also hosts the world’s greatest concentration of billionaires, and the Bay Area is home to California’s most glaring inequality, with the top 10 percent of earners raking in 12.2 times what folks in the bottom 10 percent make.

While progressives have often held a majority in the city’s legislature, they haven’t had a mayoral ally since Art Agnos lost to conservative Frank Jordan in 1991; the city’s “strong mayor” charter also adds to centrists’ power when they control the executive branch. Rising homelessness, addiction, and crime are the result of national and regional crises, including woefully insufficient spending on supportive housing for homeless people. Redmond says the current scapegoating is “a total distraction from the fundamental inequalities in the US and in San Francisco.” If anything, progressive policies like the city’s living wage ordinance, universal health care access, rent control, ten-

COURTESY OF THE RECALL CHESA BOUDIN CAMPAIGN

## “Every crime trend can somehow be blamed on him. Car burglarized? Blame Boudin. Walgreens and CVS closing stores? Boudin’s fault.”

—Gil Duran,  
the *San Francisco Examiner*

**Blaming the victims:** Municipal workers trash an encampment of unhoused people just a few blocks from San Francisco’s City Hall.

crime data does not clearly show a trend toward worsening public safety.” Even as crimes like car break-ins have increased in the city (as they have statewide and beyond), violent crimes are way down. But that hasn’t stopped the fearmongers from fanning a political wildfire.

The typically center-right *Chronicle* surprised locals with a strong editorial against the recall, arguing, “Crime stats that mirror those of when Boudin took office do not justify a recall. Violent crime is low and has stayed low even as it has surged across the country.... Cities across the country—regardless of their criminal justice approach—have struggled after COVID lockdowns lifted.” The *Examiner* and the local Democratic Party also reject the recall, as have many former prosecutors and judges.

### Scapegoating Homeless People

**O**N A RECENT AFTERNOON, ACROSS THE STREET FROM A SHINING NEW glass tower of condos for sale a few blocks from City Hall, city workers descended on tents arrayed neatly on the sidewalk’s edge. A burly public works employee snatched and tossed a silver tent onto a platform truck, atop other “junk” bound for the dump.

“The man that lives in there is a 65-year-old dude who’s out on a medical appointment,” a fellow tent dweller, an amply tattooed Marine veteran, told me. “It’s our constitutional right to live here, to have a home. You can’t take that away from us,” he urged the workers in an increasingly irate voice. When I asked who’s demanding the tent removals, city workers insisted, “The mayor, London Breed.”

Trashing an elderly homeless man’s shelter and belongings—a violation of city policy, advocates tell me—is brutally familiar in this city, where “there are more anti-homeless laws than in any other city in the state,” says Jennifer Friedenbach, the longtime director of the Coalition on Homelessness. “Homelessness in San Francisco is a popular wedge issue,” she continues. “And politicians—Shellenberg-er no exception—stoke fear of homeless people to get their name in the paper....

ants’ rights laws, and taxes on extreme wealth have blunted these crises.

### Chasing Chesa, Fomenting Fear

**W**HEN HE WAS ELECTED in November 2019, Boudin was hailed as a bright new star in a wave of reforming district attorneys that included Larry Krasner in Philadelphia, Rachael Rollins in the Boston area, and Kim Foxx in Cook County, Ill. All have faced criticism, but the backlash in San Francisco has been

particularly virulent, prompting pundits to label it “Chesa Boudin Derangement Syndrome.” As the *San Francisco Examiner* writer Gil Duran described it, “Every crime trend—even those pre-dating his tenure—can somehow be blamed on him. Car burglarized? Blame Boudin. Walgreens and CVS closing hundreds of stores nationwide? Boudin’s fault. National fentanyl epidemic? Thanks, Boudin. Police not making enough arrests? Boudin hurt their morale.” One recent recall campaign ad featured a man who closed his store because of drug dealing—but a reporter revealed that the business had been shuttered before Boudin was elected.



Homeless people, drug dealers, and criminals are all lumped together and scapegoated.”

A Twitter account named “BetterSOMA” (referencing the South of Market area) posts photographs of homeless people shooting up or crumpled on the sidewalk, a humiliating public exposure that could haunt these people’s futures. When I confronted the group about this practice, BetterSOMA and its acolytes came at me like piranhas. As one put it, “It should be humiliating. They should be shamed. If you coddle street addicts, MORE SHOW UP and are lured into depravity.” Another insisted, “They are drug addicts. Their dignity went out the window before the photos pal.”

The pandemic has only intensified the street crises, Friedenbach says. “People have been out there for two years—their [precarity] has gotten much worse, their drug use much worse.” Meanwhile, Friedenbach sees a growing “promotion of tried-and-failed strategies” such as criminalization and forcing homeless mentally ill people into institutions through conservatorship. The forces behind the recall campaign, she adds, “are complaining about homelessness and then fighting

against the solutions,” citing Mayor Breed’s opposition to voter-approved measures to expand funding for homeless services and shelters.

As the writer Gray Brechin, founder of the Living New Deal, puts it, “The question isn’t asked enough: Why are people taking so many drugs? To dull the pain of living in this incredibly cruel society. At the root of it is poverty,” he says, and “a dystopic neoliberal

environment that is guaranteed to drive people insane” while living on the streets.

### Follow the Money

**F**UELING THIS CITY’S CENTRIST OCTOPUS is an engine of big money—largely from Big Tech, real estate, and other corporate interests. And these efforts reach beyond the recalls: As *48 Hills* documented, Oberndorf has given at least \$300,000 to Neighbors for a Better San Francisco—money spent campaigning against progressive candidates and measures. In 2020, the group and its corporate allies—all aligned with Mayor Breed—spent big to oppose Proposition I, a real estate transfer tax on the wealthiest property owners to help fund emergency aid and affordable housing in the pandemic. (Voters approved the measure by a large margin and rejected several centrist candidates.)

The centrist constellation includes tech-funded groups like GrowSF, AdvanceSF (whose

leadership is a who's who from the Chamber of Commerce), and the YIMBY ("Yes in My Back Yard") movements pushing a maximal growth agenda that includes "streamlining" environmental reviews to spur more building, principally of market-rate housing. This agenda is part of what the writer Rebecca Solnit calls the "free-market fundamentalism" that has become a local religion. "The constant narrative going on for decades is that if we just build enough buildings, housing will become affordable," Solnit told me. "But we have more than 40,000 vacant units here," she notes, citing a city report. "We have a distribution problem, not a supply problem."

Observing this array of centrist and big money groups, Redmond concludes, "They're all connected, and the money proves that. Politics takes money, and they've got the money." He adds, "Well-financed efforts at framing the debate have had an effect."

In April, after many epic late-night hearings, the city's Redistricting Task Force finalized a new electoral map that could favor centrist district supervisors at the expense of progressive stalwarts like Connie Chan, another target of real estate interests. In an e-mail obtained by *48 Hills*, the real estate developer Nick Podell, a board member of Neighbors for a Better San Francisco, crowed, "For the 1st time in the 40 years that I've lived in the City, there is a large coordinated centrist/moderate movement to take on Progressive power." That effort, Podell wrote, is poised to "flip 3 districts with Progressive Supervisors to moderate majorities." The local Republican leader Richie Greenberg cheered the centrist map, writing, "Connie Chan is TOAST."

San Francisco is chronically conflicted. A nominally liberal town where Democrats outnumber Republicans nearly 10-fold, it is also a historical hub of finance capital, extreme wealth accumulation, and corporate profit, which all fuel (and fund) a moderate and sometimes conservative politics, particularly on economic issues. Since the Gold Rush, says Solnit (who has lived here since 1980), San Francisco "has always had a progressive wing and a corporate moderate wing. Because Republicans don't have traction here, people think of us as this quasi-socialist utopia, but it's not true.... Now we have millionaires buying elections through recalls." As the *Examiner* columnist Lincoln Mitchell explains, the city's rich and powerful "are not always conservative or right wing, but they have a vision that is distinctly not progressive." Their "moderate-to-conservative vision," Mitchell says, "is one where businesses and developers are empowered and given incentives to operate more or less how they like, where fear of crime is fetishized, and where homelessness is understood as a problem not of human suffering but as a quality-of-life issue for the housed."



### Big Tech's Shadow

**T**HE WRITER AND ACTIVIST ROBERTO LOVATO OFFERS A SCATHING DIAGNOSIS of his native city's neoliberal tilt, pointing to Silicon Valley's ethos of "digital Darwinism." The recalls, Lovato explains, show the cumulative effects of Big Tech's power: "You're looking at what Silicon Valley did over all these years, the near-totalitarian control of the body politic of San Francisco." This "greed machine," he argues, is manufacturing "a normalization of displacement.... One way to do it is to reengineer the political system."

"There's a fascistic cruelty beneath the shiny silicon surface of San Francisco," Lovato says—one that displaces communities and cultures in the name of relentless growth and profit. "All my friends who grew up here have been displaced. The organic growth of the Mission [District] that created the largest concentration of murals in the world has been displaced by gentrification and tech workers buying \$14 burritos.... They use our murals to push us out."

"Tech has such a libertarian tendency," Solnit says, "but a lot of it is economically regressive. We don't have the language to express how many of these folks are Burning Man libertarians while being economic Republicans." Tech's predominance here, she adds, has cultural as well as political implications: "Everything is DoorDashed and smartphoned; it's a much more mediated experience. The desire to avoid human contact has been such a part of the tech culture—the desire to live in one of the most densely urban centers in the country while being hostile to much of that life."

Even amid this centrist uprising, San Francisco progressives have mustered some positive changes. A voter-approved tax on vacant storefronts took effect in January, and activists are preparing a ballot measure to tax up to 40,000 vacant residential units to pressure landlords to fill them (a similar effort worked well in Vancouver). In March, the city enacted a groundbreaking law enabling tenants to form union-like associations to bargain with landlords. It's also worth remembering that in 2019, city voters elected Boudin on the platform of criminal justice reform that he's now implementing. On June 7 and beyond, voters here have a chance to reject this corporate-funded reactionary movement. San Francisco, as always, remains intensely contested terrain. **N**

**Crisis conditions:** Two years into the pandemic, precarity, poverty, addiction, and inequality have only gotten worse.

**"We don't have the language to express how many of these people are Burning Man libertarians while being economic Republicans."**

—Rebecca Solnit



# B&theA

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## Candid

*The art of Vivian Maier*

BY SARAH JAFFE



URING THE FIRST COVID LOCKDOWN, I, like so many other people, took to wandering my neighborhood alone, observing details that I might otherwise have glossed over. Perfectly black irises in an otherwise colorful garden; street graffiti declaring “Black Lives Matter”; a root shoving up from beneath the sidewalk; the house down the street with seven-foot-long wooden dinosaur skeletons in the front yard; handmade posters stapled to telephone poles demanding that the state “Cancel Rent.” I took pictures of my shoes next to cracks in the sidewalk, fallen flowers, and, later, autumn leaves—and I took lots of pictures of myself, of course. I sent them to friends by text and WhatsApp or posted them

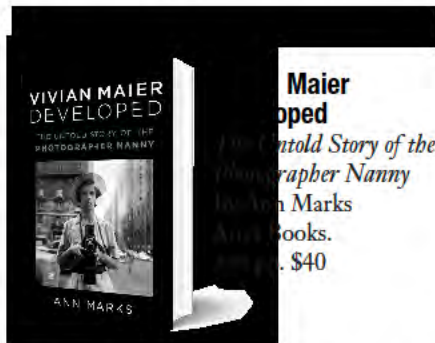
to Instagram, where we all filled our grids with strangely empty cityscapes and wilderness. Did we record these images for ourselves or for the friends we were no longer able to see? Did we post them to feel connected or just to remember that we were still alive?

I thought of all this while reading *Vivian Maier Developed: The Untold Story of the Photographer Nanny*, Ann Marks's new book on the woman who became posthumously famous in the early 2010s for her beautiful and haunting street photography. So many of us became Vivian Maiers during the pandemic, wandering streets between the day's work and taking pictures of anything and everything that struck us as pretty or funny or strange. Like Maier, we took photos not because we hoped to become famous artists or commercial photographers; we took them because we all had cameras in our pockets and nothing else to do.

In the 2013 documentary *Finding Vivian Maier*, John Maloof, credited with the titular discovery, goes searching for the woman whose beautiful photographs he bought at a storage auction, talking to her friends, her former employers, the children (now grown) that she cared for, a living relative. For him the question, above all others, was: Why didn't Maier share her amazing works of art with others? Professional artists appear on-screen to declare that "had she made herself known, she would have become a famous photographer," as if it is easy to make oneself known, as if "sharing" is something that today's art world is even interested in, revolving as it does around asset purchases by the wealthy finessed by a legion of gatekeepers. Meanwhile, others wonder on-screen why Maier didn't even share them with her family and friends—what was her motivation for taking these pictures?

Maloof and many of his interviewees are mostly confounded by these questions, but more confounded still by the idea that this great photographer was also a domestic worker. In *Vivian Maier Developed*, Marks also takes up these questions. A self-described "former corporate executive," Marks sets out, detective-like, to uncover the story behind the photographs. "For me," she writes, "no detail is inconsequential, and no question is left unanswered. My greatest passion is solving quotidian mysteries—the more convoluted, the better." But her book still treats Maier's life and art as a riddle to be solved rather than as the complicated and contradictory products of a formidable intellect. Marks may abandon Maloof's thinly veiled contempt for Maier's day job, but she nonetheless seems unable to situate Maier in a broader cultural and economic context, preferring to hunt for clues in her biography and even biology. Like Maloof, she misses the tension that could animate Maier's story: that artists are not, in fact, from a different world, but live right here

*Sarah Jaffe is the author of Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt and Work Won't Love You Back.*



**Maier Developed**  
*The Untold Story of the Photographer Nanny*  
Ann Marks  
Books  
\$40

and do the tasks of social reproduction just like the rest of us.

**W**ho was Vivian Maier? She was born in New York City in 1926 to a French immigrant mother and German Lutheran father, and her youth was divided between New York and a rural French village. She had an unstable home life: Her parents separated when she was young, and neither one was around much. What stability she did have came from her maternal grandmother, Eugenie, who found work in the homes of the wealthy as a cook. Because Eugenie, like many immigrant workers, had to put her job before her family, the emotional support she provided came with limits, and Maier and her mother often found a home with family friends—including the photographer Jeanne Bertrand, who was probably responsible for giving her access to a camera for the first time.

At age 6, Maier returned to France with her mother, beginning a relationship with the Champsaur Valley and her mother's family that would inspire much of her photographic work. By age 12, she was back in New York, leaving France just ahead of World War II and returning to a city where, again, except for time spent with Eugenie, she was left to her own

devices as a teenager and young adult.

What Marks calls Maier's "forty-year career in photography" began when she returned to the Champsaur in 1950, age 24. She had come to settle a small inheritance, which gave her the freedom to spend her time photographing seemingly every inch of the valley and its people. In her early photographs, one can see her aesthetic and political judgments shaping up: attention to children and to the working class, interest in a communist rally and a film shoot, and plenty of self-portraits.

The inheritance mostly settled, Maier returned to New York and eventually secured a job as a governess to support herself and her photographic habit when her nest egg ran out. The caring jobs gave her flexibility and even made travel possible; she went to Cuba with one family and joined another on a cross-country road trip, taking pictures all the while. And she did so without much contact with the art world. At certain moments in her life—particularly when she lived in New York and later in California—Maier did spend time with other photographers, jostling for position in photo pools, shooting portraits of artists, and planning to create prints for sale. But most of the massive trove of work she produced in these years was for herself alone: 45,000 of her photos were never even developed, let alone printed.

Throughout these years, Maier may have been trying, though erratically, to become a professional photographer, but her ambition to make a living from her pictures seems to have waned by the time she reached Chicago in 1956. From then on, she continued to photograph and stockpile her pictures, but fewer of her clients seemed to know about their nanny's creative pastime. Toward the end of her life, acquaintances commented on the sheer volume of stuff Maier had amassed, but few seemed to wonder if it could be worth anything. By the time she died, in 2009, at age 83, collectors had already begun to discover these photos, but Maier was never to know.

**T**o be an artist, does someone have to view your work? Perhaps not—but to be recognized by the world as an artist, your work has to be deemed "art" by the kinds of people who are expected to make such judgments: gallery



owners, collectors, other artists. Both Maloof and Marks subtly acknowledge this, marshaling famed photographers like Mary Ellen Mark and Joel Meyerowitz to explain why Maier's work is valuable. Would it be possible for an unknown author like Marks to write a biography of an unknown nanny without "art" being involved? Unlikely.

For Marks, this "discovery" of Maier as an artist is as much the story as Maier's own life is. She cheerily describes it as a tale of "colorful characters whose skills, tenacity, and scrappiness revealed [Maier's] talent to the world," but it is also a story about the contradictions in how our society values art. We expect artists to work for the love of it but are confounded by Maier's seeming lack of interest in profiting from her pictures. Art is supposed to be its own reward, but Marks and Maloof and many of their art world interlocutors are baffled that Maier did not seek other rewards. We say that artists are those naturally endowed with special talent, yet that talent usually needs to be credentialed through an often expensive process of art school and galleries and wealthy collectors making purchases.

Indeed, by the time Maier's photographs had been "discovered," she had only a few years left to live and had stopped paying rent on the storage lockers where her photos were stashed. Maloof only found out the basic details of her life from her obituary and then reached out to the Gensburgs, her former clients, who had still more lockers full of photos. Maloof was able to persuade them to give him the whole stash rather than toss it, and shortly thereafter, he put on the first show of Maier's work at the Chicago Cultural Center. Would she have wanted such a show? Those who knew her are conflicted; some say yes and others no. And the art world generates a different problem from this question: If Maier did not develop and print her own work, are the prints from her negatives authentic Vivian Maier's? Of course, artists do not create alone, and many famous photographers outsourced their printing—but without Maier there to supervise, how do we know she'd have considered the work hers? Then again, she had often simply dropped off her film at

a neighborhood store, the same kind of place that most of us, in the pre-iPhone days, would have taken a roll of snapshots.

We should also ask: If Maier had created her pictures as a professional photographer would, making choices based on what might sell or who might buy, would her art have been the same? We can understand any piece of art, as the sociologist Howard Becker explains in his book *Art Worlds*, "as the product of a choice between conventional ease and success and unconventional trouble and lack of recognition." But when you don't aspire for recognition, might you make altogether different kinds of artistic choices?



The real star of *Vivian Maier Developed*, of course, is Maier's photography. Marks's book contains many photos, from color self-portraits to haunting black-and-white close-ups to cityscapes and Alpine landscapes. The artist's unflinching eye calls to mind Diane Arbus, but Maier took up her camera a decade before Arbus's rise to fame. Like Arbus, she trained her lens repeatedly on the unbeautiful,

the poor, and the marginalized. Marks is ambivalent about Maier's attention to these subjects, sometimes lauding her for choosing to photograph the "down-trodden" and at other times chiding her for

"voyeurism." She applauds Maier for treating poor Black and Native children just like rich white ones, as if this were surprising, but at the same time describes some of Maier's other work as "predatory" and intrusive. Such an assumption—rather a lot from someone who is writing the life story of a person who may never have wanted the public attention in the first place—reminds us that art is still often seen as a masculine endeavor, that it is hard for so many to imagine that the skills that made Maier a good nanny also made her a great photographer. As Marks herself puts it: "Everyone mattered to Vivian." She snapped celebrities and politicians, posed acquaintances like models, and captured the emotion, up close and personal, on the faces of small children. Rather than "predatory," the word most of her pictures call to mind is "intimate." The closeness to her subjects often feels

less like a violation and more like an act of care.

A pair of photos taken a couple of months apart in 1951 and '52 illustrate this dynamic. The first is a portrait of a Cuban worker with a mustache and a straw hat, shot on the trip that Maier took with an employer; the second is of Salvador Dalí, a slight scowl behind his famous mustache. Both men are shot from an angle that gives them a heroic stature, the worker as much as the legendary artist. Taking photos like this requires not predatory aggression but equal parts confidence and concern.



The question that haunts Marks's book is, at bottom, the same one that haunted Maloof's movie: Why didn't Maier "share" her work? What neither of them quite grasps is that the question they are really asking is why she didn't make money from it. Marks shows that early in her adult life, Maier had plans, though they were not realized, to start a postcard business, citing Maier's letters to a French colleague who'd made samples from her landscapes. When she returned to New York, Maier purchased an expensive, professional-quality Rolleiflex camera designed for shots from the hip. She seems, too, to have occasionally sold prints for \$1, though her haphazard record-keeping makes it unclear how many and to whom, and to have photographed the families she worked for. In one case, she took promotional photos of the steak house her clients owned. Marks also finds evidence that later in Maier's life, her acquaintances sent her information about freelance work and a former employer wrote to her saying that she hoped Maier "would find an audience for her photography and collections."

For Marks, the main hindrance to a photographic career was Maier's perfectionism, but there are many other conclusions one could draw. The bits of information sprinkled throughout the book that indicate that Maier had connections and was recognized by others as a photographer—such as the fact, dropped on page 166 with no explanation and never mentioned again, that she "had a direct line to the Playboy Club's publicity department"—do as much to undermine Marks's preferred explanations as to support them. Despite Marks's confident assertions, it remains unclear why Maier never became a full-time professional. Did



**The real star in Marks's book is, of course, the photos themselves.**

she feel disheartened by her early attempts to become one? Did she decide instead to “work to live,” taking jobs as a nanny that allowed her to ramble, charges in tow, and snap whatever she wished? Did she shoot celebrities exiting the Playboy Club or on movie sets as work, or because she was a fan? Did the employers who expressed shock that she didn’t “share her photographs” ever offer to pay her for her creative work? To these questions, we have few answers.

Part of the problem is that Marks and Maloof cannot imagine why a talented photographer might choose a career as a care worker. Maloof’s film is laced with contempt for care workers; he snickers as he asks “why is a nanny” taking photographs, as if it’s inconceivable for the working class to have hobbies. Marks is not so much contemptuous of Maier’s care work as simply uninterested in why it might have appealed to her, or at least why it might have been the best of a bad set of options. Marks lays the story of Maier’s “family dysfunction” on thick, diving down a rabbit hole on her grandmother’s marriage and her mother’s and brother’s mental illnesses. But she misses some of the reasons why nannying may have filled a gap in Maier’s life. In a family that often treated her “as if she were wallpaper,” Marks writes, care may have been in short supply; by contrast, her most functional relative, her grandmother Eugenie, secured a decent life looking after the needs of the rich, and care work offered a kind of freedom that the other jobs open to a working-class woman of the time did not.

Marks also seems uninterested in the overlapping skill sets that Maier might have developed as a nanny and a photographer. Like most nannies, she would have been expected to lavish her charges with love and affection while receiving little in return. But it seems to occur to no one that Maier used the same skills to comfort her charges and to set a subject at ease, to fade into the background of her employers’ lives and to be an unobtrusive street photographer. Marks briefly notes that Maier’s “dispassionate demeanor” helped her photography by “diminishing her own presence,” but this too is a skill in the care laborer’s toolkit.

Whether Maier’s employers—some of whom were photographers or media personalities, including the talk show host Phil Donahue—took her photography seriously enough to see it as a bonus when they hired her, an extra skill to be exploited, or whether Maier sought out jobs in creative families, is perhaps unknowable. But in Marks’s book these are just more items in a jumble of details, as is the fact that at least one of Maier’s charges grew up to be a photographer herself.

The family that Maier was closest to, the Gensburgs, employed her for 11 years and remained close to her until the end of her life, cosigning for her final apartment and taking responsibility for her cremation. They, at least, described her lovingly, and photos of the family show

Maier being uncharacteristically affectionate with the children. While other clients described her as standoffish—one claimed to never have known her name, referring to her only as “Mademoiselle”—the Gensburgs embraced her adventurousness, and leaving them seems to have been traumatic for Maier.

The philosopher Eva Kittay, in *Love’s Labor*, describes a life like Maier’s as one characterized by a “dialectic of dependency,” in which women are able to enter public space by taking on paid care work, even though such work stigmatizes them as dependents themselves, not part of “the fraternity of equals in political life,” even as it grants them other freedoms. When the paid caring relationship ends, as most of them do, the worker is left out in the cold, cut off from the home and family that until recently was theirs. When a family no longer needed a nanny, did Maier no longer need them? The Gensburgs, unlike many of her employers, seem to have recognized their debt to her. But the work that Maier did and the care she poured into it was often discarded quickly. What effect did her disposability have on her psyche and on her art?

**T**he question of mental illness hangs over Marks’s portrait of Maier, intertwined with the question of why she kept her photos to herself. An early incident that Marks describes finds an employer complaining, “Mademoiselle must be mentally ill. Why else would she refuse to make copies? Making copies is how you make money with photography.” Disability, as Sunny Taylor and others have written, often makes one “unproductive” by the rules of capitalism, and many seem to have reversed this framework in their analysis of Maier: If she decided that she didn’t want

to “make money with photography,” she must have had an impairment.

At times Marks seems to agree, though she ties herself in knots to argue more than this: that Maier was severely mentally ill, that she would have been a successful photographer if she hadn’t been so afflicted, yet also that she “lived the life she wanted to live” and would not want readers’ pity or their concern about her wishes regarding her work after her death. Maier, Marks writes, was considered “strange” and “abnormal” and a person with “underdeveloped social skills,” even if, Marks also notes, she showed “mastery at guiding conversations and deflecting questions.” Some of the children Maier cared for speculate about her discomfort with men and recall her intense reaction to being photographed when she was not in control of the picture, in one case apparently hitting a man with an umbrella. Marks also consults mental health experts to diagnose Maier posthumously. The use of the qualifier “may have” does a lot of work in these sections, as does the phrase “as if”: “It was as if she possessed a form of post-traumatic stress disorder related to potentially threatening men.” And at the end of the book, Marks simply states it as fact: “It *was* trauma and mental illness that drove many of her critical choices.”

Marks will no doubt consider me, in writing this, another part of the “well-intended art and feminist communities” who “drove matters offtrack early on by voicing long-standing biases against the attribution of mental illness to explain artists’ talent or women’s decision-making.” But I must raise the same challenge that Rose Lichten-Marck did in her excellent *New Yorker* review of *Finding Vivian Maier* in 2014: Why must we explain women’s unconventional lives “in the language of mental illness, trauma, or sexual repression, as symptoms of pathology rather than as an active response to structural challenges or mere preference”?

**W**hat is missing from Marks’s version of Maier’s life is, of course, the politics—or rather, it is scattered throughout her book like the political buttons found in Maier’s trove. Marks’s casual dismissal of “well-intended” feminist critiques is of a piece with her casual reference to Maier’s political worldview as “communist, socialist, and libertarian”

(again, without evidence or explanation). It is simply not interesting to her as a biographer that Maier seems to have identified with the working class, or how those political views might have been shaped by her experiences as a nanny and an artist—and, in turn, may have shaped her photographic output and her decision, perhaps, to keep her photos to herself. Likewise, Marks makes casual reference to Maier's feminism, but finds it useless as an analytical tool with which to understand her life.

Yet her politics is very much a part of what made Maier exceptional. At the height of the Red Scare, and before the civil rights struggle broke into the national headlines, she seems to have sought out leftist politics, identified as a feminist, supported Black freedom organizations and Native rights, and not only photographed children of color who were “just as charming,” in Marks's words, as the rich white children she tended, but sought out political discussion and debate and even sabotaged her employers' attempts to support right-wing causes. She covered labor rallies and political events like a journalist, even carrying a tape recorder to ask strangers and friends their opinions on the events of the day. “Many

have observed that Vivian possessed an underdog's perspective, and regardless of her circumstances, she identified primarily with the working class,” Marks notes, and Maier “kept literature like the ‘Bill of Rights for Working People’ and a critique of Washington Post union busting in storage.”

How these political views might have shaped her art and care work is, like so many other aspects of Maier's story, not really a question we can answer. But it is in thinking politically—as Maier herself did—that we find the real challenges she poses. We should not treat her as an individual puzzle to be solved by digging up genealogies and photo store receipts, or view art as the domain of a select elite. What if the real lesson of Maier's life as an artist and care worker and immigrant and politically active person is, following C.L.R. James's assertion (written in 1956, as Maier was photographing Chicago with the Gensburgs in tow) that “every

cook can govern,” it is also true that every nanny can make great art.

The story of Vivian Maier, then, is not a story about why one woman chose (or did not choose) to become an artist, but rather

a story about how we all have art locked inside of us somewhere, how we are all capable of seeing and capturing the humanity of those around us, and that while only a few of us are ever lucky enough to be allowed the time and space for that art to come out and be rec-

ognized and pronounced “good” by the world, we can still go out onto the street with the cameras that nearly all of us carry now and, for just a moment, create a picture of something beautiful, whether we share it with the world or someone special or just keep it to ourselves. What if we understood that all of us—nanny, bus driver, journalist, teacher, even, yes, corporate executive—have an undeveloped trove of masterpieces within us? How, then, would we change the world? **N**

**The story of Vivian Maier is not a story about her being “discovered” but about discovering how we are all artists.**

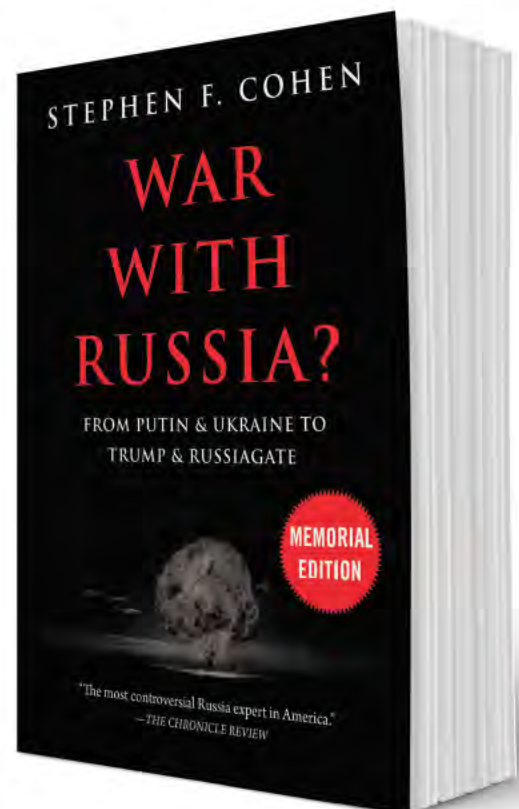
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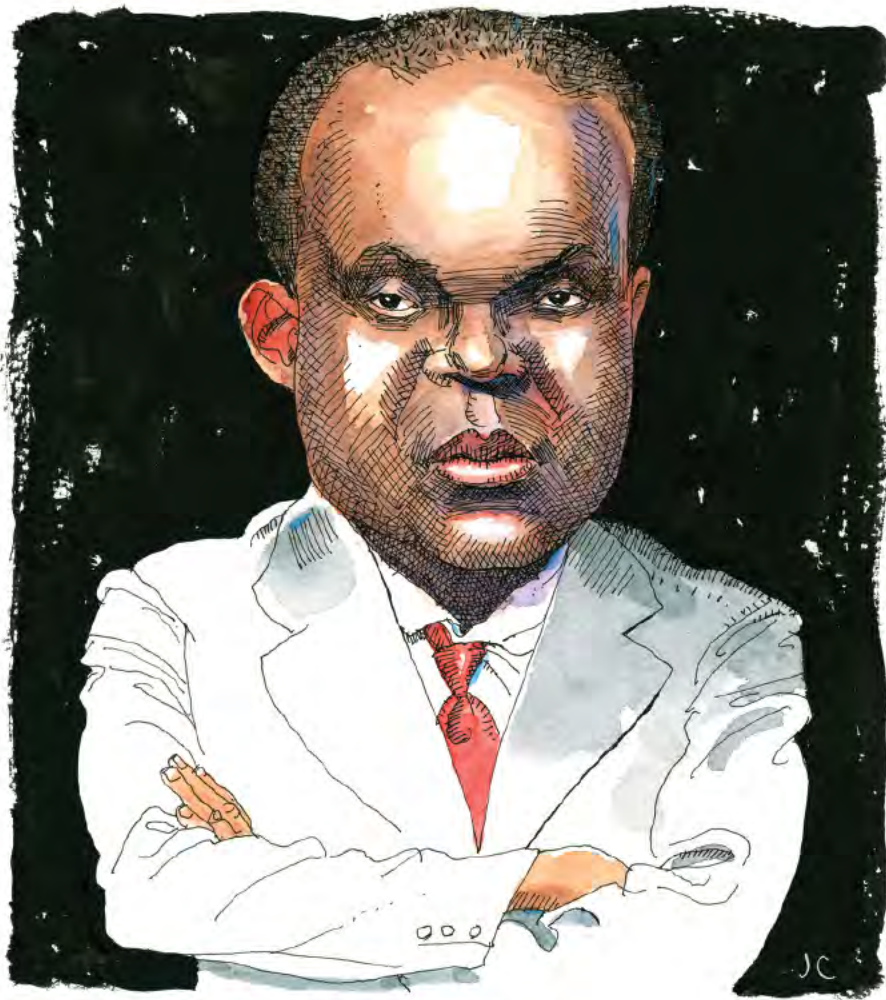
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# The Stalwart

*Hubert Harrison's radical life and times*

BY ROBERT GREENE II

**H**UBERT HARRISON REPRESENTS ONE OF THE CLEAREST examples of the difficulties of being a Black intellectual and activist in the 20th century. Upon his death in 1927, Harrison was recognized in many magazines and journals for the prominent role he'd played in this country's socialist and Black radical politics. As someone who'd organized a number of advocacy groups, as well as edited *Negro World* for Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, Harrison was arguably at his best writing, but he was also a powerful speaker and agitator. Three decades after his death, he was still revered within the Black left. In the summer of 1963, in the midst of the decolonization movement in Africa and civil rights upheavals in the United States, an essay from a Harlem-themed issue

of *Freedomways* put him front and center as one of the leading protagonists of the Black radical tradition. Richard B. Moore, in his article for the magazine, observed that Harrison was perhaps the greatest of the great outdoor speakers who gave Harlem's culture its unique flair. "Above all," Moore noted, "Hubert H. Harrison

gave forth from his encyclopedic store, a wealth of knowledge of African history and culture" that presented early ideas of Black consciousness to a Harlem populace hungry for such sustenance.

Yet since the 1960s, Harrison's genius and importance have gone somewhat into eclipse. While left intellectuals like Michael Harrington and Black socialists like A. Philip Randolph are fondly remembered, Harrison's critical contributions to socialism and Black political thought are often unfairly passed over. Even in histories examining the Black left's rich and important literary and activist history, Harrison's name isn't invoked nearly enough.

A recent two-volume biography by Jeffrey B. Perry—*Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883–1918* and *Hubert Harrison: The Struggle for Equality, 1918–1927*—seeks to correct this oversight. Tracking Harrison's life from his birth in the Danish West Indies to his long career as an activist and intellectual in Harlem, Perry leaves no stone unturned in understanding the man, the times in which he lived, and the ideals he championed. Harrison's intellect was matched only by his steadfast refusal to bend on his principles—including not taking money from sources he disagreed with. A biography that is also a work of intellectual and institutional history, Perry's two volumes offer an incisive survey of the radical upheaval at the turn of the 20th century. But above all they make a case for why Harrison is a crucial part of the American radical tradition.

Perry's background as a working-class intellectual—not to mention his writings on race and labor in American life—make him the perfect person to help recover one of the early 20th century's great Black intellectuals and socialists. Having written for publications like *Black Agenda Report*, *CounterPunch*, and many others, Perry has spent years arguing for the importance of understanding how race and class are bound together as categories used to stratify and divide American society. For Perry, what defined Harrison's legacy as a radical was that he avowed a socialist and class-based politics and yet also refused to abandon the masses of Black Americans, north and south, in their struggle against racism. Instead, Harrison examined the problem of race and class and came to the inescapable conclusion that only mass politics and

organizing among Black Americans could free them and, by extension, the working class from future exploitation.

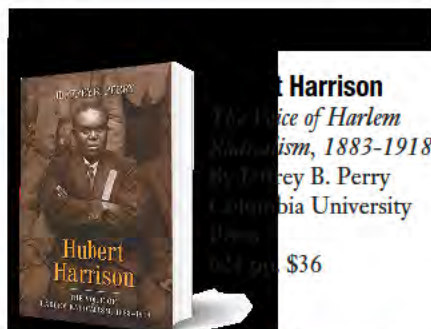
Indeed, the story Perry presents revises what most curious readers know about the history of US radicalism in the early 20th century. Harrison played a key role in two important radical traditions at once: the Black freedom movement and the building of a Socialist Party in the United States. While many histories of the era treat the two as separate, Perry's biography shows that for Harrison, socialism and Black radicalism were inextricably linked, motivated by the same insights and commitments; there was no way to privilege one over the other. As Perry argues in the first volume, Harrison was "the most class conscious of the race radicals, and the most race conscious of the class radicals."

**H**arrison's personal life provides some sense of the ways in which he was both different from and quite similar to many other Black activists in 20th-century America. Born and raised on the island of St. Croix in the Caribbean, then a colony of Denmark, Harrison grew up in a working-class home. His mother was an immigrant from the island of Barbados, and his father was once enslaved on St. Croix. Harrison's formative years were at times difficult, Perry notes: He "worked as a servant, knew poverty, and developed an empathy with the poor." His early experience caused Harrison to develop not only a class consciousness but also a race pride, having associated with so many others of African descent while living on the island.

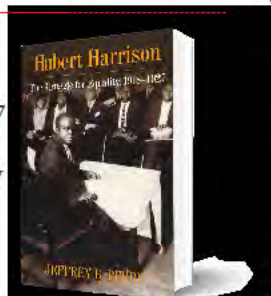
In 1900, Harrison left St. Croix for New York City. "In a sense," Perry writes, "Harrison was like many other West Indians who came to the United States at that time: young, male, and literate; thwarted by limited educational, political, and occupational opportunities at home; in search of a better life; and with a desire for more education and a propensity for self-education." While we consider this period as one of the great ages of immigration to the United States, we usually think in terms of people coming from Southern and Eastern Europe—and perhaps the banning of immigration from China in 1882. But at the same time, many from the West Indies also came to the United States, exerting a considerable influence on Black American culture, and American culture more generally, in the 20th century.

Harrison's arrival in New York City coincided with the aftermath of the Au-

*Robert Greene II is an assistant professor of history at Claflin University and has written for Jacobin, In These Times, and Dissent.*



**Hubert Harrison**  
*The Struggle for Equality, 1918-1927*  
By Jeffrey B. Perry  
Columbia University Press.  
1,000 pp. \$40



gust 1900 race riot, which injured more than 70 Black New Yorkers and marked a new low in the city's race relations. The rest of the country was arguably worse: The South was host to an epidemic of lynching (though there were murders in the North as well). But New York City was also a harsh place for African Americans—according to Perry, "seventy percent of single Black males earned under \$6, and ninety percent of single Black females under \$5 per week." Segregation marked a good deal of life in New York City as well, including education; in 1913, Perry points out, fewer than 200 Black students attended desegregated high schools. Harrison had hoped to find greater opportunity in the United States, only to discover that the country was at a "nadir" in terms of race relations. Despite proclaiming itself to be the land of the free and the home of the brave, the nation proved to be deeply oppressive for anyone of African descent.

Harrison moved in with his sister Mary and made the most of the rare opportunities offered him to pursue an education. Attending an evening high

school that had mostly white students, Harrison worked during the day as an elevator operator. Despite excelling at his studies—the *New York World* published an article about him headlined "Speaker's Medal to Negro Student: The Board of Education Finds a Genius in a West Indian Pupil"—Harrison would never attend college.

Instead, after high school, he became absorbed in politics. Like many other activists, Harrison sought a viable solution to the so-called "Negro Problem" of the early 20th century in whatever political programs he could find. At the time, there were many courses of action championed by Black intellectuals and activists as well as by white radicals and liberals. Booker T. Washington publicly advocated Black self-reliance and a retreat from political agitation; W.E.B. Du Bois insisted on full political rights and social agitation as the way forward; Marcus Garvey preached a form of Black nationalism that linked the fight of Black Americans and those of African descent around the world, while harboring a distrust of white America and a refusal to see desegregation as possible—or even desirable. There was also the liberal Black politics that emerged with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which included Mary Church Terrell, James Weldon Johnson, and numerous others who favored the creation of biracial organizations to combat the rampant racism of the day through political and moral suasion, boycotts, and legal campaigns against Jim Crow segregation in its many forms.

Harrison's approach cobbled together much of the above, with an added emphasis on socialism. Drawn to the Socialist Party's aggressive advocacy on behalf of immigrants' and women's rights in New York, he worked for the party as an organizer and writer. He also supported the Industrial Workers of the World—the Wobblies—and their leader, "Big" Bill Haywood, throughout the 1910s. For Harrison, the Socialist Party offered the chance to be a leader in the fight for greater rights for the working class, including Black workers. In Harlem, he formed a Colored Socialist Club—not, as he explained to Du Bois, to separate Black socialists from their white peers, but rather to meet Black Americans wherever they were, ideologically and literally. As Harrison wrote,

“The work must be done where Negroes ‘most do congregate.’”

However, he became increasingly frustrated by the racism and anti-Black thinking that permeated parts of the Socialist Party, and he sought to persuade his fellow socialists to make race more central to the party’s clarion call to workers caught in the class struggle in the United States. This proved to be an uphill battle for Harrison and others. As Perry notes, leading socialists like Victor L. Berger—who would later become a US congressman for Wisconsin—argued in 1902 that “negroes and mulattoes constitute a lower race.” Meanwhile, even those who declared a commitment to racial equality minimized its importance when it came to organizing. Eugene Debs, in 1903, argued that “the history of the Negro in the United States

is a history of crime without a parallel.” Yet in the same essay, “The Negro in the Class Struggle,” Debs finished by stating plainly, “We have nothing special to offer to the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races.” For Debs, the class struggle subsumed all other struggles in American society. For Harrison, this was at best a fallacy and at worst a critical strategic mistake. Like other Black socialists, he argued that “the ten million Negroes of

America form a group that is more essentially proletarian than any other American group.” They could, if approached with sophistication and understanding, become the backbone of a larger socialist movement in the United States. But the concern of many Socialist Party leaders, including Debs, that appealing directly to Black Americans would divide the working class stopped the party from ever fully embracing this position.

For a time, Harrison continued to push the Socialist Party on the issue of anti-Black racism and to make the party an attractive alternative for African Americans in an era when both the Democrats and the Republicans expressed little interest in attracting Black voters. But in the end, his efforts

were unsuccessful, and his Colored Socialist Club began to founder after it failed to receive enough support from the rest of the party in New York City.

**E**ven as he grew distant from the Socialist Party, Harrison never completely abandoned socialism, but he began to look beyond its institutions and clubs when it came to matters of politics. He crossed paths with Washington, Du Bois, and Randolph, at once befriending and establishing rivalries with them as he vied for the attention of the people of Harlem. Harrison envisioned a movement for the Black masses instead of what most of his contemporaries offered, such as the “Talented Tenth” proposed by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black*

*Folk* or other attempts to create a small cadre of Black radicals to lead the movement. Harrison argued that the potential members of the Talented Tenth were “the left-handed progeny of the white masters” and could not function without white patronage. He also argued that Washington’s notion of building up Black capital through hard work and vocational education was wrongheaded, asserting that Washington wanted the political and social relations of Black

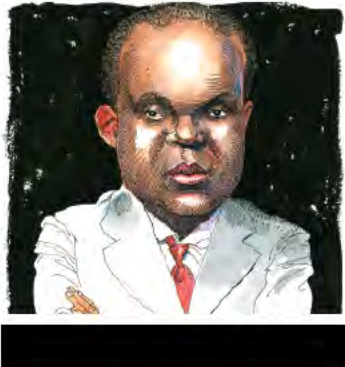
people to be “one of submission and acquiescence in political servitude.” At the same time, Harrison felt that the newly created NAACP was a good start—but that the organization was still too concerned with the opinions and goals of white liberals.

During this period, Harrison began to develop a view of Black liberation that was worldwide in scope and not merely focused on the United States. Even as other Black leaders, most notably Du Bois, asked African Americans to “close ranks” and get behind the US entry into World War I, Harrison made no secret of his contempt for those who did. For Harrison, it was more important for Black Americans to arm themselves for the battle at home—and in this case, his words were not meant to be taken metaphorically. In

the aftermath of the East St. Louis riots of July 1917, Harrison urged Black people to embrace armed self-defense as a proper and necessary strategy in the face of rampant oppression. *The New York Times* quoted him as saying, “We intend to fight if we must...for the things dearest to us, our hearth and our homes.”

Harrison’s squabbles with Du Bois over the war may have pushed him to the margins of mainstream Black thought, but by the end of the war Harrison was moving toward the center of the “New Negro” movement. With the rise of this movement and the Harlem Renaissance, Harrison’s socialism, Black radicalism, internationalism, and modernism all found new audiences among Black Americans. Cochairing the Liberty Congress in 1918, he had a front-row seat to observe the growing radicalism of a younger group of Black Americans that formed the heart and soul of both of these movements. The New Negro movement, in particular, embraced what Harrison referred to as “the Race Consciousness of the Negro people.” His earlier call for Black people to arm themselves after the East St. Louis riots also became a hallmark of the New Negro movement—an acceptance of the idea of armed self-defense and other militant tools in the greater struggle for human rights. Until then, Harrison had remained committed to a politics that had not created a mass movement. Now, leading the effort to resurrect the *Harlem Voice* newspaper in 1918, he found himself at the center of a new political and intellectual ferment, hatching a plan for organizing that would anticipate efforts by the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the Black Panthers, and a variety of other groups devoted, in one form or another, to organizing the Black working class in the United States.

The focus of Harrison’s ambitions was the South. He had grown tired of what he saw as the play-it-safe tactics of groups like the NAACP (which some of his radical peers derided as the “National Association for the Acceptance of Colored Proscription”) in the region. Part of this frustration stemmed from political setbacks, but it also came from his growing belief that very few white liberal activists could be trusted, even if they had the money and cultural and political prestige to lend legitimacy to a project. For Harrison, Black people could not trust others to do the work of emancipating Black America; they would have



**Like many Caribbean radicals, Harrison combined anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism.**

to do it themselves. This commitment to Black agency and self-help led him to Marcus Garvey, who had arrived in New York City from Jamaica in 1916, bringing with him his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which had already been active on the island. Harrison and Garvey met in the revolutionary year of 1917, and, according to Perry, Harrison's views on Black independence heavily influenced Garvey during the latter's time in New York. Garvey attended meetings of Harrison's Liberty League, and Harrison encouraged the league's members to also attend Garvey's events.

Harrison would eventually join the UNIA and serve as the editor of its newspaper, *Negro World*, which he elevated to a new level of sophisticated political engagement with the wider Black diaspora. Beginning his tenure during the "Red Summer" of 1919, against the backdrop of heightened labor strife in the United States and nationwide campaigns against the lives and livelihoods of African Americans, Harrison sought to use his editorial position to rally Black America and lauded those who embraced his calls to action, hailing the resistance against the Red Summer attacks as one of the "brilliant events in the history of the Negro race in America."

Harrison also became increasingly vocal about his internationalism during this time. In a dazzling variety of ways, he used his powerful perch at *Negro World* to promote ideas of Black diasporic solidarity and to highlight the weaknesses he perceived in liberal attempts to fight segregation in the United States. For Harrison, Black Americans, West Indians, and other elements of the broader Black diaspora had far more in common than they recognized: All of them were subjugated by the forces of capitalism, colonialism, and European assumptions of superiority. In addition, Harrison argued that Black Americans had much to learn from their brothers and sisters in Africa. "Africa was primarily a teacher," he insisted, "not a primitive unschooled child in need of 'civilization' and instruction." In every issue of *Negro World*, Harrison included sections on news from Africa and on "the status and welfare of the darker races and of subject peoples everywhere."

### Harrison often found himself navigating the worlds of Black nationalism and Black socialism.

Criticizing Black socialists like Randolph for continuing their class-first pronouncements, Harrison argued for a "race first" approach that, he insisted, did not abandon socialism. At times, he challenged Randolph and other Black socialists for what he considered to be their political naivete in navigating the complicated waters of city politics. In 1918, for example, Randolph ran for the 19th Assembly District and, in Harrison's eyes, prevented the potential victory of a Black Republican, Edward A. Johnson.

Harrison reasoned, as Perry writes, that it was more important "to break the white monopoly on holding office" than it was to support a Black socialist for the mere sake of supporting one. Harrison's tactical and intellectual arguments with Randolph and other Black socialists continued throughout the Great War period and into the 1920s. What was paramount for Harrison was the adoption by Black Americans of a race-centric strategy that would also allow room for a strong class politics. In 1920, his debates with Randolph and Chandler Owen, both editors of *The Emancipator*, were partly born out of Harrison's need to defend what he called "the principles of the New Negro Manhood Movement" from attacks by the two. However, even the editors of *The Emancipator*—which was created by the merger of the better-known *The Messenger* (edited by Randolph and Owen) and *The Crusader* (formerly edited by the activist and intellectual Cyril Briggs)—were far from united on the question of putting class ahead of race. Whereas Harrison criticized Randolph for continuing in his class-first analysis, Randolph retorted that Harrison's work with Garvey had tainted him with the larger problems that many Black activists—socialist or liberal—had experienced with Garveyism and the UNIA. (Nonetheless, when Harrison died, in 1927, Randolph paid him tribute as "our comrade and co-fighter for race justice.")

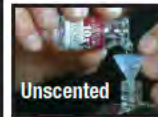
In fact, Harrison's continued commitment to class politics also separated him from Garvey, as did the latter's grandiose style. Harrison grew exasperated with Garvey's ostentatious uniforms and grand public pronouncements and eventually left his position as editor of *Negro World*. The final straw was Garvey's misuse of funds, which to Harrison was especially egregious

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considering the working-class background of the vast majority of UNIA members.



reening from one organization to another often left Harrison without a steady job. He also refused to be supported by wealthy benefactors, and he and his family experienced bouts of poverty. These periods, however, only further fueled his intellectual fire and radicalism.

How this working-class immigrant sustained himself as an activist-intellectual is an important part of the story that Perry seeks to tell. Harrison was an organic intellectual—someone who, through his own determination and genius, shaped for generations the debates about class and race in Black America. Shut out by the racist system of higher education, Harrison taught himself, hungry for knowledge and eager to read everything he could that would help him better understand his and Black America's history, culture, and politics. In this way, Harrison was not just the intellectual forefather of activists like Malcolm X or



Kwame Ture. He was also an inspiration to historians like John Henrik Clarke and J.A. Rogers, both of whom pursued unorthodox routes of rigorous self-study to become two of the best-known historians of the Black experience in the United States. While Clarke did not receive his doctorate until late in life, and Rogers never received formal training as a historian, like Harrison both men were part of the autodidact tradition of Black American letters. Harrison has been called the “father of Harlem Radicalism,” and in his day many referred to him as “Dr. Harrison,” assuming that one as erudite and brilliant as he must have received a doctoral degree.

Yet he also struggled considerably—because of both his poverty and his commitments. He had difficulty taking care of his family because of his inability to find steady work. By December 1927, Harrison had already dealt with a serious illness the previous year, and he found himself back in the hospital after an appendicitis attack, only to die following a routine surgery. His premature death at the age of 44 came as a shock, and it robbed the world of an incredible intellect and radical agitator. One wonders what Harrison’s role would have been in the 1930s, as the Communist Party took up the cause of Black freedom in the North and the South. Would he have renewed his friendship with Du Bois as the latter became more radical? Or would he have just said “I told you so”? What might have come of his commitment to both Black and working-class freedom? Harrison maintained a pride in being Black, but he was also convinced that to embrace Blackness meant pursuing a global program of solidarity to combat racism and militarism across the world.

Upon the news of his death, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the prominent Black newspapers of the 20th century, wrote that “The Race loses a stalwart champion in Dr. Harrison.” Humanity did too. When one reads Perry’s two-volume biography, it is nearly impossible to avoid letting one’s mind run away with ideas of what could have been—for the fight for Black freedom in America and for the struggle against class oppression. In the present day, with the arguments about class- or race-first remedies for Black oppression still not settled, Harrison would want us all to sharpen our analysis, for the sake of a continuing battle for the future that he never lived to see. **N**



## Illusions

*HBO’s My Brilliant Friend*

BY KATHERINE HILL



THE THIRD SEASON OF HBO’S *MY BRILLIANT FRIEND* OPENS where the second left off, in a bookshop in Milan. It’s 1968, and Elena “Lenù” Greco (Margherita Mazzucco) has just finished an event for her debut novel. The first face we see, emerging from behind a gold metal-workspiral on the door, is that of Nino Sarratore (Francesco Serpico). Lenù has loved him since she was a girl, and now, after many twists and turns, including Nino’s tortured affair with her best friend, Lila (Gaia Gerace), he finally seems ready. He holds the gilded door open for Lenù, and he holds her gaze in the crowd. These two working-class kids from Naples have made it in the cultured North; with their matching glasses, they’re practically made for each other. Too bad she’s already engaged to Pietro Airota (Matteo Cecchi), a classics scholar from one of the preeminent left-wing families in Italy.

It’s a rather lush, romantic opening for the season that ushers in Italy’s “Years of Lead,” a 15-year period marked by political violence on both the right and the left—and that’s just one of the season’s many pointed ironies. Adapted faithfully from *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, the third novel in Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Quartet, the new season launches Lila and Lenù into adulthood,

navigating the conditions of work, marriage, and family in a society undergoing radical change.

So many previously forbidden things suddenly seem possible as Lila and Lenù move out of adolescence: autonomy for working women, the rise of organized labor, fulfilling romantic love. But this season's story, written by Ferrante with series creator Saviero Costanzo, Laura Paolucci, and Francesco Piccolo, wryly checks those hopes even as it encourages and entangles them. Men crowd the road to liberation, and even the most sympathetic husbands, comrades, and lovers won't easily relinquish their traditional authority. Among the many tantalizing fantasies of this season is the suggestion that they will.

**C**ostanzo directed all but two of the episodes in the first two seasons, but now he has passed the baton to Daniele Luchetti, who oversees this sharpest turn in Lila's and Lenù's lives. Lila doesn't even appear in the first episode, and Lenù plays only a framing role in the second. For much of season three, they are separated by geography and circumstance. Lila, the brilliant elementary school dropout who married the prosperous and ultimately duplicitous grocer Stefano Carracci (Giovanni Amura), remains in Naples. Since her affair with Nino, she has descended in class, now living out of wedlock with her son, Gennaro, and her companion, Enzo Scanno (Giovanni Buselli), while working in ugly conditions in a sausage factory. At night, Lila and Enzo study the new technology of computer coding and, at the encouragement of their old friend Pasquale Peluso (Eduardo Scarpetta), attend meetings of the local Communist Party, which is trying to organize Lila and her coworkers. Lenù, meanwhile, has graduated from the Normale University in Pisa. She rides the success of her first novel, and the influence of her well-connected in-laws, to a contributor's desk at Italy's Communist newspaper *L'Unità*, supplying her parents (Luca Gallone and the magnificently furious Anna Rita Vitolo) with a coveted TV and telephone.

*Katherine Hill is an assistant professor of English at Adelphi University. Her most recent book is A Short Move.*

Of course, neither woman is happy, because neither really owns her own life, even though they're now adults. Lila, who was raped by Stefano on their wedding night, is sexually assaulted at work and shunned by her family for fleeing her marriage. Lenù, who was seduced by Nino's father as a teenager, an event she has fictionalized in her book, is constantly fending off unwanted advances from the supposedly cultured men of her new social circle—aged professors, younger intellectuals and artists. When she and

Pietro finally marry, he refuses her request for birth control, insisting that marriage means having children. Lenù is shocked; she thought theirs would be a union of equals. "Can I write another book first?" she asks in the car on the way to the civil ceremony. "You can write a book while you're expecting," he replies angrily. He impregnates her that very night, ensuring her transformation into a bourgeois housewife.

Yet progress feels possible for both women, if not without compromise. With

## Skeletons

Skeleton, some wonder if you are really practical keening as you do through this city ensconced in flesh, a tailored suit for bones lost plush in skin. Is it a good life within exiled in the singular anatomical body? (Thanatophobia, mine.) Ok, breathe. There's oodles of oxygen for now—let's live a little, we're here! Natter on, nitwit. I've had about enough of you.

\*

Sorry not sorry, said death. He wasn't fucking around, the klepto. Meanwhile, the internets wouldn't shut up about perfection, elegance, the feminine ideal, that old regime. It was hard not to puff up while lactating. It took heft to host the parasite. Pregnancy brought a swampy edema. Bye-bye ankles. Nice knowing you, feet. Intermittent fasting? Time to give it a rest. We'll shrink eventual to the ultimate bone, obits keening farewell, flesh! So wax zaftig, carb while you can, willy nilly you'll get there, we'll get there together, we're already on our way.

\*

Sunday sloth is its own milk and honey, honey, am I right? Kudos to you for rationalizing your lazy ass again as in er "not writing is also writing." Pussycat, I have bad news. Lethargy is for losers. Be kind to yourself, the shrink said. I felt shrunk. Enervating this dopamine addiction and tendency to toggle between gloomy and elate. Yeah, one minute she's ogling men on the metro like some grody monsieur, the next wanting to die. Natch, dear, you're here! Don't ruin everything, for god's sake.

DEBORAH LANDAU

help from Lenù, Lila wins an exhausting labor victory at the factory and heads back to the old neighborhood. There she reluctantly goes to work for the Solara brothers, Michele (Alessio Gallo) and Marcello (Elvis Esposito), organized crime bosses she spent most of the first two seasons resisting. They've always wanted to possess her, but now they're offering to pay her handsomely to run a data-processing center, buying her intelligence instead of her body. Lenù, meanwhile, manages to stay connected to a thread of intellectual life, even while caring for two small children full-time. With her girls, the younger one still in her arms, she attends political demonstrations and visits her feminist sister-in-law, Mariarosa (Giulia Mazzarino), who encourages her to get back to writing. A new book, about the literary fabrication of women by men, takes shape. It's around this time that Nino, who has always admired Lenù's writing—or perhaps it's just her success—returns.

**T**hough Luchetti is new to the show, he builds on the aesthetic established by Costanzo in previous seasons, borrowing from the film movements of the periods dramatized: Italian neorealism for season one's postwar childhood and French New Wave for the second season's plunge into the 1960s. Luchetti, for his part, uses the handheld cameras of *cinéma vérité* to bring to life the political action and domestic unraveling of the late '60s and early '70s. The result is a story that seems to move almost seamlessly through history, using visual cues that many viewers already subliminally associate with the culture and the times.

Core aspects of the original aesthetic remain, including an abundance of flat, wide establishing shots that are by turns enchanting and estranging, appropriate for this long story of illusions dashed and transformed. The contrasts of North and South are many: Thin, sickly Lila largely inhabits the dark, suffocating spaces of the old Neapolitan neighborhood, while Lenù enjoys a Tuscan life of old money, natural light, and towering double doors that open onto lush green gardens. Her clothes

are elegantly tailored, her hair softer and better cut, her daughters constantly praised for being so well-behaved. Even Lenù's telephone, her most consistent connection to Lila, is a cheerful yellow, a subtle contrast to Lila's violent red one.



**Neither woman is happy, because neither really owns her own life.**

Before the telephone, the brightest color in Lila's life belonged to the endless rows of pig carcasses hanging in the factory.

One of the most arresting choices of the season is the retention of the entire young adult cast, led by Gerace, 18, and Mazzucco, 19, who have grown up before the audience's eyes. In a neorealist gesture, neither had acted before *My Brilliant Friend*, and they are now playing characters older than themselves. Their undisguisable youth might have been a distraction, but instead it highlights one of the novels' most defining claims: the idea that we retain our core essences even through periods of great change. Lenù will always be Lenù, restrained and apparently good but harboring a wild, envious ambition that propels her out of the neighborhood—a tension Mazzucco captures beautifully in the faintest movements of her mouth. Lila, for her part, will always be Lila, as inflexible as Gerace's shoulders, and preternaturally correct in her critiques of power—not just of the brutal Solaras, but of the upwardly mobile Lenù too. Both actresses do their best work this season, their performances lived-in and honest; it's almost a shame they'll be replaced by older actors going forward.

The same is true of the men in *My Brilliant Friend*, who take up more space in the story now that the girls have become women. Serpico's Nino is a perfect snake, charming and self-deprecating enough to fool a smart woman; Buselli's Enzo sees the hard truth through piercing blue eyes; and Gallo's slick Michele might be dismissed as a small-time crook if he didn't keep turning up as the threatening force behind the scenes. The standout is Cecchi as the stubborn scholar Pietro. Though congenial and nonviolent in principle, he is nevertheless a disappointment. Often seen at his desk, the centerpiece of his comfortable study, Pietro gets to devote himself to his intellectual work while Lenù squeezes hers into the margins around household duties. When she points out the disparity, he sits there stolidly, as though physically

incapable of understanding. All of them, to the actors' great credit, make perfect sense to themselves.

Appropriately for a season focused on domestic work, children get a lot of screen time, especially Lenù and Pietro's young daughter Dede (Sofia Luchetti, the director's own child), who frolics and goes to the potty with the best of them. Observant and precocious, Dede is at once her mother's spirit reborn in better circumstances and her inconvenient conscience. She's also a young girl in a violent world, and we watch anxiously along with Lenù as Dede discovers what that means in a country planned and controlled by men.

**I**n Florence, Lenù is largely protected from the vendettas of the old neighborhood, but the Years of Lead bring violence even to the most cultured, peaceful spaces of the North. A student pulls a gun on Pietro over an exam question. Pasquale and his upper-class girlfriend, Nadia Galiani (Giorgia Gargano), show up at Lenù's home unannounced, aggressive and clearly on the run from something bloody. And after a murder in the old neighborhood, Lila sends Gennaro to Lenù for safekeeping.

In a world shaped so thoroughly by male authority and violence, is heterosexual love even desirable for women? The answer for Lila and Lenù is still open, but Luchetti's use of "Spring," a recomposition of Vivaldi by Max Richter and a refrain throughout the series, is telling. In season three's first episode, the piece plays over a nightmare of social control, as Lenù imagines an angry chorus from the neighborhood chasing her down over her "dirty" novel. In the last episode, "Spring" consecrates a moment of romantic fantasy fulfilled. That the same piece of music can accompany such apparently contrasting emotional states indicates they have more in common than a superficial reading would suggest. In this brave new Italy, a working-class woman can write an important novel and find her soul mate, two transformative experiences for the individual. But when the personal thrill wears off, the collective problems remain. "Everyone talks themselves into a life that suits them best," Lila tells Lenù on the phone. The question, in every season of their lives, is what they will talk themselves into now—and how, and for whom, they will act. **N**



# Letters

## US Imperialism and Anti-Asian Violence

☛ I had to take breaks in reading Panthea Lee's brilliant article, which was relentless in its detailing of the mentality that is promoted by "a girl for the price of a burger"—and what allows it to persist ["Sex, Death, and Empire: The Roots of Violence Against Asian Women," May 2/9]. Bravo, or, as is said where I come from, *shabash*.

BINDU DESAI

Panthea Lee's powerful article provides important global and historical context to the widespread violence against Asian communities and Asian women in particular. It should be taught in our schools for the important life lessons it offers to young men and women alike, and it should be shared with our elected officials for the truths that could benefit the military and policing operations they oversee. Thank you for this courageous work. It is a vital step for us all.

DAVID J. BODNEY  
TUCSON

## Abortion Activism

☛ Re "Q&A: Lauren Rankin," by Amy Littlefield [May 2/9]: I am a strong pro-abortion advocate, but as a man, I have shied away from pro-abortion activism. This brief interview has provided me with an obvious path of action: Call my local clinic and ask them if they need anything. Thank you for the reminder and for the solid, practical, and common-sense advice given here. So simple, really.

ROBERT BORNEMAN

## Involuntary Psychiatry

Re "Breaking Off My Chemical Romance," by P.E. Moskowitz [April 4/11]: For many of us, administration of psychiatric medications was not our own choice but that of psychiatric personnel acting against our will. Yet it was only in 2008, thanks to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, that the UN special rapporteur on torture tentatively applied the right to be free from psychiatric forms of torture (and other ill treatment) to "persons with mental disabilities." In 2020, the special rapporteur declared that "practices such as involuntary...psychiatric intervention" based on the "best interests" of the patient "generally involve highly discriminatory and coercive attempts at controlling or 'correcting' the victim's personality, behaviour or choices and almost always inflict severe pain or suffering.... If all other defining elements are present, such practices may well amount to torture."

I work to obtain recognition, redress, and reparation in international law for the human rights violations perpetrated in the name of therapeutic treatment against a person's will. I look forward to more open discussion of psychiatric harm, whose victims are too often silenced by the slur that any complaint is the product of mental illness.

TINA MINKOWITZ  
CHESTERTOWN, N.Y.

*The writer is president of the Center for the Human Rights of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry.*

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# Q&A

## Frances Kissling

Frances Kissling, 78, the president of the Center for Health, Ethics and Social Policy in Washington, D.C., is a bioethicist who has spent most of her professional life thinking about and working on issues of women's rights and reproductive health. In the early 1970s, she was the director of two of the first legal abortion clinics in the United States. Later, she headed up the National Abortion Federation and, in 1982, became the president of Catholics for a Free Choice, now known as Catholics for Choice. I caught up with Kissling, who is currently writing her memoirs, via telephone shortly after *Politico* published the leaked version of US Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito's draft opinion in a forthcoming decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

—Claudia Dreifus

**CD: What was your reaction when you read Alito's draft opinion?**

**FK:** On one hand, I wasn't surprised. But there's a real difference between expecting a rollback and actually seeing something in front of you.

I reacted as a woman but also as a Catholic, because the decision was, in essence, written by five Catholic lawyers who accept the most conservative version of Catholicism on abortion and who have applied it to secular American law. They have an approach to the law that is based on natural law theory. What the church says about natural law is that every phenomenon, every behavior, is governed by nature and, as such, you can't argue with nature. In the case of sexuality, a natural law thinker would say, "What is the purpose of sexuality? Well, sex can end in procreation, and so sex was given to us to procreate. You cannot interfere with that!" That's what these folks believe.

Now, I don't mean to imply that a Catholic must accept these ideas—or even that many Catholics do. There are multiple positions on almost everything, and natural law is only one among many. Moreover, abortion like everything else in Catholicism, is covered by the right of conscience. Since the church doesn't know what the fetus is, each of us is free to decide for ourselves and to act on our conscience.

**CD: In the early 1970s, in the years immediately before the 1973 *Roe* decision, abortion access was left to the individual states. What did you see during that period, and what are the lessons for today?**

**“There's a real difference between expecting a rollback and actually seeing it.”**

**FK:** I saw there was tremendous demand. On weekends, we did about 100 abortions a day. About half our patients came from out of state. I'd get to the clinic around 7:30 in the morning, and the parking lot would be filled with cars from Maine to Florida. People had traveled all night to get to us.

Most of the women, I'd say, were working- or middle-class—teenagers, young mothers, women who, for whatever reason, understood they couldn't have a child at that moment. Their decisions were reasoned and well-thought-out. No one seemed to take this lightly.

**CD: I've had students who've said that a post-*Roe* future won't be devastating because abortion will probably remain legal in the blue states. How would you answer them?**

**FK:** “Devastating” is in the eyes of the beholder. A woman whose starting point is fear that she won't be able to get a safe abortion goes through torture. It is true that it will be easier for a woman to identify a legal clinic than it was in 1970, but not all women—especially young women—will be able to navigate the process. Some women can't travel, and there will be a return to unsafe abortions in red states. A woman who has had an abortion in a legal state may have a rare complication when she gets home and will be afraid to go to the emergency room. Some women will die. Many will suffer trauma. But large numbers will move on quietly with their lives.

**CD: Given the likely possibility that *Roe* will fall in June, what should be the next move for activists?**

**FK:** The short-term priority should be to make sure that many of the women who want an abortion can get one. The long-term battle will be to recover what has been lost—but in the interim, you can't abandon the women who need abortions now. There's a moral



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# How I Stopped Being Gay

When I came out, I steeled myself to join a minority—only to find that my identity had become a marketing niche.

BENJAMIN MOSER



# I'M SECULAR and I vote



Brent Michael Davids, Wis.,  
a secular values voter

I'm a composer, citizen of the Stockbridge Munsee Community, American . . .  
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**Rainbow power:** A fist is raised at a vigil on June 13, 2016, the day after a gunman killed 49 people and wounded 53 others at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Fla., in the worst mass shooting in US history.



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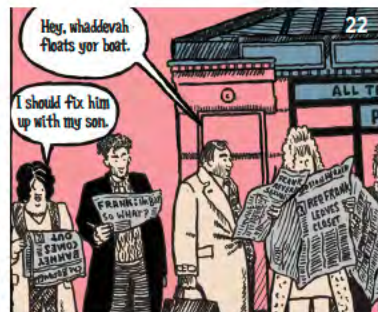
BENJAMIN MOSER

When I came out I thought I was joining a minority. Now it's a marketing niche.

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EDITORIAL / JOAN WALSH FOR THE NATION

# Democracy in Peril

**T**HE SYSTEM WORKED; THE GUARDRAILS HELD. EXCEPT THEY ALMOST DIDN'T. BUT thanks to a cadre of white Republican men, we still live in a free country. That was the ultimate message of the first three days of the January 6 Committee hearings. I know: The decision to rely on former Trump Republicans was a calculated one. And I am vastly underselling these hearings, on one level. We got photos, videos, and devastating testimony we hadn't seen or heard before.

Clearly, the guardrails almost failed. The testimony of Capitol Police officer Caroline Edwards—"I was slipping in people's blood"—will stay with me forever. President Donald Trump, who would soon be impeached for the second time, "summoned the mob, assembled the mob, and lit the flame of this attack," in the words of the committee's vice chair, Republican Liz Cheney. "Donald Trump and his allies and supporters are a clear and present danger to American democracy," the archconservative lawyer J. Michael Luttig told the committee in the third hearing.

The real takeaway from the hearings so far is this: For at least two months, the "good" Trump staffers—lawyers and others in the inner circle, the so-called Team Normal—spent all their time fighting implausible theories about nonexistent voter fraud and nonexistent (at least legally) ways to overturn the Electoral College vote and hand the election to Trump. Yet none of them came to the American public and screamed, "Look at what's happening here!" And given what we've learned in the hearings, everyone who testified absolutely should have.

Day 3 laid that out most clearly. It focused on how Trump and his allies tried to bludgeon Vice President Mike Pence into using his supposed power to somehow thwart what is historically the ceremonial counting of Electoral College votes, which would certify Joe Biden's victory, on January 6. The hearing's revelations were supposed to be shocking, but except for some new (and truly chilling) video footage of insurrectionists calling for Pence to be brought out and strung up, the effect was oddly numbing.

We learned how much time Pence staffers spent talking to John Eastman, a law professor at Chapman University with a couple of nothing ideas about how to overturn Biden's election. The committee heard about day after day of meetings in which Pence and/or staffers listened to ideas that Eastman himself would, at times, disown. But why were so many of the people around Pence and Trump, even those on Team Normal, meeting with Eastman constantly? Hint: to appease Trump, their deranged boss.

And it wasn't just Eastman. Trump's and Pence's staffers had to deal daily with the obviously lame claims of voter fraud from Rudy Giuliani and his band of should-be inmates. They'd shoot them down and come back to work the next day and do it again.

We're supposed to be grateful that these staffers thwarted Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election and hold on to

power. And, I guess, I am. But none of them went public. Sure, we remember the leaks to favored reporters at *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, some of whom undersold what they were told and saved the gory details for their books. We got leaks, but leaks are easily undermined. We needed whistleblowers, and we never got them.

If we'd seen a name and a face for one of these Republican heroes, the violence of January 6 might have been averted. Take Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short. He said he alerted his boss's Secret Service detail to the possibility that Trump's escalating attacks on Pence, for refusing to reject Biden's electoral vote majority on January 6, might put his boss in danger. But why not warn the

whole country? Or at least the whole Capitol?

And then there's Pence himself. Like so many other Republican men who were paraded before us as heroes at the hearings, Pence did,

ultimately, act to save democracy. His counsel, Greg Jacob, insisted that his boss's first impulse was to resist the efforts, especially by the farcical Eastman, to get him to reject the electoral votes he was supposed to preside over counting. But that doesn't ring true: Pence ran around to various friends and advisers, including Luttig and former vice president Dan Quayle, among others, to see if he could find a way to follow Trump's orders.

In the end, he did not. At his last meeting with Trump, where he rejected Trump's efforts to blame voter fraud and find a way to overturn Biden's election, Pence still tried to endorse Trump's delusional views. "I've done everything I could" to back up his boss's efforts to hold on to the White House, he reportedly told Trump. Let's remember: They all did. Until they couldn't anymore. **N**

**We needed  
whistleblowers, and  
we never got them.**

COMMENT / DWAYNE MONROE

# You Talking to Me?

*What the latest AI hype is really about.*

**I**N RECENT WEEKS, AN UNLIKELY DRAMA HAS UNFOLDED in the media. The center of this drama isn't a celebrity or a politician, but a sprawling computational system, created by Google, called LaMDA (Language Model for Dialogue Applications). A Google engineer, Blake Lemoine, was suspended for declaring on Medium that LaMDA, which he interacted with via text, was "sentient." This declaration (and a subsequent *Washington Post* article) sparked a debate between people who think Lemoine is merely stating an obvious truth—that machines can now, or soon will, show the qualities of intelligence, autonomy, and sentience—and those who reject this claim as naive at best and deliberate misinformation at worst. Before explaining why I think those who oppose the sentience narrative are right, and why that narrative serves the power interests of the tech industry, let's define what we're talking about.

LaMDA is a Large Language Model (LLM). LLMs ingest vast amounts of text—almost always from Internet sources such as Wikipedia and Reddit—and, by iteratively applying statistical and probabilistic analysis, identify patterns in that text. This is the input. These patterns, once "learned"—a loaded word in artificial intelligence (AI)—can be used to produce plausible text as output. The ELIZA program, created in the mid-1960s by the MIT computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum, was a famous early example. ELIZA didn't have access to a vast ocean of text or high-speed processing like LaMDA does, but the basic principle was the same. One way to get a better sense of LLMs is to note that AI researchers Emily M. Bender and Timnit Gebru call them "stochastic parrots."

There are many troubling aspects to the growing use of LLMs. Computation on the scale of LLMs requires massive amounts of electrical power; most of this comes from fossil sources, adding to climate change. The supply chains that feed these systems and the human cost of mining the raw materials for computer components are also concerns. And there are urgent questions about what such systems are to be used for—and for whose benefit.

The goal of most AI (which began as a pure research aspiration announced at a Dartmouth conference in 1956 but is now dominated by the directives of Silicon Valley) is to replace human effort and skill with thinking machines. So, every time you hear about self-driving trucks or cars, instead of marveling at the technical feat, you should detect the outlines of an anti-labor program.

The futuristic promises about thinking machines don't hold up. This is hype, yes—but also a propaganda campaign waged by the tech industry to convince us that they've created, or are very close to creating, systems that can be doctors, chefs, and even life companions.

A simple Google search for the phrase "AI will..." returns millions of results, usually accompanied by images of ominous sci-fi-style robots, suggesting that AI will soon replace human beings in a dizzying array of areas. What's missing is any examination of how these systems might actually work and what their limitations are. Once you part the curtain and see the wizard pulling levers, straining to keep the illusion going,

you're left wondering: Why are we being told this?

Consider the case of radiologists. In 2016, the computer scientist Geoffrey Hinton, confident that automated analysis had surpassed human insight, declared that "we should stop training radiologists now." Extensive research has shown his statement to have been wildly premature. And while it's tempting to see it as a temporarily embarrassing bit of overreach, I think we need to ask questions about the political economy underpinning such declarations.

Radiologists are expensive and, in the US, very much in demand—creating what some call a labor aristocracy. In the past, the resulting shortages were addressed by providing incentives to workers. If this could be remedied instead with automation, it would

**Every time you hear about AI innovations, you should detect an anti-labor program.**

devalue the skilled labor performed by radiologists, solving the scarcity problem while increasing the power of owners over the remaining staff.

The promotion of the idea of automated radiology, regardless of

existing capabilities, is attractive to the ownership class because it holds the promise of weakening labor's power and increasing—via workforce cost reduction and greater scalability—profitability. Who wants robot taxis more than the owner of a taxi company?

I say promotion, because there is a large gap between marketing hype and reality. This gap is unimportant to the larger goal of convincing the general population that their work can be replaced by machines. The most important AI outcome isn't thinking machines—still a remote goal—but a demoralized population, subjected to a maze of brittle automated systems sold as being better than the people who are forced to navigate life through these systems.

The AI debate may seem remote from everyday life. But the stakes are extraordinarily high. Such systems already determine who gets hired and fired, who receives benefits, and who's making their way onto our roads—despite being untrustworthy, error prone, and no replacement for human judgment.

And there is one additional peril: though inherently unreliable, such systems are being used, step by step, to obscure the culpability of the corporations that deploy them through the claim of "sentience."

This escape hatch from corporate responsibility may represent their greatest danger. **N**

*Dwayne Monroe is an Amsterdam-based Marxist tech analyst. He is writing a book, *Attack Mannequins, exploring the use of AI as propaganda.**

FROM THE EDITOR /  
D.D. GUTTENPLAN

## On Ana María Archila

*Why the left should be paying attention to the New York lieutenant governor's race.*

**L**ieutenant governors are like airbags: designed to be ignored except in the case of a crash. Perhaps that's why so little attention has been paid to the contest that will take place on June 28, when New York's Democratic voters will pick a nominee (which in this state usually means the eventual winner).

That's a shame—and not just because New York governors seem unusually crash-prone. (Incumbent Governor Kathy Hochul was herself deployed after Andrew Cuomo's career as a serial sex pest

finally caught up with him; Cuomo's predecessor, David Paterson, took office after Eliot Spitzer resigned during a prostitution scandal). At least 11 of the state's lieutenant governors have moved up, including Herbert Lehman (after Franklin Roosevelt became president) and Mario Cuomo. New York is also one of just six states that give the office a separate primary ballot line.

The left should keep its eyes trained on this particular race because of the candidacy of Ana María Archila, a veteran activist who became a national celebrity after confronting Senator Jeff Flake in a Capitol elevator during Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings. Archila, who has been running hard for months and has already secured the Working Families Party line, would be the first out lesbian to win election statewide, as well as the first Latina. Liza Featherstone's profile on page 26 goes into more detail, but Archila's record as a cofounder of Make the Road New York, one of the most militant and effective immigrant rights groups, has certainly earned her run a close look. **N**



THE PIVOT/Victoria Law

## Childbirth in Chains

Tennessee is the latest state to ban shackling—the practice of forcing incarcerated pregnant women to wear handcuffs, a belly chain, and leg irons during labor—but 11 states still allow it. (\*Though the data are limited, medical advocates estimate that more than 3,000 pregnant people are incarcerated each year.)

3,000  
Number of pregnant people in prison



Eleven states allow shackling during labor:

**Alaska, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Montana,  
New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon,  
South Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming**

It's time for every state to end this cruel practice.

COMMENT / JOHN NICHOLS

# Real Representation

*Progressive Senate hopefuls say voters must stop sending millionaires to Congress “who sell out working families.”*

**W**HEN ELIZABETH WARREN RECENTLY STUMPED IN Wisconsin for the progressive US Senate candidate Mandela Barnes, she reminded crowds that Barnes is not a billionaire who can “just write a check” to pay for his campaign. The Massachusetts senator was picking up on a major theme for Wisconsin’s 35-year-old lieutenant governor in his bid for the Democratic nomination, in one of the highest-profile Senate races of 2022. With Warren at his side, Barnes told supporters in Madison, “I don’t have millions and personal wealth.”

Unlike a pair of wealthy rivals in the August 9 Democratic primary—Milwaukee Bucks executive Alex Lasry and Wisconsin State Treasurer Sarah Godlewski—and the Republican incumbent, Ron Johnson, Barnes can’t fund his own campaign. Raised in one of Milwaukee’s most economically depressed neighborhoods, he is the son of a United Auto Workers member and a public school teacher. His latest financial disclosure form listed assets of less than \$75,000.

As a front-running contender in the primary race, however, Barnes argues that his background is an asset. He says Democrats need a nominee who is clearly distinguished from Johnson, whom the challenger dismisses as “a multimillionaire who sells out working families while giving his wealthiest donors \$215 million in tax breaks.”

“It is important for people to make a real choice at the ballot box, and honestly, I feel that my contrast with Senator Johnson cannot be more apparent,” Barnes told me. “I would plunge the median income in the Senate if I was elected. It would free-fall.” The Democrats’ best hope for connecting with frustrated voters in a midterm election year characterized by economic volatility and high inflation is to nominate “more people with a real-world, working-class experience,” he explained.

Barnes is not the only Democrat this year who’s arguing that the party needs to elevate more working-class Senate candidates. In Missouri, when Trudy Busch Valentine, the granddaughter of the beer baron August Anheuser Busch Sr., entered the race for that state’s open Senate seat, she got immediate pushback from her top rival. “Missouri deserves a warrior for working people, a proven patriot who’s served his country, who has the courage to stand up to criminal politicians, corrupt elites running massive multinational corporations, and billionaire heiresses who have been stripping our communities for parts,” declared the campaign of Lucas Kunce, a Marine Corps veteran and a former director of national security policy at the American Economic Liberties Project. Kunce has called out political compromises that see “bipartisan majorities vote for Wall Street bailouts, bad trade deals, Big Oil subsidies, forever wars, and overseas nation building,” and has promised not just to flip the seat from Republican to Democrat

but to upend a political status quo in which “billionaires get to call all the shots in our economy.”

Barnes raises similarly populist themes. “You’ve got to look at politicians and their financial interests—especially when you are talking about ultra-wealthy politicians. They are not going to take votes that make them less rich,” the lieutenant governor said. “If the decision is to take a vote that helps to uplift the community or increases their wealth, the community is going to get left behind every time.” The candidate is so certain this message will resonate that he’s made it central to a campaign ad in which he tells voters, “I’m not like most senators, or any of the other millionaires running for Senate. My mom was a teacher; my dad worked third shift. I know how hard you’re working, and I know that by bringing manufacturing home, we create jobs and we lower costs. If we want to change Washington, we’ve got to change the people we send there.”

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* noted the ad’s “reference to multimillionaires Lasry, Godlewski and Johnson.” The Republican incumbent spent \$9 million of his own funds to finance his initial Senate bid in 2010. This year, Johnson—who famously objected that the 2017 Republican tax cuts didn’t go far enough to help the owners of corporations—is relying on large donations and corporate PAC money to fund a campaign that has already spent \$6.9 million and has benefited from more than \$5 million in outside spending.

At the same time, Lasry is writing substantial checks to pay for a campaign that has already spent more than \$8 million—64 percent of which was self-financed by the candidate, according to the independent nonprofit OpenSecrets. Of the more than \$5 million that Godlewski has raised, almost 65 percent is self-financed. In contrast, Barnes’s self-financing figure is zero, as is that of Outagamie County Executive Tom Nelson, a progressive populist who has ranked fourth in recent polling.

Barnes, whose campaign is based on donations averaging less than \$40, is at or near the top in recent polls. He’ll be outspent, but he’s confident that he has the winning message for a fall campaign against a millionaire Republican. “Not being a millionaire gives me a better perspective,” said Barnes, who argues that voters will respond to a candidate who recognizes that “the reason the Senate is so broken is because these people do not share the experience of everyday Americans.”

**“If we want to change Washington, we’ve got to change the people we send there.”**

—Mandela Barnes



## Back Talk Alexis Grenell



# Freeze Your Eggs

*The right isn't just gunning for abortion rights, but for any procedure that allows women to control their destiny.*

**I**N NOVEMBER OF LAST YEAR, I FROZE 16 EGGS. I HAD met the man I now plan to marry a few months earlier, but if the relationship hadn't worked out, I was prepared to become a solo parent. I was tired of feeling like I'd fucked up by failing to find a suitable romantic partner during my peak childbearing years. The women of my generation have more education and workforce participation (pre-pandemic) than at any time in history, but none of the social affirmation or infrastructure to support our ambitions. Even the heterosexual millennial men who are our peers aren't necessarily interested in a financially or professionally successful partner if she doesn't put his career first. And I wasn't terribly interested in doing that.

The prime reason women elect to freeze our eggs, according to a Yale anthropologist who was the lead author for the largest study on the topic so far, involves their “lack of stable partnerships with men committed to marriage and parenting.” The 2018 study found that “most of the women had already pursued and completed their educational and career goals, but by their late 30s had been unable to find a lasting reproductive relationship with a stable partner.” Rather than partnering with the wrong person or resigning ourselves to permanent PANK (“professional aunt, no kids”) status, women—with money—who want children now have options outside of traditional relationships. Having committed the sin of staring down 40 without a mate, I decided to reject pity, self-imposed or otherwise, and proceed anyway.

This is exactly what the misogynists on the Supreme Court don't want: elective parenthood that defies biology and traditional gender norms. Justice Samuel Alito's leaked decision makes clear that the right is bent not only on overturning *Roe v. Wade* but on eliminating any exceptions to the most normative possible reproductive pathways—including the perverted one pursued by women like me, who dare to delay parenthood, remain competitive in the workforce against men, and have our baby too. It's what so infuriates the incels and men's rights crusaders: Without the threat of becoming shriveled-up old maids, it's hard to convince women to settle for them. Ross Douthat said the quiet part out

loud when he tweeted: “Worth noting that in the 50 yrs since *Roe*, men have become less likely to find a spouse, less likely to father kids or live with the kids they father, and less likely to participate in the workforce.” Destroying *Roe* is about restoring men's perceived loss of control not only over their own lives but over women's lives too. That's why we don't see any supposedly pro-life Christians rallying for my right to make a baby at 38 by mandating insurance coverage for egg freezing or in-vitro fertilization (IVF).

Indeed, the pending loss of abortion rights has set off an eager round of frenzied efforts across the states to limit those options. In Michigan, Attorney General Dana Nessel, who's running for reelection, released a mash-up video of her male opponents declaring that the legality of birth control—settled by the Supreme Court in 1965—is now a matter for the states to decide. Lawmakers in Missouri and Louisiana have introduced bills defining Plan B and even IUDs as abortifacients, since they violate the fundamentalist Christian definition of life (the instant sperm meets an egg). Louisiana nearly criminalized IVF with a bill that would have granted full rights to “all unborn children from the moment of fertilization.” Since IVF entails creating multiple embryos from extracted eggs in the hope that just one will be viable enough to implant in the womb, hard-liners regard the discarding of nonviable embryos as murder. The bill was later amended out of concern for couples struggling with infertility—a crime against innocents—as opposed to women who willfully reject their rightful role as caregivers by pursuing a technological solution outside their God-given reproductive capability. We are, as Matt Gaetz put it, “over-educated, under-loved millennials who sadly return from protests to a lonely microwave dinner with their cats.” The cries of “Just breast-feed!” in response to the baby formula shortage made the same point: Women who do not or cannot give over their entire bodies in service to others merit scorn.

I felt so much shame for so long thinking that I hadn't accomplished parenthood the fun and free way, forcing me to pay a \$20,000 tax—still, a luxury I was lucky to afford. It cost me time, mulling over what felt like an expensive admission of failure, as well as frustration that I should be considered a failure at all. No wonder. Egg freezing has been available as

**The women of my generation have more workforce participation than ever, but none of the infrastructure to support our ambitions.**

# PLEASE HELP US SEND VITAL MEDICAL SUPPLIES TO CUBA NOW!

GLOBAL HEALTH PARTNERS is launching a broad-based, urgent drive to supply Cuba with desperately needed medical equipment. Havana's Calixto Garcia Hospital, Cuba's main trauma center, has 23 operating rooms but only two working anesthesia machines. We're committed to raising \$125,000 this month to start rushing urgently needed anesthesia machines, sutures and surgical supplies to Cuba.

Founded in 1896, Calixto Garcia was the first teaching institution in Cuba, and has trained thousands of Cuban doctors, nurses, and health care technicians. Calixto Garcia needs to perform some 50 lifesaving surgeries every day, but under the U.S. embargo, the hospital cannot purchase anesthesia machines, or desperately needed sutures and surgical tools.

**“Imagine the anguish of having to wait for an operation that will save the life of your loved one.”**

*—Dr. Guillermo Sanchez, Chief of Maxillofacial Surgery, Calixto Garcia Hospital, Havana*

Please show your solidarity now with a country that has done so much for the health of its own people, and for struggling communities around the world. Help supply the Calixto Garcia Hospital with the equipment they need to provide urgent care to the Cuban people.

You helped us send six million Covid vaccination syringes to Cuba; now please join us to supply Calixto Garcia's dedicated doctors with the tools they need to save lives every day.

Global Health Partners has a U.S. Commerce Department license to send these medical supplies to Cuba. You can make an immediate tax-deductible donation to GHP at [www.ghpartners.org](http://www.ghpartners.org) or use the QR code.



## GLOBAL HEALTH PARTNERS

an “elective” procedure only since 2012, when the American Society for Reproductive Medicine removed the “experimental” label. I knew one person who’d done it outside of medical necessity, and her advice to me at 35 was full of urgency: *Get it done.* When I finally did, I felt so proud of myself. Proud for prioritizing my happiness and holding out for it rather than settling for someone and something I didn’t want.

I was sitting in a café with a friend recently—a professional woman in her mid-30s who was at the start of a new relationship—when she broached the topic of egg freezing. I rushed to reassure her

that this is now “just what we do.” Not out of urgency, not as a last-ditch effort, and not because we’ve failed at any test of worthiness. The pill was the revolutionary event of the late 20th century, and now it’s

freezing our eggs. And just as the pill was prescribed only for married women before becoming available to single women and eventually teenage girls, it should become standard for women to freeze their eggs at 25. Set it and forget it unless and until the time is right. Women deserve the security and freedom that come from not living life like we’re up against an outdated countdown clock, just as men have. Oh, and cats. Lots of cats. **N**

**The pill was the revolutionary event of the 20th century. Now it’s freezing our eggs.**

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DANIEL STEINMETZ-JENKINS

## Morbid Symptoms

### Jeet Heer



## Caught in a Bipartisan Trap

*The January 6 hearings show the dangers of trying to hold the GOP accountable while working across the aisle.*

**A**S PRESIDENT, JOE BIDEN HAS SET FOR HIMSELF TWO tasks that are, if not totally contradictory, at the very least in tension with each other: He’s been eager to work across the aisle to restore bipartisan comity, while also promising to defend American democracy from the existential threat of Trumpian authoritarianism. In the first 18 months of his presidency, he’s scored some successes on the bipartisan front (getting GOP support for an infrastructure bill and a few other measures, such as Postal Service reform and the establishment of Juneteenth as a national holiday). But these measures amount to—as even the most enthusiastic Biden fan would admit—far less than the New Deal- or Great Society-size presidency that many had hoped for. More to the point, there’s been little success in shoring up American democracy. The push for a new voting rights act has stalled, and Trumpist candidates openly promising to sabotage the next presidential election continue to win Republican primaries.

Biden’s dual program of bipartisanship and democratic restoration is supported by the Democratic Party establishment. It was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in remarks made in early May at the Aspen Ideas Climate Conference in Miami, who articulated this agenda with great clarity, saying action on the environment needed bipartisan cooperation and a “strong Republican Party.” Pelosi explained: “So rather than saying ‘Well, we have to defeat them,’ no, let’s just try to persuade them. I want the Republican Party to take back the party, take it back to where you were when you cared about a woman’s right to choose, you cared about the environment.” She added, “Here I am, Nancy Pelosi, saying this country needs a strong Republican Party. Not a cult.”

It’s clear that by “a strong Republican Party,” what Pelosi means is a party that is not beholden to the radical right or figures like Donald Trump. More cynically, she’s perhaps boasting about the fact that the Democrats have disciplined the left wing of their party in order to govern from the center and would like to see the Republicans do the same.

The project of creating “a strong Republican Party” is a strange one. The history over many decades—not just during the Trump years, but going back to Barry Goldwater’s winning of the nomination in 1964—is of moderate Republicans being easily vanquished by the far right. After all, it’s hardly the case that the GOP in recent decades, even before Trump became the party’s standard-bearer in 2016, was strong on environmentalism or reproductive freedom.

But the plain fact that the Republicans aren't willing to moderate hasn't stopped the Democratic establishment from constantly trying to prop up the small number of Republicans who, if you are willing to make allowances for some egregious actions, might be mistaken for moderates. Biden, Pelosi, and other Democratic leaders are thus engaged in an impossible juggling act: They are simultaneously trying to govern as Democrats and pushing to reform their rival party (rather than, as is normal in a democracy, to defeat it).

The hearings into the January 6, 2021, attempted insurrection vividly illustrate the confusion of this conflicted agenda. On the one hand, under the able stewardship of Mississippi Representative Bennie Thompson, the hearings did a superb job of laying out the essential case: that Trump and his cronies egged on a mob to attack the Capitol, with the intent of overturning the results of the election.

In making this case, the committee was careful to do everything possible to get Republican buy-in, even though Republican congressional bigwigs like Kevin McCarthy, the House minority leader, repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of the panel. The committee included two Republicans: Wyoming Representative Liz Cheney (who is vice chair) and Illinois Representative Adam Kinzinger. Cheney in particular was given pride of place, with Johnson describing her as "a patriot, a public servant of profound courage, of devotion to her oath and the Constitution."

The hearings were largely aimed at sorting out good Republicans from bad, with much praise being lavished on former attorney general William Barr and former vice president Mike Pence. One of Pence's assistants, attorney Greg Jacob, talked in the hearings about how on January 6 he turned to the story of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible. The implication here is that Pence was like Daniel, a hero who stayed true even in the lions' den.

But, on the other hand, this valorization of Barr and Pence is absurd. To be sure, there is value in having Barr state that Trump's claims of election fraud are "bullshit." And Pence has to be honored for resisting Trump's

**Why are Democrats so eager to protect the good name of a party holding a knife to the neck of democracy?**

threats and certifying the election results (although it's worth noting that in so doing, he merely followed the example of every previous American vice president).

Yet both Barr and Pence were thoroughly complicit in the Trump presidency before January 6. Barr has said that he would vote for Trump if he were the party's nominee in 2024. Pence has been extremely gingerly in his criticism of Trump, gesturing toward a need for the GOP and the country to move on. This is a position that serves Pence's presidential ambitions but is not, to put it mildly, a profile in courage.

The big story of American politics is the increasing authoritarianism of the GOP. The January 6 hearings do nothing to counteract this trend. In her capacity as vice chair, Cheney has reportedly worked to shield top Republicans like Ginni Thomas, the wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, from investigation. It's no surprise that Cheney is eager for a whitewash that targets only Trump and a few of his cronies while protecting the GOP. Less obvious is why Democrats are so eager to protect the good name of a party holding a knife to the neck of democracy. **N**



OPPART/PETER KUPER



KUPER

*"It's described as: A whodunit where you already know who did it—but it's worth watching to find out if democracy dies at the end."*

The **SCORE****Not All Bad News**BRYCE COVERT +  
MIKE KONCZAL

**W**hen people are asked what is the number one problem facing the economy, they overwhelmingly say it's inflation—and they aren't wrong. Inflation has been higher, broader, and more persistent than most experts predicted last year. The US annual inflation rate in May was 8.6 percent—the highest since 1981. Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent energy and food prices soaring, inflation had been higher than economists and lawmakers should have been comfortable with. Combating it requires an all-of-the-above approach, from investments in infrastructure to alleviate supply chain problems to public funding of care work to help with the labor supply. The Federal Reserve will need to tamp down demand, but it is not the solution. If the Fed raises interest rates too high too fast, it could trigger another recession. Only the government can provide the industrial policy that we need to ensure stability in food and energy prices.

Yet amid the rising prices, there are positive signs in the economy, ones that matter for everyday people. Right now, the labor market is stronger, more dynamic, and more equitable than nearly anyone following the economy foresaw. As we consider how to move the pandemic recovery into the next stage, these developments need to be not only acknowledged but protected.

First, the labor market has not been this strong for workers this early in a recovery in generations. And that is most likely due to the effects of the American Rescue Plan. There are between 1.75 million and 3 million more jobs than the Congressional Budget Office projected without the ARP, and labor force participation is 0.3 percent higher and unemployment 1.5 percent lower. This has left the United States in a much better position, both in terms of overall growth and wages, than Europe, which is facing similar inflation challenges.

The second strength is labor market dynamism. Over the past decade, economists and popular commentators have argued, correctly, that labor markets were too cold—meaning there were too few people switching jobs, starting businesses, or otherwise moving to find better and more productive places to work. This wasn't just bad for workers; it was bad for the whole economy, which lost productivity and growth and became more sclerotic.

This problem has been solved by the white-hot

labor market. Workers are upgrading their jobs at a record pace, with strong wage growth as a result. Though inflation has taken a bite out of workers' paychecks, wages have been increasing for those at the bottom of the income distribution. As the economist Arindrajit Dube has found, while workers in the middle of the income distribution have seen a slight drop in their wages in inflation-adjusted terms, those in the bottom 10 percent have seen a 5 percent increase. This is unlike what happened in previous recoveries, in which benefits went to the wealthy first before trickling down to anyone else.

Which leads to a third strength: the numerous ways this economic recovery has been uniquely equitable. As Joelle Gamble, the chief economist at the Department of Labor, recently observed, Black men have a higher employment rate now than they did before the pandemic. More generally, increases in employment have been broadly shared, especially when compared with the recovery that followed the Great Recession.

Economists have found that the recovery in the labor market is running eight years faster than the previous one. And the rebound after the Great Recession was especially slow for those traditionally excluded from the job market, but during this one, people across genders, ages, and education levels have seen significant and swift gains. Though there is a long way to go in alleviating underlying inequities—Black men, for instance, still face an unemployment rate 2.1 percentage points higher than the overall rate—a strong labor market can ensure that the recovery isn't isolated to those who were already well-off. An economic slowdown, however, would likely harm workers of color and other vulnerable groups disproportionately.

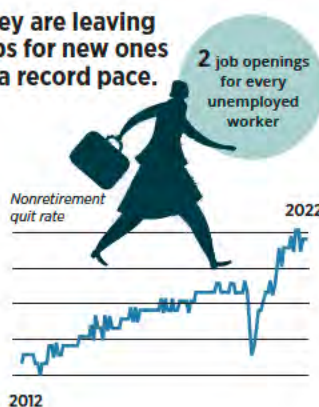
As policy-makers move to drive inflation down, it is essential that they don't lose sight of these important developments. There's room to land a soft recovery and keep what's working in our economy. But to do that, we need to recognize that, in addition to the problems, there are encouraging trends that we must fight to preserve.

Mike Konczal

**The Economy's Bright Spots**

Workers are benefiting from a strong labor market.

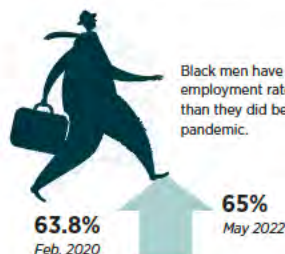
**They are leaving jobs for new ones at a record pace.**



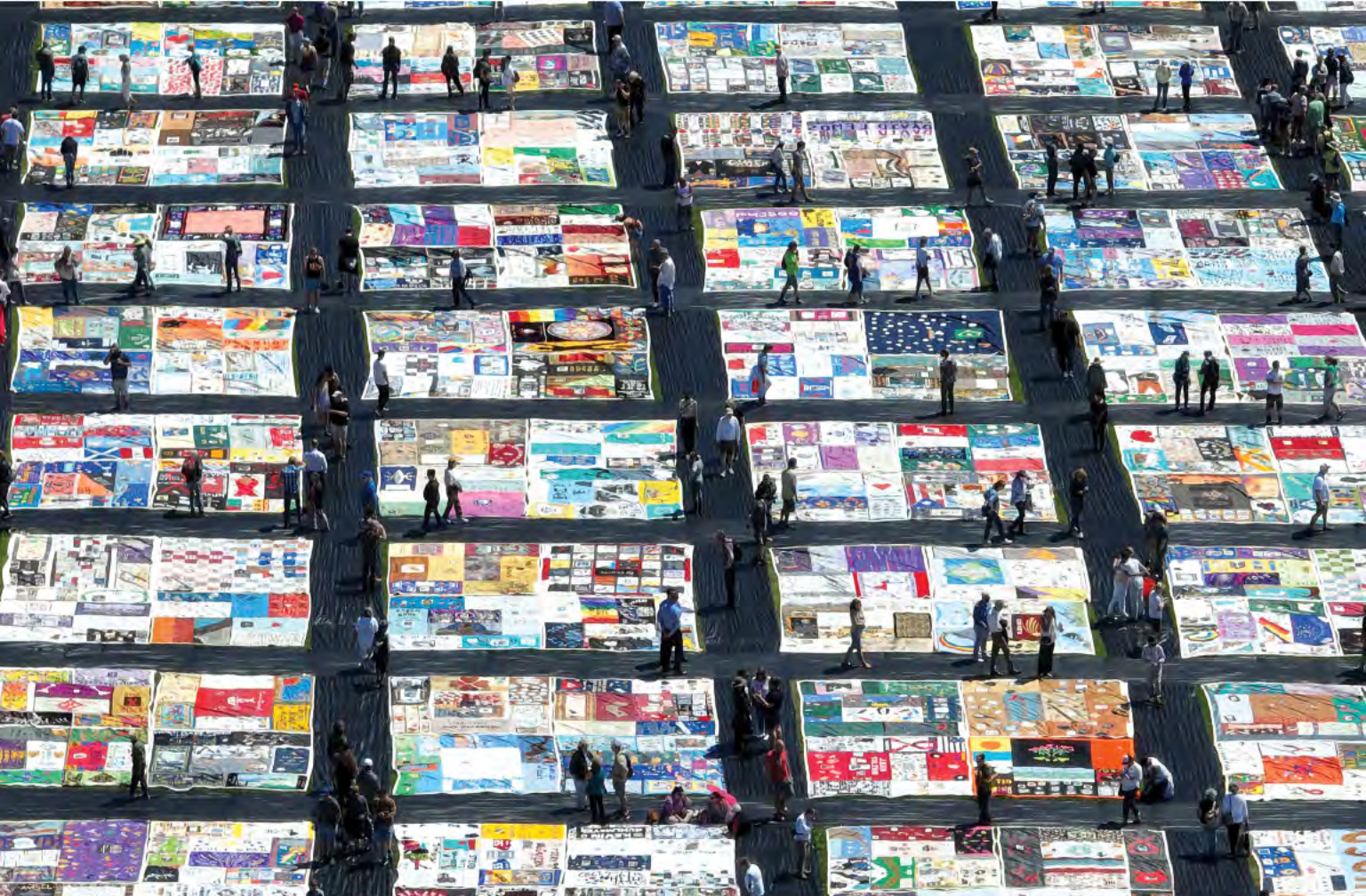
**Employment recovery has been equitable.**



Black men have a higher employment rate now than they did before the pandemic.



Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics; St. Louis Fed; economist Arindrajit Dube



SNAPSHOT/Justin Sullivan

## In Memoriam

Visitors walk among the panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park on June 11. Marking the quilt's 35th anniversary, the display of more than 3,000 panels was the largest exhibition of the memorial in the city's history. Conceived by the San Francisco gay rights activist Cleve Jones, it first appeared in 1987 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

### By the Numbers



**1.6%**

Portion of US adults who are transgender or nonbinary

**1 in 5**

Number of Americans who say they

know someone who describes themselves as nonbinary

**11M**

Number of LGBTQ people in the United States

**22%**

Portion of LGBTQ people who live in poverty

**36%**

Portion of trans people of color who are experiencing food insecurity

**100+**

Number of bills introduced across the country in 2022 targeting trans people

**23%**

Portion of abortion clinics that offer care specifically designed for trans patients

**31**

Number of states that prohibit workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity

CALVIN TRILLIN  
**DeadlinePoet**

### Election Night at the Trump White House

'Twas said that finding wise advice  
Was something Donald Trump had mastered.  
So who'd he listen to that night?  
Just Rudy Giuliani, plastered.

# How I Sto

**When I came out, I steeled myself to join a minority—only to find that my identity had become a marketing niche.**

**BENJAMIN MOSER**

**T**HROUGH SOME CHEMICAL QUIRK, I was born gay. Though inborn, this characteristic did not appear at birth. Sexuality is like height rather than eye color: I was born with blue eyes, but my height and sexuality did not reveal themselves immediately. I was meant to be tall, and meant to be attracted to other boys; but when I was a child, I was no more gay than I was tall. Since children of my generation were assumed to be heterosexual, you had to challenge the assumption—become gay in the eyes of others—and it was not until I told people, in late adolescence (around the same time I became tall), that others began to perceive me as a member of a minority.

For most of the first two decades of my life, I had not, therefore, been seen as a member of a minority. In a way this was lucky, since this was not a group anyone in my generation was rushing to join. Membership, for many people, was dangerous. For young people, it could mean being subjected to bullying, or being kicked out of your house, or being subjected to abusive “therapies.” For adults, it could mean workplace and housing discrimination, as well as other associated risks: depression, drug abuse, suicide.

I was lucky not to have these problems. Growing up gay was terrible for many, but for some

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*Benjamin Moser's most recent book, Sontag: Her Life and Work, won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 2020.*

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO



# ppe ing Gay





**Being part of a minority that nobody knew I belonged to made me naughty. It gave me a glint in my eye.**

reason—another roll of the dice—I was spared the misery many experienced. It's true that my parents were anything but bigots. (But plenty of people with families like mine were scarred by the experience.) I never had problems at school; the tall gene surely helped in this sense. (But I have known others who were not bullied and who nevertheless had a difficult time.) I didn't even have a lachrymose coming-out story. The minute I got to college, I made sure

everyone knew, and that was that.

And in 1994, gayness was considered far less novel than it had been even a few years before. There was still no lack of haters, but in the social and educational world that I was brought up in, people had gotten the memo that it was no longer cool to say derogatory things about homosexuals. Old attitudes persisted, of course. But the old language used to express them was on its way out, and those who hated homosexuals knew to say "religious freedom" or "family values" instead of plain old "faggot."

Even before I graduated from high school, I had seen the radical change in attitudes toward homosexuals. My earliest memories of gay people came from watching a neighborhood. Montrose was developed just west of downtown Houston in the 1910s. Unlike my own, more homogeneous community, inhabited by people like my parents—straight white professionals with a couple of kids—Montrose was what we would later call "diverse." Ratty apartment complexes stood alongside old mansions. Most houses were brick bungalows. The people who

lived in them were often referred to as "artistic"—a word which, I later figured out, meant gay. Montrose was seedy; the houses were cheap; and it had tattoo parlors and "adult bookstores," which I later figured out were different from bookstores for adults. Long before I ever set foot in a bar, I knew that Montrose was where the bars were.

And then, in the middle of the '80s, when I was 9 or 10, weeds and for-sale signs sprouted on the lawns of Montrose. The quirky shops closed; the neighborhood emptied out. Its inhabitants were dying off, one by one, in a mass-death event that, at least at first, went largely unseen by society at large—which was to say by heterosexual society. A neighborhood that had been associated with dodgy fun was starting to disappear. And the people who were dying were people like me.

When I was a child, I knew only one person who died of AIDS. His name was John; his sister was a friend of my mother's. I saw him just once, when he came to our house in the hills between Houston and Austin. I can see him now. He had a mustache, and sat on some puffy Edwardian chairs my mother later reupholstered. That's how I know I was very young, since the house was renovated when I was in third grade, and everything slightly shopworn, including those chairs, got a fresh lease on life.

John's death was presented as something of a mystery. He had, my mother explained, been "celibate" for several years. This was the first time I encountered that word, and she told me what it meant. I understood that celibacy made his death seem like a fluke—bad luck—like dying of lung cancer decades after you quit smoking. The implication was that gay sex was like cigarettes, something that could kill you. I don't recall John's name ever coming up again, but AIDS turned a previously unspeakable mystery into a constant topic of conversation.

I remember only two articles I read in childhood that featured gay protagonists who were not dying. One was about a man named Terry. His mother asked if he was gay; he had to admit he was; she wept. The second was about gay life at Rice University, a few minutes from our house. A student named Alex said that he and his straight girlfriends checked out guys' butts. Rated them. John's story equated gayness with death. Terry's equated it with shame, with horrifying your parents. Alex's—well, I must have remembered it because it was such a thrill. A guy only a little bit older—right down the street—checking out other guys. That was extremely exciting—all the more so because there was a picture of Alex, and he was cute. I, too, wanted nothing more than to look at men. But the message that looking at other guys was dangerous was everywhere. The thing you

**Where the boys were:** Houston's Lobo store (below) was a gay oasis. Inset: Lobo's owner, Larry Lingle (right), and his partner, Bill White.



wanted more than anything else was also the most forbidden. This prohibition destroyed many people. It could get you killed; it could force you to live in hiding and shame.

I, on the other hand, discovered a perversion in my character. This wasn't my sexual orientation. I don't know where I found the self-confidence to know that any difficulties I was experiencing on that front were temporary. I always knew that, like Alex, I would eventually go to college. And I started to like being gay because it seemed like a way off the ladder of "achievement" followed by consumption—an opportunity to do something different with my life. It allowed me to inhabit a vast zone of privacy, a place nobody else could enter. The perversion was that the secrecy turned me on. This was distinct from being turned on by men. I enjoyed being part of a minority that nobody knew I belonged to. Knowing that nobody knew made me naughty. It gave me a glint in my eye.

**H**AD SEEN MAGAZINES WITH NAKED WOMEN, furtive glimpses of someone's dad's *Playboy*, but it wasn't until high school that I saw magazines with naked men. I'm not sure how I found out about a bookshop in Montrose called Lobo. Alongside a wide selection of respectable gay and lesbian literature—"respectable" was a relative term, since at that time even the most polite gay literature was considered little better than pornography—it sold real porn.

It's hard to explain what an event this bookstore was for me—and for others, too. "It's an act of liberation, and an act of liberation that we at the turn of the century take for granted," an activist, Gene Harrington, said in a 1999 article from *OutSmart*, now archived on a website, Houston LGBT History, that preserves the memories of such places. They were "our only source of gay and lesbian literature. If you wanted a book by a gay author or on a gay issue, you either went to a store like Lobo, or you didn't get it."

Founded in Dallas in 1973 by a man named Larry Lingle, who was married to a woman for eight years and who only came out at age 37, Lobo opened in Houston in 1986. An article from *This Week in Texas* in 1987 shows just how subversive a gay bookstore was around the time I was coming to identify with that minority. When I was 11, the vice squad raided the Dallas branch and arrested Lingle for a "class B misdemeanor for possession of sexual materials, namely dildos." In 1973, Texas had passed a statute forbidding the sale of "obscene devices...including a dildo or artificial vagina." (This law is apparently still on the books.)

"We aren't worried about guns in Texas," Lingle is quoted as saying, "but you can't sell a



concealed dildo." Fourteen months of legal maneuvers followed, and the next year, he and his partner, Bill White, moved to Houston. White died of AIDS in 1995. He was 39. Lingle's life, and the bookstore's, shared features with other gay institutions of that time. There was police harassment, death by AIDS, and then—just after the business had finally become socially acceptable—death by Internet.

But when I was in high school, Lobo loomed fascinatingly. "A lot of people come to the door of the bookstore and don't even come in," Lingle said in the *OutSmart* article. I knew the feeling: I had never felt so bold walking into a store. I knew that walking in meant walking into something from which I could never again walk out. Once inside, I ought to have gravitated to works of gay literature. But being a teenage boy, I gravitated toward the porn instead. No straight person can understand the thrill of a gay boy's first encounter with a magazine made for boys like him. Has anybody ever properly sung the praises of the gay pornographers?

**I**F I WERE TO TRY, I WOULD START BY SAYING THAT GAY PORN is entirely different from straight porn. It's not even a close cousin. To use the same word implies an equation, implies that they were the same. They were not the same. There should have been another word for it.

Boys of my generation—of every generation before mine—were assumed to be interested in girls. There were limits to how this interest could be expressed, which depended on region and religion, and which changed as we grew. The ways 7-year-old boys were meant to interact with girls was different from the ways 16-year-olds could, and the role of teachers and parents was, in large part, to teach us to express this interest appropriately. At the same time, we were aggressively discouraged from looking at boys. The ridicule that surrounded homosexuality, the aura of weakness and inferiority and perversity and disease, was often more powerful than the outright violence that, we understood, awaited anyone who didn't get the message.

That message arrived long before we quite understood what it was about. Long before boys had any idea what sex or sexuality was, other children understood that there was something

**A different light:**  
Above, a portrait of the author as a young man: "The secrecy turned me on."

**"We aren't worried about guns in Texas. But you can't sell a concealed dildo."**

—Larry Lingle



different about certain boys, and often bullied them. Long before we knew which sexual interests were acceptable, or even what sexual interests were, we knew not to look at other boys. Later, realizing that we were the intended recipients of this unspoken message, we trained ourselves to avert our eyes. This required unrelenting vigilance. Wanting to look at other boys was the most natural, and most forbidden, thing in the world. Eyes could betray us, endanger us.

(How do you recognize gay men? To this day, I can spot them by their eyes.)

**Montrose memories:**  
Houston Pride, 1979.

Heterosexual couplings, romanticized and celebrated, were the plot of every book, every movie. And so, although I was lucky to be spared outright prejudice, bullying, or rejection, I shared with every other gay boy that knowledge that I wasn't supposed to look. The cops that were always on duty in the outside world were on duty inside of me, too. If I was going to keep my secret, I needed to be unrelentingly vigilant. It helped that, when I was growing up, any images of men that were even slightly sexually suggestive appeared in a heterosexual frame. When we grew a bit more sophisticated, when we learned a bit more about how to look at them, we saw that, despite this frame, many of these images were—actually, secretly—intended for us. A magazine called *Playgirl* preserved the frame even in its title.

Gay porn's contribution was to strip away the frame. I don't think a naked woman could ever look as good to a straight man

as those guys looked to us. Here, at last, were men who didn't want me to look away; who, instead, had done everything possible to get me to look. They had put incredible effort into making themselves as attractive as possible. They had spent years working out. Some had left the hair on their faces or bodies; some had removed it. Great care had gone into lighting them, dressing them, styling them, photographing them, so we could see everything they

had to show. These were not men for women. These, finally, were men for us. Their appeal was not akin to pictures of women for straight boys, merely sexual. It was existential.

These men's appeal was their invitation to look. *Check us out. Take all the time you want*, they said, knowing this was what we wanted most. They were looking at us, daring us to look back; and though their bodies were undeniably attractive, the real appeal was their eyes. In almost every one of the gay sex stories I devoured as a teenager, the plot hinged on the eyes. Two men were walking past each other; a glance gave something away. "What are you looking at?" an unattainable jock said to a boy caught peeping. I knew about wanting to look a slight split second longer—and forcing myself to look away. I knew what it was like to wonder about every guy I met: friend or foe? In gay porn, there was always a happy ending.

IN THE OUTSIDE WORLD, THERE WERE STARTING to be more images of gay men. In 1992, when I was 16, I saw *Les Nuits Fauves*, a French movie by a director named Cyril Collard. It included some sex scenes; I don't remember how explicit they were, but in a world in which such images were almost entirely absent, they were there, among the first I had ever seen. The next year came *Philadelphia*, starring the heterosexual actor Tom Hanks, whose "courage" in portraying a gay man was often praised as an indication that times were changing; for a straight man to play a gay man would once have meant career suicide. Hanks's

**When I was growing up, any images of men that were slightly suggestive appeared in a heterosexual frame. Gay porn stripped away the frame.**

character died of AIDS—and so, a few months after *Les Nuits Fauves* was released, did Collard. Now we were allowed to see a few gay men—but only with the assurance that, in the movie and even in real life, they would die at the end.

There were no such deaths in gay porn. There were no high school bullies. There was no AIDS and no vice squad, no Republicans and no religious right, nobody's hateful family kicking them out, nobody getting arrested for the possession of dildos. It was a paradise exclusively inhabited by attractive men fucking as many other hot men as they wanted—and living happily ever after. It was a bright vision of an alternative future. And from the time I discovered these magazines, I understood clearly that—marginal as they were, invisible as they were to heterosexuals, and even to the many gay people who had no access to them—the right wing was correct to worry.

What was the threat that led the cops to bust down the door of a place like Lobo? To grow up gay in the era of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush was to understand that the GOP's attacks on "obscenity," their obnoxious jokes about AIDS, their efforts to regulate women's sexual activity through restrictions on abortion and birth control, were not merely a footnote, as their supporters in neighborhoods like mine told themselves. These people were "fiscal conservatives" or "tough on crime" but saw nothing wrong with contraception or dirty movies. In the posh enclaves of Houston and many similar places, Republican voters viewed these policies as unsavory compromises inevitable in politics.

But to be gay was to understand that certain people had decided that to look at other men was to subvert the state. Looking at men was incompatible with the culture I was being groomed to inherit. To do so openly meant to relinquish whatever role I had been assigned by birth and education. The empire may not yet have realized that I was a subversive, but it knew about my kind. It knew that we were dangerous, and its stewards harassed people like me. There were so many reasons to distrust that state, and the list grew longer the more I learned about it. But for me, the most basic reason was that it wanted me dead.

That knowledge made me look at the people in charge of my society in a different way than I would have if I

had been heterosexual. I felt no loss at knowing, long before they did, that I would be excluded from the world over which such people presided, the world for which I had been made. I knew that, if being gay meant losing certain possibilities, it also offered a whole new realm of other possibilities unattainable by my heterosexual peers. I suspected that the smartest among those peers would envy those possibilities, and time has proved me right.

But that didn't solve the problem of what to do with myself. If I wasn't going to be the person I was brought up to be, what else was I to do? A life spent poolside with Brad Stone and Chase Hunter and Jake Andrews was not realistic. (Where are they now? Do they know how much they were loved?) Unlike virtually everyone I knew, these guys weren't trying to get into an Ivy League school, or dreaming of becoming an investment banker. (Although maybe they, too, dreamed of Princeton and Morgan Stanley, as far as I knew; in the days before the Internet, it was impossible to know anything of these men beyond a few carefully edited images.) But it was harder for me to let go of the values—not to mention the privileges—with which I grew up. It's not that I didn't want to. It was that I couldn't see many viable alternatives.

I knew, however, that to take off your clothes for the eyes of other men was to reject our society more thrillingly than any other way I knew. These men were showing me other possibilities. And knowing these possibilities existed, even though I didn't yet know which ones, allowed me to bide my time. I'd keep pretending to be the perfect American boy. I became an Eagle Scout. I smiled at the thought that the people around me had no idea, and the thought gave me that glint in my eye. I'd look at guys in secret for now—knowing that the minute I got to college they'd start to look back.

AS SOON AS I STOPPED AVERTING MY EYES, I KNEW THAT I WOULD BE DISQUALIFYING MYSELF FROM WHOLE AREAS OF THE SOCIETY THAT MADE ME. The perverse part of me was looking forward to it. If I dreaded exclusion, I also wanted to be freed from the jail of societal expectations and allowed to make a life of my own—but then, right as I went to college, the outside world changed. Not everywhere. Not for everyone. Not entirely. But it

**Long before we knew which sexual interests were acceptable, or even what sexual interests were, we knew not to look at other boys.**



**Sexual outlaws?**  
From the fervid nights of *Les Nuits Fauves* (left) to the eternal sunshine of *Will & Grace* (below), much was gained. And something was lost.



changed, and with astounding speed. It felt that suddenly, lots of people—not everyone, by all means, but lots of people—stopped caring if you were gay. Decades of activism by thousands of unsung Larry Lingles had led the way. To come of age as a gay man in those years, in the 1990s and 2000s, was like being there when a glacier that had sat quietly for thousands of years suddenly lurched seaward and split into icebergs. Right as I was entering adulthood, victory started to feel foreordained, and though we still faced innumerable problems, we thought that the momentum we had witnessed would continue. We thought—as we would not later—that these problems would be solved.

## “Every male homosexual lives under the constant threat of arbitrary arrest and a wrecked life.”

—John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw*

**Favorite son:** Just as the author (pictured below) entered college, homosexuals seemed to shift from outcasts to interest group. The abundance of porn on the Internet soon made publications like *Advocate Men* seem quaint.

We had come so far, so fast. In 1977, the year after I was born, John Rechy wrote in *The Sexual Outlaw* that “every male homosexual lives under the constant threat of arbitrary arrest and a wrecked life.” The year I left home, 1994, there were still weeds on Montrose lawns. We were seven years from Lingle’s arrest for selling dildos; two years from a Republican National Convention, in Houston, that denounced gay people with a fervor once reserved for communists and race-mixers. The speed of the change, at least in my world, seemed stunning.

It was true that, for a while, people went through the motions. Barack Obama might not have been able to win the Democratic nomination in 2008 if he hadn’t pretended to be against gay marriage. But the change happened so quickly that it was hard to remember how total the revolution had been. AIDS became a treatable long-term health issue—akin to diabetes—at least if you could afford that treatment; like all health issues, this one, in our country, was brutally divided by class. In a few short years, gay people went from a diseased enemy of the American family to the fun sidekicks in *Will & Grace*. This new homosexual (abs; BFF) was a considerable improvement over previous incarnations. But it was still condescending, still a caricature, still something less than full equality. And it was uncomfortably compatible with the consumerist values of the very empire that—it had seemed only last week—wanted us dead.

That’s why I didn’t like the word “homophobia.” It suggested an irrational fear. Part of me always thought—hoped—that this fear was rational. There was a bit of fantasy in this, too: No matter how much I dreamed about being separate from the system that produced me, I was always aware that I was one of its most-favored sons, and that whatever I might say or think about that system—even using the phrase “the system”—was about as threatening as a teenager painting his fingernails black. People where I came from were afraid of the descendants of the people our country had enslaved. And I thought it

was only fair that they be a little bit afraid of homosexuals, too.

The fact was, though, I was incredibly lucky. I couldn’t complain. I was fully aware that it was easier to be born gay where and when I was than at any other place or time in history. Only a few years before I came into adulthood, a gay person of identical background would have been much more marginal. The old taboo lost its electricity with a speed that was a mystery, and the result was a great human achievement. Prejudice was eroding. Effective treatments for AIDS were emerging. And—if we needed any more convincing that things were getting better—the Internet came along to offer an unlimited supply of sex. No gay people in history had it as good.

Through no effort of my own, my life had been wondrously easy. The larger effort had been made for me by others; and as I inherited other things, I inherited the fruits of someone else’s struggle. The biggest risk I had ever taken was sneaking into a bookshop to buy dirty magazines. Compared to the obstacles someone like Larry Lingle had confronted, or that the models and the staff of those magazines had faced, this was pretty pathetic. Unlike Lingle, I stood zero risk of being raided by the vice squad. My partner would not, like his, die of AIDS. I would never lose my job, home, friends, or family because I was gay. I had lucked into my life, into the broader circumstances of my life, and in this I was typical of a specific social class, in a specific generation: allowed to retreat into our own world, to pursue whatever relationships and careers and hobbies we chose, secure in the knowledge that nobody outside would ever bother us.

We wouldn’t have to invent a new way to live after all. Those of us who grew up thinking that we would be expelled from the empire were welcomed back into its fold. I had been steeled to join a minority—and then, as soon as I did, everyone, at least in my small world, forgot it was a minority. I had no hankering for opprobrium. But it was the same story with so many of the struggles my generation inherited: The victories were in the past. Though we were their beneficiaries, they had happened without us. We would not storm Omaha Beach, or march with Martin Luther King in Alabama, or throw a brick at the Stonewall riot. We had no more played a role in these struggles than we had played a role in inventing the telephone. Like a superficial wound that healed without any effort on our part, so, it seemed, did society improve. Progress had happened without us in the past, and would in the future.

By the time I graduated, gayness had become fashionable in a way that had been impossible to imagine when I was buying *Advocate Men* in Montrose. Rather than hating us, more and more people wanted to join us—or at least



accessorize with us. Over the next decades, the group known as “gays and lesbians” expanded. We would be united with bisexuals, transgender people, and then a whole list of “sexual minorities”: intersex, asexuals, demisexuals, the gender fluid, the nonbinary, the polyamorous, and so forth, all of whom were knitted together by the word “queer.” I liked the word when it was used by radical AIDS groups, but I didn’t like it once it became generalized. It suggested weirdness, first of all, and I wasn’t weird; I was gay. And the word eventually began to be employed by anyone situated on the “spectrum of sexuality”—and that, by definition, was everyone.

I LOVED GAY PORN FOR THE PLOT. THE TURN-ON, THE TENSION, the naughtiness, came from those forbidden glances, from that moment of wondering how this was going to turn out. Of course, if you bought the magazine or the video at a place like Lobo, you knew how it was going to turn out. But you also knew how a Jane Austen novel was going to turn out, and that didn’t make the book any less exciting. Porn wasn’t real life. It was an aestheticization—and, like all successful aestheticizations, more real than real life. A novel set in a splendid 19th-century country estate could feel far more relevant than a contemporary novel: Its romance, its beauty, were all the more acute because the emotions behind its exotic setting were so intimately familiar. This kind of gay porn had the intensified immediacy, and the magic, of dreams. The romance novel was effective because we longed for perfect love. And gay porn was effective because anyone who bought these secret publications understood the experience of not being allowed to look, not looking, looking, and then—eventually, finally—having someone look back. This was to gay porn what the marriage plot was to Jane Austen. Once the ban on looking started to fade, this plot evaporated. Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay productions became celebrations of sex, of the body beautiful: pornography, but, though the models were all men, not quite what I thought of as gay pornography.

Herded into a minority by “coming out,” we were welcomed back into a bland everyone, a marketing niche with certain shared tastes. In a country in which the customer is always right, that meant prejudice was out. For people who grew up without seeing themselves represented except as controversies or problems, it was thrilling to see same-sex couples buying furniture, renting cars, visiting Disney World. It was a miracle how quickly hotel receptionists stopped looking askance when two men requested a king-size bed. It was nice to be treated as an individual, not as an issue.

This is what we thought we wanted most, and in this we were typical of the Americans of our time. We wanted our identity—but not all the time, not every day. We thought of ourselves as individuals; we didn’t like labels. We knew that too much identity could lead to the yellow stars or the whites-only water fountains, and so we preferred elective identities. We didn’t want race or religion or sexuality to be the only thing people saw when they looked at us. We wanted them to see “us”—whoever that was. I don’t think it occurred to us that these categories might be far too deeply rooted to be cast out by decree. I don’t think we wondered how much of



It was the same with so many of the struggles of my generation: The victories were in the past. Though we were their beneficiaries, they had happened without us.

“us” would be left once we removed religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, sexuality, from whatever it was we wanted other people to see. We looked back in bewilderment at the discrimination tolerated in earlier times, and felt happy to be alive at the moment when bigotry finally loosened its hold. We began to feel that progress was possible, that the arc of the moral universe was bending in the right direction.

Yet I felt the ambivalence of a radical artist unexpectedly showered with prizes. I was happy with the money, the new apartment, the critical respect. But I was also aware that the work suddenly being celebrated had been created in opposition to money, to those bourgeois critics—to the kinds of people who lived in these kinds of apartments. The older I got, the more compatible homosexuality was with a career at Morgan Stanley or the State Department. It was a kind of progress, I suppose. And the only sacrifice it demanded was our special way of looking: our eyes.

**N**



A riveting, beautifully-paced novel

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I HAVE BEEN A WORKING CLASSIST AND comic strip artist since college. But when art failed to pay the bills, I went to law school, passed the bar, and moonlighted as a Capitol Hill aide.

My Plan B included an extended stint as staff counsel and press secretary for Massachusetts Representative Barney Frank.

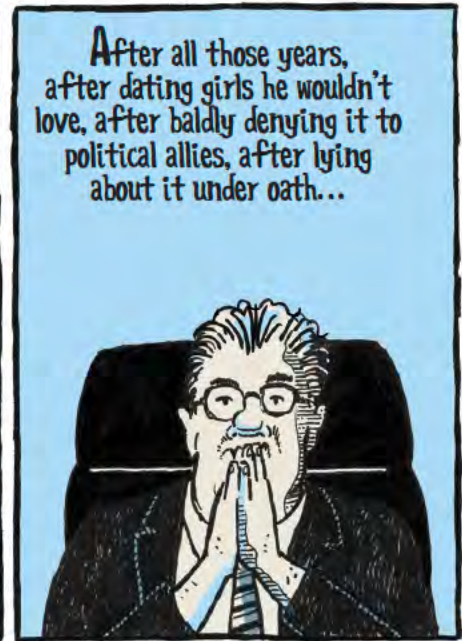
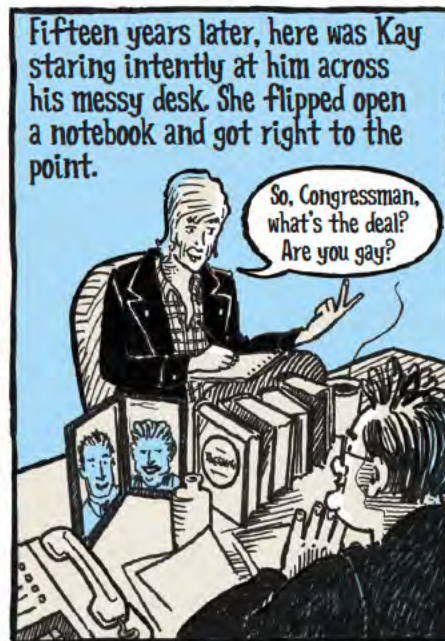
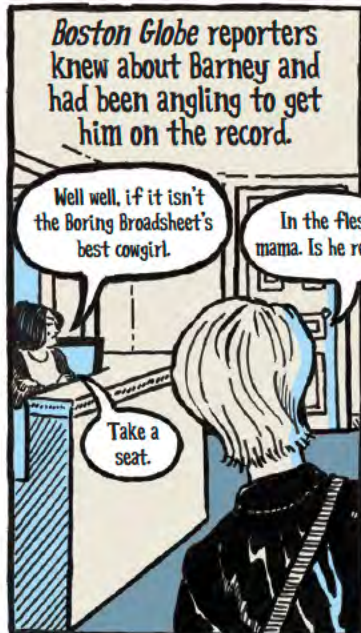
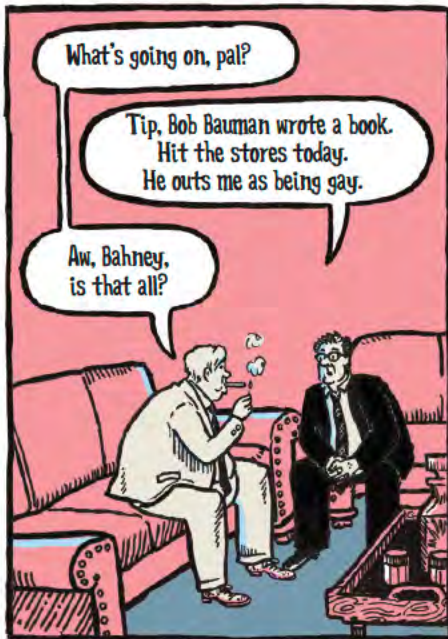
In *The Last Hurrah*, a great novel about Boston politics (and a Spencer Tracy movie), the newspaper cartoonist nephew of a big-city boss accompanies his uncle

during a mayoral campaign. My work on Barney's staff was a case of life imitating art—like the nephew, I was afforded a front-row seat to learn the stories that became *Smultrigay*.

In 1987, Barney became the first member of Congress to voluntarily come out as gay. Pretty routine stuff today, but at the time, his announcement seriously jolted America's political landscape, as well as the folks back home in the not-quite-as-liberal-as-its-reputation Bay State.



BY ERIC ORNER





After playing spin the bottle in stuffy Bayonne rumpus rooms, praying for the lights to be turned back on...



Well, that's enough of that, ladies & gentlemen. Time for everyone to go on home.

After a fucking lifetime of all that, he found himself saying:



Yeah, I am. So what?

I think the average voter says get the bridges built. Stop nukes. Find shelter for the homeless, and don't steal from the till. I'm hoping they don't give a damn about who I care to love or have sex with.



Good for you, darlin'.

Remember to breathe!

Still, back then, it was big news when a public figure came out...



To Barney's relief, the reaction was positive.



Hey, whaddehah floats yor boat.

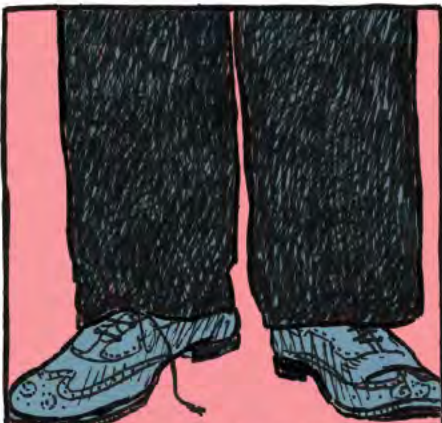
I should fix him up with my son.

FRANKIN' BENT SO WHAT?

FRANKIN' BENT SO WHAT?

REP FRANK LEAVES CLOSET

REP FRANK LEAVES CLOSET



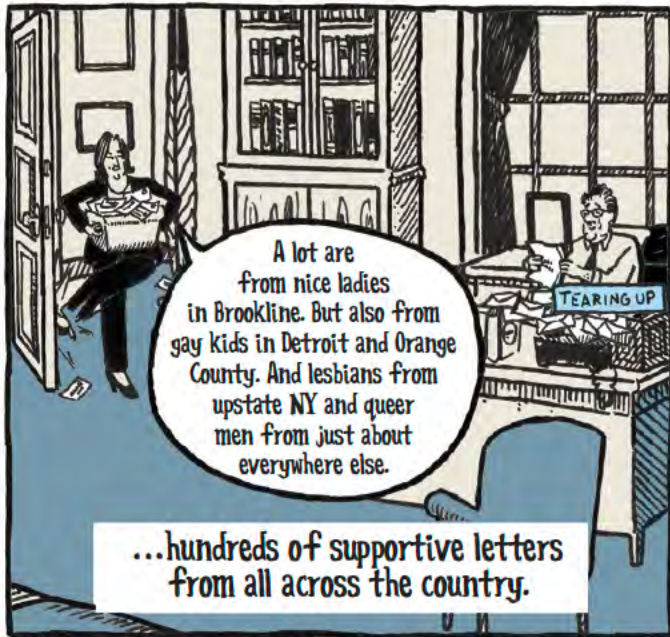
It turned out that for most voters, his being gay didn't matter any more than his failure to ever shine his shoes...

...or to love kissing babies. Their bottom line seemed to be "He fights on issues that matter." And on the bullshit side of politics, they were happy to cut him some slack and reelect him overwhelmingly.



And another nice thing came of coming out...





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# The Fierce Hope of Ana María Archila

The Brooklyn-based organizer is running for New York lieutenant governor, but is the left ready to compete statewide?

BY LIZA FEATHERSTONE

**W**HEN I ARRIVED AT THE KINGSBOROUGH HOUSES IN BROOKLYN'S Crown Heights neighborhood on a warm day in May, motorcycles and cars were speeding recklessly along the paved areas that the public housing residents use as walkways. Pedestrians yelled at the young men as they raced by. To be sure, the youth were engaging in unneighborly behavior, but as Jamell Henderson, 36, a tenant organizer who has lived here since he aged out of foster care, told me, the problem is one of resources: to restrict vehicles to residents and delivery trucks would require either a guard or an electronic system. Both cost money, which the New York City Housing Authority is unlikely to provide.

These projects are across the street from the Weeksville Heritage Center, the site of a free Black community that thrived during the 19th century and was a refuge for people fleeing capture after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850. Today, Kingsborough residents, most of whom are Black, are doing their best to help their community and families flourish, while enduring the legacies of slavery: deprivation, discrimination, and violence.

I was on a tour of the Kingsborough Houses with Ana María Archila, 43, the left-wing candidate for lieutenant governor of New York. She wore a bright pink jacket and black jeans, a colorful beaded necklace, and gold earrings. Henderson, who serves as the regional board chair for Citizen Action New York and had just been to a tenants' rights protest in Albany with Archila, was excited about her campaign and wanted her to get to know his community. Before she arrived, Henderson told me, "She is completely authentic. And that's rare." As we walked with her, I began to see what he meant.

As residents detailed their problems, Archila listened closely, responding not with talking points but with curiosity and a commitment to try to change things. Parents told her they have nowhere to take their kids to play. One woman said she's afraid to go outside because of recent shootings in the area. Other residents showed her playgrounds inside the projects that haven't been repaired and aren't safe. Archila asked where they go when they want to be outside with their children, and most mentioned green spaces that are far away: Prospect Park, Brooklyn Bridge Park. "We take our kids elsewhere to enjoy the good scenery," said Derrick Brown, who was planning to take his three kids—along with some other Kingsborough families—to Central Park that weekend.

"The most they can do is paint the benches," Brown said of the New York City Housing Authority. "They don't care about the projects." He complained of overpolicing: "We can't even have a cookout for the kids," because the police will break it up. The Weeksville Heritage

Liza Featherstone is a Nation contributing writer.



BE A  
HERO

Small illegible logo or text on the t-shirt.



**Kava-nope:** Ana María Archila addressed a crowd during a rally outside the Supreme Court against Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation in 2018.

Center is given permits to shut down the street for its events, he said, but “if we do it, it’s a criminal offense. We don’t get no respect in the projects.” Archila was so focused on what he was saying that when the two shook hands, Henderson had to remind her that she was campaigning and then told Brown, “You just shook hands with the next lieutenant governor!”

The residents took us to a child care center in one of the buildings. It’s lovingly supplied with books and toys, but now it’s unusable due to an unbearable stink—a sewer problem. The day care teacher said they do their best to ventilate it and keep the windows open when the kids are there.

New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, who is running for governor and asked Archila to be his running mate, joined us, along with a reporter for *The New York Times*. The sewage problem in the day care center got their attention: Both took notes and said they would follow up.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” Archila told the residents. “There is so much wealth in New York state, but it’s so unequal.”

There is plenty of money in the state to address these problems, she explained, but we need politicians willing to tax the rich more. That’s why Archila is running for lieutenant governor. Talking with residents, she pointed out that the current governor, Kathy Hochul, just spent \$850 million on a football stadium, even though one in five children in the state live in poverty. This does not represent what Archila calls “a culture of care.”

Realizing, with a bit of panic, that she was late to go pick up her kids, Archila had to leave abruptly. Later, in a café near City Hall, we discussed motherhood and how it changes your politics. She said she now looks at everyone and realizes “that someone took care of that person. We are all here because someone took care of us. That is actually what allows us to be. So let’s have politics that invite people into care.”

INITIALLY, GIVEN HOCHUL’S POPULARITY, ARCHILA’S campaign seemed merely symbolic. But that began to change in April, when Hochul’s handpicked lieutenant governor, Brian Benjamin, was forced out of office after the federal government indicted him on numerous corruption charges, including bribery, wire fraud, and conspiracy.

Hochul then pushed the legislature to rewrite the election laws to allow her to choose a new running mate. Showing a shocking disregard for the fortunes of the national Democratic Party, she selected Antonio Delgado, a US representative from an upstate purple district. Delgado had been in a tight race to hold on to his seat in the 19th District, which includes parts of Hudson Valley and the Capital Region, against Republican Marc Molinaro. Even before Hochul tapped Delgado, the vote was expected to be tight in a year in which the Democrats’ House majority is in peril. As



**“It doesn’t have to be this way. There is so much wealth in New York state, but it’s so unequal.”**

—Ana María Archila

the August primary looms, there is still no well-known Democrat in that race.

With centrist Democrats disgracing themselves, Archila's campaign suddenly looked winnable. In many ways, she is the right person for this opportunity. Archila is beloved in the immigrant labor rights community, and she has political connections in the Brooklyn neighborhoods where she's worked as an organizer for Make the Road, the immigrant advocacy group she cofounded in 2007. Williams, her running mate, came close to winning the lieutenant governor seat in 2018, suggesting that a progressive candidate could succeed. Unabashedly on the side of the working class, she is magnetic and charming.

Still, Archila faces an uphill climb in these remaining days before the primary. New Yorkers have not elected someone so solidly on the left to statewide office since Franklin D. Roosevelt became governor in 1928. She has little name recognition outside of New York City. Going against big money—especially New York's real estate and finance sectors—takes people power. And Archila may not have the statewide relationships and organization to pull it off, a gap that reflects the state of the left rather than any shortcomings of the candidate.

**A**RCHILA'S POLITICS WERE FORMED amid intense violence and conflict. She grew up in the 1980s and '90s in Bogotá, Colombia, a war zone of competing drug cartels and political bloodshed. During the country's 1990 presidential race, when she was 11, three of the candidates were assassinated. Her father was a human rights activist; many of his friends were killed. One day, he told her he was leaving for the United States, as the country had become too dangerous for political activists. "Anyone who was in Colombia at that time was shaped by the war," she said.

Yet despite the traumatic situation in Bogotá, it was also a time of democratic experimentation, and Archila, who stayed behind with her mother for a few years before joining her father in Brooklyn, was able to glean valuable political lessons.

Growing up, she was influenced by Antanas Mockus, a philosopher who became Bogotá's mayor, who ran for office "proposing that to make Bogotá safe, we needed to build a new culture, a culture of care," she said. "He did all

sorts of unusual, extravagant things." Archila, who was 12 at the time, recalled Mockus donning a superhero cape to meet with the Colombian president. As mayor, instead of hiring police to patrol crosswalks, he recruited mimes to mock people who disregarded traffic rules. He introduced games to promote the idea that in every society, Archila said, "everyone gives, and everyone takes. The question is whether we each give our fair share."

At 17, Archila joined her father in New York City, where her aunt, who had been a lawyer in Colombia, was cleaning houses because her English wasn't good enough to allow her to practice law. The aunt, Sara María Archila, found that immigrants like herself faced terrible conditions and lacked labor rights. Seeking to change that, she became an organizer—and a mentor to Ana María. When Sara María started the Latin American Integration Center, an immigrant workers' nonprofit, Archila joined her at its Staten Island branch, thinking she was going to run arts activities for the children. Instead, her aunt trained her to organize. When Sara María was diagnosed with cancer, she taught her niece everything she'd need to know to run the LAIC after her death, from raising money to creating "spaces of respect." Archila became its executive director in 2003. "She died, and the next day I was holding her legacy in my hands," Archila said. "I was 22 years old."

In 2007, the LAIC merged with another immigrant rights organization, Make the Road by Walking, to form Make the Road New York, and Archila became a codirector of the new organization. Make the Road's membership grew from 2,000 people to some 23,000 today, and it expanded its focus from pressuring employers on wage theft and working conditions to helping immigrant workers form unions and secure their organizing rights. In a 2013 article for *The Nation*, the veteran organizer Jane McAlevey chronicled the group's victories, which included passing stronger state laws on wage theft and helping car wash workers form unions. McAlevey described the culture of Make the Road New York as one of "love and

agitation," praising the group's emphasis on "high participation" and concluding that if more of the US progressive movement were to adopt its approach, "we'd spend less time licking our wounds and more time celebrating our successes."

By the mid-2010s, Archila was well-known in Brooklyn for her roles in Make the Road and a companion national organization, the Center for Popular Democracy, where she'd become the codirector in 2013. Under her leadership, the CPD won victories on housing policy (strengthening renter protections, for example), democracy (making it easier to vote), and numerous other areas. Then, in 2018, Archila achieved national fame.

After Brett Kavanaugh was accused of attempted rape, Archila, who is a survivor of sexual assault, went to Washington, D.C., with other women to protest his Supreme Court nomination. As Republican Senator Jeff Flake stepped out of an elevator in the Capitol, Archila and Maria Gallagher, a woman she'd only met that day, confronted him about his support for Kavanaugh. "What you are doing is allowing someone who has actually

**"She died, and the next day I was holding her legacy in my hands. I was 22 years old."**

—Ana María Archila

**Friend of the Squad:** Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, right, invited Ana María Archila, left, to Donald Trump's State of the Union address in 2019.



**“The difficulty was:  
Could I build a statewide  
organization? I’ve never  
run for office. I’ve never  
raised money for that.”**

—Ana María Archila

violated a woman to sit in the Supreme Court,” Archila told him, with CNN cameras running. She reminded Flake that he has children: “What are you doing, sir?” Flake looked extremely uncomfortable, and the reporters present tried to get him to respond. A few days before, Archila had told the story of her own sexual assault to protesters assembled outside Flake’s office. The elevator confrontation went viral on social media and was widely covered

by the mainstream press. Later, Flake changed his position slightly, saying he would support Kavanaugh only after the FBI had investigated the accusations. Explaining his shift, Flake credited the women’s elevator intervention. (Unfortunately, after a brief FBI probe led by Kavanaugh’s law school classmate, the judge was confirmed, 50 to 48, largely along party lines.)

**Elevator pitch:**

Ana María Archila confronts Senator Jeff Flake, urging him not to confirm Brett Kavanaugh as a Supreme Court justice.

**A**T A PRESS CONFERENCE AT NEW YORK’S CITY HALL, where Archila announced a slate of endorsers, I met Sophie Ellman-Golan of the Jewish Vote. She told me that although Archila is famous for her encounter with Flake, her role in supporting other women and encouraging them to speak up was just as important. “Ana María is absolutely not about ego,” Ellman-Golan said. “She never sought to make it about herself.”

A few minutes later, a crowd of teenagers protesting gun violence burst into City Hall Park. Archila went over to talk with them. Like the residents of the Kingsborough Houses, the teens liked her immediately; she seemed so plainly trustworthy and was entirely focused on them. They were soon taking selfies with her. Archila is “the real thing,” as Henderson, the tenant organizer, said: She’s all that a leader should be. Her message of redistribution and hope is a good one, and with children taking to the streets to protest gun violence in the wake of Uvalde, it’s clear that a “culture of care” is long overdue.

When I asked Archila about her campaign efforts upstate, she talked about the immigrant worker-organizers she had met on a recent trip; they sounded like amazing people doing great work. But her campaign has no physical offices—even in Brooklyn. The field operation is particularly skimpy upstate, without a lot

of volunteer opportunities even in June, and in New York City this spring, she had far fewer canvassing events than many candidates for a state Assembly or City Council seat, though she dramatically escalated her get-out-the-vote efforts in the weeks leading up to the primary.

Archila’s platform is similar to those of other left candidates this cycle: housing for all, health care for all, public safety, child care, a “Green New York,” and funding for public education. These are the right issues for a working-class campaign, and they have resonated in Brooklyn and Queens politics in recent years, but it’s not clear that has translated into either broad or deep support for Archila’s candidacy.

Antonio Delgado was able to transfer the money from his congressional campaign to the lieutenant governor’s race, and as a result, he has over \$2.2 million—more than seven times the amount Archila has raised. Even more troubling, the other candidate in the race, Diana Reyna, a machine politician aligned with the conservative Democratic gubernatorial candidate Tom Suozzi, has also raised more than Archila. Most of the donations to Archila’s campaign have come from Brooklyn, many from the activist community. Few are from upstate, and fewer are in amounts less than \$50. (When a candidate receives small contributions, it is often seen as a sign of working-class enthusiasm.)

While many progressive politicians—especially those connected with the Working Families Party, which recruited Archila to run—have endorsed her, it will take a broader coalition to win statewide. In some ways, the race seems like a missed opportunity for the left. The lieutenant governor, New York’s second-highest-ranking official, becomes acting governor if the governor dies or is otherwise unable to do the job. That’s a situation that seems hypothetical, until suddenly it isn’t—after all, Andrew Cuomo once seemed indestructible, and now his lieutenant, Hochul, is governor. Given Archila’s personal gifts and her political priorities, it would be wonderful to have her in executive office; and given the conflict between centrists and the left in the legislature, it would be a major advance to have someone firmly in the latter camp as president of the state Senate—one of the lieutenant governor’s roles.

Then again, it’s hard to fault the left for not going all in on Archila’s campaign. There are many other priorities this election year. A bigger socialist, progressive, and left presence is needed in the state Assembly—as we’ve just seen from that body’s failure to pass the Build Public Renewables Act (which did pass the state Senate) and the Good Cause Eviction bill, which would have greatly strengthened protections for renters. While several candidates supported by the Democratic Socialists of America, including Samy Olivares, a North Brooklyn district



leader running for state Assembly, have endorsed Archila, NYC-DSA has not given a formal endorsement or, crucially, the volunteer resources and work that such an endorsement entails.

This should be no surprise to those closely following New York politics: The organization favors candidates active in the DSA and with a clear path to victory, and in any case NYC-DSA is stretched thin, running 13 campaigns this year, all for Assembly and Senate seats, reflecting the organization's statewide priorities of tenant protections and publicly funded renewable energy.

The Working Families Party is showing up for Archila, but it has also endorsed candidates in a number of other New York state races, many of them more promising than the one for lieutenant governor. Left and progressive candidates who are unaffiliated with these larger organizations—CUNY activist Tim Hunter in Crown Heights, for example—are attracting enthusiastic volunteers. And there are also the efforts to expand the Squad in Congress, such as Brittany Ramos



**The incumbent:** New York Lieutenant Governor Antonio Delgado, left, joins Governor Kathy Hochul in May 2022 at his first press conference.

DeBarros's campaign to fend off centrist Max Rose and then flip the seat held by January 6 Republican Nicole Malliotakis in a district that covers Staten Island and parts of southern Brooklyn. If the New York left had deeper and broader institutional reach—if, for example, more labor unions supported progressive electoral campaigns—these efforts would begin to feed off one another. But we're not there yet.

Archila does not minimize the challenges of this race. "The difficulty was: Could I build a statewide organization? I've never run for office," she said. "I've never raised money for that, never asked for endorsements. Is this a reasonable thing to do? I didn't know if it was reasonable or not, but I did know that a coronation was about to happen"—referring to the process by which Hochul and Benjamin were chosen as the New York Democratic Party's nominees before the primary. "When coronations happen, the communities that lose are working-class communities, Black and brown communities."

During the pandemic, Archila continued, working-class people lost loved ones, jobs, and homes. "Our communities were fatigued and demoralized. When we were fatigued, the forces that didn't lose loved ones, the people that didn't lose jobs, the billionaires that didn't lose anything—who gained during the pandemic—were reorganizing. And we've lost enough." **N**

BEBETO MATTHEWS / AP PHOTO

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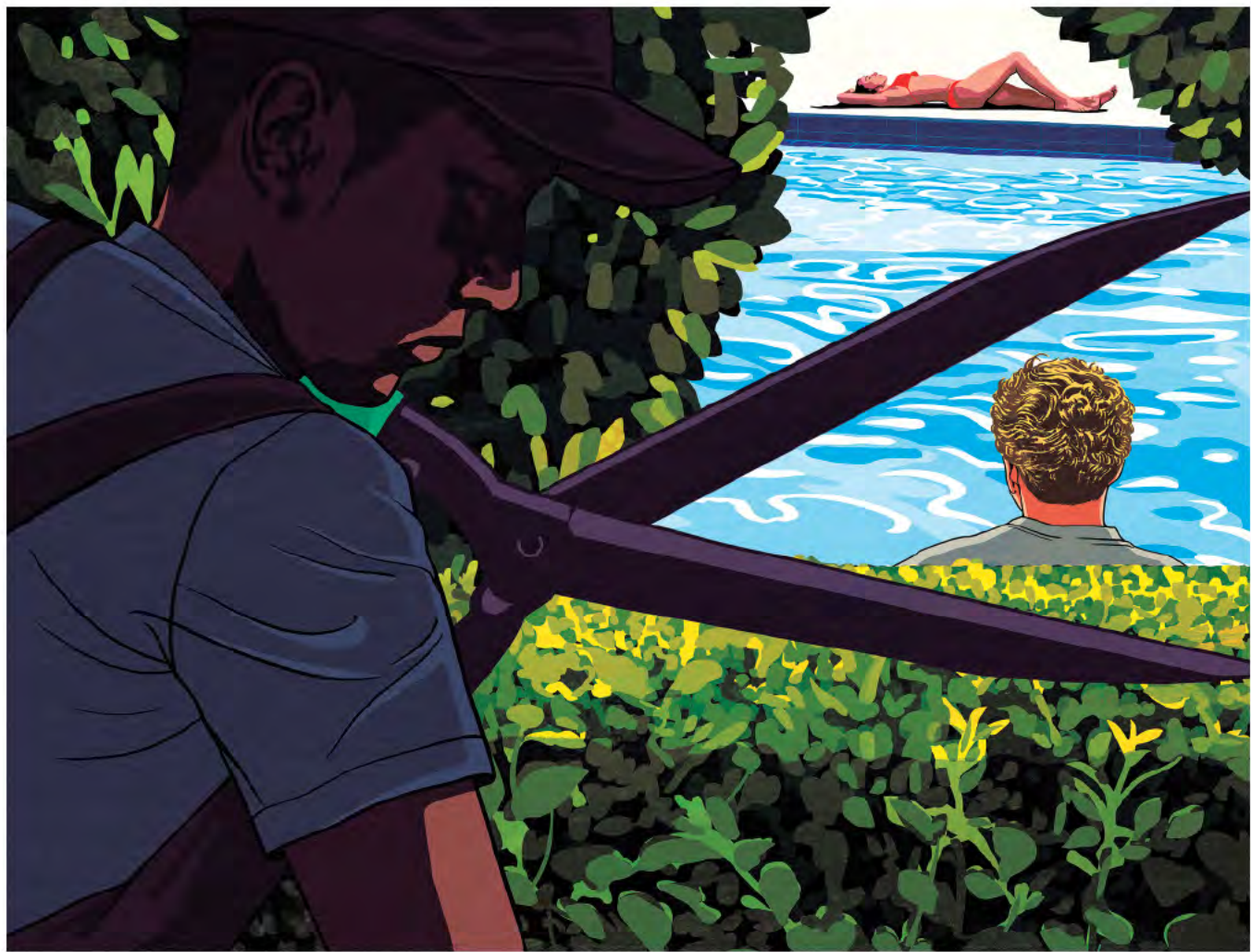
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## Baroque Monsters

*Fernanda Melchor's Mexican gothic*

BY NICOLÁS MEDINA MORA



THROUGHOUT THE MIDDLE AGES AND UP until the era of Romanticism, most literature written in Europe and its colonies was decidedly allegorical in nature: Its concrete signifiers (characters, images, plot points) were understood to refer to abstract entities (ideas, concepts, teachings). The first readers of *The Divine Comedy*, to take the most obvious example, saw Dante the pilgrim not just as a middle-aged conspirator exiled from Florence and mad with mourning for a teenage girl, but as a personification of the soul in search of God. But in the 18th century, allegory began to go out of fashion. The explicit correspondences between the literal and the figurative began to seem staid,

ILLUSTRATION BY LILY QIAN

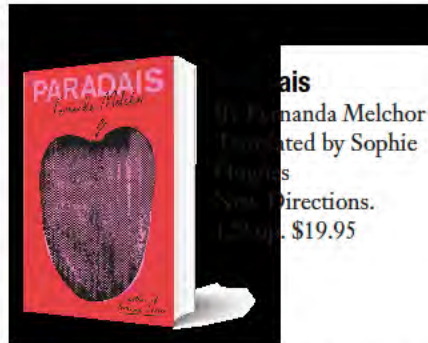
inferior, even boring. In its place, realism and a concern for the unique rather than the typical emerged. This shift did not entirely banish allegory. One could list countless modern examples, both “highbrow” (Brecht, Beckett, Kafka) and “popular” (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Dune*, *Get Out*). But even if allegory has yet to go extinct in Western literature, it has become more and more uncommon.

That is, with the exception of Latin America. There, allegory has continued to thrive. Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* might be one of the most prominent examples, but the same could be said of many the Boom generation’s masterpieces—from Juan Rulfo allegorizing the incompleteness of the Mexican Revolution in *Pedro Páramo* to Augusto Roa Bastos doing something similar with the dictatorships of the Southern Cone in *I, the Supreme*.

Today, too, many Latin American novelists carry on the allegorical tradition. Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* and Yuri Herrera’s *Signs Preceding the End of the World* both invite allegorical readings, as does the work of the Mexican novelist Fernanda Melchor. A crime reporter by trade, Melchor is only at the beginning of an exciting and promising career: She published her debut novel, *Falsa Liebre*, in 2013, followed by *Aquí no Es Miami*, a collection of literary journalism from the same year, and her second novel, *Hurricane Season*, in 2017.

Both *Falsa Liebre* and *Aquí no Es Miami* showed great promise, but it was *Hurricane Season* that established her as one of the most important writers working in Spanish today. A polyphonic account of the brutal murder of a transgender witch in a small town on the Mexican gulf coast, the novel was at once a literal murder mystery and an allegorical fable. Composed in labyrinthine sentences that often stretched for dozens of pages and yet somehow remained perfectly legible, *Hurricane Season* was also a prime example of social commentary: The killing of the witch was a synecdoche for femicide in general. The novel presented a systematic critique of gender relations in Mexico—the witch provides abortions to the town’s women; the main secondary plot concerns a girl’s sexual abuse; many of the male characters have sex with men, sometimes for money, while nonetheless remaining violently homophobic—without ever becoming a pamphlet. Melchor achieved this balancing act by structuring her vehicle (the literal level of narration) according to the conventions of “popular” genres such as slasher horror and the noir novel, a device that makes her work thoroughly readable even if one doesn’t engage in the allegorical exegesis that it calls for.

Now, with her third novel, *Paradais*, Melchor appears poised to apply her allegorical devices in an even more explicitly



political fashion. Translated by Sophie Hughes—also the translator of *Hurricane Season*—the new book revisits some of Melchor’s signature concerns: crime, misogyny, the tropical gothic of her home state of Veracruz. But while *Hurricane Season* was epic in scope, spanning two generations and featuring a large cast of characters, *Paradais* is more focused. Taking place over the course of a few weeks, the novel does not abandon the large scale of her interests but instead zooms in on them. It serves as a morality play about a working-class teenager’s participation in a rich kid’s plot to rape and murder a bourgeois housewife, his neighbor in a gated community called Paradise, or, in the book’s Spanish transliteration, *Paradais*.

**P**aradais’s title evokes a genealogy of allegorists that runs from Dante to José Lezama Lima, and from the outset Melchor makes it clear that this is what she is up to. But in many other ways, she departs from her earlier efforts. If in *Hurricane Season* she seemed primarily concerned with language and form, in *Paradais* she appears more interested in content and message. While *Hurricane Season* was often subtle, the new book is blunt, narrated through a free indirect discourse that doesn’t pull

any punches when it comes to her protagonist’s inner monologue.

Likewise, if gender was the main focus of *Hurricane Season*, *Paradais* takes class as its central concern. Having narrowed her wide cast of characters to only a mismatched pair of miserable teens, one rich and the other poor, Melchor offers a study of the pathologies of both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—and does so in prose laced with both high diction and the vernacular. Her protagonist—Polo, a 16-year-old gardener in the community—is the incarnation of this class divide: He works in the community but is in no way a part of it. He is called *muchacho*, a word that means “lad” but which in Mexico carries ugly connotations of “servant.”

Polo’s antagonist, Franco “Fatboy” Andrade, is also sketched less as a character and more as a caricature. Fatboy is grotesque, almost inhuman—a baroque monster, lust incarnate. His “gelatinous body”—a generous reader will see that the fatphobia is not Melchor’s but Polo’s—is a transparent symbol for the gluttonous greed of the rich: the blind, polymorphous desire to swallow, to consume, to possess; the insatiable need for more that will eventually drive the boy to unspeakable crimes. But the main conflict in *Paradais* is not sex or gender violence—though those are certainly important—but anger at economic injustice: It does not follow from Franco’s gluttony for fleshy capital but from Polo’s growing hatred of the rich. It is this hatred, enabled by his underlying misogyny, that eventually leads him to join Franco’s murderous scheme—a nihilistic self-immolation that, as we will see later, is the product of misdirected political rage.

Before Polo joins up with Franco to plot a home invasion, he deals with his alienation by drinking; and in fact it is alcohol that brings him close to Franco. The rich kid has money but cannot leave the gated community to buy booze, and so he deputizes Polo, the *muchacho*, to procure liquor, which he shares with him in long, mosquito-infested nights of bingeing on the dock by Paradais’s river. The two are not friends, though one suspects that Franco doesn’t know this: Polo cannot stand his drinking buddy and puts up with him only because he cannot afford alcohol without Franco. His tyrannical mother—

Nicolás Medina Mora is a writer and translator. He lives in Mexico City, where he works as an editor at Revista Nexos.

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herself a personification of the cruelly optimistic ethic of bootstrap-pulling known in Mexico as *echeleganismo*—keeps all of his paycheck and spends it to support Polo's slightly older and detested cousin, who is pregnant. In a twist, we gradually discover that this cousin sexually abused Polo when he was younger and that Polo may be the father of her child.

For all the misery of his home life, however, Polo seems to think that his greatest problem is a labor conflict. Melchor makes this explicit in a passage about the teenager's contract, which stipulates that his working hours would be "between seven am and six pm with one hour for lunch at midday, and that any activity undertaken outside of those hours would be duly remunerated." Contract notwithstanding, Polo's boss expects him to work whenever and for as long as the boss sees fit—and also to perform such humiliating extracurricular services as washing his personal car. Reading about Polo's resentment toward his boss and the apparent powerlessness of Mexican labor law gives Melchor's allegory a comic

element: It turns out that the gardener of the Garden of Eden is owed overtime pay, like so many gardeners toiling in more earthly domains. Here the novel highlights the almost feudal nature of the so-called "service economy" in Mexico. Even in the most paradisiacal places, one fact stands above all others: Before the power of capital, everyone else, including the state, is powerless.

Polo would like nothing more than to spend his days fishing in the river, or if not, at least to get as far away from that river as possible. But this is impossible. It is the knowledge of this impossibility, the awareness of the extent of his unfreedom, that drives Polo to drink—and, in a drunken stupor, to listen to Franco's fantasy of breaking into the house of a woman in the community named Marián. Once in the house, he tells Polo, he would subdue Marián's husband and rape her. If Polo agrees to help him, Franco says, he can steal anything valuable that he finds in the house. This drunken fantasy gradually becomes a plan, one that Polo half-pretends to go along with, at first almost as a joke, then suddenly very seriously—so seriously that he winds up wrapping so much duct tape around the faces of Marián's children that they asphyxiate.

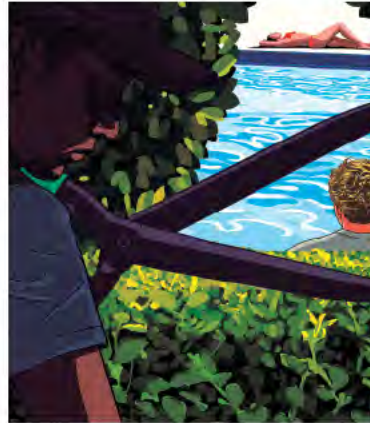
**G**iven its violent plot, there is little doubt that *Paradais* is a morality play, a story about the *muchacho's* descent into evil. But it is also a searing critique of class, one that seems to espouse a kind of determinism equidistant from Karl Marx and Juan Rulfo. And so we have to ask: Was it all fated? Was Polo's situation truly so hopeless that this was the only exit? One could imagine a slightly different story, one in which the *muchacho's* hatred for the rich led him to activism or organizing of one sort or another—perhaps even into guerrilla struggle—rather than to the killing of children. But in the Veracruz of

Melchor's imagination, there seems to be no place for emancipatory politics. Her characters never consider the possibility that their private disasters might be the product of public injustice, let alone that the answer to those disasters might be collective rather than individual.

This lack of collective consciousness is surprising, given that Mexico is a rather politicized place and Melchor a writer of fundamentally political concerns. But the absence of explicit political action in her books is not a matter of omission; she is making a point. Though Mexico these days has a government that purports to be leftist, the truth is that the country's social ills, from violence to poverty, have only grown more bitter since the defeat of neoliberalism in the 2018 presiden-

tial election. The fatalism of Melchor's characters, their inability or unwillingness to see their world as contingent, is the product of a disillusionment so deep that holding on to the optimism of the will that proves necessary for any leftist struggle is often impossible. It doesn't matter whether the president in Mexico City is a corrupt neoliberal or a charismatic left populist: In Veracruz today, as when Hernán Cortés founded the port half a millennium ago, paradise remains the private property of the rich.

In truth, the only organizing to be found in Polo's town—the only viable alternative to semifeudal serfdom—is organized crime. The gardener is acutely aware of "them," as the civilians refer to the local cartel. He sees kids younger than himself keeping watch over the town, all proud and cocky with their scooters and their dime bags of bad coke. Polo's older cousin, Milton, whom the teenager idolizes, has also joined the organization, though not willingly: They kidnapped him and enlisted him under the threat of death. Whatever the particulars of his induction into the cartel, however, the fact remains that Milton now possesses some of the same signifiers of wealth as the residents



**In Melchor's new novel, *Paradais*, crime is an allegory of capitalism.**

of Paradais: He drives a pickup truck as ostentatious as Marián's SUV and drinks the same expensive scotch as her husband. That his new line of work is destroying him psychologically and morally—his first assignment, a proof of loyalty, was to shoot an innocent taxi driver—matters little to Polo, who begs Milton to bring him into the organization. Milton refuses, thus foreclosing the only viable escape route available to him. It is then that the *muchacho* decides to join Franco's plot.

Ever the crime reporter, Melchor accurately notes that "they," like many similar organizations in Mexico, have diversified their business beyond drugs. They rob gas stations, run stolen cars, and in general find myriad ways to convert their willingness to kill into capital. And isn't that precisely what Polo tries to do when he agrees to help Franco with his plan? Could it be that crime in Mexico, whether the work of specialized professionals or a pair of fumbling teens, is nothing else but an expression of class warfare, the result of alienation, of misdirected political rage? Such is the lesson at the heart of Melchor's morality play: The injustice in Mexico is so great, the contradictions so acute, that structural violence will inevitably explode in concrete acts of violence. As above, so below: Crime is an allegory of capitalism.

At both the beginning and the end of the novel, Polo insists that "it was all fatboy's fault," that he "just did what he was told, followed orders." At the literal level, this is a transparent and unconvincing attempt at self-exoneration. But at the figurative level—if we look at the situation allegorically; if we replace the vehicle (Franco) with what is fueling it (rich people's libidinal drive to possess and consume) and read "orders" not as "commands" but as the manifestation of a "political order"—it is an accurate statement: Polo has done exactly what his society told him to do. This obedience does not justify his actions, much less redeem him, but it does complicate the picture. It also highlights the moral conundrum at the heart of the Mexican situation: The perpetrators of violence are responsible for their actions, but we are all their accomplices. How to direct the social energies derived from social antagonisms away from crime and toward political change? Melchor offers no answers—but an accurate diagnosis of the disease is often the first step toward a cure. **N**

## Nocturne

When at a loss for words—during, perhaps, a time of want or desire, when one's body is overwhelmed by light, as if by the effect of Ketamine or MDMA, when overwhelmed by the weight of the moment, the silence, the look of disappointment in a lover's eyes—what do we call the moment, then, when the words are finally summoned, like a sparkle of fireflies, and by grace, by the mercy of the night, what was damaged has been restored? Freire spoke that *one reads the world before they read the word*, which suggests that the first stage of language is in the *experiencing* of a thing to the point of knowing; in this knowing, then—of song sparrows and house sparrows, of catbirds and European Starlings, of a lover's wants and needs, one could say, genuinely, that knowing to the point of the words conjuring themselves is, perhaps, the truest form of love.

In Los Angeles, my lover drove me to the airport. It was mid-summer, and along the highway, the neon sun poked through a grove of palm trees, its corona pink with a thick haze of smog. In my youth, in the hope of producing a kind of love, I attempted to acquire the words to conjure a new world—of which I was god—not god as in *God*, but yes, as in the creator. After watching the television series *WandaVision*, I see now how foolish a person can seem when they want to be loved. Maybe foolish isn't the word. Anyway, we stopped to eat ramen a few miles from the airport, and when we returned to the car and sat inside, she leaned into me and whispered the words, *Don't go*. I whispered back, *I don't want to go*. And yet I did. I flew back to LaGuardia on a red-eye flight. What is the word for the kind of sadness that comes from having to leave a place where one is loved? What is the word for a lover who says, *I don't want to go* but goes?

KWAME OPOKU-DUKU



# The Hunted

*Pierre Senges and the novel of aesthetic sabotage*

BY RYAN RUBY

**O**VER THE PAST TWO DECADES, PIERRE SENGES HAS emerged as one of France's most important and celebrated writers. At the age of 54, Senges has published 16 novels, mostly with Editions Verticales, an experimental imprint of Gallimard, the most storied publishing house in France, as well as some two dozen radio plays. Since his 2000 debut, *Veuves au Maquillages*, a dark comedy about a man with a fetish for women who have murdered their husbands, he has won a number of prestigious literary prizes. Yet despite the efforts of a handful of devoted translators and small presses, he remains little-known among Anglophone readers.

To a degree surpassing even his post-modern counterparts in the United States, Senges specializes in irreverent literary pastiche and baroque maximalism. His 2004 novel *The Major Refutation* is a fictitious treatise

attributed to the 16th-century Franciscan monk Antonio de Guevara, whose aim is to prove the New World does not exist and to expose Columbus and the other explorers as frauds. His 2008 *Fragments of Lichtenberg* tells the story of a group of scholars who are attempting to piece together a systematic work of philosophy out of the aphorisms of the 18th-century German physician Georg Christoph

Lichtenberg. In the 2010 *Studies of Silhouettes*, Senges tries his hand at something similar with the unpublished fragments of Kafka, "completing" sentences from the Prague writer's diaries by turning them into longer fictions. And in his 2015 masterpiece *Ahab (Sequels)*, now available in an English translation by Jacob Steifring and Tegan Raleigh, we see Senges train his sights on the Great American Novel: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

The zany premise of *Ahab (Sequels)* could have been dreamed up by Eli Cash, the writer played by Owen Wilson in Wes Anderson's 2001 film *The Royal Tenenbaums*: "Well, everybody knows that Captain Ahab dies at the end of *Moby-Dick*. What this book presupposes is... maybe he didn't?" Having survived his encounter with the white whale, Senges's Ahab



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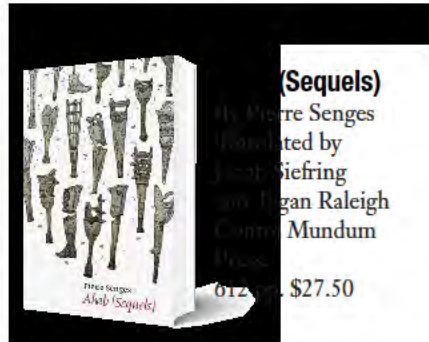


**THE**  
**Nation.**TRAVEL

moves to New York City, where he works a series of odd jobs (pastry chef, shoe shiner, elevator operator, phony Catholic priest) until he hits upon the idea of turning his time aboard the *Pequod* into the libretto for a Broadway musical. When that fails, he moves to Hollywood to try his luck in the script factories of the nascent studio system. Ahab's screenplay is passed from director to director—Josef von Sternberg, Erich von Stroheim, Billy Wilder, Orson Welles—with no success, before being handed off to the alcoholic F. Scott Fitzgerald, who works on it in the months leading up to his death in 1940. Meanwhile, the hunter has become the hunted: Up and down the coasts of North America, dozens of people have been swallowed by a white whale bent on revenge against a certain one-legged captain.

Alongside these afterlives or sequels, Senges also gives us two backstories or prequels for Ahab, one for Melville's character and the other for his own. In the first, the story of an "irascible, old whaling captain" and "pirate from Nantucket" is "palmed off" on the 19-year-old Melville by Mozart's former librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, during a chance meeting in a Manhattan tavern in 1838, just before the aspiring writer sets off for five years at sea. In the second, Ahab is born in 1851 (that is, the year of *Moby-Dick's* publication) and spends his 20s and 30s working his way up the ranks of the London stage—where he goes from prompter, to understudy, to Shakespearean actor—leaving behind a wife (the suggestively initialed Martha Doolittle) in the United States. In September 1891 (that is, the month of Melville's death), Ahab commits a crime and is forced to take to the sea in flight (it is implied that he has murdered Melville himself). Aboard the *Pequod*, the fugitive is mistaken for the captain, forcing him to rely on his experience playing Richard III, Ophelia, Shylock, and company to fool the crew. In Senges's version, Ahab the thespian invents the grudge against the whale as a sort of myth that legitimizes his position on the ship for an Odyssean two decades before the *Pequod* finally has its chance run-in with a white whale.

**S**enges makes no attempt to reconcile the two incompatible origin stories he gives for Ahab; the point, rather, is to satirically undercut the originality of Melville's masterpiece by attributing it to someone else. Just as in real life, Melville dies an unrecognized "customs inspector," but in *Ahab (Sequels)*, *Moby-Dick* remains largely forgotten: not a central text of American fiction, but an obscure, out-of-print book known only to cognoscenti like Orson Welles. Senges's Ahab is not content with just killing his maker; he also spends his twilight years and loose change buying up and destroying the few remaining copies of *Moby-Dick*



he can locate in secondhand shops. Melville's Ahab is a larger-than-life monomaniac, and his pursuit of Moby Dick to the exclusion of considerations of morality and self-interest is in no small part what gives him his grandeur. Senges's Ahab, by contrast, is a huckster whose motives are self-preservation and personal profit: "American pragmatism putting a stop to the wanderings of a Shakespearean lunatic." In *Ahab (Sequels)*, the ersatz captain's "grudge" against Moby Dick is downgraded to "pure theatricality"; the golden doubloon that Ahab nails to the mast as a reward for the first crew member to spot Moby Dick is a cheap "trick" likened to a manager giving out "bonuses." The relationship between Senges's book and its source text can be best summed up in his tidy description of the character they have in common: "Ahab: one step on his good leg, the next on a crude imitation." The first time as epic tragedy, the second time as burlesque farce.

If at first the object of satire here appears to be *Moby-Dick* itself, on closer inspection it turns out that Senges has bigger fish to fry. Ahab may "comically outlive his death," but Senges does not adequately explain how his protagonist comes to be almost 130 years old. This stretching of biological plausibility serves to change the scene from the mid-19th-century energy extraction economy in *Moby-Dick* to the early-20th-century entertainment indus-

try of *Ahab (Sequels)*. Senges's persistent use of anachronism—among other things, there are references to deindustrialization, gentrification, photo booths, *Saturday Night Live*, the speakeasy revival craze, animal documentaries, TV miniseries, fast food, and a certain coffee chain named after a character from *Moby-Dick*—suggests that the Great White Way and Golden Age Hollywood are in fact merely stand-ins for a satirical target that is nearer to hand: the totally marketized culture of the 21st century.

Especially its literary culture. Today, thanks in large part to corporate consolidation, the rise of the online retailer Amazon as a publishing platform, the academicization of significant parts of literary production, and competition from film, television, streaming services, and social media, writers in particular have been returned to levels of economic precarity unseen since Alexander Pope satirized the hacks of Grub Street in *The Dunciad*. The key feature of our literary landscape, as Mark McGurl notes in *Everything and Less*, his survey of the novel in what he calls "the Age of Amazon," is "scarcity amid abundance." More narratives are being produced than ever before, but we have less and less leisure time to experience them; prices are driven down, but the opportunity costs of reading are driven up. The result of these developments in the market, McGurl writes, is that there are "infinitely various messages" to be consumed, but only "one true meta-message: the necessity of corporate capitalism and the consumerist way of life."

Under these conditions, individual writers may still create difficult, unconventional, high-opportunity-cost fictions in the "style" or "genre" of former avant-gardes, but the subculture that was constructed over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries as a vital institution for technical innovation and a repository for nonmarket values has effectively ceased to exist. This seeming contradiction—a mode of anti-commercial writing that has "outlived" the "death" of its social function—is the central conceit of *Ahab (Sequels)*. As we will see, it goes a long way toward explaining Senges's initially puzzling aesthetic choices.

*Ryan Ruby is the author of The Zero and the One: A Novel. His criticism has appeared in the New Left Review, The Point, The Believer, Poetry, and elsewhere. He lives in Berlin.*

**T**hey were a “tough audience,” Senges writes of the *Pequod’s* crew, “lovers of tradition...and for [this reason] were not always appreciative of the avant-garde.” Ahab’s early “art for art’s sake” performances left them “speechless” and “exhausted,” so he modifies them accordingly, “playing aqtually with the ambiguity of genre.” What Ahab learns during his time as captain is how narrative can be a form of customer service. Once off the ship, Ahab is pauperized, but he wholeheartedly embraces the values and ideology of “free enterprise.” His time as an odd-jobber in New York is “part of the pilgrimage necessary to make oneself into a self-made man,” “the man oriented wholly toward the future,” “a man of common sense” who has understood the “logical and moral impossibility of renouncing profits.”

Ahab’s turn to writing is an attempt to monetize the only “merchandise” he has at his disposal: his life story. As a “reckless entrepreneur,” he is the cousin of today’s self-publishing “service providers,” and like them, he confronts the hard economic logic of a marketized culture. “Stories kept being told,” Senges writes; “all that matters” in both the Hollywood Ahab encounters and in the 21st century literary marketplace, is that “they be in abundance.” It does not matter if they are high-quality or even original: When even the avant-garde has “long since given up... the search for new subject matter,” Senges contends, why should anyone else feel any compunction about “wanting to cash in on stories that have already been told twenty times over, and then resumed under a different title”? That Ahab ends up writing screenplays rather than the best-selling “sailor’s Autobiography” (tentatively titled “Memoirs of an Irked Sailor”) that he dreamed of at first is an acknowledgment that, today, the telos of commercially viable literature is the screen.

The sticking point in the attempts to adapt Ahab’s story for stage and screen is always the same—how to represent the whale?—but Ahab never objects on creative grounds when the directors suggest that he replace the whale with something else. “*Sub specie aeternitatis*, profit of Rockefeller, genius of Puccini, it’s one and

the same thing,” he reasons. He would very much like to sell out, but under these conditions—where there is no space for evaluation external to the market—selling out has lost its meaning. In the end, Ahab’s story gets made into a TV miniseries, but he doesn’t see a penny in royalties. Ahab learns the hard way that in a cultural economy totally colonized by the profit motive, there may be a multitude of stories but really only two master narratives: that of quantitative commercial success and that of “defeat.”

Since the cresting of high modernism a century ago, several generations of avant-garde writers have cast doubt on the possibility of originality, novelty, and innovation in literature, just as Senges does in this satire. However idealistic and naive these paradigms now seem, it is worth recalling why they were held up as virtues in the first place. Originality, novelty, and formal innovation in literature were modes of differentiating particular books from others; as unique objects, they acted as symbols for the possibility of unique selves. Their individual aesthetic choices could be said to have functioned as models for their readers to achieve a degree of personal autonomy from the power of the social customs, political regimes, religious institutions, and, crucially, market forces by which we are all shaped.

In his drive to become a “self-made man” according to the commercial values of the market, rather than an autonomous self according to the aesthetic values of the avant-garde, Ahab in fact allows himself to become “thingified,” Senges writes. As a flat character, lacking both psychological interiority and a plot arc, he becomes interchangeable with anyone else. The reason the whale swallows so many people before it finally captures Ahab is that it cannot tell them apart: “from the high seas, looking at the coasts, there is not a single Ahab, but millions of Ahabs.” To the whale—who is the character that is furthest removed from the market and, not coincidentally, the most well-rounded character in the book—there is “nothing more similar to a human being, than another human being, their harmony is, the predator knows, based on this repetition of motifs.” In Melville’s epic, the singular Ahab goes on

a hunt for an equally singular creature; in Senges’s satire, everything and everyone has become generic: an act, an imitation, a copy, a plagiarism—a sequel.

**Y**et the way Senges constructs *Ahab (Sequels)* represents such a radical departure not only from the conventional realist novel but also from the American postmodern novels with which it would seem to have the most in common that it amounts to a kind of sabotage. At the level of form, the book explodes its potential as a commodity and, collaterally, the customer service logic of justifying aesthetic choices exclusively with reference to a reader’s pleasure. In doing so, Senges does not merely seek to place *Ahab (Sequels)* in the vestigial tradition of avant-garde writing; he also seeks to recapture something of its lost social function.

Much to the chagrin of its initial reviewers, *Moby-Dick* is famously split between novelistic “scene” (Ishmael’s adventures on the *Pequod*) and essayistic “discourse” (the chapters on whaling). Judging by some of the customer reviews that can be found on Goodreads, Reddit, and a number of amateur book blogs, this is the feature of Melville’s text that remains disquieting and odd to many readers to this day. (“Just skip the whaling stuff and read the story” is not uncommon advice.) Senges takes Melville’s intervention into the novel form one step further: *Ahab (Sequels)* is almost exclusively discursive; in other words, it does not show, it only tells. It contains no dialogue and, aside from a few monologues by the aforementioned directors and one by Ahab himself, no speech whatsoever.

Unlike the overwhelming majority of novels, which are narrated in the past or present tense, *Ahab (Sequels)* is narrated largely in the past or present continuous tense, and sometimes in the conditional. This gives the events the provisional status normally associated with storytelling modes like rumor, legend, or speculation—sometimes they are tagged as such by Senges—rather than with fiction proper. It is not that Senges’s narration is unreliable, a hallmark of the novel form; it is that it is unreliably unreliable. And this, rather than its syntax, or its breaks with linear chronology, or its engagements with a broad swath of European literary, artistic, and

**In Senges’s satire, everything and everyone has become generic.**



musical production going back to the Renaissance, is what makes it difficult.

A novel is a single possible world created by a one-time suspension of disbelief. Senges's use of narrative tense in *Ahab (Sequels)* multiplies these possible worlds and requires the reader to suspend disbelief over and over again, until belief is

no longer available as a response to the text. (We are told, for example, that there are "99 stories" behind Ahab's missing leg; we never find out which one we are supposed to believe is true.) Serial forms like sequels, prequels, and trilogies are beloved by authors writing for commercial success, as the repetition of a successful

formula across multiple books increases the likelihood of sales and downloads. By injecting seriality into the structure of a single book, however, Senges impedes the reader's ability to imaginatively escape into a stable fictional world and the minds of the characters that inhabit it. (Needless to say, not unlike the whale in Ahab's script, such a book could never be adapted for the screen or receive its attendant revenues, either.) The result is a formally distinctive work of literature that nonetheless limits the size of its potential audience by deliberately foreclosing the kind of narrative pleasure the novel form, grounded in the presentation of scenes, has accustomed readers to.

It is fair to ask, then, why anyone should read it. The standard defense of a work of avant-garde fiction is that once a reader has "invested the time" to master its stylistic idiom, it delivers a different (by implication, higher) set of literary pleasures: the pleasure of the unfamiliar, the pleasure of solving a puzzle, the pleasure of linguistic virtuosity and complexity, the pleasure of imagining the taboo. Senges's prose is consistently gorgeous, and *Ahab (Sequels)* is frequently funny and profound, but evaluating it on these grounds would be to ignore the way it deliberately sabotages storytelling norms upheld even by otherwise "difficult" avant-garde fictions from *Ulysses* to *Infinite Jest*.

To reduce the experience of reading avant-garde fiction to the pleasures it provides is to concede that it is one genre among others, with formal conventions that may be relied on to deliver these pleasures, and a paying audience, however small, whose needs must be met. The question then becomes how to sustain the production of such pleasures for a select audience (the handful of readers of difficult literature) and transmit them as efficiently as possible, a question whose answer finds itself in the very object of Senges's satiric critique: the literary marketplace. What makes *Ahab (Sequels)* the proper inheritor of the avant-garde is not merely its formal uniqueness, but the way that it challenges its reader to forgo the logic of pleasure entirely and, in doing so, to experience, for the duration of reading, something we used to be able to count on the institution of the avant-garde to provide: a space where we might be able to exert some measure of autonomy from the market forces that dominate every other square inch of our culture. **N**

## The Light

Isn't it the work of those of us who work to make new tools  
with the tools we are given, hammering matter  
into matter more adapted to the hand than to the memory  
of a hand, less to the past than to the path to what comes next?

And isn't it the work of the next adaptation in part to evince  
specifically by being what it is, regardless of detail and whether it  
wants to or not, the matter of persistence through change,  
the hammering of being into time, which is itself the work?

And so it was I took myself downriver, early in the midst  
of the worldwide sickness, the light on me knowledgeable  
as all light is knowledgeable, silent archive  
of everything that happens—it puts you in your place, the light

put me in my place. Light on the surface of East River in March,  
light July through October, light at noon on slopes of undulations  
pearling for a moment till it gleams up on the peaks, the light  
like melon ribbon, light dribbling from the mouth of a mythical

beast like Blake's dragon, but in effect, closer to a nebulous  
walrus made of fire. I am the nebulous walrus made of fire. I walk  
among you unrecognized but laughing. There is so much beauty  
left to see in this world. And I became what I am now to see it.

TIMOTHY DONNELLY



## Mirror/Stage

Kendrick Lamar's *Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers*

BY JOSHUA BENNETT

**W**HAT DO YOU CALL A GROUP OF PEOPLE UNITED BY GRIEF? A family. Or at least that's the formulation that has been dancing through my mind as I pondered where to begin. This is, after all, the frame that Kendrick Lamar offers from the outset on his long-awaited fifth album, *Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers*.

When my friend Tim and I talked about the record, he told me that he'd misheard its title as "Mr. Morales and the Big Steppers," which sounds like the name of a late-'70s

family band that I would love. Later that day, in my group chat, another friend, Kyle, shared the abstract of a paper that he'd just presented, in which at one point he says something like "What's important to remember is that funerals are also reunions." I hear these lines on repeat, resounding in the background as the beat builds, while I play Kendrick's album,

trying to find a foothold.

A little context: My entry point into Lamar's oeuvre was back in 2012, when a friend sent me a link to "The Heart pt. 3," which didn't remind me of anything I'd ever heard before. It was a short trip from there to one of his earlier projects, *Section.80*, and "Kush and Corinthians" in particular, which met me in the middle

of a crisis of faith that felt like my own personal apocalypse.

In the music, I encountered a young poet, full of fire, wrestling with the same sorts of questions—about grace, loss, eternity—that surrounded me. I heard a man trying to make a choice between love and the law and always doing his best to choose the former—no matter the cost.

The cover image of *Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers*, which was made public before the music, features Kendrick with his fiancée and two children. The crown he wears is all thorns. At first I was tempted to read this as a reference to kingship, a familiar trope for the artist. But now I think it has more to do with a vision of parenthood as sacrifice. And a vision of life on Earth in which we can experience the end of the world, sometimes more than once, and yet live.

**T**he opening track of *Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers*, "United in Grief," begins with an echo looming over us to establish the general atmosphere: "I hope you find some peace of mind in this lifetime." Then another voice, not yet Kendrick's, follows that affirmation with a prophetic imperative: "Tell them / tell 'em / tell them the truth." Then the first echo again, but with a slight variation, moving from the level of the individual psyche to that of otherworldly, utopian striving: "I hope you find some paradise." To round out this ensemble of voices, we hear the man himself around 30 seconds in:

I've been going through something  
1,855 days

I've been going through something

A quick bit of accounting clarifies that the 1,855 days in question refers to the period between Kendrick's last release, 2017's Pulitzer Prize-winning *DAMN*, and the project we are now listening to. This has been a period, our protagonist tells us, marked by trials and tribulations so severe they required (apart from the rare guest feature on other people's tracks) all but absolute silence.

Over the course of the 19 songs that constitute this double album, we come to learn not only the details of the "something" Kendrick has been going through but also who has been on that journey with him: his

partner and his daughter and his newborn son; his new therapist; and his cousin Baby Keem (who appears several times on the album, making his presence felt with a star turn on “Savior”). Beyond these members of his inner circle, Kendrick has been on this journey with a number of loved ones who enter the frame only via the kaleidoscopic lens of childhood memory.

More than once, Kendrick’s accepted opening charge to tell the truth brings us back to this space: one marked by triumph, regret, and, most vividly, education. Here’s a sequence from one of the album’s standout tracks, “Father Time,” that illustrates this point:

I come from a generation of home  
invasions and I got daddy issues,  
that’s on me  
Everything them four walls had  
taught me, made habits bury  
deep  
That man knew a lot, but not  
enough to keep me past them  
streets  
My life is a plot, twisted from  
directions that I can’t see

The triple entendre in the song’s title reappears here, at the end of its first verse: The phrase “Father Time” is, simultaneously, a familiar idiom, a reference to the specific stretches of time Kendrick spent with his own father, learning the various lessons the song elaborates in detail, and an almost religious vision of time as an entity that acts upon us consciously, turning each individual life into a “plot,” a work of literature, cinema, music, or some unwieldy, chimeric combination of the three.

Just as Kendrick cannot shake the indelible influence of time, he cannot undo the effects of his father’s instruction. That antagonism enters the song at the level of lyric as “daddy issues,” a phrase he repeats. This umbrella term is meant to stand in for behaviors as varied as fistfighting in the street, hesitating to express affection, or jumping up after a skinned knee without shedding a tear or making a sound (“’cause if I cried about it / he’d surely tell me not to be weak”). And though there is a certain critique of normative masculinity one can offer here, what is much more interesting, I think, is the fact that for Kendrick these memories are

presented as part of a legible tradition, one born of specific material conditions (Black generational poverty in the modern city) at a particular moment in history (Compton in the ’90s), as well as an ancient impulse to survive them at all costs.

“Father Time,” then, isn’t just a song about the limits of a dominant form of masculinity, or the failures of one man’s father, or his successes. Or the joy you felt but couldn’t sing about. Or how, for Black boys growing up everywhere in the United States of America, the language of adoration and admiration alike are policed from the very beginning, often by forces that don’t let up for as long as we are alive. Somehow, against the tide of centuries of such brutalization, there persists the possibility of something like the sort of intimacy, however fraught, that Kendrick outlines throughout the album.

This, it seems to me, is the project’s core theme: How, in a world where Blackness is said to be synonymous with general dishonor, do we nevertheless care for each other? How does such care show up in real time? Where and how does it fall short, or suffer from a contamination so familiar it defies our attempts to name it, even when we try? In what ways does that love surpass human understanding? Can it survive the full force of an entire social order dead set against such love? Could you be loved? Are you sure?

**T**he map of human relations Kendrick lays out for us here—the larger social world our love must survive—is an intricate one, full of both opportunities and threats. “We Cry Together,” for example, brings to life the story of a romance cracking at the seams—one that appears to be done for good, before an unexpected (and genuinely tragic, though it is presented ironically) *volta* at its conclusion. “Auntie Diaries” tells the story of Kendrick’s relationship with two family members who

are transitioning, and how those lifelong bonds influence the way he comes to think about the exclusionary, queerphobic rhetoric—employed by himself and others everywhere from the playground to the sanctuary—that he once treated as acceptable everyday parlance. Kinship, we are reminded, demands transformation. It is, by its very nature, marred by our human frailty, our disposition toward falling short.

Kendrick doesn’t shy away from that complexity; he embraces it. He acknowledges the terribleness that served as his condition of emergence while refusing to let that be the entire story. The sort of trauma we experience within our kinship networks—those we are born into as well as those we choose—is one of the album’s central objects of concern. Here, though, tragedy is not a casual shorthand for Blackness. There is infinitely more to the plot. There is still room for change. But it will require that we

tell the truth: “Before I go in fast asleep, love me for me / I bare my soul and now we’re free.”

These closing lines from “Mother I Sober”—perhaps the song on the album that goes most into depth about the various sorts of abuse that Kendrick’s kin, blood and otherwise, have survived over the years—are a fitting end for one of the record’s most powerful meditations on the costs of loving Blackness, loving Black people, loving oneself. Such love, Kendrick explains, requires the willful abolition of our well-earned fear. It demands the creation of new myths, icons, and images. It demands that we lift the mirror to ourselves and see the beauty, and the terror, and all that persists in between. **N**



**Kendrick does not shy away from that complexity; he embraces it.**

*Joshua Bennett is a professor of English at Dartmouth College. He is the author of two collections of poetry, *Owed* and *The Sobbing School*, as well as a book of criticism, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man*.*



# Vengeance

*The brutal verisimilitude of* *The Northman*

BY ERIN SCHWARTZ

**T**HE NORTHMAN, A MEDIEVAL NORDIC EPIC WRITTEN AND directed by Robert Eggers, begins with a familiar setup: a young prince loses his family and kingdom in an act of fraternal betrayal. King Aurvandil (Ethan Hawke) is assassinated by his brother, Fjölfnir (Claes Bang), while his young son Amleth watches; the young prince also sees Fjölfnir kidnap his mother, Gudrún (Nicole Kidman), as part of a bloody coup to seize Aurvandil's title and land. Barely avoiding capture, Amleth escapes and rows away, repeating a vow to avenge his father, kill his uncle, and rescue his mother—an overture to the story of a hero. (The film is based on a Scandinavian legend, recorded in the 13th century, that may have inspired *Hamlet*.)

We next see Amleth (played as an

adult by Alexander Skarsgård) years later, now a formidable warrior applying his martial prowess to raiding Slavic villages. His revenge oath has been indefinitely deferred in favor of pillaging with a band of shamanic berserkers; he isn't yet aware of Fjölfnir's movements, that his uncle has

lost his land and fled to Iceland. Only after the urging of a mystical figure played by the musician Björk does Amleth resume his quest. He disguises himself as a slave bound for Fjölfnir's settlement; once he arrives, he plans a series of escalating attacks with the help of another captive, a Slavic sorceress named Olga (Anya Taylor-Joy). The campaign eventually destroys the remnant's of Fjölfnir's kingdom, and Amleth faces his rival in a final duel at the top of a volcano.

Although *The Northman* represents Eggers's most ambitious project yet, both in its narrative scope and budget, he is known for choosing stories like this—spooky historical dramas that can skew melodramatic—and managing to avoid sentimentality and shtick through obsessive, anthropological detail. In his previous films (*The Witch*, a horror film set on the edges of a 17th-century New England Puritan settlement, and *The Lighthouse*, a darkly funny 19th-century drama that follows two bickering lighthouse keepers in their descent into madness), Eggers has a knack for collecting period-specific ephemera—phrases from accounts of demonic possession, antique camera lenses, a museum-replica pagan rattle, and hand-stitched costumes—to make a coherent facsimile of a world. When the method works, tenets that might seem prosaic to modern viewers become vivid and urgent, located within a faithful reproduction of the setting that produced them.

Although there are flashes of this sensibility throughout *The Northman*, the film falls into an awkward middle ground between blockbuster epic and the cerebral historical dramas that preceded it, not quite filling either prompt. Moments of revelatory strangeness come inconsistently, and they feel disjointed from a plot that's too unwieldy for verisimilitude alone to carry. The sequences that lack a sense of context to animate them can feel rote or even silly—a scene in which Amleth duels a ghost skeleton for a magic sword, for example; a couple of instances of animal-based deus ex machina; or the abrupt end of Olga and Amleth's romantic relationship, soundtracked with a swell of music that make its pathos feel forced. Still, beyond the less convincing scenes, there are glimpses of a more interesting story that reflects Eggers's broader interest in outcasts, grievance, and the futility of honoring one's fate.

**T**he parts of *The Northman* that take place in Iceland are set during a period early in the country's colonization, about 16 years before the establishment of its parliament in 930 AD. The choice was intentional: The Icelandic poet and novelist Sjón, who cowrote the script with Eggers, told *The New Yorker* that he "realized that we could slip in a family there, that settled early and then just disappeared from the face of the earth." In his other films, Eggers has chosen settings on the fringes of a more formal society, which is effective for horror because it makes the consequences of interpersonal friction more dire. To see the danger of these places feels like a forgotten instinct: These small and isolated communities have no guarantee of survival, making their members both acutely dependent on and vulnerable to one another.

When we first see Fjölfnir's settlement, a cluster of buildings in a wide green valley in the shadow of a volcano, it feels precarious, barely rooted in the earth even before the machinations of a vengeful prince work to dismantle it. It's the kind of place that, in Sjón's words, looks like it could "just [disappear] from the face of the earth." Sod-roofed structures covered in fresh grass appear halfway to being swallowed by the ground. With vast stretches of uninhabited wilderness as their alternative, a human village, even one as violent and miserable as Fjölfnir's, binds its inhabitants to it: "Even if you did escape this farm, you'd only be carrion for the blue fox and selkies," another captive tells Amleth.

In Iceland, for Amleth, two tenets meant to ensure the preservation of social order soon come into conflict: the taboo on murder and the duty to enact vengeance on murderers, especially those who kill kings, whose position of invulnerability is necessary for the strength of the state. This paradox—whether to carry out a string of killings to symbolically buttress the sanctity of life—is at the center of many tragedies, including *Hamlet*. In *The Northman*, Amleth doesn't dwell much on these social and moral intricacies: At one point he kills an opponent during a sports match by headbutting him to death. Yet he decides that he can't take his final revenge on Fjölfnir until the terms of the prophecy made by the seer in the Slavic village are met. "It was foretold that I would slay my father's killer in a burning lake," Amleth says. "Until that day comes, I will torment the man who made my life hell.... We thirst for vengeance, but we cannot escape our fate." In the meantime, with Olga's help, he executes a gruesome series of attacks on Fjölfnir's men, laden with religious symbolism, which the settlement's priestess at first blames on a "distempered spirit."

In this sense, *The Northman* resembles other recent films—*The Green Knight*, for example, based on the Arthurian chivalric romance, and Martin Scorsese's mob drama *The Irish-*

*man*—that place preordained male violence in a nihilistic, almost ironic register rather than in the heroic or tragic tone of an epic. These films facilitate a reading in which acts of violence that define a person's life can provide a necessary sense of purpose and belonging but also be arbitrary, incidental, or vaguely foolish. Partway through Amleth's campaign, his mother, Guðrún, confronts him with the revelation that his quest is built on childhood illusions about his parents and that she very much invited Fjölfnir's act of betrayal. Enraged, Amleth kills his uncle's son, but he isn't dissuaded from his goal. At the beginning of his final confrontation with Fjölfnir, instead of rescuing Guðrún, Amleth murders her in a struggle.

In these films, the violence of men trapped by fate appears both inevitable and like a waste of time; their blood feuds, which give them purpose, contain no inherent depth, eloquence, or special insight. By the film's conclusion, Amleth's commitment to vengeance seems divorced from the people it was intended to honor or protect, rolling forward on the strength of its own, preordained inertia. If in *Hamlet* a prince's desire for revenge is checked by doubt and melancholia, *The Northman's* Amleth would find that kind of introspection totally alien. This single-minded devotion to

fate would benefit from Eggers's anthropological insight; without it, we're left to extrapolate from religious rituals and scenes of parochial drudgery that being governed by destiny, no matter how destructive, may offer transcendence in a grim, chaotic world. "Hate is all I have ever known," Amleth tells Olga in the one brief moment in which he considers abandoning his quest to kill Fjölfnir. "But I wish I could be free of it."

*The Northman* is a brutal and violent film, felt in both its protagonist's appetite for revenge and a world that seems to require suffering to continue turning. Enslaved laborers are killed at random; in the continuous shots of battle that Eggers favors, half a dozen discrete, horrifying injuries might play out within the same few seconds. During the raid on the Slavic village early in the film, Amleth rips out

a man's throat with his teeth and howls to the sky like a wolf. But the film suddenly cuts ahead, to just after the battle. Amleth is part of a tableau of a dozen wounded berserkers who are hunched over, panting and bleeding from open cuts, their muscles trembling with exhaustion or pain. A separate group of more uniformly dressed and armored fighters administer the raid's aftermath. In the longer view, Amleth's group, dominant in

battle, gains the connotation of hired muscle, useful in the fight but peripheral to its planning and an afterthought in the allocation of its rewards.

That moment has curious implications. It presents comfort with brutality as a skill within a hierarchy of skills that a medieval society needs filled, and casts Amleth's quest in an almost entrepreneurial light. But those threads aren't pursued. Soon after, Amleth hears about Fjölfnir's loss of his kingdom and his departure to Iceland from a fellow fighter as he is sharpening an axe. "Fjölfnir killed his brother for nothing. Now he's a sheep farmer," the fighter says, laughing, as the cycle of fate starts over again. **N**



**The Northman**  
represents Eggers's most  
ambitious project in  
both budget and scope.



# Letters

## Not Just a Women's Issue

Re "The Fight for Abortion After *Roe* Falls," by Amy Littlefield [May 30/June 6]: Too many people thought *Roe v. Wade* was all that was needed. Except among some feminists, there was little thought about continuous organizing to protect access to abortion services, which were not widely seen as related to health—an intersectional issue connected to education, income, housing, and equal opportunity for everyone. So long as it was seen as a "niche issue" for women and not a social and political issue that affected everyone, directly or indirectly, there was always something else that was considered more important. Now women of color and poor women, especially, will pay the highest price.

CAROLYN WALLACE

## How We Win

Elie Mystal reminds us to look to abortion clinic escorts for lessons on how to fight moral battles ["The Moral Fight," May 30/June 6]. This is an excellent starting point for all Democrats. Maybe especially elected ones. I recently took the time to meet a retired woman who had volunteered as an abortion clinic escort here in Southern California. She was probably about my age (60) and had originally worked as an RN. She identified as a Seventh Day Adventist, part of the community in nearby Riverside County. What I left with is the impression that the escorts come from all kinds of backgrounds, and are forced to make personal commitments and sacrifices most elected officials might not dare dream of.

WALTER PEWEN

This has to be one of the finest columns Elie Mystal has written. I am so very pleased that *The Nation* gives such prominent place to his commentary. These are appalling times we live in, and we desperately need the kind of forceful, fluent, and no-nonsense message that he continually sends our way. Long may he prosper!

FRED COLEMAN  
AKRON, OHIO

## Collective Power

Re "The National Grid as Political Metaphor," by Jessi Jezewska Stevens [May 30/June 6]: Inconsistent as solar and wind energy can be, there is, on the other hand, the reliability of geothermal, biomass, and, hopefully soon, wave energy. Additionally, an alternative to the grid would be to require new construction to be self-sufficient, integrating renewable energy, and also to augment existing structures with renewable sources.

My energy company is swapping out my electrical panel next month in an effort to improve the grid, but I don't think grid work or any effort except transitioning off of fossil fuels will hold back climate change. Nuclear power is out of the question: Accumulated radioactive waste will harm future generations. In my frustration with government efforts, I wonder if an international boycott of fossil fuels by the public, coordinated on the Internet, would be possible.

KATHLEEN FREEMAN

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# Q&A

## Melissa Lin Perrella

The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Melissa Lin Perrella sees a direct line from her childhood in a small town in Central California in the 1980s to her work on the front lines of environmental justice.

"We looked different from most everyone else; my house smelled different, because the food we ate was different," she said. She was bullied. "It [affected] my confidence and what I thought was possible for myself, but it also made me the advocate that I am." Today, Lin Perrella is the head of justice and equity for the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council, a role that was created last year. The move is part of a larger shift among environmental organizations toward recognizing that climate change and pollution do not affect all communities equally.

Lin Perrella got her start with the NRDC nearly 20 years ago in the organization's Santa Monica office, where she worked alongside communities near the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, areas with some of the worst air quality in the state. "That's where I learned that in order for environmental policies to be responsive and durable, they have to be prioritized and really led by the communities that are most impacted by them," she said.

—Danielle Renwick

**DR: How has your understanding of environmental justice changed over the years?**

**MLP:** In the beginning, I was very focused on outcomes. But what I think has deepened over the years is my understanding of how to do that work—the need to honor local community leadership and intentionally take care not to supplant it. Even a well-intended organization can disrupt local power-building if it does not intentionally look for ways to share power. I've learned that environmental justice means reducing pollution in communities of color and low-income communities, and building community power is part of that work.

**DR: How does that relate to your new role at the NRDC?**

**MLP:** If we're working alongside communities to close down a polluting facility, NRDC shouldn't stop there. We should also be working alongside communities to transition workers that were working at that facility [to green jobs]. If we're going to propose new green spaces, we should be working alongside housing advocates to ensure that the new park doesn't result in gentrification.

**"Polluters go for the communities perceived as lacking power."**

**DR: You've said that being bullied as a child for being Asian American is part of what brought you to advocacy work.**

**MLP:** All forms of violence, whether it's a punch to your gut or pollution that burns your lungs, is targeted at those who are perceived as unable to fight back. Attackers choose who they attack. I'm vulnerable because of my race, my gender, my size—and similarly, polluters don't site their facilities randomly. They go for communities that are perceived as lacking the power to resist. That's why I think it's so important for the environmental movement to support community power-building so that these perceptions change.

**DR: The Biden administration has pledged to deliver 40 percent of federal climate-related investments to "disadvantaged communities," and it released a screening tool to determine which ones to include. The tool has been criticized because it doesn't include race. Can a "race-neutral" environmental justice strategy succeed?**

**MLP:** You need a comprehensive suite of policies and tools that consider race in order to correct long-standing environmental racism, and to see whether the policies enacted actually reduced racial disparities in environmental protection and health outcomes. Some of these policies include restrictions on siting new environmental hazards in places that already get high and disproportionate amounts of pollution. They should also include actions to reduce existing pollution burdens on low-income communities and communities of color.

It's not a mystery what needs to be done. Environmental justice advocates' vision and policy priorities can be found in initiatives like the federal Environmental Justice for All Act, a bill that environmental justice leaders have been instrumental in crafting. From where I sit at NRDC, I can use the organization's platform to lend its support to these movement voices and efforts. **N**

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